



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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A conversation with Fr. John Murphy

You will be aware of the initiative in which Fr. John Murphy, the Catholic chaplain in the Maze, has been engaged for some time past along with his Church of Ireland counterpart, Rev. Will Murphy. The two men have had exploratory discussions off and on over the past two years with the IRA and UVF leaderships (both men involved in both instances) both inside and outside the Maze. The initiative has had the support of the Church leaders from the outset (the late Cardinal and his successor, on the one hand, and Archbishop Eames and Bishop Poyntz on the other).

I visited Fr. Murphy on 30 July in order to establish how matters stood at present in relation to the initiative. Requesting that our conversation be treated in the same strict confidence as his earlier conversations with Mr. McMahon on this subject, he briefed me on a very recent development which is of some interest.

A document had come into his possession earlier in the day which indicated that the discussions he and his colleague have been having with the IRA leadership may be having tangible results in the form of altering traditional IRA thinking. A routine security "sweep" of a cell in the Maze uncovered a miniaturised document which had been smuggled in to the (Provo) prisoner concerned. The document was magnified into more legible form and two copies were made, one of which went to the Secretary of State and the other to an unnamed person, from whom Fr. Murphy subsequently obtained a copy. From the markings it bore and other indications, he is fully satisfied

that the document came from the IRA's Army Council. It is likely that copies would have been smuggled in to all senior Provo prisoners in the Maze.

Fr. Murphy gave me sight of this document. Running to three or four pages, it provided echoes at various points of argumentation and terminology used by the SDLP. (Fr. Murphy has since phoned me to say that he understands that those who wrote the document drew on a five-page text from March-April 1988 which John Hume passed to Gerry Adams in the course of the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks then in progress). The text began with a clear acceptance that the Provos' campaign of violence will never achieve the objectives of the Republican movement. At times critical of, and even openly hostile towards, the campaign of violence, it asked the blunt question: does anyone seriously believe that the British Army will ever be coerced militarily into withdrawal? It went on to suggest that, while British withdrawal remains of course the objective, a declaration of intent to withdraw would be equally satisfactory as it would set an irreversible process in motion. While it did not elaborate on this, the text hinted that some indication in this direction should give the Provos sufficient grounds to call off their campaign. The precise term used in the latter respect was "a cessation of violence" .

The rest of the document focused on the need for Republicans to reach agreement with the Unionist tradition on future arrangements for the island. Another rhetorical question asked whether anyone seriously believed that British withdrawal would solve the problem by itself. It is wrong, the document asserted, to regard the British presence in Ireland as the sole problem. The text then put the following proposition:

1. Do you accept that the people of Ireland have an absolute right to self-determination?
2. Do you also accept that the people of Ireland are at present seriously divided on what this means?
3. Do you accept that, if self-determination is to be achieved for all the people of Ireland, this necessarily involves agreement between the Unionist and nationalist traditions?

Should the answer to either 1, 2 or 3 be yes, the document continued, the right course would be for a conference to be convened by "an Irish Government", at which all parties in the North with an electoral mandate would be represented. The purpose of this conference would be to achieve agreement between the nationalist and Unionist traditions on how the island should be governed. If the Unionists refused to take part, the document went on, the nationalist parties should meet in order to agree on proposals which might be made to the Unionists (i.e., a kind of Forum Mark 2). The document concluded with an echo of the recent indication by Peter Brooke that Britain has no selfish strategic or economic interest in remaining in Northern Ireland; and with a reassertion of the view that the best chance of achieving the Republican movement's objectives lies in the abandonment of the campaign of violence (in exchange for a "declaration of intent to withdraw") and in the peaceful pursuit of agreement between the nationalist and Unionist traditions on new arrangements for the island.

Fr. Murphy offered the following comments on the document.

First, many of the concepts and terms used in it were familiar to him from the series of conversations he and his colleague have been having with two senior members of the Army Council. (When I asked about the degree of authority enjoyed by his interlocutors, he replied that he is in no doubt that they speak for the Army Council as a whole).

Second, what was new to Fr. Murphy was the conference idea and also the proposal that it would be convened by the Irish Government. None of this had arisen in his discussions with the Army Council, which had largely focused on the conditions for bringing about an end to the Provisionals' campaign (see below). Reflecting on this, he commented that "there may in fact be some good in the Anglo-Irish Agreement after all". (Fr. Murphy has been consistently sceptical about the Agreement). He speculated that the Republican movement may be finally coming to terms with the status conferred on Dublin by the Agreement (i.e., that of supreme defender of the nationalist interest). They may perhaps have concluded that Britain's formal recognition of the Irish Government in this role has brought the prospect of British withdrawal a little nearer. The logic of a positive evaluation of Dublin's role under the Agreement would be that they would wish the Irish Government to convene and chair the conference required to sort out the post-withdrawal arrangements.

