



109/77/94

PM/94/011Prime MinisterNorthern Ireland Broadcasting Restrictions

1. I have been giving some further thought to the broadcasting restrictions in Northern Ireland in the light of the Downing Street Declaration and Gerry Adams' continued international media campaign.

2. During his visit to New York, Adams received no support on the main issues, especially violence, but there was widespread sympathy for him on the broadcasting restrictions. He exploited this cleverly. The restrictions have also become the object of some derision in this country; the broadcasters, with some skill, have found a way round them, which enables Adams' views to be projected while at the same time making the Government appear petty-minded.

3. We introduced the restrictions when I was Home Secretary in 1988, to show our abhorrence of Sinn Fein, to deprive them of publicity and also, it must be said, to stave off proposals for wider reaching censorship. They served their purpose for a while, but I now believe the



restrictions have become counter-productive and that it would be in our interests to see them lifted. The difficulty is to find a mechanism to achieve that which does not provide (or at least appear to provide) the IRA with unwarranted rewards before they have given a favourable response to the Joint Declaration.

4. I think we can achieve this by presenting the lifting of the restriction as a challenge rather than a concession. The opportunity will present itself in the run up to Sinn Fein's Ard Fheis scheduled on 26/27 February. The gathering of all Sinn Fein's leaders will attract a great deal of media attention in Britain, Ireland, the United States and elsewhere. Sinn Fein seem unlikely to announce any new policy and will be pressed on this by the media. However, the media will be united in criticising our broadcasting restrictions and this will make it more difficult for us to put across our substantive points on violence and terrorism. Lifting the restrictions in advance would oblige the media to focus on the beam in the IRA's eye, rather than being distracted by the mote in ours. It would put the spotlight on the IRA and Sinn Fein if the restrictions were lifted in advance of the Ard Fheis and, in my view, would increase the pressure on them. I do not expect Sinn Fein to respond favourably. But continued prevarication by them would make it more difficult to lift the restrictions in the months after the meeting than it would be to do so now.



5. I therefore believe that it would be an astute tactical move to lift the broadcasting restrictions on all parties in Northern Ireland four or five days before the Ard Fheis is due to start. That way, the initial publicity it will receive can subside, and we will go into the media campaign which will surround the Ard Fheis in the best possible shape. I therefore recommend that we take this course of action. That would imply a lifting of the restrictions on about 22 February after your meeting with the Taoiseach on 19 February.

6. I am copying this minute to Patrick Mayhew and Peter Brooke, and to Sir Robin Butler.

Ronald Stagg

for DOUGLAS HURD

(Approved by the Foreign Secretary and signed by Private Secretary in his absence abroad)

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
11 February 1994