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by McCarty J. 19003

5 August 1987

Mr. Eamon O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

*W. Collins
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① 3 Trade file
② SREP file ✓
③ S.F. file*

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Also with
Cousellors A.I.
Aus. Liaison
Mrs. Vally
Mr. D. Matthews*

Dear Eamon

Nationalist Politics

We had a meeting in the Secretariat this morning attended on the British side by Mark Elliott and John McConnell and on our side by Michael Lillis, Sean O hUigin and myself at which the British side gave us an indication of their current thinking on nationalist politics. Within the SDLP they believe that there are differences between the leadership and the younger more aggressive activists represented by the likes of Durkan, Colton and Attwood. In general they feel the latter to be slightly more left wing than their elders. Many of the older members of the SDLP they consider inactive and without any great ability in the taking of initiatives.

Within Sinn Fein they also believe there are differences between the older and the younger activists. On the whole they think the older ones are more traditional in their approach to the use of politics. The younger ones are somewhat frustrated at the position of the republican movement, following 17-18 years of activity.

The conclusion they reach from election results, including the recent general election, is that the minority community are divided into three groups. The first group, which is small, is pro-union and generally votes Alliance. Members of this group are unlikely to vote unionist because of the failure of the unionist parties to show any concern for minority interests. The second group are what we would call constitutional nationalists supporting the SDLP and the third group, Sinn Fein supporters.

They believe that the vast majority of voters in the minority community vote consistently for one particular group. They do not believe that there is any large floating vote which might from time to time go either to the SDLP or to Sinn Fein, depending on particular circumstances. What floating vote

exists went on the occasion of the general election to the SDLP. But even if circumstances here had been such that the vote had gone to Sinn Fein rather than to the SDLP it would not have given Sinn Fein a majority of votes in the nationalist community. The exception to this is West Belfast where whatever floating vote exists had gone to the SDLP. McConnell believes that the West Belfast seat can be won by the SDLP. McConnell was as usual critical of the SDLP. He said that where they had fought Sinn Fein in the recent general election, with the exception of West Belfast, they had won. In Fermanagh and mid-Ulster the SDLP continue to look over their shoulders at Sinn Fein and they are afraid to take them on. The consequences are that Sinn Fein gains. Since 1984 Sinn Fein has set about winning hearts and minds. They have concentrated their efforts on areas where they expected they could win seats such as West Belfast, or in areas where they could win a significant number of votes such as mid-Ulster and Fermanagh. Though pressed the British had little to add to what we know of the Sinn Fein position.

McConnell said that there are some people within the minority community who believe that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has taken a burden off their shoulders. It has become clear that unity can only be achieved when nationalists convince a sufficient number of unionists that it is in their interest. In the meantime nationalists don't have to worry about unity as an immediate issue and are free to pursue their other interests.

The NIO hasn't yet carried out a full examination of the results of the recent general election but an examination of those results could lead to a conclusion that with the exception of West Belfast the SDLP had succeeded in attracting that young vote which had come on the register in recent years. In both Armagh and South Down the SDLP vote increased without any significant decrease in the Sinn Fein vote and those results would tend to lead one to that conclusion. If that is true then it would indicate that the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the more active role of younger SDLP members is having an effect and is attracting support from the youth.

In response, speaking personally, Lillis said that the overriding factor in the SDLP is the personality of John Hume. Hume has a long term strategy and dominates thinking within the party. It is accepted in both communities in Northern Ireland and by the British Government that if one deals with Hume one is dealing with the nationalist community and that he can deliver. A corollary of course is that Hume tends to be a little short on the detail. Lillis took issue with the British concept that the Sinn Fein vote is in essence an irreducible vote. The strategy of successive Irish Governments is based on the premise that the Sinn Fein vote can be reduced by taking effective action to meet nationalist concerns.

During the course of our discussion the British side returned to the issue of three-judge courts. They claimed that SDLP spokesmen and other prominent nationalists such as the Cardinal

have not, in their private contacts with Ministers, indicated that the three-judge court issue is of any great concern to them. Indeed only in recent days Adrian Colton had publicly stated that the SDLP's policy is to seek a return to jury courts. They would wish to repeat their request for a paper from our side setting out the evidence available to us that Northern nationalists desire a three-judge court which they could use in briefing Ministers on their side. //2

The discussion was in the nature of a first exchange. We are planning to have some further exchanges in the near future. We would suggest that we might discuss this issue at our regular Department/Secretariat meeting next Monday.

Yours sincerely

Daithi O Ceallaigh

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