



IRELAND NEWS BRIEFING

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Sinn Féin says it's time for equality of treatment — and full peace talks

On Wednesday, 10 May, a Sinn Féin delegation began the first open talks with a British minister that the party has had since the negotiations that resulted in the partial liberation and partition of Ireland in the 1920s.

Both Martin McGuinness, the leader of the Sinn Féin delegation that met British minister Michael Ancram, and Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams have welcomed the ending of the British ban on contacts between its ministers and Sinn Féin.

McGuinness, speaking outside the British administrative headquarters in the north of Ireland, at Stormont Castle, Belfast, told reporters: "Another obstacle on the road to lasting peace has been removed."

The Sinn Féin delegation made it clear at the meeting that its purpose in the dialogue with the British government is "to secure equality of treatment for our electorate and the nationalist community and to work out the logistics of all-party talks".

Afterwards McGuinness pointed out that the logic of the British government decision to talk to Sinn Féin is that there should now be no obstacles to talks between Sinn Féin and the British "on all levels and on all issues, including the most essential issue of creating a lasting peace in Ireland".

In this context, the Sinn Féin delegation requested a meeting between Patrick Mayhew, the senior British minister in the north, and the Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams, as



Martin McGuinness speaks to reporters after his meeting British minister Ancram

part of Mayhew's proposed series of meetings with the main political parties. "Democratic principles demand that Sinn Féin have the same access to political discussions and negotiations as the other main parties," McGuinness said.

Sinn Féin wants inclusive

negotiations with all parties to begin as soon as possible. McGuinness said:

"It is now more than eight months since the IRA announced a cessation of its military operations. It is clearly time to move the peace process on into inclusive and comprehensive peace talks."

GROWING INTERNATIONAL CONCERN OVER PRISONERS

Recent months have seen mounting international concern at the British government's lack of movement on the issue of republican prisoners, with protests in towns and cities in Ireland and the USA.

And a leading US judge, who last month spent two days visiting republican prisoners in two English jails, said he was "shocked" at the conditions in which they are being held. The prisoners are locked up in their cells for 23 hours a day and are denied access to the exercise yard for fresh air. Judge Andrew Somers urged the British government "as a gesture of good faith" to transfer republican prisoners in English jails to jails in Ireland.

BRITAIN REMAINS INTRANSIGENT

In the nine months since the IRA's historic cessation of military operations, almost all the political parties in Ireland, with the exception of the unionist parties, have agreed that the issue of political prisoners is vital to the progress and consolidation of the peace process. Sinn Féin, for its part, has argued that Irish political prisoners in Britain should be transferred home immediately, and that all political prisoners, that is, all those jailed as a result of the political conflict in Ireland, must be released as part of the process of demilitarisation.

Since the IRA cease-fire was announced on 31 August 1994, the Irish government has released a substantial proportion of the republicans held in jails in the south of Ireland.

Britain, by contrast, has been intransigent and inflexible. British ministers have repeatedly insisted that there are no political prisoners in the north of Ireland - a claim that cannot be defended intellectually in view of the martial law-style judicial system that operates in the north (no-jury courts, special rules of law, etc). In the nine months since 31 August 1994, no prisoner releases have been announced by the British. If anything, Britain's attitude to the issue has hardened: fewer of the 516 republican prisoners held in the north (101 of them life-sentence prisoners) were released on seasonal parole last Christmas than in previous years.

Of the 34 republicans held in English jails, 12 are serving life sentences. Ten are now in their 20th year of imprisonment, and thus have endured detentions comparable in length to those inflicted by the South African apartheid regime on



Saoirse campaigners in a peaceful sit-down protest in Castlederg, West Tyrone

political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela. Of the 12 prisoners who have applied for transfer to the north of Ireland, only one has been given a permanent transfer since the IRA cessation — despite European Union policy in favour of repatriation and despite too the findings of the British government's own Ferrars Report, which in November 1993 recommended that prisoners should be transferred to jails as close as possible to their families.

