

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Confidential:

Meeting with Tommy McKearney (Republican Dissident), Dublin, 5 April 2000.

Background

1. McKearney, a former hunger striker/blanket man and former senior IRA member in East Tyrone, is currently Director of the EXPAC non-aligned ex-prisoners group. He is well respected within the broad republican family, three of his brothers having died in the Troubles - two "on active service" and the other at the hands of a Loyalist assassination team. Opposed in principle to the Good Friday Agreement McKearney, and EXPAC Chairman Anthony McIntyre, insist, however, that they are not advocating a return to a violent campaign. McKearney and McIntyre are co-editors of a new publication "Fourtwrite" (copy attached) which further strained relations with their former colleagues in Sinn Féin. The magazine carried an interview with former OC of the Republican prisoners during the blanket protest, Brendan "the Dark" Hughes. Hughes' criticism of the current Republican strategy gave rise to fears of widespread dissent within the military wing of the Republican family.

Michael Hegarty case

2. McKearney called to see me to make an approach on behalf of Michael Hegarty who is currently spokesperson/leader of the Continuity IRA prisoners in Portlaoise. McKearney and McIntyre had visited Hegarty recently and he indicated to them that he wishes to sever his connection with the CIRA and is opposed to the use the use of violence in present circumstances. There are also indications that Hegarty is in poor health. In these circumstances Hegarty wishes to pursue the possibility of early release. McKearney would be prepared to act as a point of contact on this matter if it is helpful. I explained to McKearney that this is a matter for the Department of Justice but that I would let Justice know of our conversation.

McKearney's Views on Current Mood within Republicanism

3. He suggests that the Sinn Féin political leadership in campaigning for the return of the GFA structures is out of touch with the grass roots who see this approach as "seeking the return of Stormont". He pointed to their failure to attract supporters onto the streets on this issue. However, McKearney is of the view that the "middle management" of the Republican family remains opposed to any return to armed struggle and that the foot soldiers would follow orders. He also maintains that there is not any significant drift to Oglaigh na hÉireann/CIRA following the suspension of the

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Executive. In McKearney's view the Real IRA/32 County Sovereignty Movement was neutralised by the reaction to the Omagh bombing.

4. When I suggested to McKearney that his new publication "Fourthwrite" appeared to many to point to a renewed armed struggle, he disagreed with this interpretation and promised that their opposition to "militarism" would be more apparent in the next issue.

Insider View of EXPAC/Dissidents

5. I spoke with Sean Maguire, a pro-Agreement Republican, who recently resigned from the EXPAC staff (some contacts suggest that Maguire was a Sinn Féin /IRA plant to keep an eye on McKearney and McIntyre) and criticised the EXPAC/Fourthwrite position of opposition to the Good Friday Agreement in a letter to the Irish News. Maguire maintains that the group has little real support on the ground and that EXPAC has contact with only a small number of ex-prisoners. The emerging political grouping is, Maguire suggested, piggy-backing on EXPAC.. He does not see them as posing a threat to the mainstream Republican position. While critical of Adams/McGuinness and the GFA "partitionist" strategy they have themselves no alternative policies. The key players in the group are, according to Maguire, Anthony McIntyre, Tommy McKearney and Bernadette McAliskey. They have some small support in Tyrone, Belfast and Derry. Despite McKearney's insistence that "the armed struggle has (for the present?) run its course", Maguire sees the argument for a return to violence as implicit in the groups position.

Comment:

6. Reliable contacts within Sinn Fein are also adamant that there is no significant leakage from the mainstream to the dissident groups at this time. They suggest rather that there are more questioning voices within the IRA itself and a danger that a failure to put the process back on track by the Autumn could lead to real pressures and tensions within the mainstream.

Máirtín Ó Fainín
Anglo-Irish Division

CC Group 3 and John Kenny, Department of Justice

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