

From backdoors and back lanes to backchannels: Reappraising British talks with the Provisional IRA, 1970-1974.

Abstract

Following the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the British Government established an office dedicated to gathering the views of political groups there, below the level of the state. By the end of 1971, the Office of the UK Representative (UKREP) was actively seeking contacts that would allow them to communicate with the Provisional IRA. By looking at the numerous other contacts, conduits and intermediaries that existed (however temporarily) before the 1975 ceasefire, this article illustrates an almost continuous conversation between the Office of the UK Representative (UKREP) and the IRA. It also demonstrates that these contacts were centred around Dáithí Ó Conaill (then Sinn Féin Vice President), and that these contacts, when taken as a whole, can better explain the events which culminated in the 1975 ceasefire.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Peace talks, Intelligence, Negotiation, Terrorism, Diplomacy

Introduction

'The Talks at Feakle came out of the blue for us in the British government. Ever since 1969 when the army took over security in Northern Ireland, there had been *ad hoc* street contacts between the army and paramilitaries on both sides of the divide, and from the time I had taken office in March 1974 I was being advised that, according to community workers, businessmen and journalists, the Provisional IRA were in a mood to move from violence. Nevertheless, I was always sceptical and remained so when in November I was told of some sort of approach being made by the Provisional IRA.'¹

The above extract from Secretary of State Merlyn Rees's memoir of his time in Northern Ireland is both strangely evasive and contradictory. Rees does not explain how, if he knew that 'community workers, businessmen and journalists' spoke to the IRA, why a group of protestant clergymen doing apparently the same thing should be so surprising. And while his 1985 book was not consciously misleading, his interpretation of events was very different from the views he noted at the time both in his tape-recorded diary², as well as in sensitive passages held back from publication from this same memoir.³ Talks with paramilitaries (in particular the Provisional IRA) were in fact rarely as *ad hoc* as Rees suggested and had been taking place on an increasingly regular basis since July 1974. Such talks, it will be demonstrated, existed in their own context by the end of 1974 and sources clearly demonstrate that these contacts, in fact, were well into their third wave since the beginning of 1972.

Far from 'out of the blue' therefore, talks with the Provisional IRA were a fact of political life for some British officials in Northern Ireland whether or not they succeeded in bringing about a ceasefire (which they did in 1972 and in 1975).

The context for this lies in the origins of Britain's response to the Northern Ireland's civil rights crisis, specifically in that part of Britain's response that sought to take account of Nationalist views and transmit them without Unionist interference directly to the British government. The emergence of the Provisional IRA, and its determination to fight a war against the British Army in the summer of 1970 created new pressures on Britain's response. It politicised the British military presence to a far greater degree than was intended by the introduction of the troops in August 1969 and, with the deaths of the first British soldiers in 1971, policy moved from operations designed to give 'aid to the civil

power' to the form of imperial counter insurgency the British Army had been fighting previously in Aden, Kenya and Malaya. Still, there remained a key cohort surrounding the UK Representative and later the Secretary of State who were dedicated to identifying and resolving the political grievances at the heart of the crisis that became the Northern Ireland Troubles.

For the IRA too there was pressure. The Catholic community it claimed to represent were not supportive of an unlimited guerrilla campaign and there was almost immediate disenchantment when either the Official or Provisional IRA overstepped the mark. While PIRA Chief of Staff Sean MacStíofáin may have emphasised the need to 'escalate, escalate, escalate'⁴, the wider 'Republican Movement' always maintained a political strategy however underdeveloped it might have been..

The political side of the Provisionals' early strategy was contained in *Éire Nua*, Sinn Féin's manifesto written by Dáithí Ó Conaill⁵ and Ruairí Ó Brádaigh⁶ in January 1971. *Éire Nua* demonstrated a side to the Provisionals that was not apparent in the headlines produced by the group's violence. The Ireland it foresaw was socialist, autarkic and decentralised where Provincial parliaments would ensure the rights of minorities, and thus the protection of the Protestant population of Northern Ireland.⁷

While *Éire Nua* gave no concession to the right of unionists to opt out of a united Ireland – despite their status as a majority within the proposed Ulster parliament (*Dáil Uladh*), the essence of *Éire Nua* was still practical and political. It did not, for instance, envisage the need for nihilistic aggression or civil war between 'Orange and Green' in order to establish Irish unity, in this the Provisional IRA always saw their battle – however naïvely – as being with British forces in Ireland alone.

Squaring the Provisionals' political aims, with its violent (and often sectarian) actions in the early 1970s is not simple. *Éire Nua* was not just a propaganda device designed to allay the moral consciences of Irish republicans in the 1970s, nor was it simply a sop designed to garner support from Irish America. *Éire Nua* – when taken seriously – also represents the genuine early political aspirations of Provisional Sinn Fein, aspirations that remained separate from the practicalities of the armed campaign. By publishing such a document, the Provisionals were demonstrating that they remained an organisation that would continue to maintain the means through which their goals could be negotiated.

The new Standard Narrative

Whilst it can be readily demonstrated that, even at the height of the violence, both the IRA and the British government contained elements that were willing to talk, a new standard narrative of the peace process has recently emerged that centres on the use of just one key intermediary – the Derry businessman Brendan Duddy. An example of this recent historiographical change lies in accounts of the origins of the 1974/75 ceasefire. Whereas previous accounts tended to revolve around the role of the Protestant clergymen led by Rev. Arlow and their meetings with the IRA's leadership in December 1974 and early January 1975,⁸ we now know that Duddy ('The Derry Link') delivered a key message from the British to Sinn Fein President Ruairí Ó Brádaigh that Christmas morning and that Duddy was then brought to speak at a PIRA Army Council meeting on New Year's Eve.⁹ This new and compelling evidence of Duddy's role in 1974/5, in 1980/1 and from 1990 to 1993 is in the process of being released¹⁰ and certainly confirms Peter Taylor's research which first uncovered the then anonymous 'Derry Link' in 1998.¹¹ However, while illuminating, precious little archive evidence exists to add substance to this argument and over-reliance on the

Duddy narrative itself is not without methodological risk. Jonathan Powell's memoir for example has now even suggested that the Feakle talks were a 'cover story'¹² and Richard English's newest work has abandoned an account of Feakle and also uses Powell's singular 'backchannel'¹³ thesis. This trend toward an account of the role of Brendan Duddy alone is reductionist, and replacing one narrative for another is not good enough without first examining fully material that *is* already available.

