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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

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cc JB
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PB

From the Principal Private Secretary

23 December 1997

Dear Gen.

CONVERSATION WITH DAVID TRIMBLE, 23 DECEMBER

The Prime Minister spoke briefly on the telephone to Trimble this morning. He began by saying that, judging by the Press, Trimble seemed to be under some pressure.

Trimble said that there had been some malcontents in the party all along, but it was not clear yet whether there was any serious plotting going on. The letter to him from the four MPs about pulling out of the talks stemmed from Dr. Mowlam's speech to the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body, although it was not clear what had really worried them. In general, nervousness stemmed from the perception in Northern Ireland that Government policy was almost exclusively directed to reassuring Republicans, not least over prisoners. He did not think Dr. Mowlam's meetings with the DUP and UUP would help much in practice. He assumed there was not much more we could do for loyalist prisoners.

The Prime Minister asked whether there was anything we could do to help, for example an article in the Press setting out the Government's position again. Trimble said that there was no point in trying to do anything instant. It was better to keep quiet for now, and perhaps say or do something effective to show that the Unionists were taken seriously in early January. He might call a special meeting of the UUP executive committee then, and the Prime Minister might well be able to help in the run-up to that. The Prime Minister said that he would be very willing to do so, and looked forward to hearing from Trimble early in the New Year.

The Prime Minister mentioned in conclusion that he had talked to Ahern at the Newcastle/Manchester United football match. Ahern had thought that progress would be easier on the key issues in January, despite Sinn Fein's

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objections earlier this month. Trimble referred to his discussions with me about tactics. He would want to reflect further on this, but the picture was not clear for the moment.

The call ended with mutual good wishes for the holiday period.

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

*Yours
John*

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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