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'Seeking a dialogue leading to peace'

The documents released at Westminster yesterday reveal dramatic details of nine months of secret contacts between the British government and Sinn Fein/IRA. Mark Brennock pieces together the sequence of events.

BYLINE: By MARK BRENNOCK

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THE FOLLOWING account of the prolonged exchanges between the two sides is based on the documents released yesterday by the Northern Secretary, Sir Patrick Mayhew.

Sinn Fein disputes a key element of the British version the content of the oral message last February from the leadership of what the British refer to throughout as "the Provisional Movement". Mr Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein vehemently rejects the British assertion that this message said that the conflict was over. This particular message is a "counterfeit" says; Mr McGuinness.

Sinn Fein yesterday released three documents. These differ somewhat in wording from the British government versions of these documents, but not in any important detail. In one case, a different date is given by Sinn Fein and the British government for a document.

It must be stressed that the accounts given here of oral messages from "the Provisional Movement" are those given by the British government, and have not been confirmed as accurate by Sinn Fein.

INITIAL CONTACT

ACCORDING TO the British government, the message that started this year's series of contacts with the IRA came from the leadership of "the Provisional Movement" on February 22nd last. This message, according to the British government, was not in writing, but stated that "the conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close".

The British government yesterday released its version of this message, which Mr Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein immediately dismissed as "a counterfeit...no such communication was ever sent". It appears to be the case that an oral message was sent, but the content is disputed.

The following is the British government's version of this disputed message, released yesterday by Sir Patrick Mayhew:

FEBRUARY 22nd, 1993

Mon
29/11/93

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Oral message from the leadership of the Provisional Movement:

"The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold dialogue leading to peace. We cannot announce such a move as it will lead to confusion or the volunteers because the press will misinterpret it as a surrender. We cannot meet Secretary of State's public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure that we were not being tricked."

NOTE: Accompanied by texts of speeches given to Sinn Fein Ard-Fheis by Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams.

BRITISH REPLY

The British government acknowledged this message but did not give a full response immediately.

FEBRUARY 26th, 1993

Message from British Government

We understand and appreciate the seriousness of what has been said. We wish to take it seriously and at face value. That will, of course, be influenced by events on the ground over the coming days and weeks. In view of the importance of the message, it is not possible to give a substantive reply immediately. It is, however, necessary that this acknowledgement is given promptly. We are working to reply further as swiftly as possible. We understand the need for this.

McGUINNESS NAMED

The British government says it received another oral message from "the leadership of the Provisional Movement". The following is the British government's version of this:

MARCH 5th, 1993

Oral message from the leadership of the Provisional Movement

"We were pleased to receive this message and welcome the possibility of a meeting. We would like two representatives, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Kelly, to have an exploratory meeting with you as soon as possible'."

CONDITIONS SET

Within a few days, however, the British government appeared to make its willingness to continue this exchange conditional on at least a reduction in the level of IRA violence.

March 11th, 1993

British message:

"Wishing to take seriously what has developed, we have been preparing a considered and substantive response.

But in the light of the continued violence of recent days since the first response, we are not yet able to send a substantive response.

There must be some evidence of consistency between word and deed.

Given that background, our ability to send a substantive response will depend on events the ground."

BRITISH RESPONSE

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Fight days later, however, a substantial British response was sent. It confirmed that Sinn Fein could become involved in exploratory dialogue if violence ended, it warned that the British government would have to state publicly that it was getting involved in such dialogue because violence had ended (in other words there could not be a "secret" ceasefire), and it said that the British government, would not adopt the "ending of partition" as a prior objective.

MARCH 19th, 1993

British message:

1. The importance of what has been, said, the wish to take it seriously, and the influence of events on the ground, have been acknowledged.

All of those involved share a responsibility to work to end the conflict. No one has a monopoly of suffering. There is a need for a healing process.

2. It is essential that there should be no deception on either side, and also that no deception should, through any misunderstanding, be seen where it is not intended.

