

# **Labour**

Response to the Report of the International Body:

Guidelines on Decommissioning

Contribution to the Plenary

29/10/96

## Introduction.

It has been said, that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. Labour was a significant political force in Northern Ireland prior to the Troubles with over 28% of the vote . The sectarian divisions that have since re-emerged have led in the main to a party political system which reflects these deep divisions in our society. This begs a fundamental question : should these parties have total control over the decommissioning debate. They may argue the case of having a mandate to do so, but a mandate won in a divided society must be treated with great caution.

Labour's electoral support in Northern Ireland comes from both sections of the community. But Labour would qualify this by saying that there are many cultures which do not fit into the mould of unionism and nationalism. Our main agenda is to ultimately focus on social and economic issues and the wider question of social deprivation where half of our population live in households with incomes below the poverty line. In our present political climate this is difficult. However, Labour has one advantage over the larger parties at the Talks which it hopes to contribute to the decommissioning debate. We do not have historical baggage to create fundamental difficulties for us.

It is essential that the smaller parties are involved in the central issues of this decommissioning debate. For democratic pluralism to develop and for liberal democracy to sustain itself, it is necessary to encourage contributions from the nascent and progressive parties. Politics must be about how to accommodate the process of change. The larger parties must not be permitted to control the agenda in such a manner that this idea is made difficult if not impossible.



However much representatives of political parties may huff and puff , no one section of the community of Northern Ireland can deny that to some extent it shares responsibility for the mess we are in. Nor can any one section lay exclusive claim to the sorrow and suffering stemming from thousands of deaths and injuries, the wholesale destruction of property, loss of employment, loss of investment, and mass population movement through fear and intimidation.

### **Why Decommissioning?**

One question we invite the UK government representative to comment upon is; why did decommissioning ever become the political issue it is now? In the 47 pages of communications between the UK government and Sinn Fein during 1990 - 93 which were aimed at establishing the footwork for talks, decommissioning was never mentioned. Even in the 'Substantive Response' document that the government sent to Sinn Fein in November 1993, which outlined what would follow a halt to violence, the issue of arms is mentioned only in the context of ensuring that they are not being used. There was no mention of handing them over or getting rid of them.

When the Official IRA called a ceasefire in 1972 the fact that weapons were not handed in did not prevent the government of the day from having dealings with them. The Officials not only kept their illegal arms, but their members were permitted by the State to acquire legal personal weapons, helping to contribute to the total of 132,438 licensed firearms in Northern Ireland. This translates into one gun for every 11 of our population including children. There are more legal weapons in private hands in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK.

Even if every last illegal weapon in Ireland was destroyed could this guarantee peace? As well as the legally held weapons it is apparently easy to devise explosives using only finely ground agricultural fertiliser, icing sugar and diesel fuel. Are these materials to be decommissioned?

Homemade weapons can easily be produced. For 20 years (1972-92) sophisticated machine guns were illegally manufactured at the Spa, outside Ballynahinch and supplied to Loyalist paramilitaries.

An arsenal could be quickly assembled to bring about a killing rate as bad as anything during the Troubles. And if the situation demanded it weapons could be readily acquired abroad as they were in the past.

When the 1954-62 border campaign ended no weapons were handed over to the State. If anecdotal evidence is to be relied upon the IRA decommissioned its weapons by the Celtic device of a sale to the Welsh Liberation Army. The absence of weapons did not prevent the onset of the Troubles in 1969. It has been argued that the fact that there were few if any illegal arms in republican enclaves in West Belfast was instrumental in helping to create the PIRA and vastly extending their capacity for violence and destruction.

Decommissioning is a complex and sensitive issue and as long as there is no political agreement in Northern Ireland, fear of attack by the other side remains a real concern especially in working class areas. And this fear is not misplaced. The problem relating to decommissioning is not caused by lack of trust between the sections of our community, which is fairly obvious, but by the ever present fear of random indiscriminate violence. The so called peace line in Belfast bears constant witness to this fact.



Every night, chairman, I lay my head to rest not twenty feet from the spot where in 1981 my friend, a young Protestant policeman, was cruelly gunned to death by the PIRA in front of his Catholic fiancée. She never recovered from the experience and died a young woman 5 years later.

Behind me sits one of my advisers, a principal social worker, who together with his wife missed death by a few short minutes when loyalist gunmen murdered 6 innocent men watching a world cup football match in his cousin's public house in Loughinisland. It took six months of regular counselling to help them recover from the horror they witnessed that night.

Ten years ago I was evacuated from my home by the police in the early hours of one morning together with my wife and children and all my neighbours in a quiet residential street while the army blew up my car following a bomb warning. My only claim to fame was that I had worked fairly quietly in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for more than 20 years and my only public involvement with politicians was a short period as a Ministerial Private Secretary during the power sharing executive in 1974.

