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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

P.2
SUBJECT
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

9 December 1996

Dear Gen,

ANGLO/IRISH SUMMIT, 9 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach had a restricted meeting on Northern Ireland, before the more widely attended lunch. The Tanaiste, Norah Owen and Paddy Teahon were there on the Irish side, Sir Patrick Mayhew, Michael Ancram and I on our side. The session was intended to last a few minutes, but in the end went on for more than an hour. Discussion focused entirely, as I understand it did over lunch, on what should be said to the press on the issue of when Sinn Fein could enter the talks if there was a ceasefire. I have not recorded every twist of the conversation, since it quickly began to go round in circles, but I have tried to cover the main points.

The Prime Minister said that he had been concerned about a joint communiqué, since any statement of this kind would inevitably be crawled over to find differences with what he had said on 28 November and his interview yesterday. He therefore preferred to avoid this. The difference between the two sides was clear on the question of a timescale for the period between a ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry to the talks. He was not ruling out any timescale, but equally he could not issue a statement which suggested a particular date.

Bruton said that the question behind this was the British Government's real intentions about inclusive talks, and when they might happen. The Prime Minister said that there was no bar in the minds of the British Government to Sinn Fein joining the talks before elections here. But this was dependent on the actions of the IRA and Sinn Fein. He was not prepared to be put in a position where a date was set, and there was then great pressure on him to meet this date and ignore any inconvenient developments. If a date was set and Sinn Fein did not enter the talks, there would inevitably be great accusations of betrayal. Moreover, if a date was set now, this would create a position against which all

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the Unionists would instantly react. They would probably reject it definitively. He understood why Sinn Fein wanted a date, and their lack of trust in the British Government. He wanted to get them into the talks. He also believed Sinn Fein might need a ceasefire for their own electoral reasons, although the intelligence about their intentions was not encouraging. But setting a date would not help.

In summary, he wanted a ceasefire and wanted Sinn Fein to meet the conditions for joining the talks. If they did he was not looking for an artificial delay and would go ahead with an invitation to them, even in the face of backbench and Unionist opposition. He had said in his television interview the previous day that he would not be held to ransom by individual backbenchers. Similar considerations applied in the case of Sinn Fein's entry to talks. But he would not put up an Aunt Sally in the form of an early date for Sinn Fein's entry.

Bruton asked why the Prime Minister could not say Sinn Fein's entry on the timescale he was suggesting was within the realms of the possible. The Prime Minister said that he could say this was not excluded, but he did not want to put the point in affirmative terms for fear of creating a stampede away from the prospect of inclusive talks.

Bruton said that there was a need for certainty in advance about when Sinn Fein could get in. There were inevitable suspicions about who would determine that Sinn Fein had met the conditions, particularly on the ground, and how. It was hardly likely to be acceptable to Sinn Fein if they believed that it was really the Security Service who were making this judgment. There should be no accountability or transparency in such a process.

The Prime Minister said that we could not ignore the intelligence we saw, and it was difficult to be entirely transparent about all such reports. But in the end the judgement had to be made by Sir Patrick Mayhew and himself. Bruton commented that this put the Irish in a difficult position. They were partners in the peace process but not part of the decision on whether the Ground Rules criteria had been met. Nevertheless they would have to live with the consequences of our decision, against the background of inevitable suspicion about true British intentions. Putting forward a date would shift the burden of proof on to Britain to say why Sinn Fein should not be allowed in, rather than on to Sinn Fein to argue why they should be let in. It would otherwise be easy for Britain to say that it was not satisfied, without even having to explain its decision. There was obviously a fear that the British decision would be influenced not by objective criteria but by the surrounding political circumstances. This was why a specific date for a decision was needed, to remove some of the fog of suspicion. Obviously there could be no promises about what the British Government's decision would be, but there could at least

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be a promise of a decision of some kind by the end of January, and of an explanation of the reasons for that decision. The alternative was to have the decision floating in a sort of never never land.

The Prime Minister said that if he could not use intelligence information, he could be put in a position where he would be forced to accept as genuine a ceasefire which he knew from intelligence not to be genuine. In taking a decision we would obviously want to exchange views and information with the Irish Government and explain what we were doing. There could be some intelligence that we could not share, for obvious reasons. But there was no way round this. The Irish would have to accept that we genuinely did want all-party talks. If we set a date now, this could easily lead to a kind of domino effect amongst the Unionists. The UKUP would say straightaway that they would not attend talks with Sinn Fein. They would be followed by the DUP, which would then put huge pressure on the UUP.

