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For Sec Gallagher
From T O'Connor, Joint Sec

Conversation with senior Sinn Féin Contact

1. In the course of Donal Hamill's St Patrick's Day party at the Secretariat in Belfast on Thursday evening*, I had a long conversation with a key member of the Sinn Féin leadership team. This contact is close to Adams and would be highly regarded within the wider Republican movement. This note summarises the main points to emerge.

Mood within Republicanism/Backlash against Leadership

2. He reiterated what we have been hearing from other contacts about the mood inside Republicanism following the suspension of the institutions. The suspension decision had caused tremendous anger - "I have never seen it so bad" - and a real hardening of attitudes among rank-and-file Republicans. Those who had been sceptical about the process all along were having a field day. While Adams' position was not under real threat, for the first time, open

*A very well attended occasion, with a wide spectrum of guests

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criticism was being voiced. The nub of that criticism could be summarised as follows: "Adams got it wrong. He told us that this process was about real change, but when push comes to shove, it's the same old story. The Brits play the Orange card".

Brendan Hughes

3. My contact suggested that this criticism had to be viewed against Adams' enormous status in the movement - "Adams is a god; that people are openly critical is a very new development". He suggested that this was also the context in which the Brendan Hughes story had to be viewed (you will recall recent media reports of an article written by Hughes in a new Republican magazine which was withering about the peace process and the role of the Sinn Féin leadership in it). My contact said that Adams, who had personally been close to Hughes, was very hurt by the latter's comments. My contact suggested, however, that while Hughes was giving voice to what many were thinking in the movement, it only had impact in the context of politics not working - "if the institutions were up and running, Brendan Hughes' voice would be the voice of the past".

The IRA and the Dissidents

4. All of this meant that constructing a political way forward would not be easily done, as far as many Republicans were concerned. My contact said that "there was no criticism on the Falls Road today about the boys at Hillsborough" (a reference to the people arrested in Hillsborough the previous evening in regard to the explosives find), the implication being that, although it is believed that those involved were dissidents, there was support and understanding for their actions on the part of many in West Belfast. He added that "a senior IRA man" had told him that the dissidents had "pedigree young lads" in their ranks, and

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were, therefore, more formidable a threat as a result.

5. At the same time, my contact made clear that the IRA "will not allow the dissidents to take over. They will sit on them". As to the IRA's own intentions, my contact said in express terms that the IRA does not want to, and will not, go back to war. The IRA wants to make its contribution (to the peace process) and will do so. However, as far as decommissioning was concerned "the IRA is out of it. They will never decommission in the terms being required by the British and the Unionists, with deadlines, dates and times".

Putting Arms beyond Use

6. In an interesting distinction, on the other hand, my contact suggested that what the IRA would do was "put arms beyond use in their own way and in their own time". Claiming that they were prepared to engage in discussions about that and what it meant in practical terms, he drew particular attention to the phrase "public confidence" in the IRA document given to de Chastelain on 11 February. He argued that this was a key phrase which had been deliberately chosen, following consultation with contacts in the Protestant community, with whom the Sinn Féin leadership have been engaged in dialogue for some time. My contact suggested that "you could play around with this phrase" and that it was also what would "bring in de Chastelain". My understanding of what he meant was that the "public confidence" concept could be an interface between the need for the IRA to insist that putting arms beyond use was a matter for them alone to decide on, and the wider need of the process for transparency and tangibility in regard to decommissioning.

7. When I drew his attention to Gerry Kelly's suggestion in the "Irish Times" article of 15 March (copy attached for ease of reference - my contact said that it

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was an important piece] that the role for the Commission was effectively over, my contact suggested that "not too much attention should be paid to that". He believed that there was a role for de Chastelain in the context of "public confidence" and that this could be explored.

War is Over Concept

8. My contact was appreciative of the Government's efforts to widen the debate out beyond decommissioning - "this is a very important thing which the Government is doing". We discussed the likely reaction of the Unionists in this regard. I suggested that while Trimble was probably prepared to countenance an alternative approach to that pursued so far, it was, nonetheless, going to be necessary for Republicans to build confidence, for their part also. Something tangible would be needed. When pressed by my contact on what that might be, I suggested that a clear and unambiguous indication that the conflict was over was one obvious option. Interestingly, my contact did not dismiss the possibility. However, he argued that it was essential that David Trimble "was cast-iron in making clear the significance of such a move". If Trimble could give assurances to that effect, "then the Taoiseach should talk to Gerry Adams".

Conclusion

9. I am reporting the remarks of my contact in some detail. I would not over-play what he had to say, and it remains to be seen how much of it would translate into party position in actual negotiations. But I felt that it was interesting, against the background of his position inside the leadership, as a possible insight into Republican thinking on some of the core issues ahead of us in any new round of talks.

END

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