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IRA punishment beatings

1. Fr. Alex Reid called me this afternoon in response to Seán O hUiginn's contact with him yesterday conveying the concerns over IRA punishment beatings. He wanted to let us know that he had raised the concerns with Sinn Fein in the sense requested. They had told him that they were making "preliminary enquiries" and that the issue is for them a matter of great concern about which there is considerable discussion. They had gone on to point to the context as they see it: there has been an increase in acts of criminality in West Belfast recently, notably joyriding and burning out of cars. He was told that the fact that the IRA are no longer active has had the effect of removing restraints on local criminals, who have become bolder to the extent of taunting IRA and Sinn Fein members. There is an element of what was described to him as vigilantism, which can have personal roots: he was given as an example a case where one Sinn Fein supporter, who was beaten by several individuals arranged to have each of them beaten in revenge. It was stated to him that the local community in West Belfast support retribution against joyriders and other criminals. I asked about an official Sinn Fein view on the problem. He said he was not sure there was one.

2. He described the problem as essentially a policing one caused by a vacuum consequent on the end of the IRA campaign. While he emphasised that Sinn Fein's handling of the issue is still at an early stage, he understands that ~~there~~ local initiatives are planned which may serve to address the problem:
 - He was told that Sinn Fein have been in contact with Probation Officers. The objective here, he understands, is to ensure some sort of control over local criminals in a way that would defuse the tendency for people to take the law

into their own hands;

- He understands that two meetings are planned for the weekend in Belfast which may offer an opportunity to address the problems with the involvement of local Sinn Fein and SDLP representatives. Alex Attwood's name had been mentioned in this context. Sinn Fein may be represented by Joe Austin from Ardoyne. (Note for information: independently, Atwood was in touch later in the day to say that he and Austin had been invited by an Ardoyne priest (Fr. Myles Kavanagh) to a meeting organised for Saturday. Another meeting had been provisionally arranged by another Clonard priest (Fr. Gerry Reynolds) for this afternoon, involving Atwood and two Sinn Fein representatives who, according to Atwood, cancelled shortly before the meeting was due to start);

- Fr. Reid has also canvassed the notion of having a local monitoring programme to record reports of, and which could develop into machinery for acting as restraints on, such beatings.

- 3. He saw no indication that involvement of the RUC in this matter is an option for Sinn Fein.

- 4. I rehearsed again our concerns in the matter. He confirmed that he had passed these on and he felt that they had been understood, including the counter-productive aspect from the point of view of Sinn Fein's own public presentation. That said, he commented that Sinn Fein's approach on the matter was itself at a preliminary stage. We agreed to keep in touch on this and other matters.



Declan Kelleher

27 September 1994