



written by Ed Moloney

Fr Alec Reid letter to Haughey gave terms for IRA ceasefire 7 years in advance

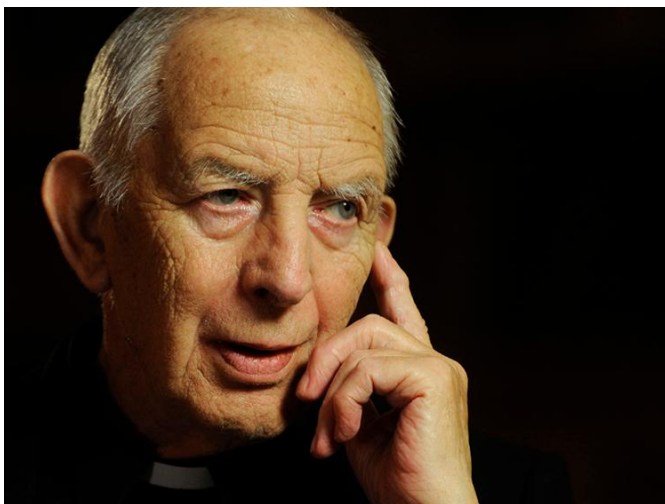
The death of Charles Haughey last year makes it possible to place on public record the extraordinary letter that launched the Northern peace process, writes Ed Moloney. The letter is just shy of 7,400 words long and if historians wish to identify the first meaningful step in the journey that led to the Belfast and St Andrews' agreements and the end of the IRA's "armed struggle", then this is it.

The letter was written by the West Belfast-based Redemptorist priest, Fr Alex Reid, to the Fianna Fáil taoiseach, Charles Haughey, on May 11th, 1987 and so explosively sensitive were its contents that it was hand delivered to Mr Haughey's home in Kinsealy by the then editor of the *Irish Press*, Tim Pat Coogan.

It took nearly six years of persuasion and cajoling, and numerous journeys from Belfast to Kinsealy, before Mr Haughey agreed to give me access to the letter.

Always a reluctant and grudging source about his part in the birth of the peace process, he once grumbled: "The stage is already overcrowded with people attempting to claim credit."

But, having stumbled upon his role via another route, I contacted him and over time became convinced that, notwithstanding the cold feet he later developed, the peace process might have been stillborn had Mr



Haughey not opened his door, metaphorically and literally, to Fr Reid. I persisted with him and was able to refer to the letter and use its contents to inform my book, *A Secret History of the IRA*, although not to quote directly from it, in accordance with our confidentiality agreement.

Mr Haughey's death in June 2006 releases me from that agreement and my publisher's decision to publish a second edition, which appears on Monday, allows me to put the entire letter in the public domain, where it rightly belongs.

The letter does not mark the start of the peace process but it does signal the beginning of government involvement in the process without which it would have been

impossible to succeed. Fr Reid began talking to Gerry Adams about "an alternative method" to IRA violence, as he called it, in 1982 after the death of a UDR man at the IRA's hands in South Armagh - although in the letter he mistakenly says this happened in 1984 - but it was some time before their ideas were solid enough to share with government.

Charles Haughey and Fr Reid started their dialogue in late 1985, when the Fianna Fáil leader was in opposition. Through Fr Reid, Mr Adams was also sending written messages to Mr Haughey, exploring ideas. Nothing was put in writing until May 1987 when the letter was composed and delivered to Kinsealy, thus formally launching the peace process.

What makes the letter so significant is that it set out Adams's terms for an IRA ceasefire seven years before it happened and that within those terms it is possible to discern the principles - and compromises - that underlay what became the Belfast Agreement. The other point of significance is that it reveals that Mr Adams was actively contemplating a ceasefire and a wholly political strategy at a time when the rest of the IRA leadership was committed to intensifying violence. The letter serves to strengthen the view that Mr Adams has for many years been working to a pre-cooked agenda not necessarily shared by all his colleagues.