While less serious, there are also problems too with accounts that consider of the negotiations toward the 1974/5 ceasefire in chronological isolation. Ed Moloney's suggestion that the talk of a ceasefire began with the Feakle talks in December before continuing with Duddy in Derry in January¹⁴ is inaccurate. And while John Bew and Martyn Frampton give the best overall account yet available, their version favours a change in the fortunes of the Provisional IRA by the winter of 1974 for bringing them unwillingly to the negotiating table.¹⁵ Bew and Frampton, while they give ample consideration to the idea that it was virtually *always* in the IRA's interests to talk, they discount the continuity of the personal links forged in all the previous sets of talks that made for an almost continuous discourse between some British officials and a section of the PIRA over a three year period between January 1972 and December 1974. It should be remembered also that both Harold Wilson and Merlyn Rees had personally met many of the Provisional IRA's leadership and Rees – though his role as the later 'Derry Link' remained hidden from him – had even eaten lunch at Westminster with Brendan Duddy whilst opposition spokesman on Northern Ireland in 1972.¹⁶ Thus, in taking account only of Brendan Duddy and the Feakle talks, and reducing their analyses to the weeks surrounding the 1975 ceasefire alone, the current explanations require a broader view. This article offers a more rigorous analysis of the earliest secret talks and communications with the Provisional IRA in the years leading up to

the 1975 ceasefire. Its purpose is to demonstrate that while the available literature has rightly become enamoured with Brendan Duddy, his story remains an example of something much wider in scope and with broader implications for both the history of Britain's political connection with Northern Ireland as well as with the history of the Provisional IRA.

Talks and the Office of the UKREP

In August 1969, British officials were sent alongside troops to monitor the political situation in Northern Ireland. The Wilson government were deeply suspicious of the motives and future direction of James Chichester Clark's Stormont administration and thus established the Office of the UKREP to keep an eye on the political developments there and the progress of Stormont's reform programme. Led by three successive UKREPs before Direct Rule (Oliver Wright, Ronnie Burroughs and Howard Smith) the post was designed to be similar to that of an ambassador to Northern Ireland. Above and beyond the Northern Ireland Governor, the UKREP was both an active gatherer of information as well as a distributor of British government opinion. In this, the UKREP established offices far from Stormont at the Conway Hotel in south-west Belfast so that meetings could be held, visitors entertained, and opinions discreetly gathered.

The UKREP himself – a Foreign Office official usually of ambassadorial rank – was therefore assigned specifically for the purpose of political intelligence gathering and right off the mark began meeting and greeting the great and the good of Northern Ireland political life whether Unionist, Nationalist, Protestant or Catholic. Oliver Wright, the first UKREP (and previously a trusted aid of Harold Wilson's) also began the curious practice of writing a regular despatch to the Home Secretary on events in Northern Ireland, using the standard

Foreign Office formatting to report on a place that was ostensibly part of the United Kingdom.

Although Wright would later disregard his temporary role in Northern Ireland as unimportant, (he commented that, 'I did a bit of John the Baptist for Jim Callaghan'¹⁷) this was far from the case. By establishing a base so far from the seat of government; by engaging with all manner of local politician and community leader; and by sending those reports directly onto Whitehall's newly established 'Irish Net'¹⁸, Oliver Wright, created a 'backdoor' channel of information on Northern Ireland that was uniquely detached from sources supplied by or through the Northern Ireland government. The UKREP specifically chose the Conway Hotel in South West Belfast so that discreet talks could be held away from the gaze of the Northern Ireland government across the city at Stormont.

Of course, for the duration of this office's existence the presence of troops on Northern Ireland's streets was considered a temporary measure only. In this respect, so too was the office of the UKREP. Papers therefore from this, the predecessor to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), are rare and widely distributed in the archives with only four dedicated files in the National Archives to record the 22 months that the UKREP was based at the Conway hotel from August 1969 to July 1971, (indeed, they did not even order stationery, and improvised by borrowing Stormont Castle's or sometimes using the Hotel's own). Nevertheless, Wright's despatches exist in significant numbers elsewhere to demonstrate his and his successors' role as envoys on behalf of Harold Wilson and later Ted Heath.¹⁹

While the backdoor of the Conway Hotel was always open, the meetings held there, though private, were not of themselves particularly 'secret' events. Neither Oliver Wright nor Ronnie Burroughs went out of their way to gather the opinions of paramilitaries at this stage and with the increased violence that included the IRA's bombing of hotels and other

businesses, the office was moved to a more secure location, closer to Stormont, in the summer of 1971.

Burroughs chose a large house for his purposes on the shores of Belfast Lough. The house, known as Laneside, while now suspected of being the home of British Intelligence,²⁰ was to be the residence and offices of the expanding British political reporting service. Fortunately for historians – though perhaps ironically considering its reputation – far more archive material exists regarding the work of Laneside before and after Direct Rule, compared with that which avoided the shredder at the relatively insecure Conway Hotel. What is clear from this material is that Laneside was not a British intelligence station in any classic ‘cloak and dagger’ sense of the term. Nor was the UKREP there to plot the downfall of Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner.²¹ It was, primarily, a more professional base where people could meet and speak with British officials and from where professional staff could monitor the Northern Ireland political scene.

While talks continued at Laneside with various community representatives, the UKREP’s Deputy, Frank Steele, who arrived in October 1971, was given the shadier task of finally leaving the office and extending Laneside’s contacts deeper into Northern Ireland’s troubled communities. Steele, a career MI6 officer, expanded the links that had been made at the Conway Hotel by beginning communications with the lower ranks of clergy and politicians, rather than waiting for them to appear at the backdoor of the Conway Hotel, or on Laneside’s front porch. Steele was interested in speaking to local community leaders too, which, in the context of Northern Ireland in 1971, meant speaking for the first time to those much closer to the operational elements of say, the Official and Provisional IRAs.

