

cc PS/SJS (L+B)
PS/M. Ancrem (L+B)
PS/Sir J. Wheeler (L+B)
PS/PU S (L+B)
PS/Mr Fell

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Sec 1



DESK IMMEDIATE 1013

71/54/95

10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

Mr Thomas *

Mr William

Mr Stephen

From the Principal Private Secretary

Mr Hogg

Mr Leach

Mr Perry

Mr Bell

Mr Steele

7 MAR 1995
3570

2 March 1995

713
Mr Watkins

Dear Martin

* We discussed X yesterday
which I think you saw

NORTHERN IRELAND in hand.
FORCE LEVELS, EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE ETC

The Prime Minister had a brief word with your Secretary of State and the Foreign Secretary after Cabinet this morning.

Your Secretary of State noted that it had already been agreed that the Drumadd roulement battalion would not be replaced in Northern Ireland when its tour ended in April. The GOC was now keen to return it to GB before then. The Prime Minister felt that soundings should first be taken about how that would be received in Northern Ireland and by Conservative MPs. Your Secretary of State said he would consult Sir Nicholas Bonsor MP and Mr Andrew Hunter MP discreetly. He would also seek to find out Mr Ken Maginnis's views, possibly by asking Sir Roger Wheeler to see him. He would report progress at Monday's meeting.

Your Secretary of State also raised the next steps in the exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein were now indicating that they might be willing to discuss decommissioning of arms, but only if a Minister were present. There was a risk that Sinn Fein might issue an ultimatum saying they would break off talks unless that was agreed. Your Secretary of State felt that the Government would be criticised if it failed to respond positively, and if that led to a break-down of the talks.

The Prime Minister thought that the Government's response in those circumstances should be to say that the onus lay on Sinn Fein to put a plan for decommissioning on the table; if they did so, the Government could then agree to a Minister attending the talks. He was concerned that if a Minister attended the talks prematurely, without any concrete evidence of Sinn Fein's willingness to contemplate serious action on decommissioning, the Government could come under strong criticism from Unionists, and would be in a very exposed position if the talks subsequently failed.

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Your Secretary of State noted that he would be visiting the US on Monday. This would be an opportunity to put across the Government's position on the framework document, as well as to stiffen the Administration on the need for Sinn Fein to make progress on decommissioning arms before they could be allowed properly into the peace process, and before they could be allowed to fund-raise in the US. Dick Spring's recent comments in the US had been unhelpful: he had said that it was a mistake to make progress on decommissioning into a prior hurdle.

The Foreign Secretary noted he would be seeing Mr Spring at the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday. He would speak to him about this, and would be grateful for a brief from the Northern Ireland Office. IX

I am copying this note to John Sawers (Foreign Office) and to Melanie Leech (Cabinet Office).

*Yours
Alex*

ALEX ALLAN

Martin Howard, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

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