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John
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From: John Holmes
Date: 22 December 1997

PRIME MINISTER

TRIMBLE

You are proposing to speak to Trimble on the telephone tomorrow morning, presumably on the way from Heathrow to Chequers. I have forewarned him.

I fear you will find him in a nervous state. The trouble within his own
... parliamentary party appears to have intensified. I attach a piece from today's Belfast Telegraph, about four UUP MPs calling for withdrawal from the Talks. When he spoke to me today, Trimble was a bit worried that Donaldson might rally to their cause for his own reasons, although this would seem odd in other ways. Trimble suspected that Jim Molyneaux might be playing an unhelpful role behind the scenes. He wondered whether somebody here could have a word with him to check and try to call him off, but I am not sure we are well-placed to do this. Do you have any ideas on who knows him well enough? David Montgomery?

The latest rash of moves on prisoners, particularly the Irish release of nine IRA prisoners, is a particular cause of concern for Trimble. His usual lament, that the flow of confidence-building measures is all one way, and that this is Mo's deliberate policy, is currently louder than usual. Unfortunately, I am not sure we can do much about this. When you last asked Trimble what we could do for them, his response was simply to ask us to stop helping the other side.

One idea is for you to place an article during the Talks recess spelling out again your basic position. This might help. You could ask Trimble about this.

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For the rest, I would be careful about what you say to Trimble on North/South. There is a big gap between the Irish insistence on all-Ireland bodies with executive powers, and the UUP position that cross-border co-operation is all that is needed, although some sort of light joint institutions might be just acceptable. I fear that there is a problem of substance here, as well as an issue of presentation. The Irish and the UUP are supposed to be getting together between Christmas and the New Year to look at all this. The hope is that, when they look at together the detail of what North/South bodies might do, this will seem less alarming to the UUP than the labels might suggest. But there is a danger that both sides will take a tough line, and the discussions will break down acrimoniously. This would leave us in great difficulty for the resumption of the Talks.

Conversely, if the UUP and Irish can agree in large measure, the prospects for the Talks will be much enhanced. In particular, we will be in a position to put forward a Heads of Agreement draft with a reasonable amount of confidence it could be acceptable.

... I attach a speaking note for you to use with Trimble. I think your main objective should be to reassure him that you are still basically on his side, despite the apparent flow of CBMs in the other direction, and give him comfort which he can pass on to his restive troops.

JOHN HOLMES