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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

28 January 1997

Dear Gen.

CALL BY IRISH AMBASSADOR, 27 JANUARY

Ted Barrington called on me yesterday. His main purpose was to ask what lay behind the Prime Minister's suggestion to a business breakfast last week that he could see a future way through in Northern Ireland. I said that the Prime Minister had not been talking about a specific new initiative either before or indeed after the election. We did not have Plan B in our pocket, and continued to believe that the present talks process offered the only way forward. It had not been a pre-scripted remark, and no particular significance should be attached to it. If it meant anything, it was probably no more than an expression of frustration at the difficulty of making progress with the parties, given their present attitudes, and a hankering after another way of getting to the kind of solution which would probably be inevitable at some stage.

Barrington did not press further, but commented that, as I would know, the Irish had long wondered about an initiative by the two Governments based on the Joint Framework Document. I did not rise to this. I asked him in turn whether the Irish had ideas for any new kind of process. He said not. The Irish were committed, as we were, to making a success of the present process. Any process had to be based on the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document.

Barrington was pessimistic about the prospects for immediate progress in the talks, and nervous about moves on decommissioning. He did not want the talks adjourned too early, for fear of the vacuum which would follow, but also doubted the wisdom of the talks staggering on for any length of time if there really was no chance of progress. I reassured him that our thinking was on the same lines. Barrington was also pessimistic about the IRA and Sinn Fein, and not confident that there would be a (declared) ceasefire for the election campaign itself. It was even possible that some in the IRA might see advantage in a major incident during the campaign to force an intemperate response and unite the nationalist community against such a response.

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Otherwise, Barrington probed a bit about Hume's activities (he is a Hume fan), and about our response to the North report (disclaiming knowledge of its contents, other than press reports). I explained where we were on Hume, but was obviously cautious about North.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin - by fax).



JOHN HOLMES

K. Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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