Bruton said that he wanted to spell out to the press his position that the onus was on the IRA to restore the ceasefire at the earliest possible moment. If the IRA called an unequivocal ceasefire in believable words, and nothing which was done subsequently was inconsistent with this and with the Mitchell principles, Sinn Fein should be admitted to the talks. In these circumstances, he believed that they should be admitted when the talks resumed after the Christmas break. But there would obviously be room for confidence-building discussions in the interval between the ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry into the talks, involving both Governments. Was this really impossible for the British Government to accept?

The Prime Minister said that a statement on these lines would open up a clear gap between the British and Irish Governments because of what he would be forced to say in response. Otherwise it would create great difficulties for him in Parliament and elsewhere. If he suggested that such a timescale was possible, he would be accused of shifting his position in response to Irish pressure. Setting a date in this way would not in practice improve the chances of Sinn Fein joining the talks early but damage them.

Spring asked what was in fact likely to happen. If the British Government stuck to the position the Prime Minister had outlined there would simply not be a ceasefire. It was not clear that Sinn Fein really needed a ceasefire for electoral reasons as the Prime Minister had suggested. Sinn Fein could easily argue that the British Government was simply raising the hurdles to their entry higher and higher as the prospect of a ceasefire became more real. Bruton commented that the politically clever thing for the Sinn Fein leadership to do would be to declare a ceasefire and then turn up at the talks demanding entry. That would put the Governments on the spot.

Bruton went on to suggest that the two Governments could agree now that, if there were a ceasefire, the two leaders would meet within seven days to consider the implications of this for the talks. This was not a considered suggestion, but the Republican movement needed some sense that decisions would not be put off indefinitely. That was the real point, rather than a fixed date for their entry. The Prime Minister said that he was happy to agree that, if there were a ceasefire, there should be regular meetings to review the implications of this. Spring commented that this would simply not be enough to produce a ceasefire. Bruton agreed. He already told the Dail that there were regular meetings and telephone conversations, and this would add nothing.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that it was unrealistic to think that we would make a decision about Sinn Fein's entry without explaining what we were doing. We could not in practice stay silent about whether paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Ground Rules were being met. Reviewing the position with the Irish Government would help to mitigate suspicions. There could be some elements of intelligence we could not reveal, but much of the evidence would be common knowledge. He therefore wondered how much there really was between the position of the two governments.

Mrs Owen said that the real problem was the open ended nature of the process we envisaged. The Prime Minister commented that we also had to keep in mind the need to ensure that others did not abandon the talks before the possibility of Sinn Fein's entry became real. Mrs Owen said that she was sceptical of Unionist threats of this kind. They had not followed through on them in the past and, although this was a more serious issue than, for example, Mitchell's Chairmanship, the Unionist parties would also have to explain to moderate voters why they had turned away from the chance of peace if they left the talks.

The Prime Minister said that the essence of the problem was that the Irish wanted a date, and he could not give one. There had to be a middle way. The Taoiseach said that he could mention a date, and the Prime Minister could say this was not impossible. The Prime Minister repeated that in theory he could say that such a date was not excluded. But he still saw a problem that this would look too obviously orchestrated. A secret deal would be immediately suspected. He could not in practice say anything different from what he had said on 28 November and in his television interview yesterday.

Bruton suggested that this was all the result of the Parliamentary situation in Britain. The Prime Minister said this was not the case. If he had worried about the Parliamentary position, we would not be in the position we were today. And he would not be blackmailed by backbenchers or Unionists on this issue. Nevertheless, if the Taoiseach spoke as he intended, he would have to respond that he could not make any comment on a possible date. We had said

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that what mattered was what happened on the ground. He could neither rule in or rule out any particular timescale. Spring worried that if this was the nature of the exchange for the press, it would send a very negative signal to Hume and those in the Republican movement who were working for peace. The Prime Minister said that many negative signals were coming the other way, both in the sense of preparation of new bombs, and statements by Adams and others, for example at the press conference Adams had given before our statement.

Sir Patrick Mayhew said that there was a widespread, if false, belief that the bomb at South Quay had forced us to produce a date for the all-party talks. It would be dangerous if it became accepted that the planned bomb at Drumadd had produced a date for Sinn Fein's entry. Mrs Owen said that if there was no ceasefire, we could face the horror of many new bombs. This would put great pressure on both governments. The Prime Minister said that this was a perversion of the democratic process. If there were new bombs, the pressure had to be on those who planted them, not on democratic governments. We could not simply appease the IRA dragon.