Thus the first backchannel contacts occurred separately from the official UKREP and outside of Laneside itself. These were largely inadvertent, made in the course of any job like

Steele's that required the investigation of community tensions on the ground. Certainly, following the introduction of internment without trial in August 1971, the British were beginning to understand the problems they faced much better, but they were not proactively seeking contact with paramilitaries at that point. Still, political intelligence had been divided from operational, and the precedent had been set. Michael Smith has more recently described MI6's role in this kind of 'Parallel Diplomacy' and cites various examples of its use beyond Northern Ireland, (Mozambique, Angola, and Yugoslavia). Smith believes this aspect of MI6's work to be 'one of the least discussed uses of Intelligence Services' that is, '[the establishment] of channels of communication with the enemy that would be too dangerous, both physically and politically for ministers or ordinary civil servants to contemplate.'²² Frank Steele's job as the Deputy UKREP (as with the UKREP) was thus to disregard this physical and political risk in an attempt to understand the conflict better and to pass whatever insights he could make back to London.

Early Contacts: 1972

From British records it was the IRA who approached *them* to seek contact and negotiation although the tasking of people like Frank Steele suggests the British were already preparing for this prospect. The first documented instance of this came in January 1972 via Conservative MP Michael Heseltine and the Home Office.²³ Heseltine had been contacted by Dr John O'Connell, an Irish Labour Party TD and long-time acquaintance of Heseltine's. O'Connell had spoken in vague terms regarding a message he had for the Home Secretary and the message was duly passed on. The Home Office sought clarification through the Foreign Office but the Dublin Embassy could only reassure them of O'Connell's widely held reputation as a 'do-gooder'.²⁴ Despite the problems, O'Connell was eventually granted a

meeting in London and only then revealed his offer; direct talks between the British government and two senior members of the Provisional IRA. Though was quickly turned down²⁵ O'Connell persevered and the Home Office was forced to ignore his determined pleas for a further six weeks²⁶ as neither they nor the FCO would risk the political fall-out of such a meeting without an IRA ceasefire.

In the wake of Bloody Sunday, which was followed shortly by the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin, and a series of reprisal attacks by both the Official and Provisional IRA. Direct talks one might have thought were an impossibility. But O'Connell was far from the only channel the Provisionals were using in an attempt to talk to the British. MI5 and Military Intelligence came even closer to direct dialogue with the Provisional IRA leadership within just a week of O'Connell's initial efforts in Dublin. The meeting in this instance took place at Victoria RUC Barracks in Derry city on 9 February 1972. In attendance was Frank Morris – adjutant of the Provisionals in Counties Derry, Donegal and Tyrone.²⁷ There, Morris delivered a message from Sean MacStíofáin, then PIRA Chief of Staff, intended to begin discussions with the British. MacStíofáin's note, it was recorded, pursued the following logic;

'The British Army could not defeat the IRA, the IRA could not defeat the British Army. In the event of a Protestant Backlash the Roman Catholics could not defeat the UVF. Therefore [MacStíofáin] proposed a truce between the British Army and the IRA.'²⁸

Such bravado on behalf of the Provisional leadership was not without substance due to a surge in support in the weeks following Bloody Sunday. But to both the British army and the MI5 officer present such a judgement was misplaced. In fact, these groups had been telling each other for several months that, far from nearing victory, the IRA was worn-out by

Internment and crippled by their new intelligence networks.²⁹ British Intelligence in Northern Ireland however was still incorrectly identifying Dáithí Ó Conaill as PIRA Chief of Staff when in fact it had been the more elusive (and more militant) Sean MacStíofáin.³⁰ Frank Morris was dropped as a contact primarily because those he spoke to felt they had the Provisional IRA near collapse.³¹

John O'Connell re-entered the frame only a month later when he convinced Harold Wilson (with Edward Heath's knowledge³²) to travel to Dublin as leader of the opposition and meet with a senior IRA delegation that included Dáithí Ó Conaill (as well as leading Belfast Provisionals Joe Cahill and John Kelly). Wilson, who was accompanied by the future Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees, sounded out the Provisional IRA leaders regarding the counter-productive nature of their methods, and the potential for them to trust in Northern Ireland's existing nationalist politicians.³³ Wilson patronised the delegates when he asked them to identify politicians they could trust as surrogates for their message; the delegates of course considered themselves to be the political leaders Britain needed to engage with, and did not understand the need for political middlemen who might negotiate on their behalf. Although Wilson noted how impressed he had been by Dáithí Ó Conaill,³⁴ the seventy-two hour ceasefire ended within an hour of his departure.³⁵

These three initiatives took place in the first months of 1972, the bloodiest year of the Northern Ireland Troubles, two in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday when hope for peace might have seemed at its lowest ebb. 1972 saw a total of 479 deaths, including 126 British troops and UDR killed by the IRA.³⁶ Arguably all efforts at building even secret bridges could not be rushed at this stage as the violence could not simply be ignored. But still, the IRA having declared 1972 as their 'year of victory' had a relatively short-term view for their

military campaign and had at least seemed willing to talk. Indeed, by mid-summer, preparations were being made for the Provisionals' first publicly declared ceasefire.

Frank Steele, while he continued his work in Derry and elsewhere, was first introduced to Brendan Duddy at some point between Wilson's meeting with O Conaill in Dublin and the cessation of June 1972. Duddy however played little part in the discussions that led up to this ceasefire, where Northern Ireland's first Secretary of State William Whitelaw used John Hume as his preferred backchannel.³⁷ Steele was chosen (accompanied by the NIO's Deputy Secretary Philip Woodfield) to meet with an IRA delegation Hume had arranged, and they were given a personal letter of introduction from Whitelaw. The IRA delegation included Dáithí Ó Conaill and Gerry Adams. The Irish government had been informed of the talks and had agreed to Hume's request that Ó Conaill be granted free passage to attend. Adams, also, had been specially released from internment by the Secretary of State so he could attend the meeting.³⁸

