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From the Private Secretary

Dear Jonathan

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH PARTY LEADERS

The Prime Minister held a meeting with the leaders of the Constitutional Parties at Hillsborough this evening. The cast was Mr. Molyneux, Dr. Alderdice, Mr. Hume and Dr. Paisley. Your Secretary of State was also present.

The Prime Minister started by saying he wanted to hear the Party leaders' views. He knew they differed, but thought it important to know what they felt. They could be in a pivotal position in the coming weeks. The Prime Minister then gave an account of his visit to Northern Ireland today, commenting particularly on the economic benefits that would flow from peace.

Dr. Alderdice said he much appreciated the Prime Minister taking trouble to come over to Northern Ireland. Whilst there was a good deal of hope around, there was also a lot of anxiety and confusion. People were concerned whether the Provisionals were going to move in the direction of ending violence; there was hope but not a great deal of conviction about this. People were also worried about the recent lack of progress on the political talks. Whether or not Sinn Fein decided to end violence it was important to make progress on this quickly: no-one could be allowed a veto on political progress.

The Prime Minister said he agreed with that. At the moment, the response from Sinn Fein was uncertain. What they had not said was as instructive as what they had said. For a limited period it was reasonable to wait, though there was no justification for violence in the meantime. And there was no point in Sinn Fein asking for extra bits of clarification every day: he was not getting sucked into negotiations. Neither he nor the Taoiseach saw the Joint Declaration as a negotiating document: it meant what it said.

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Mr. Hume also thanked the Prime Minister for coming, and for putting the problems of Northern Ireland high on his agenda. He saw widespread hope in the community, particularly from young people. The Prime Minister had laid down a clear challenge in the Joint Declaration for everyone, whatever their traditions, to come to the table and try to reach agreement. Politics in Northern Ireland was too often based on the past and on blaming others. The Joint Declaration challenged that approach. It would not be easy, but once people came together around the table there would be strong pressure for them not to leave until agreement had been reached. He very much hoped Sinn Fein would accept the challenge. There had been too much speculation and party politicking, with a new issue being raised every day. The declaration did not lay down a solution, it laid down a set of principles.

Mr. Hume also very much agreed with what the Prime Minister had said about the impact on the Northern Ireland economy if there was an end to violence. It was no accident that it was in areas of high unemployment that people got sucked into violence. His visits to the US had made him very much aware of how the image of Northern Ireland was one of continual strife; but there was lots of goodwill which would be translated into investment and tourism if there was peace.

Mr. Molyneaux said that the pressure for the Joint Declaration had come from the Irish Government, who had felt convinced that violence would be ended in a relatively short time. As a result, the Joint Declaration went somewhat further than the Unionists would have liked. But it now looked as if peace would not be delivered quickly and he thought it was essential not to sit back and mark time waiting on Mr. Adams. He wanted to see much greater progress on increasing democracy in Northern Ireland. The mechanics were there in the talks Michael Ancram was having. He thought this was the foremost weapon in the constitutional parties' hands if they worked together. The Prime Minister very much supported this: he wanted Michael Ancram's talks taken forward without delay.

Mr. Paisley said that of course he took a different view entirely. The view of his Party was that although much was made of the need for the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, their consent was never sought when there was a crisis. It had not been sought over the Anglo-Irish Agreement. And it had not been sought over this declaration. With all the euphoria about peace and reconciliation, he thought people were losing sight of certain things that could not be brought together. Unionism and Republicanism had no common ground, though Unionists and Republicans could live side by side. He too was happy when the British Prime Minister came to Northern Ireland. But he

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would have been happier if the Prime Minister had come before he signed the Joint Declaration. This had been imposed on the people of Northern Ireland. It said the consent of the people was needed, but that was never sought. Dr. Paisley thought that the Government should move immediately to consult the people of Northern Ireland by holding a border poll. That would stop the elections to the European Parliament in June being seen as a referendum.

Dr. Paisley thought there was a lot of inconsistency being talked about the Joint Declaration. The Government was telling Gerry Adams it was simple and straight forward, but was telling the DUP that it was complex and needed to be read carefully. It concealed some major changes in policy. An important principle of the political talks had been that Dublin had no role in Strand 1, on the arrangements within Northern Ireland. But paragraph 9 of the Joint Declaration gave the two governments a role. This let a foreign government get involved in internal politics. There was no place for the people he represented at such talks. It cut across the principles he believed in. And the people he represented were appalled that the Government was planning to talk to the IRA before it had handed in weapons.

