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Dear Gus

DECLASSIFICATION

Thank you for your letter of earlier today, in response to mine of 10 December, which we discussed earlier this afternoon. I was pleased that HMG has reconsidered its earlier position and now agrees that the Committee should be able to refer to the fact and timing of exchanges between Mr Blair and President Bush in public.

Unfortunately, as I explained, your letter arrived too late for me to be able to discuss it with my fellow Committee Members. I shall discuss the letter with them at our meeting in the first week of January.

As you explained, you attach considerable importance to maintaining the principle that the exchanges between a British Prime Minister and the President of the United States should be privileged; and that the balance of public interest lies in not agreeing to the release of any extracts from those exchanges. I note this; but I must record that the Committee considers that the messages sent by Mr Blair to President Bush incorporate points of central importance to the Inquiry. That is why the Committee regards its ability to explore relevant points from this correspondence as a very serious issue; and I shall need to discuss this further with my colleagues.

Given the salience of some of the messages which Mr Blair sent President Bush to the issues the Inquiry is examining, I and my fellow Committee Members will want to pursue a number of the messages which Mr Blair sent to President Bush (and a few others) in the public hearing. Your position is that it will be up to the witness to decide how he wishes to reply. Given Mr Blair's decision to disclose some of the content in "A Journey", the Committee is likely to be disappointed if he is less forthcoming in his evidence to us. This approach is also likely to increase the length of the hearing.

Finally, as we discussed, I remain of the view that the Inquiry will need to explain the position that we have reached before the public hearings commence on 18 January.

I will write to you again after the Committee's discussion of the issues.

Yours sincerely

SIR JOHN CHILCOT