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Meeting with 'Justice for Diarmuid O'Neill Campaign'
25 January 2000
Report

A delegation from the "Justice for Diarmuid O'Neill Campaign" called to the Embassy by appointment on 25 January 2000. It comprised Paul Philippou, Oliver Donohue, Danny Burke and Pegeen Brown. Mr. Philippou is of Greek origin and apparently active in Labour, human rights and trade union circles. Mr. Donohue has had a long involvement in civil rights issues and Mr Burke is a member of the Connolly Association. A number of the delegates also appear to be involved in the Irish community in the Hammersmith area (where Diarmuid O'Neill lived). The Embassy was represented by Colm Ó Floinn and the undersigned. The meeting began at 4.25pm and lasted about forty five minutes.

Mr Ó Floinn opened by referring to the substance of the Minister's PQ reply on 2 November 1999 and to the PSM's recent reply to Mr. Philippou which had made clear the Minister's hope that the forthcoming inquest (due to open at 10am on 31 January in Kingston-Upon-Thames) would assist in establishing the truth about the circumstances surrounding Mr. O'Neill's death. He also referred to the Campaign's previous correspondence with the Ambassador and assured the delegation that the Embassy had continued to monitor developments in the case.

Mr. Philippou acknowledged the interest taken by the Minister and expressed appreciation for the opportunity of the meeting. He rehearsed some of the major concerns the Campaign had in relation to the case. These included the length of time to produce the Police Complaints Authority report (two years), the length of time it had taken to interview the officer responsible (Officer 'Kilo'- 23 months), and the decision that no officer should face charges. The delegation were also strongly critical of the police operation leading up to the incident which resulted in Mr. O'Neill's death. They said that it had emerged that there were 250 police officers involved in the operation and that they had logged over 50,000 hours of surveillance. It was claimed that O'Neill and the others involved could have been arrested at any time.

Mr Philippou said that the inquest is expected to last for three to four weeks and that was unusually lengthy. Gareth Peirce, Solicitor and Michael Mansfield QC are acting for the family. He added that, despite his recent retirement, John Burton, the Coroner who had requested the Home Secretary to initiate a public enquiry into the case, would be hearing the case. The Campaign understands that Mr. Burton made a special request to be allowed sit at the resumed inquest and the Lord Chancellor's office acceded to this. The delegation expressed a certain scepticism that the truth would emerge at the inquest. They are also concerned about the decision to move its location from Fulham Coroner's Court to Kingston-Upon-Thames. The official explanation is that the move was for security reasons. The delegation was, however, of the view that the real reason was to secure a jury more sympathetic to the official position, who might also be swayed by a heavy security presence.

Mr. Philippou asked if the Embassy would send an observer to the inquest. He felt that the inquest was important not simply for the family of Diarmuid O'Neill, but also as an examination

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into the attitude of the police and other authorities here to Irish people in general. Mr. Ó Floinn (in accordance with instructions from Anglo-Irish Division) confirmed that an officer of the Embassy would attend the opening of the inquest and monitor it thereafter, attending as appropriate and possible given other commitments. The delegation expressed appreciation for this.

In further discussion, Mr Ó Floinn raised the question of the two witnesses to the incident whom the Police Complaints Authority had stated did not co-operate with the investigation into Mr. O'Neill's death. Mr. Philippou confirmed that the two witnesses referred to were Patrick Kelly and Brian McHugh (both now released in Ireland under the GFA provisions), who had been arrested at the address where Mr. O'Neill was killed. He understood that the reason for their unwillingness to co-operate with the PCA-supervised investigation was that it was carried out by officers of the Metropolitan Police, the same force that had been involved in the death of O'Neill and that they, therefore, had no confidence in it. Mr Donohue mentioned that he had heard that Kelly and McHugh might be willing to give evidence if it was felt that it might be of value but that the legal team of the O'Neill family had indicated that the value of this evidence might be limited at this time.

Mr Ó Floinn also asked if the PCA report had been given, as the Campaign had earlier hoped, to the family and legal team in advance of the inquest. The visitors confirmed that it had but they did not have a copy. They added that the provision of the report is in line with new procedures following the McPherson report into the Stephen Lawrence case. [The undersigned will be meeting with Ms Claire Tuhey of the Ireland desk in the Foreign Office later this week and will renew our request for a copy of the report in the light of this development]

Mr. Philippou left a briefing pack which includes a summary of the development of press coverage of the case, minutes of a meeting with the Police Complaints Authority, a copy of the post-mortem report and copies of parliamentary questions asked on the case. These will be forwarded to Mr. Biggar in the bag.

Before leaving, the visitors repeated their appreciation for their reception and the confirmation that the Embassy would be present at the inquest.

Bob Patterson.
26 January 2000

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