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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

13 March 1995

Dear Colleague:

In this letter I set out concisely the Government's position on:

- possible Ministerial involvement in exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein;
- the decommissioning of IRA arms; and
- how Sinn Fein could progress thereafter to entering substantive political talks.

Each of these issues has been the subject of some confused reporting in recent days. On each the Government's position is unchanged.

Exploratory Dialogue

Last October, on the basis of a working assumption that the IRA intended its violence to be over for good, the Prime Minister announced that exploratory dialogue between British officials and Sinn Fein could begin within weeks. The first meeting duly took place on 9 December. There have since been a further five meetings.

The purpose of those meetings has been to explore three areas:

- how Sinn Fein could play a full role in the democratic life of Northern Ireland;
- how they could, in time, enter the three-stranded political talks process on the future of Northern Ireland; and
- the practical consequences of an end to violence, especially the need to decommission the IRA's arms.

Sinn Fein are now pressing for Ministerial involvement in this exploratory dialogue.



A Clear and Reliable Assurance

Before Ministers will participate there must first be a clear and reliable assurance from Sinn Fein that constructive discussion - particularly in achieving substantial progress on decommissioning arms - would be facilitated and accelerated by Ministers joining the dialogue. This would certainly involve exploration of the ways in which arms could practicably be decommissioned.

So far, no such assurance has been received.

Substantive Political Talks

On the separate issue of Sinn Fein's participation in substantive political talks, as distinct from exploratory dialogue, this cannot happen until there has been substantial progress on the decommissioning of arms. I explained in Washington last week that this would need to include at least:

- a declared willingness in principle to disarm progressively;
- a common practical understanding of what decommissioning would entail; and
- in order to test practical arrangements and to demonstrate good faith, the actual decommissioning of some arms as a tangible confidence building measure and to signal the start of a process.

The Adams Statement of 9 March

Mr Adams's statement of 9 March does not provide the "clear and reliable assurance" which we need before Ministers can enter exploratory dialogue, let alone before Sinn Fein can enter substantive political talks.

Mitchell McLaughlin, the Sinn Fein Chairman, said on 10 March:

"Mr Adams is simply repeating a position that Sinn Fein leaders have taken throughout this entire process which is that all weapons have to be taken out of circulation and we have to create the conditions in which the gun has been taken out of Irish politics permanently" (BBC Radio 4, Today, 10 March 1995).

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Sinn Fein remains inextricably linked with the IRA. As I said in Washington:

- the IRA remains in being;
- it maintains its arsenal;
- it is still recruiting;
- it is still targeting;
- it is still training;
- it is still researching the manufacture of improvised weapons;
- it is still seeking foreign sources of weaponry and funds to organise and sustain its operations; and
- it continues and has stepped up the loathsome practice of punishment beatings.

Throughout this process we have consistently maintained the position that it would be wrong to enter into substantive political talks with any party that still implies that if it does not get its way democratically it is prepared to condone a return to violence. Without the foregoing assurances that implication will continue to be present.

Therefore the ball is in Sinn Fein's court. It is for them to provide, both for exploratory dialogue and for substantive political talks, the assurances we need.

For avoidance of doubt, the same considerations apply to political parties associated with loyalist paramilitary organisations.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Mayhew
