

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Workers' Party
December 16, 1995
Belfast

Participants: Tom French, Des O'Hagan, John Lowry

Summary

Representatives of the Workers' Party, noting the Irish Times poll indicating overwhelming support in the south for decommissioning, said commencement of political talks would be difficult without some decommissioning; trust and confidence-building depends on the turnover of weapons and recognition of the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state; there has never been substantial support for paramilitary group anywhere on the island of Ireland; the comparison of the IRA with the Palestinians or the ANC in South Africa is obscene; the leadership of the IRA has probably oversold the efficacy of political talks to its membership; the Framework documents probably contain the essence of an eventual solution to Northern Ireland's problems; and charges that there are 110,000 armed unionists roaming the north are rubbish since most of those legally held guns are in the hands of farmers who use them for hunting and vermin control.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

French said the recent Irish Times poll recording overwhelming sentiment in the south of Ireland for decommissioning is telling. It will be difficult to get all parties around the table without movement on decommissioning. The IRA is ambiguous in its attitude towards democracy. It has not said what it wants to come out of talks. The increase of punishment beatings and the four murders since the ceasefire that can be attributed to the IRA raise questions about that organization's commitment to democracy.

O'Hagan said the IRA uses the events of 1969 to justify the use of weapons. Those events won't be forgotten. Official Sinn Fein (progenitor of the Workers' Party) and the Official IRA (the Provisional IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein broke away from the "Officials" in 1969) turned away from violence in the early seventies. Official Sinn Fein became Sinn Fein - the Workers' Party in 1977, then simply the Workers Party in 1982. Trust and confidence-building depends on the surrender of weapons and recognition of the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state. As yet Sinn Fein/PIRA has made no clear change of policy on the Northern Ireland sovereignty question.

Lowry said the reality is that the people of Ireland, north and south, have never supported paramilitary organizations to any substantial degree. Murders and punishment beatings hint that the paramilitaries won't accept the outcome of political negotiations if that result fails to track with their political goals. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are not threatening anyone, but the IRA would be ready to resume violence if the perceived causes of Ireland's woes are not addressed.

French said that attempts to equate the situation in Ireland to that of the Palestinians or the ANC in South Africa are ridiculous. Sinn Fein doesn't have the support of the majority of nationalists, especially on an all-Ireland basis, and has no right to speak as though it is the government of Ireland. For O'Hagan, the comparison with South Africa is grossly obscene. What has gone on in Northern Ireland is not all the fault of unionists. Catholics insisted on separate education. Lowry said the chief beneficiary of direct rule in NI over the past two decades has been the Catholic middle class. Virtually all the demands of the

peaceful civil rights movement of the late sixties have been satisfied. Radical nationalists refuse to acknowledge that any progress at all has been made. The shape of any future agreement in NI is likely to resemble the vision incorporated in the Framework documents.

Lowry said the IRA probably has an internal problem, promising more from political talks than possibly can be delivered. In some areas, the IRA claimed at the time of the ceasefire that the British would be out of Ireland and the RUC disbanded by Christmas. The IRA's leadership is not building within the organization towards the compromises that will be necessary for a widely acceptable settlement. Nevertheless we are optimistic that the IRA will not return to substantial violence.

O'Hagan said the IRA counted on American opinion to sway the British in its alternate strategy. But they have misread American public opinion. Tip O'Neill's condemnation of terrorism is telling. But the decision by the administration to talk to the provos was the right one. For years, Lowry said, the provos have talked only to themselves, developing a wildly skewed view of the nature of the world. French said ordinary people are weary of war. Talk of a possible return to violence is probably scare-mongering, but those in the IRA who never thought the armed struggle should be given up may break away at some stage.

O'Hagan noted that 60% of the population of Northern Ireland is not Roman Catholic. When Adams says Brits out, the ordinary non-Roman Catholic thinks that that means him. In reality, Lowry said, the British play a very important positive role. A million people in Northern Ireland don't want to be part of a united Ireland. Lowry said the stories about 110,000 armed unionists are all rubbish. The vast majority of these arms are owned by farmers. All such weapons are subject to strict control and regulation.