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From: JOHN HOLMES

Date: 4 December 1996

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

NIO advice on how to handle next Monday's Summit has finally arrived. It has been much mulled over and you owe it to Paddy Mayhew to read it carefully.

The bottom line is that the NIO want to bow to Irish/US pressure to fix at the Summit a date by which Sinn Fein could enter the talks if they declared a ceasefire and met all the criteria we have set out. They say that this is fully compatible with last Tuesday's statement, and that Trimble has said things which suggest he could live with this. Both are, to my mind, dubious at best.

Trimble was indeed conciliatory in Washington (see attached Embassy account of his meeting with Lake), and suggested Sinn Fein entry "within a few weeks" was possible. But he rang me from Washington to say that he was disturbed by the US attitude and the possible implications for Monday's Summit. He may come to see me on his return to London tomorrow. I think he will be very opposed to setting a timeframe in advance of a ceasefire. So will many of your backbenchers.

In any case, you have made clear (as I have told the NIO) that you will not set a date. And you could not do so without NI clearance, which might not be forthcoming.

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So how do we handle the Summit? Should we try for a communiqué at all? I am nervous about the idea. It will be crawled over by everyone to look where we have shifted our position since last Thursday, and conceded ground to the Irish.

It would be possible to have a shorter communiqué which ended after para 7 of the present draft, or half way through para 9. We could look for more weaselly wording. But this would be hard to negotiate, still vulnerable to Kremlinology, and the negotiation might in any case only bring out areas of disagreement. So I am not attracted to a communiqué. You and Bruton will of course need to speak to the press and will need to agree a general line. But the line need not be exactly the same for both of you.

I had a word with Teahon this evening about all this, to say that we needed to agree on handling in advance of the Summit. I explained (again) that setting a date in advance of a ceasefire looked politically impossible for us and that I was doubtful, to say the least, about any idea of a communiqué. But I added that our position remained that if the IRA and Sinn Fein declared an unequivocal ceasefire quickly, and said and did the right things thereafter, an invitation to Sinn Fein on the sort of timescale they wanted remained possible.

✓ Good  
Teahon (who was glad to hear from me) said that he understood our position.

... The Irish position had also now been spelt out clearly (see the attached text of the Taoiseach's statement to the Dail). Sinn Fein's position was not so clear.

Robert ✓ || He could not guarantee 100% that, if a date was fixed as the Irish wanted, this would bring about a ceasefire. But it was more than likely.

Teahon went on to suggest that, even if we could not fix a date publicly, he thought there needed to be a degree of "private understanding" between you and

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That's OK.

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the Taoiseach that, if the IRA did declare a ceasefire and do the right things, we would not move the goalposts. I said that I would reflect on this. Certainly your position was a genuine one, and you would be prepared to make that clear to the Taoiseach, and to say that we would not depart from the approach we had set out. But you would obviously also be wary of anything which smacked of a secret deal.

I hope we can talk this through for a few minutes in the morning. Despite US and Irish pressure I believe we are not badly placed. But the NIO are rightly concerned that where we are will not achieve a ceasefire, and are looking for a way through. I simply do not think their way through is politically credible. (It isn't) And I remain unconvinced that we can go down the US road of getting Sinn Fein signed up in advance before we go public on a date. The Americans continue to push this very hard.

My instinct therefore is to tell the NIO that

- ✓ - you are not prepared to set a timeframe in advance of a ceasefire;
- ✓ - you are not keen on a formal communiqué, which will only invite comparison with our 28 February statement;
- ✓ - you are prepared to tell the Irish again, and hint more clearly in public (ie talking to the press in Downing Street after the Summit) that if the IRA and Sinn Fein do their stuff properly, you do not rule out Sinn Fein's invitation to the talks within a relatively short timescale;
- ✓ - but the onus must be on them to deliver and convince us;

(I've said that: I'll repeat it!)

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- you want to talk to the Taoiseach on the telephone in advance about handling the Summit, and particularly the press angle, so that false expectations are not aroused and to assure him again that movement on the timescale suggested is possible, although you are not prepared to set a date in advance (you could do this at the weekend). ✓

If we are going to tell the NIO to get lost (again), I think you ought to have a word with Paddy on the telephone or in the margins of Cabinet to explain why. ✓

*John*

**JOHN HOLMES**

4 December 1996

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