

International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Green Party
December 17, 1995
Dublin

Participants: Trevor Sargent, Vincent McDowell, Lucille O'Shea

Summary

Representatives of the Greens rejected by analogy decommissioning of weapons as a precondition to all-party talks; urged demilitarization of the state authorities as well as the paramilitaries; welcomed the establishment of the International Body as the long-desired internationalization of the Northern Ireland conflict; suggested that the IB could use a mutual no-first-strike pledge to draw the conclusion that paramilitaries no longer need their offensive weapons; called for the replacement of British troops with neutral peacekeepers; and advocated adoption of a "referendum" system that would result in the selection of policy options least objectionable to the most people in Northern Ireland.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Sargent explained that the Greens are represented disproportionately in the European Parliament, with two of fifteen delegates while holding just one seat (Sargent himself) in the Dail. The Greens analyze the decommissioning issue from the point of view of ecology. Non-violence is our cornerstone. The entire decision-making process must be non-violent. We have great problems with majoritarian rule in Northern Ireland as practiced in the past. Both the state authorities and the paramilitaries need to be demilitarized. The prisoner issue is crucial to the equation, particularly in response to a decrease in violence. The European dimension is important. Ireland is close to dangerous nuclear facilities which we believe should be shut down. We would not make closing these facilities a precondition to talks. This analogy applies to the decommissioning issue.

McDowell said Northern Ireland must be seen in the international context. The International Body takes the problem out of the domestic British arena. Neutral peacekeeping troops and international lawyers should be a part of an eventual settlement. Reform of the RUC is critical to an overall demilitarization of the conflict. Some steps have already been taken, but the RUC needs to be seen as disarming more. The RUC should be more accountable; it has overtones of accountability to only one community. We have argued at the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation that a no-first-strike pledge would help allay fears among unionists. The Sinn Fein reaction at the Forum to this idea has been evasive, a fudge. They only talk about everybody disarming. A non-aggression pact is attainable -- the loyalists have already given a no-first-strike pledge.

Northern Ireland is probably more militarized than any society in the world. To solve the problem, security should be removed from the responsibilities of the police. We have advocated the replacement of British troops with neutral peacekeepers and an unarmed police force with no security responsibilities since our founding in 1983. The unarmed police force would have to have members from all communities. We do not believe that the present peace process will lead either to a united Ireland or to a return to Stormont. The British are raising decommissioning as an artificial barrier to prevent republicans from participating in the political process. We understand the fears of unionists and therefore propose as a first step that each paramilitary make a solemn no-first strike pledge. Once that pledge is made, it could be said (by the International Body, for example) that as a consequence offensive weapons are no longer needed. The British might agree to provide compensation for weapons turned in, perhaps in the form of contributions to charities on behalf of paramilitary prisoners.

O'Shea noted the conclusion of the 1992 Opsahl report that any solution to the problems of Northern Ireland must be psychologically conducive, with no humiliation or diminution of any party.

McDowell said the Greens support the Downing Street Declaration and accept that the people have the final right to decide their own political fate. Sargent said the Greens have devoted a lot of thought to consensus decision-making. We recommend a "preferendum" system that considers a wide variety of options, a system that produces as the preferred result the least objectionable option to all the people. Such a system requires much education of the populace to use effectively.

McDowell said the Greens would change the RUC's name to the Northern Ireland Police Service to remove the red flag that the name RUC represents in some communities ("royal" does not appear in the name of any other police force in the UK). The RUC is 92% Protestant, in part because of IRA threats to prospective inductees from the Catholic community.

Sargent, a Protestant whose grandparents served in the Royal Irish Constabulary, said there is no devious or divertive discrimination in the south directed against Protestants. Empathy is needed on both sides to understand what the other is thinking and feeling.