

SECRET - PERSONAL

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From the Private Secretary

*Dear Gen,*

DRUMCREE

Following a discussion with Dr Mowlam this morning, we had a quick word with the Prime Minister after the Budget. He is not fully up to speed with all the details, and is not trying to second-guess the experts from here. But you may find it helpful to know how he sees the situation, on the assumption that efforts to achieve a local accommodation do not in the end succeed.

The Prime Minister is clear that we have to accept the Chief Constable's judgement of the public order position, and back up his decision at the end of the day. His operational independence must be fully respected. But he also believes himself that banning the march from going down the Garvaghy Road would be very hard to justify (let alone enforce), unless it was clear that the public order consequences of not doing so would be so severe as to make any other decision untenable. What the organisers are seeking to do is not after all illegal. His personal view is therefore that the best course would be for the Chief Constable to impose strict conditions on the march, and agree to it going ahead if these are met. The conditions could include limitations on numbers, bands and general behaviour, with the clear proviso that if these were not met in practice on the day, this could have consequences for the ability to march next year (although this is of course likely to be governed by the North Commission).

A decision on these lines would be justified publicly on the basis that such a march should not be banned unless there were overwhelming public order reasons for doing so. The Government would also need to make clear that the decision to go ahead was the operational decision of the Chief Constable and that it would not be right to interfere with this.

*Yours ever  
John*

JOHN HOLMES

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