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by fax

4 September 1996

John Holmes Esq  
No 10

Prime Minister

With apologies for the poor quality of the fax, this is worth a read. Encouraging common sense from Mitchell. I also strongly agree with him about x below. Unionist fears about being sold down the river to a United Ireland are silly, but they just won't listen.

Dear John,

John 6k.

## SENATOR MITCHELL

1. I saw George Mitchell this afternoon, for a private talk before he flies to Belfast for the resumption of talks on Monday. (He confirmed that he would be glad to call on the Prime Minister at 0900 - not 0915 - on Thursday 12 September.)

2. I described, in general terms, how we saw the politics of Northern Ireland at the start of term. Mitchell said he felt strongly that the talks process had to be seen to be working, if only because there was no other game in town. A collapse would be enormously damaging. There had been some difficult sessions before the summer break - though, with hindsight, his credibility with the Unionists had probably been helped by his rather public row with Seamus Mallon of the SDLP. But agreement on rules of procedure had been achieved after Drumcree; and it was significant that some leadership had been shown, on both sides, in avoiding trouble during the rest of the marching season. He was reasonably optimistic that early agreement could be reached on the agenda. The talks then needed to get on with substance as quickly as possible.

3. Mitchell did not down-play the difficulties, whether or not there was a new IRA cease-fire (which the Irish were telling him could be just around the corner). It was disconcerting that people were saying that nothing would happen until the British elections were out of the way. If that were the case, he did not see how it would be possible to avoid a whole-scale resumption of violence in the meantime. Decommissioning would, of course, be



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the heart of the negotiations. Drummer had inevitably hardened the Nationalist position. But he did not think it would be impossible to agree on a way forward, linked to the recommendations of the International Body. The Unionist position remained a worry - especially the DUP's apparent determination to push the Loyalists out of the talks. Too many of them had a vested interest in there being no progress: where would the DUP be without a monster to frighten the children? The key requirement was to convince the Unionists that the support of the British, Irish and American Governments, and of the SDLP, for the principle of consent meant that their fundamental fears were unfounded. If they could accept that, the outlines of an agreement acceptable to all could emerge quickly.

4. Mitchell recalled a difficult conversation he had had with Adams (before 9 February). He had argued that the principle of consent meant that the nationalists would have to settle for less than a united Ireland; and that Adams was doing his supporters a grave disservice by not admitting as much. Adams had replied that to "indulge" the unionists as Mitchell was suggesting would remove any pressure on them to negotiate - and then retreated into meaningless rhetoric.

5. Mitchell said he had seen Lake yesterday, and had lunch with Mickey Kantor, Secretary of Commerce, today. He had (again) discouraged Lake from the idea of making a visit in the near future, on the grounds that the Unionists were disposed (for some reason) to see everything coming out of Washington as an element in Clinton's re-election campaign. I explained the background on Smyth and MacBride. Mitchell pulled a face: Dole was nowhere on Northern Ireland and Democratic Party managers were worrying unnecessarily about the Irish vote. Lake and Mitchell had agreed that it was unhelpful of Sinn Féin, in their present triumphant mood, to keep sniping at the talks. Lake had mentioned his idea of making a speech about Northern Ireland in the coming weeks. Mitchell had said he thought this might be helpful, but would seek the views of the British and Irish Governments (he asked me to tell you he would raise this with the Prime Minister next week).

6. He was sure that Clinton would remain interested in what happened in Northern Ireland, even after the elections: like all Presidents before him, Clinton would spend his second term looking for his place in history. But we shouldn't forget the impact which his visit last November had made on the President. In answer to my question, Mitchell said he personally was willing to stay involved for as long as that would help. He would have to be away for a few days in the autumn (Kantor had asked him to help out on some trade policy issues) but his private hope was to construct a package by the spring which would give the Prime Minister some return on the energy and commitment he had invested in Northern Ireland before he had to go to the country. He would be telling the Taoiseach - and had asked Lake to ensure that the President did the same during his visit to Washington - that the





Irish Government, too, should regard the next 6-8 months as a window of opportunity which would not remain open for ever.

7. With Kantor, Mitchell had talked mainly about the Pittsburgh Conference. Kantor wanted to visit Northern Ireland, to see things for himself. Mitchell had advised him to do this only after the US elections. He had also advised Kantor not to invite political leaders to Pittsburgh. If the emphasis could be kept on trade and investment, the conference might yet be a useful confidence-building measure; but not if it degenerated into political grand-standing, and arguments about who was and was not on speaking/hand-shaking terms. Mitchell confirmed that he would be speaking on the first day.

8. Mitchell regards these conversations as off the record. I should be grateful if his confidence could be respected.

*Yours ever,*

*Peter*

Peter Westmacott

cc: Ken Lindsay Esq, Private Office, NIO  
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