

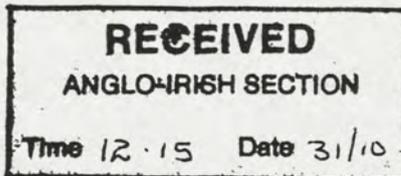


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BÉAL FEIRSTE

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29 October, 1986

Mr. Eamonn O Tuathail,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
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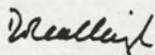
Dear Eamonn,

I enclose a copy of a paper drawn up in the Northern Ireland Office titled "Sinn Fein: The Changing Attitude to Abstentionism". The paper was given to us for our information by Elliott. The paper on the whole would not seem to contain anything that we would find astonishing. It was drawn up before the Maguire statement indicating support for abstentionism and is in the nature of a briefing paper for Ministers and others on the issue.

Elliott, in response to a question, told me that the debate within the Northern Ireland Office about how to deal with Sinn Fein continues with no outcome yet in sight. Work is being done on the possibility of trying to limit in a legal way the open verbal support which Sinn Fein members give to the IRA and which others in Northern Ireland give to the various paramilitary groups including the loyalist ones. The British think it should be possible for them to find a suitable wording which would be related specifically to the encouragement of violence and which might be linked with a prescribed organisation. But their deliberations are not in any way definitive and Elliott stressed

that he continually presses the case with his own authorities that they will have to enter into serious discussions with us before any decisions are taken with regard to Northern Ireland. He also mentioned that there is some language in the pending Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order relating to incitement.

Yours sincerely,



D. O'Ceallaigh

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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE, BELFAST

TITLE: SINN FEIN: THE CHANGING ATTITUDE TO ABSTENTIONISM

1. The forthcoming Sinn Fein Ard Fheis in Dublin is likely to agree to any Sinn Fein elected representatives taking up their seats in the Dail. This will be the culmination of an orchestrated campaign by Gerry ADAMS and his Northern colleagues to secure changes in the policy of the Provisional movement and to implement in full its dual political and terrorist strategy.
2. A change in Sinn Fein policy would be impossible without PIRA endorsement. This has now been secured at the first meeting for 16 years of a General Army convention (The "Supreme Army Authority"). A PIRA press announcement issued on 14 October 1986 is attached. With the Convention's support ADAMS should have little difficulty in steering the change through the Ard Fheis (31 October - 2 November), in advance of a general election in the Republic of Ireland. The Ard Chomhairle (the Executive Committee) has given its support to a change in policy by introducing motions for the Ard Fheis.

The Internal Argument

3. The vote in the Army Convention is the vindication of a long campaign by ADAMS. It stemmed from the Provisional leadership's reaction to the successes of republican (and H Block) candidates in local and national elections in Northern Ireland and the Republic during the hunger strike of 1981. The Provisionals' policy of not taking up parliamentary seats is a reflection of their political belief that they are the true heirs of the 1916 Rising and the Second Dail of 1921 and constitute the legitimate Government for the whole of Ireland. The argument over abstentionism is one of great moment in the Republican movement: it was the major reason for the schism which developed in the IRA in 1969, leading to the creation of two wings for the movement - the Provisionals and the Officials. ADAMS will therefore be careful to handle the tone and manner of the debate in the forthcoming Ard Fheis with sensitivity. Though he is virtually assured of winning the vote, he will not want to humiliate the deep-rooted and traditionalist opposition, represented by such figures as David O'Connell and Rory O'Brady.

Campaign for Change in Policy

4. The abandonment of abstentionism was first raised as an issue at an Ard Fheis in 1980 but was rejected out of hand. In 1981 it was agreed that Sinn Fein should take up any seats won in Northern Ireland District Council elections. It was at this stage that Danny MORRISON made his, now famous, declaration "who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot-box? But will anyone object if with a ballot paper in this hand, and an armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland".
5. The 1983 Ard Fheis agreed, in advance of the European Assembly elections in mid 1984, that Sinn Fein would take up any European Assembly seats. The following year saw the removal from

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The Ard Fheis agenda of an anti-abstentionist resolution relating to Parliamentary elections in recognition of the strong opposition it would cause. At a special party conference in December 1984 ADAMS set out his reasons for a more flexible approach on abstentionism. The speech was well received but ADAMS did not feel confident enough to press the point at the next Ard Fheis in November 1985. In the debate, despite their known views, neither ADAMS, MORRISON nor McGUINNESS spoke or voted on the issue. The anti-abstentionists were, however, defeated quite narrowly (181 to 161) and this result undoubtedly gave much heart to ADAMS and his supporters.

