



## An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

<b>Reference Code:</b>	2021/93/9
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Department of the Taoiseach
<b>Accession Conditions:</b>	Open
<b>Copyright:</b>	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

SECRET

Asst. Sec. O hUiginn

A conversation with Fr John Murphy

As you are aware, Fr John Murphy, the Catholic chaplain in the Maze, and his Church of Ireland counterpart have been engaged in exploratory discussions over the past two years with the IRA and UVF leaderships, both inside and outside the Maze. The initiative has had the support of both Church leaders from the outset.

Last July Fr Murphy brought me up to date on recent developments (my report of 2 August refers). He mentioned, in particular, the circulation to Provo prisoners of a document drafted by the Army Council which indicated that the chaplains' contacts with the latter were bearing some fruit. The document, which echoed at various points argumentation and terminology used by the SDLP, opened with a clear recognition that the Provos' campaign of violence will never achieve the objectives of the Republican movement. It hinted that some indication in the direction of a declaration of intent to withdraw should give the Provos sufficient grounds to call off their campaign. It went on to propose that, in the event of a Provo "cessation of violence" consequent on such an indication, there should be a conference, convened by "an Irish Government" and involving all parties in the North with an electoral mandate, whose purpose would be to achieve agreement between the nationalist and Unionist traditions on how the island should be governed.

Taking up the story from there in a confidential briefing which he gave me last week, Fr Murphy told me that the Army Council document was well received by all senior Provo

prisoners in the Maze (traditionally regarded as the most hard-line elements in the Republican movement). This meant that the Army Council could be sure of its ground in any subsequent contacts with the chaplains, the Church leaders and, ultimately, the British Government.

The next development, in August, was that Archbishop Eames and Cardinal Daly had a further meeting with the NIO, at which they discussed the modalities for possible talks between the IRA and the British Government. The key question was how to reconcile the IRA's requirement for talks which would lead to a permanent ceasefire with the British Government's insistence that no talks with the IRA could be contemplated until after a ceasefire. Eames proposed a formula whereby the Army Council would have preliminary talks about a ceasefire with a former British civil servant. The latter would be present on behalf of the British Government but would be disownable in the event of the meetings receiving publicity.

A name which was mentioned in this connection was that of Sir John Blelloch. Fr Murphy, who had earlier floated this idea himself in informal contacts with the NIO, knows Blelloch well from their joint involvement in the hunger-strike crises of 1980-81. While he does not particularly like Blelloch, he admires his "'professionalism'" and considers that he would be well qualified for this particular task. Fr Murphy indicated, however, that Blelloch's was not the only name which arose in discussion.

The NIO had no fundamental difficulty with this approach and said it had no objection to the Church leaders pursuing it with the IRA. As Fr Murphy had difficulty in locating the two intermediaries through whom he had previously contacted the Army Council, he switched to another. This individual is not a member of the Army Council (as the earlier two were) but

he "reports to them". He recently completed a prison sentence in the Maze. Since his release, he has met the Secretary of State in some capacity (Fr Murphy was unsure of the precise circumstances) and he is also known to the Cardinal, who met him at a social occasion recently.

This individual, whom Eames met with the two chaplains, relayed the proposal to the Army Council. The response, which came promptly, was positive. Questions were asked, however, about the precise status and negotiating authority which the 'Blelloch figure' would have.

The Army Council envisages a scaled-down campaign of violence continuing while talks about the terms for a ceasefire are in progress. Once the ceasefire is achieved, formal talks about the political future of Northern Ireland would begin (and the 'Blelloch' figure would be replaced by official British Government representatives). Fr Murphy recognizes that there is little prospect of the British Government agreeing to the first part of this proposition. He hopes, however, that it might prove possible to blur the distinction between the two stages. In this respect, the British Government's ability to disown its interlocutor, if necessary, would be important - hence the attraction of a 'Blelloch' figure.

