

Ulster Democratic Party

Discussion of decommissioning issue

Opening remarks

Oral Submission

Delivered 28th October 1996

Independent Body:

At time of its inception, preparation and presentation circumstances were different - I.R.A. was on cease-fire. Therefore the basis for the international body's proposals has changed. This of course impacts upon any consideration of application of proposals.

The UDP made a contribution to the International Body, and this has been circulated for the participants information. While again this was prepared in a different climate than we experience today, the principles behind our submission are still applicable.

Firstly that the core issue is not whether arms are possessed but what purpose such arms could serve.

Whether arms shall be used against community or State in pursuit of political change.

Whether the possession of weapons can be used to gain political leverage either by threat of use of those weapons or by tactical decommissioning..

There can be no effort to trade arms for political concessions.

And as we observed at the time parties should not be expected to sit comfortably around a negotiating table while uncertain whether armed groups shall resort to armed confrontation if they do not achieve their political objectives.

I can only speak about how loyalists, in my estimation view the decommissioning issue.

First of all I must point out that the U.D.P. is fully committed to achieve the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations, as is evidenced by our public subscription to the six democratic principles outlined in the report of the International Body.

In our submission to the International Body we stated, *'The UDP recognise and share the desire to remove all illegal arms from our society and shall continue to do everything in our power to achieve this.'*

However, from a loyalist perspective such commitment does not guarantee that such an objective is immediately achievable.

Current circumstances are an important factor which causes me to make this remark.

It must be recognized that the ability to achieve loyalist disarmament depends upon how the loyalist groups who possess illegal weaponry view the intentions and actions of others.

As we pointed out in our submission to the Independent Body one should examine the reason for the existence of loyalist organizations.

Loyalist paramilitary organizations came into being due to the direct attack upon the Northern Ireland community by republican terrorists. They exist to protect the loyalist community from attempts to persecute them by armed attack and political subversion. They have previously engaged a military strategy to resist and retaliate against those who seek to enforce political change against the free given will of the people. The creation of loyalist paramilitary groups was an inevitable reaction to the concerted campaign of murder and persecution waged against the loyalist community, and the failure of the government to tackle those responsible.

The British government has the primary responsibility to protect the rights of the Northern Ireland people. For the duration of the conflict it has abdicated that responsibility. The policy of successive governments has been to contain the republican threat rather than eradicate it, resulting in the policy of the acceptable level of violence, ensuring there could be no military defeat of anti-state terrorism. As a result of such a policy the loyalist community has maintained a mercurial support for the continued presence of loyalist organizations, seeing them as a necessary evil as it were, a line of defense filling the vacuum left by a failed government security policy.

The Irish government position is an important factor also. Loyalists have historically viewed the Irish State as an aggressor, in pursuit of a united Ireland through political subversion, and providing a safe haven for the enemies of democracy. The failure of the Irish Republic to address their illegal territorial claim over Northern Ireland and their blatant refusal to deal with I.R.A. terrorists in their midst - as we were most recently reminded by the revelations of Mr. Dermot McNally, Maze escapee, who

is able to live freely in Sligo, evidencing the continued protection of these people by the State and Judiciary. This does little to convince loyalists that the intentions of the Republic of Ireland Government should be considered with anything but suspicion.

It is important to recognize there is a clear distinction between the arms held by loyalists and those of republicans.

Republicans seek to prosecute through violence a political objective, regardless of the democratic will of the people. Loyalists on the other hand uphold the principle of democracy enshrined in the principle of consent.

Loyalists do not pose a threat to the democratic process, and have never sought to force political change through violence.

Loyalists weapons merely exist to defend the community against attack and against subversion of the democratic rights of the people.

In no way do loyalists seek to influence the course or outcome of these negotiations by the use or threat of force.

Nor do they seek to change through force, any political agreement reached in Northern Ireland by the democratic will of the people.

There is clearly no parallel between republican and loyalist arms.

Loyalist possession of arms does not mean that an intent exists to use those weapons. Loyalists play a purely defensive role, and therefore they consider their arms as purely defensive. It is for that reason and with a regard to the factors which I have already referred to which influence loyalists, that in my view loyalists shall not under any circumstances contemplate unilateral disarmament.

