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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

22 December 1996

Dear Mr. Lindsay,

SINN FEIN

I spoke to Paddy Teahon on 21 December to compare notes before the Christmas break. He said that Irish officials had met Sinn Fein again the previous evening. They had told Sinn Fein that it was the view of the Irish Government that the way forward was a new IRA ceasefire. They had pressed them to bring this about as soon as they could.

Sinn Fein response had been predictable. They could not deliver a ceasefire without a date for their entry into talks. It was clear that the British Government were not in a position to offer this. A ceasefire was not therefore possible at present. Teahon said that those at the meeting implied that in their view, a new ceasefire was the right thing to do but they simply couldn't manage it. In 1994 it had been possible to bring along the whole movement with the idea of a new ceasefire. In current circumstances this was not possible; there would be defectors if a new ceasefire was declared, for example some might join Republican Sinn Fein.

However, the Sinn Fein side had also talked about the possibility of working up with John Hume a new project in order to ensure that Sinn Fein were in the talks after the British election. The Irish side had asked them what they had in mind, but no details were forthcoming. It was however implicit both that there would not be much violence before the election, and that there might even be a formal ceasefire. The Irish had said they would reflect on this themselves over the Christmas break before a fresh meeting in the new Year.

Teahon and I also discussed the prospects for the talks, and agreed that chances of progress when they resumed were not bright. We agreed that, however long the talks went on after the resumption, what was needed was to find a way to park the process without acrimony so that it could be picked up again after the election.

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Comment

The Irish meeting with Sinn Fein was of course before the attack on Dodds, and my conversation with Teahon was before the apparent Loyalist response this afternoon. These two events clearly increase the risk of further violence, particularly if the Loyalists have effectively abandoned their ceasefire. Whether or not they do, one of the tricky issues we will have to face before long is the place of the Loyalist parties in the talks.

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

Yours Sincerely

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JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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