Belfast man Paul Norney is now entering his 21st year of imprisonment in an English prison. His many requests for a transfer have all been rejected.

By contrast, those British soldiers imprisoned for serious offences committed in the north of Ireland are invariably transferred to jails in Britain within a few months (and then quickly released).

CAMPAIGN GROWS

Precedents in Irish history for the release of republican prisoners, and a widespread recognition in Ireland that the republican prisoners currently held in British jails would not be there at all if it was not for the British occupation of a part of Ireland, are among the factors responsible for the growing campaign in support of the political prisoners.

The Saoirse ("freedom") campaign has mounted protests in towns and cities in all parts of Ireland. A number of district and county councils have passed motions calling on the British government to start the release of all political prisoners.

MOTION FOR EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

And early this month County Clare MEP (Member of the European Parliament) Brian Crowley promised to raise a motion on the prisoners in the European Parliament on 12 June.

Meanwhile, Saoirse's campaign urging people to wear a green ribbon in support of the prisoners, which was planned as a one-month initiative, proved such a runaway success, spreading throughout Ireland and beyond, that it has been extended indefinitely.

In the USA, activities in support of the prisoners have included rallies, vigils and car cavalcades. In recent weeks, protests have taken place in San Francisco, St Louis, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and outside the British embassy in New York. Green ribbon campaigns have been launched in recent weeks in Omaha, Nebraska, Cincinnati, Ohio and Arizona.

Events show British time-wasting

1993

25 September: Following several months of talks, Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams and the SDLP leader, John Hume, report considerable progress on the creation of a peace process and suspend their talks to allow wider consideration by the Dublin and London governments.

29 November: Following unionist leaks, the British government admits that it has been having secret talks with Sinn Féin. It is later revealed that talks and exchanges of documents took place over a 3-year period, against a background of intense military activity.

15 December: Britain promises, in the Downing Street Declaration signed by the London and Dublin prime ministers, that it will "encourage, facilitate and enable" agreement among the Irish people.

1994

31 August: The IRA announces a "complete cessation of military operations".

The British prime minister John Major immediately insists that he will not begin talks with Sinn Féin unless he receives an assurance that the IRA cessation of operations is "permanent", a stance immediately criticised by SDLP leader John Hume as "nit-picking".

8 September: Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) Albert Reynolds meets Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams and John Hume at Government Buildings in Dublin.

24 September: Adams arrives in the USA, having been granted a further visa by the US authorities, despite pressure from Britain.

3 October: The US administration lifts its long-standing ban on official contacts with Sinn Féin and invites Adams to Washington to meet officials.

13 October: Loyalists announce a "conditional" cease-fire.

21 October: After insisting for nearly 2 months that it could not meet Sinn Féin unless the IRA declared its cease-fire "permanent", Major says he will now make the "working assumption" that the IRA cease-fire is permanent — but still fails to set a date for talks.

9 December: More than 3 months after the IRA ceased military operations, a Sinn Féin delegation enters talks with British officials. But members of the government still refuse to talk with the party.

A few days later, the fringe loyalist parties, with only a minuscule electoral mandate, are invited to similar talks with British officials.

1995

16 March: US President Bill Clinton meets Gerry Adams at the White House.

22 March: The British government begins talks with the fringe loyalist parties at ministerial level.

7 April: Armed and masked UVF men publicly boast that their weaponry is now "more up to date" and that they have "infiltrated" several nationalist areas.

11 April: Britain announces that it will begin bilateral talks on the political future of the north of Ireland with most of the local political parties, and engage in "exploratory" talks with Sinn Féin on what it terms the "decommissioning" of weapons. The next day, following a meeting with the new taoiseach John Bruton, the senior British minister in the north of Ireland, Patrick Mayhew, appears to backtrack. Subsequently, he denies accusations that Britain is seeking to put into place a dual-track peace process — but he still fails to include Sinn Féin in the planned bilateral talks.

