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There have been no direct discussions or negotiations between NIO officials and Sinn Fein. But, as Tony Dawson's letter of 21

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we have been made aware that there are those in the Provisional movement who may wish to engage in a dialogue with HMG (and with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland).

There are self-appointed people working to bring this about. Our stance continues to be that there will be no negotiations with those who commit acts of terrorism.

Thank you for your letter of 17 January enclosing a copy of a letter which the Prime Minister has received from David Trimble MP.

Ministers and officials unavoidably have contact with Sinn Fein Councillors during their visits to local Councils since Ministers have decided that the presence of a Sinn Fein councillor will not itself be sufficient reason to prevent a visit to that Council. In addition, officials have contact with Sinn Fein local programmes and projects, and also with Sinn Fein members. There are agreed internal guidelines on these contacts to ensure that no person in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein or not, is disadvantaged in his other daily affairs.

An article by journalist Chris Ryder in the Daily Telegraph on 8 January spoke of "often self-motivated intermediaries" working to persuade the IRA to cease their campaign of violence. In his letter Mr Trimble significantly misrepresents the Daily Telegraph article which makes no mention of intermediaries "who carry messages back and forth". Following on from a subsequent Question asked during Prime Ministers' Questions on 15 January, Mr Trimble now seeks an assurance that there is, and will be (to quote his Question), no "indirect negotiations and contacts taking place between the Northern Ireland Office and Sinn Fein." Mr Trimble would undoubtedly see this as a form of surrender to the IRA and a reward for terrorism. The implication is that the NIO would do a deal with Sinn Fein and the IRA in which a ceasefire or other cessation of IRA activities would be repayed by some loosening of the Union - and the ultimate 'betrayal' of Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

MH/10269

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There have been no direct discussions or negotiations between NIO officials and Sinn Fein. But, as Tony Pawson's letter of 21 December pointed out, we have been made aware that there are those in the Provisional movement who may wish to engage in a dialogue with HMG (and with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland). There are self-appointed people working to bring this about. Our stance continues to be that there will be no negotiations with those who commit acts of terrorism.

Ministers and officials unavoidably have contact with Sinn Fein councillors during their visits to local Councils since Ministers have decided that the presence of a Sinn Fein councillor will not itself be sufficient reason to preclude a visit to that Council. In addition, officials have contact in dealing with local programmes and projects, and also with constituency matters. There are agreed internal guidelines on these contacts. This is to ensure that no person in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein voter or not, is disadvantaged in his other daily affairs.

I attach a draft response for the Prime Minister's consideration.

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. I reaffirm my determination that terrorism will not be rewarded.

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