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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

17 February 1998

Dear Ken,

NORTHERN IRELAND: CONSERVATIVE VIEWS

The Prime Minister met William Hague and Andrew Mackay in the House of Commons this afternoon for just over ten minutes, at their urgent request. I was also there.

Hague said he was worried about the present situation, which could drive the Government and the Opposition apart. In particular, he was worried about the potential readmission of the UDP after a short period. Would the talks and the Mitchell principles have any credibility if this happened? The Opposition would have some difficulty in supporting this.

The Prime Minister explained the circumstances of UDP possible return. It was possible, and perhaps logical, to say that any breach of the Mitchell principles meant that those responsible were out on a permanent basis. But this would make it impossible to keep the process together. These were not easy judgements to make. We thought it was important to give those expelled a route back, while trying to make clear at the same time that a decision had to be made between politics and violence.

Mackay raised the possible precedent being set for Sinn Fein. The Prime Minister said that any serious resumption of IRA violence would obviously be different. In present circumstances, it was very important to keep the Irish Government with us if at all possible.

Hague asked whether there would not be an opportunity for a UUP/SDLP agreement, if Sinn Fein were clearly out of the picture. The Prime Minister said that if we were seen to be excluding Sinn Fein unreasonably, the SDLP would simply not play ball. We did not want a position where Sinn Fein were excluded

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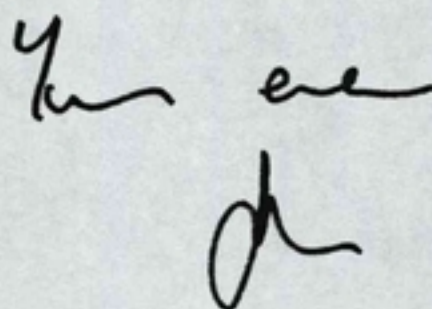
but still had some friends. They might peel off from the talks process at the end, but the SDLP and Unionists had to be bound together at that point.

Hague said that the Opposition were bending over backwards to be supportive, but he had to say that there were alarm bells ringing in their heads, and in Unionist heads too. Mackay added that they were not really convinced that the UDP had said or done the right things to be allowed back in so soon. I suggested that there was a difference between the kind of action we were prepared to take over one breach, and what would follow any repetition. Mackay suggested this meant that we were following a sort of "yellow card" approach.

The Prime Minister repeated that we were making the best judgements we could in the difficult circumstances we faced. It would be very sad if bi-partisanship were lost. In Opposition the Labour Party had held fast to it, despite ups and downs in the then Government's policy. He hoped the present Opposition would hold fast too. Hague said that they wanted to stay on board, but also wanted to ensure the Prime Minister was alert to their real concerns.

Comment

The conversation was interrupted at this point by an urgent telephone call from President Chirac. The Prime Minister believes that the Opposition's position is now worrying. He will try and talk to John Major about this in the near future.



JOHN HOLMES

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