

The International Body

Meeting with Reverend Roy Magee, retired Presbyterian minister
December 15, 1995
Belfast

Summary

Magee said neither the loyalist nor the republican paramilitaries could accept decommissioning as a precondition for participation in all-party talks. As long as the guns are silent, continued retention of weapons can be tolerated. For the loyalists, the ceasefire is permanent. Governments should pursue a policy of small steps in the search for a win-win solution in which no side loses face. PIRA should reciprocate the loyalists' no-first-strike pledge and Sinn Fein acceptance of the principle of consent would be a useful small step.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Magee, known for his work on the loyalist ceasefire announced October 13, 1994, stated the following: As long as the arms are silent, he does not mind that they continue to be held by the paramilitaries. The problem arises with unionist politicians who have told the British authorities that without decommissioning they will not participate in talks. To disregard these politicians would be a negation of democracy.

It would have been preferable had the parties closely associated with the loyalist paramilitaries appeared together before the International Body. The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), will send a delegation without military personnel but will speak with the authority of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC). The Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), associated with the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), organized in cells in contrast to the UVF's hierarchical military structure, does not have the same degree of authority.

The paramilitaries, in particular, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), have painted themselves into a corner. Everyone is hung up on decommissioning (Magee uses "depositing"). For PIRA to turn in weapons would be a surrender. Groups involved in terrorism have never turned in weapons. It would be helpful if ultimate desires were not expressed, if governments did not suggest what they wanted at the end of the day but concentrated instead on small steps.

It would be exceedingly important and very beneficial if PIRA reciprocated the CLMC's recent no-first-strike pledge. Failure to reciprocate is creating some edginess in the loyalist camp, but most loyalist leaders are sane and sober and understand that such statements can be made only in the context of the desires of respective constituencies. A win-win solution in which no one loses face must be found. The general public is delighted with the ceasefire and won't let go easily, but neither the republican nor the loyalist paramilitaries can agree to a decommissioning precondition for talks. Decommissioning has to be taken out of politics. The longer peace lasts, the tougher it'll be to break.

As far as the loyalists are concerned, the ceasefire is permanent. Irresponsible unionist politicians can no longer use the threat of a loyalist return to violence in their machinations. Loyalists will no longer provide the fighting for the tough talking. Someone should shuttle back and forth between the British and PIRA in a process of negotiation to find out what small steps can be taken short of the unachievable decommissioning move.

Loyalists are concerned that something may be foisted on them from the outside. It would be a small but vital step if Sinn Fein were to acknowledge the principle of consent. The people of NI like their politicians to be predictable, a fact with several negative side-effects. Voters may not like the stand of a politician on a given issue, but they know where he stands on the union and it is that position that determines many votes.