

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Progressive Democrats
December 17, 1995
Dublin

Participants: Mary Harney, Des O'Malley, Michael McDowell

Summary

: The representatives of the Progressive Democrats said a gesture on decommissioning, perhaps destruction supervised by a third party, would be needed to convene all-party talks; decommissioning as a precondition to participation in the political process had been policy of the Irish government until very recently; the majority of people in the south believe that illegal arms should be decommissioned; International Body recommendations that irritate all sides would probably be on the right track; the perception in Dublin is that the IB will come down in favor of Sinn Fein and therefore apply additional pressure on the British; a solemn declaration by Sinn Fein of respect for any settlement that enjoyed the support of a majority of nationalists in the north and the south, as well as a no-first-use pledge and an expression of remorse for past misdeeds from the IRA, would help; and the proposal for an eighty member assembly in Northern Ireland is too unwieldy but perhaps parties could help representatives to send to the negotiating table.

End Summary.

Account of Meeting

Harney said the visit of President Clinton had renewed hope in the peace process. Trust is the key. At the moment there is none. That is understandable. Confidence-building requires a gesture. A solemn declaration from Sinn Fein that it would respect a settlement that enjoyed the support of a majority of nationalists in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland would help. A declaration from the IRA of no-first-use coupled to an expression of remorse for past deeds would also help. Intimidation must stop. Just the previous week, Sinn Fein prevented a soccer match with an RUC team.

According to O'Malley, Adams's statement with Hume and Reynolds on September 6, 1994 was personally made in good faith. But Adams has never followed through, probably because of internal difficulties. The distrust by unionists of the republicans is the key factor. The loyalist no-first-use pledge and expression of remorse for past wrongs had fairly considerable impact. The loyalists are easier to talk to in Dublin than is Sinn Fein. Four murders since the ceasefire attributable to the IRA heighten mistrust (three were alleged drug dealers). The use of firearms to "arrest" people continues and punishment beatings have increased -- 230 since the ceasefires, 2/3 of which are republican. The message these actions send is, if we don't get our way, we'll go back to violence. UUP members and supporters are not unreasonable people. If the UUP were persuaded that it's possible to build trust, they would pull other unionists behind them. The power of the U.S. should not be underestimated. The provos won't throw away their White House connections. Pressure from the International Body could be very useful. There is a very real mood for compromise in Northern Ireland.

Harney said the fifteen months of the ceasefire have really been a very short time. We always assumed at least five years would be required to reach a political settlement. If everyone is irritated at what the International Body recommends, the IB will have done well. If talks do not begin by February or March, none are likely to commence until after the next Westminster elections. A body of eighty in an elected assembly in NI would be too unwieldy to tackle NI's problems, but perhaps party negotiators could be elected.

McDowell said the capacity of the IRA to bluff should not be underestimated. They are in particular playing to the American audience with hints of a return to violence. The perception in Dublin is that the IB, in particular Senator Mitchell as Washington's man, will come up with a recommendation that is favorable to the Provos and put pressure on the British. It is accepted that a majority of nationalists in the north would not accept anything the majority of nationalists in the south opposed and vice versa.

O'Malley said the lines in the north are not as hardfast as commonly supposed. Some Catholics are basically unionists while some Protestants have a nationalist outlook. The SDLP, moderate nationalists, draw two and a half times the vote of Sinn Fein in the north.

Harney pointed out that Sinn Fein is the only party in the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation that does not accept the principle of consent. Sinn Fein sold the ceasefire on the contention that the British were on their way out. The majority of people in the Republic believe that paramilitary arms should be decommissioned. The Irish government, at least Taoiseach Bruton, supported decommissioning as a precondition to all-party talks as recently as two months ago. McDowell said that Foreign Minister Spring had stated no participation in the Dublin Forum without decommissioning so it is untenable to maintain that the British did not have the same understanding.

O'Malley said Sinn Fein is prone to portray the conflict as between nationalists and the British but in fact it is really a struggle between two traditions. The Irish want to internationalize the conflict and fear a return to Stormont. Each side fears the other seeks total domination and the complete extinction of the other side. Unionists fear that if they are not always on top, they will suffer the same treatment they meted out. No party on either side of the divide will make a submission to the International Body that gives an inch to the other side. The trick is to come up with something that requires compromise from all sides.

Harney said that, in her view, all-party talks won't happen without a gesture on arms. McDowell said only some form of verified destruction of weapons, perhaps to or by a third party such as the International Body, could bring about such talks. Harney reiterated that all sides have a considerable capacity for bluffing. O'Malley said British PM Major is personally anxious; delivery of permanent peace in Northern Ireland would be a major achievement. Even if Major thought the unionists are off base, he could not rush to talk with people sitting on a large cache of arms. Harney said the key task for the International Body is to get everybody off the hook. If the public sees the recommendations of the IB as fair and balanced, it will be difficult for the governments to discard them. It is important to do something with the 140,000 guns in the hands of unionists as well. O'Malley noted that, as Minister of Justice in the early seventies, he presided over a massive call-in of weapons. A three week deadline was set; compliance was virtually universal in the Republic.