Third, as regards the "declaration of intent", Fr. Murphy commented that what has been under discussion in his contacts with the Army Council has been a softer version of this, amounting to the British speaking to them in a "meaningful" way which would enable them to call off the campaign. The shorthand which Fr. Murphy has used to cover this point in his discussions has been "50% plus one", i.e., (as I understand it), something which falls well short of an absolute

commitment to withdraw but which nonetheless recognises that there is no fundamental British interest in remaining in Northern Ireland.

Fr. Murphy believes that the Army Council would now settle for something on these lines and that the object of the document was to set out their thinking to the "hard men" in the Maze in the hope of converting them to the political approach. He would expect to hear, at his next meeting with the two Army Council members, whether or not the men "inside" have indicated their agreement.

I asked Fr. Murphy for his assessment of the British Government's current attitude towards the initiative. He suggested that, although the British interest in it had fallen off while the talks process was underway, they might look at it with renewed interest in the changed circumstances. He hoped that sight of the document might help to persuade them of the potential the initiative offered for a break-through. Brooke, Fr. Murphy speculated, would respond immediately if he felt there was "a chance of peace". (In this respect, Fr. Murphy recalled Brooke's explicit request that a decision by him to leave VCPs in the Fermanagh area open at night for the duration of the IRA's ceasefire last Christmas should be represented to them as a gesture of goodwill made in response to this ceasefire). Conversely, of course, Fr. Murphy recognised that the document might encourage the British Government to "sit back"; they might decide that the Provos were now "on the run" and that, by waiting long enough, they might be able to avoid talking to them.

The two Murphys have kept the Secretary of State informed via Danny McNeill (of the NIO's political secretariat). The initiative has also been mentioned in contacts between the two

Church leaders (Daly and Eames) and the Secretary of State. While Cardinal Daly has been privately supportive to Fr. Murphy, he remains, it would appear, cautious about the initiative and he has refrained from endorsing it too strongly in his contacts with the Secretary of State.

Archbishop Eames, on the other hand, appears to have developed an enthusiasm for it and has involved himself in the detail of it to a greater extent. Recently, for example, on the question of the modalities for eventual talks between the IRA and the British Government, Eames proposed that the IRA might talk to the two Primates " in the presence of a British Government representative". Fr. Murphy felt that this would be unacceptable to the IRA and proposed instead to invert the formula, ie, the IRA would meet a British Government representative in the presence of the two Primates. Eames, he indicated, has accepted this. The British Government's thinking in this regard, however, has yet to be established.

The Army Council contacts have told Fr. Murphy that they would agree to a meeting with the British Government at either political or official level. They are not opposed to the Government representative meeting Sinn Fein instead (which is the preferred British position) but they believe that it would save time and effort if the British agreed to a direct meeting with the Army Council. They insist on the distinction between themselves and Sinn Fein, which they characterise merely as "the party which is closest to their thinking". Fr. Murphy strongly favours direct contact with the Army Council (for the same reason). He also agrees with the distinction made between the two organisations (and is irritated with the British Government's persistent refusal to make this distinction). While he is aware of a small number who have "dual membership" (one of his contacts, he indicated, is

simultaneously a senior Army Council member and a middle-ranking Sinn Fein member), he is personally satisfied that they are, for the most part, two quite separate organisations.

With Sinn Fein representing them at the conference, Fr. Murphy observed, the Provos would cease to have any role once they called off their campaign. They would, in effect, be "demobbed". Fr. Murphy was under no illusion about the difficulty which this situation would pose for many of them and the likelihood that recalcitrant elements would refuse to obey the stand-down order.

As to what Sinn Fein would hope to achieve from the conference, he has been told that they would want "only our two-and-a-half percent" (i.e., a share of power commensurate with their electoral standing).

The Army Council envisages that what emerges from the conference would be put to referenda North and South so that "the people of Ireland could give their verdict".

Conclusion comment

The two chaplains are to meet the Church leaders next Tuesday. I understand that they will encourage them to revive the initiative with the NIO, pointing to the evidence that it is having some effect on IRA thinking.

David Donoghue

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2 August 1991

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