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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

SUBJECT
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From the Principal Private Secretary

17 February 1998

Dear Sir,

CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT CLINTON, 16 FEBRUARY

The Prime Minister spoke to President Clinton for 25 minutes last night. The discussion was mostly about Iraq, but they also covered Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister said that there was not much doubt that, in the end, Sinn Fein would have to be put out of the talks, if only for a short time. If they had said right at the beginning that they condemned the killings and disassociated themselves from those who had carried them out, it might have been possible to do something with such a statement. But he now saw no choice but to take action against them. If this was not done, the Unionists and others would probably leave the talks, and the process would collapse. The Taoiseach was being reasonably robust.

Clinton echoed this. Ahern had been very good when he had spoken to him at the end of the previous week. The Prime Minister went on that the IRA's motivation in carrying out the killings remained unclear. Perhaps they had been influenced by their view that they had to be seen to be "defending their people". What was important now was to make clear that, if Sinn Fein went out of the talks and came back in, there could be no repetition.

Clinton said that he had no doubt we were doing the right thing. He thought also that people like Kennedy and Dodd had been pretty good about this. They had been telling Adams that there was no choice.

The Prime Minister said that we could not have justified any other course of action. If they came back into the talks, he wanted to push on hard with the process. He had been encouraged by his most recent contact with Trimble, who had been quite forthcoming on the substance of North/South structures. Meanwhile, it was very important that the three Governments stayed together.

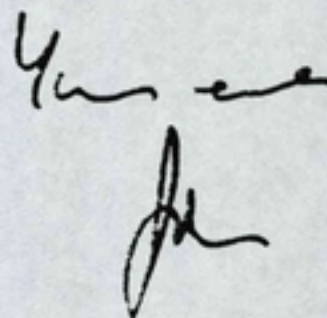
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His strategy all the way through had been to bind Sinn Fein into the process if at all possible, but if Sinn Fein ultimately refused to stay in, he wanted to ensure that they had no respectability. Clinton commented that this seemed to him exactly right.

I am copying this letter to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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