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Ink time 17. 4. 1973

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NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr. Reilly T. mentioned this at 9M. today 1974

Secretary AA 17/4/73

NOTE:-

The British Ambassador phoned this morning to say that he had instructions to convey, on the Prime Minister's behalf, a picture of the situation in Northern Ireland as the British saw it developing, in continuation of the briefing which he had last given the Taoiseach on 21st February. He said that he had been in Belfast yesterday and had been given a full briefing there by Mr. Frank Cooper, Secretary of the Northern Ireland Office. I mentioned the Ambassador's message to the Taoiseach, who said that he would like to see him. A meeting was arranged accordingly for 3.30 p.m.

At the meeting, the Ambassador said that the Secretary of State would be meeting the Minister for Finance on Saturday, after the Rugby match, in his (the Ambassadors) house. The meeting would be short because the Prime Minister had let Mr. Rees away from Belfast only on condition that he left on Saturday, for the match, and was back the following morning.

The Ambassador said that the meetings with the Provisional Sinn Fein had continued, since 21st February, when the last briefings had taken place. The main participants at the meetings, on the Sinn Féin side, had been those whose names the Ambassador had previously given. The principal person present had appeared on two or three occasions and had been particularly anxious that his presence at the meetings should not be known except to a very small and limited circle. On the British side, the main representative was James Allan. He was accompanied by the "Lanside Group". The meetings were not organised on any regular basis. They were completely ad hoc, on request. The British had taken the initiative in calling meetings. Once they had done so when incidents in South Armagh and Newry had seemed likely to have serious consequences. The main question was whether these incidents had been planned or the action of a few cowboys. The second meeting had been to explain to the Sinn Féin representatives the statements by Mr. Rees, made on 12th March, and also the statement by the Prime Minister after his recent visit to Northern Ireland.

The purpose of the meetings was unchanged - to ensure a continuance of the ceasefire and to expound on British Government policies.

The Ambassador said that there had been no written documents handed over or exchanged at the meetings

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Mr. Reilly 17/4

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 2 -

except the published discussion papers on Northern Ireland, copies of Hansard, containing relevant speeches, and copies of the Prime Minister's speech on his last visit to the North. The amazing thing was that the Sinn Féin interlocutors had not got these documents or certainly had not read or understood them.

On the Sinn Féin side, the main burden of the conversations had been concerned with what they regarded as breaches of the ceasefire, on which insufficient satisfaction had been given through the incident centres, and the general complaint of an inadequate response too by the British to the ceasefire.

On the first of these points the shooting of Provisional Sinn Féin (or I.R.A.) members had received most notice. The interlocutors had been apparently under considerable pressure from the rank and file on -

- (1) the continued arrest of members either of Sinn Féin or of the I.R.A. on criminal charges;
- (2) the question of provocative searches.

The British response had been that there was no question whatsoever of immunity or safe conduct for anybody responsible for a criminal offence. Persons carrying guns must have licences from the R.U.C. The law must take its course. They had also denied that the searches were provocative and had emphasized the undertaking of the Secretary of State that his response to a genuine and sustained cessation of violence would be genuine and realistic.

On the general complaint of an inadequate response to the ceasefire, the British had signs that some of the rank and file members were getting restive. They had the feeling that the people coming to Lanside were, perhaps, in a difficult position in that they were talking to the British but, at the same time members of their organisation - or of the I.R.A. - were being pounced on. They had not insisted on the response taking any particular form but their general line seemed to be that -

- (1) the security forces should maintain a low profile;
- (2) there should be action on detention and
- (3) there should be some signs of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

In reply to these points the British had said that the response to a genuine and sustained cessation of violence would be as the Secretary of State had indicated. They had released 40% of the persons who were in

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 3 -

detention on the 22nd December, when the ceasefire started. They were making these releases gradually, as a matter of deliberate policy because this was likely to cause less excitement among the majority and because it made it impossible for Sinn Féin to organise any fiesta or public demonstration of rejoicing. At the same time it enabled the S.D.L.P to build some credit for the releases. The Ambassador said that with the present level of violence there did not seem to be much more that could be done.

There had been no negotiation whatsoever on the political future of Northern Ireland. The background to the constitutional Convention and the importance of the Convention for Northern Ireland had been explained. The British got the impression that the speakers at Lanside had genuinely regretted the decision of their associates not to participate in the elections. When they harped on the question of a British withdrawal, the reply had always been on the extreme complexity of the problems in Northern Ireland and a reference to the Northern extremists. The Sinn Féin speakers had been asked why they did not talk to them. So far as the British knew there had been no effective contact between the two wings sides.

On the incident centres, the Ambassador said that the way in which they had been built up by Seamus Locklin *Loughran* and the Poblacht had not turned out to be the practice. They seemed to be dealing with matters of the utmost triviality - they were particularly busy when the pubs closed. The British have used them quite a lot to get across their point on particular incidents.

On the Provisional Sinn Féin centres, the Ambassador said that these have become wholly counter-productive. The organisation had great difficulty in getting people to man them. All they could find was young people. These were now coping with complaints about gutters and plumbing. They were developing a "blocked drain" complex. Instead of being a potent political influence for Provisional Sinn Féin they have become the reverse. They have become and are seen to be centres of political impotence. There are now far *seven* for using them than in the beginning.

The U.D.A. patrolling had gone in the same way. The British had tried to talk the organisation initially out of their policing ideas and this, together with the way in which events had developed, had seemed to be successful in reducing, if not eliminating the extent of the problem.

