

Dermot Nally Papers

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Statement from Sinn Fein Ard Comhairle member, Martin McGuinness

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Let me begin by saying that I never thought there would be a need for us to set the record straight as we are doing today. Let me stress that we are doing so reluctantly and because of the blatant abuse by the British government of the line of communication between us and it.

The Sinn Fein leadership has always accepted that each side in this process will seek to gain advantage over the other. This is part of the battle in which we are engaged. However, what has occurred this last year and which is now partially in the public domain goes far beyond legitimate manoeuvring. At no time, even under Thatcher, has any government attempted to use and abuse communication by fabrication and forgery in the way which the Major government has.

The history of my involvement with this line of communication between Sinn Fein and the British government must be seen against the background of our initiatives on peace and against the background of the evolution and the development of party policy on this issue. Most of you will be aware that for the last five years, at least, Sinn Fein has been involved in trying to build consensus in Ireland around the need for a negotiated settlement of the conflict here. This was publicly outlined in a series of discussion documents from "Scenario for Peace" through to "Towards a Lasting Peace". It has dominated party Ard Fheisenna and it has been the central focus for us.

As part of our strategy, senior party members were given responsibility for engaging in private and public debate with different elements of opinion here and abroad. I was given major responsibility for engaging in public debate with the British government. I was accountable to a small committee, chaired by party President, Gerry Adams.

As many of you will recall the development of our policy and the public articulation of it informed public debate during this time. Sinn Fein has always had a policy based on the need for dialogue and for as long as I can recall, we have been in regular contact with many elements of Irish and British opinion. As Sinn Fein engaged more and more confidently in the peace debate these contacts became more intense. It was in this climate that the British Government re-activated the line of communication and its current phase of protracted contact and dialogue with us. This line of contact was not an alternative to other dialogue that we were engaged in. Nor indeed was it the most productive. At all times our objective was aimed at building a process towards a lasting peace. The most significant progress in this regard has been made in the discussions between John Hume and Gerry

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Adams. Throughout these discussions, and especially when significant progress was made we pointed the British government at this initiative and advised them that it presented the best opportunity for peace.

The line of communication goes back over two decades. I had no dealing with it before the hunger strikes although I was aware of its existence. The line of communication was dormant from the breakdown of 74 - 76 truce until the hunger strike. The two hunger strikes were a period of frenzied contact between us and them. The contacts between us and the British government at this time is not disputed. Incidentally, we were assured during this period that Margaret Thatcher had authorised the line of communication with us and with the political prisoners in the H Blocks and Armagh prisons. The British government representative was appointed by London not Stormont.

After the hunger strikes the line of communication was dormant until mid 1990. Even though the line of communication was dormant the contact remained in touch with the British government representative and occasionally with me. In mid 1990 the British government representative intimated that he wished to open up the line of communication once again. We thought that this was only an opening approach aimed at picking up on the bad situation between us since the hunger strikes and we received some general and occasional oral briefings on the British government position during this time. During this period also the British government representative informed the contact that he would like to meet me. Towards the end of 1990 he passed word to Sinn Fein that he was due for retirement and he would like to meet me before he left and to prepare the way for a new British government representative. Gerry Adams and I discussed this invitation with others in the Sinn Fein officer board and decided to go ahead with the meeting. I was instructed to proceed on a listening brief.

This meeting took place in October 1990, the contact was also in attendance. It was a low key meeting lasting for 3 hours and discussed the general political and the current state of British policy and Anglo/Irish relations. In keeping with my brief, I said very little and was non committal on all aspects of republican policy. The British government representative intimated to me that after his retirement a new representative would be appointed and that there would be an effort to re-activate the line of communication. I was non-committal on this. I reported all this back to my colleagues. While we felt a moral imperative to explore any overtures from the British, because of previous experiences during the hunger strikes and the 72 and 74 bi-lateral truces, and given that there was no public evidence that the British government position had changed, we were sceptical about their intentions. This strongly influenced our attitude. However,

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we agreed if the British desired to activate the line of communication that we were morally and tactically obliged not to reject their offer. We did not communicate this to the British. In January 1991 the British government representative I met retired.

April 91: Contact informed us that the British government, through the now retired British government representative, had passed to him information that the loyalist death squads were about to announce a ceasefire for the inter-party talks.

We were informed of this orally, through the line of communication and after this there was no contact until June 1991. Then we were informed that a new named representative had been appointed. He had introduced himself to the contact. He verified his status by producing a letter signed by the then British Secretary of State Peter Brooke. This letter was read by the contact and kept by the British government representative. His status was also verified by the previous British government representative. We were informed that he was appointed by London.

