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*At  
fldrum mel  
faxed to NIO  
& FCO*

From the Private Secretary

6 July 1997

*Dear Ven*

**DRUMCREE**

The Prime Minister spoke to the Taoiseach this morning shortly before 8am. I had tried but failed to speak to Paddy Teahon in advance, having spoken to him several times in the course of Saturday.

The Prime Minister apologised for disturbing the Taoiseach so early, but he had wanted to speak to him as soon as practicable. The Chief Constable had decided at about 0400, having tried everything to avoid this, that the march should be allowed to go down the Garvaghy Road under certain conditions. He took the view, with the support of the GOC, that this was the best way to ensure the public safety of all in Northern Ireland. The Government could in theory ban the march, but it was very difficult to ignore clear advice to the contrary from the Chief Constable and the GOC. The march would only be allowed to go down with the Portadown Lodge itself, in silence, with strict restrictions on bands and flags.

The Prime Minister went on that this was a situation we had been desperate to avoid. Dr Mowlam had tried everything to find an accommodation, continuing right up to the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and beyond. But, we were now where we were. The need in these circumstances was to try to insulate the wider peace process from the fall-out of Drumcree, difficult though this would be. Dr Mowlam would be making clear publicly how much she would have wanted to avoid this position, and her hope that putting the Parades Commission in place would help in future. He appreciated the difficult situation the Irish Government was now in, but hoped we could work together to calm passions. The march itself might pass off relatively peacefully, but the aftermath could be more difficult. The whole situation was ridiculous, but we had not been able to find a way out.

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Ahern said that he would certainly call for calm, although he would also be bound to express disappointment. What worried him was the sequence of future marches, including the Lower Ormeau Road and Derry. He hoped he could stay in close touch, and that the lid could somehow be kept on the situation.

The Prime Minister agreed. He hoped the Irish Government would be able to point to all our efforts to find an accommodation. Part of the difficulty was that prima facie there was a right to peaceful assembly in Britain. If the Orangemen had been asking to do something clearly unlawful, it would have been easy to ban it. But that was not the case. He added that we were keen to reply to Sinn Fein in terms which he hoped the Irish Government would find reasonable. A copy of the draft was with Irish officials. He hoped Sinn Fein would not use Drumcree as a pretext to stay out of the process.

Ahern said he hoped some hotheads would not take matters into their own hands. He appreciated the call from the Prime Minister. He would certainly do his best to control the situation and would keep in touch. But he repeated he feared for future marches.

The Prime Minister quoted at length from the statement Dr Mowlam was proposing to make to demonstrate how much we regretted the situation we found ourselves in. He knew that what angered the nationalists particularly was the apparent Unionist sense of triumph. But the key was to point to the progress being made in the broader process. There were things happening here which should be in the interests of the nationalist community - certainly the Unionists were extremely unhappy about eg the decommissioning paper. He therefore hoped the nationalists would rise above the march.

Ahern repeated that he would try to calm things, but there were "mad guys" around. The marches were a throwback to another age. But he knew how hard we had tried. He repeated that he appreciated the Prime Minister's call.

The Prime Minister said he would call again if there were significant developments during the day.

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Comment

This call went as well as could have been expected. Ahern was very calm and moderate – perhaps helped by the fact that he had clearly just woken up! I subsequently spoke to Teahon, who was a little less relaxed, but not angry in the way he was at the same time last year.

I have also spoken subsequently to Sandy Berger. He listened carefully but made little or no comment. He hoped the day would pass off well. We had faced an impossible choice. He did not sound surprised or distressed that we had acted as we had. I understand from our Embassy in Washington that the Americans are likely to say little or nothing today. I am meanwhile sending Mary-Ann Peters (NSC) a copy of the draft reply to Sinn Fein.

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

*Yours*



JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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