

SE 1175

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FOR: Second Secretary O hUiginn

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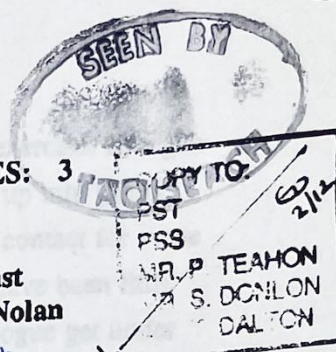
FROM: Bill Nolan

Tadiseank Gf
This is encouraging for the longer-term but this need not invalidate less hopeful prognosis for the nearer term
hvk 5-12-96

Subject: Sinn Féin meeting with representatives of the Protestant churches, Conway Mill, Belfast, 30 November.

1. A meeting took place at Conway Mill on Saturday, 30 November between senior Sinn Féin figures and representatives of the Protestant churches. This follows a series of contacts going back over several months, promoted by Fr. Gerry Reynolds of Clonard Monastery, Ken Newall of Fitzroy Presbyterian church, David Porter of ECONI and others, who were anxious to take advantage of the 1994 ceasefire to establish as far as possible direct, face to face, dialogue of this kind involving Sinn Féin.
2. What was significant about Saturday's meeting was the fact that, for the first time, it was organised by Sinn Féin itself under the chairmanship of Gerry O'Hara. Jim Gibney and Tom Hartley were the principal organisers, drawing on their (by now) extensive range of contacts on the other side.
3. Pat Doherty was present for part of the meeting. He had to leave to attend another gathering nearby on the prisoners issue, but did so reluctantly, I am told, having made plain that he considered the Conway Mill meeting "one of the most important developments as far as Sinn Féin is concerned" in a long time. Francie Molloy was also present, as were other Sinn Féin reps from throughout the North and border counties.

Among those present on the other side were: John Morrow, Jack Weir, Stephen Knox, David Cooper, David Porter and Tim Kinahan, also David Gallagher, son of Eric Gallagher.



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4. The meeting was from the start a serious listening and explaining exercise. It began with presentations by each of the main participants and then broke up into groups for intensive consultations. As many of those present have been in contact for some time - largely via the Clonard/Fitzroy connection - there seems to have been little difficulty establishing sufficient rapport to enable a substantive dialogue get under way on the basis of a shared understanding of the purpose of the meeting.

5. Among the points made by the Protestant clergy were:

- The failure of Sinn Féin to realise that London cannot provide "solutions" to the problem of NI; Sinn Féin must understand that they have to get to know and come to terms with the fears of Protestants - they cannot go over the heads of Protestants if they want to find a way forward.
- In the event of another IRA ceasefire, Sinn Féin must use new language in order to address the foregoing point. The Protestant clergy stressed the need for "a decommissioning of intentions", saying this would have far more meaning for Protestants in Northern Ireland than any "progress" on the question of arms decommissioning.
- Several of the Protestant clergy referred to the great loss of face they had suffered within their own communities following the breakdown of the ceasefire. Sinn Féin should, therefore, do more to address Protestant fears and stop playing games with London if they want to bring more of the other side out of the trenches. They don't perhaps realise that Protestants distrust London just as much as Republicans do and that Orange power is more of a perception than a fact.
- The abolition of Stormont was seen as a particular loss by the Presbyterian community, which in the past had had to fight "the establishment" just as much as the Catholic community. The latter should, therefore, be in a position to appreciate much more the feelings of loss, isolation and siege among the Presbyterians of Ulster, "once upon a time their comrades in arms", and should seize the opportunity of a new ceasefire to somehow begin to reforge an old and largely forgotten relationship.

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6. Sinn Féin representatives made an equally "full and frank" presentation of their difficulties, including the question of why, in their view, violent actions are unavoidable in certain circumstances. They insisted the IRA is not wedded to violence for its own sake, but neither can it abandon a physical force option in the absence of structures and processes which render violence redundant and without purpose. O'Hara opined that "if the dialogue taking place today could be replicated elsewhere, that would help take us beyond violence".

7. Conclusions were:

- There should be follow-up meetings, the dialogue should be deepened and strengthened. Both sides expressed interest in exploiting "this new opportunity" and while no date was set for another meeting, there is an expectation that follow-up of some kind is likely without delay.

- A 'bi-focal' perspective is important, i.e. small, local initiatives aiming at community solutions are just as important as the big political picture.

8. In final exchanges after the meeting, Sinn Féin representatives seemed very anxious to emphasise to the clergymen the importance and significance of this new departure for Sinn Féin. They wanted them to know that, while Sinn Féin may indeed have been negligent as regards listening to the Protestant viewpoint, there was now an agreed policy within the Party that this problem would have to be addressed and should be addressed on the basis of a mutual dialogue.