June to Christmas 91: During this period the new British government representative initiated a series of periodical meetings and occasional telephone conversations with the contact. We were given detailed briefings on British government policy. The meetings took place both in the six counties and in London. The representative declared that it was his objective to ensure that republicans knew the thinking of his government. We presumed that he was also engaged in building up a relationship with us and with the contact. We were assured that John Major had authorised the line of communication. Our private position was that in all of this that the British government's strategy remained one aimed at defeating the republican struggle. During this period we did not initiate any contact and our response to all information was to note it.

January to April 1992: Throughout 1992 the British government representative became very active in briefing us. The major part of these briefings was taken up by reports of the progress, or lack of it which was being made in the inter-party talks. Peter Brooke made a number of keynote speeches at this time and we were advised of these in advance.

April to Christmas 1992: During this time, after the Westminster election Peter Brooke was replaced by Patrick Mayhew. We were informed that the line of communication would continue as before and that Patrick Mayhew was "fully on board".

We were being given consistent reports from the British government representative that the Brooke/Mayhew talks were

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going nowhere and that the government's prediction was that they would end in failure.

We were also being told that there was friction between the senior civil servants (in London and Stormont) and Mayhew. In October, We were provided with a two page document on the progress of the talks under Sir Ninian Stevens. (see attached document)

Jan-Mar 1993: The British government representative was in frequent contact, on occasion on a daily basis. He was suggesting that there was a possibility of meetings taking place between British government representatives and Sinn Féin representatives. We began to take his proposal more seriously when he got into discussions about the logistics of carrying out such a meeting.

At all times we stressed that there could be no preconditions to such a meeting and that Sinn Féin's electoral mandate was the basis for our engagement. The British government representative said there would be a need for the British Prime Minister to defend talks with us if these became public and this would be most difficult if the IRA campaign was continuing at a high level. He told us that the British government accepted that the IRA activity would only be halted as a result of negotiations. He said that the British government believed that intensive meetings with Sinn Féin would persuade republicans that armed struggle was no longer necessary. He proposed that if we got agreement of these meetings that the IRA should reduce its campaign or suspend it in order to enhance this process.

In February Sinn Féin held its Ard Fheis. There were key note speeches from Gerry Adams and myself outlining party policy on the need for a peace process.

This triggered further intense responses from the British government. We were advised that we would shortly be in a situation in which a definite arrangement would be made for such a meeting. Suggestions were made that meetings could take place in various venues. They offered to arrange an airplane to fly us to Scotland, Norway or Denmark.

I asked for information about the make-up of the meetings eg numbers of delegates. I was informed that the British were prepared to be flexible about this. They suggested that three delegates, accompanied by three advisors, would be sufficient.

They would also be similarly represented. I asked for an indication of the seniority of the British representatives. I was then given the names of those who would represent the British side. The British government representative stressed that the British government believed that the end result of

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these talks would be that Republicans would feel that there would be no need to go back to armed struggle.

He also stated that he believed two weeks intensive daily meetings would suffice. I reported this to Gerry Adams. After a discussion with senior colleagues, the British request was passed to the IRA.

By this time, the British government had appointed two representatives. By the end of March we had reached agreement in principle about the meetings. The Sinn Féin side applied itself to terms of reference and an outline of policy position. It was during this period that we received the British 9 paragraph document. We prepared an 11 paragraph response to it. We also appointed a small secretariat under my tutelage.

At this time Sinn Féin sought and was given a commitment by the IRA that it would create the conditions necessary to facilitate this round of talks and to enable us to explore the potential of the British government's assertion. This would have involved a 14 day suspension of operations.

This was conveyed to the British government on May 10th.

Although we were informed that the positive response by republicans to the British proposal was the subject of a series of high level meetings by British ministers and officials, including John Major there was no positive response by them. I was informed that this was discussed on Monday, 17 May 1993, at a meeting which included Major, Hurd, Mayhew, Chilcott, Braithwaite. The meeting was indecisive and was reconvened on Tuesday, 18 May, and Kenneth Clarke was involved in this. Clarke's advice was that ~~the opening of~~ public negotiations with us was "too risky with the government under seige". Mayhew was wobbling between "pushing for acceptance and wanting a safer longer period of cessation". John Major compromised by instructing his secretary to draw up a programme which he would be able to announce in Parliament..... "that he was instructing the NIO to enter into dialogue with the Republican Movement". Later we received a written communication which you have before you. This deals directly with the 10 May situation. From this point, although the line was in regular use in this period it was not used in any positive way. In fact, the British moved away from their proposal and refused to follow it through.

We believe that this was due to John Major's difficulties within his party and in the British parliament, and his need to secure an alliance with the UUP.

During this time there were a number of leaks to the media which hinted at contact between us and the British. We made a

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number of formal complaints as we had done on previous occasions and expressed concern at the risk to the process.

In fact we believe these leaks to have been inspired from within the British military and political establishment and that this led to the British government being forced to give the UUP a limited briefing on its contacts with Sinn Féin.

July 1993: The Sinn Féin response to the British government's 9 paragraph document, which had been prepared in April for presentation by our secretariat in advance of the proposed delegation meetings was lodged with the contact to be passed to the British. This outlined the basis on which we were entering negotiations.

