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by fax

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British Embassy
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Facsimile: (202) 588 7859*Dear Mary,*

I was hoping to catch up with you during the Democratic Convention in Chicago, but was so disorganised that, in the end, I didn't even manage to call your hotel. The loss was mine.

Back here in Washington, we have all been turning our minds to other issues - not least Iraq. I enjoyed reading your column on 5 September, but was a bit bothered to see you write that the IRA went back to their bombs because "John Major dragged his feet on peace talks".

This idea seems to be developing into part of the accepted wisdom of what happened over the last couple of years. But I don't think it's right. Bear with me with I run through a few of the key features of that critical period between 31 August 1994 and 9 February 1996:

- We only got the cease-fires, remember, because Major and Reynolds kicked things off with the Joint Declaration of December 1993.
- We told the paramilitaries that, if they would end the violence, "establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods", and show that they "abide by the democratic process", they would be welcome to "participate fully in democratic politics and join in dialogue in due course ... on the way ahead". (I have lifted these words from the Joint Declaration: contrary to Sinn Féin folklore, it really doesn't say anything about an immediate move to all-party talks.)
- When, eight months after the Joint Declaration, the IRA announced their cease-fire, we asked them to declare it permanent - as required by both Governments in the Joint Declaration. They declined to do so.
- As the IRA had known since the end of 1993, part of the process of confidence-building required "substantial progress" on the issue of decommissioning. But they declined even to discuss the issue during the preliminary dialogue which we established with them in December 1994, after making a "working assumption" that the IRA's cease-fire was permanent.

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- As a further attempt at unblocking the situation, we and the Irish launched what we called the "Twin Track" process on the eve of President Clinton's visit to Northern Ireland, in November 1995. The idea was to make progress, in parallel, on political issues and decommissioning (with the help of the recommendations of the International Body, set up under George Mitchell's chairmanship).
- When the International Body recommended that some decommissioning should take place during all-party talks, rather than beforehand (as the British Government had requested) we accepted that recommendation - and all the other provisions of the Mitchell report, immediately and in full. Sinn Fein didn't. Because - as Mitchell recognised - it was necessary under Twin Track to make progress as well on the political side, we then proposed elections to be followed immediately by all-party talks - realistically, the only way to get the parties to come together.
- Meanwhile, the British Government continued with a series of confidence-building measures: three full battalions of soldiers withdrawn to mainland Britain, all military checkpoints dismantled, army patrols off the streets of Belfast and Londonderry, all border crossings with the Republic opened, more generous remission for paramilitary prisoners, an end to the broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein, prisoners transferred on humanitarian grounds etc.
- What was the response of the IRA/Sinn Fein? Frankly, nothing. Each new move from the British Government was pocketed, grudgingly, and followed by further demands - while the "punishment beatings" continued unabated.
- Despite the ending of the IRA cease-fire on 9 February, we and the Irish went ahead, at the end of that month, with the announcement of all-party talks, with a fixed date, an open agenda, and no pre-conditions - all things to which Sinn Fein claimed to attach the greatest importance.
- What did they do? Tell their friends that they hoped to restore the IRA cease-fire before or shortly after the opening of all-party talks on 10 June 1996. They failed - and are still failing - to deliver, while seizing every opportunity to denigrate the talks process they had for so long demanded.

I share your disappointment that the cease-fire came to an end - and that Drumcree has further damaged the prospects for a lasting peace. It is easy to accuse John Major of dragging his feet. But I am reminded of the words of one Northern Ireland civil servant who sat through all the meetings with Sinn Fein during the months of cease-fire in an effort to find a way forward: "They never gave us a chance".

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To me, one of the most remarkable aspects of the whole process has been the energy and commitment which John Major has put into the search for a settlement in Northern Ireland. He didn't need to do it; there don't appear to be any votes in it; and his small majority has undoubtedly complicated his task immensely. But he has never given up; and has, in my view, made more of an effort than any British Prime Minister in recent history to try to get things sorted out in the Province. Of course there are others doing their best, in difficult circumstances, to see off the men of violence and get the right result; but credit where credit is due.

Forgive me for writing at such length, but I thought it worth sharing with you, very informally, a few thoughts prompted by your own writings!

With very best wishes,

Peter

Peter Westmacott