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Meeting with P. J. McGrory,
Belfast, 16 February 1987

I met P. J. McGrory, the Belfast solicitor, in Belfast on 16 February.

Among the points which we covered were the following:

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Provisional IRA/Sinn Fein

Gerry Adams called recently to McGrory's home to give him a signed copy of his new book. (McGrory, in turn, gave him a copy of his own Field Day pamphlet, which Adams had already read and which, to McGrory's surprise, he praised). In the course of a long conversation, Adams said he regarded it as legitimate for Sinn Fein to support the "armed struggle". At the same time, however, he personally felt entitled to decide that the armed struggle was undesirable at a given point in time. McGrory read this remark in two ways: first, Adams disapproves of individual IRA atrocities (though, as he told McGrory subsequently, he will never say so in public - "the Army Council gives me only so much leeway..."); and secondly, he favours the political struggle at the present time. McGrory views Adams as "a politician more than a gunman". He is still buoyed by his West Belfast victory in 1983 and basically wants

to make a career in politics. He believes (or hopes) that the "movement" will become more and more political as time goes by. The remarkable thing is that he carries the overwhelming majority of Northern Republicans with him. Despite his professed subservience to the Army Council, the essential reality is that "whatever Adams says, the Provos will eventually do".

I noted reports of an attempted policy shift within the Labour Party towards a harder line on Irish unity and the fact that a Labour delegation had recently met Sinn Fein in Belfast. Adams would clearly have an interest in nurturing any movement in Labour towards a policy of British withdrawal. McGrory told me that in their recent conversation Adams indicated to him that he was "thinking along those lines at present". However, he remains suspicious of Labour (in the light of the events of May 1974) and is wary in all his dealings with them. When I floated the possibility that Adams might push a future Labour Government in the direction of a declaration of intent to withdraw, McGrory replied by saying that Adams had mentioned this to him a number of times in the past. In McGrory's view, a declaration of intent would go "a long way, indeed a very long way" towards meeting Adams' desiderata. Adams would, of course, want a stated time-scale - "maybe 25, 40 or even 50 years". If he were to get something which he found acceptable, he would undoubtedly be able to sell it in turn to the Provos. It might take some time, and there would be a lot of suspicion and scepticism to overcome, but eventually he would carry the Army Council with him.

Referring in this general context to the "End of Empire" series which has been shown on British television recently, McGrory noted the parallels between the situation in Kenya, Cyprus, etc., prior to British withdrawal and the present situation in Northern Ireland. He also observed, however, that a period of major and sustained violence was necessary in each before the final withdrawal came. In his view, the Provos would not be capable of sustaining such a campaign. They are "war-weary" at

this stage and they have a general feeling that they are getting nowhere. Though a core of dedicated and ruthless activists remains, recruitment is on the decline at present. They are stagnating and at times appear simply as a "backdrop" to Adams' political movement. Their immediate acquiescence in the proposal to end abstentionism showed that they follow Adams' lead on everything. They expect that, as a consequence of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (which, to their considerable surprise, Mrs. Thatcher is defending to the hilt), the Loyalists will sooner or later "go berserk". Some of them are simply waiting for that to happen, holding themselves ready for outright civil war which they think will propel them into power. The more sober among them realise that the Provos will never have enough manpower or equipment to defend the Catholic community in a civil war situation. Adams spoke to McGrory, with what the latter took to be complete sincerity, of his fears that the Catholic community of West Belfast would be "annihilated" in the event of a major conflagration in which Loyalists on the rampage would be supported not only by their own paramilitaries but also by elements in the security forces (UDR and some RUC).

The Agreement in general

In conclusion, McGrory recalled that he had been unhappy with several aspects of the Agreement, in particular its constitutional implications. However, he has now come round to the view that the "distinct Irish presence" in Northern Ireland which the Agreement affords is something which must at all costs be preserved. He fully agreed with the recent TV warning by Seamus Mallon about the undesirability of an "Irish withdrawal from Northern Ireland". Any move in that direction would, in his view, "destroy the morale of Northern nationalists". He considered it most unlikely, however, that this step would be contemplated by any Irish Government. Looking ahead to a possible change of government, he predicted that there would be simply "changes of emphasis here and there" in relation to the Agreement. He also expected that a new

Irish Government would be more sympathetic to the "dilemma" posed for Northern nationalists by, on the one hand, the attractions of political and security reforms which would ease their condition in the short to medium term and on the other, the danger that such ameliorations might consolidate the status quo in Northern Ireland and compromise, therefore, the search for Irish unity in the longer term. In short, he would like to see the Agreement supported but in a manner which would make plain that any reforms it achieved were not ends unto themselves but part of a "wider process".

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
19 February 1987

cc:

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