

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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TO: SECRETARY GALLAGHER<HQ

FROM: BILL NOLAN<SECRETARIAT BELFAST.

re Conversation with Fr. Alex Reid.

COPY TO
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1. I had an opportunity to speak with Fr. Alex Reid following the function at the Gresham Hotel last night at which the Clonard/Fitzroy Fellowship (Fr. Gerry Reynolds and Rev. Ken Newell) received the 1999 Peace Prize awarded by Pax Christi International.

2. Fr. Alex is in good spirits and pleased with the outcome of the Mitchell Review. The careful sequencing and choreography leading to balanced, moderate incremental steps forward is, in his view, just the right way to build the necessary confidence that the Agreement can be made to work. This is the essential requirement especially on the Republican side, he said, recalling that the IRA have signed up to the Peace Process, but not to the Good Friday Agreement(GFA) itself. Only when they decide they are in a position to formally sign up to the GFA (and this will come about only when they see it working in full) are they likely to begin to deal with the problem of decommissioning.

3. He emphasised again the momentous nature of this development for Republicans. Simply deciding to put the question of arms on an agenda for discussion is a grave matter as this would set in train an irrevocable series of steps which could only be contemplated when the leadership is 101% certain that the necessary two-thirds support of the Army Convention (he believes this is the threshold required for such action) is assured. To understand the gravity of this matter for Republicans, Fr. Alex believes, one has only to recall that there has been a split in the IRA in every decade since 1922, arguably on a less serious issue on each occasion.

4. Fr. Alex expressed some concern as to how De Chastelain might approach the difficult and delicate task which he now faces. He hopes that, as an army man, he will be able to bring to the job a good understanding of the subtleties and sensitivities involved when a soldier is being asked distance himself from his weaponry. I mentioned a remark I had heard on the Vincent Brown radio programme on Monday night, which could be helpful if interpreted wisely.

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James Leslie, UUP Assemblyman, was asked what he and his party wanted to see on decommissioning between now and February. Did they need to see actual decommissioning?, Brown asked. Leslie said this was not necessary, that they "would take De Chastelain's word for it".

5. A great deal turns, therefore, on the nature of the proceedings about to commence between De Chastelain and the IRA interlocutor. Fr. Alex believes that that is more important now than any moves by the UUP or others to try to force the issue in any way. It could be disastrous, in his view, if De Chastelain's manner of dealing with the situation is "too legal- istic and prescriptive". On the other hand, a proper interpretation of what is required to bring about voluntary decommissioning will, he believes, prove productive in time "because they have already decommissioned in their minds". He is certain, therefore, that an enormous, not to say unprecedented, prize in relation to IRA arms is achievable but only if the surest touch is applied to the decommissioning lever and the leadership can go before its membership and say, in relation to all the outworkings of the GFA : "we have seen the future and it is working".

The Disappeared.

6. Fr. Alex is much preoccupied by this matter at present. He also seemed quite distressed and worried about it. His main complaint seems to be that there is a lack of understanding generally, and on the part of the police in particular, as to the conclusions to be drawn from the difficulties of obtaining precise locations for the remaining bodies. He believes the police do appreciate that there are genuine difficulties and that these are probably insurmountable. There is always the chance, of course, that a new piece of information might come to hand or that a fresh witness might come forward as the political situation develops. But there is no certainty that such an event would materially improve the prospects of further discoveries. He told me that a new witness had come forward voluntarily some time ago, apparently believing he could identify a particular site, on the basis of what was to him a clear memory. Upon arriving there, however, he was, according to Fr. Alex, upset and embarrassed to discover that his memory of the terrain was not in accordance with its present lay-out and he could only confess bewilderment and failure.

7. In these circumstances, which may well not now improve, Fr. Alex is anxious that the relatives should be accorded clear messages. He feels that where there is something to go on, the police should mark out a certain area around the supposed site and let the relatives know that this area will be examined carefully, but that, if nothing shows up, the effort will then cease in relation to that particular location. I gathered from him that some of the relatives at least would prefer this approach to the more open-ended uncertainty which prevailed earlier this year.

Patten.

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8. Finally, Fr. Alex mentioned the alarm in some Republican quarters with regard to recent remarks by the SOSNI on the Patten policing proposals. He feels he will need to speak to Archbishop Brady about this soon. I gave him a quick run over the various steps we have taken and will continue to take at all levels on this matter since Patten came out and assured him that we have left the British side in no doubt whatsoever about the urgency of implement- ing all of the Patten proposals exactly as the Commission recommended. There would be not let up on this front, I emphasised, as everything depends ultimately on Patten.

Fr. Alex mentioned the sense of hurt among RUC widows and relatives and of the need to take this into account. He wondered if the Commission ought to have been a bit more generous in its remarks. I replied by quoting him what Maurice Hayes said to Donall Hamill and I when this point came up in conversation a few weeks ago. "If we felt we should have paid the kind of tribute which is now being talked about", Maurice said, "then we would also have had to refer in no uncertain terms to the circumstances which brought about the Stalker enquiry, the Stevens enquiry, the Port enquiry etc. etc. We decided to leave all that in the past and deal with the future as our terms of reference required us to do." Fr. Alex thought this remark perfectly illustrated the wisdom, as well as the many other attributes, which the members of the Commission brought to their task.

END.

Bill Nolan
1 December 1999.

cc Joint Secretary

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