

*It is clear that the British government did raise the arms issue before the ceasefire*

## Timetable Of A British Message

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**T**HE theology of the decommissioning of arms issue in Northern Ireland has become so complex that it is beginning to baffle even seasoned observers of the peace process.

In the latest twist, the former Irish Taoiseach, Mr. Albert Reynolds, speaking in Belfast on August 9, claimed that he would not have signed the Downing Street Declaration if the British government had then insisted on arms decommissioning as a precondition before round table talks. Baroness Denton, Northern Ireland Office Minister replied tersely with a reference to memory loss.

In fact, this debate has been raging all summer. The Republican leadership and the leadership of Fianna Fail insist that the issue of decommissioning was in fact sprung on an unsuspecting Republican leadership by the British after the August 31 ceasefire announcement.

Dublin media opinion — writers usually as diverse in their views as Dr. Garret FitzGerald of the *Irish Times*, Mr. Gene Kerrigan of the *Sunday Independent* and Mr. Tom McGurk of the *Sunday Business Post* — has unanimously insisted that this Fianna Fail/Republican version of events is accurate.

The purpose of this article is not to resolve this complex issue on its merits but to examine the accusation of bad faith, levied against the British government by so many in Dublin, by outlining the bald record of public pronouncements on this issue.

March 19, 1993. Nine paragraph document sent by British government to Sinn Fein says in Paragraph 5: 'The British government has made clear that ... in the event of a genuine and established ending of violence, the whole range of responses to it would inevitably be looked at afresh.'

October 10, 1993. In an RTE radio interview Sir Patrick Mayhew says the IRA will have to make available its guns and explosives to show its violence is over.

December 15, 1993. The Downing

Street Declaration says that what is required to enter the talks process is the permanent end of the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence; in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.'

In the Dail Dick Spring says that an end to violence would involve paramilitaries handing over their arms:

'Questions were raised on how to determine a permanent cessation of violence. We are talking about the handing up of arms and are insisting that it would not be simply a temporary cessation of violence to see what the political process offers. There can be no equivocation in relation to the determination of both Governments in that regard. (*Dail Debates*, Vol. 437 c.776)

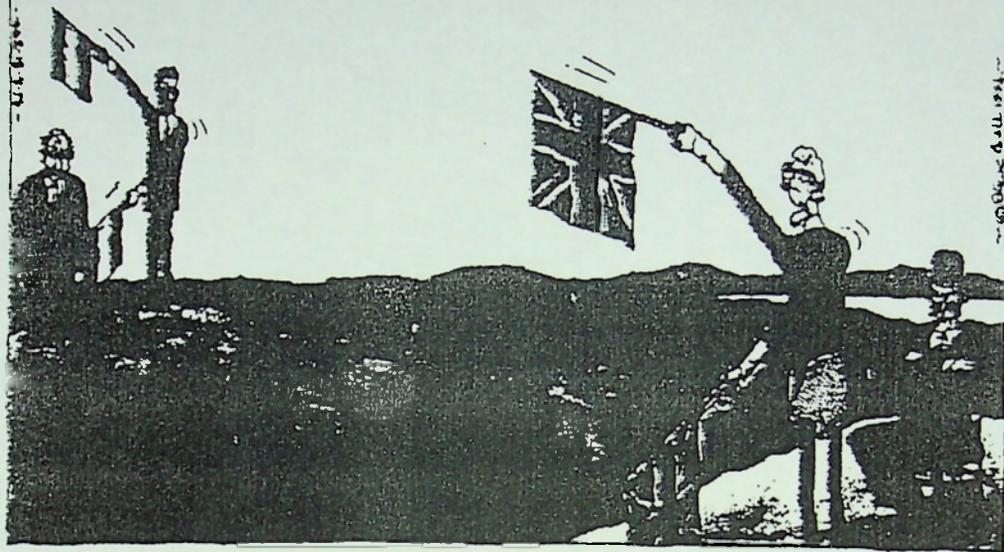
January 8, 1994. In an Irish News interview Gerry Adams criticises Sir Patrick Mayhew's post Declaration statements that talks between Sinn Fein and the government will concern the decommissioning of arms:

'Mr. Mayhew goes on to say "well the exploratory dialogue will be so we can discuss with Sinn Fein how the IRA will hand over their weapons." So I say to myself: "This is what they want. They want the IRA to stop so that Sinn Fein can have the privilege 12 weeks later, having been properly sanitised and come out of quarantine, to have discussions with senior civil servants of how the IRA can hand over their weapons."

June 1, 1994. In the Dail Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Dick Spring states that the key to Sinn Fein joining political discussions is a permanent cessation of violence.

He continues; 'There will have to be a verification of the handing over of arms. As I said publicly on many occasions, there is little point in attempting to bring

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people into political dialogue if they are doing so on the basis of giving it a try and if it does not work, returning to the bomb and the bullet. It has to be permanent and there must be evidence of it.... There will obviously have to be a precise means of establishing the commitment to use exclusively peaceful methods and that obviously has to be decided and agreed by both Governments. There can be no participation by Sinn Fein/IRA in political discussions with either Government until they have made a very firm commitment that the violence has ended. (*Dail Debates*, Vol. 443 c. 1021-22)

August 21, 1994. In a radio interview NIO Minister Michael Ancram says: 'We are not prepared to enter into any form of dialogue, including exploratory dialogue, with those who support violence until there has been a permanent renunciation and cessation of violence on a credible basis.'

