

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Church of Ireland
December 18, 1995
Dublin

Participants: Archbishop Robin Eames, Bishop Samuel Poyntz

Summary

Representatives of the Church of Ireland said decommissioning as a precondition to participation in all-party talks is probably not the wisest course; the establishment of trust between communities is the overriding aim; the loyalist paramilitaries have never broken their word in undertakings with church representatives; an elected assembly, properly structured, is part of an overall solution; the republicans should end punishment beatings and surveillance of targets in loyalist communities; and the withdrawal of all non-Irish British regiments from Northern Ireland, leaving approximately 6000 of the 16,000 troops at the time of the ceasefires, would leave sufficient security forces in place and be of considerable symbolic importance.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Eames said that the Church of Ireland, on a proportionate basis, had lost more than any other faith in Northern Ireland. Losses among the security forces have been especially heavy. Eames himself has conducted countless funerals for the fallen. The Church has mediated on the Shankill and was involved in the negotiations for the Downing Street Declaration at the invitation of Prime Ministers Major and Reynolds. As an individual, Eames was engaged in brokering the loyalist ceasefire. Through intermediaries, contact with Sinn Féin is maintained.

The key question is trust. Words such as "surrender" are loaded. Nothing the International Body comes up with will have the slightest chance of acceptance unless the vast majority of people are behind it. The future cast of the RUC is an important issue. The RUC really wants to be a civilian police force, ideally unarmed. The RUC has stopped buying armored vehicles.

The loyalist paramilitaries view themselves as reactive. We almost got a gesture on decommissioning from them a few months ago. The attempt blew up in our faces, but we believe they could still be persuaded. Eames offered his services to the International Body.

The work of the IB cannot really be separated from the political track in the twin-track approach. An elected assembly with a limited mandate, a circumscribed term of office, and a requirement to report to both the British and Irish governments by a date certain is part of the solution. Such an assembly could give the average citizen a stake in the political future, a feeling that destiny can be controlled. An assembly, chosen on a proportional representation basis, would give those politicians associated with the paramilitaries an opportunity to gain the electoral mandate they now lack.

Poyntz, recently retired as Bishop of Connor which includes Belfast's "murder triangle" within its diocese (1/3 of the 3000 fatalities and 1/3 of the 30,000 injuries inflicted over the past quarter century occurred in the "murder triangle"), said unionists have suffered in equal measure with nationalists. The levels of educational achievement and job training in deprived Protestant areas such as the Shankill are even worse than the most dismal of republican ghettos. Republican paramilitaries continue their

surveillance of loyalist areas. They play on fear, thus eroding the peace process. Loyalists will tell you that over 60 Protestant buildings have been destroyed since the ceasefires. Punishment beatings have averaged three a week. Surveillance and punishment beatings should be ended. 245 punishment beatings have taken place in the fifteen months since the ceasefires in contrast to 190 in the fifteen month period before the ceasefires. Eames added that the practice of forcing people into exile should cease and the location of the bodies of paramilitary (mostly IRA) victims should be disclosed.

Eames said the British and the UUP seemed to be hooked on decommissioning but he was not sure that was the wisest course. The original Ulster Volunteer Force never turned in its arms. An additional 1000 died in 1920 because of Lloyd George's misguided insistence on turning in weapons.

Poyntz suggested the withdrawal of all non-Irish British regiments, leaving a total of approximately 6000 troops (of 16,000 as of the ceasefires). That force together with the RUC ought to be enough to maintain the peace. Eames underscored the symbolic importance of the Irish looking after the Irish.

Eames said that in his experience the loyalists have never broken their word to him, nor have they played any games. Roman Catholic clergy close to Sinn Fein say the same about that organization. Poyntz said it is fair to note that there is a fairly sizeable criminal element on both sides. Eames said that the statement of the International Body that it could not in advance promise the success of its endeavors had an enormously positive impact on the loyalist paramilitaries as evidence of a sober approach to a difficult complex of problems.