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**PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT: MESSAGES BETWEEN
THE IRA AND THE GOVERNMENT**

My Lords, with the leave of the House, I will now repeat a statement being made in another place by my Rt Hon and Learned Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

With permission, I will make a statement about messages between the IRA leadership and the Government.

There has for some years been a means of communication by which messages could be conveyed indirectly, between the Government and the IRA leadership. Clearly such a chain could only function if its secrecy was respected on both sides.

At the end of February this year a message was received from the IRA leadership. It said:

"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 for 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".

That message came from Martin McGuinness. Madam Speaker, I have placed in the Library and the Vote Office all consequent messages which HMG has received and despatched.

The Government had a duty to respond to that message. I will read to the House the substantive response which, after an intermediate exchange, we despatched on 19 March. The text published yesterday was no more than instructions as to how this was to be transmitted. The message was in these terms:

"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 responsibility as possible to local politicians 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. 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."

It is clear that this message was consistent with our declared policy: namely that if such people wanted to enter into talks or negotiations with the Government they first had genuinely to end violence. Not just temporarily, but for good. If they did, and showed sufficiently that they meant it, we would not want, for our part, to continue to exclude them from political talks. That remains our policy.

The IRA sent a reply on 10 May which did not constitute the unequivocal assurance of a genuine end to violence on which we had insisted. Clearly a temporary ceasefire would not do.

Our reply was despatched on 5 November:

"1. Your message of 2 November is taken as being of the greatest importance and significance. The answer to the specific question you raise is given in paragraph 4 below.

2. We hold to what was said jointly and in public by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Brussels on 29 October. A copy of the Statement is annexed. There can be no departure from what is said there and in particular its statement that there could be no secret agreements or understandings between Governments and organisations supporting violence as a price for its cessation and its call on them to renounce for good the use of, or support for, violence. There can also be no departure from the constitutional guarantee that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people.

3. It is the public and consistent position of the British Government that any dialogue could only follow a permanent end to violent activity.

4. You ask about the sequence of events in the event of a total end to hostilities. If, as you have offered, you were to give us an unequivocal assurance that violence has indeed been brought to a permanent end, and that accordingly Sinn Fein is now committed to political progress by peaceful and democratic means alone, we will make clear publicly our commitment to enter exploratory dialogue with you. Our public statement will make clear that, provided your private assurance is promptly confirmed publicly after our public statement and that events on the ground are fully consistent with this, a first meeting for exploratory dialogue will take place within a week of Parliament's return in January.

5. Exploratory dialogue will have the following purposes:

- (i) to explore the basis upon which Sinn Fein would come to be admitted to an inclusive political talks process to which the British Government is committed but without anticipating the negotiations within that process;
- (ii) to exchange views on how Sinn Fein would be able over a period to play the same part as the current constitutional parties in the public life of Northern Ireland;
- (iii) to examine the practical consequences of the ending of violence.

6. The attached Annex summarises the sequence of events and provides answers to the procedural questions concerning exploratory dialogue which have been raised.

7. If, in advance of our public statement, any public statement is made on your behalf which appears to us inconsistent with this basis for proceeding it would not be possible for us then to proceed.

8. If we receive the necessary assurance, which you have offered, that violence has been brought to an end, we shall assume that you are assenting to the basis for proceeding explained in this note and its attachment."

The House will appreciate from what I have read out, and from the other messages when they have time to study them, that our main objective has been to reinforce and spell out in private our publicly stated positions.

It is for the IRA and their supporters to explain why they have failed to deliver the promised ending of violence. They should do so at once. Murder in Northern Ireland is no more tolerable than murder anywhere else in the United Kingdom. We must never lose sight of the fact that it is the terrorists who must answer for the deaths, destruction and misery of the last 25 years.

It lies therefore with the IRA, and with them alone, to end their inhuman crimes. It is for them and those who support and justify them to explain why they have wickedly failed to do that.

I promise the House and the people of Northern Ireland that, for our part, we shall not cease our efforts to bring violence to a permanent end. As my right Hon Friend told the House on 18 November if we do not succeed on this occasion we shall keep exploring again and again the opportunities for peace. Peace, properly attained, is a prize worth risks.

If a genuine end to violence is promised, the way would still be open for Sinn Fein to enter the political arena after a sufficient interval to demonstrate that they mean it. Our message of 5 November again spelt that out.

The key to peace is in the hands of the IRA.