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From the Private Secretary

3 December 1996

LISBON SUMMIT: NORTHERN IRELAND

In the event, the Prime Minister and Taoiseach did not manage to get together in Lisbon. The Prime Minister had hoped to speak to the Taoiseach in the margins, not least to make clear that, while we wanted to work closely with the Irish Government, we could not set a specific date for Sinn Fein's entry in advance of a ceasefire. I also know, because I bumped into him myself, that the Taoiseach was hoping to talk to the Prime Minister. But circumstances at Lisbon were such that their paths did not coincide. The Taoiseach was incidentally reasonably friendly.

Vice President Gore took an early opportunity to mention Northern Ireland to the Prime Minister, in the margins of the collective photograph. He handed over the attached speaking notes (he did not give us card 3 of 3, if one exists). The Prime Minister said that he did not believe our positions were in practice very far apart. We had set out criteria for the IRA and Sinn Fein to meet. If they could do so, that would be fine and Sinn Fein could join the talks. It was a genuine offer. But we needed to be convinced that they meant what they said, in view of events on the ground. The Unionists were of course even more suspicious. David Trimble would no doubt be making these points during his visit to Washington.

The conversation could not be pursued further.

I am copying this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and by fax to Sir John Kerr in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.

JOHN HOLMES

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Northern Ireland Office

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