It is also essential that both sides have a clear and realistic understanding of what it is possible to achieve, so that neither side can in the future claim that it has been tricked.

3. The position of the British government on dealing with those who espouse violence is clearly understood. This is why the envisaged sequence of events is important.

We note that what is being sought at this stage is advice, and that any dialogue would follow an unannounced halt to violent activity. We confirm that if violence had genuinely been brought to an end, whether or not that fact had been announced, then dialogue could take place.

4. It must be understood though, that once a halt to activity became public, the British government would have to acknowledge and defend its entry into dialogue.

It would do so by pointing out that its agreement to exploratory dialogue about the possibility of an inclusive process had been given because and only because it had received a private assurance that organised violence had been brought to an end.

5. The British government has made clear that:

No political objective which is advocated by constitutional means alone could properly be excluded from discussion in the talks process.

. The commitment to return as much should be seen within a wider framework of stable relationships to be worked out with all concerned.

. New political arrangements would be designed to ensure that no legitimate group was excluded from eligibility to share in the exercise of this responsibility.

. In the event of a genuine and established ending of violence, the whole range of responses to it would inevitably be looked at afresh.

6. The British government has no desire to inhibit or impede legitimate constitutional expression of any political opinion, or any input to the political process, and wants to see included in this process all main parties which have sufficiently shown they genuinely do not espouse violence.

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It has no blueprint. It wants an agreed accommodation, not an imposed settlement, arrived at through an inclusive process in which the parties are free agents.

7. The British government does not have, and will not adopt, any prior objective of "ending of partition".

The British government cannot enter a talks process, or expect others to do so, with the purpose of achieving a predetermined outcome, whether the ending of partition or anything else. It has accepted that the eventual outcome of such a process could be a united Ireland, but only on the basis of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

Should this be the eventual outcome of a peaceful democratic process, the British government would bring forward legislation to implement the will of the people here. But unless the people of Northern Ireland come to express such a view, the British government will continue to uphold the union, seeking to ensure the good governance of Northern Ireland, in the interests of all its people, within the totality of relationships in these islands.

8. Evidence on the ground that any group had ceased violent activity would induce resulting reduction of security force activity.

Were violence to end, the British government's overall response in terms of security force activity on the ground would still have to take account of the overall threat. The threat posed by republican and loyalist groups which remained active would have to continue to be countered.

9. It is important to establish whether this provides a basis for the way forward. We are ready to answer specific questions or to give further explanation.

The person who delivered the above message was given an accompanying note by the British government asking him or her to stress a number of points when delivering the message.

Speaking note accompanying MARCH 19th British message:

This process is fraught with difficulties for the British government, as must be obvious. They are nevertheless prepared to tackle these and accept the risks they entail. But it must be recognised that all acts of violence hereafter could only enhance those difficulties and risks, quite conceivably to the point when the process would be destroyed. If that were to occur the British would consider that a potentially historic opportunity had been squandered.

The paper gives our substantive advice in response to, the initial message. As it makes clear, we wish to establish whether this provides a basis for a way forward. We on our side, are ready to answer specific questions or give further explanation.

You should also emphasise to your interlocutor the British government's acknowledgment that all of those involved share a responsibility to work to end the conflict. We agree on the need for a healing process. We wish to take a positive view of these developments and hope that it will be possible to continue to do so.

The following explanatory note relating to the above document was issued by the Northern Ireland Office yesterday:

NOTE: The version published in the Observer on November 28th, 1993, contained, in addition, peripheral instructions as to how this "speaking note" and its accompanying written note were to be used, i.e. it was prefaced with "The following instruction should be delivered orally to... when you hand over Annex C in written form. In handing over this written message and you need make no bones about the fact that it is a written message that you are handing over you should emphasise to... the following points. You should emphasise that...", etc.

There was an additional paragraph added which said: You should be aware that the above has been personally approved by SOSNI, in fact all but the first sentence of the first paragraph is his own wording, in other words it is not

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negotiable."

