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**SUBJECT  
MASTER**

**Filed on:**

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*FILE**KK**bc**JPS**AC**PB**JEH**PMCF*

From the Principal Private Secretary

12 February 1998

*Dear Gen,*

**CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT CLINTON,  
12 FEBRUARY**

The Prime Minister spoke to Clinton this evening for about 15 minutes. After warm words from both sides about last week's visit, the Prime Minister explained the problem we had over Sinn Fein. The security authorities and the RUC Chief Constable were clear that the two murders earlier in the week were the work of the IRA. We had been through the evidence ourselves, and Dr Mowlam had been over to Belfast to look at it in detail. We had come to the same conclusion. On the basis of his conversation with Ahern earlier in the evening, the Irish were pretty much of the same view. We desperately wanted a way out of the dilemma we were in, and did not want to push Sinn Fein out of the talks. We had tried to get them to issue a denial, to disassociate themselves from what had happened, and to condemn it. However they only said that the ceasefire was still intact. He could not explain why they had done it, but he feared there was no doubt that they had. It was clear from his discussion with Ahern that we were going to have to take some action against Sinn Fein, as we had with the UDP. A strong condemnation and disclaimer of association might still help at this stage, but this was a remote possibility. Mo Mowlam had spoken to McGuinness. All he said was "prove it". If we did not put Sinn Fein out of the talks, the Unionists would walk out and we would have no process left. Ahern could see this too.

The Prime Minister continued that he simply did not know what had motivated the IRA. Perhaps they thought they had to retaliate against Loyalists, and had thought they could get away with this, but had then bungled the operation. Perhaps it was a safety valve for the hard men in the republican movement. In any case they had put us in an impossible situation, and we would have no credibility if we did not take action. Public opinion here would tear us

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limb from limb. He had agreed with Ahern earlier that he would try to persuade Sinn Fein that they would be thrown out for a while but could come back in later as the UDP should be able to do. He thought it was extremely important that, if we had to take action against Sinn Fein, as we probably would, the three Governments were absolutely together and there was no place for Sinn Fein to go.

Clinton asked whether the IRA had protested their innocence. The Prime Minister said they had not. They simply repeated that the ceasefire was intact. Clinton asked whether their motive was revenge. The Prime Minister said it might be. There was also a real debate within the IRA. He was surprised by their action. He had thought that Adams and McGuinness wanted to come in from the cold. Perhaps they did. But they had put us in an impossible position.

Clinton asked whether Ahern would go along with action. The Prime Minister said he thought so, on the basis of his earlier conversation. We wanted a way out, but it was hard to see one now. The moment for clear condemnation and disassociation had unfortunately passed.

Clinton agreed that what Sinn Fein and the IRA had said so far was bull shit. They had been in touch with Sinn Fein earlier to say that they had to make stronger statements. It was up to them if they wanted to walk away from the process. But he was quite clear that they could not expect the British Government to let them have it both ways, ie sit in the process and dabble with violence at the same time. He wanted the three Governments to be together. He certainly did not want a position where he and the Prime Minister were against the Irish. He would call Ahern himself, and he would have one more go at Sinn Fein to improve what they said. But he recognised that this might be hopeless if we were really convinced that they were responsible. The Prime Minister repeated that coming out with a strong statement now could be too late, although it would perhaps offer something to cling on to. Clinton said that he could not understand why the IRA had done it, unless it was explained by a split in their ranks. The Prime Minister had done everything possible for them.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to stick with Ahern. The only salvation he could see was that Sinn Fein went out of the process for a while, with all the three Governments together, so that they had nowhere else to go.

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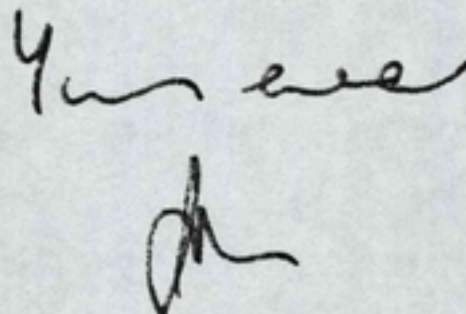
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Clinton said he agreed, but repeated that he would talk to Ahern and have one more go at Sinn Fein. He was sorry this had happened. He would come back to us.

Comment

There is an obvious danger that Clinton and the Irish will squeeze out of Sinn Fein some further (unsatisfactory) wording, and appeal to us not to take action on this basis. This is a risk we have to run, but Washington should leave the Americans in no doubt that we will not appreciate being put in an impossible position by the Americans, given the strength of the evidence we have. We will get as much of this for the Americans as we can, and as soon as we can.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Holmes', with a stylized flourish below it.

JOHN HOLMES

Ken Lindsay Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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