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Reviewers
Fr. Alex Reid

Political Developments

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Meeting with Fr. Alex Reid

1. I met Fr. Alex Reid over the weekend, in company with Fr. Brendan Callanan. Fr. Reid was convalescing from a period of prostration, with flu-like symptoms.
2. I asked him for his assessment of the current prospects. He repeated a familiar analysis that the kernel of the IRA motivation, even if they were not prepared to say so, related to the dignity of their community in Northern Ireland, and not primarily or necessarily a united Ireland.
3. They had believed in a "dynamic of arms" and to reach them in terms they could relate to, it was necessary to convince them of a "dynamic of politics".
4. In the discussions with the IRA leading up to the ceasefire, Adams had argued both the futility of the campaign of violence and the value of a political alternative based on solidarity in the wider nationalist tradition. (Fr. Reid added in parenthesis that meetings involving Sinn Féin were a highly important outward symbol of that understanding. Agreement on the early meeting between former Taoiseach Reynolds, John Hume and Gerry Adams had been a sine qua non of the ceasefire. The Taoiseach's refusal to hold a similar meeting, by the same token, had a resonance beyond what was perhaps understood at the time).
5. Fr. Reid said that the IRA were realistic. They realised that any common enterprise could not be on their terms, but rather had to be on, what might broadly be described as SDLP terms. The use of "democratic", as opposed

to "nationalist" consensus was an acknowledgement that they could not expect the result to be all their own way.

6. Fr. Reid said he had been working on a new paper or approach, to persuade the IRA to restore the ceasefire.
7. He then gave details and read some excerpts from a long detailed "strategy paper" which he had written and, I assume, circulated to the Republican movement.
8. This reaffirmed the overall objective of a democratic resolution of the conflict, through dialogue, negotiation and agreement between all the political parties.
9. It repeated the goal of round-table negotiations as the essential format to achieve the objectives of the strategy. It specified that no party would have a veto over the holding of talks, the progress of the negotiations or any democratically agreed outcome.
10. The paper reaffirmed, in generally helpful language, Hume/Adams language on accommodating the democratic rights of people of both the unionist and nationalist traditions. It repeated also the idea, which had also featured strongly in discussions at the time of the ceasefire with the former Taoiseach, the SDLP, that Sinn Féin and the Irish Government would cooperate on issues protecting the human rights and "democratic dignity" of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland so as to ensure parity of esteem and equality of treatment for the rights, etc., of people of both traditions in Northern Ireland.

11. Where Fr. Reid's current approach differed from the previous one was what he termed "the need to learn from mistakes". The essential mistake, in his view, was that the understandings with the previous Government were private, and therefore not known or else misunderstood by the people generally. His new approach was to suggest that since Republicans had always accepted that the people are "the dynamic of democracy", they would also be the dynamic of the new situation. Hence the need for clear public understandings, which the people could support, and, if necessary, protect against attempts, including from within the Republican movement, to destabilise them.
12. His paper then envisaged an extremely elaborate structure of understanding, common action and even monitoring and arbitration systems for the new approach.
13. The core of the approach envisaged by Fr. Reid was a consensus between the SDLP and Sinn Féin. He envisaged teams from both parties working out a common programme, an information system which promulgated the results to the wider community and a kind of mediation system to resolve any differences.
14. Building on this central core, Fr. Reid then envisaged that this Northern nationalist consensus would engage with the Irish Government. Here again there would be an elaborately structured pattern of regular meetings, with public information and mediation systems.
15. I stressed to Fr. Reid that such an elaborate system seemed to me very problematic. The essence of politics was managing the ultimate stresses and uncertainties within any society. To take an obvious example, political

leaders would worry that it would be the arbitrators, rather than they themselves or their parties collectively, that would be the ultimate arbiters of policy. Fr. Reid said that the understandings would relate strictly to the limited and ring-fenced agenda of equality, human rights, etc. Parties would otherwise retain all their freedom and individuality. As for mediators, they could come from within the parties.

16. I said there were real differences between Sinn Féin and other parties (e.g. on the principle of consent) notwithstanding likely common views on parity of esteem issues. Codifying the relationship between the parties might bring those differences into sharp relief. I recalled that a previous attempt at a common paper between Sinn Féin and the SDLP had been more anodyne than operational.
17. I urged also on Fr. Reid the problem of timing. We were committed to negotiations on the 10th June. If Sinn Féin were to be there, the ceasefire had to be reinstated in very short order. Even if there was a political will on all sides to engage in the very elaborate understanding he envisaged, I doubted whether it could be completed within the necessary timeframe. (It seemed a curious feature of Fr. Reid's paper that it did not address the question of a common position in negotiations, or indeed the situation within negotiations in any sense). Fr. Reid said he had echoes of this concern from Sinn Féin also (Ms. Rita O'Hare) who had emphasised the urgency of the matter.
18. I asked whether an alternative approach might be to revisit the analysis which the IRA had made prior to the 1994 ceasefire. If the actions of the two Governments showed that the expectations entertained at that time (meaningful negotiations, etc.) were being implemented, would that be a

quicker path to restoring the ceasefire. Fr. Reid thought that Sinn Féin themselves would be the best judge of that. He felt that if Sinn Féin were themselves persuaded, it was likely that they in turn would be able to persuade the IRA.

19. We spoke briefly about the decommissioning issue. Fr. Reid said the simple fact was that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland did not want the IRA to decommission. It was concern for the protection of that community, and not united Ireland objectives, which made it so difficult for the IRA not to hold onto their weapons. Nevertheless, he had emphasised to Adams, and Adams was echoing publicly, the concept of the "big picture", to take the gun out of Irish politics forever. In that context decommissioning could be a reality.
20. Fr. Reid mentioned that in the wake of the Hume/Adams IRA meeting, after the Canary Wharf bombing, the IRA had been very frustrated at what they perceived as Hume's failure to pass on the message about the importance of a nationalist consensus to Dublin. Adams had however argued, and helped to convince them, that Hume was exercising a valid political judgement as to what might or might not be feasible. Fr. Reid thought that the various meetings at official level which had taken place in the interval had been a reassuring factor in terms of that concern.
21. Much of the remainder of our meeting was taken up with going over, in alternative guise, some of the previous points. Fr. Reid argued very passionately the great potential of the wider understanding he sought to achieve, not just in relation to the political situation, but also in relation to contentious issues such as marches, policing, etc. I argued, in turn, that an understanding based on the practicalities of the situation and the imminence of

negotiations, might be a more direct route to a restoration of the ceasefire than the very elaborate structures he had in mind. He said he would think over some of the points I had made and be in contact again.



Sean Ó hUiginn

8 May 1996