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Title: Letter from Donal O’Sullivan, Ambassador of Ireland to the UK, to Hugh J McCann, Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs, concerning his meeting with William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Topics discussed included the killing of Joe McCann by the British Army, IRA [Irish Republican Army] activity, the strengthening of the Garda presence on the border, the murder of James Elliot by the IRA, the release of internees by the British government, Unionist efforts to undermine the Secretary of State, ‘No-Go’ areas in Derry, and a proposed meeting of William Whitelaw with Patrick Hillery.

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Personal and Confidential

April 21, 1972

Dear Secretary

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland reacted promptly to my request for a call on him yesterday and he invited me to come to his office for a drink at 6 o'clock. I was with him until 6.45. He told his Secretary it was not necessary for him to remain during our talk and this is rather unusual for Ministers here. After the Secretary had left the room, Mr. Whitelaw said "we can now have a heart-to-heart chat".

He said, first of all, that he wanted me to know that he greatly regretted the killing of McCann. This was an unfortunate mistake. He should have been shot in the legs and then arrested "we have now made a martyr of him". IRA activity in the North has intensified in the past week or so. This the Secretary of State believes to be due to -

- (i) the killing of McCann, and
- (ii) an effort by the IRA to produce a special show of strength at a time when support for them is, according to all his information, noticeably on the wane.

He wished me to convey to the Taoiseach his deep appreciation of the recent strengthening of the Garda force on the Border. If, additionally, we could do more about bringing the IRA to justice, this would be a tremendous help. He understood that two men had been arrested following the "ghastly murder" of Mr. Elliot and he hoped these would be properly dealt with.

Without any publicity, he had released 27 or 29 more internees this week. He is determined to continue this process of release as he is now personally convinced that internment was a grave mistake. He recalled that when we last met, he had told me that he may find it necessary to bring the hard core to some form of trial. He now doubts

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very much whether this will be happening. It may be impossible to sustain a charge in the great majority of the hard core cases. Anyhow, these men have already been locked up for 9 months without trial and he may have no alternative to taking a chance and letting them out. If a proper job in the North is to be done, chances have to be taken and he will not be found wanting in courage. The SDLP are still sticking to their line that they will not talk until internment is ended. This is something he cannot ignore even though Gerry Fitt has told him privately that there are certain gunmen behind bars who should, under no circumstances, be released.

Mr. Faulkner and some of his hard-liners are trying to make life very difficult for the Secretary of State. They are doing their best to convince the Protestant community that the initiative has already failed and that Mr. Whitelaw is personally a disaster in the job. He will, however, not be deflected from his main purpose which "initially is designed to ensure that not a single trace of discrimination remains in the North". There was a great deal more of it than he personally had ever suspected. He is now about to move with great speed on local government reform and on one man one vote. Despite Mr. Faulkner's efforts, the Secretary of State is satisfied that he has growing sympathy from the moderate Protestant community. He must, however, move with great caution to avoid giving them the impression that he is heading in the direction of an eventually united Ireland "whether or not that may be the case".

The Bogside and Creggan situation is very serious. A similar situation cannot be allowed to arise in Belfast and every time that barricades go up there, they will have to be knocked down. I remarked that any attempt by the Army to take over the Bogside and Creggan at this stage would almost certainly result in a holocaust. The Army, he told me, has no intention of moving in. If peaceful persuasion fails to influence the people of the Bogside, he may in the end have to resort to methods such as the stopping of social service and other payments. There is no truth either in the rumour now current in London that a separate police force is to be established in the Bogside and Creggan. Such a move would be interpreted, and rightly so, as an admission of defeat and capitulation to the IRA.

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We then talked about a meeting with the Minister. The Secretary of State said he had received a message about the meeting earlier in the day from Sir John Peck.

Mr. Whitelaw warmly welcomed the possibility of such a meeting. Unfortunately, Tuesday next would be impossible for him. He has a particularly heavy programme in the North for the first three days of next week. He will be spending all of Monday in Derry and has some important speeches to make on Tuesday and Wednesday.

He will be in London on Thursday, Friday and the following Monday and, apart from the Cabinet meeting on Thursday, he will make himself fully available to the Minister. All I have to do is to suggest a time to his Private Secretary.

He said he would be delighted to meet the Minister over a meal in the Embassy. He may have to mention the proposed visit to the Embassy to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and he could not see that there would be any objection. He would propose to be accompanied to the Embassy by Sir William Nield, the Permanent Secretary of his Department.

Yours sincerely

DONAL O'SULLIVAN

Ambassador

Hugh J. McCann Esq
Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
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*Since changed
to a meeting
in Mr Whitelaw's
Office - no doubt
to avoid drawing
unimost opinion
about from other
possible reasons*

Hugh