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FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
ASSOCIATE POLITICAL DIRECTOR (L)
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PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

cc PS/Michael Ancram (L&B)
PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Steele
Mr Thomas (L&B)
Mr Bell
Mr Leach
Mr Ray
Mr Watkins
Mr Beeton
Mr Brooker
Mr Hill (L&B)
Mr Lavery
Mr Maccabe
Mr Budd, Cabinet Office
HMA, Dublin
Mr Lamont, RID



DINNER WITH IRISH OFFICIALS: THURSDAY 16 JANUARY

Taking advantage of a visit to Dublin on other business (reported elsewhere), PUS, Mr Thomas and myself (accompanied by the Ambassador) had dinner last Thursday evening with Paddy Teahon, Tim Dalton, David Donoghue and Wally Kirwan in Government Buildings. (Sean O hUiginn was elsewhere, attending an IFI Board Meeting but Mr Thomas saw him separately the next day.) The occasion was a relaxed and amiable one, with both sides agreeing on the usefulness of a general review of the situation on both the peace and talks fronts. I did not take notes at the time, but this note records the key points that emerged over the course of the evening.

Peace and Hume/Adams

2. Early on, the Irish side asked if we had received a fresh text from Hume. We confirmed that we had and that it was a re-working of the 10 October text, apparently ignoring our own statement of 27 November. We did not give the Irish side a copy of the text, nor

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discuss the specific amendments incorporated into it. But we indicated that they could be interpreted as an attempt to move in the right direction, particularly with the indication that Sinn Fein would be prepared to accept the existing rules and agreements in the talks process, albeit one that still fell far short of what was required. Whatever the intention behind it, however, our view was that any attempt to resurrect an approach based on the 10 October text - which inevitably meant HMG renegotiating the 27 November statement - was fundamentally flawed. The Secretary of State would have to tell John Hume this when he met him (as we then thought, later that evening).

3. At the same time, we expected that the Secretary of State would also want to reassure John Hume that HMG remained committed to keeping a way open by which Sinn Fein could join the political process on fair and proper terms. Indeed, it was not widely understood - least of all by Sinn Fein - that the British Government was under a legal obligation, if the requirements of paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Ground Rules were met, to bring Sinn Fein into the negotiations even if that meant unionists leaving at the same time (obviously not an outcome we sought). If there remained any opportunity for securing a genuine ceasefire, the Government would take that seriously. The message for Mr Hume therefore would be that, while any approach based on reviving the 10 October text would not work, we remained open to alternative approaches. On that basis, had the Irish any ideas?

4. This candour elicited a frank account of the Irish Government's decision that there should no longer be direct contacts between the Irish Government and Sinn Fein unless the Irish Government were assured that a genuine ceasefire were imminent and that there were a number of practical matters which required discussion by means of such direct contacts. Nevertheless, the Irish Government had obviously received accounts via Mr Hume and knew of the approach based on revising the 10 October text (they seemed not to have seen any revised text): the Irish side had counselled against such an approach as requiring HMG to resile from its 27 November statement

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which was politically unrealistic. The Irish side were disappointed (but not, it seemed, greatly surprised) to hear that their advice had been ignored.

5. The Irish side urged that if there was anything at all positive in the revised text then we should if at all possible build upon it, while moving away from an approach based on the 10 October text, which they agreed would not work. They confirmed their assessment that Sinn Fein attached greater importance to the certainty of a date on which they would join the negotiations following an unequivocal ceasefire, than the immediacy of the date - providing negotiations were not continuing in the meantime which would confront them with an awkward presentational problem. They said this had become clear in the run up to the 27 November statement (and we gently chided them for their own shifts of position at that time).

6. Both sides noted that, even if the talks continued well into February, the two elections in Northern Ireland were likely to mean that talks would be suspended for a period of around 3 months and possibly longer. We said that this might offer opportunities to increase the certainty which Sinn Fein could be offered on the date they would enter negotiations if an IRA ceasefire met the required criteria. Realistically, 3 months should be long enough to reach a considered view on whether any ceasefire met the criteria we had set out. But we emphasised that any attempt to bridge the "narrow but deep gap" which remained with Sinn Fein first of all required an absence of terrorist attacks on the ground without which it was difficult to take any approach seriously. We also pointed out that if Sinn Fein were looking for greater certainty about HMG's intentions, we were also looking for greater certainty about the IRA's. The current level of attacks only cast more doubt on whether republicans generally wished to join the political process on the terms we had in mind. If Ministers were to work for an approach which might deliver a genuine ceasefire, they would be looking for some indication in advance as to the nature of any ceasefire and the intention behind it.

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7. We noted that any attempt to use the period of suspension in the talks over the elections to construct an agreed basis for a ceasefire might require some understanding that it would be implemented by any party which won the election. We counselled that this was an area which required care and that the right approach was for the Irish Government to work with HMG, who would need to decide whether and how to consult others. The Irish side recognised the sensitivities.

Talks

8. We spent rather less time on the talks process. The Irish side had had an account from Mr Barrington of Mr Trimble's conversation with Mr Thomas at the US Embassy in London. Inevitably, they were sceptical about UUP intentions and the possibility of a deal on decommissioning this side of the election.

9. The Irish side seem to have picked up the notion that we were taking the view that the talks process could not be successfully parked for the election without a deal on decommissioning. We corrected this noting that, while we believed there remained a prospect of a deal and we would be using our best endeavours to achieve one, it remained our overriding objective to keep the talks process in being. If there could be no decommissioning deal, we would still be working to see the talks parked on a satisfactory and agreed basis.

10. We stressed to the Irish side that if there was any prospect of securing UUP support for an agreement on how to tackle decommissioning, that would require the UUP to have some faith in the Irish Government's seriousness on the issue. This meant some assurance that the Irish Government would look to see actual decommissioning during negotiations and were prepared to use sanctions, or at least moral persuasion, to achieve it.

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11. The occasion was a relaxed one. It also proved a useful configuration on the Irish side, with Tim Dalton making much of the running for them and David Donoghue uneasily trying to maintain DFA orthodoxy. Paddy Teahon ending by suggesting that it was the sort of occasion which could usefully be repeated and we concurred, noting afterwards that it was the first time we had successfully engaged Teahon himself in this sort of informal dialogue with the NIO.

12. It is worth recording that Teahon himself told one telling anecdote. He explained we were having dinner in the room in which many of the meetings between Adams and the Taoiseach had occurred. At one such meeting Teahon had found himself cutting across Adams a few times. On the third occasion, Adams had turned to him and said: "If you worked for me, I should soon settle you."

(Signed JAS)

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