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**FAXED**

18.00 to Wton/Dublin  
via comcan. 2/6.

From the Private Secretary

2 June 1997

**SUBJECT  
MASTER**

*Dear Gen,*

**Filed on:**

**NORTHERN IRELAND: CALL BY THE INDEPENDENT CHAIRMEN  
2 JUNE 1997**

Senator Mitchell called on the Prime Minister for 25 minutes this morning. He was accompanied by Harry Holkeri, General Chastelain, Martha Pope and three other aides. Dr. Mowlam, Paul Murphy, Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Powell and I were there on our side.

The Prime Minister said that he was extremely grateful for the work the Independent Chairmen had done and would be doing. He knew how frustrating this was, but he had no doubt that it was indispensable. He hoped that the talks could in future be on a more inclusive basis, and would be trying to get Sinn Fein into the talks on the right basis of an unequivocal ceasefire. This came against the background of tension on the ground, and uncertain elections in Ireland. He had had a good discussion with President Clinton about all this. The balance was always difficult to strike, but the trick was to get Sinn Fein into the talks without losing the Unionists through the other door.

Mitchell said that the government had made a good start. The Prime Minister's speech represented a good balance. Dr. Mowlam had also done an excellent job so far, although he had to warn her that her honeymoon could be somewhat short. It was only a matter of time before Paisley and McCartney turned on her. Meanwhile there was a great opportunity for progress, if the political leaders in Northern Ireland were ready to seize it. He and his fellow Chairmen would do what they could. They had always had good relations with British officials, and he had no doubt this would continue. He agreed with the Prime Minister that the trick was to get Sinn Fein in, while also keeping the UUP still in.

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The Prime Minister said he wanted, once Sinn Fein were in, to drive on rapidly to the substance. There was widespread agreement on the basic elements of a settlement, namely devolution in Northern Ireland and some kind of North/South arrangements. The parties were not a million miles apart in these areas, if discussion could ever get on to the substance. This was what made the process so frustrating.

Mitchell agreed with this analysis and with the general strategy. It was important to reassure the UUP constantly, since they were under constant pressure from Paisley and McCartney. If Trimble could acquire confidence to go forward, real progress could be made. The UUP and SDLP had been close to agreement last December on decommissioning but the UUP had in the end decided to pull back for fear of being denounced. The key questions now were:

- Was Trimble now in a position, after the elections, to resist pressure from Paisley and McCartney?
- Had the SDLP been so damaged and frightened by Sinn Fein's success in the general and local elections that they would refuse to come out of their hole?

A further effort would be needed to get over the hurdle of decommissioning, involving these two parties. Reviving the ideas discussed last December could be a way through, but he understood HMG and the Irish Government were also talking about ways to find an opening. One problem was that the UUP were caught on the hook of their own paper insisting on prior decommissioning.

The Prime Minister repeated that he would do his best to move the process on. He had no Parliamentary or backbench constraints, but the inhibition of not losing one side or the other remained. In practice, any of the big parties could wield a kind of veto. He hoped to build up enough public support for his strategy to put real pressure on the political leadership in Northern Ireland. He was also trying to build up pressure from the business community.

Mitchell agreed strongly with the last point. He had been astonished by the almost complete divorce between the business and political communities in the past. Dr. Mowlam mentioned the recent letter from Sir George Quigley, appealing to all sides of the community to help avoid a further repetition of trouble at Drumcree. This would not endear him to the politicians but was definitely needed.

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Mitchell said that the line he would take with the press, both immediately after this meeting and in Northern Ireland, was that he believed the election of the new government and the Prime Minister's speech created a new opportunity; that it was up to political leaders on all sides to take advantage of this opportunity; and that he and his colleagues would be doing their best to ensure that there was no unnecessary delay in the process.

The Prime Minister said this sounded good. He repeated his gratitude to the Chairmen for their thankless task, and said again that he proposed to drive the process forward rapidly if he could. Mitchell said that the cause was worth the frustration. The three co-Chairmen had become masters of apparent action, to keep the talks going where necessary. He was certain that the people of Northern Ireland did not want to go back to the past. The key was for the centre to wrest the momentum from the extremes.

I am sending a copy of this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), and to Sir John Kerr in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.

*Yours etc*



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

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