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30 April 1997

Dear Secretary

DISCUSSION WITH NIALL O'DOWD

1. Niall O'Dowd called me to-day, on his return from his recent visit to Northern Ireland (my earlier report of 21 April also refers).

2. O'Dowd said that during the visit, and much to his surprise, he had found Gerry Adams to be in remarkably buoyant mood. The adrenalin that flows from any election campaign may well account to some degree for this, as well, of course, as the strong likelihood of Adams taking the West Belfast seat from Joe Hendron. But O'Dowd felt that the reasons for the Adams' mood went deeper, and conveyed to him a sense that the political side of the Republican movement was moving back into the ascendancy.

3. The second message O'Dowd took away from his meetings was that Adams was "ready and determined to do business" quickly after the British election. Adams implied that he did not want on this occasion to have the ceasefire dependent on the British moving, but was prepared to take risks on a unilateral basis. His message to the IRA after the election would emphasise that there are now more Republicans in Northern Ireland than ever, precisely because of the peace process. Moreover, if Sinn Féin were to win two or three seats, this would not only signal, in his view, the primacy of politics but would place an obligation on the Republican movement to re-establish the ceasefire and opt into the political process.

4. I tried to get a sense from O'Dowd of why, if Adams was indicating his willingness to move quickly after an election, he had not accepted the compelling logic of calling a ceasefire some weeks ago. O'Dowd's response was that Adams saw the obvious sense of this and was, moreover, of the view that in such circumstances Sinn Féin would have added four or five per cent to their Forum figures. However, and while he might just have managed to secure a ceasefire at that time, his firm view was that this would not have held - leading to

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all kinds of credibility and other problems. He saw a far more favourable scenario existing after the 1st May, given the presence of a new Administration in London, with a clear overall majority and some welcome fresh thinking. (In this general regard, O'Dowd also said he understood Sinn Féin to have its own direct and ongoing contacts with the Labour party).

5. On the election itself, Adams is reasonably confident that he and McGuinness will win seats for Sinn Féin. On the other hand, he feels that the SDLP will take West Tyrone. In this regard, he said Joe Byrne is a much better candidate than Denis Haughey is in Mid-Ulster; moreover, Willie McCrea was far more of a "bogeyman" for nationalists than Thompson is in West Tyrone, thus tempting many into tactical voting for McGuinness, as the stronger candidate.

Comment

6. It is very difficult to assess the above, given the conflicting signals about the imminence of a renewed ceasefire which have been coming from the Republican movement for some time. I might add that, as a result, public patience with Sinn Féin is wearing very thin indeed, including here in Washington. The reality also is that every new incident makes it more difficult to facilitate their entry into talks; moreover, no one knows what atrocity, intended or inadvertent, may be around the corner. That said, O'Dowd is an astute observer, who seems to be able to get a straighter steer from Adams than most and I have found him quite reliable in the past. However, we can only wait and see.

Jim Lyons

7. I should also mention that I had a long conversation last evening with Jim Lyons (the President's close friend, and the U.S. Observer on the International Fund). Lyons had dinner recently in Belfast with Adams, at the latter's request. On that occasion, Lyons told the Sinn Féin leader, in extremely unambiguous Colorado political terms, what the President and the Administration thought of the behaviour of the Republican movement since Canary Wharf, and what was now required of it. He also helpfully conveyed the same message (as I had through O'Dowd) about the absolute futility of Adams applying for a new visa, in the absence of a ceasefire. Adams seems now to have accepted this reality.

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8. Finally, given his extremely close ties to the President, I have been encouraging Jim Lyons recently to become more active on the North. He is an invaluable, direct channel to the President. His message last evening was that the President remains very committed, and keen to help in every way possible. And Lyons, for his part, is fired by the possibility of the President playing a crucial part, in his second term, in helping to bring about a lasting settlement in Northern Ireland. (In the second term, as you know, all Presidents spend significant time in reflecting on their place in, and contribution to, history! It is something we should be ready to take advantage of).

Yours sincerely

Dermot Gallagher
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