I mention this catalogue of events to support the claim of fear of indiscriminate violence that many people make. Because of the experiences of my friends and myself I can empathise with those who live in the working class ghettos of our cities.

Indiscriminate violence is no respecter of persons to which proposition I feel sure that many people present in this room could attest. Twenty five years of the IRA campaign has left a deep feeling of unease in Protestant areas. Catholics recall readily the events of 1969 and the attacks which drove many thousands of them from their homes. Many of these people have no confidence that the state can provide them with defence.

The majority of working class people want a political solution and favour compromise to achieve it. But they also realise that the solution is probably a long way off. Their fear that the threat of sectarian attack could come again is very real. The events of this summer have helped to heighten that fear. And so we have the claim of paramilitary defence of their areas. It has to be said as events of the last quarter of a century have shown no paramilitary organisation has ever been capable of defending any area successfully. And ironically the PIRA which was set up to do just that failed also.

If community defence is the issue, the whole question of community policing needs to become part of this debate. In the Labour Coalition's election manifesto our demand was for a community based police service, locally accountable and reflecting communal balance. I look forward to making our case on this as and when we get into substantive negotiations.

### **No International Precedents for Decommissioning**

Northern Ireland and the conflict here has often been compared to other countries which have had similar conflicts. Lessons can be learnt and political arguments have more sway if they are based on a similar resolution. For example if there were precedents for armed groups surrendering weapons as a precondition for peace talks the position of those who demand prior decommissioning would be much stronger. However as was pointed out by NIACRO in their publication "Release and reintegration of Politically Motivated Prisoners in Northern Ireland. A comparative study of South Africa, Israel/Palestine, Italy, Spain and Northern Ireland" the following points were made,

"In none of the jurisdictions we have studied was the issue of arms mentioned to us as a significant factor. When we raised the issue it was variously represented to us as a matter of little import, as an



issue which would have prevented meaningful dialogue between the government and the armed protagonists had the government remained inflexible on the issue or as a question which could be best dealt with at the conclusion of a political settlement."

They went on to give their opinion that;

"Given the current state of the international arms market, the issue is not the possession of weapons of war but the inclination, or lack of it, to use them."

In South Africa under the government of Pik Botha it was suggested in the late 1980s that the ANC should hand over their weapons and renounce the armed struggle in return for prisoner releases and political discussions, not dissimilar with the demands here for decommissioning before talks. This offer was rejected out of hand by the ANC leadership. In an interview in Fortnight magazine Abdullah Omar of the ANC had this to say on the issue of arms -

"This was a very, very long drawn out contested issue but it did not hold up negotiations. The ANC refused to hand in arms until we had in place a transitional authority which would control the security forces."

## **Sinn Fein and the Loyalist Parties Perceived Position**

Most people in Northern Ireland would be aware of the positions of the major parties on the issue of decommissioning. Since the issue arose few have seemed prepared to move from their initial positions. It is either full decommissioning prior to substantive negotiations, decommissioning following a negotiated settlement or as the International Body recommended, decommissioning during negotiations. It would be useful to examine the positions of the three political organisations who are likely to have the greatest practical influence on actual decommissioning.

### **Sinn Fein**

Sinn Fein's submission to the International Body was entitled 'Building a Permanent Peace'. In this document and in previous articles their position was quite simply that there was no expectation or hope of disarmament except in the context of a negotiated settlement. Furthermore they stated that "a major role of the IRA has always been the defence of the nationalist people from attack" and "it is fundamentally important to realise that even nationalists who are anti-IRA are against it disarming because the nationalist community would be left defenceless and vulnerable."

They also argued that when the IRA cessation was announced it was clearly understood by the nationalist political parties that any issue could be brought to the table and that the issue of arms and demilitarisation of society could be effectively dealt with as part of an overall political settlement agreed between and acceptable to everyone. They contended that the ceasefire itself was of the utmost importance, and also that decommissioning was just a smoke screen.



## The Loyalists

On the loyalist side the UDP and the PUP appear to have a position similar to Sinn Fein-In the Belfast Telegraph (21 January 1995) Gary McMichael stated that "weapons are a symptom of the physical and political conflict and if that conflict can be resolved - then the issue of arms can then be addressed."

The PUP have said more or less the same thing in their statement 'The Question of Arms and their proposed decommissioning' (25 January 1995)

They then went on to criticise their critics saying that "The PUP will continue to be proactive in facilitating the tottering steps towards the trust which is a prerequisite to any decommissioning methodology and provocative public pronouncements for political gain which undermine our endeavours are possibly a greater hindrance to Her Majesty's government securing a resolution than any apparent reluctance on the part of the PUP to address the entire arms question."

The PUP has repeatedly said that it wishes all war materials removed from the political arena.

## Labour Commitment to Decommissioning.

Labour is totally committed to the process of decommissioning. By decommissioning we mean not just the destruction of arms and military ordinance but the standing down and disbandment of the command structures of all paramilitary organisations. The use of violence to achieve political ends in Northern is not acceptable to anyone who subscribes to civilised values.