August 25, 1994. Following a statement from Fine Gael leader John Bruton the previous week, saying that an IRA ceasefire was only 'the tactical laying aside of arms with an implied threat of resumption, and it would be an appalling development if Sinn Fein was able to use the situation to garner political advantage'. *An Phoblacht* criticises Bruton as being, 'more unionist than (some) unionists.'

August 31, 1994. IRA announce ceasefire. Prime Minister John Major says: 'We need to be sure the cessation

of violence isn't temporary, that it isn't for one week or one month, but a permanent cessation of violence'.

Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, accepts the IRA statement as implying a permanent ceasefire and in an attempt to reassure Unionists states:

'I hope that they now see over a period that this is for real, that there are no hidden agendas, that there is no deal beneath the table and that the principles that are enshrined in the Downing Street Declaration are the principles on which we are proceeding.'

October 9, 1994. On *Radio Ulster*, Dick Spring says: 'There are a lot of matters which have arisen in the past five

perhaps more than guns - are a crucial issue that will have to be dealt with as we advance the process.' (*Hansard*, Vol. 248 c. 140)

March 1, 1995. Speaking in London, Gerry Adams says the decommissioning of arms will happen at the end of negotiations, not the beginning.

In Washington Dick Spring says: 'If we make the attitude that nothing will happen unless there is a surrender or decommissioning of arms, then I think that is a policy for disaster'.

March 14, 1995. Speaking at Dublin airport before flying to the US, the new Taoiseach John Bruton says that some method will have to be devised whereby arms can be decommissioned before political talks in NI can proceed. 'If you are pursuing the democratic road you don't need arms. These arms are now redundant. It is a question now of how they are to be dealt with' he states.

April 15, 1995. Speaking on *Radio Ulster*, Gerry Adams appears to rule out the idea of a decommissioning of weapons by the IRA. Asked about the perception that there was no prospect that the IRA would ever hand over its weapons, Adams says 'I think that is a sensible view of the situation.'

April 18, 1995. Nationalists criticise the continuing government policy of Ministers refusing to meet Sinn Fein until they are prepared to discuss the decommissioning of arms. While Sinn Fein accuses the British of 'stalling' SDLP

**Who said what and when about the decommissioning of the IRA arsenal**

weeks in terms of what is going to happen to prisoners, in terms of what is going to happen to the arms, but I think quite frankly they are issues to be discussed down the line. Let's start working on the political side of this.'

October 13, 1994. In the House of Commons John Major says 'Armaments - especially semtex and detonators, per-

leader John Hume says there is 'no excuse' for a further delay.

May 23, 1996. In Boston, Sir Patrick Mayhew says that 'the Government cannot and therefore will not fudge the issue of arms and explosives. We do not ask for everything at once. But if Sinn Fein and the other parties associated with the paramilitaries have truly given up justifying violence then there is no longer any need for paramilitary weapons. Gerry Adams says his meeting with the Secretary of State must be more than symbolic.

May 24, 1996. In Washington, Sir Patrick Mayhew and Gerry Adams meet privately for 36 minutes.

June 14, 1996. In an interview with the *Irish Times* Gerry Adams says that: 'The demand for the surrender of IRA weapons as a precondition to negotiations was never mentioned by the British government before August 31 1994. In my view, had a surrender of IRA weapons been imposed as a precondition to peace negotiations prior to the cessation, it is possible there would have been no IRA cessation on September 1 last year.'

The Sinn Fein President adds that by asking the IRA to hand over weapons; 'the British government is not simply interested in a gesture. It is, in reality, demanding the start of the surrender process as a precondition to all party talks.'

Now what do these comments, all of them on the record, indicate? In the first place, it is clear that the British government did raise the arms issue before and immediately after the Downing Street Declaration - long before the ceasefire - and that the Republican leadership was clear in its own mind as to the implications.

Mr. Adams' interview with the *Irish News* in January 1994 is evidence of that and does not appear to be compatible with his June 1996 interview in the *Irish Times*. It is only by assuming that the British government's formal declarations on this issue were pure propaganda and meant to be disregarded that the Sinn Fein or Fianna Fail position can be salvaged - but as Mr. Adams' remarks show, he did not disregard them.

If the Unionist failed to hear fairly clear British messages about the framework documents before February 1994; the nationalists for their own reasons, have been hard of hearing on decommissioning.

To be fair to Mr. Reynolds, he was always a sceptic about decommissioning; more so than his Tanaiste, Dick Spring, or his successor, John Bruton. In so far as there has been a softening of position or the emergence of a new one, it has been movement by the two governments designed to enhance Sinn Fein's involvement in the peace process.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that the peace process is unlikely to be strengthened by quite such an economic attitude to the *actualité* as we have seen in the past few months. ■