



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

**Reference Code:** 2021/99/6

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AMBASAID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



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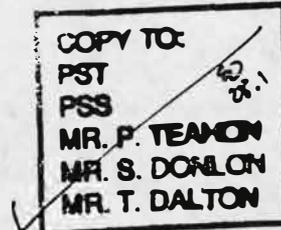
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27 January, 1997.

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



*passed to  
the Taoiseach  
28/1/97*

Dear Secretary,

**Conversation with John Holmes**

As discussed I met John Holmes for about an hour at 10 Downing St. this afternoon. The purpose of the meeting was to review developments since the meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in December, to review the current state of the peace process, and to establish what the Prime Minister might have had in mind when he indicated on BBC Radio Ulster last Wednesday that he thought he could "see some ways in which we can make progress" and that he could "see a way in which we can proceed". Following are the main points.

**Prime Minister's Remarks**

I asked Holmes if the Prime Minister had intended to signal a new initiative, if it related to the two main problems in the talks (entry conditions for Sinn Féin and decommissioning), and if there were ideas about timing. Holmes said that he thought that more was being read into the Prime Minister's words than they deserved or than the Prime Minister intended. Major was speaking off the cuff

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and these aspects of his remarks had been unscripted. He had not been briefed along these lines and had not indicated in advance what he intended to say. Such ideas as the Prime Minister had did not relate to the details of the current Belfast talks and they had no new proposals on the two issues that I had mentioned. He was reluctant to speculate further. Pressed a bit Holmes said that what the Prime Minister was referring to was the possible need to take the initiative at some point in the future if the parties to the Belfast talks failed to agree. But any such approach, if it were to happen, would certainly not be before the General Election. He asked if thought was being given in Dublin to how to proceed in the event of continued deadlock.

I said that the problems in the two areas I had indicated continued to worry us and we did not see any easy or early way through. I agreed that it was difficult to see the political parties themselves coming up with a solution. In these circumstances I thought that Dublin would consider very seriously indeed any proposal for an agreed initiative by the two Governments to break the deadlock. Of course any such approach would need to be founded on the basic principles already agreed, in particular the Downing St. Declaration, the Framework Documents, and the ground rules for the talks. Holmes did not disagree but he repeated the tentative nature of the Prime Minister's ideas and the point that any initiative would be for the post election period.

I asked if there were any possibility of the Prime Minister's making a statement of policy after the dissolution of Parliament when he would be free of Westminster arithmetic and perhaps less constrained by Parliamentary pressures than he is now. Holmes said that he could see the thought behind such an idea but felt it most unlikely that the Prime Minister would want to make a major departure on policy on Northern Ireland when the House was not sitting.

### Entry Conditions

Holmes confirmed that the position set out by the Prime Minister at the December Summit on the conditions for Sinn Féin's entry into talks stood; indeed it had been reinforced by recent IRA activities. The conditions had been publicly stated and he did not see any hope of adjustment. The proposals "being hawked around" by John Hume added nothing and were a non runner. They did not provide a basis for a new Prime Ministerial statement. He said that the idea had arisen (in discussions with Hume?) of the Prime Minister's

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replying to questions from Hume in order to clarify the Government's position. While he did not rule out such an approach he felt that there was really very little to add to what had been said already.

### Decommissioning

Holmes said that the main problem on decommissioning lay with the UUP. Frankly, and notwithstanding some signals from Trimble of a possible softening, he did not think that Trimble would be in a position to alter his approach (on prior handover and schedule) in advance of the election. To do so would risk handing the initiative to the DUP and the UKUP; Trimble would not take that risk. There had been some optimism on this point in the Northern Ireland Office but he did not share it. The best hope of a change in the UUP position would come after the election. The current electoral pressures on Trimble would no longer be there and he would be in a better position to face up to Paisley and McCartney. He thought also that the arrival at Westminster of a Government (of whatever hue) with a substantial majority would affect the climate, or psychology, of the Belfast negotiations.

### Suspension of the Belfast Talks

The discussion then turned to the question of suspension of the Belfast talks for the election period. Holmes said that the position might be clearer at the end of this week but he wondered whether there was much steam left in the current round, particularly if no real progress could be made on decommissioning. He was doubtful that proposals for discussions on economic and social questions could fill the void. At the same time it was important not to damage the process or to give succour to those who would like to see it fail. If the decommissioning block could not be removed then the question was: under what conditions are the talks suspended and at what time? We could take it that the British would wish a suspension that preserved the process intact for a post electoral resumption. On timing much depended on the General Election. A mid-February suspension would relate well to a March election and, possibly, with Easter intervening, to an April poll also. It would be more difficult credibly to bridge the distance between mid-February and a 1 May polling date.

### IRA Activities

Holmes repeated the views of Mayhew to me some days ago that the British believe that the IRA have resumed their campaign in Northern Ireland and that it is "for real". For electoral and broader strategic reasons the IRA will not target civilians and will try to avoid civilian casualties but they will target the RUC and the Army with intent to kill. He speculated a little on IRA intentions in Britain itself, "on the mainland" as he put it, but wondered if the leadership would wish to invoke the kind of security response that would be inevitable in the heightened atmosphere of an election campaign.

### North Report

I asked if there would be a prompt legislative response to the North recommendations. Holmes said that he was not free to discuss the terms of the report but that there would be an early public response welcoming North's findings and indicating that the Government intended to have further consultations. Proposals relating to the powers of the police and the role of the Secretary of State would require Parliamentary debate and legislation (i.e. not Orders in Council) and he did not see this happening in the current Parliament. Other recommendations would not need legislation. The setting up of an independent commission, for example, would not necessarily require legislative action, but clearly any such body would require the widest possible support and trust. He did not anticipate a positive Unionist response to the Report's findings which, he said, had not been discussed with the UUP leader.

### Overall Outlook

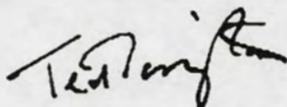
Although Holmes made the by now ritualistic remarks about the Prime Minister's commitment to the process and the observation that progress could still be made, he did not conceal his view that little of substance can be done between now and the general election. He said that in general Ministers' minds were almost exclusively focussed on election politics and that Whitehall had virtually "closed down" when it came to Governmental or legislative initiatives.

As a good Civil Servant Holmes would not proffer an opinion on who might occupy Downing Street after the election. But I did detect a resigned view that

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the current Prime Minister may not be there to develop his putative initiative.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington  
Ambassador