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Mr Burns - B

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Mr J Daniell

DISCUSSION WITH FATHER ALEX REID

Father Reid lunched with me on 10 March in Stormont House. David Kyle was present for part of this time but Father Reid was sensitive about some of the more political issues and these we discussed alone.

Prisons

2. Father Reid told me that he believes there is a new campaign to be launched in relation to prisoners and he gave me some papers relating to that campaign, including a re-issue of a paper titled "The Plight of Irish Republican Prisoners and Their Families", issued by the Sinn Fein POW Department (sic). The campaign will include an attack on the Review Board system and he gave me details of the six demands which will form the basis of the criticism of the current system. He also expects that there will be a renewal of the campaign to have Irish prisoners held in prisons in GB returned to Northern Ireland to serve their sentences, and talked of a re-issue of certain papers including material from the National Association of Probation Officers (copies also given to me). In Northern Ireland he expects a renewal of the calls for segregation within Magilligan Prison and believes that, what he calls the politicians in Sinn Fein, will soon resurrect this issue. I have written separately to Mr Steele on these prison matters.

Recent disturbances in West Belfast

3. According to Father Reid Sinn Fein has been trying to stop the disturbances in West Belfast though he believes they will certainly try to mark the funerals of the three terrorists killed in Gibraltar by a major show of defiance. He mentioned that he had been talking to Joe Austin about these particular topic earlier in the week. He told me that Sinn Fein is sure that they can control the

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situation and will get the response from the RUC they need in order to have a major propaganda coup.

Politics

4. I did not of course talk about how the meeting between John Hume and Gerry Adams was set up but spoke to Father Reid about the benefits which Sinn Fein and SDLP respectively might hope to gain from such meetings. Father Reid had a number of points to make. To begin with he is convinced that there is a general point of benefit in that it is in the interests of peace that dialogue takes place because the isolation of Sinn Fein has been a major factor in strengthening the armalite side of the operation. As regards the SDLP's view point he believes that John Hume is trying to persuade Gerry Adams that his political aims can be achieved without violence. Father Reid, does not accept that this is likely but whilst there is any hope he believes such efforts are worthwhile.

5. From the Provisionals standpoint Father Reid told me that HMG should be in no doubt that the Republican movement is political and that PIRA is merely one tool being used by politicians who believe that their ends cannot be achieved without this type of violence. Adams therefore can use his meetings with Hume to stress the need for a political balance between the "politicos" and the violent side of the organisation. Reid said that in his experience there have been occasions when the political side has tried to deflect the military side from a course of action which would have been counter-productive either locally or in international propaganda terms. He quoted the example of attacks on prison guards having stopped which he believes is a direct result of political intervention on the military side. Moreover the promotion of the political side at the '86 Ard Fheis, and the agreement to take any seats won in the Dail, was a significant move and a 'courageous step' by Adams to move the organisation towards politics. However Father Reid believes that there is a limit to how far Adams can take this and his assessment is that SF would not take seats won in an

assembly election.

6. At this stage he said that he would not be surprised to find that British Intelligence had a hand in the Gibraltar operation. He speculated that the PIRA Active Service Unit had been led into a trap in the sure knowledge that the situation could be controlled before the ASU could get into a position of causing any death or damage. I asked him to elaborate on this but he merely said the view in some of the circles in which he travels is that the operation was so badly bungled that an agent provocateur may have been involved.

Comment

7. An interesting insight into Father Reid's contacts emerged when, during our conversation, I told him that one of the saddest things I had heard in recent days had been the remarks of Danny Morrison who had spoken of young Irish people being willing to replace those who were killed in Gibraltar. I told him I felt that this was the sort of pointless rhetoric which caused young people, about which Father Reid expressed concern, to be either killed or placed in prison. He responded by saying that he knew "Danny" and on many occasions he was inclined to speak off the top of his head and thought that the remarks were probably made in the heat of the moment. This illustrates clearly to me that Father Reid talks regularly to top members of Sinn Fein/PIRA and is well placed to make the sort of comments he made to me.

8. There was no suggestion that I should meet with any of the people involved, in fact Father Reid was adamant that HMG has no role to play in the current dialogue and should stay well away from the Hume/Adams talks until some conclusion is reached.

9. Whilst he did not express any optimism about the outcome of the talks but he clearly believes they are well worth trying. He spoke of persuading Sinn Fein that they have a legitimate aspiration, as have the Unionists and the SDLP, and that each one of those aspirations should and can be achieved through political

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means. He said that if Sinn Fein can be persuaded of this then the pressure will be on the military side to rethink their strategy. I take this to mean that Father Reid does not believe there will be a ceasefire in advance of political progress .

(signed)

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Political Affairs Divison
14 March 1988
AG883

PS Further to his views on the funerals, set out in para 3 (and bearing in mind my comments in para 7) Father Reid telephoned me late yesterday and said that his recent information was that if the security forces adopted a low profile there was every chance that the funerals might pass off quietly.

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