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*cc of Kinley help
Adams & Wi Sant for*

27 January 1998

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

COPY TO
30.1.98
MR O'DONNELL
MR HICKEY
MR BOUGHTON
MR PAV
MR CALLAGHAN
MR [unclear]

Dear Secretary,

Sinn Fein public meeting, 25 January 1998

I attended a public meeting on Sunday evening addressed by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Also on the platform were Bairbre de Brun, who chaired the meeting, Francie Molloy, Martin Ferris, and Michelle Gildernew. Gildernew was described by Adams as the head of Sinn Fein's "new diplomatic mission in London".

The meeting lasted for two and a half hours. The Camden Centre was full, giving an audience of perhaps five hundred or six hundred people. Admission was mainly by ticket. It was clear that many of those present had come on the understanding that they were to be "consulted" by the Sinn Fein leadership.

Among those present were the Islington MP Jeremy Corbyn, Professor Mary Hickman, and Gareth Peirce. I attended at the direct invitation of Michelle Gildernew.

Opening the meeting, Gerry Adams spoke for a half an hour without notes. He strongly supported a united Ireland as the ultimate objective of Sinn Fein, and took a strong line on prisoners, equality issues ("no second-class citizens"), and the need for an international enquiry into Bloody Sunday. On the objectives for the current political talks, he said nothing very specific. From a news point of view, the original element in his speech was a denunciation of the recent UFF statement

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as "not worth the paper it is written on", coupled with a demand that the British government avoid double standards. Adams did not call explicitly for the UDP to be expelled from the talks.

Over a period of two hours the platform took many dozens of questions, in batches of five or six. From the emotional and often polemical character of the questions it was clear that for the most part, at least, they were spontaneous. The platform were asked, for example:

- can the peace process bring peace?
- why has it taken the leadership so long to come to London (i.e., to hold a public meeting in London)?
- why does Sinn Fein deal with "death squads" in the talks?
- would it not be better for Nationalists to remain second class citizens and "fight imperialism"?
- is the leadership really standing up to Blair, who said there will be no united Ireland in his lifetime? What are they saying in private?
- can the Sinn Féin agenda be maintained throughout the talks?
- why does Blair want to hold on to Northern Ireland?
- has the Irish government betrayed Sinn Fein?

Most of the questioners were Irish. Many represented groupings to the left of the Labour Party. All were Republicans. On balance the audience was sceptical of the peace process, as something that might "copper-fasten partition". I summarise below some of the main arguments made from the platform.

Adams, McGuinness, and Ferris made much use of the words "process" and "phase". Their argument was that a process can be put in place which will lead to Irish unity and that the negotiations mark a new "phase in the struggle". McGuinness argued that the present process is not just what the British government imagines it to be. He cited the debate over the word "permanent", the elections in June 1996, decommissioning, the setting of a time-frame for negotiations, and Sinn Fein arguments against the propositions paper to argue that

Sinn Fein can work within the process to change it.

McGuinness argued that in the perspective of thirty years ("since I was twenty-one"), significant progress has been made by Nationalists, including the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Joint Declaration, and the Framework Document. McGuinness said that Sinn Féin are not supporters of the Framework Document and "want to go further". At the same time, he suggested that proposals for North-South bodies with executive power represent a step forward.

Adams and McGuinness referred to the "tide of history", implying that the present talks will not be conclusive and that the "process" which Sinn Fein wants to see will continue into the future. However, the speakers from the platform did not use words such as "transition" and "interim" in relation to any prospective settlement.

Both Adams and McGuinness responded at some length to questions on the true nature of British intentions. Their conclusion was that the British do indeed have an interest in maintaining the Union, although not for the blatant economic or strategic reasons of the past. They referred to the habits of the Establishment ("if there is a British Empire, we are it"), the temptation to take the course of least resistance, the refusal of the British establishment to listen to arguments based more on morality than on expediency, and "the fear of the impact of a new Irish society on Britain itself" (this latter argument one of several appeals by Adams to the sentiments of left-wingers in the audience).

From the above analysis Adams drew the conclusion that "we must make it expedient for powerful interests in Britain to leave Ireland". Adams strongly implied, without saying so directly, that the Republican movement has up to now not found the right strategy to do this. He concluded one strong intervention on the line. "let's start getting it right".

McGuinness argued that British attitudes have been changing and that "it is the Unionists who are confused". They cannot "rise from the negotiating table with a strengthening of the Union". McGuinness referred warmly to the Archbishop of Canterbury and others in the Church of England who have apologised for the past and are willing "to work proactively" (for what, he did not say in so many words). "More and more people are sharing our analysis". Sinn Fein have made electoral gains in Dublin, Cavan, and Kerry.

Both Adams and McGuinness suggested, to the largely British audience, that

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British people do not understand Northern Ireland and that their outlook would change if they drew the connection between, on the one hand, mindsets of their own and on the other hand, the sectarianism of the Orange Order and the activities of "death squads".

Adams and McGuinness used the word "responsibility" in connection with the role of the Republican movement, implying, I thought, that the ending of violence is a proper goal in itself. McGuinness said the Republican movement must do everything possible to prevent more IRA volunteers and British soldiers from being killed.

On Articles Two and Three, Adams said that the Irish nation and people are "an island nation". He added that he would like to see the constitution changed in a number of directions, for example to promote gender equality and protect children.

In response to criticism of the Irish government from the floor, Adams rejected the word "betrayal", saying that if "Dublin argues for less than is required", it may be because of a "learning curve". On the question of unity, the "instinct of Irish people is good".

McGuinness strongly emphasised the results of the Omagh local government by-election.

Martin Ferris, who arrived late, spoke in standard language about the "importance of "a process" and "different phases in the struggle". He said that the (alleged) harassment of Republicans in his constituency is now on the wane. (It was an issue for some members of the audience that "activism" in the Republican cause could lead to forms of harassment.)

Both Adams and McGuinness suggested that "British agents" or the "British military establishment" may have had a hand in the recent spate of killings.

In response to a question, Adams said there is no plan to establish a Sinn Fein cumann structure in Britain. He said that London, and not Brussels, should perhaps have been the place for Sinn Fein to build up their support base once their office in Washington was up and running. It was announced that Michelle Gildernew would take names after the meeting of those who might be willing to assist her in her work in London.

Winding up the meeting, Gildernew thanked "Embassies and MPs" for their

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presence. The meeting ended with a minute's silence for "all those recently killed in the North".

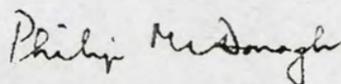
Comment

Martin Ferris spoke briefly and a little woodenly, and referred to different "phases of the struggle" in a general way. Despite some old-style rhetoric (Adams: "the hard business of making revolution"), both Adams and McGuinness seemed to hint at the need for new approaches from republicanism and seemed to be preparing the ground for greater flexibility on the substance of the political talks than a majority of their audience seemed to want. They also hinted at a new phase of political activity to follow an agreed settlement. Martin McGuinness said that the Republican movement must ask itself where it wants to be "five years from now".

It was noteworthy that despite strong rhetoric on some subjects, the platform speakers did not commit themselves to a particular outcome to the talks - although both the Framework Document and the May deadline were mentioned.

In a brief word afterwards Francie Molloy told me that the Sinn Fein leadership is trying to educate its followers. If this is so, my impression is that by and large, Adams and McGuinness were successful on this occasion. They received warm if not rapturous applause. When Martin McGuinness said, "I will struggle for justice until the last day of my life", and was cheered, the audience seemed to accept the struggle in question could take a political form.

Yours sincerely,



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor