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Reference Code:	2017/10/47
Creation Dates:	16 March 1987
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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Meeting with Fr. Gerard McCall (Short Strand),
16 March 1987

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I met Fr. Gerard McCall, the PP of the Short Strand parish (St. Matthew's), in Belfast on 16 March.

Short Strand is a small nationalist enclave just across the Lagan River from Belfast city centre. Numbering roughly 3,000 Catholics, it is surrounded by the working-class Loyalist areas of East Belfast and its exposed position makes it a relatively easy target for Loyalist sectarian violence.

Among the points which Fr. McCall made to me were the following:

Provisional IRA

Short Strand is a Provisional IRA stronghold and has been one for a long time. "Dickie" Glenholmes, for example, came from Short Strand (as did his daughter Evelyn). The existence of this Catholic enclave on the eastern shore of the Lagan goes back to the days when Catholics found employment in the nearby Harland and Wolf shipyard. When the 'troubles' broke out, the Provos moved into Short Strand to protect Catholic workers from Loyalist aggression. As unemployment followed, it was all too easy for the Provos to consolidate their grip.

Over the years, quite a number of nationalists in Short Strand were burned or otherwise intimidated out of their homes. Others decided voluntarily to leave because of the poor living conditions and to move to Poleglass and other newer estates on the outskirts of Belfast. The result was that, between the late sixties and today, the population of Short Strand declined

from 12,000 to roughly 3,000. The unemployment rate among this surviving population is in the region of 75% - 80%. Conscious no doubt of the Provos' ability to exploit for their own purposes the discontent created by massive unemployment and poor housing, the British Government has been engaged in recent years in an extensive re-housing and refurbishment project in Short Strand. When the management of the Sirocco engineering works complained at the siting of their factory in a hostile (Catholic) environment, the Government provided funds to enable the plant to be relocated in a friendlier environment (i.e., closer to the East Belfast hinterland). This move created a large area of waste ground in Short Strand on which several hundred new houses have now been built. People living in the old sub-standard accommodation in Short Strand are being gradually moved into these new houses. In all, the project, which is nearing completion, will make available to the Short Strand population 800 houses which are either new or refurbished.

Far from being disconcerted by this rehabilitation of the area, the Provos are exploiting it to their own advantage. They have gained control of most of the building sites (the others being allocated to the UDA) and are collecting weekly protection money. Things have been a bit tense on the sites in the last few months, since the "carve-up" arrangements between the Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries for the Belfast building sites broke down in the middle of last year, but so far there has been no major trouble.

Fr. McCall does not know many of the local Provos. He has, however, had contact with one or two. Following the murder of Paddy Murray, an alleged informer, by the Provos in Short Strand in August 1986, he received a phone-call from two individuals who told him that there was a weapons dump in the bottom of Murray's garden and asked him to report this to the police. Fr. McCall did so. The Provos' intention was plain: they wished to preempt a police search of Murray's house and other nearby houses (with the possibility of arrests) by giving the police something which would satisfy their curiosity for

the time being. Fr. McCall, who was told what the haul consisted of, noted with interest that, when the police came along and uncovered the dump, two important items were missing from the list which they subsequently gave to the media. Along with rifles, handguns, a Sten gun and explosives, the dump contained a RUC uniform and handcuffs - yet the police made no mention of this to the media. A point of concern to Fr. McCall about this particular episode was that, when he rang the police to pass on the information, it was immediately apparent that the police knew already. He could only conclude that his phone was being tapped and that the conversation with the Provos (which had taken place only half an hour earlier) had been overheard.

Fr. McCall had contact about a year ago with two other local Provos who called to see him, told him who they were and asked him to report a local youth to the police for vandalism and other "anti-social behaviour". He refused to do so.

Violent incidents

Fr. McCall moved from Ballymurphy to Short Strand four years ago. Prior to that, there had been a lot of violence and unrest in Short Strand. In the intervening years, however, things have quietened down noticeably. This is probably due in large measure to the steady decline in Short Strand's population. The continuing strong presence of the Provos, however, has probably also discouraged Loyalist sectarian activity.

In Fr. McCall's time in Short Strand, there have only been three major incidents. About three years ago, a local youth was killed by a drunken RUC officer who was sitting in a police car opposite the RUC station and shot the youth dead when he approached him to ask him a question. In August 1985 a Protestant youth was picked up and beaten to death by local Provos, who were under the influence of drugs at the time, and his body was left a few yards away from Fr. McCall's church. In August 1986, the alleged informer mentioned above (Paddy

Murray) was shot dead by the Provos. Murray's guilt in this respect was hotly disputed in the community and the killing caused a lot of bitterness locally. Murray himself had on one occasion shot dead another youth alleged to have been a police tout.

Security forces

The RUC have survived relatively unscathed in the area because, by a happy coincidence, the police station is unassailable. Mount Pottinger RUC station is situated in the middle of a row of nationalist houses and, as any bomb attack would inevitably destroy the adjacent houses, the Provos have not attacked it.

Contact between local people and the police, however, is minimal. The Worker's Party are present in Short Strand but are generally despised, Fr. McCall told me, "because they cooperate with the police". He himself has next to no dealings with the police.

The Army no longer come into the area. The UDR can occasionally be seen operating patrols on Albert Bridge but they very rarely enter Short Strand.

Fr. McCall believes that, in the event of a major breakdown in public order in Northern Ireland, nationalists living in Short Strand would be at very serious risk. He can only hope that, in that eventuality, the Army would again move into the area to protect nationalists. (About five years ago, when serious trouble broke out in Short Strand, the Army took up position in the church grounds and elsewhere and their presence had a considerable reassuring effect on local residents).

Naiscoil

Referring to the Naiscoil in Short Strand, Fr. McCall said that the MacAirt community centre in which it is located has been taken over by the Provos. He would like to see the school kept open as he feels that it serves a useful social function. In

the absence of government funding, the Provos will try to operate the school through intimidation, pressurizing local people into making contributions. He understands that the bus service which used to take children from Short Strand to the Bunscoil in West Belfast has now been suspended under Provo pressure. In general, Fr. McCall did not seem greatly perturbed by the issue. He mentioned, however, his regret that the director of the local parish school had not seen fit to offer the service which was now being provided by the Provos through the Naiscoil.

Political representation

Sinn Fein are active but the SDLP has virtually no presence in Short Strand. Finally, Fr. McCall commented that "a number of our people swear by the local MP" for getting things done — Peter Robinson.

David Donoghue

David Donoghue

18 March 1987.

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