12 April: An RUC unit in a residential area of Derry fires 3 shots at an unarmed motorist involved in a driving offence.

13 April: Further releases bring the number of republican prisoners granted early release by the Dublin government since the IRA cease-fire to 21 — more than one-third of the total held on 31 August 1994.

13 April: Huge caches of loyalist arms including submachine guns and assault rifles are found at the homes of a British Ministry of Defence official in England and his brother in the north of Ireland.

18 April: Sinn Féin reaffirms that it is willing to discuss all issues in talks with Britain, including arms.

23 April: Former Irish prime minister Albert Reynolds reveals that a section of the December 1993 Downing Street Declaration was written "word for word" by loyalist paramilitaries.

24 April: It is at last announced that a member of the British government will enter "exploratory dialogue" with Sinn Féin.

27 April: Mayhew tells the British parliament: "There are no political prisoners in Northern Ireland", and once again rules out the early release of republican prisoners.

3 May: Major suggests that following skirmishes between the RUC and nationalist protesters in Derry, the "exploratory" talks with Sinn Féin may not take place.

4 May: More than 200 rioting loyalists throw petrol bombs, bricks and bottles at the RUC in Belfast, in one of 3 sectarian disturbances involving loyalists over the weekend. At no time subsequently do the British suggest that these pose any threat to the peace process.

9 May: Ulster Unionist Party councillor Chris McGimpsey becomes the second unionist to debate face to face with Sinn Féin on US TV — while the unionists continue to refuse to sit round the table and talk with Sinn Féin back home.

10 May: A British government minister at last enters talks with representatives of Sinn Féin. It is the first open meeting between the party and the British government since the 1920s.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE MUST BE PRIORITY FOR WASHINGTON CONFERENCE

Up to 1,000 delegates, including Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams, are expected to be in Washington on 24 May for the US economic conference, examining ways for American business to assist economic regeneration in the north of Ireland and in the adjoining border counties of the south.

This conference, welcomed by Sinn Féin as demonstrating the positive encouragement by President Bill Clinton and the US administration of the peace process, has not fallen prey to the political vetting exercised by the earlier British government economic conference last November, which excluded Sinn Féin from the key conference sessions. Nonetheless there are concerns that British unwillingness to allow major nationalist economic concerns to be raised at this influential forum has had some influence on the conference agenda.

These concerns include political vetting (a process whereby the British government has blocked European, international and of course British funding from community-led regeneration projects in nationalist areas), and discrimination by bodies such as the British government's Industrial Development Board (IDB) in failing to encourage inward economic investment to locate businesses in the areas of greatest social and economic deprivation. These include West Belfast, which has borne the brunt of much of the political conflict over the past 25 years, and for which there is no visible official strategy for economic development.

Sinn Féin will be supporting at the conference the submissions by Fr Des Wilson of the Conway Enterprise Centre and by the Clár Nua (New Agenda) community development group, who will be attempting to raise these concerns. Conway Enterprise Centre is a particular example of how the British government has attempted to regulate or stifle community-led economic development in nationalist areas. Launched in the early 1980s in a disused linen mill complex, the initiative promised to create 250 jobs for local people within a few years. The British government refused funding to it, prevented it from getting European or International Fund for Ireland monies, and told other emerging local businesses that they would receive funding only if they did not locate in the Centre's extensive premises. The extent of community support in West Belfast for the Conway enterprise can be gauged by the fact that local community projects have funded Fr Des Wilson's attendance at the Washington conference.

Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams arrived in Boston on Monday, 8 May at the start of a hectic three-week coast-to-coast speaking tour of the USA, aimed at raising funds for Sinn Féin and at putting Sinn Féin's views to President Clinton's conference on International Investment in Ireland.

Sinn Féin badly needs funds because in recent years every one of its offices in Belfast have been bombed, shot at or rocketed, several more than once. Offices in Derry, Coalisland and elsewhere have also been damaged in raids by the RUC and loyalist attacks. No other political

Adams tours USA again

party in Ireland has suffered similar conditions, yet they have always had the right to raise essential funds in the USA.

