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SUBJECT  
MASTER

by fax to  
MIO, Dublin +  
Washington  
16/1

JP  
PM  
JH

From the Private Secretary

Filed on. 16 January 1998

Dear Ken,

### CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH

The Prime Minister spoke to the Taoiseach on the telephone for about ten minutes on 16 January.

The Prime Minister started by saying that he had received the Taoiseach's letter (copy enclosed). He understood what he was saying. Ahern said that he knew the Prime Minister was in a hurry. He wanted to make two points: Sinn Fein were jumping all over him at present; but he would have everyone walking all over him, if he did not get an independent inquiry on Bloody Sunday. He hoped the Prime Minister could deliver this.

The Prime Minister said that he was worried about re-opening old wounds. There could be calls for an inquiry into atrocities by the other side, such as Enniskillen. Nevertheless, he understood this was a very sensitive issue. Ahern said that it had never really gone away. The people involved were ordinary people. British television stations would be in Ireland this weekend crawling all over the issue. A question had been put down in Parliament for answer on Wednesday. This had created an expectation that there would be a statement, although he doubted this was the case, otherwise we would have told him. The bottom line was that, if there was no independent inquiry, they would be "blown out of the water".

The Prime Minister said that he would be frank. He did not mind the fuss and bother that would be associated with an inquiry. But it would re-open old wounds and would go on for months and months. He would look ridiculous if the IRA ceasefire broke down in the meantime. Ahern said that it was not a case of opening old wounds; they had never closed. The reality was that there was substantial evidence that Widgery had been a "con job". An inquiry would be seen as part of the healing process. The Prime Minister said that a full, independent public inquiry would require sittings, evidence and so on. He repeated that it could go on for a long time. Ahern said that not that many

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people would be involved. An inquiry would close the issue for all time. The people fighting for an inquiry were not Provisionals, but people like churchmen and the previous Irish Government, who wanted to see justice for the innocent people killed.

The Prime Minister said that he would reflect very carefully. He understood the points Ahern had made. He would see Sinn Fein next week, following the message sent by the Irish side. Nevertheless, he was worried they were simply raising the stakes. Ahern said that Bloody Sunday was more difficult than Sinn Fein. He had had 2 ½ hours with "the bearded man" (presumably Gerry Adams) that morning. There had been "blood on the walls". He could live with this. But he did not want all of nationalist opinion in Ireland on his back.

The Prime Minister took the opportunity to raise BSE at this point (recorded separately).

The Prime Minister repeated that he would think very carefully about Bloody Sunday and would get back to Ahern. He asked if it was Ahern's position that, if there was no independent inquiry, we should do nothing. Ahern said that if there was no independent inquiry, we should do nothing until he had finished in politics.

I am copying this letter to Dominick Chilcott (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and to Veronica Sutherland (Dublin) and Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington), both by fax.

Yours ever,

Philip

PHILIP BARTON

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