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From the Private Secretary

18 May 1997

See her.

NORTHERN IRELAND SPEECH: IRISH REACTIONS

I discussed the speech at some length with Teahon on Sunday, having welcomed the Taoiseach's statement.

Teahon was positive about the speech – it gave the impression of a Government really determined to move things on. Ninety per cent of it was acceptable to ninety per cent of the people in Dublin. However, on close reading, there were some passages to worry a “thinking nationalist” (by which I assume he meant O’hUiginn). Why was it necessary to make the reference to no-one in the room living to see a united Ireland, even if it was only in one sense stating a fact? More specifically, did the passage about not negotiating cross-border arrangements which could be threatening to Unionists mean we were back-tracking from previous discussions, or giving the Unionists a new veto. I said that, while the sentence was admittedly ambiguous, in my view it should be taken as meaning that the kind of cross-border arrangements we had in mind, eg as set out in the Framework Document, would not in our assessment be really threatening to Unionists. Otherwise, we would not be prepared to negotiate them.

Teahon went on to make clear that, despite the official welcome for the speech, there was a sense of hurt in the Irish Government, both about the meeting on 8 May and because they had not been briefed about our thinking more in advance. Teahon distanced himself personally from this feeling – and confessed that he had not told Bruton and Spring what I had told him about the speech on Thursday afternoon (!) – but said it was no less real for that. He himself fully accepted that we could not clear our speeches with them in advance, any more than the reverse could be the case. Nevertheless, we needed to be aware of this Irish feeling. Spring seemed to feel it particularly because his was a sister party and he had thought he had a particularly close relationship with Dr Mowlam.

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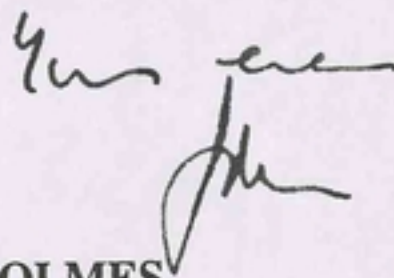
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I explained again the background to the line we had taken on 8 May, and also said that our own thinking on the speech had only firmed up at a late stage. But I did not pursue the issue. Teahon seemed to be speaking more because he had been instructed to do so than because he believed we had behaved badly.

Veronica Sutherland told me that she had also picked this up from Teahon on Friday. Obviously we need to be conscious of Irish sensitivities, which are particularly raw at the moment. (Teahon freely acknowledged that elections inevitably played a large part in Irish reactions at the moment.) But I am not inclined to be defensive or apologetic. The Irish set themselves up for what happened on 8 May, and we behaved perfectly properly over the speech.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', written over the printed name.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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