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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

5 December 1996

Dec 4th,

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE APPROACH TO CHRISTMAS

The Prime Minister was very grateful for Sir Patrick Mayhew's minute of 4 December setting out how we should now take matters forward, with a particular eye on the Summit meeting with the Taoiseach on 9 December.

The Prime Minister is broadly content with the approach outlined, with the single but important exception that he is not prepared to set a date for Sinn Fein's entry into the talks. He does not believe doing so would be credible politically, following the Statement of 28 November. The Prime Minister believes that we should stick to the position we have taken, which is that we have not set a timeframe, but are not seeking delay; if the IRA and Sinn Fein say and do the right things according to the criteria, Sinn Fein's invitation to the talks within a relatively short timescale is certainly possible; but the onus is on them to deliver and convince us. He is prepared to make this clear again to the Taoiseach at the Summit (and before, see below) and publicly afterwards.

The Prime Minister is not keen on a formal communiqué on Northern Ireland from the Summit on Monday. This will be an open invitation to Northern Irish Kremlinologists to compare and contrast this document with the texts of 28 February. If the Irish are absolutely insistent on a communiqué, he is prepared to look at this again (and does not have difficulty with the thrust of your draft, with the exception of the last sentence), but we should not offer one.

I should record that I had a preliminary discussion about this with Paddy Teahan last night. He did not press hard for a communiqué and seemed ready to accept that, politically, we could not sign up to a specific date for Sinn Fein's entry. He did say however that if a date could not be publicly set, the Taoiseach would be keen on at least a private understanding with the Prime Minister that, if the IRA and Sinn Fein did the right things, we would not then move the goal posts. I said that I thought the Prime Minister would be

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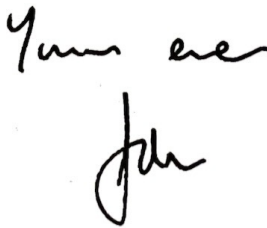
prepared to make this clear to the Taoiseach again, although there could not of course be a secret deal on a date. I propose to confirm this again to Teahon later today, and to suggest that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach should speak on the telephone, perhaps over the weekend in order to agree in advance about press handling of the Summit.

The Prime Minister believes that he and the Taoiseach should be able to agree on what they will say to the press after the Summit on the point at issue. They may well not say exactly the same thing, since the Taoiseach is bound to repeat his preference for a specific date. But this need not cause particular difficulty if both sides are clear in advance how this is going to be handled and how it will be presented subsequently.

Teahon said incidentally that the Irish position was now clearly on the public record, following the Taoiseach's statement in the Dail yesterday (I have faxed you a copy). But he added that Sinn Fein's position was not so clear. He could not guarantee that Sinn Fein would declare a ceasefire even if we offered a date for entry to the talks. He thought it was likely, but it was not certain.

I would be grateful for a speaking note for the Prime Minister's use with the Taoiseach, covering the decommissioning point too.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish below the name.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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