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Dear Jonathan,

US/NORTHERN IRELAND

1. I had a first round on Northern Ireland this morning with Jim Steinberg, the new Deputy National Security Adviser at the White House. Mary Ann Peters was there, but Nancy Soderberg was not: she seems to have given up the idea of staying engaged on Northern Ireland from New York, and is now concentrating on the move, and on helping Tony Lake prepare for his confirmation hearings on the Hill next month.

2. Steinberg was mainly in listening mode. We talked in general terms about the Administration's involvement in Northern Ireland: I said that, with earlier disagreements now far behind us, we found the supporting role of the United States valuable in many respects. I paid due homage to George Mitchell's continuing role. I brought him up-to-date on the prospects for the Talks, and on our continuing efforts to find an agreed way forward on decommissioning. Steinberg said he admired us for trying, but felt that everyone now accepted that little progress was attainable until the elections were over. Perhaps for that reason, agreement to recess the talks might not be too hard to achieve.

3. I briefed him on where we'd got to with John Hume, emphasising that although (as Hume now accepted) there was no point in trying to re-open the 28 November text, we were very willing to look seriously at any plan (including "clarification") which held out the prospect of a new, unequivocal IRA cease-fire. I also took Steinberg through the North Review and the Government's response to it. He had no complaints, merely observing that it might have been easier politically to implement all the recommendations at one go than to hold consultations which would leave HMG having to make its own judgement later on, with only minimum cover. I explained Ministers' reluctance to take a decision now which, without further consultation, could make the prospects for the marching season this year worse rather than better.

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Comment

4. Not surprisingly, this turned out to be more of a briefing than a negotiating session. But Steinberg asked a number of good questions, suggesting that he was both getting up to speed and enjoying the process. As I left, he said he wanted us to be clear that, while he would be our main interlocutor on Northern Ireland, Berger would also be involved. Northern Ireland came with the job. So, as and when White House/No 10 contacts were called for, it would frequently be Berger who made/took the call.

*Yours ever,
Peter*

Peter Westmacott

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