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Maze Chaplains' initiative on paramilitary talks

Background

1. This initiative has been conducted by the Catholic and Church of Ireland Chaplains in the Maze (both named Murphy) over the past two years. From the beginning, the initiative had the support of four Church leaders (O Fiaich, Eames, Cahal Daly and Poyntz).
2. On the basis of recommendations by the Chaplains earlier this year, the then two Archbishops (O Fiaich and Eames) approached the Secretary of State on 1 May to indicate that the Army Council of the IRA were prepared to enter into secret talks with London which, if judged meaningful, would result in a cessation of the campaign of violence. While no definition of "meaningful" was available, the IRA were insistent that "they would not be found wanting" in such a process - clearly indicating that they might settle for something less than their traditional demand for a simple declaration of intent to withdraw on the part of the British.

Recent Developments

3. In recent weeks there has been a series of (separate) meetings between the Chaplains and (a) two representatives of the IRA Army Council and (b) Danny

McNeill, the recently-appointed Head of the Political Affairs Section at the NIO. These meetings were devoted to clarifying what might be envisaged in any talks process (my report of 10 December refers).

4. I met the Catholic Chaplain, Fr Murphy, on 17 December for an update on recent developments. On the previous Friday, he had been contacted by McNeill who asked to see him not as on previous occasions in Stormont, but at his (Fr. Murphy's) house near Lisburn. In the course of their meeting, McNeill (who had just returned from a briefing in London specifically related to the possibility of talks) made the following points:

- The Secretary of State was generally supportive of the initiative and would probably recommend proceeding with secret talks if these were recommended by John Chilcot (the new Permanent Under-Secretary of the NIO). However, McNeill was careful to underline the obvious political risks involved for Brooke; if the process turned out to be successful in bringing about peace, it would mark a significant triumph for Brooke (a triumph which would fireproof him against attacks from Unionists or any other group); on the other hand, if the initiative were to fail, the Secretary of State would have to carry the can;
- as regards the attitude of the new Prime Minister, McNeill said that Mr. Major was aware of the initiative but not in a way which would require him to consider taking a decision one way or the other at this time;

- the British had also received an approach recently suggesting talks with Sinn Féin. In response, Fr. Murphy again emphasised to McNeill the distinction which had to be drawn between Sinn Féin and the IRA. The IRA view was that "Sinn Féin was the party which was closest to them". However, if the British were to take up the option of talks with Sinn Féin, there was no guarantee that they would be able "to deliver" the IRA. In Murphy's view, the IRA must be directly involved in any process if they are to be persuaded that their objectives can be pursued by other than military means;
- Murphy had a sense from McNeill that he believes that the British Government will agree in the end to the proposal for secret talks with the IRA. His assessment is to a large degree based on McNeill's repeating of a view he had conveyed previously - that it would be difficult for any British Government to refuse an option for peace being put forward by the leaders of the two main Churches. McNeill said he hoped a decision on the matter would be made "within weeks" (this seems to us rather optimistic);
- on the question of an interlocutor for any talks, the British seem to have in mind the recently-retired former Permanent Under-Secretary of the NIO (Sir John Blelloch) - an idea suggested some time ago by Fr Murphy. Whether or not (in the event of talks) the British decide to use Blelloch, Fr Murphy argued that it would be necessary, in order to

ensure credibility with the IRA, that any interlocutor should be English (and not from the North);

- McNeill was anxious to draw Fr Murphy out on the likely substance to any talks, but the latter refused to go down this road (on the grounds, in particular, that he might end up acting as a kind of intermediary on issues of substance). Murphy's only objective is to get the protagonists to talk to each other face to face - something which he is "morally certain" would lead to peace;
- McNeill also went through the Brooke "neutrality speech" of 9 November in detail with Fr Murphy; he was anxious in particular that the Army Council should realise that this speech had been addressed to them.

Other Aspects

- Fr Murphy's two interlocutors on the IRA side are both members of the Army Council. He also told me he has a channel direct to the current Chief of Staff. It is apparently from this channel that Murphy detects a particular anxiety to get talks under way at an early date.
- the Chaplains have not been in direct contact with either Archbishop in recent weeks, and appear to have no plans to do so in the near future (largely because of their continuing suspicion of Eames);

- Murphy finally said he had been very pleased with the tone of Cahal Daly's homily on the occasion of his installation - a homily which, in Fr. Murphy's view, should strike the right note with the republican leadership and also reflected a sensitivity to the progress which had been made to date on the Chaplains' initiative.



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