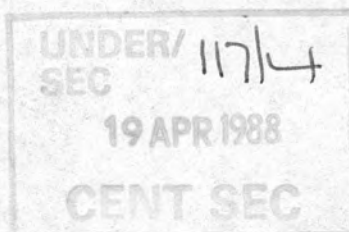


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PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr A W Stephens - B
Mr Chesterton - B
Mr Miles - B
Mr Spence - M
Mr Daniell - M
Mr Wood - B
Mr J McConnell - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Masfield - M
Mr Kirk

CC Mr Burns - B



POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP

I attach the agenda and paper for the meeting on Wednesday 20 April at 10.30 in the Conference Room, NIO (L).

S.L. Rickard

S L RICKARD

CPL

18 April 1988

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Agenda for Meeting on Wednesday 20 April in the Conference Room,
OAB, at 10.30am.

1. Recent Developments

- (a) Mr McConnell to report (with Mr Daniell as necessary please) on the current mood of the parties;
- (b) Mr Bell on Anglo-Irish relations.

2. Sinn Fein

Paper by CPL summarizing recent consideration, attached.

3. Talks about Talks - Our Strategy

Short paper by CPL, to be circulated.

4. Any Other Business5. Summary of Action Required6. Date of Next Meeting

Tuesday 17 May in Belfast?

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SINN FEIN**The Party**

1. Sinn Fein is the political wing of the Provisional IRA and advocates a united socialist Irish Republic, brought about if need be by violence, and against the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. It shares a common leadership and single coherent strategy with PIRA, to which it lends support both material and moral.

Current Policy

2. HMG would not normally have a policy, as such, towards a political party. Sinn Fein's objective of a united socialist Irish Republic cannot be regarded as illegitimate. But the Government is bound to be concerned about Sinn Fein's support for violence in pursuit of this objective. Support for violence is inimical to democracy and reduces the chances of a peaceful resolution of Northern Ireland's problems. The Government does not therefore accord Sinn Fein the courtesies shown to a normal political party. It has however allowed Sinn Fein to operate as a political party (while keeping the possibility of proscription under review) and ensures that constituency complaints raised by Sinn Fein representatives are fairly dealt with in the interests of the constituent.

HMG's Objectives

3. For so long as Sinn Fein supports violence, the size of its vote and the number of its elected representatives will continue to give some indication of the level of support in the community for violence as a political tactic (although violence also originates on the loyalist side). For this reason, and because Sinn Fein's elected representatives pose certain tactical problems for HMG, it is tempting to suggest that HMG's objective should simply be to reduce Sinn Fein's electoral support. In fact, HMG's real concern is the underlying reservoir of community support for violence, of

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which Sinn Fein's electoral support is merely one manifestation. If support for violence can be reduced, then a reduction in Sinn Fein's electoral support should, all other things being equal, follow. HMG's primary objective, therefore, is to undermine support for political violence throughout the community, by a range of social, economic, political and security policies designed to administer Northern Ireland fairly, and so remove the grievances on which support for violence feeds.

4. A fall in Sinn Fein's electoral support would be one indication that support for violence in the community had been reduced. For Sinn Fein to renounce violence and behave as a normal political party would be a still greater prize - if it could be achieved. This is not completely beyond imagination. It was the intention behind the 1974 Government's decision to deproscribe, and may be behind Mr Hume's current contacts with Sinn Fein. The evolution of pre-1970 'official' Sinn Fein into the non-violent Workers' Party provides a precedent. In present circumstances, however, Sinn Fein's renunciation of violence seems unlikely. Sinn Fein's simple demand for a British withdrawal does not appear to admit of compromise; and the Workers Party's transition to political legitimacy depended upon an OIRA ceasefire. The alternative, of splitting Sinn Fein and bringing a fragment into normal politics, also seems unlikely in present circumstances. Nonetheless, we should not close the door to either possibility. Changed circumstances, or a less competent leadership, could lead Sinn Fein, or part of it, towards political legitimacy. The Government should not by its actions close off such possibilities.

The Scope for Change

5. If the possibility of bringing Sinn Fein to renounce violence is at least temporarily laid aside, no alternative strategy seems likely to produce decisive results. Apart from the difficulties of enforcement, proscription would not reduce, and might increase, the Provisionals' underlying support. It would also seem to reduce the chances that Sinn Fein might turn away from violence. Bolstering

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the SDLP as a constitutional nationalist competitor to Sinn Fein may already have had some marginal success, if measured by recent election results; and despite doubts about the SDLP's capacity as a competitor to Sinn Fein at grassroots level, vigorous work by the two Governments through the Agreement machinery to enhance the SDLP's credibility could yet produce further dividends. Nor should we neglect the inherent weaknesses of the Provisionals' dual strategy. Each outrage presents an opportunity to roll back their influence; and if electoral considerations impose restraints on, or pre-empt resources intended for, terrorist activity, then so much the better.

6. However, treating Sinn Fein as a normal political party would needlessly arouse the ire of the other parties at what they would see as a 'softening' of HMG's position. Are there ways in which our present policy could be refined? A review of the current Greyband on Sinn Fein is in hand. Inside Northern Ireland, however, the nature of Sinn Fein is well understood; fresh verbal attacks tend to strengthen the case for proscription. Also in hand is a review of the details of policy on access to government by Sinn Fein. In principle, the fewer Sinn Fein's opportunities for constituency work, the better. But it is in the Government's interest to maximize its impact on those areas, such as West Belfast, where Sinn Fein is most deeply entrenched. In pursuing that interest, contact between Sinn Fein and officials often cannot be avoided, and in some circumstances officials could not decline contact. There are also legal pitfalls, and the interests of constituents (who may not have voted for their Sinn Fein councillor or MP) to consider. The sensible scope for tightening the policy appears, at most, extremely limited.

Conclusion

7. Our current policy towards Sinn Fein appears to be the best which can be devised in the circumstances. It is unlikely to reduce quickly the underlying reservoir of support for violence as a political tactic. Only a combination of social, economic, political and security policies, such as are already being pursued, can hope

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to do this. Decisive change could be effected by persuading Sinn Fein to reject violence or perhaps splitting the party; whilst neither seems likely in the short term, the doors should not be closed by the Government. Meanwhile, the presentation of policy and the question of access to government are subject to detailed reviews, which may produce minor policy changes, but within the broad framework outlined above.

CPL Division

18 April 1988

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