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FAXED

Via Comcen 5/8/96
JH

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From the Private Secretary

4 August 1996

Dear Mr Lindsay,

NORTHERN IRELAND: US VIEWS

I had a long conversation with Nancy Soderberg on the evening of 2 August. I had tried to speak to Lake but he was busy at the time. She said he would call me back but he had not done so by the time I left on holiday (!). We covered the following:

Belfast talks

Soderberg said that Mitchell had been relatively upbeat about progress on his return to Washington, but he was nevertheless doubtful whether the will really existed to get much further. As usual, Soderberg tried to suggest that decommissioning was not really important, and that the Unionists could simply be told to come off it. I corrected her.

Soderberg made clear that the Americans were worried about the long gap between now and the restart of the talks, and were wondering how to fill it. Their thinking was at an early stage, but she hinted that one of their thoughts might be a visit to Belfast by her or Lake. I made heavily discouraging noises.

Hume/Adams Initiative

Somewhat to my surprise, Soderberg did not press me on this, or on contacts between us and Sinn Fein. This suggests to me that Adams may have told the Americans that the so-called initiative is unlikely to prosper in the near future. There is certainly a degree of disillusion on the American side about Hume (which I did nothing to dispel). I explained to her carefully where things stood, and what Hume had told us most recently. Her own impression was that there was no chance of an IRA ceasefire before September at the earliest. Sinn Fein would certainly want to see how decommissioning went first.

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Apprentice Boys

I brought her up to date on the latest discussions. She said that, following my conversation with her earlier in the week, Lake had taken a tough line with Adams about the need for Sinn Fein to help find an agreed solution. Adams had not been particularly accommodating in return, stressing the need for a solution going wider than just Derry. I had the impression that, following this conversation with Adams and perhaps discussions with Mitchell, Soderberg is now less naïve about this issue.

Comment

This conversation illustrated again that the Americans remain very nervous about recent developments, no doubt partly for their own electoral reasons. They hanker after activity and a greater US role. But so far they have no good ideas and are (rightly) wary of pressing us for fear of being told not to interfere. We must continue to play them along but also watch them closely to ward off any signs of unhelpful initiatives or activity. In particular, we should continue to discourage any idea of a visit to Belfast. This would arouse a mixture of hostility on the Unionist side and expectation on the Nationalist side which could be extremely unhelpful.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Sir John Kerr in Washington by fax.

Yours Sincerely,

John Holmes

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Northern Ireland Office