

PAB/6705/DGMcN/RG

FROM: D G McNEILL, PAB  
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- cc Mr Ledlie [3]
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5 / PS/PUS (B&L) [1&2]

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POLITICAL MOVEMENT AND THE PROVISIONALS

1. Since my meeting with the prison chaplains yesterday I have been reflecting on the possibilities of testing the sincerity of the PAC contacts and encouraging any movement away from violence if that is possible while at the same time reducing, by the greatest degree possible, the risk that we could be criticised for being in dialogue with PIRA/Sinn Fein before violence had ceased. I offer the following for the debate today.

2. What I have in mind does not eliminate risk - it can't unless we remain totally at stand off. However I wonder if we could pursue an immediate strategy which would entail

- (i) a clarification to PAC - better face to face; less than ideal through the chaplains (see below) - of the British Government's position on Northern Ireland ie the British Presence Speech;
- (ii) an assurance that Government has no wish to exclude the Republican Movement from political dialogue;
- (iii) a commitment to engage in dialogue with the Republican Movement but only through its elected representatives ie Sinn Fein when the PAC has publicly called for an end to violence;

*(? - that has <sup>been</sup> transmitted into action?)*

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(iv) a commitment that that dialogue would be open, businesslike, non-discriminatory and responsive if appropriate - eg Springvale;

(v) we would not specify nor attempt to identify any agenda for dialogue until violence had ceased; however we could say;

(vi) that any dialogue in the political future would be on the basis of a commitment by Government that any political settlement in NI will be addressed in the context of the 3 strands of the "totality of relationships" and that Government will facilitate Sinn Fein's participation in that dialogue with all the relevant parties;

(vii) and that it could include all social and economic issues, prisons matters, and other security matters.

I fully realise that the above means that we could be seen as being engaged in dialogue. However we could say that we were doing no more than attempting to spell out so there is no misunderstanding the Government's position. Furthermore the priests keep assuring me that any initial dialogue would be confidential. If it fails to persuade the PAC then we know that they are not sincere but if the priests are correct then it may demonstrate to PAC that we are prepared to engage in "meaningful dialogue". It would also have the added advantage that if it failed we could at least demonstrate to the Churches that we were prepared to test the water and were not refusing to take advantage of an opportunity as they see it.

There are of course problems about who should pass any such message were it to be approved. In my view PIRA/Sinn Fein does want to engage in dialogue as an end in itself more than we may realise and may be prepared to contemplate an end to violence with that as its major prize. If that reading is correct the more that we can convince them that we could engage in genuine dialogue the better. For that reason it would be better if any message were passed "face

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to face" by officials in the first place; however the priests may be a less risky channel in terms of our defensive position though they may not be able to achieve a cessation without direct dialogue; finally John Hume may be a channel but there are more risks if we use that route that it would become public knowledge.

5. Nothing about this issue is easy. All courses are fraught with risk and a significant cost even the do nothing option. As I have said what I am suggesting contains much risk and an uncertainty as to whether it would produce an end to violence. Furthermore it contains considerable uncertainties about the likely chances that any long term dialogue would be sufficient to maintain an end to violence. However I believe it is worth considering.

6. I have left to the side the question of Christmas ceasefire though that could make it easier for us to contemplate dialogue in the way in which I have suggested. The reason I have left it to the side is that although I support the view that it would be helpful to have a Christmas ceasefire I am not certain that such a ceasefire could be arranged in the time available nor do I think it could be arranged without a direct message to PIRA from Government.

(SIGNED)

D G McNEILL  
Political Affairs Division  
SH Ext 2724

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