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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to
the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
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30 January 1998

Dear John,

REFORM OF FIREARMS LAW IN NORTHERN IRELAND

You asked yesterday for a note setting out where we now stood on handgun controls, and what options there were for proceeding with the reforms package generally.

The Prime Minister's agreement on Wednesday with David Trimble effectively defers for the foreseeable future, any public move by the Government to prohibit the approximately 2,000 target handguns in the Province along lines similar to Great Britain. But it also unfortunately inhibits any policy initiative which my Minister would otherwise have pursued with the Chief Constable to improve the poor safety record of non-prohibited personal protection firearms. At his Wednesday morning meeting with Trimble to brief him (on Privy Council terms) on our proposals, my Minister was at pains to assure his guest that protection firearms would continue to be available to those persons who genuinely needed them on grounds of threat and that there was no linkage with decommissioning or concessions to Sinn Fein. However it was apparent that Trimble was simply unwilling to accept our proposals for addressing the handgun problem in a balanced manner.

However David Trimble did assent to the other legislative reform proposals, which were listed in the Annex to my Minister's minute to IN dated 16 December. It is therefore be our intention to proceed with publishing these as a consultation paper next month (February) by way of an arranged PQ/Press Statement with briefing of key media interest. It would remain our hope to bring these matters before the NI Grand Committee at some stage during the consultation process, and discussions are continuing to that end.

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More immediately, this morning's unhelpful 'Newsletter' article on handguns quoting John Taylor MP (in which he worryingly reports key elements from my Minister's confidential briefing of Trimble) copy attached, will need to be addressed robustly, not least to reassure understandably nervous owners of personal protection firearms that they will be allowed to retain their guns. It would have been preferable to announce our decision on handguns/protection firearms simultaneous with publication of the consultation paper, but the Taylor article will oblige us to bring that forward.

While the Government's decision not to move against legal handguns here will be welcomed by the Unionist political establishment, it will undoubtedly be criticised from a number of other quarters. Not least, anti-guns groups such as the Gun Control Network will see an announcement now as insensitive and contrary to the Government's manifesto commitment to rigorous firearms controls, particularly with the Firearms (Amendment) (No.2) Act coming into force on 1 February and with the second anniversary of Dunblane on 13 March. Shooting organisations will take strength from what they will see as double standards within the United Kingdom, and may use this in their pending application to the ECHR which, as you know, is challenging the legality of the handguns ban in Great Britain. Nearer home, it is probable the Province will attract numbers of otherwise disenfranchised target pistol shooters who cannot legitimately participate in their sport elsewhere in the country, with the resulting safety and administrative demands this will place on the RUC. In the local political context, the Irish Government, SDLP and Sinn Fein will undoubtedly interpret the Government's decision on handguns as yet another concession to the Unionist lobby, in an area of public policy to which the Government has attached considerable national importance and legislative urgency.

Notwithstanding, my Minister acknowledges that these criticisms will require to be faced down. In public safety terms, our decision not to move against target pistols will be the most difficult to defend, simply because it flies in the face of strong public sentiment in favour of

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tighter gun controls. Personal protection firearms are however different because of their uniqueness to the Province. Unfortunately there are also more of them (approximately 10,500) and they do have a significantly worse safety record than target pistols. My Minister therefore believes that we should at least consider the option of instigating an independent review into handgun controls in Northern Ireland, consulting as need be and taking account of local circumstances including the security situation. This would help to ameliorate the kind of criticisms previously described (including David Trimble's bizarre comment to the Minister that these were matters on which the Government was not genuinely consulting); while maintaining a measured momentum towards tighter controls and preparing the necessary evidential material (if indeed that should prove the case) for an eventual ban on handguns here in parity with Great Britain. My Minister recognises that you may consider this not to be a viable option given the Prime Minister's recent conversation with Mr Trimble. Nonetheless my Minister believes it would be wrong not to draw this option to your attention, otherwise there is a very real risk that the Province will become a permanent refuge for firearms prohibited elsewhere in the United Kingdom; and that were a Dunblane-type incident to occur here, the Government would be exposed to criticism.

Yours Sincerely
Steven McCourt

Steven McCourt
Private Secretary to Adam Ingram JP MP

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