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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

8 July 1981

Dear Sir James,

Thank you very much for your letter about the paintings for the State Dining Room here, and for taking the trouble to come here last week with Mr Leggatt and Mr Green to see the room.

I have now considered all the various possibilities which you and others have suggested to me, bearing in mind both the immediate need for improvement and also a better arrangement for the longer term. The decisions I have reached do, I think, bring about in more or less one operation an immediate and a longer-term solution.

One person who has also advised me about the room is Dr Roy Strong, and he recommended mirrors as a means of bringing the room to life by reflecting, as they will, the light, silver and glass. I am attracted by this idea and we have available two elegant tall mirrors which will be in keeping with the panelling and should look well on the long wall facing the windows.

For the central position over the mantelpiece I want to hang the Shackleton portrait of King George II, because he was the Sovereign who first presented No.10 to the First Lord of the Treasury. For the side panels on that wall I would be delighted

/to borrow

to borrow, if he feels able to lend it to us, Mr Leggatt's magnificent Beechey of Nelson, matching this on the other side with the Duke of Wellington by Wilkie which Dr Baron can borrow for us. I realise that both these pictures could probably only be lent for a relatively short time, but it would be marvellous to have them here, however briefly.

Of the other pictures which the National Portrait Gallery have generously offered to lend I felt that those of Disraeli and Gladstone, while supremely appropriate, were rather sombre for this particular room. The same is of course not true of the Reynolds' portraits of Lord Bute and Warren Hastings, but I wondered whether the Bute was not a little too large for this room, while I think there are some difficulties about having Warren Hastings here, remembering what happened to him! I had in mind, too, that pictures of this quality could not be away from the Gallery for long and that such short-term arrangements could cause some disruption both here and at the Gallery.

I plan to hang between the mirrors the fine Northcote portrait of Admiral Sir Thomas Graves which is in the Government collection.

The Sickert of Sir Winston Churchill is a marvellous picture which would perhaps fit more happily in one of the other rooms. But again I expect that this is not a picture which the Gallery, understandably, could lend us for very long.

I think that these changes will be a great improvement and

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I wanted you to know of what I had decided. I want you to know, too, how grateful I am to you and your colleagues for all your concern and readiness to help.

You must come and see them in person - I am very excited at the prospect. I can't think why people have previously been satisfied with inferior pictures.

Yours sincerely
Margaret Skelton

Sir James Hanson, F.R.S.A.