6. ADAMS did not return to the charge at the mid-year conference in late May 1986 but chose instead to emphasise the need for flexibility, compromise and co-operation with other groups. This could have been a coded speech designed to advance the anti-abstentionist cause without mentioning the issue directly. Alex MASKEY took the lead in the debate and suggested that seats be taken up only in the Republic. MASKEY has indicated elsewhere that he would contemplate going further, perhaps standing for Westminster elections or elections for any future Northern Ireland Assembly. Other evidence shows that ADAMS has ambitions eventually to extend Sinn Fein Parliamentary representation beyond the Dail.

7. As a further indication of the leadership's intentions, during the summer of 1986 Danny MORRISON, the Education Officer for Sinn Fein, set about improving the standards of Sinn Fein party workers particularly in the Republic. ADAMS also went on an extensive speaking tour in the South. His public statements in defence of abstentionism became increasingly ambiguous. In addition, an orchestrated series of letters from Republican prisoners, including those in GB gaols, began appearing in An Phoblacht/Republican News giving support to the anti-abstentionist cause. There has been some public and private opposition, but in a muted form. Some of the old-guard appear to have acknowledged defeat. Some may leave the movement, but there is little indication of a will to set up a rival or alternative grouping.

Outlook

8. The leadership realises that it can make no significant inroads into the electoral support for the major parties in the Dail, but in any close contest it could hold the balance of power. There is some nervousness among constitutional politicians in the South that, if it wins any seats, Sinn Fein would take the opportunity to disrupt Parliamentary proceedings. We have no evidence to show that Sinn Fein would deliberately seek to do this. It is more likely to look for a platform to air issues close to its heart such as the welfare of republican prisoners, extradition procedures, and the restrictions on the Provisionals' use of the media imposed by Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act.

9. It is unclear whether Sinn Fein will eventually extend a policy of parliamentary participation beyond the Dail. ADAMS possibly intends to use the experience in the Dail to persuade

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More recalcitrant Sinn Fein members to countenance the Party taking up seats in Westminster or in a future Northern Ireland Assembly. PIRA's press release of 14 October, 1986 leaves this open. But the benefits to Sinn Fein will have to be substantial to persuade many hard-line republicans to consider participation at Westminster. Attendance in the Dail will not deflect supporters in their determination to rid Ireland of a British presence. The Army Convention has reiterated its dedication to the armed struggle and political activity will continue to be subordinate to the terrorist campaign. It would require an unusual feat of education and discipline to sustain the will for a "war" against the British whilst agreeing to participate in Westminster.

October 1986

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ANNEX

PIRA Press Statement, 14th October 1986

"Recently and after much careful planning, IRA delegates from all over Ireland secretly met in a General Army Convention for the first time in 16 years. At this meeting were members of the outgoing Army Council and representatives of the Army Executive, GHQ staff and Battalions and Units, all of whom were elected by their own Conventions to attend.

"The Convention opened with a unanimous pledge of rededication to the armed struggle and confidence in the armed struggle as being the means of breaking the British connection and bringing about Irish independence.

"Several sections of the constitution of Oglaih Na H-Eireann were amended and by more than the required two thirds majority the delegates passed two particular resolutions. The first removed the ban on volunteers discussing or advocating the taking of parliamentary seats. The second removed the ban on supporting successful republican candidates who take their seats in Leinster House.

"Also reaffirmed was General Army Order No. 8 which prohibits offensive action against the administration in the 26 counties or its forces.

"The constitution was modernised so that it reads in non-sexist language.

"The objective of restoring the Irish language as the everyday language of the Irish people was reaffirmed.

"The present strategy of the Irish Republican Army was discussed and endorsed although the volume of resolutions made it impossible to deal with every issue.

"By secret ballot the delegates then elected a 12-person Army Executive, which in turn elected a new Army Council. The Army Council, the Chief of Staff it has appointed, and the Army Executive will study the outstanding resolutions which relate to how best to prosecute the struggle for freedom.

Signed ... P. O'NEILL, Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, Dublin".

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