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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

3 September, 1991.

CONFIDENTIAL

Mr. Sean O hUiginn,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Dear Assistant Secretary,

The Sinn Féin Letter

In Robert Alston's absence on leave, his deputy on the political contacts side of the NIO, Mr Danny McNeill, called to see me this afternoon about last month's letter from Gerry Adams to the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister (addressed to 10 Downing Street, Belfast!). McNeill said he believed that a more substantive letter had also been sent to the SDLP, DUP and presumably to the other political parties; and that it seemed also that letters had been addressed to Church leaders. So far as he was aware from his contacts with the Churches in Northern Ireland, no encouragement is intended to be given by them to Adams and company and, indeed, this is borne out by the cool response given by Cardinal Daly in a joint interview with Archbishop Eames which appears in Fortnight Magazine today.

The only British response so far has been a typically colourful and unscripted remark by Minister Needham that the letter was a publicity gimmick and that Adams should call off his Rotweillers. The question of a reply to the letter has been left aside until Mr. Brooke's return to the office which will occur on Thursday; McNeill went on to run past me the advice which he intends to give.

His own view is that there is nothing in the letter to warrant a substantive response, that it arose from pressure on Sinn Féin during the bout of sectarian killings last month and that it would be very unwise to give encouragement in reply. In this respect, McNeill pointed out that the three-day truce which was widely welcomed last Christmas was followed within a couple of days by the major attack on the shopping centre at Sprucefield and not long afterwards by the attack on the British Cabinet in Whitehall. McNeill added that any kind of substantive response would cause waves in the Unionist community - Paisley sought to make a meal of Government contacts with Sinn Féin representatives

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on local issues in the wake of the Adams letter - which was also a factor for his Government to consider.

McNeill is advising, therefore, that either no response should be made to the letter on the grounds that it was essentially a public statement for propaganda purposes, or, if some reply is considered necessary, that it should be a simple acknowledgement noting the contents.

I told McNeill that as far as I was aware no response had issued to the letter on our side and that there was no immediate intention of issuing one. I expressed no difficulty with the advice he proposed to give and told him that if there were developments in our view, we would inform his side.

While Adams' letter contains nothing of substance (I understand the text received by the British is as reported in the Irish News of 21 August), I noted that Martin McGuinness had come out in support of it two days later with a statement that "Sinn Fein is willing to risk everything to create a real peace agenda . . . if we are bluffing, why not call our bluff?". I asked if the British side attached any significance to McGuinness's intervention. McNeill thought that McGuinness had come in to sustain interest in Adams' initiative which was sinking in a sea of derision and because of a critical editorial in the Irish News which said Adams needed to engineer a ceasefire before talks could begin (the Irish News repeated this editorial view in response to McGuinness although it recognised his statement as important coming from someone who is regarded as a hawk in the movement).

It may be of interest that McNeill's underlying view is that Sinn Fein are under enormous pressure in West Belfast where the ground is being taken away from them by the economic activities of the British Government, the Catholic Church and organisations like the Phoenix Trust with the support of the International Fund. He thinks the pressure is much less elsewhere, for example, in Newry where he believed the IRA would ride out the cathedral controversy but, generally, he believes that the IRA may give up in a year or two, recognising not only that they do not have the capacity to win militarily but that they have also exhausted the armalite/ballot box strategy and otherwise run out of ideas. He thinks there is a good chance this will happen provided his government "does not do something silly like introduce internment". By the same token, he believes it necessary to keep up attempts to get talks going if only to maintain political pressure on the IRA.

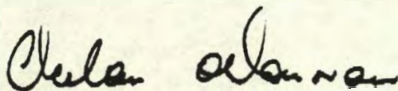
McNeill is the senior Northerner (and Catholic) on the political side of the NIO. His English superiors tend to more sceptical views of the prospects for a ceasefire although the Permanent Under Secretary, John Chilcot, shows interest at times; and the

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NIO as a whole has embraced the "no selfish economic or strategic interest in staying in Northern Ireland" line which is intended to put pressure on Sinn Fein and which was repeated again in Mr Brooke's Dungannon speech before the August break.

Yours sincerely,



Declan O'Donovan