It is peculiar to say the least that those who are the most fervent advocates of loyalist disarmament are also those who insist that these negotiations are doomed, that this is part of an Anglo-Irish conspiracy, that the British and Irish governments are attempting to force their political predetermined agenda proposals upon the people of Northern Ireland, against the democratic will. That the British government shall betray its citizens.

That as part of that conspiracy the government shall succumb to the will of violent nationalism.

So as the I.R.A. bombs its way around the UK, Mr. Paisley and Mr. McCartney, argue that Unionists are sold out, and that these talks cannot succeed, and in the same breath insist that loyalists must disarm in the face of the scenario they paint for them, and that subsequently the unionist people should be left without defense.

I will leave that thought to hang for the time being.

There is of course the question of commitment and good faith.

It is naturally, important that participants feel comfortable that other participants are sincere and serious in their commitment to pursue their political objectives through democratic means alone.

Reg Empey said at the beginning of the debate that commitment could be measured by how people formally associated with violence hold to what they have promised and by the influx of time.

Well in this respect the record of loyalism speaks for itself.

Just as the record of the I.R.A. conversely speaks for itself.

The loyalist cease-fire has stood the test of time despite the severe provocation dished out by the I.R.A. Loyalists have stood by their commitment to the democratic process.

The promises made by loyalists have been kept.

I point to the most stark example when on the 25th, August 1995 the C.L.M.C. promised:

“We wish to re-assure the people of Northern Ireland that provided their rights are upheld the C.L.M.C. will not initiate a return to war, there shall be no first strike”

That promise had been honored in very difficult circumstances, and with courage.

There has been no first strike. Indeed loyalists have consolidated that declaration immeasurably. For there has been no Second Strike despite the campaign of sectarian murder by the I.R.A.

Now lets turn to republicans and these talks. We speak about the need for an I.R.A. cease-fire which is dependable before they can be included in negotiations.

I agree there is an undeniable need for republicans to prove they are serious, to convince us that they will not resort to violence as a means to pursue their objectives once again. That a new cease-fire be more than another tactical diversion.

I can tell you that loyalists need as much convincing as anyone around this table, if not more.

Republicans would have done well to replicate loyalists in their approach to the peace process.

However the I.R.A. were not at any point of a mind to pursue a fair and reasonable settlement.

They did nothing to prove or demonstrate a commitment to democracy, nor a desire for accommodation between our divided communities.

Indeed the attitude of republicans did nothing to address the fears and distrust of their position felt within the unionist community or seek to build confidence with unionism -

Instead they engaged an elaborate strategy of community agitation with an objective, which they pursued very successfully, I might add, to create further division and intolerance between our communities.

It is clear now that the I.R.A. cease-fire of 1994 was far from dependable.

If participants are expected to take Sinn Fein seriously at a time somewhere in the future when the I.R.A. may decide to call a new cease-fire then republicans should focus their minds towards how they can convince us of their sincerity.

Unfortunately, experience tells us there is little likelihood of a conciliatory approach to our apprehensions.

And more likely we would find ourselves with a dilemma, with the current legislation providing for the insertion of Sinn Fein into these talks with a simple restoration of the 1994 cease-fire, ultimately a simple transition from armed conflict to political conflict, a continuation of the war by other means, in their terms with the real prospect of a subsequent return to armed conflict again at some point.

The legislation which provides the condition for Sinn Feins invitation to these talks must be redressed. It is clearly inadequate under the present circumstances.

John Major must spell out to the IRA what he considers will constitute a dependable cease-fire. He has refused to do so at this juncture. Does he really think that a simple restoration of the 94 cease-fire shall facilitate the elevation of Sinn Fein to the same standing as the rest of us within these talks. If he does, then he is deeply mistaken. For if Sinn Fein were thrust upon us in such circumstances, then they shall find themselves talking to rows of empty chairs.

In this respect Bob McCartney is wrong in his assertion that if Sinn Fein were forced into the talks that we could not be rid of them, for there would be no viable talks process.

But to return to the matter of loyalist decommissioning. The Loyalist cease-fire cannot be compared with the republican position by any stretch of imagination, despite the efforts of some unionists to do so.

First of all there is a loyalist cease-fire and that cease-fire has been sustained for more than two years, in spite of severe provocation. Secondly for in part for that very reason, the loyalist cease-fire is widely accepted to be dependable.

