



An Chartlann Náisiúnta **National Archives**

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Sinn Féin file

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Chaplains' Initiative on Paramilitary talks

In the light of recent developments, it might be useful to summarise the history of this initiative and provide an update on recent developments, based on my conversations over the weekend with Fr John Murphy, Catholic Chaplain in the Maze.

History:

In earlier reports I outlined in some detail how, over two years ago, Fr Murphy, along with his Church of Ireland colleague in the Maze, Rev Will Murphy, launched an initiative designed to facilitate the establishment of talks involving the paramilitaries on both sides of the divide. This initiative was based on the thesis that there will be no cessation of violence until such time as those actually engaged in the campaign of violence are involved in the search for a basis for peace in Northern Ireland.

The initiative was given the go-ahead by the Four Church Leaders at the time (the late Cardinal O'Fiaich, Archbishop Eames, Bishop Poyntz and Bishop Cahal Daly). That "go-ahead" was by way of a general endorsement of their effort - none of the church leaders have become involved in any of the detail of the discussions. [To a considerable extent, the support of the church leadership appears to have been based on two considerations - (1) the fact that the initiative was born in the Maze would help its status and credibility in paramilitary circles; and (2) the high regard in which both clergymen are held by their respective churches - perhaps most notably in the case of Fr Murphy. He has been working in the Maze for the past 15 years, appears to have the respect of the republican movement, and has a track record in terms of his involvement in the hunger-strike negotiations - where his interlocutor on the British side was Sir John Blelloch, recently retired Permanent Under-Secretary of the NIO.]

The initiative began within the Maze over two years ago and involved both the IRA and the UVF. The initiative subsequently moved outside the prison. In the course of these discussions the UVF leadership made it clear that they saw their campaign as purely reactive - i.e. a cessation of the IRA campaign would automatically result in a cessation of the UVF campaign. [The UDA have not become involved in the initiative at the (not unreasonable) insistence of the UVF who view the UDA as gangsters and totally infiltrated by the security services.] At first there was some involvement with the Sinn Féin leadership, following which the matter was handed over by Sinn Féin to the Army Council of the IRA.

Developments - April/May 1990:

Following a number of discussions with the IRA leadership, both Chaplains reported to the Church Leaders in April of this year that the IRA were willing to seek an alternative to the campaign

of violence and, with this objective in mind, were prepared to enter exploratory discussions with the British Government. These discussions could be either private or public and, if judged meaningful by the IRA, could lead to some form of cease-fire or laying down of arms. The Chaplains were convinced of the sincerity of their interlocutors in this matter. While there was no definition of what the IRA might judge as "meaningful", in the Chaplains' view, some sort of formulation outlining Britain's limited and conditional commitment to the maintenance of the Union; coupled with some agreement on the withdrawal of troops from the streets; along with some sort of programme of releases/amnesty; might help to induce a change of direction on the part of the republican movement away from the campaign of violence.

As a result of this development, both Cardinal O' Fiaich and Archbishop Eames had a meeting with the Secretary of State on 1 May 1990 where they informed him of the IRA's position. At that meeting, the Secretary of State was apparently taken aback; expressed interest in the initiative; and expressed his anxiety that information on the initiative be kept absolutely quiet for the moment (possibly because of the initiative involving the constitutional parties - then at a critical stage).

Developments - September 1990:

The sudden death shortly thereafter of Cardinal O' Fiaich inhibited further development of the initiative. In that context, both Chaplains became progressively more sceptical as to whether Archbishop Eames was really supportive of their efforts. [Fr Murphy recently commented that Eames had probably initially given his endorsement to the initiative on the basis that it would get nowhere. Now that it showed some possibilities, he felt that Eames probably saw major difficulties in selling anything which might emerge from this process to his own community.] Growing frustration with Archbishop Eames' inertia led Bishop Cahal Daly to take action himself by seeking a meeting with the Secretary of State in September. At that meeting, Brooke again expressed interest in the initiative and scheduled a further and more detailed meeting involving Bishop Daly, Sir John Blelloch and the then head of the Political Affairs Department of the NIO (John McConnell).

Recent Developments:

Since then there have been further contacts with the IRA who have expressed continuing interest in talks with the British - either in public or in private and assured the Chaplains that "they would not be found wanting" in any such talks process. At the same time the IRA have cautioned the Chaplains to ignore statements from Sinn Fein which they implied were purely for public consumption.

Bishop Cahal Daly was in Rome for much of October and Fr Murphy had been keeping him informed of developments during that period. However, in the face of a growing reluctance on the part of the Church of Ireland leadership (Eames apparently was quite firm in telling them both not to get involved in negotiations) and the

concern which this engendered for both Chaplains that the NIO were not being told the full story, and in the absence of Bishop Cahal Daly in Rome, the Chaplains decided "to take the bull by the horns" and sought a face-to-face meeting with Sir John Blelloch at the end of last month. That meeting, which lasted some hours, involved Blelloch and the new head of the Political Affairs Department of the NIO (Danny McNeill).

Since that meeting, the Chaplains have received positive signals which appear to indicate a heightened interest in the initiative on the part of the British -viz-

N.B. // McNeill sought out the Chaplains at a recent routine lunch meeting devoted to Prison issues. After the meeting, McNeill asked both of them to stay back. He told them (a) that the original approaches by the church leaders had been fully understood; (b) that they must understand that they (the British) would have to go public on this - something which at the time worried both Chaplains but which they now see as a reference to the Secretary of State's speech; (c) that the idea that any talks would be private would be "palatable" from their point of view; (d) emphasised that "you will have to move at our speed".

// The previous day (9 November) the Prison Service held its annual Remembrance Day Service at the Training Centre in Millisle. Fr Murphy studiously avoids such occasions and did so again this year. Traditionally, Ministers rarely attend the Service. However, on this occasion, John Cope attended and apparently "made a bee-line for Rev Will Murphy" and asked whether Fr Murphy was present. The occasion was a public one and when asked by Cope how his work was progressing, Rev Murphy replied that "he was still working for peace", to which Cope responded that "we are very very happy with what you (plural) are doing".

Future Developments:

// Both Chaplains were delighted with Brooke's speech on 9 November which they see as reflecting much of the language of their discussions to date. The next stage is that the New Permanent Secretary of the NIO (Chillcot) along with Danny McNeill are to meet Bishop Cahal Daly tomorrow (13 November). Following that meeting, both Chillcot and McNeill will meet with the Chaplains.

Fr Murphy agreed to keep in close touch on developments over the coming weeks.

RS

Brendan McMahon
Anglo-Irish Division
12 November 1990

cc A/Sec Gallagher, R. Murphy

cc PST, PM, H. Nally, PPS, H. P. P. P.