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PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF MOTIONS ADOPTED AT SINN FEIN CONFERENCE (24 JULY)

No [unclear]

This is useful

part 9
2/9/94

General

1. There was never any realistic likelihood that yesterday's Sinn Fein conference would produce an unambiguous endorsement of the Declaration and open the way to an early and permanent cessation of IRA violence.
2. An equivocal response to the Declaration was the likeliest outcome in all the circumstances and, indeed, various signals to this effect had been given by Sinn Fein spokespeople in recent weeks.
3. In the event, the terms are somewhat more negative than had been anticipated. The message of Sinn Fein unhappiness with key aspects of the Declaration is delivered in a blunter and more emphatic manner than might have been inferred from e.g. the more oblique pronouncements by Gerry Adams over recent months.
4. The limitations of the device of using party motions to articulate complex positions must, of course, be taken into account - along with the more general difficulties faced by Sinn Fein, because of its own severe deficiencies as a political organization, in articulating coherent party policies.
5. A point for consideration, furthermore, is whether there is a case for regarding yesterday's meeting as an

exercise directed essentially to the internal needs of the party (regardless of the external costs), i. e., whether the three rather clumsily drafted motions which Sinn Fein adopted yesterday are necessarily Sinn Fein's final word on this subject.

6. In overall terms, yesterday's meeting lends itself to a mixed interpretation.

It is, of course, disappointing in the immediate and obvious sense and political and public reaction in each of the jurisdictions affected will no doubt reflect that.

But it is important to look beyond that and to recognize that, however trenchant its language, Sinn Fein has been careful not to foreclose any options for the future. While rehearsing familiar criticisms of the Declaration, it has nevertheless made clear its willingness to build on the positive elements which it has identified and to "bridge the gap" between the Declaration and Sinn Fein's own "Irish Peace Initiative". In substantive terms, therefore, the outcome of yesterday's meeting leaves all significant doors open and Sinn Fein's freedom of manoeuvre essentially intact.

7. On the other hand, the failure to present the party's position on the Declaration in more balanced terms (let alone to announce unconditional acceptance of it) will probably mean a significant loss of public support and tolerance for Sinn Fein. Yesterday's motions will be seen by many as a disappointing and inadequate outcome to what was supposed to be seven months of intensive internal consultation. The points offered for and against the Declaration cover well-worn ground and the failure to demonstrate any fresh thinking after this lengthy period of reflection will prompt a sense of

anticlimax and frustration. The clarification exercise, much insisted upon by Sinn Fein earlier in the year, will be perceived to have had negligible impact on the party's ultimate position. The patience and flexibility shown in this general context by the two Governments (to varying degrees) will be seen to have been inadequately recompensed.

8. Another tactical error arguably made by Sinn Fein is to have disowned the Declaration on the issues of consent and the "Unionist veto" - issues on which they cannot hope to sustain public sympathy indefinitely (if at all) - rather than on the potentially more fertile terrain of the role to be played by the British Government in promoting a balanced settlement of the conflict.

9. A more subtle, and possibly more rewarding, approach on Sinn Fein's part would have been to register the same difficulties with the text as they did yesterday but to take a generally more positive approach to the possibilities of the Declaration and the peace process, to the point where public opinion (and possibly the two Governments) would have been divided over the relative priority to be given to that process from now on. As it is, it may reasonably be presumed in the light of yesterday's response that there will be broad public support for a clearer concentration by the two Governments henceforth on the preparation of an agreed framework for new talks, while making clear that the Declaration provides a continuing opportunity for paramilitary organizations on both sides to end the violence if they wish to take it.

The Sinn Fein motions

10. The following is a brief appraisal of the Sinn Fein response in terms of its positive and negative implications for an eventual successful conclusion to the peace process.

11. On the positive side of the balance-sheet, Sinn Fein has shown a serious readiness to address the challenge of pursuing Republican objectives through the political process. No positive case was advanced yesterday for the use of violence to achieve those goals. Sinn Fein's quarrel, it would appear, is with the terms of the Declaration, and the suitability of that particular document as a basis for a change of policy, rather than with the principle of political engagement. In short, an underlying trend in favour of ultimate participation in the political process is unmistakable.

12. Sinn Fein has also sketched out an agenda for political action in the short and medium term. Motion 3 accepts that the peace process contains potential for the resolution of "issues of immediate concern" to nationalists (with a view to achieving parity of esteem and equality of treatment across a range of security, cultural and economic sectors) and commits Sinn Fein to "pressing ahead" with the peace process in the context of these more specific objectives.

