

APW/744/JT
FROM AUSTIN WILSON
US (LAW AND ORDER)
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HMG CONTACTS WITH THE PROVISIONALS

I am replying to your minute of 13 March about reports in that day's Newsletter, and in particular the article by Ric Clarke. The Secretary of State had expressed concern about references in the article, apparently based on Army sources, to the effect that there had been regular contacts last year between "British intelligence" (there was a further reference to "MI5 operatives based at Thiepval and Stormont") and "two high ranking IRA members". The front page "trailer" for the Ric Clarke article also stated presumably to support the assertions in the main report, that the Prime Minister had last month confirmed that 'direct and indirect contact' had been maintained with Sinn Fein and went on to say that in a so-called written statement he "did not deny that any contact had been made with Sinn Fein".

2. The Secretary of State is, I am sure, right in linking the references to the Prime Minister's "written statement" to the letter which Mr Major sent last month to Mr David Trimble MP, who had also asked about contacts (with both Sinn Fein and the IRA) following an article by Chris Ryder in the Daily Telegraph. You will have a copy of the text of this as sent. But, in the draft I have seen, the phrase "direct and indirect contact" does not appear. Instead, Mr Trimble was being told simply that "Ministers and some Government officials will have contact with elected Sinn

Fein representatives in respect of local matters and constituency interests". The draft letter went on to say that "As to contacts with terrorists, HMG takes the view that there cannot be - and there have not been - talks or negotiations with people who use or threaten violence to advance their arguments". (The words underlined appear between quotation marks in the Newsletter front page article).

3. As the Secretary of State will know, the position as stated by the Prime Minister to Mr Trimble is the correct one. There has been no contacts (still less "secret talks") with the IRA about a ceasefire. The Newsletter's assertions about such contacts are completely mistaken.

4. I regret that I have not been able to establish, in my attempts to discover the source for the Newsletter reports, "who said what to whom". My contacts last night with HQNI (the GOC's office, Chief of Staff and the Chief Information Officer) produced a total (though, to me, unconvincing) denial that there had been any known contact between Army "sources" and the reporter. Mr Clarke, I was told was not on the Army "hit list" as someone to use for a story. No one had had any recent contacts with him. The Chief Information Officer had made enquiries earlier in the day about the possible source of the story, but had drawn on complete blank etc etc. In effect, my message to the Army was: "I believe you, but don't let it happen again!"

5. So far as I am aware, the "story" has not been picked up by the newspaper. If that is the case, my advice would now be that the least said about it the better. If the Secretary of State does find himself being questioned about contacts, he will no doubt wish to answer consistently with the terms of the Prime Minister's reply to Mr Trimble.

(signed APW)

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