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*File*  
SUBJECT  
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

4 December 1996

*Dear Gen*

### HUME PROPOSALS

John Hume talked to the Prime Minister in the House of Commons late last night, first of all together with Dr Paisley (they raised BSE and the Education Boards in predictable terms), then alone. The Prime Minister's PPS was present for part of the time, and I have only had a brief account of what passed.

Hume said that he thought a new ceasefire next week was possible, if Sinn Fein could be sure of getting into the talks relatively quickly. If we could agree to see Sinn Fein quickly after a ceasefire at official/Ministerial level, Sinn Fein signed up to the Mitchell principles, and the IRA stopped activities on the ground, an agreed date for Sinn Fein's entry could be brokered by the time Mitchell reconvened the talks. Hume also seemed to talk about the possibility of bilaterals between Sinn Fein and the parties as part of this process (but see below).

The Prime Minister made clear that he could not set a date for Sinn Fein's entry to the talks in advance of a ceasefire. He also made clear his strong doubts about the likelihood of bilaterals between Sinn Fein and the other parties taking place, or leading anywhere helpful if they did.

Hume's basic thesis, having talked again to Adams, was that the Republican leadership were casting around for ways of producing a new ceasefire and genuinely feared they would be overthrown by the hardliners if there were not some movement soon.

I spoke to Hume this afternoon, to try to get a clearer picture of what he had been saying. I am afraid this was only a partial success. On Hume's own account, what he had been trying to tell the Prime Minister was the difficulties he saw in the process we had suggested in our statement for the lead-up to Sinn Fein's entry into the talks. He saw difficulties in the proposed bilateral talks part of this, because the Unionists would not cooperate (in other words, the same point the Irish have made to us).

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Hume confirmed again that the main difficulty was the absence of a timeframe for Sinn Fein's entry into the talks, since otherwise they feared another 18-month wait. He also repeated the fear, which he said had been voiced to him specifically by both Adams and McGuinness, that the present "moderate" leadership would be overthrown if no progress was made soon. I repeated to Hume that I did not see how the Prime Minister could promise entry by a particular date. But no timeframe was ruled out, and we had made a genuine offer.

Hume said he hoped the Prime Minister could make another statement using the language on terms of entry and decommissioning in his 10 October text (!). I said that this would not be possible, but I don't think it really went in. Hume could see nothing wrong with his language.

Hume also said that he was going to go back to Adams and McGuinness to argue very strongly that they should declare a ceasefire and, if they did not trust the Prime Minister, at least call his bluff. He personally believed in the Prime Minister's sincerity, although he also saw him as a prisoner of his Parliamentary situation. But how could the IRA/Sinn Fein convince us that they were serious? I said the language of a ceasefire declaration would be important, together with what was said and done after that. Hume said he had suggested a two-sentence form of words to Sinn Fein, which included all four meanings of "permanent" given by the Oxford Dictionary.

Hume added that he had also asked to meet the PIRA PAC, to urge them to call a ceasefire. I suggested to him that he might find he had met some of them already, which he seemed to find a surprising thought.

#### Comment

I imagine his Sinn Fein interlocutors must find him at least as frustrating as we do. To be fair, he is taking us at our word that all doors are still open and is not simply repeating the mantra that we must fix a date for Sinn Fein's entry. But he is in danger of simply sowing confusion rather than being helpful.

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

*Yours ever*

JOHN HOLMES

*John*

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