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Provisional Sinn Fein Strategy

1. In the course of a Memorandum for the information of the Government circulated on 17 April, the Minister for Foreign Affairs set out his view, based on contacts with persons in Northern Ireland who are well-informed, of the strategy of the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein. The Minister stated that the objectives of that strategy might be summarised as follows:

- (a) Firstly, they will take control of the nationalist vote without abjuring violence. If they get more than 50% of that vote, as they confidently expect to do in May next year, they will effectively have achieved this objective. Our information suggests that the IRA will, in the meantime, confine its activities to certain limited categories of "legitimate" targets in the North and very large financial hauls in the South.
- (b) They will then claim that the major implication of such a vote is that violence is democratically legitimate.
- (c) This, they believe, will undermine the argument of successive Irish Governments, urged repeatedly both at home and abroad, that violence does not have the support of a majority of nationalists in Northern Ireland.
- (d) Once they have taken 50% of the nationalist vote, they believe that their only opposition on their own side, the SDLP, will quickly disintegrate.
(Comment: This could well prove to be the case.)
- (e) Against that background, they will then seek a violent confrontation with the Unionists, claiming that they are engaged in a legitimate war.
- (f) The chief object then will be to destabilise this State by seeking to draw the South into that confrontation.
- (g) Their goal, as defined by Danny Morrison, "to take power in Ireland with the armalite in one hand and the ballot paper in the other", will then be in sight.

2. The Minister stated that in those circumstances if, as it is reasonable and prudent to assume, they came about, we would face a number of unpalatable options:-

- (a) Political confrontation with Britain, while seeking to remain otherwise on the sidelines. The Provisionals would in effect call the nationalist shots in those circumstances and would claim credit for any concessions made, thereby demonstrating the "irrelevance" and "weakness" of the South.
- (b) Remain totally uninvolved, in the face of a high level of casualties on both sides and, as experience in other situations has indicated, probable British negotiations with the Provisionals: the stability and authority of the State would be severely tested in those circumstances.
- (c) Military involvement.

3. Nothing that has been learned since April justifies any change in the above assessment. Despite, and to a certain extent because of, the impressive victory by Hume over Morrison in the European Parliament election of 14 June, Sinn Fein are concentrating a major effort on next May's local elections. The information available to the Department of Foreign Affairs from a considerable range of sources in the nationalist community consistently confirms that the Sinn Fein organisation has increased its effort in the local nationalist community, especially in the area of "service politics", which are, of course, geared specifically to suit a successful performance in local government elections. A new theme which is emerging strongly in local Sinn Fein strategy is the cult of an image of social responsibility for the party. Examples of this are:

- the establishment in Derry City by Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness of a community committee to combat petty crime; despite the bizzare irony that the Provisional IRA are the direct and outstanding cause of social breakdown in working-class Catholic communities, a combination of fear and alienation have caused a

certain number of the aged and disadvantaged to turn to this group for help and protection;

- the IRA's own violence having created an atmosphere ripe for delinquency of the most serious kind in the Catholic ghettos, Sinn Fein are organising a structure of vigilantes (presumably the IRA) who meet out "punishments" of great cruelty to the "guilty", thus winning for Sinn Fein an aura both of compassion and effectiveness.

4. The Provisional Sinn Fein percentage of the nationalist (i.e. Sinn Fein plus SDLP) vote in the European election fell from 42.84% in the 1983 general election to 37.7%, while Hume's was 62.3% in the European election compared with 57.16% for the SDLP in the general election. It would be a serious mistake to see an encouraging underlying trend in this for several reasons:

- Hume is the outstanding figure in the SDLP; Morrison is a much less considerable political candidate, even within Sinn Fein's own camp, where Adams has a more authoritative image. The fact that Sinn Fein decided to field Morrison, and not Adams, against Hume was read by nationalists generally and even by Sinn Fein supporters as an effective concession of defeat.

- The actual Sinn Fein vote of 100,989 against 102,700 in the general election demonstrates that, even in the adverse circumstances referred to in the previous paragraph, Sinn Fein enjoy an impressive hard core of support which, in the more favourable circumstances of a local government election, could be developed quite considerably.

- Hume enjoyed a high number of first preference votes which normally go to the Alliance Party but which went to him through a conscious decision of Alliance voters to block Morrison. Thus the SDLP first preference vote climbed from 137,500 in 1983 to 151,399 in 1984 while the Alliance vote fell from 61,275 to 34,046. There are no grounds for assuming that this would be repeated in the localised circumstances of next May's election.

The evidence suggests that, outside Derry, the level of Sinn Fein personation was considerably lower than in 1983. In other words the same effort was not made. Informed sources say that Sinn Fein will make a considerable effort in this area next May.

5. The SDLP are weaker than Sinn Fein in their capacity to "deliver" on local government issues. Lacking both funds and a strong local organisation and subject to violent intimidation by Sinn Fein, their performance is likely to be well below even that of the 1983 general election. Sinn Fein, on the other hand, are relatively well financed, have an impressive network of "advice centres" manned on a full-time basis throughout the nationalist community and, with the IRA behind them, encounter no local obstacles to their political activities on the ground. They enjoy a degree of cooperation, however reluctant, from Government Departments when they act as surrogates for persons seeking welfare or similar services.
6. It must therefore be assumed that, in the absence of credible political progress in the meantime, Sinn Fein would stand a real chance of overtaking the SDLP in next year's local elections.

29 August 1984