In the opening days of his tour, Adams attended a reception in Boston hosted by Senate President William M Bulgar, spoke to the UN Correspondents Association at

the UN Plaza in New York, and fulfilled other speaking engagements in New York and Portland, Maine.

Adams will also explain Sinn Féin's assessment of the best way forward for the peace process to audiences in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Florida.

He will conclude his trip by representing Sinn Féin at the Washington investment conference on Ireland on 24-26 May, accompanied by party chair Mitchel McLaughlin and Monaghan Councillor Caoimhghn O Caoláin.

Peace award for Adams

Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams has been awarded the 1995 Thorr Peace Award.

The award, which was presented to Adams in Basel, Switzerland, on 30 April by the Geneva-based watchmaking company MDM, is dedicated annually to "one who has worked towards promoting world peace, human rights and the principles of freedom and democracy".

Adams was chosen for the award by a judging panel that included an ex-president of Switzerland and former Thorr Peace Award winners Mikhail Gorbachev and Italian judge Antonio di Pietro, celebrated for his work in combating the Mafia.

Sinn Féin rep in Brussels

Sinn Féin's new representative in Brussels is national executive member Tony Catney.

Catney's priority will be to lobby in the European Parliament and European Union, in order to increase understanding of, and support for, Sinn Féin's work to achieve a just and peaceful Ireland.

Sinn Féin can be contacted by post in Brussels at Nervierslaan 51, B-1040 Brussels. Or telephone/fax: 32-2 7359822.

WHAT THEY SAID...

"It must be perfectly obvious to anybody familiar with Northern Ireland and its problems that the issue of arms is one that will be addressed towards the end of a settlement process rather than at its outset. Anything else is simply a case of putting the cart before the horse. More dangerously, a misguided insistence on addressing the weapons issue now threatens to stifle the peace process at birth." — **Bill McCabe, chairperson of the CBT business group in *Business and Finance* magazine, 20 April.**

"There should be no plaudits for the British government over the fact that it has finally agreed to ministerial talks with Sinn Féin. This is no imaginative leap forward by an administration eager to maintain the momentum of the peace process and to build on the historic opportunity presented by the IRA and loyalist cease-fires. Instead, it is a stupid and stubborn government being rescued, as a result of pressure from Dublin, Washington and elsewhere, from its own inexplicable intransigence, which had brought the peace process to the point of collapse. Eight months have been wasted in public and private debate that had more to do with semantics than with reality." — **leader in the Dublin-based *Irish Press*, 25 April.**

"... there is an element in the British establishment that wants to defeat the leadership of the IRA." — **former Irish**

taoiseach (prime minister) Albert Reynolds, 23 April.

"If the British persist in pursuing the dream of military victory instead of addressing the injustices that led to the problem, then what guarantee is there that peace will continue?" — **leader in the Dublin-based *Sunday Business Post*, 23 April.**

"Virtually every political party in Ireland, bar the UUP and DUP, had over the past few weeks called on the British government to open talks with Sinn Féin or face a breakdown of the peace process." — **An *Phoblacht/Republican News*, 27 April, commenting on the announcement that British ministers would at last talk with Sinn Féin.**

"Today sees the falling of yet another obstacle to peace, and I fervently hope it will be the last." — **Sinn Féin national executive member Martin McGuinness, speaking to the press minutes before beginning talks with British minister Michael Ancram in Belfast.**

"It would be ludicrous if Mr Adams could be received by Bill Clinton in Washington and John Bruton in Dublin, but still face closed doors at the highest political levels in his home city of Belfast." — **the Belfast-based *Irish News*, 11 May, on the prospect of a meeting between Adams and British minister Patrick Mayhew.**

GLOSSARY

EU — European Union
RUC — Royal Ulster Constabulary, a 93

per cent Protestant, 100 per cent unionist, paramilitary force
SDLP — Social Democratic and Labour Party, led by John Hume MEP

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