

The International Body

Meeting with British Prime Minister John Major

January 17, 1996

London

Other Participants: Sir Patrick Mayhew, John Holmes

Summary

Prime Minister Major recommended the addition of a principle about north-south referenda to ratify any agreement that emerged from all-party talks; said unionists would not believe verbal commitments from Sinn Fein on decommissioning, noting that some sort of partial decommissioning would remove the unionist objection to Sinn Fein participation in talks; urged the International Body to endorse the idea of an elected mandate and bemoaned John Hume's opposition to such an idea; asserted that the recommendations of the IB will exercise influence over the behavior of the paramilitaries and that its recommendations should therefore be taken in light of that fact; and said that the British Government would have to reject IB recommendations on timing of decommissioning that could not carry the House of Commons.

Account of Meeting

Major said that if anyone goes to the street to drink champagne after the release of the IB Report, the Report will not have been done right. Major urged the IB to seek a no-first-strike commitment from the republicans, perhaps for a fixed period of up to two years. Such a pledge would go a long way to reassure unionists. Senator Mitchell explained that republicans say they cannot make such a pledge because they cannot bind in any way future generations of republicans. In any case, in their view, Sinn Fein is on par with the British Government. The British Government, not the loyalists, is the antagonist.

Major said the IB can make a definite determination on Washington Two (commitment to decommissioning) and a qualified statement on Washington One (modalities) with a projected timescale. Senator Mitchell said with respect to Washington Two that there is a clear commitment to decommissioning, but not prior to negotiations. The subject of timing cannot be avoided. The Irish Government suggested commitment to principles such as the use of democratic and exclusively peaceful methods, renunciation of the use of force, and acceptance of any outcome of all-party negotiations. Major said addition of a point on referenda, north and south, to ratify the results of all-party negotiations would sharpen the concept. In response to General de Chastelain's observation that a no-first-strike pledge is a military statement, Major said he would rather see such a pledge as a political-military statement.

In response to Major's question, Senator Mitchell said Sinn Fein had answered with its version of history when the IB ran a list of principles by them. SF provided a long exegesis why Downing Street Declaration-style consent was not acceptable. SF was extremely negative on phased decommissioning during negotiations. SF was totally hostile to anything which could be seen as a precondition to negotiations. They did agree to the principles of democratic and peaceful methods and rejection of "punishment" beatings. The loyalists were also fiercely opposed to decommissioning during negotiations. The loyalists expressed concern about the potential of the INLA to step up its activity in an environment in which the IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries are decommissioning. They also expressed fears of splits within the IRA that could lead to renewed violence.

Major said the problem with verbal commitments from Sinn Fein is that unionists won't believe them. Senator Mitchell noted that partial decommissioning doesn't solve that problem. Major said that such decommissioning would, however, remove the unionist objection to a commencement of talks.

Major said that if the paramilitaries won't decommission prior to talks and the unionists won't talk without prior decommissioning, then the only way out is through an elected body. The elected body idea goes beyond the IB remit, but in commenting on Washington Two (depth of commitment to decommissioning) it would not be unreasonable to talk about the potential role of an elected mandate. Senator Mitchell said he wanted to get in a reference to an elected assembly that would be constructive without going beyond the IB remit.

Major said the situation is not static. Every party is subject to public opinion. The peace process must not come to a halt. The IB should not say that the paramilitaries will not engage in prior decommissioning because they will change their behavior based on what you say. You can provide stimuli to move the situation. Mayhew urged the IB not to be anxious about moving outside its remit. An elected body is the context in which the "when" of decommissioning could be considered.

Senator Mitchell said the issues are not possible to segregate in reality. Nobody in any of our discussions stuck to the IB remit. We can rationalize any event which contributes to the establishment of trust. The IB cannot take over the political track, but it is entitled to make some reference to other issues on that basis.

Major said the attitude of John Hume is absolutely baffling. He is erecting barriers to talks. I understand the emotion but not the logic. We are talking about an elected body whose lifespan is limited, with a narrow remit, and called into creation only to pave the way for talks. Since Hume in the past has been the principal force for talks and reconciliation, his opposition is illogical.

Major said he took it that the IB would make no recommendation on the timing of decommissioning. If the IB did so, it would be extremely difficult for the Government not to reject it. We wouldn't carry the House of Commons. General de Chastelain said the IB wanted the Report to be of as positive use as possible. Senator Mitchell said we hoped at a minimum that the Report would do no harm.

In response to Prime Minister Holkeri's question, Mayhew said that the Government had asked for a letter from RUC Chief Constable in order to have on record his recollection of what was said in his meetings with the IB.