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From the Private Secretary

2 July 1996

DRUMCREE MARCH: UUP VIEWS

As discussed on the telephone, David Trimble and the Reverend Martin Smyth called on me this morning to ensure that No.10 was aware of their concern about possible violence surrounding the Drumcree March. The discussion covered much the same ground as recorded in Paul Wilkinson's note of the meeting on 29 June between Trimble and Sir John Wheeler.

Trimble's main point was that the Unionist community, and the Loyalists, would not accept the re-routing of the parade. For various reasons, Unionist opinion was volatile, and at least some of the Loyalists were looking for trouble. This was not just a question of Unionist and Loyalist opinion in Portadown, but across the community in Northern Ireland. Trimble feared that, if the parade was re-routed, there would be a violent Unionist/Loyalist backlash, which could include real trouble in Nationalist areas. That would then give the IRA an excuse to come in with violence of its own, acting as the defenders of Nationalist areas. He was convinced there was a serious risk of trouble and of major consequences flowing from it.

Trimble accepted that a decision to allow the parade to take its normal route down the Garvaghy Road would also result in trouble. There was no doubt that Sinn Fein were stirring up the local Nationalist community - with limited success, in Trimble's view, because most were SDLP voters and not interested in trouble. He realised that the RUC would not want to be seen on television fighting the Nationalist community, but this was still a lesser risk than that of re-routing. He thought estimates of how many people Sinn Fein could turn out to block the Garvaghy Road should be taken with a pinch of salt, based on the previous year's experience and Sinn Fein's failure to cause trouble at other sensitive parades earlier this year.

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Smyth expanded on these points, in a more hard-line way. He made a lot of the unacceptability of law-abiding citizens being prevented from going about their lawful business while IRA terrorists roamed the streets freely.

Trimble said that there had been a long meeting with DCC Flanagan the previous evening. He hoped that Flanagan had taken some notice of the points made to him. But there was some fear that he would not, and that he would make an announcement about the re-routing as early as Tuesday evening. This seemed to be connected to his view that, if the Garvaghy Road route was to be secured, this would have to be done several days in advance. This seemed to the UUP entirely unjustified.

I said that I understood the points that had been made and would ensure the Prime Minister was aware of them. As they knew, these matters were for the operational decision of the RUC, and we could not direct them. I said incidentally, in response to hints from Smyth during the discussion about undue Irish influence, that I simply did not believe this. I had certainly seen no evidence whatsoever to justify such stories. Trimble and Smyth were grateful that I had taken the time to listen, and did not press me to do anything more specific.

As discussed, I would be grateful if we could be kept in close touch with developments.

I am copying this letter to Paul Wilkinson in Sir John Wheeler's office and to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

JOHN HOLMES

Robert Crawford, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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