



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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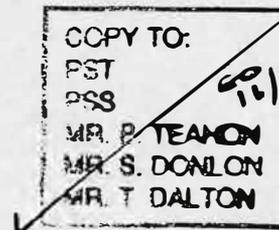
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*Caps*

27

13 December 1996

Mr Sean O hUiginn  
Second Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
HQ



Dear Secretary

**Conversation with Jonathan Stephens,  
Associate Political Director at the Northern Ireland Office**

Jonathan Stephens invited me to lunch today at Alistair Little's in Soho. My wife and I are to be at a party at the Stephens' tomorrow evening. Today's lunch was to obviate the temptation to embroil ourselves in a business discussion on that occasion.

**Monday's Summit**

Stephens said that the Prime Minister is greatly appreciative of the "straight manner" in which the Taoiseach conducted Monday's press conference outside Downing Street. It is well understood by the Prime Minister that Monday was a disappointment for the Irish side. In his report to Cabinet this week, Mr Major said that the manner in which the Taoiseach responded in what was for him a difficult situation is a very good augury for their future relationship.

Stephens said that the decision to refuse a fixed date, "whether it was right or wrong", should not be interpreted as a sign that the Prime Minister is resisting an inclusive peace process. The Prime Minister sincerely believes, independently of other factors which have been adverted to by commentators, that he must avoid being taken in by the IRA - as Major sees it, for the second time.

2

I put to Stephens the argument that the British Government has breached an understanding contained in the Ground Rules paper.

Stephens advanced two counter-arguments, one general and one specific. His general argument was that on other occasions over the past three years, for example in the run-up to the Downing Street Declaration and on the decommissioning issue, the impression took root that the British Government was yielding to the Unionists. These fears have ultimately proved unfounded.

More specifically, Stephens reminded me that the Thiepval barracks bomb on 7 October was followed immediately, on 10 October, by a new Hume/Adams draft. The psychological effect of this on ministers - of what Stephens, in boxing terminology, described as a "right followed by a left" - should not be underestimated. The idea of a time period was introduced at that time not as a means of undermining Hume/Adams but as the only possible way of securing Cabinet support for continued British engagement with Hume's initiative.

### **IRA intentions**

Stephens said that since July, there has been speculation in the British system that the IRA may have already decided on a ceasefire and have been using the Hume/Adams paper as a means of extracting some extra benefit. This reasoning is based on the nature of Hume's ideas, which do not seem so radical that in themselves they would produce a change of direction in the republican movement. [Comment: I recall that Quentin Thomas made this point to Ambassador Barrington some time ago.]

At this point, Stephens finds it hard to read IRA intentions. The recent aborted operations could be a sign of "rustiness" within the IRA, but can also be interpreted as warnings. However, the impression that is being created of IRA inefficiency puts pressure on the organisation to carry out a real attack. Moreover there are indications that instructions of some kind have been given regarding a resumption of hostilities on a fairly large scale.

Having said all this, Stephens believes that nothing is certain and that it is worth while to continue joint British/Irish efforts to bring about a ceasefire leading to Sinn Fein participation in negotiations.

### **A "pro-Major" or "anti-Major" ceasefire**

I speculated that one option for the republican movement is a ceasefire adopted "unilaterally", aimed more at the elections than at participation in the present talks process. Borrowing a phrase that came up yesterday in our conversation with Mo Mowlam, I said that this could be described as an "anti-Major" ceasefire.

Stephens expressed a strong preference for a ceasefire brought about on foot of Hume /Adams and the 28 November statement. This would be likely to be a more convincing ceasefire than the first variant. It would also offer more hope for the future of the negotiations. Furthermore, Stephens joked that it could hardly be described as "pro-Major" if it is Sinn Fein's belief that Mr Major doesn't want them in the talks!

### **The Prime Minister's position**

Stephens said that he is confident that the Prime Minister would quickly invite Sinn Fein into negotiations if there is a genuine ceasefire. Mr Major's present position is a somewhat personal one, based on the fact that he was "burned" over Manchester and Lisburn. From personal knowledge, Stephens said he was in a position to affirm that the Prime Minister remains deeply committed to the project which began with the Downing Street Declaration and will do what is morally and politically possible to bring it to fruition.

Stephens said that the Prime Minister is aware that a ceasefire will not be a "black and white" affair. That is why, in the Prime Minister's statement of 28 November, it is said that surveillance, targetting, and weapons preparation would be "directly relevant". The judgement would not be absolute. There could be a facility for contact between Sinn Fein and the British Government to discuss any particular incident and reassure others that the British Government would not be making a "private judgement". Stephens remarked that the likeliest kind of incident to arise would be the targetting of a loyalist politician. Such incidents often come to light because of informal contacts by Unionists with members of the RUC.

Stephens added that the Prime Minister is clear in his mind that a ceasefire would not mean an overnight transformation of the IRA. It would be more like a shift of gears or a change of approach which one could hope to build on by drawing the republican movement into political negotiations.

### The position of the Unionists

Note || Stephens expressed certainty that the position of the Unionists will not be a barrier to bringing Sinn Fein into inclusive negotiations. The Prime Minister will not allow the Unionists to deflect him from inviting Sinn Fein to the negotiations if the ceasefire is genuine.

Moreover, Stephens is almost equally certain that the Unionists themselves would wish under those circumstances to remain at the table. Trimble seems to have given an indication of this in Washington. More significantly, the latest UUP /SDLP/Alliance accommodation on decommissioning suggests that the UUP are on the verge of a decision to allow the three stranded negotiations to begin before the General Election. If this proves to be the case, it becomes increasingly improbable that the UUP will want to fundamentally disrupt the process in the new year.

