



10 DOWNING STREET  
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From the Private Secretary

CH  
bc PB  
6 January 1998

Dear Ken,

**CONVERSATION WITH LORD ALDERDICE, 6 JANUARY**

Lord Alderdice requested an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister earlier this week. Since this was unlikely to be possible for a week or two, the Prime Minister spoke to him on the telephone today, as a prelude to a meeting later this month.

Alderdice said that the situation was worrying. He thought the essential need was not to try and buy off this or that party through so-called confidence-building measures, but to force the parties to face their responsibilities. If devolved government in Northern Ireland was ever to become a reality, parties like the SDLP and UUP had to start taking responsibility. Meanwhile, the paramilitaries were being given too much. They should be told firmly that, if they went back to war, they would find life very hard.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to see immediate progress in the talks, and was pressing hard for this, not least with Trimble. It surely ought to be possible to agree on the outline of a settlement, since most people knew roughly what this looked like already. Alderdice agreed, but said he was worried about Hume's attitude. He had spoiled efforts to reach agreement before Christmas by refusing to contemplate the word "Assembly", just as he had done in 1992. He needed to be told that such an attitude was not acceptable. Without an Assembly, the rest of a settlement would make no sense at all. Meanwhile, the relationship between Trimble and Ahern was important. It would be helpful if they could reach some kind of understanding and correspondingly bad news if they could not. Meanwhile, it would be helpful if the Irish stopped doing silly things like releasing prisoners without warning.

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The Prime Minister asked whether another visit by him to Northern Ireland to see the parties would help. Alderdice said it would. The Prime Minister would have to make his own serious input into the process.

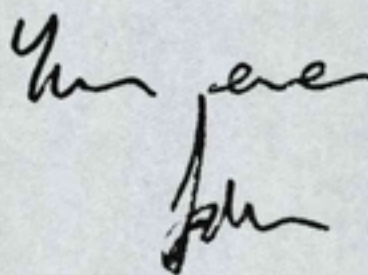
The Prime Minister asked about views on the ground. Alderdice said that people on both sides felt frightened and dispirited; there was a danger that they would run to the extremes. The degree of sympathy expressed for Billy Wright after his death was, for example, worrying. In the talks, the Prime Minister was right that political progress soon was absolutely critical. Meanwhile, it should be made clear to the paramilitaries that any progress on prisoners depended on the paramilitaries taking themselves out of the military business.

The Prime Minister concluded that he would reflect on these points. The conversation had reinforced his view that urgent and dramatic progress was needed.

#### **Comment**

As you will gather from the above, the Prime Minister is thinking about the possibility of another visit to Northern Ireland, particularly to follow up any success in tabling draft Heads of Agreement. It would be helpful to have your views on the likely value of the visit, and the best potential timing for it, but we can also discuss this tomorrow morning.

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

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**JOHN HOLMES**

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office