On the 28th November 1995, the British and Irish governments issued their communiqué announcing a twin track approach to make progress in parallel on decommissioning and the All Party Negotiations. The International Body consulted a wide range of people during its deliberation. This consultation was carried out based on the need for people in Northern Ireland to be reassured that their democratic and moral expectations can be realised. It was recognised that there would not be any easy solution to the decommissioning process.

The silence of the guns and bombs during the one and a half years of the ceasefire may have heightened those expectations. But the renewal of the PIRA bombing campaign in England and the latest atrocity in Lisburn have extinguished even those hopes and expectations. The decision of the loyalist paramilitary organisations to sustain their cease-fire is to be commended, and has left us at least with a glimmer of hope rather than a return to total despair. The only way that this vacuum can be filled is for PIRA to declare a permanent cease-fire and allow Sinn Fein to join with the other political parties in the Talks to find an agreed formula acceptable to the parties and the people of Northern Ireland by referendum. We challenge PIRA to act on our proposal and call an immediate cease-fire as their contribution to the restoration of this assurance.



The International Body also called for Confidence - building Measures to be adopted to encourage a return to the democratic process. As well as building confidence in the general public, the participants in the Talks must ensure that they are treating the Talks process with the seriousness it deserves and apply themselves to reaching a consensus that can command the support of all parties in the Talks, otherwise Sinn Fein and the IRA will never be encouraged to participate in a process that is rapidly becoming a charade. Sinn Fein in its election manifesto said that the voter had the power to re-build the peace process. Labour will welcome Sinn Fein to the table to be party to the discussions on decommissioning. They are part of the problem , they must be part of the solution.

The fifty year long Cold War was a bipolar international conflict between two social systems which resolved itself by the tact and diplomacy of the US and Soviet governments. Confidence Building Measures played an integral role in helping to de-couple the military, political, social, human rights, and economic issues. This should give encouragement to the those seeking peace in Northern Ireland, indicating that the present perception of an impasse may not be a permanent problem of the overall decommissioning .

### **On the Report of the International Body.**

Labour accepts the central thesis of the Report of the International Body, in relation to decommissioning - we are in an impasse between those who for good reasons demand prior decommissioning and paramilitary organisations who refuse to decommission until a political agreement is in place. It seems to Labour that the only sensible way to surmount such a difficulty is to compromise with parallel decommissioning.

## Constitutional Politics

Labour wishes to see proper constitutional politics in place with a truly representative political system. This can only be achieved by commitment to progress. It must be achieved if we are to have a stable society. However, this begs the question : is it important where decommissioning fits into the agenda? Some parties have very strong views on this. Labour contends that without the co-operation of the IRA and the loyalist paramilitary organisations, not a gun or bullet will be handed over.

The state has the ultimate responsibility to uphold the rule of law if any of the paramilitaries engage in violent activities. Governments have the sovereign power to address this threat of paramilitary violence through legislation, intelligence, and appropriate security measures. But anyone with a modicum of common sense realises that there is no acceptable military solution to terrorism in a society imbued with the ethos of paramilitarism for more than a quarter of a century. Events have proven that military methods in aid of the civil power are a blunt instrument which can be highly counter-productive. Any squaddie in the army will confirm that. I speak from personal experience.

Labour recognises that there must be a political solution to satisfy the aspirations of those who, from whatever divide of the community, now seek peace and an opportunity to lead a normal life. We share the view of the overwhelming majority of people in this island that any political agreement we come to will be grounded firmly in the principle of consent.



## **The Way Forward : Labour recommendations.**

- 1) All parties must work selflessly to create a climate of trust and co-operation.
- 2) Governments must put in place without delay the necessary legal instruments to facilitate decommissioning.
- 3) The PIRA must call a permanent cease-fire and Sinn Fein must accept the Mitchell Principles.
- 4) There should be a no first strike pact between the paramilitary organisations.
- 5) There should be a symbolic destruction by all paramilitary organisations of an acceptable quantity of arms and ordinance as an indication of goodwill towards the peace process.
- 6) There should be a package of Confidence-building measures including a PR strategy to encourage trust within the peace process and help to dissipate public cynicism.
- 7) There is a need to involve an objective, knowledgeable mechanism such as the OSCE (Organisation for the Security and Co-operation in Europe) to act as the honest broker to assist all parties including both governments towards finding a final solution to our present difficulties.

### **Conclusion.**

In due course Labour will make a further contribution on the modalities of decommissioning, let me conclude by agreeing with the view expressed in para 15 of the Report of the International Body :

“ ... a resolution of the decommissioning issue -- or any other issue -- will not be found if the parties resort to their vast inventories of historical recrimination. Or, ... what is really needed is the decommissioning of mind-sets in Northern Ireland.”

28th October 1996.