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Reference Code:	2016/52/13
Creation Dates:	29 October 1986
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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MEETING WITH DEAN GERARD MONTAGUE,
BELFAST, 29 OCTOBER 1986

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I called on Dean Gerard Montague, the parish priest of St. Paul's (Falls Road), in Belfast on 29 October.

Among the points which Dean Montague made were the following:-

Sinn Fein and abstentionism

The proposal to end abstentionism is very popular in the North. It is consistent, furthermore, with the way in which Sinn Fein has been developing under Gerry Adams' leadership. Many of those who gave Adams their vote in the last general election did so in the hope of strengthening the trend away from violence and towards politics which they detected in the Republican movement. Adams (whom Dean Montague knows well) has never had a reputation as a gunman. He has always been more interested in the political approach and has "got away with this" essentially because his own Republican credentials are impeccable (both his father and his grandfather had IRA involvement). He is extremely popular in West Belfast and has a calming effect on some of the "wilder types" among the Provos.

Dean Montague was certain that Adams would win the vote at the Ard Fheis. He expected that this would precipitate a split of some kind in the movement.

Adams' own position

The bedrock of Adams' support in West Belfast is not the disillusioned youth, as people are inclined to assume, but rather "the old women" who, no matter what, will always vote for "the boys". It is by no means a foregone conclusion,

however, that Adams will retain his West Belfast seat at the next Westminster election. He does not command majority support but won his seat essentially because the opposition to him was divided. Under less favourable circumstances (i.e., without the headwind lent to him previously by the H-Block crisis), he may not be able to repeat his success. The loyalties of the West Belfast electorate are not easily predictable - Dean Montague observed, for example, that Will Glendinning did very well at the last Council elections, even though in theory a "neutral" should have no chance in West Belfast.

Security forces in West Belfast

There has been a deterioration in the behaviour of the security forces in West Belfast in recent months.

In the case of the Army, this can be attributed to the presence of the Marines, a regiment which has been known in the past for its aggressive behaviour towards nationalists. I indicated to Dean Montague that we recently raised the Marines' conduct in the Conference framework. By way of example, Dean Montague mentioned that he witnessed an incident a fortnight ago in which a Marine, apparently without provocation, assaulted a youth on the Falls Road. He was immediately surrounded by a hostile crowd. The RUC intervened but stood around "doing nothing" until Dean Montague suggested that they take statements from the soldier, the youth and the witnesses. Some of the by-standers subsequently went down to Grosvenor Road RUC Station and made a formal complaint against the soldier.

Dean Montague also complained about insensitivity shown by the Army in the security arrangements at a number of recent funerals in the area. I told him confidentially that this issue had been raised by us in the Conference framework. Regarding the McKernan funeral, he confirmed that McKernan's widow had told the Provos explicitly that she did not want a

paramilitary funeral and that, as far as he was aware, no Provos were in attendance. The same held true for the funeral of an IRA man called Murphy who died in London recently and whose family (who had dissociated themselves from him years previously) refused to countenance a paramilitary funeral. "By and large", Dean Montague said, the Provos respect the wishes of the families. Where the family agrees to a paramilitary funeral, the Provos try to mobilise a large attendance by offering payment of £5 to all who attend (though this is not given to anyone who enters the church, i.e., who identifies himself as a 'bona fide' mourner). Dean Montague remarked that this tactic is also being used by the DUP to organise an impressive turnout for Loyalist funerals - many of those who attended the recent Bingham funeral, for example, were of the "rent-a-crowd" variety.

Local clergy, Dean Montague continued, have also complained at a lack of cooperation from the RUC recently. While hitherto the RUC used to try to "sort things out" and to defuse local difficulties, now they are less inclined to do so. Dean Montague's own explanation for this was that new training courses introduced for the RUC recently have given RUC men a greater sense of their own importance and the role of the "local bobby" no longer holds any interest for them. Matters are not helped, furthermore, by the fact that many RUC men have been transferred from the Springfield Road barracks, where they could easily be contacted, to another barracks in Cullingtree Road (off the Grosvenor Road), where they are less accessible.

On the other hand, local youths under the Provos' influence have been far from blameless. In a recent incident, two youths planted a blast-bomb (which went off) on the road outside the RUC's Springfield Road barracks. When Dean Montague went to the local Provos to complain about this, the response was: "They were just a couple of hotheads who wanted to annoy the police - we let them go ahead". It is known, however, that the culprits in this and similar incidents were paid by the Provos for their trouble.

IRA campaign against people working for the security forces

This campaign is not biting in the Belfast area because there are relatively few Catholic contractors in this area and the authorities can usually avoid hiring them. In other parts of the North, where Catholic contractors are in a majority, the campaign is more effective.

INLA activities

For some time past, the INLA have been "patrolling" an area of St. Peter's parish (which is centred on the Divis Flats) where local juvenile delinquents have been causing trouble. One night last summer, confusion was caused by an incident in which the INLA started shooting at some "hoods" near Divis Flats, thereby provoking the intervention of the Army who believed themselves to be the targets of the gunfire. The INLA have elected to "patrol" the area concerned, claiming that the local Provos have lost their grip and are unable to do so.

Workers' Party activities

As an interesting example of cooperation 'across the divide', Dean Montague mentioned that a parishioner of his who has Workers' Party connections applied recently for a license to run a drinking club in the old Blackstaff Mill off the Springfield Road. With a DUP Lord Mayor in City Hall, there would normally be no chance. The word is, however, that Sammy Wilson is prepared to be helpful, both in this and in a number of similar cases, in order to buy the support of the Workers' Party ⁱⁿ key votes in Belfast City Council.

Employment in West Belfast

Dean Montague commented that the Provos like to give their people "beer and skittles" (i.e., drinking clubs) but draw the

line at anything even remotely resembling employment. "Jobs are bad news for the Provos". He mentioned with some bitterness in this context Sinn Fein opposition to efforts he himself has been making recently to set up a small enterprise centre in West Belfast.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

Finally, Dean Montague commented that the Agreement, while in itself a good thing, barely impinges on the lives of people living in West Belfast. He recalled in this connection the anecdote of the labourer at the road-side who, spotting Parnell one day, called out: "Will you be getting us Home Rule?" To which Parnell replied: "Yes, I will - and you'll still be breaking stones".

David Donoghue

David Donoghue

3 November 1986.

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