In further contacts between the clerical side and the Army Council, the presence of the two Church leaders at the proposed talks was debated. In this respect, an unequivocal view was transmitted back from the Army Council: Eames would be acceptable to them as a "guarantor" of the talks but the Cardinal would not be. While no reasons were offered, Fr Murphy attributes this to a perception on the IRA's part that the Cardinal accepts the British position that a ceasefire must come before any talks. Eames, in contrast, has given an impression of flexibility in this regard. When Fr Murphy

mentioned to the Cardinal that the Army Council were vetoing his involvement, the Cardinal did not seem either surprised or upset. When Fr Murphy observed that the IRA ''regard you as a churchman but Eames as a politician'', the Cardinal agreed with a rueful smile. Efforts to change the Army Council's mind on the Cardinal were made subsequently via the intermediary but without success.

Eames briefed the Secretary of State on developments. He also, it appears, had a meeting either with the Prime Minister or with someone very close to the Prime Minister. He told Fr Murphy afterwards that he was greatly taken aback by the degree of detail which the Prime Minister seemed to possess about the contacts to date (who had met whom where, etc). He speculated that this may have reached the Prime Minister from intelligence sources. In support of the view that MI5/MI6 were au fait with what was going on, Fr Murphy mentioned some circumstantial evidence relating to a number of the meetings he had had.

The most recent development was that John Chilcot came to see Eames within the past two to three weeks and, citing the Prime Minister, told him that the British Government did not wish to pursue the initiative, at least for the time being. However, when the Archbishop asked if he should therefore send the chaplains back to their normal duties, Chilcot made clear that he should not do so as ''we may need them yet''. The point of most interest to Eames, in a lengthy discussion of the initiative which ensued, was Chilcot's indication at one stage (on which he did not elaborate) that ''we have our own channels to these people''.

Fr Murphy's own surmise - and, he indicated, that of the Archbishop also - is that the British Government has decided either to pursue the initiative quietly on its own now or else

to hold in reserve the possibility of doing so at some stage in the future. He believes that the British would prefer not to have to rely on clerical mediation in order to get through to the Army Council - but equally, should their own contacts fail, they would like to hold the clerical route in reserve. They may have decided to make direct use, either now or at some future date, of the intermediary used by the clerics (whose name Eames divulged to the NIO).

Alternatively, they may have decided that it will not finally be necessary to do a deal with the Provos. The Provo counter-argument, Fr Murphy suggested, would be that they favour talks but that, if these are not forthcoming, they have the wherewithal to continue their campaign indefinitely.

Eames, who is a little sore at the British Government's apparent decision not to pursue the initiative, is now turning his attention to ways of bringing together the IRA and UDA/UVF leaderships with a view to arranging a joint ceasefire. This was explored at the outset of the chaplains' initiative but was put to one side when the Provos insisted on the central importance of talks with the British Government.

The Cardinal is, on the whole, more detached and cautious about the initiative. He is fully supportive of Fr Murphy, and has done everything which Fr Murphy has asked him to do, but he has a more sceptical view of the prospects than his Church of Ireland counterpart. He also strongly favours SDLP involvement in any talks between the IRA and the British Government. In fact, Fr Murphy attributes much of the Cardinal's hesitation about the initiative to a suspicion on his part that the SDLP's dialogue with Sinn Fein is still continuing in some form and that he should do nothing which might compromise its chances of success.

Finally, as regards the hint in the direction of a declaration of intent to withdraw which the Provos would like to see, Fr Murphy said that he had been struck by the importance attached by senior Provo prisoners, in private conversations last week, to the Channel Four poll indicating that 61% of the British public favour British withdrawal. Fr Murphy suggested to me that a statement by a British Minister which in some way acknowledged that majority opinion in Britain favours withdrawal would be "getting close to what they want". He recalled that Brooke had sent a very deliberate signal to the Provos some time ago with his references to Britain no longer having a selfish strategic or economic interest in remaining in NI. This had gone down very well with Fr Murphy's Army Council contacts. Another such hint building on the Channel Four poll could have a very valuable effect. He also noted that, in the event of a change of Government shortly, much could be made of Labour's declared commitment to Irish unity. The implications of 1992, with Ireland being treated as a single economic unit in various contexts, could also be exploited helpfully.

David Donoghue

31 October 1991

W6798