

The Independent Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Alliance Party
December 16, 1995
Belfast

Participants: John Alderdice, Seamus Close, Steve McBride, Sean Neeson, Eileen Bell

Summary

Representatives of the Alliance Party said decommissioning prior to talks will not happen; an international body should carry out any eventual decommissioning; an inventory and inspection of weapons stocks by such a body would provide evidence of paramilitary commitment to decommissioning; an end to punishment beatings would furnish proof of a commitment to non-violence; unionists are unlikely to engage in talks before the next Westminster election; therefore election of an assembly is necessary to keep the peace process rolling; such an assembly would have a mandate to negotiate only and all three strands would be on the table; the assembly could make decisions only with a 70% weighted majority.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Alderdice opened the discussion for his delegation: The Alliance submission is in the nature of first comments. Even the report of the International Body will not be the last word. The March 1991 agreement of the four constitutional parties to hold discussions on a three-strand basis (internal Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland, UK-ROI) with the British and Irish governments took four years to achieve. In 1992 the SDLP and the government of Ireland reversed the conventional wisdom by seeking a statement of principles to end the armed conflict, followed by the convocation of all-party talks. Many meetings over the principles eventually led to the Downing Street Declaration, welcomed by the SDLP, grudgingly accepted by the UUP, and rejected by the DUP and, ultimately, by Sinn Fein.

Unionists greeted the IRA ceasefire with caution. The two governments went ahead with work on what eventually emerged in February 1995 as the Framework documents. The Alliance welcomed the Framework documents, but the UUP (largely because of suspicion of the process), the DUP, and Sinn Fein rejected the Framework. The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation established in Dublin after the issuance of the Downing Street Declaration has not, after a year of work, achieved something that Sinn Fein can accept. One of the reasons for the emphasis on decommissioning is deep suspicion of Sinn Fein's program. The cessation of violence may be a tactic; if the outcome of deliberations is not to Sinn Fein's liking, a return to violence may ensue. The facts of no commitment to decommissioning and no commitment to non-violence will not keep the Alliance from talking with Sinn Fein as long as violence is not resumed. On the basis of these talks with Sinn Fein, it appears that the republicans are in fact pulling back. Illegal weapons pose a threat in any society. South African Deputy President De Klerk told the Forum in Dublin that his one regret in the South African peace process was the failure to address the question of the decommissioning of illegal weapons.

That a fundamental dividing line has been drawn with the past with respect to violence would be a justification for the hold in the political process induced by the 1992 SDLP/Government of Ireland shift in strategy. If in fact the apostolic succession for the use of violence has not been renounced,

then the question is how long do we keep the representatives of 85%-90% of the population from addressing problems. There is frustration that all other political processes have been stopped to accommodate the agenda of a small fraction that has shown no sign of compromise.

One can clearly see when the state security forces are "decommissioning": soldiers are sent back to England, borders are opened, etc., but the decommissioning of illegal weapons cannot be seen, thus the need for verification. If decommissioning is to go anywhere, there have to be assurances to those holding the weapons that protection against prosecution will be available. Serious decommissioning will not be easy for the organizations involved. It is essential to understand the practical and psychological significance of decommissioning. Decommissioning causes serious problems for the peace process. Obviously if parties don't show up for all-party talks, such talks have little meaning. Mutual satisfaction requires mutual sacrifice. The fact that the debate keeps coming back to the NI question suggests to unionists that nationalists cannot be satisfied. That said, an objective should be the removal of all illegal weapons.

Decommissioning should in practice be practical and non-threatening. Decommissioning may have to be carried out by some international agency because it is unlikely that the paramilitaries will to hand over weapons to the security services, north or south. Such an international agency would have to have very considerable resources, including technical and field staff. The establishment of an inventory of materials would be a useful step. The security services think they have a reasonably accurate idea of paramilitary weapons holdings. One should get the estimates of the security services, then go to the paramilitaries to compare figures. It would not be an easy task but could be read as a sign of commitment. The inspection of weapons stocks would be a very powerful sign of commitment to the peace process. The physical destruction of weapons, perhaps in the presence of an international body, would be powerful evidence of commitment to decommissioning. That said, the weapons offered up for decommissioning are those least likely to be used. Many people in NI have legally held weapons acquired on the recommendation of the police. It would be useful if these weapons were taken out of circulation, perhaps for financial compensation.

The fact that the ceasefire has lasted fifteen months is welcome and significant; regrettably that does not set aside evidence of beatings and murders during the ceasefire period. The purpose of punishment beatings is territorial control. An end to punishment beatings would be persuasive evidence of commitment to non-violence. Statements from the parties closely associated with the paramilitaries would be useful if they unequivocally stated a commitment to non-violence but there has been nothing like that. We told PM Major in September 1994 that the two governments should talk directly with those in possession of the weapons.

The Alliance party thinks it unlikely that the unionist parties will engage in talks with Sinn Fein before the next Westminster election. Therefore an election to some form of an NI assembly is essential to get political talks under way.

Close noted that perception often means more than reality in NI. It would be extremely helpful to open channels of communication with those who hold weapons. Neeson said the name of the game is getting the parties off the various hooks they have impaled themselves upon. McBride underscored the need for a climate of confidence and pointed out the utility of concentrating on practicalities. According to Bell, time is running out for Sinn Fein. People expect the democratic process to develop society as they want.

Alderdice observed that NI is a dependency community. None of its home-grown politicians have any power or responsibility. The idea of an elected assembly is a good one, a possible

short-term way around decommissioning. Bell said the perception is that violence has paid off, that everyone is courting Sinn Fein. Close noted that Sinn Fein has electoral strength no greater than that of the Alliance party. The difference is that Alliance is solely democratic. The loyalists don't yet have an electoral mandate. According to Neeson, the reality of the situation is that neither paramilitary will hand in weapons prior to talks.

Alderdice concurred. Some intermediate steps such as inventories, inspection, a sort of Washington 2 1/2 are imaginable. Our suspicion is that there won't be enough for the UK government, much less the unionists, in any eventual deal. Sinn Fein has never stood before on a platform of democracy. An assembly as envisaged by the Alliance would require new legislation, but it is not seriously believable that passage of such legislation would take long. Neeson said the UUP and DUP want to see the destruction of the fringe loyalist parties, but one should not lose sight of the fact that the first anniversary of the loyalist ceasefire drew 50,000 people into the streets. Both the PUP and the UDP are working hard in communities to build up an electoral base.

The word "assembly," according to Alderdice is associated with legislative powers. We want an assembly only with the power to negotiate, with a finite life span and an imperative to discuss all three strands. We don't want a 50% plus one formula to make decisions. A weighted majority is necessary. The support of 70% of elected representatives would be required for any decisions. Policing is a north-south issue as well; perhaps some sort of all-Ireland Interpol could be set up. Hume dismisses the assembly idea as old hat, something that failed before. But we should have another go with new parameters. If Sinn Fein and the SDLP were elected to an assembly, perhaps they would participate at a higher level than at the Forum in Dublin.

There is little point in wasting time with those who can't deliver. It's best if possible to open direct channels of communication rather than working through often feckless organizations that allege close ties with the paramilitaries. The strength of the International Body's recommendations depends on the persuasiveness of its case to the people. We think it unlikely that the unionist parties will engage in political dialogue with Sinn Fein in advance of the next Westminster elections. Therefore elections to an NI assembly are essential to keeping the peace process ball rolling.