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FROM: DAVID COLEMAN
CPL DIVISION
10 SEPTEMBER 1997



cc see attached list

1. Mr Hill [DAVID HILL 10/9/97]
2. PS/Mr Murphy (L&B)



CONTACT WITH SINN FÉIN

The Secretary of State has decided, in the light of Sinn Féin's admission to the Talks and their affirmation of the Mitchell principles, that they should now be treated on the same basis as other political parties, including the loyalist parties. The purpose of this submission is to seek the Minister's approval for revised guidance on contact between Ministers and officials and Sinn Féin reflecting this change in policy.

Advice to Departments

2. Suggested revised guidance on contact with Sinn Féin for officials in the NIO and NI Departments is attached at Annex A. Some key points to note are:

- the suggested new approach is that for so long as the IRA ceasefire continues and Sinn Féin remain eligible to participate in the Talks, the Government would consider requests for meetings from Sinn Féin with Ministers or officials on their

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merits and having regard to the level of their electoral support and political representation.

- the new policy will remain in force so long as the ceasefire holds and Sinn Féin remain eligible to participate in the Talks . If either of these two factors change the policy would need to be urgently reviewed.

- Treating Sinn Féin on the same basis as everyone else does not, of course, mean that they can expect automatic access to Ministers. If a meeting is justified it might be more appropriate, as with other parties, for it to be held at official level.

3. Some practical changes may flow from this new policy, in particular:

- Sinn Féin representatives may now be invited to government receptions.

- Sinn Féin representatives may now be considered for public appointments on their merits.

- Sinn Féin representatives may now also appear on the programmes for official visits by backbench MPs and other VIPs to NI.

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- PAB officials may also develop contacts with Sinn Féin representatives at various levels.

4. Central Secretariat are currently looking at the level of involvement which would be logical and defensible in the areas mentioned at paragraph 4 above in relation to contact with the now wide range of legitimate NI parties with a view to producing comprehensive guidance for Departments.

5. In the meantime, Ministers may wish to reflect collectively from time to time over the next couple of months on the pattern and number of meetings between Ministers and Sinn Féin, to ensure that this does not get out of step with the level of contact with other Northern Ireland parties.

Advice to Whitehall Departments

6. Attached at Annex B is a draft letter for PS/Mr Murphy to send to No 10 informing Whitehall Departments of the new policy. IPL are separately preparing revised guidance, in consultation with the FCO, for dissemination to Posts overseas.

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Conclusion

7. Is Mr Murphy content to authorise the attached guidance for dissemination within the NIO/NI Departments and for the draft letter to issue to No 10?

Signed David Coleman

DAVID COLEMAN
Constitutional & Political Division
11 Millbank, ☎ Ext 6576

GOVERNMENT CONTACTS WITH SINN FÉIN

GUIDANCE TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE AND
NORTHERN IRELAND DEPARTMENTS

This guidance, which has been agreed between CPL, PAB, IPL and Central Secretariat and approved by Ministers, provides advice to Departments on contact with Sinn Féin following the Secretary of State's decision that the necessary requirements for their participation in the political Talks have been met. It overtakes the Central Secretariat guidance "Access to Government" issued on 16 June 1997.

The New Policy

2. In the wake of the Secretary of State's announcement on 29 August that she regarded the ceasefire as unequivocal and Sinn Féin's formal commitment to the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence on 9 September, Ministers have agreed that they would be ready to consider requests from representatives of Sinn Féin to meet Ministers and officials on their merits. Such requests from Sinn Féin should be dealt with on the same basis as requests from other parties having regard to the level of their electoral support and political representation.

3. This new policy has been specifically introduced on the basis that it will continue in operation only for so long as Sinn Féin remain eligible to participate in the Talks and the IRA ceasefire remains in place. The policy would therefore have to be reviewed again urgently, were either of these two factors to change.

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Contact Points

4. Any queries should be addressed to Mrs Devlin in Central Secretariat (telephone 01232 528158) or Mrs Rogers in CPL (telephone 0171 210 6575).

**CONSTITUTIONAL & POLITICAL DIVISION
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT**

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ANNEX B

DRAFT LETTER FOR PS/MR MURPHY'S SIGNATURE

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary of the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AA

September 1997

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT: SINN FÉIN

You will wish to know that Ministers have recently approved revised guidance on contact between Government Ministers and officials and Sinn Féin representatives. This guidance has been agreed in the wake of the Secretary of State's announcement on 29 August that the necessary requirements for Sinn Féin's participation in the Talks have been met and Sinn Féin's affirmation of the Mitchell principles of democracy and non-violence on 9 September.

The New Policy

The new policy which has recently been agreed by NIO Ministers is that for so long as Sinn Féin remain eligible to take part in the Talks and the ceasefire holds, the Government would be ready to consider requests from representatives of Sinn Féin to meet Ministers and officials on their merits and on a similar basis as requests from other parties having regard to the level of their electoral support and political representation.

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It would be helpful if Whitehall Departments could follow a consistent approach with our own and with this in mind I should be grateful if Private Secretaries could arrange for the relevant persons in their Departments to be informed of the new policy. We are separately preparing revised guidance to overseas Posts, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Points to Note

Some particular points to note are:

- i) Sinn Féin should not expect automatic access to Ministers: if a meeting were justified, it might be more appropriate, as with other parties, for it to take place with officials responsible for the matters in question;
- ii) we would not wish contact between Government Ministers and officials and Sinn Féin to get out of step with that with other Northern Ireland parties. With this in mind, it would be helpful if, at least for the next couple of months, Departments could keep the Constitutional and Political Division of the NIO informed of any proposals for meetings with Sinn Féin (telephone: 0171 210 6575/6).
- iii) the new policy has been specifically introduced on the basis that it will continue in operation only for so long as Sinn

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Féin remain eligible to participate in the Talks and the IRA ceasefire remains in place. The policy would therefore have to be reviewed again urgently, were either of these two factors to change.

- iv) each case should be assessed on its merits, taking into account how similar requests from other constitutional parties of a similar stature would be dealt with.
- v) in cases of doubt, advice can be obtained from the Constitutional and Political Division of the NIO (telephone: 0171 210 6575/76).

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries of Cabinet Ministers and to Jan Polley in Sir Robin Butler's office.