

# SF signal decoded by Hume

From GEORGE JACKSON in Derry

**THE ABILITY** of politicians and civil servants to read between the lines, to spot and decode verbal signals and then send out their own coded replies, more often than not through the media, has been fully tested in the North in the past week.

It all started last weekend from an unexpected and surprising source — senior Sinn Féin figure Martin McGuinness. At a republican rally he called on Northern Secretary of State, Peter Brooke to outline to the republican movement what imaginative steps he would be prepared to take if the IRA's "armed struggle" ended.

The fact that Mr. McGuinness, and not Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, asked the question of Mr. Brooke, is not without significance. The Derry Sinn Féin leader has, rightly or wrongly, been associated with the hawks rather than the doves within the republican movement. That there have been differences of opinion



**Martin McGuinness . . . NIO "can tell us privately."**

between the two camps is well known.

The more politically-orientated members of the republican movement are increasingly concerned about civilian casualties resulting from IRA gun and bomb attacks. Sinn Féin's ballot box is being gradually emptied by the IRA's armalite. The IRA's "long war" theory has made it more difficult for Sinn Féin to recruit members into their ranks.

One of the most astute of political decoders, SDLP leader John Hume, said he wanted the Northern Ireland Office to carefully study what he called Mr. McGuinness's "very interesting" statement. Mr. Hume, who shortly before the Anglo Irish Agreement was signed in November 1985, met with IRA leaders to ask them to lay down their arms, said there is clear distinction between a ceasefire and a cessation of the IRA's campaign of violence.

"There could be no more positive contribution to the present situation than an end to the so-called armed struggle. Such a move would transform this society more than any other single act," said Mr. Hume.

The SDLP leader, who yesterday celebrated the 21st anniversary of his election as M.P. for Foyle in the former Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont, said: "Given the nature of the IRA, such a decision would require a great deal of courage by its leadership. I hope that they are in the business of laying down arms and joining the rest of us in the very difficult task of breaking down the barriers in the community and building for future generations."

The response by the Northern Ireland Office to Mr. McGuinness's speech was both expected and predictable — "The Government's position remains the same in that as long as Sinn Féin supports and endorses terrorism, they cannot expect to be treated in the same as other political parties."

Far from being snubbed by the NIO response, Mr. McGuinness in an interview with the Belfast daily newspaper, *The Irish News*, pressed on.

"They (the British Government), have talked before. They have talked in the past and at this point in time there is an avenue which they are aware of whereby they can make what imaginative steps they are thinking about is known to the Republican movement."

That avenue in the past has taken the form of "neutral" middle men, sometimes politicians, sometimes clergymen, who have been consulted and briefed by government officials on the one hand, and IRA representatives on the other, and then passed on messages between the two.

Mr. McGuinness has hinted that such an arrangement would again be acceptable to the Republican movement by stating, "unless they do not want to do it publicly, and if they think there is something to be lost by stating publicly how flexible they would be, or how imaginative, we are saying they should tell us privately. They have a means for doing that. They have had it for twenty years. The British government can contact us within an hour," he said.

Talks of an IRA ceasefire, or even a cessation of violence are premature. Neither will happen unless and until the ongoing internal debate within the Republican movement has ended.

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