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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

Secret

17 Grosvenor Place
London SW1X 7HR

19235
20876

Lillis
Conciliation
Washington
Box
Mr. O'Donnell
to contact in
urgent.

21 January 1986

Discussion with Reginald Weir QC, 11 January 1986

Dear Assistant Secretary

It might be of some interest to report on several discussions which I had with Reginald Weir QC over the weekend of the British/Irish Association meeting in Balliol College, Oxford. (This included a discussion in a group involving Weir, Kevin Boyle, Padraig O'Malley and - for a time - Eamon Mallie of Downtown Radio).

[I think you may have spoken yourself with Weir over the weekend. In addition to his practice in Northern Ireland as Queen's Counsel, he has been called to the bar in both London and Dublin and, some days after the BIA Conference, was due to be called to the inner bar in Dublin. He represented McGlinchey in his successful appeal in Northern Ireland some months ago and, following his call to the inner bar in the South, he will appear for him in our Courts along with Patrick McEntee SC. In addition to his appearances for the defence in several prominent cases, Weir has also prosecuted cases for NIO - including the case of the British soldier convicted last year.]

Weir was absolutely scathing in his judgement of the UDR (some of whom he has defended in specific cases) and highly critical of the RUC. He said the UDR was "unreformable". He saw it as the direct successor of the old B-Specials and thought that the only reason for its existence was to keep its members out of worse mischief which they would get up to individually.

Weir was also quite trenchant in his criticism of the RUC and of the Chief Constable Sir John Hermon. I ventured the view, widely promoted by Hermon, that the RUC has in many respects become more "professional" over the past decade but Weir would have none of this. He said he knows the police; and the ordinary rank and file recruited in recent years are worse and more sectarian than their equivalents would have been fifteen or twenty years ago. Twenty years ago, he said, the "ordinary decent policeman" in a police car getting "the two finger sign" from nationalists youths would have driven on and ignored it. Today the police in a similar situation would haul those involved into the police station and fingerprint them etc. - thus spreading bad feeling against the police further within the Catholic community. Weir had little respect for Hermon and gave no credence to his story of improvement in the force. He also thinks that Hermon, privately, has a very poor opinion of the quality of the Gardai in the South and on the Border (though Weir himself implied that he

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would have his own tales to tell, in a critical vein, about policing on the Southern side which he observes regularly when he goes to his holiday home in Donegal).

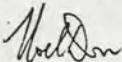
Weir mentioned that he had obtained a conviction in the case where he prosecuted a British soldier last year, in the teeth of continuing and serious obstruction on the part of the police.

He believes that the only remedy in the case of the RUC is to bring in more "mainland" officers at the rank of Inspector and similar ranks. Such an injection of outsiders at the appropriate level would stiffen the force and make it more professional and less sectarian.

Notwithstanding the fact that Weir had expressed these views very trenchantly and repeatedly in discussion on Saturday night (backed to a considerable extent by Kevin Boyle) he spoke much more blandly and with no real criticism in a ten minute presentation to the Conference as a whole which he was asked to make on Sunday morning. At that session there was virtually nothing said to bring out the alienation of the minority population from the security forces despite the fact that Weir and Boyle had been very strong on this theme the previous night. I took this up afterwards informally with both of them saying that I thought the blandness of the Sunday morning session did not adequately represent the feelings they had expressed so strongly the night before. Weir acknowledged this but he explained that this was his first attendance at a BIA Conference and he had not quite known what tone to adopt in his public presentation. It had been put to him (I think by Sean MacReamoinn who chaired the session?) before the meeting that he should make his presentation a fairly non-committal one and he had followed this approach in order not to give offence. He felt somewhat regretful afterwards that the result had been to gloss over the real problem and Kevin Boyle who joined our discussion shared this view. I understood from him that he too had suggested in advance to Weir that he adopt a "factual" approach and that he now agreed rather ruefully, that this had meant that the real underlying criticisms had not surfaced at all. I gathered from Boyle (who had spoken on the previous night about his own observation of alienation in his own extended family on the recent occasion of his father's funeral) he is thinking about doing some kind of paper, possibly for publication, to bring out the nature of the problem more clearly than it emerged at the BIA itself.

I might mention finally, notwithstanding what might be expected in view of his opinions, that Weir himself made a point in discussion of the fact that he is of a Protestant background and family. He thought this was why he had been asked to prosecute in certain cases.

Yours sincerely



Noel Dorr
Ambassador

Mr Eamon O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2