WARRINGTON BOMB

The day after the above message was sent, the IRA exploded a bomb in Warrington, killing one child instantly and fatally injuring another. The next day, the following message was sent orally to the British Government:

MARCH 22nd, 1993

Oral message from the leadership of the Provisional Movement:

It is with total sadness that we have to accept responsibility for the recent action. The last thing we needed at this sensitive time was what has happened. It is the fate of history that we find ourselves in this position, all we can think of at this time is an old Irish proverb: "God's hand works in mysterious ways." Our hope is that this hand will lead to peace and friendship.

NOTE: The "recent action" was the Warrington bombing of March 20th.

IRA VIOLENCE

More than six weeks later the British government appeared to warn again that it needed to see evidence of the IRA's determination to end violence. The reference to "recent events" presumably refers to the Warrington bombing, as the IRA had killed just one person in the intervening six weeks.

MAY 5th, 1993

British message:

Events on the ground are crucial, as we have consistently made clear. We cannot conceivably disregard them.

We gave in good faith the advice which was sought, taking what we were told at face value. It is difficult to reconcile that with recent events.

Nonetheless we confirm that we stand by the 9-paragraph document, which we prepared in response to that request for advice.

We have not received the necessary private assurance that organised violence has been brought to an end. We hope that we do so soon and that violence is genuinely brought to an end as, without that, further progress cannot be made.

ORDER OF EVENTS

The next message from the British government makes it clear that the correspondence released yesterday by the British government is not complete. A major point, of argument was clearly whether Sinn Fein could become involved in exploratory talks before IRA violence ceased.

MAY 6th, 1993

British message prepared in response to an indirect oral inquiry sent on May

6th:

Yes, the order of events was the main problem. We will be back tomorrow with a more detailed explanation of exactly what, we mean.

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NOTE: The inquiry related to whether the British had difficulty with "the order of events", i.e. whether exploratory dialogue should follow, or precede, a halt to violent activity.

END TO VIOLENCE

The more detailed explanation followed, as promised, the next day. It again confirms that any dialogue between the British government and Sinn Fein/IRA could only take place after violence ended, and after a private assurance that this cessation was permanent.

MAY 7th, 1993

British message:

We confirm that we stand by the nine paragraph document. The Secretary of State will, as you know, be away until next week. This gives the opportunity for you to consider any other questions which you may wish to put to us or to seek further explanation.

We confirm that the ordering of events is important. The nine paragraph note made clear in paragraphs three and four that any dialogue could only follow a halt to violent activity and receipt of a private assurance that organised violence had been brought to an end.

SF/IRA CONCERNS

According to the documents released yesterday there followed a detailed message from "the Provisional Movement". The text as published reveals concerns on the Sinn Fein/IRA side that the process was moving slowly; that the British might not send senior enough representatives to any talks; that the period between an end of violence and the beginning of dialogue might be overly, long.

This message is the most detailed so far, referring to details such as an end as formats of meetings and the seniority of representatives. It also makes clear that at this stage there had been "face to face" meetings, but the note at the end maintains that these were not authorised.

MAY 10th, 1993

Message from the leadership of the Provisional movement:

We welcome face to, face exchanges with your representative. Given the seriousness of this project we trust that this represents only the beginning of such meetings. We are concerned that the movement to further meetings has been delayed by your side.

It is important that we are frank with each other. Our seriousness in addressing this project should not be in any doubt but it is greatly tempered by the caution occasioned, by the far from satisfactory experiences in 1972, 1975 and during the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981.

It will be wrong to minimise or underestimate the problems which these experiences have given rise to. Having said that, we are responding directly to your request for advice, recognising fully the sensitivity of any position from, you or us which is committed to paper at this stage. Our response has been couched accordingly. But it is clear that we are prepared to make a crucial move if a genuine peace process is set in place.

You say you require a private assurance in order to, defend publicly your entry into dialogue with us. We have proceeded to this stage without assurance. We wish now to proceed without delay to the delegation meetings.

