

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the British Government
January 15, 1996
Belfast

Participants: Michael Ancram, Minister for Political
Development (NIO), Sir John Wheeler, Minister for Security (NIO)

Summary

Representatives of the Northern Ireland Office told the International Body that decommissioning cannot be addressed in isolation from other issues; asserted that the paramilitaries could deliver on decommissioning if subjected to sufficient pressure; advised the IB to call on paramilitaries to halt "punishment beatings"; stated that the modalities of decommissioning are almost irrelevant, that the verification of disposal of paramilitary arms is the real issue; and urged the IB to do what it could within its remit on elections, elaborating that an elected body would solely address the resolution of Northern Ireland's problems within the context of the three-strand process.

Account of Meeting

Ancram said the purpose of the process is to create confidence. It may be impossible to look at one issue (decommissioning) without reference to others. Wheeler said the IB needs to make recommendations which none of the parties can walk away from. The central problem is the creation of credibility and trust that echoes within the minds of ordinary people. Meanwhile the paramilitaries continue their violence, intimidation, beatings and murders.

Ancram said that decommissioning is a confidence-building measure. Weapons cannot be replaced just like that. We are good at stopping shipments from coming in. Wheeler said the IRA's semtex is old. Semtex made now has an ingredient which makes possible identification of the product. If you had asked anyone including Chief Constable Annesley whether the paramilitaries could deliver on a ceasefire our answers would have been ambivalent. They can deliver if they want to, if the right kind of pressure is applied to them. Under pressure they changes tactics.

Ancram said the IB should ask the paramilitaries to stop "punishment" beatings. Such actions undermine the value of the whole process. Wheeler noted that "punishment" beatings stopped during the visit of President Clinton and "punishment" killings have now stopped as well with the presence of the International Body. All major parties in Westminster had supported continuation of emergency legislation.

Ancram said the paramilitaries should commit to abide by any outcome and to commit to the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means to seek change. They should agree that change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland is impossible without the agreement of the majority of people in Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein advocates self-determination on an all-Ireland basis and has never agreed to the principle of consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland as an essential element of an overall settlement.

Ancram noted that in his book published last spring, Gerry Adams emphasized the right to resort to the armed struggle. Confidence needs to be built among people who see no difference between Sinn Fein and the IRA. It all comes down to guns. We are trying to get everybody around the table. Put yourselves in the shoes of unionists. You would be worried if there were a danger of a return to violence.

In response to General de Chastelain's question, Wheeler said the details concerning the modalities of decommissioning are almost irrelevant. We know what the stocks of illegally held weapons are. The problem is verification of disposal. Ancram said that phased decommissioning would be problematic. Those in possession of the weapons could drag their feet. The RUC would want to see that forensic testing of decommissioned weapons was done, but none of the information acquired would be used to initiate criminal proceedings.

Ancram said the loyalist paramilitaries have less discipline than the IRA. Their leadership is not integrated and the political parties associated with the paramilitaries are definitely junior partners. Wheeler said persons with influence vary almost from day to day on the loyalist side.

Ancram reiterated Prime Minister Major's exhortation to the IB to do what it can within its remit on an elected body. Ancram asked whether the IB would address the elected body issue; Senator Mitchell said that was under discussion. Ancram said that loyalists would have a chance for representation only if the body had as many as 90 members (five from each parliamentary district). Ancram said such a body would have to fall within the three strand context and not be seen as an attempt at an internal settlement. All the required parties would have to participate and the body would be convened for the sole purpose of reaching a comprehensive settlement on all three strands.