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From: J A Dew
British Embassy, Dublin
Date: 11 January 1995

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Mr Stephens - B

cc: PS/Secretary of State - B	PS/Michael Ancram - B 13.1
PS/PUS - B	PS/Mr Fe
Mr Thomas - R	Mr Reil
Mr Williams - B	Mr Leach - -
Mr Watkins - B	Mr Wood - B
Mr Maccabe - B	Mr Brooker - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B	Mr Currie - B
Mr Hallett - B (Via SIL)	

355/1
Mrs Kenny
Mrs Doherty
LD16/1

TAKING REPUBLICANS SERIOUSLY? MEDIA HANDLING

1. I had a lengthy conversation yesterday with Fionnula O'Connor, NI correspondent of the Economist. [redacted], she has in the past articulated Nationalist views with clarity and (some) detachment.
2. She had picked up strong but conflicting vibes from Northern Republicans about Sir P Mayhew's off the record remarks last weekend about the need to be helpful to Gerry Adams. Some thought this showed that the Brits did, after all, to some extent, "understand" and were just being slow to keep Unionists on board. Others thought it no more than a ploy to divide the movement, and that some ostentatiously pro-Unionist pronouncement to head off protests would soon follow.
3. The signals HMG were sending out were being read as negative. At first (ie before Christmas) our line on arms had appeared (more or less) nuanced and sensitive - but Ministers had appeared (no evidence quoted) to toughen it significantly in a series of public statements. This had, for Republicans, inevitably become linked to the question of prisoners and Christmas releases - on which again Ministers had appeared (rightly or wrongly) to have chosen to make uncompromising noises and to have passed up an obvious chance to make a conciliatory gesture eg extending criteria for seasonal release to increase numbers.
4. The Provisionals were arguing that HMG were setting an absolute precondition over arms, which amounted to a demand for surrender without any quid pro quo. The Sinn Fein leadership could not sell that to the significant portion of the movement who had always been sceptical of the 'peace process', and who had been brought on board by expectations that there would be early "results" after a ceasefire. These people had never thought that they would have to produce arms up front before any political progress could even be contemplated. But this was what HMG now appeared to be saying. The more we said it, the more difficult we made it - and it was already difficult enough.

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5. I said that none of that gave any credibility to recent Sinn Fein statements/speeches conveying their pretence that they had no connection with the IRA, refusal even to discuss the issue and refusal to acknowledge that they had a problem entering "normal" politics as long as they insisted on making it obvious that return to violence if they did not get satisfaction at the talks table remained an option. We were not demanding 100% unilateral disarmament before anything else could happen, but insisting (reasonably) on a credible process being set in train for both sets of para-militaries. If it were, then further reductions in security measures reflecting an obvious reduction in the threat were bound to follow. She and other journalists should ask who was really holding things up.

6. She (more or less) acknowledged all this, for herself, but came back to Provo perceptions and the signals Ministers were giving. She admitted that HMG had indeed moved on a number of fronts, but said we had presented it too negatively to make any impact. We made life impossible for the Sinn Fein leadership by rubbing in, each time they went to Stormont, that they were not being given substantive political discussion. Their ability to show their supporters that they were being taken seriously and were getting anywhere as a result of the ceasefire was thus near-zero.

7. I expect you and others hear this sort of thing every day. But I record it because it summarises themes that are finding an echo among journalists here, and may surface in the Dublin weekend press. I propose to do what I can to counter this, drawing on the sort of points set out in para 5 above. We would not at present appear well placed to emerge on top in Dublin media terms should eg the next XD meeting end in a Sinn Fein walk out. It would be helpful if we could:

- be significantly more explicit about the reductions in army activity that have taken place;
- make more of political moves we have made eg acknowledge that we have relaxed the ban on Ministerial meetings with Sinn Fein Councillors;
- be able to put stress on exactly what else is being discussed in XD apart from arms.
- wrong foot Sinn Fein over rejection of our discussion paper.

(Signed)

J A Dew