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ASST MM 52/1
SEC 04 JAN 1995
CENT SEC

HCS 4/95

FROM: D FELL
4 JANUARY 1995

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|----|----------------------------------|---|
| cc | PS/Sir J Wheeler (DFP, B&L) | B |
| | PS/Michael Ancram (DENI, B&L) | B |
| | PS/Baroness Denton (DED, DANI&L) | B |
| | PS/Mr Moss (DOE, DHSS&L) | B |
| | PS/PUS (L&B) | B |
| | Mr Legge | B |
| | Mr Thomas | B |
| | NI Permanent Secretaries | |
| | Mr Whitlaw | |
| | Mr Watkins | B |
| | Mr Leach | B |
| | Mr Kennedy | |
| | Mr Alexander | |
| | Mr Wood (B&L) | B |
| | Mr Maxwell | B |
| | Mr Bell | B |
| | Mr Williams | B |
| | Mr Stephens | B |
| | Mr Brooker | B |
| | Mr Maccabe | B |
| | Mr Campton | |
| | Mr Lindsay | |

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CENT

Mrs Kenny (O/R)

Mrs Denton

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (B&L) - B

FIRE IN PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

1. You and I accompanied the Secretary of State to Parliament Buildings this morning, where he was able to inspect the result of the fire in the old Commons Chamber. We also discussed with him my submission of 3 January, and he accepted the main recommendation that he should commission an independent inquiry into the fire precautions and fire fighting arrangements in Parliament Buildings, and the lessons to be learnt, not just in relation to that building, but to other parts of the Government office estate. The Secretary of State indicated a preference for the inquiry to be conducted by the Home Office Fire Inspectorate, or if that was not possible, by the Chief Officer of a Fire Service such as Glasgow.

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2. DOE colleagues have in turn been in touch with the Home Office Fire Inspectorate, who were able to recommend Sir Reginald Doyle, who retired as the Home Office Chief Fire Inspector in December 1993, to undertake the review. Sir Reginald has been sounded out, and indicated a willingness in principle to undertake the task, subject to discussion with officials to clarify the nature of the inquiry and the terms of reference. We have arranged for him to come into OAB at 3.00 pm this afternoon for a VCR discussion with DOE officials and myself. It may be that a representative of the DED Fire Inspectorate can also attend; and Andy Wood will also be present. Subject to us reaching a satisfactory understanding with Sir Reginald about the inquiry, it would be valuable for the Secretary of State also to meet Sir Reginald, while he is in OAB this afternoon, before formally inviting him to conduct the inquiry. (I do not envisage the inquiry being constituted as a formal public inquiry under statute, but rather the provision of independent advice to the Secretary of State, in the manner one would expect from a consultant.)

3. In the event that the Secretary of State does decide to invite Sir Reginald to conduct the inquiry, there would be benefit in announcing it at the earliest opportunity. I attach a first draft of a possible statement announcing the inquiry.

[signed: DF]

DAVID FELL

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SECRETARY OF STATE'S STATEMENT ON PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS FIRE AND
INDEPENDENT INQUIRY

In a statement today about the fire at Parliament Buildings on Monday morning the Secretary of State said he was able to confirm that serious damage had been confined to the former House of Commons debating chamber. Sir Patrick said that the loss of the debating chamber, which had had great architectural distinction, was a grievous loss to Northern Ireland. He was however very thankful that neither loss of life nor injury had resulted from the fire. He praised the performance of the Fire Service, the Police and Government employees who had responded magnificently to the occasion.

Sir Patrick confirmed that work to restore services to Parliament Buildings was already well underway and he hoped that a phased return to normal working could start within [a few days/a short while]. [NB the implications of this reference to be discussed.]

The Secretary of State noted that the fire doors in the parliamentary area of the building had proved effective in helping to prevent the spread of the fire and he referred to the extensive programme of improvements to the building now in progress. These improvements will ensure that although Parliament Buildings is now more than sixty years old, it will be served by the best available system of facilities for the detection, warning and fighting of fire. He was entirely satisfied that the programme was necessary and appropriate and that it includes all measures necessary for fire security.

It was however important to consider whether there might be lessons to be learned from the fire at Parliament Buildings which might help to further enhance the safety of that building and other public buildings.

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Sir Patrick said, "I have a high degree of confidence in the professional competence of the officials in the Northern Ireland Departments who have responsibilities for safety matters, but given the understandable public concern about Parliament Buildings I have decided to seek an independent strand of advice which will take account of all of the circumstances relating to the recent fire. This advice is likely to be relevant to other public buildings and to the safety of people working in them or visiting them. I am very glad to say it has been agreed that such an inquiry should be conducted by Sir Reginald Doyle. Sir Reginald is exceptionally well qualified to provide this assistance, having previously been Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services in Great Britain. I am most grateful to Sir Reginald for his prompt agreement to assist us. I have today discussed with him the fire at Parliament Buildings and he has advised me that he is available to begin work on the inquiry at once."

The Secretary of State said that he had been concerned about fears which had been expressed about the risk of fire in Government offices in Northern Ireland. The law regarding standards of fire precautions applies to Crown Buildings as to similar buildings in the private sector.

Sir Patrick emphasised that the Government takes most seriously its responsibilities to all who work in Crown Buildings or have occasion to use them. Safety has always been a predominant consideration in the construction and maintenance of these buildings and will continue to be so. The current programmes of safety work, not only at Parliament Buildings, but at other public buildings, and the inquiry to be conducted by Sir Reginald Doyle, were indications of this. It is important that people should be aware of the Government's continuing commitment to safety and that proper interest in fire precautions does not lead to exaggerated expressions of concern.

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