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13 July 1996

John Holmes Esq
No 10

BY IMMEDIATE FAX

Dear John,

US NORTHERN IRELAND

1. As I told you on the telephone, Nancy Soderberg spoke to me this morning, apparently before receiving reports of the Taoiseach's television interview last night.
2. Soderberg said she had been in touch with the usual people - Hume, Adams, Kennedy Smith, other Irish Americans. They were all mad at the Unionists, the RUC and the British Government. No one believed that the decision to allow the Drumcree march to proceed - "the dumbest decision imaginable" - had been taken by the Chief Constable alone. It had showed that violence paid, and had reinforced the prejudices of those who had always doubted British good faith. It also, the Nationalists claimed, made it easier for the IRA to justify resisting decommissioning, and harder to achieve a new IRA cease-fire.
3. I interrupted to say that those who criticised the Chief Constable decision's had to ask themselves what might have happened if the ban on the Orange march had been maintained. It was possible to disagree with some of the judgements made, but absurd to accuse any of those responsible for the difficult decisions which had to be taken of bad faith. Soderberg said that the decision itself was not the point. The Nationalists were upset about how it had been taken. If the Chief Constable had decided that he had to reverse his earlier decision, he, and local political leaders, should have explained to everyone concerned what was going to happen and why. The only local consultations which had taken place had been with the Unionist communities. That said, Soderberg said she had argued strongly to all her interlocutors that the problems which had arisen were the result of chaos, not conspiracy; but she hadn't found many takers.

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4. Soderberg went on to say that the possible silver lining to the cloud of the last week's events was that they might provide cover for some leaders to reach out to their opponents. David Trimble, in particular, ought now to feel that he had more room for compromise. Adams, as we would know, was arguing that the behaviour of the Unionists over the last week made it illogical for the British and Irish Governments to continue to exclude him from all-party negotiations. He claimed - with some justification, in Soderberg's view - that he had sought to exercise restraint at moments of tension in recent days. He was now determined to establish some kind of dialogue with the British authorities.

5. Soderberg said she recognised that this would be difficult for us. She wondered whether George Mitchell might be instrumental by arranging proximity talks, as an alternative to "business as usual" when normal negotiations resumed on Tuesday. She hadn't talked to him, but felt that an initiative of this kind was badly needed. It could be damaging (she didn't explain why) simply to bring the parties together in the usual way next week. In her view, an initiative which had the joint blessing of the two Prime Ministers would stand the best chance of success. The White House stood ready to help, if we would like them to do so. So far, she had succeeded in discouraging those who wanted the President to produce instant judgements on the events of the last week. But she didn't think the Administration should continue to sit on its hands.

6. Soderberg is not available at the moment. When I get back to her, I will take the following line, as we agreed: we are grateful for her brainstorming and for the restraint which the Administration has shown to date in its public pronouncements. But Bruton's interview yesterday evening was very damaging, and now is not the time for gestures of togetherness. Nor, frankly, is there much stomach in London for establishing a dialogue, even on a proximity basis, with Adams, given that the IRA are now back shooting British soldiers, as well as letting off bombs in mainland Britain. But we look forward to staying in touch.

Yours ever,

Peter

Peter Westmacott

cc: Martin Howard Esq, Private Office, NIO(L)
William Ehrman Esq, Private Office, FCO
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P.S. For what it is worth, Martin Pope (who just called) thinks that anyone suggesting that Mitchell holds proximity talks should be on medication.

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