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From the Private Secretary

6 December 1996

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND: 9 DECEMBER SUMMIT

... My letter of last night promised a draft form of words which the Prime Minister could use with the press in Downing Street after the Summit and which we could show to the Irish in advance. I attach a first effort, and would be grateful for comments as soon as possible, so that I can send a text to Paddy Teahon. The Prime Minister has not seen this draft, but it is consistent with his views and his approach to the Summit.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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PRIME MINISTER'S LINE AT 9 DECEMBER PRESS CONFERENCE

We set out our 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 ceasefire. Both Governments are quite clear about that. It is spelled 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. Sir Patrick Mayhew, whose ultimate decision it is, must be satisfied about this before he issues an invitation to join the talks.

What our statement of 28 November did was to make clearer what we shall be looking for. We are not interested in a phoney 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 be consistent with this, in particular 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 ceasefire intended to be for good and exclusively peaceful means. This is no more than common sense.

We have said some time will be needed to establish that these criteria for a genuinely unequivocal ceasefire are being met. We have not said, and cannot logically say, how long this period of time should be. That depends on the IRA and Sinn Fein and what they say and do. So I am not prepared to fix a date or a specific timescale.

But 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 12 or 18 months have no basis in reality. An invitation to Sinn Fein to join the talks could be possible within a relatively short timescale if, and I emphasise again that this is the crucial point, if the requirements are convincingly met.

That is not in our hands, but in the hands of the IRA and Sinn Fein. The way is open for them to join the talks if they choose to take it. This could be in the early part of next year. The sort of timescale the Taoiseach has talked of is by no means ruled out. But that is up to them. 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.