However, in spite of the dependable nature of the loyalist cease-fire, and the positive and constructive way in which loyalism has conducted itself over the past two years, most notably during the intense provocation since Canary Wharf, the DUP and UKUP continue to argue that loyalist disarmament must take place as a condition for my party's participation in substantive negotiations.

It seems that the commitment demonstrated by the UDP, and by loyalism as a whole, to the democratic process counts for nothing in their eyes, and that fellow unionists are content to measure loyalists solely by the actions of the IRA. Thankfully loyalists have not succumbed to the temptation to follow through the logic of that attitude. That there is no penalty for replicating the tactics of the IRA as one will be seen purely in their image anyway by these parties.

It is testimony to the resolute commitment of loyalists that they have refused to do so.

I can see no just reason why my party should be excluded from taking its rightful place within substantive negotiations. In fact it is somewhat curious that fellow unionists would deliberately choose to weaken the pro-union position within negotiations by their stance. I view this as gross disservice to the pro-union people. Mr. McCartney has erected a platform for himself, lecturing us all about the need for a united pro-union front, a desire which we of course share, but he appears to be achieving the exact opposite.

Lets remember that my party along with the PUP, which are regarded in similar terms by the DUP and UKUP, represent a greater number of the unionist people combined, than Mr. Mc Cartney. I would have thought that a continued insistence upon our exclusion has a greater impact upon the strength on the pro-union position in this process than Mr. McCartneys participation.

Of course we welcome Mr. McCartneys participation in these talks and recognize his party's representation bolsters the pro-union position despite his refusal to recognize our right of place in these talks, as democrats.

I do not wish to see the exclusion of any democrat from this process, indeed it is vital that the present compliment of participants continue to play a full role in these talks. For there is of course a collective responsibility to pursue, through dialogue, a successful resolution of our political differences. That is the reason for negotiations, at least it is from our perspective.

We have a collective responsibility to apply ourselves to resolve all difficult issues, including decommissioning.

However some are trying to heap the responsibility for the successful resolution of that issue upon convenient shoulders, namely ours, for anyone who may have been in some doubt.

I cannot accept that. I believe that if we have all committed ourselves, as democrats to the objective of total disarmament, then we all bear equal responsibility in the pursuit of that objective.

It is not on that we are to be told, this is how decommissioning is going to happen, like it or lump it, and if it doesn't happen you guys are thrown out of the talks.

This brings into focus the question raised at one point by McCartney. Is there a difference between unwilling and incapable?

Naturally there is. My party has a relationship with two of the loyalist paramilitary organizations, voluntarily initiated and pursued in the interest of building a peaceful non violent society.

The influence which we have been able to assert upon those organizations is upon the basis of an offered continual analysis to them. The decisions which they take are their own decisions and we are not privy to that process.

Our relationship does not secure any form of control over their armaments or personnel. That reality does not prejudice our absolute commitment to continue to use all our influence to achieve the objective of total disarmament.

Our commitment to this objective is perhaps somewhat more honest than that of some others. We have been fully open in our efforts to influence loyalist paramilitaries and urge them towards a democratic process in the interests of peace for our society, not without cost.

We have been hindered by violent attention of militant nationalism, which despises loyalist cohesion. In July of 1994, Ray Smallwoods, the UDPs principle liaison with the CLMC and a negotiator for the loyalist cease-fire was brutally murdered in front of his family by the IRA for his endeavors. This was reminiscent of their tactics three years before when they murdered our North West chairman, Cecil McKnight shortly after

the unilateral CLMC 1991 cease-fire. And subsequently many others within our number have had their lives put at serious risk because of our continued commitment to the removal of loyalist violence.

Despite the actions of the IRA and other republican groups, the rewards for our efforts has been the successful removal of loyalist violence for more than two years. For that we are thankful.

The DUP Bob McCartneys fringe unionist party are intent upon punishing the UDP because we have taken such steps, voluntarily, to remove violence and democratize those who have formerly been associated with violence. Steps it would seem that others were not prepared to take.

I argue that our commitment is beyond doubt, but that the failure by others to seek to influence those who have been engaged in violence, and to convince them of the merits of the democratic non violent path speaks more clearly of their degree of commitment and the level of responsibility which they have shown.

Let us recognize now, that the responsibility to pursue disarmament rests on all our shoulders, as it does for all important matters. I can commit the UDP today to go to equal lengths as the other delegates in this room and accept our share of the collective responsibility to realize our collective objective of the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations.