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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

12 July 1996

Dear Martin,

MARCHES: ALLIANCE PARTY VIEWS

Dr. Alderdice rang me this evening. He said that he had just returned from Vienna, to find the situation in Northern Ireland extremely serious, and as bad as he had ever known it. He believed that a number of things had been irretrievably lost because of the Drumcree decision, not least nationalist confidence in the RUC. He had been receiving distressed calls from all sides since his return, including from protestant members of his own party. Serious questions now had to be asked about the RUC, and about whether parties like the Alliance were prepared to continue working in the Police Authority.

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The consequences for the future of the peace process were even more serious. He was not necessarily predicting large scale violence. It was rather that the nationalists simply had no more confidence in the British Government and their ability to protect them, and in the possibility of the kind of political settlement which had seemed to be on offer. The Nationalists could not sign up to any kind of deal which would be remotely acceptable to the Unionists. He therefore saw no prospect of a settlement. He underlined several times that he could not convey to me sufficiently, and via me to the Prime Minister, the seriousness of the situation that had been created, and the depth of the anger felt.

Dr. Alderdice said that there now had to be a question mark over the Belfast talks. Would others be prepared to sit down with the Unionist leaders, who he believed had behaved absolutely appallingly over the past few days, and were in practice in breach of the Mitchell principles they had signed? The underlying point was that force had been seen to triumph. The protestant community could enforce its will on the British Government when it wanted. This was worse than 1974.

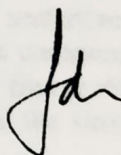
There was a lot more in the same extremely pessimistic vein. He was not really interested in my explanations of the appalling dilemma the RUC Chief Constable had faced, or the consequences of the alternative if the stand-off at Portadown had continued. He said that the developments after the original decision to reroute the march were entirely predictable to anyone who knew Northern Ireland. The Chief Constable must have known them when he took his original decision. He should therefore have stuck to it, come what may. He would now have to go. He had no credibility with anyone.

Alderdice said that he wanted to meet the Prime Minister next week to convey in person the extreme seriousness of the situation now created, and to discuss ways out of it (he did not have any suggestions for the moment). I said that we would look into this and get back to him.

We will need to discuss at the beginning of next week what meetings with Northern Ireland political leaders may be needed, bearing in mind that the Prime Minister's diary is, as usual, appalling.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin by fax.

Yours ever



JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office