The meeting between Steele and the IRA leadership went remarkably well, it avoided recriminations and was relatively friendly.³⁹ Steele and Woodfield's remarkable achievement lay in not judging, berating or second guessing the initiative. This paid dividends with Ó Conaill using his influence to gain an IRA ceasefire on 26 June in exchange for a meeting in London on 7 July. This meeting with Whitelaw however, at Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, was a disaster. Ó Conaill presented a copy of *Éire Nua* to the Secretary of State⁴⁰ before the rest of the IRA team gave the British little more than an eighteen month quit notice; something the British were not at all prepared for, or likely to succumb to.⁴¹

Despite the acrimonious meeting and lack of negotiating skill by the IRA delegation, Steele continued his conversations with the men on the flight back to Northern Ireland.⁴² Steele it seemed, had developed a functioning relationship with a senior member of the

delegation and, although the ceasefire was now rapidly crumbling, in the days after Cheyne Walk, the MI6 officer continued to receive telephone messages from Dáithí Ó Conaill (under the alias of Sebastian Coffey) on the hotline he had established at Laneside.⁴³

Steele did not step in to resolve the crisis that eventually broke the 1972 ceasefire – the Lenadoon affair – nor could he have stopped the shooting of a further five Catholic civilians (including a 13 year old girl and a priest) by British soldiers a few miles away in Ballymurphy.⁴⁴ The hotline between negotiators was ill-equipped to deal with the minutiae of contentious incidents on the ground when the same channels were being used to discuss the broader political problem itself. If the Lenadoon affair was avoidable, and the Ballymurphy shootings criminal; future ceasefires would need a systematic incident reporting and aversion system. The way in which the 1972 ceasefire had broken down thus led directly to establishment of incident centres, staffed by local civil servants stationed in Social Services offices throughout the 1975 cessation and demonstrates a key continuity between the ceasefires of 1972 and 1975.

Beyond events in Cheyne Walk, Lenadoon and Ballymurphy, the IRA chose to investigate two other perceived backchannels to the British in the summer of 1972. Joe Cahill had met the acquaintance of Dame Ruth Railton (founder of the National Youth Orchestra and wife of newspaper magnate Cecil King). Railton (considered something of a condescending socialite on dining terms with Ted Heath) met and entertained Cahill and Ó Conaill at her Donnybrook home in Dublin on several occasions that summer.⁴⁵ There, she advertised (falsely) her influence over the British Prime Minister, and later boasted to other friends that ‘she had spent two whole nights with the IRA – “My Provisionals” – drawing up a plan to solve the whole mess.’⁴⁶

After the ceasefire broke down, the IRA met again with Harold Wilson in a meeting to which Whitelaw was made aware of and had 'demurred'.⁴⁷ This time the meeting was in England, at Great Missenden, Bucks where Wilson kept a house close to Chequers. The IRA delegation led by Joe Cahill was flown by private plane from Dublin on 18 July,⁴⁸ but again, this meeting came to no agreement.⁴⁹ Merlyn Rees noted later that the Provisionals 'basically repeated the demands already made to Whitelaw. Harold emphasised that a leader of the opposition could give no commitment, and he castigated them for putting the Secretary of State in an impossible position by having revealed their talks with him.'⁵⁰ Although otherwise a complete failure, this second meeting with Wilson marks the only occasion in which Dáithí Ó Conaill was not personally involved at the highest level. In fact, Ó Conaill may have been specifically excluded from attending this meeting by the IRA Army Council.⁵¹ The surprising exception here proves the point that *he* had become the essential evangeliser of *Éire Nua* and the Provisionals' political strategy.

Less than a fortnight later, in response to Bloody Friday's car bomb attacks throughout central Belfast, and incensed by the IRA's return to violence, the British launched a new strategy aimed at forcing the IRA out of its urban enclaves and away from its supporters.⁵² This was defined by Operation Motorman on the morning of 31 July 1972 when the British Army saturated the 'No Go' areas of Belfast and Derry, so ending their existence as IRA safe havens. Frank Steele, had allowed the IRA to be forewarned of the operation so minimising the risk to life and property such an operation would incur if opposed,⁵³ but also removing barricades in a way that would grant him greater liberty to meet his contacts in these crucial Catholic areas.

Contacts after the 1972 ceasefire

While Steele and later Michael Oatley (soon to be his successor in the most secret aspects of his work) were most interested in contacts that could put them in touch with the upper echelons of the IRA, there were numerous other groups that volunteered their services as intermediaries, especially in 1973 in the context of the inter-party talks that were leading up to the Sunningdale agreement. One such group, Conciliation Ireland⁵⁴ approached Laneside after having spoken to both the Irish government and the Catholic Church. Conciliation Ireland espoused the view that, following Sean MacStíofáin's arrest and imprisonment in the Republic in December 1972, '[The IRA] clearly wanted a ceasefire' but would not commit to one unless they had a guarantee regarding their safety from arrest.⁵⁵ Steele's reaction was well considered, partly because he did not trust the IRA and partly because it was now plainly stated government policy not to talk to the IRA. He told the group that there could be no deal without a ceasefire first, but then added that the British would 'lower the level of our activity' if the ceasefire were permanent – i.e. more than a fortnight in duration – and that until that point 'the IRA must remain in hiding as otherwise they would be liable to be lifted by us.'⁵⁶ In other words, if the IRA were to declare a ceasefire and remain in hiding, they would be allowed to re-emerge in a relatively short space of time without fear of arrest. Steele was *de facto* communicating with the IRA via Conciliation Ireland, making them aware that their concession would be granted *without* explicitly communicating with them.

