



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/50/275

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

13/02 '96 13:09

SECURE-FX TRANSMISSION
IRISH EMBASSY -->00 353 1 4757822

NI 5/1

Pg. 01

AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HA
Telephone: 0171-235 2171
Fax: 0171-246 6961

*Mr. Conroy
Mr. Myles
BB*

COPY TO:
PST
PSS
MR. F MURRAY
MR. P TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T DALTON

12 February, 1996.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

*Mr. O'Garra
(See refs to Maitland/Hunter
etc.)*

Dear Secretary,

Commons Statements on Canary Wharf

I attended the exchange of statements in the House of Commons this afternoon on Friday's IRA bombing of Canary Wharf. You will already have seen the statements by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition which followed the indications given to us earlier today from Government and Opposition sources.

The mood in the Commons was sombre and restrained, marked by an absence of recrimination or point scoring. A backbench MP to whom I mentioned this afterwards commented that "unfortunately we have had plenty of experience of set-piece debates in response to IRA atrocities". The tone was set by the Prime Minister's opening statement and sustained throughout by his response to questions - factual, unemotional, understated and in general looking to the future rather than to the past. Major showed a steely determination to rescue the peace process, the one successful policy (up until Friday at least) of his Premiership.

The Prime Minister's ability to manipulate opinion in the House of Commons was evident again today. Three weeks ago, in the debate on the Mitchell Report, he succeeded in escaping from the hook of Washington 3 without significant criticism from the right-wing of his party. On the contrary he won widespread applause for his position from both backbench MPs and Unionists. To do so, of course he impaled himself on another hook - elections as the alternative route into all-party talks. Today in another feat of legerdemain he attempted to get off this second hook, defining the electoral route as one alternative way forward as well as explaining the electoral route in a manner more acceptable to Nationalists. Again there was no significant criticism - at least on the floor of the House. It appeared that whatever scruples MPs

- 2 -

might have about this change of direction were less important than the fact that the general idea of elections seemed to be making headway. But reflective minds must be wondering whether today's approach if adopted a few short weeks ago could not have saved lives as well as the peace process.

There was no criticism of the Irish Government's policy. Quite the opposite. The Prime Minister at several points in his statement, and in reply to questions, stressed the need for the two Governments to find a way forward. And he pointed to the identity of view between us. This was particularly noticeable on the question of dealings with the IRA where, after some equivocation by British Ministers over the weekend, the Prime Minister shifted to the tougher position outlined in the Irish Government's statement of Saturday. But the Prime Minister was less forceful on the need for a three-stranded approach. Conversation with Conservative MPs, including the redoubtable Olga Maitland, showed a desire to repair relations with the Irish Government and establish a united approach. Maitland incidentally spoke warmly of her meeting with the Taoiseach and said that it had given her a better insight into our policy.

Another noticeable contrast with the Mitchell debate was Major's openness to the consideration of new options and ideas. This is stated explicitly at the close of his speech where he accepts that "others have ideas too", including the Irish Government, and states that his mind is not closed. But it was also evident in his willingness to, for example, take into account John Hume's proposal for referenda. Whether he will do so is another matter, but the response did seem to indicate a willingness to at least be seen to listen to Nationalist opinion. Beyond this of course may be a calculated desire to separate the SDLP from Sinn Féin, and this may explain why the Prime Minister's attitude to the SDLP leader was noticeably warmer than during the Mitchell debate. Hume's proposal is seen by some as an opening to an electoral test of opinion. Michael Mates told me that he was intrigued by the idea and wondered whether it signalled the beginning of a move by the SDLP to accept the electoral route.

Neither Major nor Blair set down condemnation or apology by Sinn Féin as a precondition for Sinn Féin's entry into talks. This itself is noteworthy given the British media's preoccupation over the weekend with Adams's refusal to condemn the bombing. I believe that the Taoiseach's argumentation on this point on the BBC at lunchtime on Sunday had an important effect on British views. For Major the test is the same as the Irish Government's - a genuine end to renewed violence. Blair's speech, delivered from hand written notes, reflected his prior consultations with the British Government (he was given Major's text some hours before the debate) as well, I believe, as Labour's close contacts with us, including in particular Blair's conversation with the Tánaiste this morning. Nonetheless I felt that the Labour Leader was not entirely sure of his ground, and he seemed to wobble slightly early in his speech when a reference to the provision in the

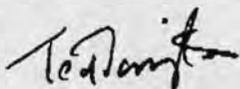
- 3 -

Downing Street Declaration that Britain had no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland and to the role of the Irish people drew groans from the Government backbenches and shouts of "what about the United Kingdom?". The question had as much to do with Labour's policy on devolution as with Northern Ireland, and it served as a reminder that, for some, the issue of Northern Ireland is not far below the surface of their thinking on the developing constitutional debate in British politics.

There were no calls for tough new security measures. Here again the tone was set by the Prime Minister who said simply that security in Northern Ireland had returned to pre-ceasefire levels and that all necessary measures to cope with the present situation were now in place. This of course is consistent with the Government's current policy of keeping doors open.

I came away from the debate with the feeling that Major had achieved another volte face in policy sustained by a genuine desire by the House of Commons to see the ceasefire restored, dialogue resumed and relations with Dublin repaired. He has the benefit of his track record, and this has earned him the benefit of the doubt. But if senior backbenchers like Andrew Hunter are prepared to admit, albeit in private only, that the Prime Minister made a mistake in his reaction to the Mitchell Report questions may yet emerge about Major's surefootedness. And the mood could change rapidly if there are further bombs in Britain and further loss of life.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington
Ambassador