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From the Private Secretary

27 January 1998

*Dear Ken,***TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH CLINTON:
NORTHERN IRELAND**

Clinton asked the Prime Minister where things stood on Northern Ireland during their telephone conversation on the Middle East on 27 January.

The Prime Minister said that in one sense progress had been made. A basic document had been tabled to which people could agree. There had then been a problem over the upsurge in violence. But he thought the prospects were still good. Sinn Fein had felt left out, but action had been taken to bring them back into the loop, although there was a new difficulty today with the Unionists. The Government would also have a new position on Bloody Sunday quite soon.

Continuing, the Prime Minister said that the key point was to reinforce the basic message that a political settlement could be found and all parties should continue to avoid violence. If the IRA decided, tactically, to return to violence, he would have no chance of keeping Sinn Fein in the peace process, or bringing them back subsequently. He had staked his political credibility on the present process by, for example, seeing Sinn Fein a number of times. Clinton said that he would work with the Prime Minister to prevent the IRA returning to violence.

The Prime Minister welcomed this. His relations with the Irish government were very good. He believed he could bring the Unionists along. But it would be impossible to hold things together if the IRA returned to violence. He feared they might believe that they could resume violence for a while and then return to the talks. This was mistaken. If they did return to violence, the pressure of public opinion would be enormous and it would be impossible for him to let them back in again. He would be able to explain the position in more detail during next week's visit.

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The conversation then turned to the Middle East Peace Process.

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

Yours ever,

Philip

PHILIP BARTON

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Northern Ireland Office

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