

CONFIDENTIAL

17 June 1997

DRAFT STATEMENT

Madam Speaker, with permission I shall make a statement about the IRA's murder of two police officers and the Government's search for peace and political progress in Northern Ireland.

RUC Constable Roland John Graham and Reserve Constable David Johnston were shot dead through the back of the head in Lurgan on Monday morning. The IRA claimed responsibility.

The House will join me in expressing our sympathy to the family including 5 children all under 10 and colleagues of these two brave officers.

Their murder is a stark reminder. A reminder of the evil power of terrorism which the people of Northern Ireland have suffered for so long now. A reminder of the courage and resilience of the men and women of the RUC and their colleagues in the other security forces who continue to go about their duty, on behalf of us all, in the face of such a threat from wherever it comes. A reminder that two other RUC officers have died since the election - one the victim of a brutal beating by loyalists and the other murdered while off duty by the INLA.

It is a reminder too of the callous strategy by which, while Sinn Féin talks peace, the IRA continues to wage war.

There is never any excuse for murder. But these murders came at a time when this Government had gone out of its way to seek to establish whether Sinn Féin was genuine in its talk of peace and desire to enter negotiations. Or whether it would continue to rely on violence to strengthen its electoral mandate.

We did so because this question had come to dominate the current negotiations. It is one reason why they have become deadlocked on the issue of decommissioning.

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If the process is to succeed, political negotiations in the three strands need to be under way in September. I am determined to make progress then, one way or another, with or without Sinn Féin.

But realistically, agreement on the way forward is unlikely while there remains genuine doubt over whether Sinn Féin wish to, and will, participate or not.

So, in order to demonstrate that Sinn Féin had no reason to be unclear about either our approach or what was required to participate in the negotiations, I authorised officials to meet with Sinn Féin.

The purpose of these meetings was to explain the Government's position and clarify Sinn Féin's. There was no question of negotiating an IRA ceasefire. But I wanted to leave no doubt that the Government had taken every possible step to make clear our position to Sinn Féin.

Officials had two meetings with Sinn Féin at which, acting on Ministerial instructions, they set out the Government's position. Following the second meeting, I authorised a note to be sent to Sinn Féin recording the Government's position on the points where Sinn Féin had sought clarification.

This note was sent last Friday evening, 13 June. I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

This note sets out the British Government's position. It was not agreed with anyone else. But it followed consultation last week with both the Irish and United States' Governments, for whose support for this approach I am most grateful.

The note repeats that the entry of Sinn Féin into the talks requires an unequivocal restoration of the IRA's ceasefire. Some time will be required to see that words and deeds are matching. But, to remove any misunderstanding or uncertainty, the note sets out that this period of time is some 6 weeks.

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The note also sets out what confidence-building activity would occur in this period; our commitment to a timeframe for the negotiations ending in May 1998; our determination to resolve the issue of decommissioning to the satisfaction of the participants, on the basis of implementing all aspects of the Mitchell Report, so that it does not block the substantive political negotiations, beginning in September; and our commitment to build confidence more generally on all sides of the community.

In sending this note we said we were prepared, subject to events on the ground, to have a further meeting with Sinn Féin to go through it and clarify any further points on either side. Following Monday's murders, there is no question of such a meeting.

Madam Speaker, this note removes any lingering doubt there may be over what must be done if Sinn Féin is to join the negotiations. It offers a fair and reasonable approach.

I must tell the House frankly I do not know whether the murder of two policemen was a considered and deliberate response. It might be.

I dealt in good faith. Now the world must judge the good faith of others.

I will not be swayed by violence. I will not make concessions. I will not negotiate under threat of violence.

There is now no hiding place. Sinn Féin can no longer claim there is uncertainty or lack of clarity. They should be in no doubt that we will go ahead without them.

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