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Reference Code: 2021/99/29

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11 APRIL

14 April 1997

No of pages including this one:

To: HQ
For: Second Secretary O hUiginn

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

Subj: Conversation with David Ervine

1. I had a conversation with David Ervine at a BIA reception last Friday evening.
2. Ervine was deeply pessimistic about the future of the Loyalist ceasefire in the wake of the IRA's shooting of Constable Alice Collins in Derry the previous day. It could be taken for granted, he said, that members of one or other of the CLMC's constituent organisations would respond over the next few days, probably by carrying out another attack on a Sinn Féin member.
3. Once again, this would be presented as a "measured response" to an IRA provocation. There would be no claim of responsibility and the CLMC ceasefire would remain technically intact. What concerned Ervine, however, was that the cumulative effect of the series of "measured responses" to date was to transfer the initiative increasingly away from the relatively moderate CLMC leadership and into the hands of a hard-line element who were demanding a full-scale return to paramilitary activity. It was only a matter of time, Ervine suggested, before the hard-liners would succeed in having the ceasefire brought explicitly to an end.
4. Part of the difficulty, according to Ervine, arose from friction and competition between the CLMC's three constituent groups. The rogue elements within each would claim that their particular organisation had been targeted in some recent IRA operation and that they were entitled, accordingly, to take retaliatory action. The greater the provocation from the IRA, the more these elements competed for the "honour" of responding to it - and the weaker the CLMC's restraining influence became.
5. Ervine, like everyone else, was outraged at the particular circumstances of Thursday's shooting (a defenceless policewoman, and mother of three, shot in the back). He was

convinced that its timing was related to the widespread speculation about an imminent IRA ceasefire. It seemed to him to strengthen the hypothesis that the Republican movement is split on the way forward (as the attack could hardly have been less helpful to Sinn Féin at this point in the election campaign).

6. Ervine predicted, however, that Thursday's shooting would be followed by a "spectacular" of some kind, designed partly to show that the IRA did not just attack unarmed policewomen, and that there would then be a perceptible scaling-down of IRA violence for the last fortnight of the campaign. (Comment: Media sources have also suggested to me today that a scaling-down is likely and indeed - noting that there has been no further IRA activity since last Thursday - that this may already have begun). Ervine expects that there will be no declared ceasefire before the election but that there will be one shortly afterwards to facilitate Sinn Féin entry to the talks on 3 June. He rehearsed in familiar terms the difficulties which such a scenario presents from the Loyalist perspective.
7. As regards the Loyalist Volunteer Force, Ervine sharply criticised the British Government for adding to the CLMC's problems by treating the imprisoned Billy Wright in a manner which is bound to enhance his self-importance and, therefore, to exacerbate tensions within Loyalism. The British Government have transferred Wright from Maghaberry to the Maze and appear to be entertaining his demands for special status within the prison (comment: we are raising these points with the British side). Ervine feared that one consequence of enhanced recognition for the LVF would be to embolden Wright's cohorts outside the prison to the point where there would be open warfare between the LVF and their former colleagues in the UVF. He also remarked on the hypocrisy of the LVF, who loudly protested at the expulsion order served on Wright last year but are known to have coerced two individuals ([REDACTED]) into leaving Northern Ireland recently. In addition, Wright is serving a prison sentence at present for having issued a death threat to a woman.
8. Ervine dwelled on the close links between the LVF and the DUP (already illustrated, of course, in the Wright/McCrea connection). He claimed that DUP activists have been involved alongside the LVF in fomenting tension recently within the Unionist community in East Belfast. One example was an arson attack on a Protestant church, carried out by people who ran away shouting "Up the IRA" but who, he is reliably

informed, were associated with the DUP.

9. Ervine emphasised the strains generated within Loyalism by current IRA activities. The instability caused by the resumption of IRA violence is feeding bids for power and influence within each of the Loyalist groupings and an increasingly competitive relationship between them. Though he did not refer specifically to North Belfast (where increasing UDA/UVF tension is reported to have contributed to the weekend disturbances which forced seventeen Catholic families from their homes), he expressed a general concern about the fracturing of Loyalist cohesion under current pressures and the diminishing influence of the CLMC.
10. Reflecting his own particular allegiance, Ervine denied media reports that John Slane was killed by the Red Hand Commando (which he described as virtually indistinguishable from the UVF). These reports, he suggested, had arisen because of the discovery of a list of UVF targets during a house-search shortly before the Slane murder. In fact, this was irrelevant and the UFF had been responsible. It may be noted that his colleague Billy Hutchinson has been calling over the weekend for those involved in the Slane murder to "own up".