Not only was the IRA in the midst of importing tons of Libyan supplied weapons in anticipation of a stepped up and spectacular campaign in Ireland, Britain and Europe when the letter was written, but it was dated just three days after eight members of the elite and hard line east Tyrone brigade of the IRA were wiped out in an SAS ambush at Loughgall, Co Armagh. Key members of the east Tyrone unit were about to break away from the IRA when the ambush happened.

Mr Haughey thus received Mr Adams's terms for peace at a particularly low point in the IRA's fortunes but also one which had seen the removal of potentially significant internal opponents to a non-violent strategy.

In his letter Fr Reid spelled out in considerable detail the history and motives of what he described as a church initiative for peace, aimed primarily at ending IRA violence. Along with unnamed colleagues from within and outside the Redemptorist community, Fr Reid began the search for peace by going to see Adams who agreed to participate, on certain conditions.

These were that any subsequent dialogue would be "open-ended" and would involve Sinn Féin; that IRA violence could only be ended by the creation of an acceptable "alternative method" and that "the right of the nationalist and unionist people of Ireland to decide their own constitutional and political future through dialogue among themselves and without dictation from the British authorities" be safeguarded. Within this phrase lay a new and original definition of what was meant by British withdrawal, the key IRA demand.

Fr Reid then outlined the core of the proposal, the creation of a nationalist political consensus - something that unionists derisively termed "the pan-nationalist front" - beginning with talks between Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil aimed at agreeing a common approach to the North. (Mr Haughey balked at this suggestion, fearing political

disaster if he was caught talking to Adams and he nominated SDLP leader John Hume to represent him instead.)

It is though when Fr Reid turned to the principles that would guide Sinn Féin in any dialogue that it became evident what huge compromises Adams was prepared to make.

Fr Reid wrote: "These principles as I understand them may be set out as follows:

"1. The aim of 'the armed struggle' is to establish the right of all the Irish people to decide their own political future through dialogue among themselves. The establishment of a 32-county socialist republic is not therefore the aim of this struggle. From the Sinn Féin point of view this is a political ideal to be pursued and achieved by political strategies only.

"2. The British must in some formal and credible way declare their willingness to set aside the claim enshrined in the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 that they have in their own right the power of veto of the democratic decisions of the Irish people as a whole. In practice it would be sufficient for them to declare their willingness to set aside the Government of Ireland Act, 1920 in view of any agreements that the representatives of the people of Ireland in dialogue among themselves might make about their constitutional and political future.

"Such a declaration would set the scene for a ceasefire by the IRA.

"This principle relates only to the right of veto which the British authorities claim in Ireland on the basis of the 1920 Act. It should not therefore be taken to mean that Sinn Féin want the British to withdraw from Ireland at the present time. On the contrary they accept and would even insist on the need for a continuing British presence to facilitate the processes through which the constitutional and political structures of a just and lasting peace would be firmly and properly laid by the democratic decisions of the Irish people as a whole.

"Once the representatives of all the Irish people, nationalist and unionist, could meet together in accordance with the principle of independence outlined in (2) above, all options for a settlement of the national question, for organising the constitutional and political structures of a just and lasting peace would be open for dialogue and decision."

All this, of course, is exactly what happened: the British publicly declared their neutrality in Northern Ireland, allowed the local parties to make their own deal unhampered, and eventually amended the 1920 Act. On the republican side, the IRA called the promised ceasefire while Sinn Féin has accepted a continuing British presence and no longer talks about "a 32-county socialist republic". In the shape of the Belfast and St Andrews' agreements the party also made good its promise to embrace "all options" for a settlement and the implied principle of consent.

In the conclusion to his letter Fr Reid wrote: "I can . . . say that the opportunity which now exists is the best that has presented itself since the present Troubles began in 1969 and that it is an opportunity not just for a ceasefire but for making final peace with the IRA and taking the gun out of nationalist politics forever." He was right.