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**DUBLIN 3 DECEMBER: MORNING MINISTERIAL SESSION**

While the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach held their tete a tete, the Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland met with the Tanaiste and Minister for Justice. On our side, Sir Robin Butler, Mr Chilcot, Mr Thomas and HM Ambassador were present. On the Irish side, Mr Dalton, Mr Dorr, Mr Small, Mr O'hUiginn and other Irish officials were present.

**Summary**

Irish recriminations over the revelation of contacts between the Government and the IRA were answered. The Irish presented an optimistic assessment of the prospects for an end to PIRA violence, while we drew out the risk of a marked upsurge in loyalist violence if the unionist community saw it achieved on 'sell-out' terms.

**British/IRA Contacts**

The Tanaiste said that, having worked in good faith with us on an open basis, the Irish Government were very disconcerted to find that they had not been informed about another process which was in operation and which was

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possibly in conflict with their own search for peace. The Irish Government had passed on everything they knew about PIRA's desire to enter the democratic process; why had we not trusted them?

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland recalled that, on first meeting Mr Spring, they had agreed that they should be entirely open with one another. It had perturbed him that this chain of communications had had to be kept secret, but that was essential because lives were at risk. Within the British Government, knowledge had been kept to a very inconveniently tiny circle. That being the case, it would have been inconceivable to tell the Irish Government what a large part of the Cabinet and Parliament were not told. But, although it was not possible to describe the character and nature of the chain of communications, the information received through it had informed the overall assessment of PIRA intentions which had been shared with the Irish Government. As to the future, the Prime Minister had said there was continuing value in a chain of communications and that was now widely supported in the country. The indications coming through the chain were that PIRA wanted it to continue but they were anxious to disavow the original message although the full dossier was entirely consistent with it.

The Foreign Secretary said that we had always been careful to draw a clear distinction between answering PIRA's queries on how to bring violence to a close, and entering negotiations on matters of substance which we had never done. At no time had we received clear evidence of a definitive decision to bring violence to an end. We had

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always insisted that words had to be matched by actions and, from the evidence on the ground, it was clear that violence continued. Sir Robin Butler added that, while we had shared our assessment of the prospects of PIRA giving up violence, we had protected the character and nature of the chain itself for just the same reason as we did not seek to know the nature and character of how information reached the Irish Government about PIRA's intentions.

Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn said that the Irish Government felt more than sore on this issue: it felt betrayed and sold down the river. This "tiny circle" had apparently included PIRA but excluded the Irish Government. She would have expected the terms of the message of 22 February to be passed to her as Minister for Justice. The release yesterday by Sinn Fein of further papers, including ones relating to last year's political talks, was even more worrying. The Irish Government had come to last year's talks in good faith and had entered into confidential discussions with the British Government. But it now appeared that, at the same time, the British had been having parallel discussions with PIRA and passing confidential information to them. This had worrying implications for the IGC Restricted Session: if other confidential information had been passed to PIRA, had we passed on information about security co-operation as well? What was the point then of having a "Restricted" session: perhaps Mr Adams should have been invited to join it. All these leaks were very damaging: was there someone in the British system trying to destroy the process of peace?

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that our purpose throughout had been to bring terrorism to an end.

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There had been no dealing, no negotiating, no bargaining, as was clearly confirmed by the dossier of messages. It was in both Government's interests to see violence brought to an end, no matter how. As he had told the House of Commons, he had an obligation to respond to the message received in February but, in doing so, there had been no question whatsoever of communicating anything discussed in the Restricted Session. Far from it, we had a common cause with the Irish Government in defeating PIRA. It was understandable that the Irish felt annoyed, but they were not justified in feeling betrayed.

The Foreign Secretary said that it was clear that some elements of PIRA were very anxious to undermine security co-operation and the peace process. They now appeared to be using public misinformation to achieve their aims: the Irish should not fall for this. The shared interest of the two Governments in good co-operation was overwhelming. Over the years, we had consistently defended the level of co-operation against accusations that it was inadequate. It had indeed steadily improved and it would only hearten those who opposed the Anglo Irish Agreement for it to falter now.

#### Prospects for an End to Violence

Moving on, Mr Spring asked what we judged to be the prospects for an end to PIRA violence. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said their intentions were very difficult to read. It appeared they were divided and the present revelations might have been a result of that division. Clearly McGuinness feared recriminations if he did not deny the origin of the February message.

