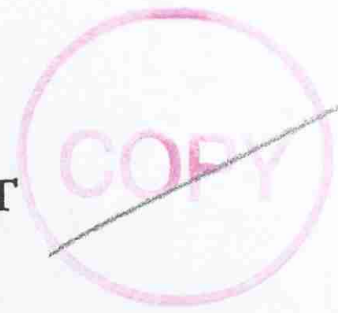


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From the Private Secretary

19 February 1997

Dear Ken

**CALL BY THE US SECRETARY OF STATE:
NORTHERN IRELAND**

During the course of the Prime Minister's discussions with Madeleine Albright today at Downing Street, Northern Ireland was discussed at some length.

The Prime Minister said that George Mitchell had performed brilliantly, not least in showing the patience needed to deal with the Northern Ireland parties. The present position was that all concerned were trying to appear reasonable, but in practice staking out positions which made short-term progress impossible. The talks might therefore have to be adjourned shortly. But we hoped to resume them after the elections and make progress then. Decommissioning was the major stumbling block, as we had always known it would be. The Mitchell Report had produced the only sensible way forward, i.e. parallel decommissioning. We wanted to stick to that.

Sir Patrick Mayhew added that we wanted to keep the talks going as long as possible in order to keep the gap before their resumption as short as possible. But we might have to accept a "soft landing" before very long. There was an impasse at the moment. In crude terms, the Unionists would not accept the idea of trading confidence-building measures for guns, while the nationalists would not accept anything which looked like creating new pre-conditions for Sinn Fein's entry into the talks. There was no readiness to take risks on either side in present circumstances.

The Prime Minister said that he remained personally committed to a settlement achieved through dialogue. We continued to want Sinn Fein in the talks. But the main obstacle to that was Sinn Fein themselves. If there was a verifiable IRA ceasefire, we would get Sinn Fein in. If there was no ceasefire and Sinn Fein could not join, we would go on without them, although this was in many ways a "pudding without a theme". President Clinton's role in persuading Sinn Fein to move away from violence, since it could not possibly work, could

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be crucial. We were very grateful for the President's help in the past. The Taoiseach had also been extremely helpful, despite occasional cross words between London and Dublin. He was confident of making progress after the elections but for the moment all concerned were positioning themselves for the elections. Sinn Fein hoped to get a seat in West Belfast, and might declare a bogus ceasefire to help them achieve that. But it would not be convincing.

The truth was that, as the Taoiseach had said, the republican movement had military and political wings. The military wing was aching to do more damage and was probably capable of doing so. We had escaped the worst so far through a combination of good luck and effective security work. But if things went on like this, there was no possibility of persuading Parliament to support Sinn Fein's inclusion in the talks. Moreover, Sinn Fein walking in one door would only result in the unionists walking out of the other. The truth was that Adams did not trust the British Government. He believed that we would always move the carrot out of reach at the last minute. This was not true. But both sides would need to make a leap of faith to break through the present stalemate. In any case, it was clear that violence could achieve nothing.

Sir Patrick Mayhew reiterated that the two sides of the republican movement each knew what the other was doing. The IRA and Sinn Fein could not be divided. Sinn Fein claimed that the two Governments had squandered the last ceasefire but the Taoiseach had comprehensively demolished this argument in a recent press article. As the Prime Minister had said, we faced the threat of more major attacks, because the republican movement still seemed to believe that they could bomb their way to the table. This was where the US could play such a useful role, because nothing hit Sinn Fein and the IRA harder than the knowledge of US hostility to their violence.

Mrs. Albright said that the Americans had made clear their dismay at the return to violence. The President wanted to continue to be helpful behind the scenes, and to support the efforts of the British Government and the Irish Government to move forward through dialogue. She would emphasise that Sinn Fein could not enter the talks without a credible ceasefire. Indeed, she had just done so in an interview with David Frost to be shown later. She was glad to hear that the talks should be resumed after the elections. This was very important. The US would continue to be there in the background.

The Prime Minister confirmed that a soft landing and a speedy resumption after the elections looked achievable, although they could not be guaranteed. The

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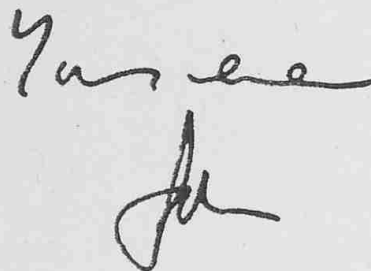
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key was to persuade the UUP to behave sensibly. The process could cope with negative attitudes from the DUP and the UKUP, but not if all the unionists were unreasonable.

Comment

Mrs Albright should not be in doubt about our views after this.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).



JOHN HOLMES

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K. Lindsay, Esq.,
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