In order to facilitate this step we sought and received a commitment which will permit you to proceed so that we

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can both explore the potential for developing a real peace process. This depends on agreement between us about the next stage and particularly about the seniority of your representatives. It is important that you understand how important a gesture this is; it underlines the sincerity of those involved and their faith in us.

We wish to stress that we will not be party to any dealings which would under mine this faith. To do so will serve only to damage our peace project and the overall quest for peace.

Democratic reasons clearly determine that Sinn Fein's right to represent its electorate and to promote its analysis should be accepted and acted upon. This is the basis on which we enter into dialogue. We need to agree agenda and formats for meetings etc. We have appointed a small secretariat to assist in this task.

We would like to nominate someone to liaise with Martin McGuinness on this. We also have a number of questions. They have to do with the mechanics of the sequence outlined by you and they are:

- (a) Who will represent you?
- (b) When will the British government be politically represented in this process and by whom?
- (c) We need clarification of the phrase progressive entry into dialogue".
- (d) When will this start?
- (e) Where is the proposed venue?

It would be more practical and quicker if these details could be agreed -directly with Mr McGuinness. If this is not possible we ask that you proceed through the usual channel as soon as possible.

NOTE: The "face to face exchanges with your representative" referred to in the first sentence was the unauthorised meeting between Mr McGuinness and a British official.

NO FORMAL REPLY

There were several further expressions of frustration from the Sinn Fein/IRA side at the slow pace of developments.

JUNE 1st, 1993

Oral message from tile leadership of the Provisional Movement:

The Provisional leadership is dismayed that it has not yet received a formal reply to its offer contained in the speaking note of May 11th. The leadership is particularly dismayed because it had placed on the table the offer of a total cessation which carried its hopes for the future of all the people in these islands.

The various incidents which have taken place are the inevitable result of this vacuum and without co-operation the future looks bleak for all concerned.

NOTE: The reference to the "offer of a total cessation" is to the message of May 10th. This was said to contain such an offer. Any such commitment would evidently have been equivocal and conditional.

TERMS OUTLINED

The Sinn Fein/IRA sent another detailed message outlining its position. It called on the British government to "play a crucial and constructive role"? in persuading the unionists "to reach an accommodation with the rest of the Irish people."

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The message is dated July 22nd - the same day as the crucial Maastricht vote in the House of Commons in which the UUP MPs supported the British government. The "understanding" between the government and the Unionists is understood to date from around this time.

July 22nd

Message from the leadership of the Provisional Movement:

1. We welcome this contact and hope it can help create a healing process which removes both the causes and the consequences of conflict.

Everyone shares the responsibility to work to bring about a real and lasting peace in Ireland. Republicans are not reluctant to face up to our responsibility in this but the British government clearly has the power and the major responsibility to initiate the necessary process.

2. Our longstanding position has been of willingness to enter into dialogue with a view to resolving the conflict. In all of this we do not seek to impose preconditions nor should preconditions be imposed on us.

This is not a position we could easily recommend let alone successfully defend. Dialogue and negotiations are necessary and inevitable if this conflict is to be resolved on a democratic basis.

Preconditions represent obstacles to peace. Moreover, after more than two decades of conflict and political impasse, we hold as self evident the view that democratic, political and practical imperatives clearly require the open involvement and inclusion of all political views if a democratic resolution is to be sought and achieved.

Democratic reasons clearly determine that Sinn Fein's right to represent its electorate and to promote its analysis should be accepted and acted upon. This is the basis upon which we enter into dialogue.

3. The route to peace in Ireland is to be found in the restoration to the Irish people of our right to national self determination in the free exercise of this right without impediment of any kind.

4. British, sovereignty over the six counties, as with all of Ireland before partition, is the inherent cause of political instability and conflict.

This must be addressed within the democratic context of the exercise of the right to national self determination if the cause of instability and conflict is to be removed.

5. We seek to assist the establishment of, and to support, a process which, with due regard for the real difficulties involved, culminates in the exercise of that right and the end of your jurisdiction.

LOAD-DATE: December 1, 1993

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH