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CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH - PIRA CHRISTMAS ANNOUNCEMENT

Line to take

- Peter Brooke has already made a statement on this (attached at Annex A). This is designed to give a limited welcome to the suspension of hostilities but also to emphasise that if the IRA is serious in sharing the wish of the people of Northern Ireland for peace, they should maintain the suspension indefinitely, and renounce the armed struggle;

Defensive Points

- It is essential not to be too forthcoming in our response; what we said last year was not universally well received. Our primary audience must be the long suffering people of Northern Ireland. Anything that gave the impression we were about to make concessions to a short-term cessation, particularly after PIRA's murderous activity recently would not only be offensive but also politically counter-productive;
- It is better that any statement should come from Peter Brooke, rather than myself. We do not want to give too much initial significance to a short-lived PIRA suspension on past experience little if anything is likely to come of it. We must not give the impression that we are changing the direction of our security or political policies in response to some political "gimmick";
- If we are eventually to make progress - and there can be no guarantee that we can - with Sinn Féin/PIRA in persuading them to abandon violence, we must not rush our fences - least of all in public.

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Background

In 1990, PIRA announced on Sunday 23 December that they would observe a three day ceasefire from midnight that day. The Secretary of State responded, publicly, welcoming the cessation of violence; but emphasising the need for a more prolonged renunciation of violence. At the same time, the Army announced that restrictions at permanent vehicle check points on the border would be eased, and relaxed some other precautions (eg on helicopter flying). There was no explicit, or public, linkage between such easements and the ceasefire. HMG's response was more positive than that of Unionist politicians who dismissed the ceasefire as a purely cynical measure, noting that PIRA traditionally took a holiday over the Christmas period anyway. They also criticised the Government's response.

It is against this background that Annex A and the above line to take has been prepared: it demonstrates that the Government is prepared to respond in limited terms to what may well be little more than a cynical manoeuvre; but is also determined to avoid any counter-productive over-reaction.

It is not clear why Mr Haughey should want to speak to the Prime Minister (although it is possible he had originally been "tipped off" about the suspension). The Prime Minister should resist blandishments from him to over-react: the Taoiseach has shown signs in the past of a perhaps too great an optimism that he could achieve some sort of deal with the Provisionals (whose ability to continue the "armed struggle" he tends to underestimate) to renounce violence, and to take too little heed of the imperative of carrying all shades of political opinion in Northern Ireland, including the Unionists, with us if a lasting political settlement (and probably a lasting peace also) is to be achieved.

"As of midnight on Monday, Active Service Units of the IRA will be instructed to suspend hostile military operations for a period of 72 hours. This temporary suspension of operations will cover the period 24, 25 and 26 December".

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