Mr. Hume said it was important to reach an agreement on future relationships. He thought Dr. Paisley was engaged in silly frightening tactics. It was essential to sit down and settle problems. Unless that was done, the uncertainty and concerns would always remain. Dr. Paisley said he had not come to have a discussion with Mr. Hume. He wanted a way now for people to be allowed to give their consent. He pressed for a border poll: "then let's see who believes in democracy."

The Prime Minister said that he had visited Northern Ireland several times before the signing of the Joint Declaration and had had several meetings in London with all the constitutional leaders. Dr. Paisley was right about consent: that was at the root of democracy. This was a point he had made in relation to Scotland before the election. He thought the way in which the views of those in Northern Ireland should be sought was after the talks process was complete and a set of consistent proposals had emerged.

The Prime Minister said that he had never said that the IRA could keep their weapons: possessing weapons was illegal. Dr. Paisley should not pre-judge the Government's position. The Government was following a delicate road in the hope that Dr. Paisley would never again have to attend funerals in his constituency of those killed in sectarian violence. He disagreed with the DUP view that it would never be proper even to talk to Sinn Fein if they had renounced violence. They still retained the support of a significant portion of

people at the ballot box. If Dr. Paisley was confident in his position, he need have no fears about going through with the talks process and then seeking the views of the people of Northern Ireland.

Dr. Paisley said he did not believe a proper question would come out of a talks process involving the Irish Government. There would not be a clear cut issue, and people would be asked to vote on all sorts of structures and other arrangements. He wanted a simple decision via a border poll.

The Prime Minister, with some exasperation, said he was sick of the slaughter in Northern Ireland and wanted Dr. Paisley's help to try to stop it. His door was open to Dr. Paisley any time he wanted, and there was no need for Dr. Paisley to go out in the Street and raise all sorts of unnecessary fears.

Mr. Molyneaux said that it was ironic that in the past Dr. Paisley had felt strongly about the need for there to be a referendum at the conclusion of the talks process, and it had been Mr. Molyneaux who warned him of the danger of a simultaneous referendum in the south. He hoped it would be possible to meet Dr. Paisley's points by pressing on with Strand 1. He thought it was sensible to have a fairly good idea of how the Province was to be run before progress was made on wider issues.

This restarted Dr. Paisley on his allegation that paragraph 9 of the Joint Declaration gave the Irish Government role in Strand 1. Your Secretary of State said paragraph 9 referred only to Strand 2. Dr. Paisley said this was not Dublin's view. He would like an assurance in writing from the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister said he would certainly write to Dr. Paisley if that was necessary. But would Dr. Paisley in turn take up his offer of a meeting with your Secretary of State or Michael Ancram to discuss any doubts about the Joint Declaration in private rather than in public? Dr. Paisley expressed great suspicion about talking to anyone until he was sure of the basis of agreement. He wanted to put his questions in writing. Mr. Molyneaux chipped in with support for discussing things face to face. Dr. Alderdice cautioned about the potential inconsistency between ruling out a request for clarification when raised by Mr. Adams but offering talks with Party leaders on the interpretation of the declaration. If we moved away from the simple line that the Declaration meant what it said, we could be led a merry dance.

The Prime Minister asked whether the Party leaders were willing to have further talks with Mr. Ancram. Mr. Molyneaux, Dr. Alderdice and Mr. Hume all said yes. Dr. Paisley said he had to do what he had to do. He was not making a decision on that now. He would decide when he had seen the Prime

Minister's letter about paragraph 9.

The Prime Minister accepted the point made by Dr. Alderdice. There was, however, a distinction between talks between constitutional leaders and requests for clarification from Sinn Fein before they had even agreed to end violence. He hoped that when Dr. Paisley received confirmation that paragraph 9 related to Strand 2 only, he would feel able to lead his colleagues into further talks.

The meeting then came to an end. I think Dr. Paisley might have been planning to walk out, but the Prime Minister stood up at the same time as he did. The Prime Minister wished him a Happy Christmas and got a slightly grudging "and the same to you too"!

I am copying this letter to Melanie Leech (Cabinet Office)

Mr Williams	1
Mr Bell	1
Mr Brooker	1
Mr Quinn	1
Mr Rodell	1
Ms Dobbin	1
Mr Hallett, SA2	1

*Yours
Alex*

ALEX ALLAN

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