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Secret

Meeting with Alex Atwood, 4 November 1993

I met Alex Atwood in Glengormley on 4 November. The following points arose:

Hume/Adams

- Like other nationalist contacts I met on this trip, Atwood referred to the sense of hurt felt by nationalists, in this case those in West Belfast, on foot of the perceived "snub" to John Hume by the British and Irish Governments. Atwood himself assumes that the Government would move to reassure Northern nationalists. He well understands the reality that Hume and Adams said in their own statement that it would be for the two Governments to develop the principles evolved and commented that Hume's ego was not totally absent from the scene. That said, he feels there should be no illusions about the anger in the nationalist community or the feeling that the British Government are unlikely to be able to deliver anything meaningful given their parliamentary reliance on the UUP. Despite the possible negative electoral implications of the Hume/Adams dialogue for the SDLP in Belfast, SDLP supporters are in general agreed that both Hume and Adams had taken risks, and that, whatever about British dismissiveness, the perceived acquiescence of the Irish Government had been keenly noted.

- Atwood met with Sinn Fein Councillor Pat McGeown, a former hunger striker who is close to Adams, and who has strong credentials with the Army Council. McGeown was proposed by Sinn Fein as a candidate in the local council elections earlier this year, apparently as part of the internal jockeying to put persons close to Adams into influential and visible positions. McGeown was unusually frank with Atwood in their recent meeting. Atwood

therefore asked me to treat the following remarks by McGeown in strict confidence;

- Sinn Fein have organised a series of internal "emergency meetings" (McGeown's words) over the next three or four days to review recent developments (i. e. the attitude of the British and Irish Governments and where matters stand in relation to Hume/Adams). McGeown is going to take soundings himself. Atwood understood from this that Sinn Fein are unlikely to come to a definitive position until this process has been completed;

- There are considerable tensions within the Republican Movement in the light of the Governments' reactions to Hume/Adams. These tensions stem from the differing views of a variety of elements within the IRA and Sinn Fein. They have not spilt out into the public domain because there is currently a "balance of tensions" between various groups;

- The reaction of the British Government, although disappointing did not surprise Sinn Fein. They are, however, deeply concerned at the Irish Government's reaction, which they regard as very unhelpful to their approach as it appears to undermine a significant element in the current strategic orthodoxy outlined in the Sinn Fein theoretical document "Towards A Lasting Peace in Ireland", i. e. the entrusting of a leading role to the Irish Government. The approach of Adams and his supporters, that it would be possible in some sense to work through Dublin, has been damaged. Sceptics within the Movement are saying "We told you so". The view in Sinn Fein is that Dublin, who should have taken issue with the British Government over the British attitude to Hume - Adams, at the critical moment deferred to the British;

- Within the 'Movement' Hume appears to enjoy at present considerable respect and trust. McGeown's view is that Hume's approach in recent days is keeping many within Sinn Fein on side, as far as Hume/Adams is concerned;

- The Sinn Fein strategy which led to Hume/Adams was prompted and heavily influenced by the perceived development in the British position ("no selfish or strategic interest etc.") of the Brooke speech at Bangor. Sinn Fein's response to this has up to now been quite deliberate;

- On the question of the use of military means, McGeown emphasised that within the Republican Movement there is only one authority i.e. the Army Council. He referred to the criticisms voiced of Adams for engaging in talks aimed at peace while the IRA carried out bombing attacks "in London". These criticisms, McGeown said, were "very naive". The military and political strategies are common and mutually consistent. The IRA think the way they always thought. The military strategy remains very important and there are no tensions in the leadership of the Republican Movement between the political and military aspects of strategy.

- McGeown referred to "younger and more extreme elements" in the IRA and made a point throughout of referring to the "current leadership" and the "current standing of the leadership". He went on to say that Adams had been given a degree of grace and manoeuvrability but he does not have a free hand. He added that Atwood would be surprised at who some of the strategists are, and went on to say that they are not just public profile figures such as Adams, Hartley and McGuinness;

- Atwood also picked up from McGeown a signal that consideration is being given by Sinn Fein to popular

agitation e.g. marches, pickets on behalf of Hume/Adams. The watchword would be one of support for "peace". Atwood, not surprisingly, sees the downside of such a campaign from an SDLP perspective.

Declan Kelleher
5 November, 1993

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