

CONFIDENTIAL

From Q J Thomas  
AUS(L)  
14 February 1990

1.  
cc Sir K Bloomfield - B  
Mr Burns - B  
Mr Ledlie - B  
Mr Miles - B  
Mr A Wilson - B  
Mr J McConnell - B  
Mr Daniell - B  
Mr Dodds - B  
Mr Kirk - B  
Mr Hill - B



PUS (L&B) - B

**POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PIRA/SINN FEIN**

1. Thank you for your minute of 9 February about this. I am sure a discussion about all this would be most interesting and useful and I look forward to taking part in it at Millisle.

2. I take it that you are not looking for a fully considered paper to provide a basis for discussion, but if I am wrong about that I hope you will correct me. Accordingly, I offer no more than preliminary reactions to the issue, in part stimulated by the questions you identify in your minute.

3. Your first point - suggesting that our present approach to PSF seems to rest on the assumption that the SDLP will in time be capable of marginalising Sinn Fein - exposes, as you no doubt intended, uncertainty about whether indeed we do have a coherent approach. For myself, I am sceptical whether that is the right approach, and doubtful whether it is the one we have.

4. It seems to me that our starting point, as in 'Defeating Terrorism', must be our objective of bringing terrorism to an end. While Sinn Fein is inextricably bound up with PIRA we are entitled for most purposes to treat them as a collective entity: PIRA/Sinn Fein. Our approach to dealing with that collective phenomenon has of course been fully documented in the 'Defeating Terrorism' paper.

5. But of course, and this is the point your note focuses on, to some extent Sinn Fein is a separate political entity. Our attitude to it crucially turns on the extent to which it is engaged in legitimate and constitutional political activity, and the extent to which it has no real identity separate from that of PIRA. Indeed one part of our strategy, as I understand that it is or should be, is to detach the Republican movement or aspiration away from terrorism. Efforts (like the Anglo-Irish Agreement, to some extent from the British point of view and certainly from the Irish) to protect and foster the SDLP stem only from the fact that it is for most purposes the authentic voice of constitutional nationalism in the North. But it seems to me we have no inherent interest in preferring the SDLP to Sinn Fein or any other potential movement

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speaking for nationalism provided it adopts a constitutional road. Indeed if there were an alternative voice to the SDLP it would, it seems to me, have many attractions. And if it brought with it the strain of anti-clericalism which I detect in Sinn Fein that might have interesting possibilities for levering open the somewhat theocratic structures of Northern and Southern nationalism to the benefit of an accommodation with the Unionist community.

6. Indeed, while I think it is right for most purposes to treat PIRA/Sinn Fein as a collective entity, we should sometimes pause to remember that that sometimes may be a misleading or even distorting view. Clearly, only a very small minority of those who vote for Sinn Fein are members of PIRA and/or actually practice violence. It would be difficult to make any categorical statements about the degree of support for violence which Sinn Fein's electoral strength may represent. Some recent polling, I gather, has suggested that a very substantial minority of those who vote for Sinn Fein say that they do not support violence. I do not suggest that that consideration should lessen our concern about Sinn Fein - it is certainly a depressing fact that Sinn Fein, with its known support for PIRA, can regularly win the support of over 10 per cent of voters (usually more voters than opinion polls suggest that the Conservative Party might muster in a general election) - but we should be careful about equating "support for violence" with the number of people who actually vote Sinn Fein. There are probably significant numbers of Unionist voters who are more supportive of paramilitary violence than some people who vote for Sinn Fein; and of course in the quite recent past, some Unionist politicians have indicated a greater enthusiasm for violence than some Sinn Fein councillors do (or did until recently, their words now being constrained by the declaration against terrorism). We should also bear in mind who votes Sinn Fein and why. As in other parties, many of its supporters seem to have inherited their allegiance and are likely to stick to it. The evidence is that young Catholic unemployed are more likely to vote Sinn Fein than the employed, and it is not surprising that research also suggests that it is generally the Catholic disadvantaged who are most likely to seek political succour from Sinn Fein. This is of course a point acknowledged in the "Defeating Terrorism" context and in the work now being done on the reduction of community differentials.

7. Against that background, as the saying is, I suggest that the main plank of our policy towards Sinn Fein derives directly from our policy on bringing terrorism to an end. We wish both to demonstrate the viability and efficacy of the constitutional road, at the same time as demonstrating the evil and futility of terrorism operating crucially on the terrorist will to continue the struggle in that form. So, I suggest, a good deal of the work you suggest might flow from a Millisle discussion has already been done, in 'Defeating Terrorism' which was, as you know, as much a 'political' paper as it was a security one and the work now being done on the reduction of community differentials.