Again in May 1973 two Northern Ireland Labour Party politicians⁵⁷ gave the Secretary of State a direct account of their meeting with senior Provisional IRA members. Once more Dáithí Ó Conaill emerged from the discussions as the most conciliatory and

offered a structured and monitored truce in exchange for talks that would lead to a timetabled British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.⁵⁸

Yet another source emerged briefly in September 1973 in the unusual form of retired Vice Chief of the General Staff, General Sir John Hackett. Hackett had kept a holiday home in West Donegal and there, on the streets of the village of Killybegs, he had met none other than Dáithí Ó Conaill. Ó Conaill again confirmed to Hackett that he was interested in discussions with the British and, over a number of telephone calls, he explained to Hackett that he was serious about dialogue. Hackett's exchange culminated in a request to the Secretary of State not to arrest Ó Conaill as 'his removal would open opportunities for less respectable elements [of the Provisional IRA]'⁵⁹ before handing over 'a rather thick wad' of documents relating to Ó Conaill's political ideas.⁶⁰

While Hackett was correct to be concerned about Ó Conaill (he had now become the Republic's most-wanted man)⁶¹ Whitelaw refused to entertain the potentially embarrassing contact with Ó Conaill via the General, as he was already in very sensitive discussions with the main political parties in the run-up to the Sunningdale Agreement. Thus Whitelaw wrote a robust response to his officials:

'These documents are damaging in the extreme to John Hackett and dangerous. O'Connell will probably let him down as he did me [the previous summer]. If any of this became public Hackett would be hounded as almost a traitor, certainly as helping the Queen's enemies! ! Not a good position for a General!'⁶²

Whitelaw demanded Hackett receive a strongly worded rebuff to warn the General off contacts like this for the sake of his future reputation but Whitelaw's officials went

beyond the whole truth however when they told Hackett that ‘there is no question of using you, or for that matter anybody else, as an intermediary.’⁶³ In fact, whether it was through Conciliation Ireland, the NILP or even John Hume, the Secretary of State had at this point at least three other channels through which communication *could* occur.

While good political intelligence regarding the Provisional IRA’s thinking was coming to the NIO from these numerous intermediaries, archive evidence suggests that between the 1972 ceasefire and the summer of 1974, William Whitelaw was mostly unwilling to open two-way communications with the IRA. This was mostly because Whitelaw felt personally betrayed by the publicity the IRA gave to their supposedly secret Cheyne Walk talks and was particularly angered by the sudden return to violence and Bloody Friday’s car bomb attacks on Belfast. But the above contacts also suggest that Dáithí Ó Conaill remained firmly in control of a large and powerful wing of the Provisionals that continued to seek a negotiated way out of the conflict.

Back lanes: The use of Laneside for talks with paramilitaries.

With a change of government and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974, attitudes toward talks with paramilitaries changed again. The change in government however did not initially lead to a change in the day to day work of the NIO’s Laneside office. James Allan and Michael Oatley (respectively secondments from the FCO and MI6)⁶⁴ continued their low-level discussions but talks were in fact undertaken with loyalist groups rather than republicans when Labour returned to office and held under very different auspices than those with the IRA prior to the 1972 ceasefire.

In these meetings Allan and Oatley went to great lengths in their attempts to conciliate with groups of loyalist paramilitaries linked with the Ulster Workers Council. This included senior members of both the UDA and the UVF and took place both before and after the UWC Strike and the atrocities of the bombs in Dublin and Monaghan. They offered advice to the loyalist delegates who opened up to them about their concerns relating to prisoners and community politics in a series of meetings between May and September 1974.⁶⁵

From the NIO's perspective, the channelling off of loyalist paramilitaries from the rest of the UWC was partly designed as an attempt to bring these groups into the mainstream of Northern Ireland politics. James Allan recalls being told to 'have a chat up the chimney, so to speak' and that the talks were unstructured 'in many ways the agenda didn't come from [the Northern Ireland Office]. It came from those who were pressing to be seen at Stormont or at Laneside... as far as trying to recall it, we weren't working to a particular agenda, it was much more easy going, we were massaging' Dean Pruitt, has more recently suggested that, in order to end their paramilitary campaigns, terrorists need to be made to believe that; 'they can achieve power by coming in from the cold, that they will be more effective through participation in legitimate politics than by fighting the authorities.'⁶⁶ Thus, Laneside provided a location where they could express their identities and aspirations freely and where misunderstandings in the communities might be resolved with a phone call. For the officials at Laneside this was easy to do and added to the guests' sense of responsibility. However, mainstreaming ran an obvious risk of splitting groups into different factions, suspicious of what was being said behind closed doors and the disastrous performance of Gibson's newly formed 'Volunteer Political Party' in that Autumn's election (a development Laneside had encouraged) demonstrated the lack of support for a political programme from

both inside the UVF as well as inside the communities they claimed to be defending. By the autumn of 1974 it was clear that unless the IRA also went on ceasefire, any democratic spin-off from either the UVF or the UDA would not carry the critical mass of internal support required to isolate those that continued to use violence.

The archival record, although far from complete, shows that talks with the IRA began again with a 9 July meeting with the Provisionals' Seamus Loughran⁶⁷ at Laneside whilst these loyalists talks were ongoing. At this meeting Loughran admitted this was the first direct contact between the NIO and the Provisionals since the Lenadoon Affair that had ended the 1972 ceasefire. Meeting James Allan was a pleasant experience for Loughran, who had previously dealt with the NIO's Dennis Trevelyan and Neil Cairncross (both of Home Office extraction) in 1972. Arguably, the diplomatic niceties of MI6 and the FCO meant that Allan and Oatley were better suited than the senior Home Office officials that populated the rest of the NIO. Loughran said that these men had 'looked down on me as if I was something that had crawled out of a bog.' Instead, Loughran was given a drink and sat down with James Allan to watch the Six O'clock news.⁶⁸

The meeting with Loughran was organised through the mediation of Joe Camplisson, a community worker, and Dr John Burton, an Australian international conflict specialist then at the University of London who wrote about mediation and Northern Ireland in his previous works.⁶⁹ These men were also privately arranging meetings between the UVF and the NIO and later the UDA and the IRA.⁷⁰ While the meeting with Seamus Loughran ran fairly smoothly, records of a return meeting have yet to be uncovered, although, as Loughran's continued role is referred to in correspondence between Harold Wilson and Merlyn Rees in November 1974, it did take place.⁷¹

