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28 November 1996

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

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COPY TO:
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MR. P TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T DALTON

Dear Secretary

Conversation with Jonathan Stephens

Jonathan Stephens, Associate Political Director at the NIO, has telephoned me to make the following points:

- * today's statement is not intended to rule out any particular timescale or scenario
- * the reply to Andrew Hunter in the Commons, echoed in the covering statement ("Government Statement on Northern Ireland"), was designed to allude to the Taoiseach's ideas about the Christmas break and 30th January
- * the Taoiseach's ideas are not ruled out: it was only in the course of today that their full significance became apparent, leaving very little time to react
- * the British Government hopes that all sides will avoid hasty judgements and reactions
- * there is no intention on the British side to "bring an end to the initiative". There is "all to play for". Today's British statement is "not conclusive in itself".

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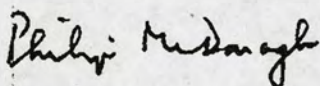
Stephens argued that Adams' comments to the press on Tuesday night made it difficult for the British side to continue the dialogue without an on-the-record statement. To have done so, or to have published a statement different to that conveyed to John Hume last weekend, would have exposed the British side to the charge of negotiating with the IRA.

Stephens noted a statement by Mitchel McLoughlin this morning that the British attitude is ambiguous and requires clarification. Stephens welcomed the implications of McLoughlin's statement. The British analysis is that what will determine the ceasefire, if there is one, is only partly to do with today's statement.

I expressed disappointment as to the content of the British statement, the handling of contacts with Dublin, and in particular the failure to take up what I took to be direct proposals from the Taoiseach.

Stephens claimed that there was no time to address the Taoiseach's proposals today and that nothing precludes their further consideration. He hoped that we would appeal in private to Sinn Fein to suspend judgement and to explore the present opportunity to take things forward. He also hoped that we would be able to counteract the suspicion which would inevitably exist in that quarter about British intentions.

Yours sincerely



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor