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From: John Holmes
Date: 9 February 1998

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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

You are now seeing Mo tomorrow evening. I will join you for a drink between 7.30 and 8.30 pm, after which you can discuss politics over dinner.

Mow is now much happier than she was a week or two ago, and seems to have forgotten her grievances against us. But there is still a significant division between us and the NIO about next steps. I recommend you read the attached NIO paper, just arrived, both for the background it gives on the present relatively encouraging position in the talks, and for the recommendations on how we manage the awkward problem of manoeuvring towards a final text. The NIO way out is that we might encourage the Irish to table a paper unilaterally. This would then leave us free to table our own paper later, as a basis around which support could coalesce.

This is alright in theory, but I doubt the Irish will play ball. We are therefore likely to be left with some kind of operation similar to that which preceded the Propositions paper, with us bringing along the UUP, and the Irish (and we) trying to bring along the SDLP and perhaps Sinn Fein as well. All this will have to be behind the scenes before anything is tabled in the talks. Mo remains resistant to this scenario, because of the difficulty of maintaining the talks process while the behind the scenes negotiations go on.

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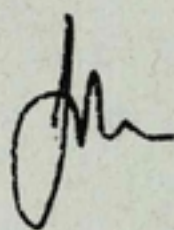
- 2 -

Mo also wants to talk about the time-table for the next few months and how we prepare for a referendum. She has come to the conclusion that we should aim for a referendum on 1 May, if we are to have any chance of success before we are all overtaken by the marching season. She knows this is extremely ambitious, but thinks we do not have much more than two or three weeks after that before it becomes too late.

Mo also wants to talk about how to handle the UDP. You should also discuss the substance, in particular where we are trying to get to on North/South bodies and the Council of the Islands as an umbrella for them.

You are meeting Trimble, and possibly Taylor, later in the week for a drink. Mo is not yet fully aware of this, and you need to take her through it, and the need for it. We want to make the meeting private but this will, as usual, be difficult to achieve.

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JOHN HOLMES

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