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Reference Code:	2022/84/45
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23 AUG 1999

cc PSec. PSpkS Mr Ahern, Mr Roche, Mr Kelly, Mr Gallagher, Sinéad Kane; also W+L, Counsellor's Office

Ms Whelan passed on to the Taoiseach. [illegible] 25.8.99

Discussion with Fr. Alex Reid,

20 August, 1999

BRIEFING BY IRA ARMY COUNCIL

(52) (58)

Summary

1. Fr. Reid said he had been asked to meet representatives of the IRA Army Council in late July, and to pass on their message to the two Governments. His contacts added that, at his discretion, he could convey the message to other key players. In this regard, he had already spoken to John Hume, and intended seeking an early meeting with David Trimble.

2. The essence of the message was that, while the Army Council were committed to the peace process (including the Good Friday Agreement), and wanted it to work, they were concerned that developments in recent months had caused credibility problems for the Sinn Féin leadership. Adams and McGuinness should not be pushed beyond the point where they could not deliver. To do so would only undermine their leadership. This was the case, in particular, on decommissioning where the Sinn Féin influence could only be exercised in the context of the active implementation of the Agreement. The Army Council could not decommission one gun without an Army Convention, which would require a two-thirds majority, and without a change in its constitution. This was simply not on at present. It would be "pushing at a door, and it will not open". Interestingly they said, however, that they had authority to dump arms.

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DETAIL OF DISCUSSION

Overall attitude of IRA to Political Process

3. Reid, who read from notes, said that the Army Council representatives had strongly supported the Sinn Féin leadership throughout. They said they had been convinced by Adams and McGuinness that there was a political alternative to achieving their objectives. As a result, they felt a "moral and de facto responsibility" for maintaining the peace process. This included the Good Friday Agreement. Although there were aspects of the Agreement they did not like, they realised that any process of negotiation always ended in compromise. They believed also that the Agreement had the potential to move their political agenda forward.

Decommissioning

4. Reid's contacts made it clear that they were not prepared to discuss decommissioning except in private among themselves. They would not even consider placing it on an agenda for discussion. Only an Army Convention had the authority in this area and it would require a two-thirds majority before even one gun could be decommissioned. It would also require a change in the movement's constitution.

5. Any move at this time to call a Convention on decommissioning would be madness. It would almost certainly lead to a new military leadership, to be followed quickly by a new political leadership. If this happened, it would be a long time before a new political process could be got under way.

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6. In saying the above, the Army Council did not rule out movement on decommissioning in the right context. But they emphasised that at this time any pressure on decommissioning was "pushing at a door, and it will not open". Interestingly, they added that they had authority to dump arms as distinct from decommissioning.

Role of British Government

7. Reid's contacts made the point forcefully that, if the British Government continued with their present approach, they would be in danger of losing the peace process. They emphasised that this was not a threat, but rather a realistic assessment of the state of Republican thinking at this time. The leadership simply did not know what forces would be unleashed if the present approach continued, and whether "other forces" might in fact take over the movement. They were especially critical in this regard of the fail-safe legislation, and also of the *Way Forward* document.

Recognition of integrity of IRA's position

8. The contacts said that the two Governments should recognise "the strength and the integrity" of an organisation that has access to a huge amount of ordnance, but has chosen not to use them. (In other words, they were asking that the significance of their ceasefire be fully recognised.)

Vulnerability of Sinn Féin Leadership

9. The contacts were deeply worried that, after some five years of ceasefires and three years of negotiations, the end result had been the exercise of the Unionist veto in July. This had caused huge problems at the level of their

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activist base and had damaged the Adams' leadership. The rank and file had always been sceptical of the peace process but had gone along with it because they trusted the leadership. The new political mind-set being built up and developed among Republicans was now in danger of being suffocated.

10. The situation had been exacerbated by Tony Blair stating in July that decommissioning could take place within weeks. As a result, the Army Council had extreme problems in calming people on the ground who suspected that Adams and McGuinness had agreed to this formula. It had to be realised that, as a result of this, the leadership's grip and control was tenuous.

11. The Army Council was very concerned, personally and collectively, about "the abuse of the good offices" of Adams and McGuinness. By this they meant the continuing attempts to bring the Sinn Féin leadership across lines which had not been agreed, or public statements that Sinn Féin had agreed to positions when this was not the case. Sinn Féin should not be asked to take decisions when it was not in a position to do so.

12. If there was to be "a slide" in the credibility of the Sinn Féin leadership, this could well happen quickly. A more intransigent and hard-line leadership would then take over. In saying this, the contacts wished to emphasise that they welcomed the "benign leadership" of Adams and McGuinness and wished it to be as effective as possible, including on decommissioning. In order to strengthen the leadership, it now needed to be sent signals by the British that those parts of the Good Friday Agreement not dependent on Unionist agreement were being actively implemented. Policing and demilitarisation were obvious examples in this regard, but the equality area and funding for Irish language schools were also very important.

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13. On demilitarisation, the contacts said that the security forces in the North were taking advantage of the ceasefire by actively continuing to recruit informers and to plant listening devices, etc. They could not understand why the British would not demilitarise given that they could, if necessary, remilitarise within 24 hours.

Joint Authority

14. Finally, the contacts made the point that, if the Good Friday Agreement fell, the maintenance of the peace process would require the two Governments to jointly agree on a series of measures designed to move the political agenda forward (in effect, a form of joint authority).

DOG.

Dermot Gallagher

20 August 1999

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