



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/98/8

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1. I met at his request with Fr. Alex Reid last night. His conversation, characteristically, was mostly on the level of well-rehearsed generalities about the determination of Northern nationalists never again to accept second class citizenship, the realism of IRA perceptions and the significance of their willingness to settle for admission to negotiations (as opposed to specific goals of united Ireland, etc.), and his very genuine religious faith in matters ultimately turning out for the best.
2. His analysis was that this was a crucial, and worrying period. It could set matters in motion towards "the best peace or the worst war".
3. On the basis of (presumably IRA) contacts about a week ago, he rehearsed the requirements which are familiar to us from our contacts with Sinn Féin. He said that they regarded meaningful negotiations as the acid test whether the British did or did not accept the need for a change for the better in the way nationalists were treated. They saw the timeframe as a test of the sincerity of British commitment to negotiations. On decommissioning, the IRA would "accept the Sinn Féin position based on the Mitchell Report". He stressed the importance of confidence-building measures, including prisoners, Irish language and equality issues.
4. I recounted in detail the practical constraints on the British Government, and the need for everyone, including for that matter the IRA, to operate in a climate of political realism. We had gone to the limit of our capacity to explain Sinn Féin positions to the British Government, and vice versa. I challenged him to say what more we could do.

5. He did not over develop this point beyond a suggestion, which he did not sustain, that we were not putting sufficient pressure on the British. He advocated direct contact between the British and the Republicans, "locking themselves in a room for three or four days if necessary".
6. Reverting to his comment about "the worst war", I said we would be doing everything possible to ensure the British response was sufficient to make a ceasefire possible, but the possibility of failure was always there. Could anything be done to prevent catastrophe in those circumstances?
7. Fr. Reid developed at great length his analysis of the options in that case. The IRA had asked John Hume and Gerry Adams to rebuild the conditions from the ceasefire, basing their efforts in the North. There had been some frustration that Hume had not followed this line with more energy. Fr. Reid's scenario essentially involved persuading the SDLP and Sinn Féin to cooperate on those matters on which they could agree to cooperate (roughly speaking, an equality agenda). The IRA were not psychopaths and would embrace with relief a political alternative, provided they were convinced that it would work. Fr. Reid saw a formal decision to abandon the gun and a purely political joint strategy as essential parts of such an alternative strategy.
8. Fr. Reid stressed the difficulty in dealing with the IRA, because of the depth and intensity of their tradition. They saw themselves as "up in the mountain" to protect the nationalist community from oppression. They were convinced in the last ceasefire that the British strategy was simply to "draw them down from the mountain" and to defeat them. Anything like surrender was totally anathema to them. (He mentioned at another part that the difficulty in getting forthcoming language in a ceasefire statement derived from this psychology: they feared that any concession would be misinterpreted by the British as weakness, or a readiness to surrender).

9. I probed Fr. Reid somewhat on his vision of an alternative strategy to that involving a sufficiently forthcoming British statement. As he developed his ideas on a joint position between Sinn Féin and the SDLP, I felt that while his idea probably did have some resonance in terms of the IRA psychology, his assessment of what might or might not be possible for the SDLP seemed to me somewhat optimistic and politically naive.

10. I developed at some length the view that the dangers of failure at this juncture were so enormous that everyone, including Sinn Féin and the IRA, had a duty to try and go the extra mile. Fr. Reid accepted very readily that the suspicions had deepened on both sides compared to 1994, and that it would in principle, be understandable that the British also would need more comfort this time round. He said however that Gerry Adams was deeply afraid to go to the IRA with a proposal which would be "knocked back". The IRA had a military mindset and were suspicious of all politicians, including those in Sinn Féin. Responding to my point about the dangers of any further attack, Fr. Reid said that Gerry Adams also understood fully the dangers, but was nevertheless very worried about another bomb.

11. I urged Fr. Reid to do everything in any contact open to him to stave off the worst case scenario we all dreaded. I said that Hume's argument that "violence was a distraction" was being shown to be more and more literally true, and if the IRA needed to understand the counter-productive impact of their violence, they should study how much some unionist spokesmen relied on it to avoid pressures for dialogue.



Sean Ó hUiginn
22 November 1996