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MASTER

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From the Principal Private Secretary

20 November 1997

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS

The Prime Minister and Dr. Mowlam had a brief meeting this morning to review the next steps, following the Prime Minister's latest meeting with the UUP.

Dr. Mowlam expressed concern at the continuing lack of UUP engagement, which was threatening to undermine the talks and was destabilising Sinn Fein (no doubt deliberately). Talking to Trimble about Heads of Agreement could be valuable but the problem remained how to inject whatever conclusions were reached into the talks process. Otherwise the talks would be marginalised and people like Mitchell could become demotivated. This was a serious risk. Some of the parties felt completely left out, and Sinn Fein needed to be seen to be in a meaningful process. There was a particular need for some progress by the end of the following week, with the review plenary due to start the week after.

The Prime Minister said that his intention was to explore whether Heads of Agreement could be drafted which could be agreed by the UUP, the SDLP and the Irish. If so, we would probably have to float any agreement ourselves, but we might be able to use Mitchell to do this, on the basis that he would then take forward the process of putting flesh on what the Prime Minister imagined would be very bare bones. He agreed that there was a danger of seeming to ignore the talks process. The difficulty was to find a way of breaking the logjam outside the process, and then putting whatever could be agreed back into it.

It was agreed that Dr. Mowlam should brief Mitchell confidentially about what we have in mind. It was also agreed that we should now move quickly to set up a call on the Prime Minister by Sinn Fein in the week before Christmas. (This is in hand.)

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

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