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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

18 December 1997

Dear Gen,

VISIT TO BELFAST, 17 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister was most grateful for the arrangements for his visit last night, all of which were made at short notice. I would be grateful if you pass on the Prime Minister's thanks to all those who worked so hard.

It seemed to us that the visit worked well, and achieved its limited objectives in a short time. It would be helpful to know what press coverage was like in Northern Ireland itself.

There was little of political interest to report from the visit. The Lord Mayor of Belfast took the opportunity to make two points to the Prime Minister. First, he had been approached by the Sinn Fein prisoner organisation, SAOIRSE(?), and had agreed to pass on to the Prime Minister their view that, while they understood there could not be wholesale prisoner releases, a scheme for gradual prisoner release would help bind Republicans into any peace settlement and would be very helpful. Second, he was very keen for some kind of European meeting to take place in Belfast during our Presidency. This would help to underline the European dimension in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister said that we were indeed hoping to hold an informal meeting in Northern Ireland during our Presidency.

The main interest of the Question & Answer session with sixth formers was the relative lack of attention given to the Northern Ireland political problem. Bloody Sunday was mentioned, as was a certain degree of frustration with the talks, but otherwise the questions were all about "normal" subjects such as education, BSE and welfare reform. There may be particular reasons why the

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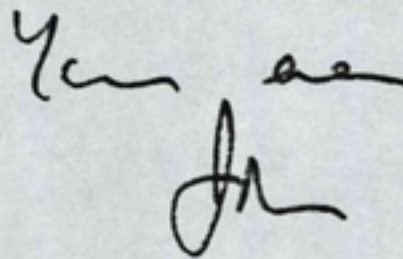
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children involved preferred to avoid Northern Ireland politics on this occasion but, subject to that, their preoccupations struck us as healthy.

One of the sixth formers approached the Prime Minister afterwards to raise the case of his father, who had been killed and whose murder was being investigated, so far without result. The Prime Minister said he would look into this, but unfortunately did not recall the boy's name or any details of the case in what was a very hurried conversation at the end of the meeting. I wonder if you could identify the boy and let me have a letter the Prime Minister could send. We are incidentally pursuing the request from one of the boys for the Prime Minister's tie!

The visits to the RUC station and Hazelwood School went off very well. The Prime Minister seemed to be well received in both places, with genuine appreciation for his visit.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized 'J' and 'H'.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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