Unfortunately, excluding rather vague correspondence between Wilson and Rees on Oatley's other two conduits, the second half of 1974 remains shrouded in official secrecy by MI6. There is little physical evidence available regarding Laneside talks with Republicans in Belfast or elsewhere for the rest of that autumn, even though these were continuing to take place on an almost daily basis. Brendan Duddy, for example, is adamant that he virtually 'lived at Laneside' at this point⁷² although this secrecy may be explained by the fact that this period was marked by the most intense IRA bombing campaign in England that included the multiple pub bombings in Guildford and Birmingham as well as the almost daily attacks around the rest of the country. Though he did not elaborate at the time, Peter Taylor probably remains correct in his assertion that 'By late 1973 several of the Provisional leaders and most notably David O'Connell were looking for a way to end the campaign... Around this time messages from Laneside, apparently originating from Oatley, started to arrive in Dublin where the Provisional leadership was based, via the three different channels.'⁷³ We can now at least identify two of these channels in Duddy's 'Derry link' and in Belfast with Loughran, and two other key Belfast Provisionals Jimmy Drumm and Billy McKee.⁷⁴

Although Rees was only made aware of Loughran's existence later (and Duddy's later still) the work of the community and religious groups, political parties and other individuals that communicated to the British the view that the IRA were seeking another peace initiative means one can only conclude that the Feakle ceasefire offer did not come 'out of the blue.'

Laneside was established precisely for the purpose of channelling information like this to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State. It was designed for maintaining links and backchannels with groups it would not otherwise have spoken to. In the centre of this system was Brendan Duddy, who was rapidly emerging as Oatley's primary means of secure

communication with the PIRA. Functionally however, Duddy remained one of a significant number of other private ways the British had of discreet communicating with the IRA (or less discreet in the case of John O'Connell or the Feakle clergy who both quickly publicised their contacts) and at the centre of the vast majority of these contacts there remained the ubiquitous Dáithí Ó Conaill.

Conclusion

Channels of communication between the IRA and the British Government in the early Troubles were numerous and extended far beyond either the Feakle clergy or Brendan Duddy's 'Link'. They were not dependent on whoever had the upper hand (or felt they had) militarily. In fact, to take a maximalist approach, violence was as much a part of communication as the talks themselves were part of the conflict. The gun battles, the bombs, the arrests and the security patrols were in many ways simply another means by which the Republican movement and the British communicated.⁷⁵ In a sense this language is demonstrated by James Allan and Seamus Loughran's pause to watch the Six O'clock news during their relatively momentous meeting in July 1974. From the point of view of those who negotiated the IRA's 1975 ceasefire, the justification for talks was relatively simple. For those at Laneside the Provisional IRA were not fighting a war that had any of the usual strategic or territorial aims; rather, it was a guerrilla/terrorist campaign with a specific political ambition (i.e. the withdrawal of British sovereignty from Northern Ireland). In this sense, whether communication between the IRA and the British manifested itself in bomb attacks or in peace talks, the object remained the same. Thus, if the *method* of communication could be changed (and the method itself made a British withdrawal no more

likely) then peace, being the absence of political violence, could feasibly be established.

Secret talks, however they were formulated, were an essential part of this strategy as it was hoped that they would give political focus to groups that were otherwise seeking their goals through the use of paramilitary violence and terrorism.

This was a subtle view and not held by everyone involved in Britain's governance of Northern Ireland. Indeed, communication was refused – or quickly failed – when offered by the IRA to representatives of the Home Office, Military Intelligence and MI5. The fact that Duddy, Seamus Loughran, along with members of the UDA and UVF were handled primarily by NIO 'Advisors' seconded from MI6 and the FCO should not be surprising, especially when considering Michael Smith's account of the use of 'parallel diplomacy' by MI6. Much of this is down to the culture of MI6 as Britain's *foreign* intelligence agency; operating in a deniable manner usually outside the state's borders and thus familiar with operating beyond public accountability in ways that were alien to the rest of Britain's home departments. Laneside also existed separately from Britain's growing security apparatus in Northern Ireland, and this made MI6 secondments to the office far more willing to talk.

Certainly, Britain's political leaders were also important in this respect as while Whitelaw was willing to trust the IRA with direct contact once, Harold Wilson and Merlyn Rees rarely ruled out direct contact in exchange for even the most temporary of ceasefires. And while the Irish government steadfastly opposed talks with the Provisionals and urged the British to exclusively support the constitutionalist efforts of the SDLP,⁷⁶ both the SDLP and the Irish government had their own secret means of contact with the IRA, (albeit less frequently).⁷⁷

Despite their willingness to communicate, contacts with Northern Ireland's paramilitaries whether direct or via the numerous intermediaries rarely, if ever, constituted

negotiations; indeed, conversations were abrupt whenever they strayed into this territory. MI6 were never in fact negotiating fundamental points and neither Steele nor Oatley were ever given the authority to agree to any constitutional change to the status of Northern Ireland, indeed it would have made the talks a farce if they *had* claimed this kind of power. Instead, Laneside was attempting to 'mainstream' these organisations, by slowly replacing their violent tactics with peaceful ones all the while avoiding the negotiation of constitutional ends.

Brendan Duddy later described how the IRA had a dichotomous approach to their struggle, explaining that 'this is the department that bombs, and this is the department that talks'⁷⁸ a similar approach was being used by the British in some respects. When the IRA approached the wrong people, talks were short and things were boiled down to first principles very quickly. While this does not suggest that Dáithí Ó Conaill (or equally Frank Steele and Michael Oatley) were malleable individuals (and certainly the papers show the opposite is true) the sheer number of direct and indirect contacts Ó Conaill in particular was at the heart of, along with his antagonistic relationship with Sean MacStíofáin on the Army Council,⁷⁹ leads to the conclusion that the British did not fully grasp Ó Conaill's personal ambition to deliver an IRA truce and begin a political process until after Labour's return to power in 1974.

Once the practical concerns of both the IRA and the British were made clear – at Feakle, through Loughran and through Duddy – a pro-truce cohort in both camps arranged a ceasefire that was followed by more prolonged discussions. This prolonged period of discussion, I argue, was the 1975 truce and while this was directly facilitated by Brendan Duddy, his role must be seen as part of a larger narrative, existing over several years and through a wide variety of different intermediaries. From this point of view, the 1975 truce

marked the culmination of systematic attempts by elements within both the British government and the Provisional IRA to speak clearly to each other.

¹ Rees, *Northern Ireland: a personal perspective*, 149.

