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Northern Ireland Office
Parliament Buildings
Belfast BT4 3SS

Prime Minister

SINN FEIN

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I refer to John Holmes' letter to my Private Secretary of 28 November.

I agree that there are a number of confusing and conflicting signals at present. But, rather than seeking certainty which can never be achieved, I suggest it is better to adopt an approach which is robust against a range of eventualities, so that the Government is seen to be pursuing a coherent and consistent policy whether violence resumes or does not.

Earlier in the year, you successfully established that the political process must go forward with or without Sinn Fein. Equally, you also secured credit for bringing Sinn Fein into the political process on the basis of an unequivocal cease-fire and commitment to the Mitchell Principles. We promised, in our letter to Sinn Fein of 9 July, that Sinn Fein would then be treated the same as other political parties, including in respect of meetings with you. This was very successfully demonstrated in practice with your visit to Castle Buildings.

The key to managing the current uncertainty is to ensure that the political process can go forward if necessary without Sinn Fein. In turn, the key to that is to ensure the blame for any breakdown in violence rests with Republicans and not the British Government. The more we demonstrate we have taken risks for peace, the more difficult it is for Sinn Fein to blame us.

I recognise that there clearly is a risk associated with your meeting with Sinn Fein, but I do not think that the approach John Holmes suggests helps. At best we will get some further verbal assurance from Sinn Fein, or from the Irish and US Governments on their behalf. If violence subsequently breaks out, it will not help us significantly to say that we were

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worried this might happen so we made sure we got further verbal assurances - we shall simply be accused of naiveté. I think we are going to have to take risks, if we are to move the process forward.

By contrast, this sort of challenge is easy for Sinn Fein to side-step. They could say that they have already made their commitment to the Mitchell Principles and the IRA has a cease-fire which the Chief Constable has recently described as "stable". He is not likely to say that without reason or to put the lives of his officers at risk. What more do we want? We then either climb down and accept existing assurances, or we cancel the meeting. If the latter, it could achieve exactly what we are trying to avoid. It would be difficult to explain why the Prime Minister would not sit down with Sinn Fein but the other parties in Castle Buildings should continue to do so. The result could well be the collapse of the Talks and the Peace Process, with the British Government receiving the blame. If Republicans really are intent on a return to violence, this would provide them with just the excuse they may be looking for.

I agree that we should brief both the Irish and US Governments about our current concerns in advance of the meeting with you. But I suggest we use this to claim maximum credit with both Governments for continuing to take risks for peace. The aim would be to continue to bolster our position with both Governments so that, in the event of a return to violence, both would say that we had done all we reasonably could and would place the blame firmly on Republicans.

In the event of a return to violence after the meeting, that could also be the basis of our public posture. We would emphasise that the Government had consciously taken prudent risks for peace - not out of naive trust but with an open-eyed and realistic assessment of what might be achievable. The prize of peace was great and could not be neglected - but the opportunity had to be seized by all. We had played our part to the full - but the IRA proved

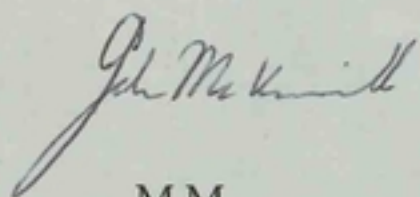
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unequal to the challenge of peace. This was the sort of approach which you played successfully in the wake of the Lurgan murders which came after you had authorised official contact with Sinn Fein.

If you agree, I attach some possible lines for use in talking with the Taoiseach and the President.

A copy goes to Sir Robin Butler.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John McNeill", is written above the typed name "M.M".

M.M

*(Approved by the Secretary of State
and signed in her absence)*

2 December 1997

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