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8. Nonetheless, there must be important issues about Sinn Fein in its political mode which may benefit from further attention. What is our present attitude to this organisation? It arises in various ways:

(i) The organisation is not proscribed and produces candidates who stand, successfully, in the various electoral events in Northern Ireland. We do not seek to deny the constitutional rights which derive from that.

(ii) However, Ministers do not meet Sinn Fein elected representatives, and that stretches even to delegations which include a Sinn Fein member;

(iii) however, the Home Secretary's broadcasting restrictions forbid the direct speech of those speaking on behalf of Sinn Fein, though their words can of course be reported in indirect speech and their faces can be shown with the lips moving. (The restrictions do thus not benefit those who can lip read.)

(iv) We assume that the identity between Sinn Fein and PIRA is such that it would be a mistake to allow public money to go towards organisations or ventures in which Sinn Fein has a part or would be a beneficiary.

(v) We point out that Sinn Fein, as part of Sinn Fein/PIRA, cannot win and can have no part in the constitutional process. The present Secretary of State has, perhaps more than any recent predecessors, gone some way to emphasise that if violence were renounced there would be a different situation with new possibilities.

9. The area where there may be scope to develop our policies, I suspect, is in our response to the positive constitutional aspects of Republicanism. Much is being done on the Irish language as part of a wider policy - consistent with the Anglo-Irish Agreement - of responding to the validity of the two traditions, culturally and otherwise. It may however be that we have seen this too much in terms of responding to the needs of the SDLP, and not enough in terms of demonstrating our willingness to acknowledge and accommodate the full spectrum of Nationalist/Republican interests and aspirations. (The words 'Republicanism' has a difficulty of course, since we often define it as incorporating the notion of using violence in support of political activities. I use it here to indicate Nationalism different from, and perhaps greener than, that of the SDLP.) Should we for example do more to accommodate Sinn Fein political representatives whose hands are not too obviously dripping in blood? On one view the more they are sucked into political activity the more they will see the benefit of the constitutional road. And the more too it might be seen that we are not being drawn ourselves into political cronyism in respect of the SDLP. It is clearly in that context important that we continue to

appoint Nationalists to public bodies who are not nominated by the SDLP or the Irish Government.

10. At the same time, do we do enough to indicate the value of the constitutional road by acknowledging the legitimacy of those who have, or claim to have, renounced violence. Ministers have now had meetings with the Workers' Party. Should more be done to acknowledge their presence?

11. However, having said all that, I remain of the view that by far the most important aspect of our attitude to PIRA/Sinn Fein should be our efforts to bring terrorism to an end. Insofar as Sinn Fein can be distinguished from terrorism now, or in the future, I believe we should acknowledge its claims to attention as appropriate (in particular reflecting its electoral strength). I do not think we should, as an end in itself, favour the SDLP over Sinn Fein's constitutional manifestations such as they are or may become.

Political Development and PIRA/Sinn Fein

(SIGNED)

I was grateful to Mr Miles for sending me a copy of his minute of 7 February. He also had a brief word about it yesterday

Q J THOMAS  
AUS(L)

Extn 6469  
MRC/3478

This is clearly in record that I would welcome it if as part of the discussion at Millisle on 14 March we were to spend some time on the subject of PIRA. With 'Defeating Terrorism' on the stocks, I think the time should in fact be available. While there may be better ways of addressing the issue, it seems to me that the kind of questions we should be asking are:

- a. Our present approach to PIRA seems to rest on the assumption that the SDLP (no doubt with help) will in time be capable of marginalising Sinn Fein, ideally to the point at which it is as insignificant in the North as it is in the South. Is this assumption sound?
- b. If it is, then is there anything that we should be doing but currently are not to assist the process, ie, is there anything more that we can be doing to help the SDLP, who so often seem to be unable to help themselves?
- c. If the assumption is, on the contrary, wrong or at best highly suspect, then what does that imply (if anything) for Government's present stance in relation to Sinn Fein?

I might hasten to add that I do not necessarily expect a hour or so discussion at Millisle to produce the answers to these questions. It is rather a matter of deciding whether or not these questions are the right ones and if they are what work is worth

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From PUS  
9 February 1990

L/2/18/DMC

*With Sir Connell*



putting in train to provide these answers that are  
serious;

Mr Thomas

- cc 1. Sir K Bloomfield <sup>12/2</sup>  
Mr Burns  
Mr Ledlie  
Mr Miles  
Mr A Wilson  
Mr J McConnell  
Mr Daniell  
Mr Dodds

2. Pol 2

JOHN BLESSON

Political Development and PIRA/Sinn Fein

I was grateful to Mr Miles for sending me a copy of his minute of 7 February. We also had a brief word about it yesterday afternoon.

