

MESSAGES BETWEEN THE IRA AND THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

Points to make to Mr Spring

1. This particular channel has functioned on and off for nearly 20 years, and during successive administrations.
2. The nature of the channel has, over the years, necessitated maximum secrecy. There is no doubt that lives could have been put at risk, and still could be, by widening the circle of knowledge about the operation of the channel.
3. No one in the Northern Ireland Secretary's Ministerial team had been briefed about the existence of the channel before last week.
4. Sir Robin Butler's briefing of the Irish Government was given as soon as it became apparent that an authentic document relating to the channel was going to be published.
5. The exchanges were not set up as an alternative agenda to the Joint Declaration. They were necessitated by the duty to respond to the Provisional leadership's initial request for advice in its message of 22 February. Notwithstanding Sinn Fein denials, there is no doubt that this message came from Martin McGuinness.
6. We will continue to protect the details of the working of the channel. But we will naturally be very ready to keep you in touch with developments.
7. Our discussions today will rightly focus on the Joint Declaration, the British draft Joint Statement, and other possible related texts. You can be assured that the disclosure of the exchanges and the channel does not detract in any way from the seriousness with which we address these issues.

## MESSAGES BETWEEN THE IRA AND THE GOVERNMENT

### 1. Were there errors in the documentation published by the Government on Monday?

Yes. These purely transcription and typing corrections cast no doubt whatsoever on the original message of 22 February from the IRA leadership saying "The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close." The allegations made by the IRA leadership that it was the British Government who initiated the exchange of messages and was seeking advice remain entirely false. The corrections similarly do not cast doubt on the authenticity of the message sent by the IRA leadership on 2 November.

In re-checking the documentation, some transcription and typing errors came to light. They do not change the sense of the messages, but have been corrected.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wrote last night to Northern Ireland

spokemen and MPs enclosing a list of the necessary corrections together with the text, thus corrected, of the 9 paragraph message which the British Government despatched on 19 March. His letter and enclosures have been placed in the Library and the Vote Office. He is answering a Written Question at 3.30pm, when the corrected version of the full dossier will be placed in the Library and Vote Office this afternoon.

### 2. Why were these errors made?

These errors arose from the speed with which the dossier had to be compiled in Northern Ireland on Sunday, following the decision that day that it should be published in the House contemporaneously with the Monday Parliamentary statement. They are all either transcription or typing errors.

3. The corrected version of paragraph 3 of the 19 March message now says "What is being sought at this stage is advice." Doesn't that cast doubt on the original message of 22 February?

Neither this correction nor any of the others casts any doubt whatsoever upon the authenticity of this message. As was indicated in the statement, this came from Martin McGuinness.

Paragraph 3 of the 9 paragraph note is a direct reference to the request for advice contained in the IRA message of 22 February. The speaking note accompanying the 9 paragraph note, published in the dossier and first printed in the Observer, makes it entirely clear that the British message gives "substantive advice in response to the initial message".

4. What about the reference in the message of 10 May from the Provisional leadership, in paragraph 1 to "your request for advice"?

This does not affect the

authenticity of the 22 February message. It is for the Provisionals to say whether this reference in the 10 May message was a misunderstanding or a deliberate attempt to conceal the request for advice in the message of 22 February.

5. What about the fact that the Sinn Fein version of the 22 July message says, in paragraph 11, "We found our preliminary meeting with your representatives valuable". Did the British Government delete this sentence?

No. This sentence did not appear in the document received by the British Government.

[If pressed. The Government has already acknowledged that there were two unauthorised meetings involving officials.]

6. Are the documents now all correct?

To the best of the Government's knowledge, all the messages in the corrected version of the dossier are as sent or received. Given the

circumstances of the chain of communication, it is impossible to demonstrate that all messages were received on either side exactly as conveyed.

7. Is the channel of communication still open?

If the Provisional leadership decides to send further messages we will deal with them as appropriate. The one message which everyone wants to hear from them is the one which they should give now: but their violence has finally been brought to an end.

HMG does not propose to divulge any subsequent message received or despatched through this channel.

8. You and the Secretary of State have lost the trust of the people of Northern Ireland?

These documents demonstrate that the Government has acted properly and has done its duty. The transcription and typographical corrections in no way affect that.

These exchanges have involved no betrayal, no appeasement, no rewarding of terrorists by negotiating with them, no bargaining for peace, no weakening of the fundamental guarantee of Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom while that is what a majority of its people desire.

9. Isn't this further proof that you have been playing with words?

The Government has consistently made clear that no-one has been authorised to have talks or negotiations before violence is demonstrably renounced. That is true and will remain true.

The difference between bargaining for peace and spelling out that violence must be renounced is not a matter of semantics.

10. [If further purported documents released by Sinn Fein?]

HMG has already provided the full authentic text of all the messages which it has authorised to be sent. It will not comment on other alleged reports, whether or not represented as being based on discussions between intermediaries.