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Mr Chilcot said that there had been signs of a hardening in PIRA attitudes before the recent revelations. We knew that followed a process of soundings throughout the movement, but it was very difficult to judge the exact balance of views at any one time. It was encouraging that there were indications that PIRA wanted to keep the chain of communications available: they had sent a message to that effect, but then denied it. The present set of revelations had been hugely destructive, but it might also provide Adams and McGuinness with a necessary screen for them to continue to press for peace. There was no evidence that the leak had come from our side: for PIRA to use the Reverend William McCrea would not be surprising. The likeliest explanation was that, as continued exchanges emphasised that it was PIRA which were seeking advice and had made the original approach, so McGuinness felt under increasing pressure within the Movement and the revelations had been designed to protect his position. What mattered about the chain of communication was not so much the identity of those involved, but their role, motivation and purpose: that still required protection.

Mr Dalton offered the Irish side's assessment. Those favouring peace in PIRA remained in a good position, but we needed to understand that within PIRA there was an alternative structure grouped around those older PIRA members. The key question was how many currently actively PIRA members would transfer to this alternative structure in the event of an end to violence. At present the indications were that not many would do so, but the more the process dragged on, the greater the risk that the movement would split leaving an effective structure behind to continue

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terrorism. Mr Chilcot wondered whether Adams and McGuinness might not have already reached the conclusion that the tide was running against peace, and that this explained why they had leaked contacts with the Government and denied the February message.

#### Unionist and Loyalist Reaction

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that few unionists had been genuinely surprised that there had been contacts between the Government and the IRA. But the fear, although ill-founded, that they might have amounted to substantive negotiation had engendered suspicion and created instability. As far as the UUP were concerned, the Parliamentary Party appeared to be riding it out and had appreciated the consistency between the Government's public and private lines. But among the rank and file, suspicion had not yet been allayed and there was scepticism about the February message. It was possible that, out of pique at the firm rejection of the Hume/Adams plan by both Governments, Adams had deliberately leaked the contacts in order to create the impression that the Government was in negotiation with PIRA in the knowledge that this would lead to instability. The DUP were hoping that the UUP would lose out: their basic line was that the Government had lied in its denials that there had been talks or negotiations, which there had not been.

Turning to the loyalist paramilitaries, the Secretary of State said that loyalist paramilitaries would cease violence if PIRA did so, providing it was not on terms which could be represented as a sell-out. Even so, there might be some in

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the UFF who would continue terrorism. We were not aware of any top or high level contacts between loyalists and republicans although there was a great industry in intermediaries.

The Tanaiste said that the prize was an end to PIRA violence. There had been a significant change in their mind-set. They had discarded fundamental principles of the past and no longer insisted on a British withdrawal; nor on Britain joining the ranks of persuaders; nor on the right of a majority in the whole of the island to over-rule a majority in Northern Ireland; and they were prepared to abandon violence. This opportunity had to be seized before the next generation of the leadership emerged.

Mrs Geoghegan-Quinn added that failure now would not return us to the status quo, but to a far worse position where the price demanded for an end to violence would be far higher.

Mr Dalton said that, while there might be a risk of heightened loyalist alienation as a result of an end to PIRA violence, that might be a lesser risk (and more containable) than renewed PIRA violence exacerbated by a loyalist response.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said that there was no question at any time of paying a price for an end to violence. Nor was there any point in simply shifting the seat of violence from one side to another. If violence on the republican side were brought to an end on a basis which a broad mass of people in the unionist community thought unacceptable, that would lead to a seriously unstable situation with an upsurge in support for loyalist paramilitaries. We were not playing the "orange card", but

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we had to make a realistic assessment of the risks involved.

Mr Thomas said that part of the problem for unionists at present was the degree of uncertainty. They did not know what was in the Hume/Adams plan; nor in the Taoiseach's so-called peace plan; nor did they know PIRA's intentions. There had been a great deal of briefing and leaking about what might be necessary to secure an end to violence, a lot of it unhelpful. But, to our knowledge, PIRA had yet to set out a clear basis on which they were prepared to bring violence to an end. The ultimate test for Unionists would be events on the ground; until they conformed to what was said to be PIRA's intentions, there would be understandable scepticism. No message we had received amounted to the clear assurance that violence would be brought to an end, which was fundamental to progress.

The Foreign Secretary commented that the Irish analysis of the prospects for an end to violence appeared more optimistic than the British analysis. We were yet to be persuaded that there was a change in PIRA's attitude. It was not surprising therefore that these different assessments might result in different policy preferences.

The meeting broke for lunch.

Copies go to John Sawers (FCO), Jeremy Heywood (HMT), Joan MacNaughton (Home Office), John Pitt-Brooke (MOD), Melanie Leach and David Blatherwick in Dublin.

Signed

**JONATHAN STEPHENS**  
Private Secretary