Over the past month or so, there had been two crises of emotion. The first of these seemed to result from rank and file pressure on the I.R.A. leadership, which tended to make the ceasefire fragile. The British had

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 4 -

given nothing away in their contacts. The Provisional Sinn Féin members who had attended had been given a good talking to on the general context of the talks and took it. One of the reasons why the ceasefire was continuing was that the Provos feel that public opinion is against them. Their statement in Dublin of 19th March seemed to be a response to this type of back-bench pressure and had relieved it temporarily. The Great Victoria Street bomb on 2nd April had been another indication of the extent and type of this pressure.

The second matter on which there had been a crisis of emotion had been on the question of a personal appeal to the Prime Minister, who had indicated that he was ^{not} having any. The Provisional Sinn Féin representatives had been told that anybody was free to write to the Prime Minister but that this sort of letter would be treated in the ordinary way and need not necessarily be answered by him. The Price sisters had been released in response to the undertaking given by the Home Secretary - and not as a response to the ceasefire. This had been explained to the Provisional Sinn Féin representatives.

The Ambassador said that the really serious question now was whether the ceasefire was going to continue. The Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Frank Cooper) just didn't know. He thought that to speak of a slide into permanent peace, was, perhaps, being over optimistic. The contrary view of a slide into civil war seemed to be similarly over pessimistic. The best judgement that he could make was that the situation was going to lug along with the ceasefire continuing, with the odd incidents or breach. These incidents need not be so minor, for example, the Bank Buildings explosion caused damage to the extent of about £500,000.

The Northern Ireland Office were ^{a lot} ~~not~~ more worried about sectarian violence. This was much the bigger threat to stability at the moment. They had re-^{deployed} ~~applied~~ the Army on inter-sectarian boundaries which was now the main area of Army activity. They had also increased the numbers in the C.I.D. to deal with this problem. At this point the Ambassador produced the statistics, which are appended to this note.

The Taoiseach asked if statistics were available to show in which Community the arms finds were being made and in which Community the house searches were being concentrated.

The Ambassador said that they had not precise statistics but so far as he knew more arms were collected in Loyalist than in Republican areas. The Taoiseach asked if it were possible that a break-down of the figures could be given. The Ambassador said that they would have a shot at it but he could not guarantee results. What he would look for would be a break-down, as between the Communities, of the statistics which he had given

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 5 -

so as to show where searches, and finds of arms and explosives had been made. He drew particular attention to the number of persons arrested since the beginning of the year, for carrying arms. This figure of 63 was due to the more extensive patrolling of sensitive areas.

On the question of policing, the Ambassador said that they were making progress and were moving slowly back into areas from which they had been excluded. This movement was very slow and deliberate. In the early days of the ceasefire the police got a very bad time. This had been an organised Provisional Sinn Féin campaign to get them out but it had failed. What had happened was that small groups of women and children had followed individual constables and shouted at them and throwing stones. There had not been any widespread crowds or widespread support for this agitation. Sinn Féin had dropped it because it obviously did not have community backing. It was very evident that the agitation was artificial and inspired.

On the political front, the Ambassador said that the election campaigns seemed to be just about beginning to get going. Mr. Rees was studiously avoiding seeing politicians or delegations. There had been virtually no talks with political parties in recent times, for this reason. Mr. Fitt had seen Mr. Rees recently. He had been very ebullient and optimistic. He had mentioned a figure of 7 or 8 members in the Convention for Brian Faulkner and 7 or 8 for the Alliance. The general guess on the part of the Northern Ireland Office was that the U.U.U.C. would get a majority, which at best, so far as the North was concerned, would amount to 4 or 5. This was an optimistic assessment.

The Ambassador enquired as to the prospects for the Criminal Law (Jurisdiction) Bill, 1975. The Taoiseach said that it was hard to give a definite answer. The Bill would be coming up in the Senate next week. After the debate then we would know better what the answer to the Ambassador's question was. The Government were, of course, going on with the Bill. The Dáil was over loaded with work, particularly with the financial Bills. The Justice Bill had been transferred to the Senate to ensure a quicker passage.

The Ambassador enquired as to whether one or two Government supporters in the Dáil might fall by the wayside. The Taoiseach said this was not very likely. The Taoiseach said that it was extremely important that action should be seen publicly to be taken against those responsible for the sectarian assassinations. He said that he appreciated what the Ambassador had said on this subject but the important thing was to make certain that the British efforts were widely known and appreciated. The Ambassador said that not only

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 6 -

had they been taking the action he had indicated but they were also keeping a special watch on pubs where assassinations or incidents were particularly likely. However, the whole problem was a terribly difficult one - particularly because of its random nature. What seemed to be happening was that two or three people would get together and decide to drive into the area of the opposing side. They would then open fire on anyone seen walking about or in that area - completely at random. This was an extremely difficult form of activity to stop.

The Ambassador said, incidently, that the action of the Provisional Sinn Féin in deciding to work against participation in the Convention elections was not entirely ⁱⁿwelcome in that it would keep them busy and in that, in the end, it could show them up as being particularly ineffective.

There was some general discussion on the releases of detainees. The Ambassador said that they had some reasonably firm intelligence that a number of the persons released were rejoining the I.R.A. cadres. The Taoiseach raised the possibility of trying to re-habilitate these people and to get them working again as part of the local community. The Ambassador said that efforts were being made in this direction, but, so far as he could see, they were not entirely successful, at present. The problem was particularly difficult in relation to younger men.

The meeting then concluded. It started at approximately 3.30 and finished at about 4 p.m.

D. Nally

16th April, 1975.