

FAX

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27 March 1996

TO: S/Secretary O hUiginn, H.Q. FROM: B. Nolan, Secretariat

Subject: John Alderdice at Clonard Monastery.

Sunday, 24 March 1996

1. **John Alderdice** was the guest speaker at Clonard Monastery on Sunday evening, 24 March, at the latest in their series of Sunday Talks. The series owes its origins to the gathering at Florence last year, sponsored by the **San Egidio Community**, which looked at the Northern Ireland problem among several others. **Gerry Adams** and **Roy Garland** were previous guest speakers. The Clonard series seeks to bring together persons of differing faiths and traditions to promote discussion and examination of these differences in a benign and (as Clonard would see it) prayerful setting. It might work in a smaller and more intimate location, but as the event takes place in the fairly large church at Clonard, confrontation rather than dialogue is rarely far beneath the surface.
2. I attended on Sunday evening at the invitation of a Redemptorist Father, I had earlier met at a Queens University function. The principals adjourned for tea afterwards and there was an interesting hour-long discussion, including a fairly combative argument between **Alderdice** and **Brid Rodgers** on various aspects of the peace process, in particular the **election arrangements** and the **forum proposal**. **Brid Rodgers** was present as chairperson for the Talk and felt clearly uncomfortable as this obliged her to play a passive role for the most part. Not an easy thing to do in a nationalist area during a public discussion, when key issues of the moment, such as **policing** and **elections**, were being raised (sometimes angrily) by local voters. I think she felt it was a mistake for her to have taken on the role, especially as **Alderdice's** replies to questions turned out to be evasive and cliché-ridden for the most part. Her mood was not helped either by remarks two local SDLP supporters made to her as they were leaving the church. **They said they**

would "have to vote Sinn Féin in this election as it is the only way to get the British Government to take Nationalists seriously." Rodgers told me she is getting the same message from members of her own family.

3. As indicated, it was not an impressive performance by Alderdice. The Talk itself was interesting: a largely anecdotal sketch of his personal and political ancestry. He sees himself as "coming from" the enlightened, liberal strain of Ulster Presbyterianism, going back to the United Irishmen, which attained its Golden Age (globally speaking) during the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson. It was all a bit much for some of the locals as the questions quickly showed. The questions covered all of the expected topics: **decommissioning, policing, the elections and John Major**. Apart from his reply on decommissioning, he managed to equivocate and obfuscate in fairly eloquent terms on other matters. This impression was reinforced afterwards in the private discussion when (I felt) a note of arrogance and impatience with "nationalist demands" crept into his conversation.

Decommissioning

4. **On decommissioning** he was clear. He wants to see an **International Body** set up by the two Governments to deal with decommissioning of arms. This could begin its work as the all-party negotiations get under way, but **it would be an entirely separate exercise and not linked in any way to the negotiations**. He thinks this would work and it is, in any case, the only way to deal with the problem.

Forum

5. On other issues, Alderdice is remarkably detached. **He does not believe all-party negotiation will get anywhere. In the end the two Governments will have to impose something along the lines of the Framework Documents**. In spite of this pessimistic view he is quite happy with elections and the proposal for a forum. He and **Rodgers** had a spirited discussion on the forum proposal afterwards, but he stuck with his view that it could be a useful ventilation exercise, spoke highly of the Dublin Forum and refused to entertain the notion that it might be used successfully by some parties and individuals to block and wreck agreement in the negotiations.

Sinn Féin

6. **He does not believe the ceasefire will be restored before June and he is not worried that Sinn Féin could thereby be excluded from negotiations.** This was raised during the public session and it obliged **Brid Rodgers** to intervene from the chair to ask him if **John Hume** was wrong to speak with **Gerry Adams** long before the 1994 ceasefire. Alderdice replied that it was a matter for each party to decide. He could understand Hume's view but he could not agree with it. In the private discussion afterwards when this matter was again raised, Alderdice mentioned (approvingly) the Irish Government's refusal to speak with Sinn Féin. I asked him to note that this is entirely different from the notion of exclusion, which seems to be the Unionist idea of the way forward. The Irish Government's position is determined by the need to **include Sinn Féin, not exclude it from the negotiations**. In our view, all-party, inclusive negotiations mean just that. Failure to achieve inclusive negotiations will be a serious set-back. The Irish Government's refusal to speak with Sinn Féin at Ministerial level at present is a **tactic** which has inclusion as its aim and is not to be confused with the **strategy** of others which aims at exclusion and an illusory banishment. This led on to a brief discussion of other peace processes, including South Africa, which Alderdice has visited, and on which he holds a few remarkably selective and self-serving views.

Policing

7. **Policing** came up at both the public and private sessions. There was one particularly angry contribution from the 'congregation,' an elderly man who said he had lived in West Belfast all his life and knew what he was talking about. Alderdice replied by referring to members of his own family circle, policemen, who had died in the Troubles and whose killers were not apprehended. This provoked the questioner to intervene and say that had they been caught, they would now be in prison, while similar offences by known RUC personnel had gone unpunished. Alderdice went on to say that the RUC should not be blamed for Stalker, which was "probably an M15 affair". He made no reference to any of the current controversies surrounding the policing issue and no mention of reforms, which, in the circumstances, seemed remarkable. He referred to the growing drugs and crime problem in Belfast and elsewhere and remarked that it was all too easy to say: let's get rid of the RUC. In South Africa, he said, there were similar crime problems and people were happy to have their police, "now that they are Mr. Mandela's police and not

an apartheid police force". I took issue with him afterwards on this over-simplification, but he seemed unwilling to engage, referring in an irritating and unnecessary way to the "strong action" the Garda had to take in times past in the South.

9. While **Alderdice** knows where he "comes from" politically and is clearly proud of it, he appears to be less sure of where he is going and that may account for his detached view of things on Sunday evening last. Several participants at the talk were determined to stir things up a bit. There was some clapping and counter-clapping during the Q and A session and this did not perhaps help Alderdice's mood or suit the ecclesiastical setting. A degree of evasiveness may have been inevitable in that context, but somehow one expected more following his opening tributes to the tradition from which he comes. When a united Ireland was mentioned he replied that he had no difficulty with it "as long as that is what a majority want". When he was invited to blame John Major for the breakdown of the ceasefire, he said "yes John Major is to blame, but so is Gerry Adams and John Bruton". When I asked him privately afterwards if he believed the UUP in particular was willing to "seriously engage" in negotiations, he said it doesn't matter as the negotiations will get nowhere. An extraordinary inversion of cause and effect principles.

Kane, Timmons, Kelly

10. The only positive remarks addressed to Dr. Alderdice from the 'floor' came at the very end of the Q and A session when a frail elderly man began to speak. He turned out to be the father of **Patrick Kane** and his tribute to Dr. Alderdice for his efforts on behalf of **Kane, Timmons and Kelly** drew warm and sustained applause.
11. The Clonard Talks series concludes next Sunday evening with a discussion on the **Springvale Campus** project. **Prof. Ewart** will be the guest speaker and **Chris McGimpsey** will chair.

c.c. Joint Secretary
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