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 SUBJECT
 MASTER

From the Principal Private Secretary

23 March 1998

Filed on

Dear Gen,

CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT CLINTON, 20 MARCH

The Prime Minister and Clinton discussed Northern Ireland briefly during a longer telephone conversation about the Middle East. The Prime Minister began by thanking Clinton for all the efforts he had made with the Northern Ireland parties earlier in the week. He now saw his own task as to work on Trimble. Clinton agreed that this was the hardest part ahead. He knew it was easier said than done. We had to understand Trimble's position. He did not want an agreement to be his swansong, and had to be conscious of Paisley and his own dissidents waiting to get him. No doubt he exaggerated the threat to him but he was not just crying wolf.

The Prime Minister agreed. He would press Trimble to do a deal, but there was a limit to how far this could be taken. The Unionists could always walk away, though the same was true of the other parties too. We were all now looking over the edge of the precipice together.

Clinton said he was also worried about the post-referendum phase. There were a lot of enemies of peace out there. He suggested that someone the Prime Minister trusted, not involved in current efforts, might work on how an agreement could be made to stick. He would certainly be ready to make whatever reasonable investment he could in this. Meanwhile he admired Mo Mowlam enormously.

The Prime Minister repeated that he would put his all into trying to reach a settlement, and try everything with Trimble. But you could only take a horse to water The Unionists were always explosive material to deal with.

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Comment

I think Dr Mowlam is already reflecting on Clinton's point about the post-referendum period. The Prime Minister thinks Clinton's idea of someone separate from the immediate talks devoting time to this is a good one.

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

Ym ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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