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Sinn Féin seeks talks on electoral deal with SDLP

By Deaglán de Bréadún,
Political Reporter

SINN Féin has written to the SDLP inviting it to discuss electoral strategy for the coming Westminster poll. *The Irish Times* has learned. The SDLP replied that it would not be discussing electoral strategy with any other party until an election was called.

Although observers saw the exchange of letters as a significant move in the direction of a possible election pact between the parties, a spokesman for the SDLP strongly rejected this interpretation.

"I can categorically say there was no definite inference on behalf of either party", the SDLP spokesman said. Describing the Sinn Féin letter as "very open-ended", he said it was "basically saying that their arch-enemy is the SDLP and asking us if we had any ideas".

The SDLP had sent a "court-ous" reply, stating that the party would be looking at its own approach to the poll and would not be discussing strategy with anyone else until there was an election in the offing.

The Sinn Féin letter was sent in the name of the party's northern chairman, Mr Gearóid O hÉara. However, Mr O hÉara said that the letters were private and he

Hume queried on IRA report

could not disclose their contents without the SDLP's permission.

Senior Irish Government sources have pointed out that an unequivocal IRA ceasefire, which facilitated a Westminster election pact with the SDLP could lead to major political gains by the nationalist parties in Northern Ireland. However, sources close to republican thinking say a ceasefire is not on the cards before the election unless Mr John Major launches a new initiative on the North.

Yesterday, the Sinn Féin spokesman, Mr Martin McGuinness, added his voice to that of the SDLP leader, Mr John Hume, in calling for an early Westminster election. "The reality is that the people who have set their faces against a peace settlement on this island have been the leadership of the British government and the leadership of the unionist parties", Mr McGuinness told RTE.

In a separate RTE interview, Mr Hume admitted that he was "frustrated, deeply angered and saddened" by the state of the peace process and accused the British government of wasting opportunities for peace by making stupid decisions.

The SDLP leader refused to say if he would be contesting a Westminster seat in this year's British general election. He pointed out that he had a very heavy workload as an MEP and party leader and said that he would decide on this much closer to the election, which has to be held by next May.

Asked about a report in the *Sunday Times* that both Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams were leading members of the IRA,

Mr Hume replied: "A lot of strange things have been appearing in newspapers over the last month or two, and I find it very strange. I have no comment to make on them at all. I have always assumed that Sinn Féin is the political wing of the republican movement, the IRA is the military wing of the movement. As far as I am concerned, if you are a member of Sinn Féin or a member of the IRA, in both you support the strategy and tactics of that whole movement."

"I don't know whether or not the two men you mention are actual members of the Army Council or not. I don't know that, but what I do know, and I have assumed this all along, and my whole approach to strategy is that Sinn Féin are the political voice of a movement which has a military voice called the IRA, and that they speak with the same voice when it comes to the politics of our situation."

In a statement on the 1,000lb IRA bomb abandoned near Belfast Castle, Mr Michael McDowell, of the Progressive Democrats, said that the Dublin Government should speak out "clearly and un-



Mr Hume: no knowledge of Army Council membership.

equivocally against the efforts of the entire Provisional movement to drag Northern Ireland, the South and Britain into a renewed orgy of atrocities."

Mr Ken Maginnis, the Ulster Unionist MP, said that similar incidents over the past year indicated "the folly of suggesting the IRA is prepared to make a quantum leap from terrorism to democracy".

Mr Billy Hutchinson, of the Progressive Unionist Party, which is associated with the UVF, told Radio Ulster: "Republicans need to step back and ask themselves if they want to condemn young loyalists and republicans to another 25 years of war. Because that is what they are going to do."

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