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From: Allen McVeigh
Political Affairs Division
5 December 1996

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NOTE FOR INFORMATION

Mr. C. G. Saw.
Mr. J. Ce.
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PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
PS/Lady Mayhew - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Daniell - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Priestly - B
Mr Lavery - B
Ms Bharucha - B
Ms Mapstone - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B
HMA Dublin - B

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"GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER": MEETING BETWEEN SINN FEIN AND CLERICS
AT CONWAY MILL ON 29 NOVEMBER

Prior to the latest meeting (held at Conway Mill last Saturday morning) once again bringing together Sinn Fein and Protestant - mainly clerics' - viewpoints, [REDACTED] from ECONI called to see you on Friday afternoon. (The background to this was set out to some extent in my minute to you and yours to Mr Thomas of 4 and 13 November - not to all - respectively, giving details of earlier SF contact meetings). Mr Watkins and I were also present.

2. ECONI's primary purpose in coming to your office was two-fold: to first of all state their position with regard to participation and involvement in the ongoing SF contact meetings to avoid any misunderstanding later and, second, to explore whether or

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not HMG would be likely to be receptive to fairly limited participation in a 'local bosberaad' initiative, further designed to broaden SF's "getting to know you" contacts. Our objective was to ensure that HMG's position was unequivocal and to glean any additional information offered about this particular SF meetings series. The following briefly summarises Friday's discussion (of just over one and half hours duration) and my conversation with Mr [REDACTED] late on Tuesday to get his reflections of Saturday's meeting. I should be grateful if copy recipients noted this minute records in confidence discussions with ECONI.

3. It quickly became evident that ECONI feel more than a little vulnerable that their involvement in this round of SF contact meetings might be misconstrued by their many contacts, including HMG, should (or when) these become public. This was becoming increasingly more likely as they had learned SF were now briefing the press (Comment: subsequently transpired to be [REDACTED] who has not (yet) gone public) about this supposedly private dialogue.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. ECONI wished to make clear, in keeping with their evangelical beliefs and without the restrictions imposed on others, that they felt it was incumbent upon them to engage with SF; while also stressing that they represented no-one but themselves and said so in their dialogue. They found no dissent on their approach from our side.

4. There then followed a lengthy explanation from you and Mr Watkins on HMG's position regarding Sinn Fein's entry into talks, as set out in the statement of the day before, together with confirmation that contact between HMG and SF had ended back in February. Mr [REDACTED] in particular argued that the lack of trust, etc was just as real on the side of SF and that links needed to be restored as soon as possible if barriers were to be overcome: again he was left in no doubt why that could not be at present. The

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contact theme was developed further by ECONI as they explored whether or not the "bush weekend away" approach. Successfully utilised in South Africa might find favour with HMG. This has been promulgated by Dr Michael Cassidy and adopted by Sir Fred Catherwood and others - essentially a weekend which excluded politics while only personal contact was established by, for example, fishing together. They indicated the idea already had support in some quarters at Westminster. Again, while the idea (which had attractions) was not one to be rejected outright, the timing and political realities meant that it had to be ruled out by HMG, for the foreseeable future. Messrs [REDACTED] accepted this stoically but clearly disappointed Mr [REDACTED]. On leaving they confirmed that the meeting had been both useful and helpful, not least for their preparation for the next day.

5. I subsequently spoke to Mr [REDACTED] about the meeting on Saturday. He confirmed SF had at least 50 people (male and female) present as expected. He also confessed that he had felt trepidation about going into the 'lion's den', of Conway Mill. However, the world had not collapsed and the atmosphere, with warm humour abundant as well, was good throughout the meeting despite hard things said on both sides. With hindsight and the benefit of the meeting on Friday afternoon (and discussions with others), he had concluded that since 'events were currently in the stratosphere' that the value of Saturday's meeting would be for the long term. He confirmed more meetings are in the pipeline.

6. Sinn Fein clearly do their homework for these meetings, and put a lot of effort into their construction to gain maximum benefit for themselves from them. For example, the speakers had been chosen with care to provide an Anglo Irish Establishment figure, an eccumenical liberal type, a social justice representative, and an evangelical fundamentalist (it is not too difficult to work out who is what!) It is worth recording that at the end, each speaker was presented with a celtic cross: [REDACTED] was unable to confirm if they were home-craft industry products from Lisburn! [REDACTED] was a

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'penal cross from Lough Derg', apparently one off, if not the most Catholic of crosses in Ireland! The significance of this was not lost on the audience or [REDACTED] when the background to was explained to him afterwards, which amused him. It also proves that SF's appetite for using hidden messages to convey sub-text remains strong. I thanked him for sharing his observations of Saturday with me and we agreed to keep in touch.

Comment

7. ECONI continue to engage in this contact initiative with their eyes open and remain alert to any manipulation by SF. That we are above that is, I believe, one of the strengths of our relationship with ECONI. It can only be to the good that they and others involved in this process are not afraid to put across some unpalatable views to those in SF who need to hear same. There is also some comfort that at least some within SF have already been converted and are endeavouring to assist in the further spreading of the message. Hopefully such seeds will not lie dormant and perish, but germinate speedily and produce a harvest, however, only time will tell.

(Signed)

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