13. A positive interpretation is also supported by the following textual elements in the Sinn Fein motions:
 - Sinn Fein "recognize and welcome" the progress made to date in the evolving peace process, in which the Declaration is a "further stage";

- The Declaration contains "many important political implications";

- Singled out for attention in this respect are:

(i) the statement in para 1 that "the most urgent and important issue is to remove the causes of conflict";

(ii) the British Government's recognition ("for the first time in such direct terms") of the right of the people of the island of Ireland alone to exercise their right to self-determination;

(iii) the "clear recognition" that present structures and policies have failed and an implicit recognition that political and constitutional change is necessary for a satisfactory and permanent settlement;

(iv) the British Government's acceptance (paras 4-9) that any permanent agreement must be in the context of the island of Ireland;

(v) the two Governments' support for "healing divisions" and their statement that this can come about only "through agreement" and "cooperation at all levels";

(vi) the acknowledgment that the Declaration is the "starting point of a peace process designed to culminate in a political settlement";

(vii) the "positive role envisaged for Europe";

(viii) the formal inclusion of the assertion that

Britain has "no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland".

14. In addition, Sinn Fein recognizes that, despite the Declaration's "inadequacies", the potential to build upon "a real peace process" still exists. It commits itself to advancing that process by "building on the positive elements" in the Declaration and by attempting to "bridge the gap" between the latter and the "Irish Peace Initiative".

15. On the negative side, the fact that the Declaration is dealt with in only one of the three motions (with the other two mapping out an independent strategy based on the "Irish Peace Initiative") indicates Sinn Fein's own sense of priorities.

Furthermore, the motions illustrate a number of serious deficiencies in Sinn Fein's analysis of the problem which will have to be corrected if there is ever to be a successful conclusion to the peace process. In particular, they reveal a continuing fundamental ambivalence regarding the rights of the Unionist community.

16. Points worth noting in Motion 1's rehearsal of the main points of the "Irish Peace Initiative" include the following:
 - The exercise of the right of the Irish people as a whole to national self-determination is described as "a matter for agreement between the people of Ireland", i. e., the qualifications in this regard which the two Governments accepted in paras 4-5 of the Declaration are conspicuously ignored;

- The two Governments are expected to commit themselves, in consultation with "all other parties", to a process to achieve the exercise of this right "within an agreed time-frame" (an element absent from the Declaration);
- The "consent and allegiance of Unionists" are described as essential ingredients if a lasting peace is to be established (the language on this point is unchanged since its first appearance about fifteen months ago, i. e., Sinn Fein makes no attempt to clear up a position acknowledged to be an improvement on its earlier attitude but widely criticised for its ambiguity);
- Regardless of the acceptance of the need for Unionist "consent and allegiance", the next point warns that Unionists cannot have a veto over British policy or over political progress in Ireland;
- The British Government is told that it "must join the persuaders" (in Motion 3, it is made clear that this means "persuading Unionists that their future lies with the rest of the Irish people").

17. The motion goes on to reaffirm Sinn Fein's commitment to "building the conditions for demilitarisation" as part of the search for a lasting peace settlement - but does not spell out how this would be achieved, whether it would be unilateral or multilateral etc. It also speaks of generating a platform of "political demands" but makes no attempt to define these. In short, the motion avails of vague and ambiguous language to mask ill-thought-out and to some extent contradictory positions on Sinn Fein's part.

18. Motion 2 describes the Declaration as a "stage" within a process launched by Sinn Fein. It presents a somewhat confused list of "important developments" since the Declaration for which, it implies, credit must go to the Irish Peace Initiative rather than to the Declaration. The list includes an insinuation that general agreement has been reached on a framework "in the Irish Peace Initiative" for a resolution of the conflict. Incongruously, it also includes reference to the "protracted dialogue" between Sinn Fein and the British Government (which ostensibly took place prior to, rather than since, the Declaration).

19. The motion goes on to list what are described as "negative and contradictory elements" in the Declaration, including:

- the absence of a reference to "Britain's political interest, selfish or otherwise" in the assertion referred to in para 12(viii) above;
- a supposed contradiction between Britain's statement of disinterest and the constitutional guarantee;
- the qualification of the right to self-determination by the consent provision in para 4 of the Declaration and the constitutional guarantee reference in para 2;
- an assertion that the manner in which this right is to be exercised is a matter for the Irish people, not the British Government;
- references in the Declaration to what Sinn Fein views as a Unionist "veto";

- no recognition of the rights of nationalists (the motion recalls a reply in the British Government's clarification document - the only one cited - which suggested that there was no basis for claims of coercion against nationalists);
- no commitment by the British Government to amend its constitutional claim in the Government of Ireland Act.

(The points made here have, of course, already been addressed - either in the British Government's clarification document or separately in public statements by the two Governments).

20. Finally, Motion 3 reveals more of the ambivalence which colours Sinn Fein attitudes towards Unionism. A distinction is made between "consent on the part of all the Irish people" and the perpetuation of a Unionist veto over constitutional change. Sinn Fein recognizes that "the consent and agreement of Unionists is of course necessary to build a stable and peaceful Ireland", and that Unionists have "democratic rights which must be upheld in an independent Ireland", but it again conspicuously avoids an opportunity to spell out its position on this critically important issue.

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25 July 1994