

CONFIDENTIAL

PRIME MINISTER

CLOSED UNDER THE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION
ACT 2000

From: JOHN HOLMES
Date: 6 December 1996

cc: Mr. Oakden
Mr. Haslam

BRUTON: NORTHERN IRELAND, 1230-1430

Once the European side of the talks is through, i.e. about 1230, the rest of the time is for Anglo-Irish affairs - which won't take long - and Northern Ireland. As I have said in the note on European discussions, Teahon and I have agreed, subject to your views, that we should start with a restricted session, for 30 minutes or so, before a wider discussion over lunch. The restricted session would be you, Mayhew and me on our side (plus possibly Ancram) and Bruton, Spring and Teahon on their side.

The main point of the session would be to agree how to handle the question of Sinn Fein entry, privately and publicly (see my separate note in the box). You will need to steer a very careful line between assuring Bruton that we mean what we say about an invitation to Sinn Fein once the criteria are met, and not misleading him about how definitely you can promise Sinn Fein entry by (say) the end of January. You should make clear that you are not asking him (or Irish officials) to say anything to Sinn Fein of which he is not confident. No good purpose would be served by that.

The other big Northern Ireland issue is decommissioning. We want to find a way through the current procedural impasse. To simplify, the UUP will not accept referring the issue to a sub-committee of the plenary since they believe the nationalist block will prevent it ever coming out again. They also want some prior decommissioning. We suggested in November setting up an

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

independent Commission to look at decommissioning, which would *inter alia* "offer a judgement" on when decommissioning should start. This has some attractions for the UUP.

The Irish rejected this initially with horror - this huge political decision could not be handed over to a non-political body. They still oppose it, but have softened somewhat. They might be brought to live with it if they are convinced it will be accepted by the UUP and pave the way for genuine political talks in the New Year. //

Meanwhile Mitchell is cooking up his own initiative. This is likely also to involve an independent Commission, but without the remit to judge when decommissioning should start. We have told Mitchell this will not do the trick with the UUP.

Our objective for Monday is to persuade the Irish that they should give our approach a fair wind since it offers a real chance of getting through into the three-stranded talks. The UUP are much readier to be flexible now that Sinn Fein's terms of entry are on the table in a way they can live with, and there is a real opportunity for progress.

On the Anglo-Irish (East-West) front, there is not much to say, except pleasure that relations are so much better and all sorts of visits/exchanges are becoming possible. The attached short draft text has been agreed for issue after the Summit. The main point is to improve youth exchanges and other non-governmental links. A particularly sensitive point for the Irish is improved reception for RTE in Northern Ireland. We have no problem with this (nor do the Unionists), as long as the Irish pay for the upgrading of the relay station in Northern Ireland (we think they will agree).

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

The other point to bear in mind is the Taoiseach's own political problems in Dublin - the financial scandal involving Dunnes' payments to Irish politicians. It is not yet clear how far the scandal will spread, or whether Haughey really is the mystery recipient of £1 million.

NIO briefing below, but most of it is not much use. I attach my own checklist. Also below are some basic texts - you may like to glance in particular at those on decommissioning to get the flavour.



John Holmes

f1brut.as

NB Second reading of the Decommissioning Bill is on Monday afternoon.

CONFIDENTIAL