2. This is simply to record that I would welcome it if as part of our session at Millisle on 16 March we were to spend some time on our policy towards PSF. With 'Defeating Terrorism' on the stocks, as it were, I think the time should in fact be available. While there may be better ways of addressing the issue, it seems to me that the kind of questions we should be asking are:

- a. Our present approach to PSF seems to rest on the assumption that the SDLP (no doubt with help) will in time be capable of marginalising Sinn Fein, ideally to the point at which it is as insignificant in the North as it is in the South. Is this assumption sound?
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- c. If the assumption is, on the contrary, wrong or at best highly suspect, then what does that imply (if anything) for Government's present stance in relation to Sinn Fein?

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putting in train to provide those answers that are not immediately obvious.

signed

JOHN BLELLOCH

9 February 1990

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From Q J Thomas  
AUS(L)  
9 February 1990

cc PS/PUS (L&B) - B  
1 PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B  
Mr Burns - B  
Mr Ledlie - B  
Mr A Wilson - B  
Mr McConnell - B  
Mr Daniell - B  
Mr Dodds - B  
Mr Blackwell - B\*  
Mr Kirk - B\*  
Mr Hill - B\*  
\*Mr Miles' minute copied  
to you earlier this morning

2, p2

Mr Miles - B

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PIRA/SINN FEIN



Thank you for your minute of 7 February about the importance of keeping in mind the PIRA/Sinn Fein dimension in our work on political matters. For the record, as the saying is, I would assert that this is indeed a central preoccupation of our political work, as it is indeed a central fact about the work of the Office as a whole. While in general terms our political policy is clearly based in part, as you acknowledge, on an analysis of the way in which it can make a contribution to the defeat of terrorism, it is more difficult at a level of detail, as your minute perhaps helps to illustrate, to be sure how this consideration should be weighed.

The pursuit of devolution while regarded by Government as a desirable end in itself, as a feature of good government, is clearly also intended to constitute a set back for PIRA/Sinn Fein. There are a number of aspects to this. But two important considerations are that the availability of functioning local institutions of government would demonstrate the rewards of the constitutional path, and, by filling the present local political vacuum, marginalise the activities of Sinn Fein/PIRA. The existence of fully functioning, and widely based, local institutions of government would also make it much more difficult for Sinn Fein/PIRA to characterise their activities as an attack on the Brits, rather than as an attack on the local community. We also seek ways of demonstrating that constitutional action, rather than the use of violence, produces results. Much the same thinking underlay the preparation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, of course. In that rather subtle sense there is something in the view that we were bombed into the Agreement. (Note incidentally that at that time we were told that the condition precedent for SDLP participation in devolution negotiations, and in local institutions of government generally, was the satisfactory settling of the Irish dimension through the Agreement. We are now being told - or at least were until recently - that the condition precedent is for the Unionists to settle their relationship with 'the rest of the people of this Island'.)

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As you know we have all been conscious of the need to avoid a 'hard landing' as and when our nudging activities come to an end. That is of course one reason why we have been anxious to avoid any premature reports that we have 'taken off', for example by refusing to characterise our activities as an 'initiative'.

And of course all this lies under the shadow of one of the 36 Northern Ireland conundrums: political progress would contribute to the defeat of terrorism, but becomes possible only after that defeat. Another is that a devolved Government would have credibility only if it were responsible for security policy (which history might suggest it would pursue with more vim than Westminster), but it could be given such responsibilities only after terrorism were defeated. Another version of that might be that terrorism could be defeated only by local people through locally accountable institutions, but such institutions can be established only after terrorism has been defeated. In any event it is clear that Provisional IRA violence and the way we respond to it (inquests, collusion, UDR, PBRs etc etc) will have an impact on political development.

A more difficult question, perhaps, is the way in which we handle Sinn Fein's inevitable impact on political development. We can keep them out of unelected conferences or talks, but Sinn Fein would be very likely to win seats in a new Assembly, or in a Convention. How would we keep Unionists in play then? Any agreed rules on, for example, sharing Committee seats between the parties in an Assembly would also be drafted with at least one (Unionist) eye on the use which Sinn Fein might make of such opportunities. If we were to seek to avoid such difficulties by disenfranchising Sinn Fein members in some way we would merely give them another propaganda trick. And for the reasons given in your paragraph 3(3) the Irish Government and the SDLP would probably react badly. I do not offer answers at this stage, merely another reason why we cannot and must not forget the Provisional movement when considering political development.

(SIGNED)

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