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NOTE FOR THE RECORD
PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO NORTHERN IRELAND,
17/18 DECEMBER 1996

This was a successful and worthwhile visit, despite its brevity and difficulties caused by fog. The programme was well balanced, and enabled the Prime Minister to meet a good range of non-political figures. As on previous visits, he was well received by all he met. I detected no signs of hostility at any stage. Comments on the individual items are as follows:

(i) Dinner at Hillsborough

This was mostly social, but enabled the Prime Minister to have a long talk with George Mitchell. There was a brief discussion at the end of dinner, introduced by Sir Patrick Mayhew. He invited those working in the community at local level, a businessman, a local editor, and one of the church leaders to express their concerns. The general theme was disappointment at the political process and disillusion with the political leaders in the Province, combined with a feeling that, despite Drumcree, the people of Northern Ireland remained ready for dialogue, and a settlement. George Mitchell took the opportunity to pay a personal tribute to the Prime Minister's commitment to peace in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister picked up the general theme when he spoke briefly at the end. He believed that, despite the problems in the peace process, it was moving in the right direction, albeit slowly. There had been a notable change of rhetoric over recent years and months. The elements of a settlement could be discerned, although it remained extremely difficult to get there. Recent economic successes in the Province also helped to create the conditions for a settlement. So he was by no means

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despairing although Drumcree had dramatically revealed the extent of polarisation on both sides. He believed that a fundamental problem was poor political leadership in the Province on all sides for many years. He believed that it might be necessary, at some stage in the future, to appeal over the heads of this leadership to the ordinary people in order to bring about a settlement.

These words by the Prime Minister were well received and attracted a round of applause. The Prime Minister made clear before he spoke, and afterwards, that he assumed the dinner was an entirely private occasion, and his words should not be repeated elsewhere. There is nevertheless a considerable risk that his remarks about lack of political leadership will leak in one form or another.

(ii) Security Meeting

After dinner, the Prime Minister met briefly the RUC Chief Constable, the GOC and John Steele. Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram were also there. Both the Chief Constable and the GOC said that they expected more violence from the IRA, possibly in the immediate future. It was more likely to be in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK and to be aimed at the security forces rather than civilians. They gave no credence whatsoever to the theory that recent failed bombs had been deliberate IRA failures, to remind us of their existence ("visiting cards"). There was obviously a danger that the Loyalist ceasefire could break down in the event of future bombs, but it was impressive that it had held so far.

There was some discussion of the possibility of an IRA ceasefire before the General Election. The GOC said that unity of the movement would

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remain an important factor. He thought that the military side of the organisation might go along with the political leadership for a new ceasefire if they felt that their violent campaign was getting nowhere. One of the attractions of a new tactical ceasefire was the boost this would give to Sinn Fein's attempts to displace SDLP politically.

(iii) Visit to the Military

Fog prevented the visit to Dungannon base from taking place. We landed instead, at very short notice, at the Portadown Headquarters of the Royal Irish Rangers. The Prime Minister was able to meet briefly the Commander and some of his soldiers.

(iv) School visit

We had to go from Portadown to the school by car, and used cars subsequently, which complicated the programme considerably. The state primary school was an excellent choice, with good staff and delightful children. The visit was enjoyable and successful, and provided a good opportunity to talk to the press afterwards.

(v) RYOBI

Another good visit, to inaugurate the gas supply to the first industrial customer in Northern Ireland. It was well organised from all points of view, and again gave the Prime Minister a good opportunity to speak about economic prospects in Northern Ireland, notably the latest fall in ... unemployment and the link between this and the peace process (text attached).

(vi) Lunch with community workers

A well organised occasion, which allowed the Prime Minister to meet a

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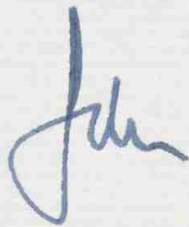
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wide range of people working at the grass roots. They appreciated the opportunity to put their views to him. The only slightly sour note came in an exchange with Brendan McAllister and others in one group about HMG's failure to respond positively to gestures from Sinn Fein. The attractive museum setting for the lunch contributed to a successful occasion. The Prime Minister made an excellent off-the-cuff speech about the work being done by those present and the prospects for the ... peace process (text attached).

(vii) Ballynahinch town centre

The walk-about was a good chance for the Prime Minister to meet ordinary people from both communities in a small market town. The response was universally friendly, with continuing evidence that his personal commitment to Northern Ireland is much appreciated.



JOHN HOLMES

19 December 1996

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