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10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

7 January 1997

*Dear Gen,***NORTHERN IRELAND: FUTURE OF THE TALKS PROCESS**

Thank you for your letter of 6 January, setting out Sir Patrick Mayhew's considered advice on our approach to the talks process.

The Prime Minister is broadly content with this advice. He agrees that our objective must be to sustain the talks process, and if possible make progress in it, for as long as possible. It is not in our power to suspend the talks unilaterally, and their suspension at the end of January is likely to be premature. When the talks are suspended, we want this to be on the agreed basis that they will be resumed after the Election.

The Prime Minister shares Sir Patrick Mayhew's hope that we will be able to produce further progress on handling of decommissioning, or if necessary, bypassing it. It is just possible that the UUP will soften their attitude, on the basis that a new IRA ceasefire in the near future now looks less likely. But the Prime Minister does not believe this is probable and suspects that the UUP are more likely to stick to their desire to see the process adjourned as soon as possible after its resumption on 27 January. Making any kind of meaningful progress is therefore likely to be hard.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister agrees that we should not signal any shift in our own position in advance of the resumption of the talks. Nor does he see much opportunity for any kind of new political initiative in present circumstances. So we face, almost certainly, a period of marking time until after the Election, whatever the date of adjournment of the talks.

This will inevitably create a kind of vacuum which the men of violence may try to fill. We need to keep the length of this vacuum to a minimum - hence the value of keeping the talks going well into February if possible. In order to help keep violence to a minimum in the run-up to the election, we will want to go on pointing out the futility of continuing IRA violence, as your Secretary of State was doing yesterday, and the untenable position of the Sinn Fein leadership. Do you see any other effective way of helping to fill the

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vacuum? Would a substantive speech by the Prime Minister or Sir Patrick Mayhew, setting out our views and objectives, be helpful or simply provide an Aunt Sally for all the parties?

We must also continue to try to hold the Loyalists in check. The issue of continued Loyalist participation in the Talks is likely to be awkward if the present position of attacks despite the ceasefire continues. It would be helpful to have advice on the line we should take in due course.

I am sending a copy of this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

*Yours  
John*

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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