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10 DOWNING STREET
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From the Private Secretary

20 May 1996

Dear Martin,

NORTHERN IRELAND: NEXT STEPS

The Prime Minister, Sir Patrick Mayhew and Michael Ancram spoke on the telephone on Sunday afternoon about how to handle the next steps, particularly with the Irish and US Governments.

Sir Patrick Mayhew reported that the Irish Government were sticking to an interpretation of the Mitchell proposals on parallel decommissioning which was incompatible with our view of it, and its natural interpretation, as requiring decommissioning during negotiations. Michael Ancram reported his discussions with Senator Mitchell and Tony Lake. Mitchell had been interested in the suggestion of taking on the plenary and decommissioning, but it was clear that the Irish had been working hard to persuade Mitchell and the US Administration that Mitchell should insist on charring Strand 2. They had also been pushing their interpretation of parallel decommissioning. Mitchell was due to ring him shortly with his response. He expected Mitchell to say that he would be happy to take on the plenary, but not decommissioning itself; that he would also like to do Strand 2; but that we would accept whatever the two governments offered him.

The Prime Minister said that there could be no question of compromise on the meaning of parallel decommissioning, even if that might ultimately lead to a breakdown. As far as Mitchell was concerned, there were strong arguments against allowing him into Strand 2. The Unionists would probably not wear it, and there was a strong likelihood that Mitchell would try to balance political concessions for decommissioning. We would therefore need to make clear to the Irish that we could not accept Mitchell for Strand 2, but wanted him to take on the plenary and decommissioning.

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Michael Ancram suggested that we should try to get Mitchell to repeat publicly his own interpretation of parallel decommissioning, ie during negotiations, to make it more difficult for the Irish to argue anything else. We should ensure that Mitchell implemented his compromise proposal, rather than pushing a further compromise. The Prime Minister suggested that if we asked Mitchell to repeat what he meant, he might be tempted to say something different. We should therefore assume, including in talking to Mitchell, that he continued to mean what his report said and what he had repeated on the Today programme.

It was agreed that I should talk to Teahon, to spell out again our position on decommissioning and Mitchell for Strand 2; that I should also work on Lake to bring him to accept that there could be no backing away from Mitchell's parallel decommissioning proposal; that Sir John Kerr should carry on this work as necessary, with the possibility of a message from the Prime Minister to President Clinton in reserve; that Michael Ancram should continue to persuade Senator Mitchell that he was the only man who was suitable for the major task of plenary rather than the time-consuming detail of Strand 2; that Michael Ancram should also keep Trimble abreast of developments when he saw him tonight; and that meanwhile the IGC scheduled for 22 May should not be postponed, although there would no doubt be lots of contact with the Irish before then, including between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach.

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

Yours ever
John

JOHN HOLMES

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