² LSE Archives, Papers of Merlyn Rees, 1/5, Recorded diary (Transcripts), 24-25.

³ LSE Archives, Papers of Merlyn Rees, 2/4, pages redacted from memoir, 1.

⁴ O'Brien, *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Féin*, 119.

⁵ Ó Conaill aka David O'Connell, PIRA O/C Southern Command, PIRA Director of Publicity and Vice President of Provisional Sinn Féin, 1970-c.1976.

⁶ Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, President of Provisional Sinn Féin, 1970-1983.

⁷ Sinn Féin, *Eire Nua*, 56.

⁸ Bishop and Mallie, *The Provisional IRA*, 269. Also, English, *Armed struggle: the history of the IRA*, 178-179.

⁹ Peter Taylor, *Provos: the IRA and Sinn Féin* (London, 1997), 176-178, and Robert White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh: the life and politics of an Irish revolutionary* (Indiana, 2006), 223-225.

¹⁰ Brendan Duddy's private papers are soon to be released at NUI Galway. See also, Ó Dochartaigh, 'The Contact': Understanding a communication channel between the British Government and the IRA'

¹¹ Taylor, *Provos*, 166-186.

¹² Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room*, 69.

¹³ English, *Terrorism: how to respond*, 127.

¹⁴ Moloney, *A secret history of the IRA*, 141 & 144.

¹⁵ Bew, Frampton and Gurruchaga, *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country*. A similar argument was first presented in Bishop and Mallie, *The Provisional IRA*, 269.

¹⁶ Interview with Brendan Duddy, 17 December 2009, 30mins. Confirmed by LSE Archives, Papers of Merlyn Rees, 1/4 recorded diary (transcripts) side 4 pp9-10, relating to a meeting before 28 June 1973, recorded 8 July 1973.

¹⁷ British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Interview with Sir Oliver Wright, 18 September 1996, http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/Wright_Oliver.pdf [accessed 4 March 2011].

¹⁸ The term was given to the offices concerned with Northern Ireland throughout Whitehall, and in which papers on Northern Ireland can now regularly be found, i.e. FCO, Joint Intelligence Committee, Home Office and Downing Street. Interview with Kelvin White, Undersecretary at the FCO's Republic of Ireland Dept. 1969-1974, 25 October 2007.

¹⁹ The National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter TNA: PRO), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter FCO) 33/767, Oliver Wright's Despatches from Belfast; 'Ulster: 13 September 1969', FCO 33/769, 'Relations between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland' 24 October 1969, also FCO 33/770, 'Ulster: Christmas 1969'.

²⁰ Ramsay, *Ringside Seats*, 85, 106.

²¹ In fact, Oliver Wright had first considered it 'essential to sustain the authority of the Northern Ireland administration... [as] only Stormont has any real prospect of carrying its people with it as it institutes reforms.' TNA: PRO, FCO 33/767, Despatch from Oliver Wright, 'Ulster: 13 September 1969'.

²² Smith, *The Spying Game*, 365.

²³ John O'Connell's own recollections tally with the official record and this research sticks to this, the most readily verifiable account. There are differences of opinion, however, in how the O'Connell talks originated. Robert White's description of a meeting in February 1972 between Sean MacStíofáin and Frank McManus is of interest, as is Peter Taylor's account which credits Tom Caldwell MP as the initiator of contact with the British Labour Party. O'Connell, *Doctor John*, 126., White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 176. And Taylor, *Provos*, 131.

²⁴ TNA: PRO, CJ 4/134, Blatherwick to FCO, UKREP and Home Office, 10 January 1972.

²⁵ Joe Cahill and one other. TNA: PRO CJ 4/134, Note of a Meeting with Dr John O'Connell, Graham Angel, Home Office. 27 January 1972. While the language used chimes closely with *Eire Nua* policy and the thoughts of *Eire Nua*'s authors at the time, Ó Brádaigh recalls only being approached by John O'Connell **after** Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972). White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 176.

²⁶ TNA: PRO, CJ 4/134, Dr John O'Connell to Graham Angel, 2 February 1972.

²⁷ The odd choice of location for this meeting by Morris is unexplained. The IRA had however bugged the main switchboard at Victoria Barracks and had recorded telephone calls on the afternoon of Bloody Sunday less than a fortnight earlier. *Guardian*, 29 September 2000,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/sep/29/bloodysunday.northernireland> [accessed 4 March 2011]

²⁸ TNA: PRO, FCO 87/5, Memo from Director of Intelligence, note of meeting with Frank Morris, IRA Adjutant, Victoria Barracks, 9 February 1972.

²⁹ Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles*, 226. Hennessey uses mostly Bloody Sunday Inquiry Sources (CT1) and PREM 15/1000 to construct his argument. See also TNA: PRO, CJ 3/98, Frank Kitson memo, 4 December 1971, 'it is [now] necessary for me to receive some direction beyond our immediate mission of destroying the IRA.'

³⁰ TNA: PRO, FCO 87/5, TNA: PRO, FCO 87/5, Memo from Director of Intelligence, note of meeting with Frank Morris, IRA Adjutant, Victoria Barracks, 9 February 1972. fol. 13. Ó Conaill was not Chief of Staff as also alleged in Bloody Sunday Inquiry, CT1, RUC Special Branch assessment, 19 January 1972, para. 35, attached to statement of Major General Marston Tickell, http://report.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org/evidence/CT/CT_0001.pdf [accessed 4 March 2011].

³¹ My interpretation of this meeting is subject to some debate. Certainly the papers indicate that MI5 made the judgement to drop the contact with Frank Morris, but they may or may not have been present at the Victoria Barracks meeting. In fact, all the names on this document have unnecessarily been redacted. Michael Smith in 'The Spying Game' has speculated that Frank Steele organised and ran this meeting. I disagree for three reasons. First, Steele did not meet anyone else in RUC barracks and the IRA rarely came to Laneside, he preferred to meet in people's homes or the homes of third parties. Second, the style of reporting – direct to MI5's F-Branch and the Chief of the General Staff – suggests that this is not considered a document relevant to the UKREP, unusual as Steele was Deputy UKREP. Third, Steele's name appears on documents throughout the records. He had a legitimate position, if a rather interesting story about how he came to get such a job, and his other minutes are rarely redacted and never to this extent. It is however, standard procedure to remove the names of serving military and MI5 officers. Steele, when in Northern Ireland, was technically just another British official. This matter was not resolved in a recent Freedom of Information request, and the document remains redacted under Section 23 of the Act, its contents having being supplied by an 'exempt agency', i.e. the Security Service, SIS, GCHQ or the Special Forces.

