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Re IRA

Sec. Secton

After South Quay

The peace process to date was predicated upon achieving and sustaining the ceasefires as a foundation upon which a political settlement might be built. The process was thus contingent on the continued approval, or at least acquiescence, of the IRA Army Council and the CLMC. Should we now seek to rebuild the process on the same basis?

As a first point, it appears that notwithstanding some early comments by the Taoiseach, both Governments envisage being able to do business with Sinn Fein if the IRA simply reinstate the ceasefire as it previously obtained, and that a declaration of permanence, while obviously desirable, would not be necessary. However, a renewed "complete cessation" would require our Government, the SDLP, Sinn Fein, and Irish-America to change the basis of our argumentation quite radically; instead of arguing for compromise on the basis of a presumably permanent peace, we would have to do so on the basis of a peace which would be patently contingent upon progress being made in the eyes of those who declared the peace, on this occasion the Army Council. This gear-shift will be at the least uncomfortable.

The Army Council were presumably aware that in revoking the ceasefire they would inflict huge, perhaps irreversible, damage on the political capital and credibility of Gerry Adams, John Hume, the Irish Government and the Irish-American consensus - elements which we regard as fundamental to the construction of a viable talks process, but which appear to have been set aside by the Army Council in favour of some or all of the following considerations:

- It is probable that in the eyes of the Army Council the peace process appeared to have no chance of substantive movement in the near future. Given the time needed to organise Friday's bombing, they may indeed have viewed the entire twin track as a pointless attempt to keep a moribund process alive. Perhaps also the feeling was growing that if against the odds all-party talks were convened, any likely settlement to emerge would be unacceptable.

- It is clear that the longer the ceasefire were to be maintained, the weaker the IRA organisation would become and the harder it would be to maintain core support in the republican community for a return to violence. The view may have been taken that a continued ceasefire in the absence of substantial progress would inevitably have provoked a split within the organisation; such a split would probably have destroyed the IRA as an effective paramilitary force as well as causing the deaths of many of those involved.

In these circumstances, the perception on the Army Council may have been that a return to violence would:

- end the perceived humiliation of republicans;
- maintain the discipline of the organisation;
- seek to provoke concessions on the part of the British Government through a single bombing and the threat of further action;

- if unsuccessful, lead to a sustained campaign in London and perhaps elsewhere with the intention of forcing the British to reevaluate their strategy;
- provide an opportunity to punish the British Government and the unionists for their intransigence.

It seems likely at this early stage that the IRA will not reestablish the ceasefire unless all-party talks appear to be an immediate prospect. It equally appears that such a prospect is hardly possible so long as on the one hand the ceasefire is revoked and Sinn Fein maintain their traditional equivocal position, while on the other hand SF involvement in all-party talks is considered an essential requirement.

While it is obviously too early to settle on a strategy for the new situation, there is a need privately to examine the alternatives; and if the vicious internal logic of the above scenario is borne out, we may have to consider pursuing a strategy which essentially takes on the Army Council and its supporters rather than seeking their consent. They have shown their analysis to be sufficiently distant from our own that it could be unwise to try to build for a second time a process dependent on success measured in terms of that same analysis.

Assuming that an early reestablishment of the ceasefire is not in prospect and that Sinn Fein are most unlikely to abjure violence and split with the IRA, the Government should find some symbolic means of enabling the vast majority of people, who would support a stand for democracy and against violence or the threat of violence, to make their feelings manifest, both to maximise public

solidarity and to put the greatest degree of pressure on the republican movement to put its cards on the table. For example, the Government could encourage every citizen who would like to make a stand publicly, for democracy and against violence, to wear a white ribbon (white being inter alia the central colour of the flag).

On the political front, the Governments could pursue as an urgent aim substantive talks between all parties expressing an irrevocable commitment to peaceful and democratic politics as per paragraph ten of the Downing Street Declaration. However, Sinn Fein, despite having committed themselves more or less to the Downing Street criteria in joint statements since the ceasefire, found themselves able over the weekend to revert to a more sympathetic analysis of paramilitary action by others; it would thus appear that whatever criteria of commitment to constitutional politics are to be used will, in order to be meaningful, have to include an explicit rejection of political violence on the part of any group.

Sinn Fein will probably not be in a position to make such an explicit commitment. The paramount question then becomes whether Hume would be prepared to involve the SDLP in substantive talks while Sinn Fein are sidelined; this must be highly doubtful. (It must be even more unlikely that Hume would consent to an election in the current circumstances.) Unless, therefore, the ceasefire is reestablished, thus permitting Sinn Fein some active involvement, substantive political negotiations will probably not be attainable.

If the political side of the process proves as barren as this in the near future, the security strategy pursued by each Government may prove decisive in

determining future developments. In a situation where violence continues (and a campaign of any sort, however contained, may be expected to provoke the reengagement of the CLMC), the strength of publically-expressed solidarity on the part of individual citizens will be critical in determining the extent to which the existing degree of support for the IRA or Sinn Fein can be transferred to a democratic alternative, or used to pressurise those organisations to shift ground. A haemorrhage of support might reduce the pro-violence movement to a hardline few; one could expect that such a group would be correspondingly difficult to deal with.

Renewed violence which in turn would probably provoke a new intensity of public response could lead both Governments to consider security measures not previously in the ball-park. If things go from bad to worse, could the stick of a severe, bilateral response (or threat of same) allied to the carrot of a concrete set of political incentives provide a means of talking to the militarists in terms they appreciate?

ED

12 February 1996