

ALLIANCE PARTY

Confidence building measures sub-committee

Paramilitary Activity

1. Prior to the current round of Talks parties associated with paramilitary groups asserted that they were being unfairly excluded from the political process. The response of the Government was to call to the table on June 10 1996 the ten parties which had obtained an electoral mandate the previous month, irrespective of their association (or otherwise) with paramilitary organisations. However all parties at the table were required to sign the Mitchell Principles as an indication that they were committed henceforth to exclusively peaceful and democratic methods. The two Governments and the Independent Chairman were of the view that while no obstacles should be placed in the way of those who wished to turn to the path of peace, there could be no question of parties being attached to both the bullet and the ballot box.

2. The Mitchell Principles are unequivocal and completely clear cut about the use of violence. It is therefore perfectly obvious that the continuing and very serious acts of violence currently being carried out by Republic and Loyalist paramilitary groups are an obvious breach of the Principles.

3. The IRA, the UVF and the UFF declared cease-fires in 1994. The UFF returned to a campaign of killing but subsequently reinstated their cease-fire. The IRA have had two further breakdowns of their ceasefire.

Despite the 'cease-fires' however the paramilitary organisations have continued to engage in a very high level of violent activity.

Since September 1994 the Loyalists and Republicans have been responsible for hundreds of beatings and many shootings.

The physical and psychological consequences of many of the beatings are much worse than those following gunshots to the legs. It takes a large degree of force, and often a period of some time, to fracture the legs and arms of a healthy young man. Staff in hospitals throughout N.Ireland who treat the victims continue to be disgusted by these attacks which are sanctioned by mainstream paramilitary organisations which proclaim their commitment to 'peace'.

During 1997 Loyalists shot 48 people and Republicans shot 24 people.

The shootings have continued with greater ferocity into this year.

It was striking that last week, while the two Governments contemplated the implications of the two IRA killings for the presence of Sinn Fein at the Talks, the IRA had no compunction about carrying out further shootings. They knew there would be no penalty to pay.

It is also the case that many young men have been 'exiled' from N.Ireland after threats from paramilitary groups. There is little attempt to disguise who is behind this and other forms of intimidation.

In many areas of Northern Ireland people live in fear of a group of masked and armed men coming to the door to shoot and beat their sons. People are afraid to inform the authorities even when they know the identity of the perpetrators. The police and legal authorities appear unable to act. The victims know that their tormentors will not be brought to justice and that the paramilitary linked parties will do nothing to stop the violence. What we are witnessing is nothing short of fascism.

4. The Alliance Party recognises that the two Governments are not prepared to contemplate excluding Parties from the talks on account of the barbaric activities mentioned above. The Governments clearly regard what has happened as "an acceptable level of violence" in as far as exclusion from the talks is concerned.

Alliance understands the reasons why the Governments do not wish to exclude certain voices at the conference table. However it is deeply regrettable that the price of this is to turn a blind eye to the continuing and very serious acts of violence carried out in a systematic way which causes great trauma to so many. **We believe that the two Governments should state openly that their stance is that beatings and shootings will not lead to exclusion of Parties from the talks. We call upon them to state more strongly and more frequently than before that these acts of violence are brutal and totally unacceptable and that they will pursue every avenue to have them stopped. We call upon the Governments, when they are meeting Parties associated with paramilitary groups to highlight their view that these vicious activities must end immediately.**

5. The Alliance Party wishes to say to Sinn Fein, the UDP and the PUP that we hear very clearly their statements that they are committed to ending violence in our society. However we must also say to them that despite their self proclaimed commitment to peace, their associates continue to be involved in an overt way with very serious and totally unacceptable acts of violence. If these Parties want their commitment to peace to be treated with full respect then they must do much more to stop the violence. Actions speak louder than words.

6. The Alliance Party as a liberal Party, has always been concerned that prisoners and families are treated fairly. In this Committee a number of Parties have argued for the early release of prisoners, beyond the 50% remission which is currently available. **The Alliance Party reiterates its position that paramilitary prisoners who are members of well organised, well armed and disciplined organisations can only be considered for early release in the context of a complete cessation of beatings, shootings and other violent activities.** The early release of prisoners at the present time would be a direct insult to the continuing series of victims of the terrorist groups and would give a clear signal that the Governments are prepared to accept the cancer of further violence in our community. Those Parties who wish prisoners to be released early need to be told that this possibility lies entirely in the hands of their own paramilitary organisations.

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