

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP)

January 14, 1996
Belfast

Participants: David Ervine, Billy Hutchinson

Summary: Representatives of the loyalist PUP stressed the importance of acceptance of the principle of consent; stated that decommissioning is morally sensible, but cannot be achieved with preconditions; said that phased decommissioning would be very difficult to sell, especially since republicans are deadset against it; and observed that 80% of "punishment beatings" represent efforts to enforce internal discipline. End Summary.

Account of Meeting

Ervine stressed the importance of acceptance of the principle of consent to loyalists. Loyalists would rather have nothing if the principle of consent is not agreed, in accordance with the principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Loyalists can commit to the principle of employment of democratic and exclusively peaceful methods. The no-first-strike pledge is proof that loyalists have gone the extra mile in the quest for peace. Hutchinson said even if everyone committed to decommissioning, the destruction of arms would not happen for some time, hence the importance of a reciprocal pledge from the republicans on no-first-strike.

Ervine said it is morally sensible to decommission but the circumstances must be right. All trains have to leave the station at the same time; parallel movement, including on decommissioning, is essential during the peace process. Loyalists would have no problem with a commitment to total and verifiable decommissioning but have gone as far as they can without others moving. With respect to a commitment to phased decommissioning during negotiations, there should be no preconditions to negotiations. It is the same with prisoners held hostage; we do not want to play that game. We do not say that phased decommissioning cannot work, but it would be very difficult to sell. We do not want to make commitments that we cannot keep. The negotiating process itself is the biggest confidence-building measure. There is not the remotest chance that the republicans would agree to phased decommissioning. Even if they did, Hutchinson added, loyalists would have difficulties.

The unionist demand for decommissioning is really hypocritical. After all, they say they are ready to sit down with all parties after elections without any decommissioning at all. Unionist leaders do not really lead. They tell people what they think they want to hear. They are respectable bigots. Against the background of violence they spoke to us. Now against the background of peace they won't talk to us. Ervine said there has to be some sort of symmetry. The republicans will play games, bellowing that the British government is the enemy, but in reality they are very fearful of what loyalists might do and are watching us constantly. Hutchinson said that the loyalists already agreed in November 1994 to oppose punishment beatings, but Ervine noted the difficulty in stopping such actions. Hutchinson said 80% of the "punishment" beatings occur for reasons of internal discipline. Our condemnation of "punishment" beatings is unequivocal but sometimes can be counterproductive for us. Some dubious people take advantage of the phenomenon of "punishment" beatings for their own ends; Hutchinson said the community must learn to go to the police, not the paramilitaries, to seek justice. As Assistant Chief Constable Ronnie Flanagan has said, it is in no one's interest to see fracturing of paramilitary organizations until a political solution is found.

Ervine said there has been an atmospheric change in relation to the International Body. The IB is not in a weak position.