³² O'Connell, *Doctor John*, 129.

³³ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Harold Wilson papers, MS Wilson c.908 f.8, Note of meeting with Provisional IRA, 13 March 1972.

³⁴ O'Connell, *Doctor John*, 134.

³⁵ White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 177.

³⁶ Sutton, *Bear in mind these dead*.

³⁷ TNA: PRO, PREM 15/1009, Note of meeting between Secretary of State and John Hume and Paddy Devlin, 19 June 1972.

³⁸ TNA: PRO, PREM 15/1009, Notes of meetings between John Hume, Paddy Devlin and the Secretary of State 18&19 June, 1972, also, John Peck (Dublin Ambassador) to FCO and UKREP, 19 June 1972.

³⁹ TNA: PRO, PREM 15/1009, Woodfield's notes of meeting the IRA, 20 June 1972.

⁴⁰ White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 188.

⁴¹ Bishop and Mallie, *The Provisional IRA*, 277-78.

⁴² Taylor, *Provos*, 143.

⁴³ TNA: PRO, PREM 15/1009, Telephone call from Sebastian Coffey, 21 June 1972.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Provos*, 145.

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Joe Cahill*, 252-255.

⁴⁶ Dudley Edwards, *Newspapermen*, 403.

⁴⁷ Rees, *Northern Ireland*, 27.

⁴⁸ Moloney, *Secret History*, Appendix 5.

⁴⁹ O'Connell, *Doctor John*, 138.

⁵⁰ Rees, *Northern Ireland*, 27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Smith and Neumann, 'Motorman's Long Journey', 416.

⁵³ TNA: PRO, CJ 4/644, Frank Steele, 'Policy in Northern Ireland', 25 July 1972.

⁵⁴ Conciliation Ireland emerged in February 1973 and was led by businessmen Colm Scallon and Ben McArdle.

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- ⁵⁵ TNA: PRO, FCO 87/221, Meeting with Conciliation Ireland at Laneside, 7 February 1973.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Vivian Simpson and Frank Gogarty.
- ⁵⁸ TNA: PRO, FCO 87/221, Meeting with Vivian Simpson NILP at Laneside, 7 May 1973.
- ⁵⁹ Hackett to Whitelaw, 1 October 1973.
- ⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, CJ 4/319, Secretary of State's Private Secretary to Woodfield, 5 October 1973.
- ⁶¹ White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 205.
- ⁶² TNA: PRO, CJ 4/319, Whitelaw to Woodfield, 7 October 1973.
- ⁶³ TNA: PRO, CJ 4/319, Whitelaw to Hackett, 13 October 1973.
- ⁶⁴ Allan and Oatley both requested their postings to Northern Ireland. Allan's only previous experience in negotiation had been as Head of Chancery in Beijing, 1969-71. Oatley had returned from Africa and following a posting in London also volunteered. Interviews with James Allan, 18 January 2010, and Michael Oatley, 24 February 2010.
- ⁶⁵ The meetings are minuted in TNA: PRO, FCO 87/341, FCO 87/342 and CJ 4/838.
- ⁶⁶ Pruitt, 'Negotiation with Terrorists', 379.
- ⁶⁷ Loughran was a Sinn Féin organiser in West Belfast, he had been among the first interned and had spent over a year in Long Kesh. Whilst at the meeting with James Allan on 18 July he officially represented Sinn Féin, he was at that time one of five northerners on the PIRA Army Council according to Moloney, *Secret History*, 143.
- ⁶⁸ TNA: PRO, FCO 87/342, James Allan, 'Meeting with Seamus Loughran', 9 July 1974, and 'Note for the Record: Mr Seamus Loughran', 18 July 1974.
- ⁶⁹ Burton, *World Society*, 150-163.
- ⁷⁰ Camplisson and Burton's role in UDA/NIO is notable in TNA: PRO, FCO 87/342, James Allan, 'Dr Burton and Possible paramilitary contacts' 21 June 1974. For UDA/IRA meeting see TNA: PRO, CJ 4/863, James Allan, 'Possible mid-may conference of Sinn Féin', 28 April 1975.
- ⁷¹ *Irish Independent*, 9 January 2005, Ronan Fanning, 'MI6 and the IRA'.
- ⁷² Interview with James Allan, 1 hour 46mins,
- ⁷³ Taylor, *Provos*; 169.
- ⁷⁴ Moloney, *Secret History*, 144.
- ⁷⁵ One of the attempted mediators, John Burton agreed at the time; 'Dropping bombs is one form of participation and communication in a conflict. Argument around a table is not necessarily a more effective form of communication' Burton, *World Society*, 152.
- ⁷⁶ Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life*, 258-59.
- ⁷⁷ On Taoiseach Jack Lynch's behalf, Irish diplomat Eamonn Gallagher met with the Provisionals' Sean Keenan early in 1970 separately, Charles Haughey admitted to the Cabinet prior to the Arms Crisis that he had met with Dublin Provisionals, and in the period 1987-93 the Irish government held talks with Sinn Féin through intermediaries in Belfast. Interview with Eamonn Gallagher, 19 May 2008, 30mins, Craig, *Crisis of Confidence*, 70; Duignan, *One Spin on the Merry-Go-Round*, 98-101.
- ⁷⁸ Brendan Duddy in 'The Secret Peacemaker' BBC Documentary with Peter Taylor, first broadcast March 2008.
- ⁷⁹ These divisions between MacStíofáin and Ó Conaill were made public in September 1972 when Maria McGuire left the PIRA and went public with her story, *Observer*, 3 September 1972, Maguire, *To Take Arms*, 162-4 and White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh*, 204-5. These divisions were apparently also known to Merlyn Rees, Rees, *Northern Ireland*, 24-25.

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