



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
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MO 6/17/15/1D

9th January 1991

John Ashdown

Good news.

CS 9/1

Very!

Dear Charles,

CALL BY MR ASHDOWN

The Rt Hon Paddy Ashdown MP called on the Defence Secretary this afternoon at his request. He said that he had been reviewing his Party's position on the Gulf and wanted to put some questions to Mr King on a Privy Counsellor basis.

He began by asking what were the Government's reasons for not giving sanctions more time? The Defence Secretary said that there were three reasons. First, there were the continuing atrocities in Kuwait. Second, there was a military reason that any force built-up to a peak of capability, beyond which its morale and performance would decline. The Iraqis by contrast were continuing to build up their defences. There would thus come an optimum moment for military action. Third, the Defence Secretary was concerned that the international coalition would not hold indefinitely. Although sanctions had worked - indeed they were said to be by the experts the toughest ever to be introduced - they were not putting real pressure on Saddam Hussein to withdraw.

Mr Ashdown asked whether it was fair to say that international opinion was "flaky" and whether waiting until September could effectively rule out a military option. The Defence Secretary agreed with both points. Mr Ashdown then asked whether we were likely to face a greater threat from weapons of mass destruction if we waited until the Autumn. The Defence Secretary said that Iraq was undoubtedly developing longer range missiles and working on both chemical and biological warheads. The experts advice was that they were likely to acquire a nuclear weapon capability within the next 2-3 years, but we did not know whether they could put together an improvised device more quickly.

Sir Charles Powell KCMG
 No 10 Downing Street



Finally Mr Ashdown asked whether the Allies were sure of success. The Defence Secretary said that military advisers were confident. Although the balance of ground forces was against the allies, there was a massive superiority in air power which should redress the balance.

In conclusion, Mr Ashdown said that having previously been keen to give sanctions more time he had now reached the view that we should move towards a military option soon if the present round of negotiations failed. Delay would increase the cost of success and the chance of failure. This would not be altogether easy to sell within his own Party but he expected to announce the new policy tomorrow. Another important factor for his party was that the UN could not be seen to fail. This was the best chance at re-establishing its credentials and we must not let matters drag on until the Autumn and then fail to deliver.

The Defence Secretary said he was pleased to hear that the Liberal Democrats would take that view.

Since Mr Ashdown revealed his plans in confidence I am limiting the circulation of this letter until they are announced. I am sending copies initially only to Richard Gozney (FCO) and Sir Robin Butler.

Wm Sneyd
Sir Webb

(S WEBB)
 Private Secretary