

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of Sinn Fein
January 15, 1996
Dublin

Participants: Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Lucelita Bhreatnach

Summary

Representatives of Sinn Fein told the International Body that the IRA is very unlikely to go beyond its ceasefire statement of August 31, 1994 and specifically would not issue a no-first-strike pledge; stated that in any case the loyalist no-first-strike pledge is conditional; said that the conflict in the north is not a domestic dispute, but a dispute between the republicans and the British Government; said that a voluntary handover of weapons to the IB or anybody else was a non-runner; noted that republicans could not accept any principle such as that of "consent" which infringed on the right of Irish self-determination; and argued that elections would be an unnecessary delay to the foremost need, immediate convocation of all-party talks.

Account of Meeting

Senator Mitchell asked whether SF agreed with the recommendations of the Irish Government: no prior decommissioning and acceptance of a series of principles. In response to Adams's question, Senator Mitchell said the principles were not intended to be preconditions.

Senator Mitchell also asked whether SF would be willing, in a voluntary gesture to the IB, to hand over some weapons. Such a move would provide evidence useful in making a determination of the commitment on the part of those in possession of weapons to engage in decommissioning. General de Chastelain asked whether the republicans would be prepared to make a no-first-strike pledge.

Adams said we want to argue very strongly that the SF submission is as far as we can go. With respect to a no-first-strike pledge, the IRA is very unlikely to make any statement that goes beyond the August 31, 1994 announcement of the ceasefire. The loyalist no-first-strike pledge is conditional; in any case and British military operations continue. The conflict in Northern Ireland is not a domestic dispute. It is between republicans and the British Government.

Adams said that were the IB to set out a principle with DSD-style language on consent, that would ring the bell in nationalist communities that the IB had sided with the British. Those in Ireland who could subscribe to DSD-style consent -- and some can -- have not lived where we live, McGuinness said.

A voluntary handover of weapons to the IB is a non-runner, Adams continued. The IRA has made clear that it will not happen.

With respect to the list of principles, a general caution is warranted. The issue is Irish self-determination. It is important not to move from one hook (decommissioning) to another. We are committed to democratic and peaceful methods, oppose the use of force, and do not condone "punishment" beatings. We have difficulty with any principle which effectively gives unionists, only 1% of the population of the UK, a veto over Irish self-determination. In our view, consent applies to the whole of Ireland.

Senator Mitchell expressed his belief that the peace process is at a critical stage. The IB intends to make clear the value of the ceasefires themselves and the risks that SF and others are taking for peace. The challenge for the IB is to issue a report that is just and right and to help the process to move forward.

McGuinness said he would like to take all of this under consideration. We have a the responsibility to protect the interests of those we represent. The DSD on consent is a formula for a unionist veto that ensures no change. For us consent is a two-way street. It would be almost sectarian for us to accept this DSD-style formulation.

Adams said we brought the issue of self-determination back to the forefront before the Downing Street Declaration. We presented a draft declaration to the Governments before the DSD. We seek no veto. We only want to project the power and influence of our argument. It should not be surprising that Trimble does not talk to us when John Major does not talk to us. We take the same position on consent in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. We will not shift our stance.

McGuinness said the dispute over consent has been known since the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. We still say that no party should be given a veto. Adams said we believe nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. The British are refusing to talk. They are trying to avoid movement which they say endangers the status quo. The peace process has gone nowhere. The logic has to be go to the negotiating table now. We represent a segment of the population at the worst end of the social scale with 86% unemployment in some areas. Trying to find a middle course is going to be very difficult for all the parties.

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In response to Prime Minister Holkeri's question on SF's stance with respect to an elected body, Adams said we are prepared to consider any idea and would look at it at the negotiating table. But we oppose a return to Stormont. Everybody should have a right to include items on the agenda of talks, including an elected body. All parties already have a mandate. Elections would be an unnecessary delay. An election to nominate negotiators would be difficult because candidates would be forced to make firm statements during the campaign. Negotiations within an elected body would be unwieldy. Bhreatnach said an elected body separates out a strand from the three-strand process; an internal settlement is totally unacceptable.

According to McGuinness, since Trimble has taken over the leadership of the UUP, he has tried to reverse the baby steps taken by his predecessor James Molyneaux towards accommodation with the joint efforts of the British and Irish Governments. The partition of the island of Ireland makes no economic sense at all. The unionists fear the end of the union. It is a red herring to maintain that elections are necessary to establish party mandates. Those mandates exist now on the basis of past elections. New elections would change little in that respect.

De Chastelain confirmed, in response to Adams's request, that the IB had asked the British Government about the status of a number of reports and was told that the reports were, by and large, classified.

Returning to decommissioning, Senator Mitchell said he thought it a profound error to dismiss the possibility of phased decommissioning during talks because the parties close to the paramilitaries would control whether there is decommissioning in the course of all-party negotiations. In response, Adams said that we collectively are only as useful to the peace process as long as we have credibility. Once I lose that credibility, I might as well grow potatoes.

Senator Mitchell said that if all parties adhere to their current positions, progress is unlikely. What is important is to get to the table. Once started, talks would be like a snowball rolling down the hill. Adams said when the IRA says it won't decommission, it won't decommission. In other situations, for example in South Africa, at some point something clicked with those in power to lead to a breakthrough in talks. Nothing has yet clicked with John Major.