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cc. PUS(2) -  
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Dear Sir

**THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF NORTHERN IRELAND**

Thank you for your letter of 22 December about the reference in the Joint Declaration to the Government having "no selfish strategic ... interest in Northern Ireland".

The history of this phrase goes back, at least to its inclusion, in Peter Brooke's 'British Presence' speech delivered in London on 9 November 1990. It was intended to demonstrate to nationalist opinion that if a majority in Northern Ireland were to favour unity, then the Government had no vested interest in the Province which would cause it to stand in the way of implementation of the majority will. (The Government has of course long been committed, most formally in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to introducing and supporting legislation to establish a united Ireland if a majority of the people of Northern Ireland want it.) John Hume and the Irish Government attach considerable importance to this phrase and, in our view, its inclusion in the Joint Declaration has helped the Irish accept the language designed to safeguard the Unionist position and reiterate unequivocally the constitutional guarantee. As you recognise, the word 'selfish', which qualifies 'strategic', is important.

Along with other Ministers, your Secretary of State saw a draft of the Declaration, including the words in question, before it issued.

I can well appreciate that this phrase might have raised a few eyebrows amongst your colleagues though Ministers have used it, I believe, at least since 1990 and possibly 1988. However, with an explanation of the context and meaning that was to be imparted, I hope that you, and they, are reassured. It is of course for you to decide when and how to review the defence implications of any contingency. Nevertheless, as you say, it is worth bearing in mind that a change in Northern Ireland's constitutional position is hardly likely to be on the agenda for the foreseeable future, a situation recognised and accepted by Irish Ministers in public statements.

Yours sincerely  
Q. T. Thomas

QUENTIN THOMAS

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