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6 December, 1996.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

COPY TO:	46
PST	12
PSS	
MR. P TEAHON	
MR. S. DONLON	
MR. T DALTON	

Dear Secretary,

Conversations with John Chilcot and John Holmes

I met John Chilcot, Permanent Under Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, for an hour at his office in Admiralty Buildings this morning. Chilcot was accompanied by Quentin Thomas. I also had a brief discussion with John Holmes who telephoned me about some of the practical arrangements for Monday's meeting. The main points are outlined below.

John Chilcot

I went over our position on the publication of the Prime Minister's statement in terms similar to those at my meeting with John Holmes last week. I emphasised that in our view an important opportunity had been missed to set out a realistic scenario for a restoration of the IRA ceasefire and the entry of Sinn Féin to inclusive talks. It seemed to me that one of the central questions for the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister on Monday would be the entry conditions for Sinn Féin and in particular the issue of a fixed date.

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Chilcot replied by saying that while both Governments were in agreement on the objective of inclusive negotiations there was an important difference of approach. For the British the important thing was to make the talks "as inclusive as possible" and to avoid actions that would reduce the numbers participating. The Irish side on the other hand seemed to lay greater emphasis on restoring the ceasefire and the early entry of Sinn Féin even if the conditions in which this were achieved had the effect of alienating others from the talks process. Thomas said that he would put it more bluntly. In his view the Irish Government's overriding objective of bringing Sinn Féin in had led us to adopt a "vacillating" position on the entry conditions which had been difficult for the British to handle. At one point we had spoken about a two to three week period before Sinn Féin's entry; then we had moved to a demand for immediate entry; subsequently we appeared to accept two months with the creative use of the Christmas period. Our final position of last week, which was put to the British side only in the last hours of the process, was better and clearer but it had come too late. Chilcot added that if we had arrived at our final position earlier the British response might have been different and "we might be having a different conversation today".

I said that throughout the discussions there had been one constant on the Irish side: the need for certainty on Sinn Féin's entry into the talks and the need to treat Sinn Féin on terms of equality with the other parties. The question of a specific time period, while important, was subservient to those requirements. Any changes in our position in this respect were made in response to changes on the British side. I could not accept that our approach had been vacillating.

The discussion then turned to Monday's meeting. Following on from the points made above Chilcot said that he hoped that there were no illusions in "your system" about the Prime Minister's position on a fixed date for Sinn Féin's entry to talks. Major would not be able to agree to a fixed date at the meeting with the Taoiseach on Monday and it would be "fruitless" to pursue one. I noted this position but repeated that in our view this was what was required to bring about an IRA ceasefire and I felt sure that the Taoiseach would be as firm on this on Monday as the Prime Minister would be on his position. I asked if the British side would be prepared to consider language that would envisage the entry into talks on the resumption of negotiations in the New Year. Chilcot said that this amounted to a fixed date and would not run. He went on to emphasise two points

- first, that the Prime Minister in his correspondence with the Taoiseach

had been at pains to point out that he was not closing doors but leaving them open. His statement on 27 November had specifically "envisaged" Sinn Féin's entry to negotiations at the end of the process he had outlined.

- second, on the question of "certainty", he pointed out that under the legislation the Secretary of State had to make the decision on Sinn Féin's entry. Once Sinn Féin met the conditions the legislative requirement on the Secretary of State to admit them was mandatory not discretionary. Thus even if the political assessment was that the Unionist parties would walk away from the talks on Sinn Féin's entry Mayhew could not take that into account once Sinn Féin met the conditions specified in the legislation. He would have no option.

Chilcot said that the British side did not envisage a communique after Monday's meeting. It was unlikely that the two sides could reach agreement on a substantive joint text with new content. In the circumstances they thought it would be better for the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister to try to agree on what they might say individually afterwards which would help the process.

Chilcot also said that the Prime Minister would want to discuss and compare notes on the future of the Belfast negotiations if there is no ceasefire. They had doubts and real fears about the SDLP's willingness to enter into substantive negotiations in the three strands in the absence of Sinn Féin. There was still a great deal to do, especially on decommissioning. In this connection they did not rule out the latest Mitchell ideas. But the proposals in their present form were not acceptable to the UUP. Mitchell knew this. They viewed his proposals as part of a series of successive approximations towards agreement on how to handle decommissioning. We were not there yet and further efforts were needed. I said that we were considering Mitchell's latest ideas. They might have certain attractions but they had the disadvantage of bringing decommissioning up front in the talks. What was clear was that we could not accept the British ideas which would give the Verification Commission the call on when arms should be handed over.

Chilcot asked me for our views on the possibility of another IRA ceasefire. I said that we were still working on the basis that in the right conditions a ceasefire might be obtainable. However, I thought that there could be no doubt that the events of the past week or so represented a setback to our hopes in this area. That was why the meeting on Monday was so important.

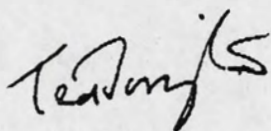
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At the end of our conversation Thomas emphasised the need for the two Governments to find a way to act together. We had done so after Canary Wharf and Manchester, in setting up the talks, and in the various agreements that had been reached in the talks to date. In his view the effect of the Hume initiative had been to put a wedge between us. By putting the Irish Government in a position to press their demands Sinn Féin had achieved their objective of splitting us.

John Holmes

Holmes in our telephone conversation confirmed the line taken by Chilcot about the impossibility of the Prime Minister's agreeing to a fixed date either in public or private. He said that he was drafting language which he would fax to Paddy Teahon this afternoon as a basis for discussion on Monday as to what the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach would say to the press.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington
Ambassador