Bruton said that he was very worried indeed about presentation of this position to the press. The two governments had to stick together. There might be a difference on tactical appreciation of whether it was better at this stage to have Sinn Fein inside or outside the tent, but presentation was all important. His Government was walking a tight rope. He had hoped that the wording we had sent him the night before had opened the way for a reasonable outcome, but these words had then been amended in an unhelpful way this morning. He continued to regret that there had been no attempt to negotiate a joint communiqué.

The discussion returned to what might be said to the press. The Prime Minister suggested that, if the Taoiseach could soften his statement, for example by saying "I would like to think that Sinn Fein's participation could be possible by the end of January, but of course events on the ground cannot be predicted", he could then say that he shared the Taoiseach's wish for no undue delay, and could confirm that he too wanted to see inclusive talks involving all the parties which had shown themselves committed to the democratic process and peaceful means. Bruton saw a possible opening here, and it was agreed that Paddy Teahon and I should work on forms of words during lunch which could be used by the two Prime Ministers at the press conference.

While discussion continued over lunch (recorded separately), Teahon and I worked out the attached forms of words for use by the Taoiseach and Prime Minister respectively. These were then taken into the lunch, and discussed. Although the initial Irish reaction seemed reasonably favourable, this quickly changed when O'hUiggin joined the Irish huddle. Further discussion over lunch then degenerated in a bad tempered way until it became clear that

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agreement on forms of words was not going to be possible. It was therefore agreed that each leader would have to say what he thought best in the circumstances.

There was then a lengthy pause while each side reflected on what it should actually say. It was quickly agreed on our side that the Prime Minister should use the words which had been drafted for his use. But the Irish side spent some 30 minutes by themselves discussing what the Taoiseach should say and rehearsing his lines.

I attach a copy of what was eventually said by both men in Downing Street. As you will see, the Taoiseach inserted a lot of material about previous agreements between the two governments, and laid a lot of emphasis on the Ground Rules both in his opening statement and in answer to questions. But in the end, he backed away from naming a date, and referred only to his hope that Sinn Fein's entry to the talks would be possible early in the New Year. He and the Prime Minister were then able to stay reasonably close to each other in response to further questions from the Irish press, probing at the extent of differences between the two governments. The Taoiseach's powerful appeal to the republican movement was also helpful in putting the onus back on the IRA to prove that they were serious about a lasting ceasefire.

Comment

This was a bruising and bad tempered discussion on both sides, although little of this emerged when the two men spoke to the press afterwards. The Prime Minister's tactics of being as difficult as possible about the question of a date, and what he might say in response to Bruton's own reference to a date, finally paid off. Bruton would not budge in discussion, but clearly decided in the end that the Irish side had more to lose from an obvious row about this than we did. The public result was correspondingly satisfactory from our point of view.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington, by fax) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin, by fax).


JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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**REMARKS BY THE TAOISEACH, MR. JOHN BRUTON, T.D.
IN JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE, DOWNING STREET,
MONDAY 9 DECEMBER 1996**

For some time now, the twin objectives of Irish Government policy have been

- the establishment of a truly inclusive process of negotiations, and
- the unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire at the earliest possible moment.

These conditions are necessary to any durable and freely negotiated agreement that will be fair and acceptable to all.

A talks process has been put in place which both Governments want to be inclusive, and which has the potential to lead to a freely negotiated comprehensive settlement, provided there is an unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire.

My Government's position is that if the IRA clearly calls an unequivocal ceasefire, in words that are believable, and provided that events on the ground are consistent with this ceasefire and with the Mitchell Principles, then Sinn Fein should be admitted to participation in the talks.

I would not wish any undue delay in that participation. I would like to believe it would be possible, for example, by the end of January. The onus is on the Republican Movement to restore the ceasefire credibly and at the earliest possible moment. There would be room for useful reciprocal confidence building contacts, after a ceasefire was declared, in which both Governments would be involved.

A productive way forward is possible. All who are willing to negotiate with patience and determination are welcome to take part. For the sake of the people of Ireland and of all in these islands, I call on the republican movement to give us an IRA ceasefire, so that all can negotiate their future together free of threat.

I am not going to speculate about whether a particular date is possible for Sinn Fein to join the talks. [I'm not ruling anything in or out.] That will depend on what is said and done if a dependable ceasefire is declared. Developments on the ground must be consistent with this and with the Mitchell principles of peace and democracy. I certainly share the Taoiseach's desire to see inclusive talks involving all the parties as soon as all concerned have established their commitment to the democratic process and peaceful means. And I share his view that there should be no undue delay in coming to a judgment on this. But, as the Taoiseach also said, the onus must be on the IRA and Sinn Fein to restore their ceasefire credibly and as soon as possible.

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