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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

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From the Private Secretary

14 October 1997

Dear Gen,

VISIT TO NORTHERN IRELAND, 13 OCTOBER

Yesterday's visit was a significant success. It was certainly worthwhile, and I hope will have injected further confidence into the peace process and the talks. The Prime Minister remained relatively optimistic about the prospects of a settlement after the visit. He was also most grateful for all the efforts put in by so many people to making the programme work, not least given all the last-minute changes and pressures. I know only too well what a strain we put on the system. I would be grateful if you could ensure that his gratitude and appreciation are known to all concerned, though we will as usual be writing to some people directly.

The experiences of the past week, combined with those of earlier visits, have nevertheless convinced me that we need to revise the way in which we organise and prepare for these visits, particularly while the present ceasefires last. I discussed this with David Watkins at various points during the day. My main suggestion is that a joint advance recce, including people from here, is essential if we are to get right the balance of the programme, and of individual events. It is hard to visualise what a location or a particular gathering actually looks and feels like, and how long it will actually take, without walking the course. And the input and experience of people from here in how the Prime Minister operates, and what works best in presentational terms, would in my view make a considerable contribution. I think incidentally we also need to change the briefing, to make it more user-friendly from the Prime Minister's point of view. Again, I discussed this with David Watkins. Perhaps the best way forward for all this would be a meeting between the key people on both sides in the next few weeks.

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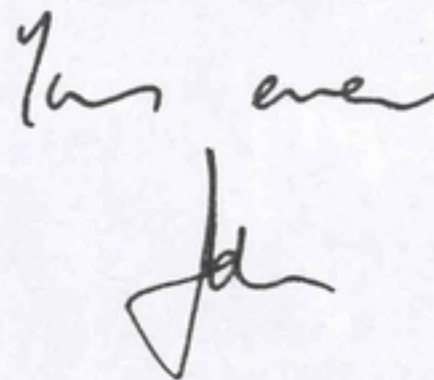
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One final point: we need a proper inquest into how we got into the position we did at Connswater, which spoiled much of the effect of the day, at least in media terms. The reason is not in order to recriminate, but to draw lessons for the future (when we might face genuinely difficult situations). Let me say straightaway that all those involved here, including me, accept part of the responsibility: we all knew the programme but no-one fully anticipated the problem, although it is obvious in retrospect. To start the ball rolling, several questions strike me:

- why was the likely reaction in Connswater to the handshake not better foreseen? Even on the day, we were assured by various people (including Trimble) that there would not be a problem;
- why did no-one warn us from the scene once the crowd had gathered that things were likely to turn ugly? The RUC had said to our own detectives at a relatively early stage in the day that they thought there could be problems, but this was never fed through the system properly;
- why did the RUC tell people in Connswater so early in the day (as early as noon, by one account) that the Prime Minister would be visiting? This gave the demonstrators time to organise.

I would be grateful if you could let me have some thoughts on this by the end of the week.



JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

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