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FROM: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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// February 1997

Dear John,

LETTER FROM MR TRIMBLE

Mr Trimble's letter of 6 February to the Prime Minister looks like a rather unsubtle piece of attempted wedge-driving. This letter sets out the background to the attached brief draft reply.

The UUP paper of 21 January began with a piece of analysis which effectively challenged the whole basis of the talks process, including the view that the negotiations should - on proper terms - be inclusive of Sinn Fein. The specific proposals it contained, while presented as being compatible with the talks process, represented a clear attempt to pursue an alternative path of political development. My Secretary of State and Michael Ancram took the view that the proposals were both inconsistent with our own analysis of what is required to make progress towards a comprehensive political settlement, and likely to prove unacceptable to the Irish Government and virtually all the other political parties in Northern Ireland.

We did make an attempt to build the main features of the UUP's proposals into our paper setting out a possible basis for resolving the issue of decommissioning before the

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election and securing a commitment to resume the talks after the election. (A copy of that paper was attached to my letter to you of 20 January.) Michael Ancram made clear to Mr Trimble in a number of meetings that it was only in that context that we believed there was any prospect of persuading the other participants to look constructively on the UUP's proposals.

As David Trimble's letter of 6 February confirms, the UUP were not able to go along with our proposals at this stage. It is encouraging for the future that the UUP feel our paper "if developed further" could help on the decommissioning issue; but it is clear that they feel too electorally-exposed to the DUP and UKUP to make any move in this direction before the election.

We see no basis on which the UUP's proposals could win support as they stand, although Michael Ancram made clear to Mr Trimble that if he could persuade the SDLP to support them we would happily take them further. My Secretary of State and Michael Ancram will be meeting David Trimble and some of his colleagues later this week and will consider with them whether any of the ideas could be taken forward, perhaps in the context of the current "mediation" exercise which the parties have invited the Chairmen to undertake.

On our proposals to extend the role and remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee, the Prime Minister said at the Conservative Party Conference that he would consult the parties about how best to achieve what he had proposed. That consultation has predictably revealed diametrically opposed views. The Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, SDLP and Alliance Party are opposed to any development of the role of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee; the UUP and Mr McCartney would like it to have legislative powers far in

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excess of the Scottish and Welsh Grand Committees. Cabinet colleagues are agreed that we should not go beyond the half dozen modest adjustments to the role and remit of the Northern Ireland Grand Committee which my Secretary of State had suggested in launching the consultation. My Secretary of State will be meeting the SDLP and Dr Mowlam shortly to tackle what appears to be a number of misunderstandings about our proposals: that should pave the way for a firm announcement about the results of the consultation. Meanwhile the Committee will next week have its first opportunity to debate the Northern Ireland PES announcement, a development foreshadowed in the consultation.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office).

Yours ever,

Ken

W K LINDSAY

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