After this the exchanges we received became less and less. They continued to avoid the main issue raised on May 10th. Their content was increasingly disingenuous and it became clear that the British were quite blatantly abusing the line of communication for their own narrow, short term interests.

The communications were quite clearly being written with a view to disguise the British government's rejection of the substantial and courageous response by the IRA to the British request. Simultaneously the volume of leaks and rumours increased quite noticeably. During this period the Hume/Adams discussions were making considerable progress and we conveyed this to the British both verbally and in written messages. November 1993: In early November we received a British government document which purported to be in response to a request from us. We immediately despatched a repudiation of any request from us. You know the rest.

I have outlined this chronology to you because the line of communication with the British government has been abused by Major and Mayhew. Today we are setting the record straight. It is important that this is done because if this line of communication is to have any value in the future its integrity must be restored. The British government are acting in bad faith and are now actively abusing our contact with them in order to sow dissension and confusion and to distract attention from the real issues. This can only devalue the peace process.

Sinn Féin acted at all times in good faith. We sought to move towards peace both through this private contact with the British government and through our involvement in the Irish peace initiative. Republicans have demonstrated flexibility and integrity throughout. The British government have demonstrated intransigence and duplicity. They have rejected very real and tangible opportunities for peace. It is up to John Major to explain why his government walked away from its

intensive shuttle diplomacy on the part of Sir N. Stephen. Atmosphere improves.

2. On 16 October SOSNI had a short meeting with the Irish. Both Governments agreed that the best chance of progress lay in the proposal that Sir Ninian Stephen should invite all the talks participants to submit to him privately their individual suggestions for Heads of Agreement across all three Strands. It was a high risk strategy, but Sir Ninian appeared well aware of the extreme delicacy of the task and the importance of getting his synthesis right first time. There was a slight danger that Sir Ninian's report would be based on the lowest common denominator of the parties' submissions and thus not form the basis of a workable blueprint; this was a risk which would have to be taken.

3. On the afternoon of 16 October there was a short session of the Strand 2 committee. Sir Ninian formally asked the parties to submit to him, either orally or in writing, their ideas for Heads of Agreement, their concept of the areas where their proposals agreed with those of other delegations, and their views on any areas where they perceived disagreements to exist. Sir Ninian would then correlate the submissions with his own impressions and formulate his report. He had no preconceptions about the form the report would take, and indeed he realised that there was disagreement between the participants as to the scope of the exercise; he saw the process as being a dynamic one which would assume a more coherent form during the course of the following week's consultations.

4. On timetable, Sir Ninian suggested that 19 and 20 October be taken up with bilateral consultations with the NI political parties and that he should talk to the two Governments separately on 21 and 22 October. On 23 October he would report progress to the entire sub-committee either orally or on paper. This, however, he stressed, was only an outline, and changes could be made if people felt it desirable. In addition, he encouraged the delegations to talk to each other as much as possible.

5. These proposals were accepted, albeit with some reservation by the SDLP.

Outlook

6. The talks have thus entered an entirely new stage. Sir Ninian is now effectively in control of all three Strands and the nature of his proposed shuttle diplomacy over the next week (and possibly for longer) means that events could begin to develop very quickly. Information about who is saying what to whom will be at a premium.

7. In preparation for its meeting with Sir Ninian on 21 October the HMG team is drawing up model Heads of Agreement which it BELIEVES.....



believes stand the widest chance of being accepted by all concerned. These will be submitted for his use on a non-attributable basis, in an attempt to guide his consultations. The idea is to "ghost-write" Sir Ninian's report. The main elements are as follows:

Strand 1. Based closely on the Strand 1 sub-committee report of earlier in the year, with the chairman of Assembly committees becoming heads of department, and with the Assembly being the sole legislative authority but having to submit draft legislation to the separate "Panel" for ratification.

Strand 2. This envisages co-operation between respective departments in the North and the South, the establishment of cross-border executive agencies by the respective legislatures North and South and remaining answerable to them, and the delivery of some all-Ireland executive functions by the body itself, subject to democratic approval and accountability.

Strand 3. An IGC and Secretariat to deal with non-transferred matters affecting NI, with Panel members and committee chairmen from NI formally part of the IGC structure. On the constitutional status of the Province, a statement that NI is currently part of the UK is proposed, together with a recognition that a substantial minority wish for a united Ireland, and have the right to pursue that by peaceful and democratic means and without impediment. Replacement of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution by an aspiration to a united Ireland is also sought.

The paper, it is stressed, represents HMG's judgement of what is possible to achieve, rather than its own sense of priorities in individual areas.

8. If an outline agreement something along these lines is possible there may be a chance of the parties reconvening to put flesh on the bones at some point in the future after the 16 November IGC. Events in the next couple of weeks could move rapidly and unpredictably.