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Mr. E. O Tuathail  
Assistant Secretary  
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Eamonn

On Thursday last we had a discussion in the Secretariat of an informal character at the request of the British on perceptions of current Sinn Fein strategy. We have had a number of such discussions on different topics. I feel it is worth reporting a little on this particular exchange as the British had done some preparation beforehand.

The following were the points that struck me.

The British view is that Sinn Fein were to a certain extent surprised both by the fact that the two Governments were able to agree at the end of a long negotiation the perception of which was that agreement probably would not be possible. They were also to a certain extent surprised by the substance of the Agreement.

Their view is that it is not possible to distinguish between Sinn Fein political strategy on the one hand and the campaign of violence on the other. That is to say it is the same people who are directing both although they clearly understand the need at one time to stress politics and at another to demonstrate their capacity to strike militarily. At the same time those who direct these matters do not have perfect freedom to modulate, as it were, the emphasis. For example it takes some time to prepare a particular phase of the campaign of violence and there are of course, from time to time, problems of arms and explosives, although apparently no serious problems of availability of personnel.

The British believe that the campaign against RUC stations had been prepared some time ahead of the conclusion of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and was not related directly to it.

They feel that, on the political front, Sinn Fein are going through a period of uncertainty and casting about for issues on which to revive their relevance and credibility in their own strongholds. Both sides noted the emergence of efforts to spread alarm in some nationalist areas at the possibility of major loyalist attacks including the distribution of leaflets in West Belfast calling for medical, paramedical and other professional persons to assist in preparation for such an eventuality. The British felt that these efforts have not so far elicited much response.

Both sides also noted two themes in recent speeches by Adams and Morrison. One is the articulation of this alarmist theme accompanied by criticism of the SDLP and Dublin for putting the Catholic community in danger through the Agreement. The second theme, recurring particularly in Morrison's speeches, is the somewhat contradictory charge that the unionist reaction as has now emerged has been created by a constitutional political initiative (the Agreement), thus demonstrating the "fallacy" of the SDLP/Dublin attack on the republican movement for putting the nationalist community in danger through a campaign of

violence. In other words this sort of unionist reaction will happen no matter whether the "provocation" is by constitutional nationalism or the campaign of violence. We noted the contradiction of this argument with the oft-repeated claim of the Sinn Fein leadership that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is the result of their own activities, viz. the British would not have embarked on the Agreement were it not for their fear of the rise of Sinn Fein as a political force.

Elliott, rather in the style of Foreign Office cold calculations of the strategies of violent opposition to British rule, sees the republican movement as being fundamentally determined on their campaign of violence and not really committed to a political programme. We argued forcibly that there has been a change in the situation in the past five years; that short-term political opportunities and problems now matter significantly to the leadership of both the IRA and Sinn Fein and that the IRA, by becoming deeply involved in the politics of nationalist alienation, have put themselves into a position where they have no option but to respond politically. We suggested that this was different from the concerns of the republican "warriors" who previously ran the movement from the South and whose concern was exclusively with the single objective, however long-term, of forcing the British to withdraw. Of course this remained the primordial objective but the concerns and anxieties of those who directed both wings of the movement had been transformed, perhaps irreversibly.

We emphatically drew to the attention of our colleagues the recent attempts by the Sinn Fein leadership to expose the inadequacies of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, not simply on the basis of its ideological "incompatibility" with an anti-partitionist stance, but because of the alleged failure of the Conference as yet to produce results in relation to the UDR, RUC, administration of justice and human rights. We argued that it was highly significant that Sinn Fein was directing its criticism to these areas: this demonstrates that Sinn Fein are afraid that the Conference might actually deliver in these areas

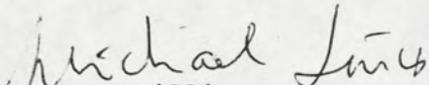
and that delivery would undermine their support and enhance the position of constitutional nationalism. We said that this underlined the need for the Conference to be seen to succeed.

I suggest that this might be a useful argument to be deployed by the Minister with King. I say this because of a conviction that the only factor that will motivate the British to deliver to the Conference is the fear of a revival of Sinn Fein or of popular support for the campaign of violence.

I attach a small selection of reports of recent Sinn Fein speeches which bear out the arguments that we put. I have no doubt that the Department could easily develop this material.

In the past we have through a number of contacts in Belfast kept track of political thinking in the Sinn Fein leadership. I think this has been very useful and suggest that it might be looked into again in the near future.

Yours sincerely

  
M.J. Lillis