As to why the UUP have come to this decision, Stephens speculated that the paper of 28 November has given them sufficient cover on the question of Sinn Fein entry into negotiations to allow them to be more flexible on decommissioning.

But it may also be the case that the UUP negotiators may face an unexpected challenge from within the party. The NIO has no specific information but is aware of the precedents. In Stephens' view it would be very valuable if the SDLP could rapidly concede to the UUP on the language which is still bracketed because

- \* overall, the package is much closer to SDLP than to UUP views
- \* the sentence, "all aspects of decommissioning" can be interpreted under the Mitchell Report as including other confidence-building measures
- \* an SDLP offer of this kind will greatly strengthen the hand of the UUP members who negotiated the package against possible critics in the party.

Provided the obstructionism of Paisley and McCartney can be kept within bounds, there is now a prospect of concluding the opening plenary before Christmas. In that case, the appointment of the members of the Independent Commission could occupy the whole of the month of January and provide the basis for delaying the resumption of negotiations until then. In this context, Stephens remarked that the Americans seem to believe that even a date at the end of February for Sinn Fein's entry into negotiations might be acceptable to the republican movement. I surmised that this would be on the basis that the talks themselves were not resumed until then.

5

Stephens believes that the agreement on decommissioning, on terms acceptable to the SDLP, should provide another incentive for an IRA ceasefire.

He also remarked that with three stranded negotiations in prospect, Senator Mitchell may be prevailed upon to remain in Northern Ireland next year.

### Conservative Party

*Correct!* As to attitudes in the Conservative Party, Stephens said that the determination of the Prime Minister is a more important factor than the disposition of individual right-wing MPs.

### Assurances for Sinn Fein

Stephens said that he has been giving some thought to ways in which the British Government could provide further assurances for Sinn Fein without going back on the Prime Minister's opposition to a fixed date.

#### - *The wording of the cessation of violence*

*Stephens said that if Sinn Fein can clarify the manner in which the IRA would be ready to strengthen the announcement of a cessation as compared to 1994 this could create room for movement on the British side.*

*I asked what wording he had in mind. Without being ready to engage in drafting, Stephens said that he has two elements in mind:*

- \* as proposed in the 28 November statement, there should be some kind of statement of purpose implying that a ceasefire would last*
- \* the cessation of military operations could include a reference to an end to the "planning and preparation" of military activities*

*The latter phrase would "shift the onus of proof" as regards IRA conduct on the ground. There would be a presumption that targetting and surveillance would be ended.*

*I asked Stephens whether wording of this kind would enable the Prime Minister to say in turn that, "if such language is used, the intention of the British*

6

*Government would be to see Sinn Fein in the negotiations within X weeks." Stephens said that this is his own thinking but that he would not mislead me by implying that it would definitely be accepted by ministers.*

***- A role for third parties***

*A second avenue of approach would be for third parties to promise Sinn Fein that "they would not be alone" in the event of a ceasefire. The Irish Government has already said something like this, in our response on 28 November. The SDLP might have a role. The Americans might be willing to act as guarantors of the good faith of both Sinn Fein and the British Government.*

***- A meeting between the British Government and Sinn Fein***

*Stephens said that the option of a meeting between the British Government and Sinn Fein remains open, although for some reason it has not been taken up. While British ministers have not formally agreed to sanction such a meeting, Stephens said that we could assume it is possible if*

- \* the British side can say that Sinn Fein requested the meeting*
- \* the meeting is "publicly avowed", probably shortly after the event*
- \* the meeting is regarded as explanatory or exploratory rather than as a negotiation.*

I asked Stephens whether his three ideas for reassuring Sinn Fein could be combined. What, for example, if the Americans were to convene a meeting at which the British side could offer Sinn Fein some of the explanations that Stephens was offering me?

Stephens said that this would require some thought. In principle he saw no objection, provided that it were still possible for the British to say that they were not negotiating.

7

**The IRA and the worst-case hypothesis**

I drew Stephens' attention to the unfortunate impression created in the minds of Sinn Fein by such things as Sean O'Callaghan's frequent media appearances, the Daily Telegraph editorial about "destroying" the IRA, and alarmist reports of IRA activity.

I made it clear that I was referring to a perception. I personally found it strange that those who sponsor the idea that the IRA can keep the peace and war options fully open right up to the moment of a ceasefire, are indignant at signs of a similarly ambiguous approach within parts of the British Government.

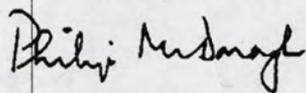
Stephens argued that the release of O'Callaghan had been in train for some time and was not part of an orchestrated series of events. By way of illustration, Stephens added that today's story about Home Office complaints on the handling of prisoner transfers by the Irish authorities came as a complete surprise to the NIO and was most definitely not part of any political strategy.

As to the substance of Sean O'Callaghan's thesis, Stephens said that he personally is not persuaded. Quite apart from his own experience in this domain, Stephens is convinced from a Christian point of view that reaching out to people and engaging with them enables change to take place.

**A Greek tragedy**

Stephens said that his greatest fear is that we are implicated in what he described as a Greek tragedy. Despite goodwill in all camps, events themselves seem out of control, driving people to kill. We may soon have to contend with the chaos of IRA and Loyalist violence interacting. The greatest tragedy of all is that as the slide downwards gathers pace, and the need to meet one another becomes all the more urgent, dialogue becomes harder and harder to arrange.

Yours sincerely



**Philip McDonagh**  
Counsellor