



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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22 September 1998

Mr. Dermot Gallagher  
Second Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Secretary,

#### **Conversation with Francie Molloy**

I met with Francie Molloy of Sinn Fein for over an hour yesterday afternoon. Both of us were attending the Lib Dem conference in Brighton.

#### **Formation of the Shadow Executive**

Molloy impressed on me Sinn Fein's deep concern about the possibility of a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council before the Shadow Executive is formed. If this were to happen, according to Molloy, "the Agreement would be on the slippery slope". I assured Molloy that this is not the scenario we have in mind. ✓

#### **Decommissioning**

Molloy also raised with me a number of points on decommissioning:

- \* the Republican leadership is engaged in the very delicate task of leading the movement into wholehearted participation in new institutions without an end to partition. The significance of this is not adequately appreciated by Unionists

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- \* the Assembly is the issue on which McKeivitt tried to split the movement. The Real IRA has backed away. Nevertheless there is still potential dissent among republicans. A wrong move on decommissioning would offer an opening to opponents to the present leadership (Molloy made an allusion at this point to Republican Sinn Fein)
- \* one of the consequences of a serious split in the movement could be political immobility, partly because those who "take a line" are personally targeted. This was the experience in 1970s.
- \* it is likely that most of the semtex that is said to be in IRA hands is no longer capable of being used. To hand over a small amount would (a) provoke immediate demands from Unionists for further handovers of weapons and (b) have a disproportionately negative effect on the Republican "base"
- \* sectarianism of the kind that is happening in Portadown reduces the Republican movement's ability to address the decommissioning issue. A sense that the IRA is armed has an important psychological effect in some Nationalist areas - and in a way that can make it easier (Molloy implied) to achieve political progress
- \* it is too early to say when decommissioning will begin. If Sinn Fein were pressed now to name a date, they would have to focus on dates quite far down the line in terms of the implementation of the Agreement. The more the Agreement is seen to take shape, the easier decommissioning becomes
- \* in the end, the IRA may destroy weaponry themselves, with provision for verification, or may agree to transfer weapons to a third party, e.g., the armed forces of South Africa.

I made it clear to Molloy that while we understand as Sinn Fein does the letter of the Agreement, we are interested in practical ways of moving the situation forward.

### North-South

Molloy said that within the Republican movement, the North-South aspects of the Agreement have been understood as "transitional" towards all-Ireland

arrangements. Sinn Fein are conscious that in the interests of embedding the Agreement, the North-South dimension should not become excessively contentious. At the same time, Molloy was keen that the Irish government and Northern Nationalists should develop ambitious and imaginative proposals. He mentioned two specific ideas:

- \* is there scope for cross-border partnership boards bringing together local councillors and business leaders under European auspices? Molloy was thinking of boards in Derry-Donegal, Fermanagh-Leitrim, Tyrone-Monaghan, Armagh-Louth
- \* is there scope for an initiative in third-level education drawing together institutions on either side of the border in a new university? Molloy observed that third-level opportunities are unevenly distributed on the island and that a strong third-level institution in a border area could form part of an effort to persuade at least some of the many students who now travel to Britain to stay at home.

*ie with money allocation - worth thinking about*

**The Clerk of the Assembly**

Molloy noted that the position of Clerk of the Assembly (which will be the subject of an open competition to be advertised in October) will be of key importance.

**Conclusion**

Molloy conveyed throughout our conversation a strong personal attachment to the Good Friday Agreement and even a certain enthusiasm at the prospect of day-to-day politics within the new institutions.

Yours sincerely,

*Philip McDonagh*

Philip McDonagh  
Counsellor