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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

10 November 1997

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**CALL BY NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION,
6 NOVEMBER**

A delegation including Monica McWilliams, Pearl Sagar, Bronagh Hinds, Avila Kilmurray and one other, called on the Prime Minister for what turned into 45 minutes. Dr Mowlam was also there.

Monica McWilliams said the NIWC still broadly supported the Framework Document deal, but some of its key words needed amending to reflect the New Labour approach. For example, 'parity of esteem' reflected an assumption of two divided communities. A more inclusive approach was needed, as well as one which was more gender-conscious. There was also a need for imagination in devising electoral arrangements for the proposed Assembly, to get in more diverse groups and break up the old party structure. The NIWC also thought the 3-man Panel idea a poor one, and wanted a second chamber on economic and social issues. They were a bit depressed by the progress of the talks so far, but still thought the process should be talked up in public.

Pearl Sagar said the talks were going at a snail's pace, and there was no realism visible yet. The Unionists and their unfounded fears were the main problem, but it was difficult to know how to solve this. The Coalition saw three options: the independent Chairman to be more proactive; expertise from outside; the two governments pushing the process on together. Their preference was for Mitchell to be more active. The NIWC remained totally committed and hoped the same was true of the government.

The Prime Minister said it was hard to see the necessary settlement being negotiated around the talks table. He could see that it was difficult for others if the UUP thought they had a back channel to him, but it had been necessary to get

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them into the talks and keep them there. It was not possible to deal with issues in a normal way in Northern Ireland circumstances, regrettably. The current talks stagnation could nevertheless provide an opportunity to push the process on. The outlines of the solution were visible to all, but no-one wanted to put their bottom lines on the table. Nevertheless he was optimistic about the chances of a lasting settlement.

Dr Mowlam said that the government were talking to Mitchell, and to the Irish. But the two governments had to be careful not to seem to impose solutions. Bilateral meetings could also give the process a kick. Pearl Sagar said the UUP needed their hands held, but they should not be pampered. They could not dictate the terms of the process. Not engaging was not actually good for them either.

Bronagh Hinds added that the UUP had not come in to the talks only to see them fail. They should be both pressed and encouraged. They had to understand that the status quo was no longer an option anywhere in the UK. Meanwhile the talks should not depend entirely on the two big parties. The smaller parties should be fully involved, as should the people. Civic action was flourishing in Northern Ireland, and various groups were now speaking up for peace and a fair settlement. There was a need for a wider education campaign to persuade people of the merits of the solution in the JFD, even if the JFD itself was anathema. It should be made a people's project, so that people could feel involved in the process as they did not now. There was after all a Bill of Rights project already. Dr Mowlam said she agreed in principle but it was hard to do this before the talks were concluded. Bronagh Hinds said that there was nevertheless a need to sell a settlement on a cross-party basis, and begin that process now.

Avila Kilmurray said there were now about 1000 community groups active. There was a huge groundswell of support for the peace process, but much ignorance and a feeling of insecurity. That made many cling to the old certainties. That was why it should be made a people's process and not just a politicians' process. She also thought there was a need to make the Unionists feel comfortable through an East-West dimension, although it might not be as helpful to them as they thought, since Scottish and Welsh views of Britishness were very different from their own. Overall the peace process needed a lot of rooting. And the British Government should be seen less as a neutral referee, and more as a closely engaged party.

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The Prime Minister said that he agreed that people needed to be educated about the realities of the likely settlement, but it was hard to do much until the politicians had signed up.

The meeting concluded with Pearl Sagar asking what more the coalition could do to help. The Prime Minister suggested they should talk more to the Opposition, to ensure they received a wide spread of views. It was important that bipartisanship should continue.

In conclusion, Bronagh Hinds handed over the attached documents.

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

Yours
John

JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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