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From: John Holmes
Date: 6 December 1996

File
John Holmes

PRIME MINISTER

cc: EO

NORTHERN IRELAND: SUMMIT

OK (as amended)
7.12.

✓ The actual briefing for the Summit is elsewhere in the Box. This minute brings you up to date on discussions over the last couple of days.

✓ I have made clear again to the Irish and to the Americans that you are not prepared to name a date for Sinn Fein's entry to the talks. Both now seem to have accepted this, although both continue to make the point that without a date they doubt a ceasefire is possible.

✓ I have also told Teahon that we prefer to avoid a communiqué, in order to avoid invidious comparisons with our 28 November statement. Again he has accepted this. I have suggested instead that you and the Taoiseach should be clear in advance about what you will each say to the press in Downing Street - which should be close, but cannot be identical because of the point about the date. Teahon agreed, and we were going to exchange possible texts today, but he got cold feet and said that he wanted to await an Irish Government meeting on Saturday afternoon.

I had also suggested a weekend telephone call between you and the Taoiseach to clear lines about a "private understanding" in advance of the meeting. But again Teahon has become hesitant about how useful this could be. This may not now happen. (I am sure you will not be too upset!)

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

As far as the "private understanding" is concerned, I have spelled out to Teahon that it cannot be about a date. But you would be prepared to assure the Taoiseach that we would play the game fairly about an invitation to Sinn Fein if they declared a rapid ceasefire and did the right thing. Teahon understood this, but was worried about the UUP: they might try to push us off this position if they did not want to face themselves the dilemma about Sinn Fein's entry; and they might in any case walk away. I said that we could not guarantee what the UUP would do, but again I thought you would be ready to say we would not move the goalposts.

Teahon also said that Bruton was worried about being caught out. If you assured him that you would play the game and that a reasonably rapid timescale was possible, and he gave Sinn Fein that assurance, he would be horribly exposed if they did their stuff and no invitation to the talks followed. I said that I understood this fear: we would certainly not wish the Taoiseach to be making Reynolds-style promises which had no basis.

NO. (... Teahon will ring me on Saturday evening to relay the conclusions of the Irish meeting. We may then be in a position to exchange draft press lines. I attach a possible draft on our side, cleared with the NIO. It would be helpful to know in the course of Saturday if you are content with this. We could in theory go further and refer to the possibility of Sinn Fein's entry "within a few weeks" of a ceasefire. This would echo Trimble's own language, and you said you could live with it. But I am cautious both about raising nationalist expectations and fuelling unionist/backbench suspicions (not exactly what you need at the moment).

I saw Trimble on Thursday evening, as did (separately) Cranborne. He was generally happy with his US visit, except for US pressure over a date for Sinn

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Fein's entry. He was otherwise OK, as long as we are not going to fix a date. He acknowledged that he had referred himself in Washington to "within a few weeks" but made pretty clear that if this happened, he would find it extremely difficult to stay in the talks and would not thank us.

My guess is that the chances of a quick, satisfactory ceasefire are not at all good. So we are not likely to face the (otherwise desirable) difficulties of deciding how early to let Sinn Fein in. But we still need to keep our position carefully balanced.



JOHN HOLMES

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**PRIME MINISTER'S LINE AT
9 DECEMBER PRESS CONFERENCE**

I set out the Government's position on the possibility of Sinn Fein joining the Belfast talks in a statement on 28 November. ✓

It is perfectly clear. There is an absolute requirement for an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire. Both Governments are quite clear about that. ✓
It is spelt out in the Ground Rules for the talks.

The same Ground Rules also require all parties taking part in the negotiations to establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and show that they abide by the democratic process. Both Governments are agreed that these requirements must be satisfied before Sinn Fein can join the talks. ✓

What our statement of 28 November did was to make clear what we shall be looking for. We are not interested in a phoney or tactical ceasefire, to be discarded again when it suits. So what is needed is for any ceasefire to be declared in terms which can convince us that this time it is meant to last, and that Sinn Fein are indeed genuinely committed to the democratic process and exclusively peaceful means. ✓

We also need more than words. Actions on the ground need to show that the IRA are adhering to both the ceasefire and the Mitchell principles, in particular through the absence of the kind of paramilitary activity which continued throughout the last ceasefire - targeting, surveillance and weapons preparation - and which is simply not compatible with a dependable and genuine ceasefire intended to be for good and with exclusively peaceful means. This is no more than common sense. ✓

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

We have said sufficient time will be needed to establish that these criteria for a genuinely unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire are being met. But how soon Sinn Fein can join the talks after a ceasefire depends on the IRA and Sinn Fein and what they say and do. So we cannot fix a date for Sinn Fein to enter the talks which pays no regard to what is said or done. What matters is whether the criteria are met, not the time period. ✓

We are not looking to delay Sinn Fein's entry into the negotiations by a day longer than necessary, if we can be satisfied that the requirements I have set out are being met. Suggestions that we will be insisting on a long period of ^{many} ~~some~~ months ^{are not true} ~~have no basis in reality~~. An invitation to Sinn Fein to join the talks can issue within a ^{reasonable} ~~relatively short~~ timescale if, and I emphasise again that this is the crucial point, if ^{our} ~~the~~ requirements are convincingly met ^{and can be seen to be met}. ✓

That is not in our hands but in the hands of the IRA and Sinn Fein. ^{They can open the door to joining the talks.} ~~The sort of timescale the Taoiseach has talked of early next year is certainly possible. But~~ ^{It all depends on the IRA and Sinn Fein.} The only way forward is for them to declare a ceasefire as soon as possible and convince us that this time it is genuine, dependable and lasting. A ceasefire now would give everyone time over the natural Christmas break to reflect on the new situation.

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