

The International Body

Meeting with Representatives of the Methodist Church in Ireland
December 15, 1995

Participants:

Reverend David Cooper, Council on Social Responsibility
Dr. David Gallagher, Council on Social Responsibility
Reverend Henry Keys, Council on Social Responsibility
Harald Good, Council on Social Responsibility

Summary

Representatives of the Methodist Church said a gesture on decommissioning as a precondition for all-party talks is highly unlikely; the intent to use weapons is far more important than their possession; unionists fear that any change would be a change for the worse; an unequivocal endorsement by Sinn Féin of the principle of consent would be helpful. A peace initiative by the Four Main Churches as well as other churches is currently in its behind-the-scenes infancy but could bear fruit early in the new year.

End Summary

Account of Meeting

Gallagher explained that the Methodist Church, as the smallest (5%) of the Four Main Churches in Ireland, can often say and do things the bigger churches would find difficult. The Methodist Church is in touch with all political parties in Northern Ireland, including the parties associated with the loyalist and republican paramilitaries. Methodists, like the other Protestant denominations, offer a spectrum of opinion, particularly on the issue of decommissioning. We would all like to see the arms removed, but accept the reality that decommissioning prior to talks is highly unlikely. Methodists note and appreciate the sustained period of ceasefire, permitting a reduction in security structures. The British government has moved on the cultural dimension, probably as fast as some would wish. Whatever emerges should be the result of consultations and implemented on a stage-by-stage basis. Methodists make a distinction between offensive and defensive weapons. The republican movement has been undergoing a metamorphosis over the past five to six years. The goals remain the same, but methods are under review. Sinn Féin could improve the atmosphere with an unequivocal endorsement of the principle of consent. Former Presbyterian moderator John Dunlop publicly asked both Gerry Adams and Mitchel McLaughlin of SF whether an "agreed Ireland is a divided Ireland." They both said yes.

Gallagher said Adams is unable to go to the IRA to ask for a "gesture" on decommissioning. This is understandable. We do not have the right to ask him to do something we cannot/will not do ourselves. We want to encourage the unionist community to act better towards SF: past treatment of SF councillors in district councils has been shameful. The intention to use weapons is fundamentally more important than the weapons themselves. It is much more important to work out agreed negotiations and get to the table.

To Senator Mitchell's observation that a dispassionate visitor from Mars would assume that the unionists would be in a no-lose situation at the negotiating table, in particular with nationalist acceptance of the principle of success, Good acknowledged the logic of that analysis, but noted that in Northern Ireland one deals with history and fears, real and imaginary, with paranoia and permanent suspicion. Keys said the 25 years of strife have reinforced, not allayed fears. Another 25 years would

be needed to erase profound fears and suspicions. Cooper said the unionist community has lost self-confidence. Any change is seen as a change for the worse. Good said from a certain unionist perspective all these question of sovereignty were resolved in the early twenties. Just deal with the troublemakers and get on with the way life ought to be is a common attitude.

In response to Prime Minister Holkeri's question about the role of churches in dealing with decommissioning in practical terms, Gallagher said it was difficult to get into this area. Good saw that churches, with other actors, could perhaps play a role, but not without internal and external controversy. Joint action by the four main churches would not be difficult to orchestrate. Gallagher confided that moves, in conjunction with other churches as well, are underway to do just that. These moves are in their infancy, but may bear fruit early in the new year.

Cooper returned to the psychology of the situation. There is a great vacuum between the government and people on the ground. For unionists, Gallagher said, with the Adams ceasefire, the IRA is just doing something that never should have been, and the answer to the question what have the republicans done to secure the peace since the ceasefire is nothing. Keys said any return to violence would plunge NI into unknown depths, a prospect too horrible to contemplate. Cooper said every day without violence strengthens peace, but paradoxically the passage of time without a settlement heightens tension. Gallagher said both sides should free themselves from the past and be prepared to take leaps of faith. Good said unionists must acknowledge the hurt on the nationalist side, accept the nationalist culture, and allow for full participation in society. The people of Ireland desperately want the guns removed but are not ready for it because segments of the community see the holders of the guns as their protectors.

Cooper said Methodists try to encourage people to put themselves in others' skins. South African Deputy President De Klerk was especially eloquent on this subject during his recent visit to Dublin, using phrases much needed in Ireland such as inclusiveness, diversity, and the willingness to take risks.

Gallagher shared the results of soundings he'd recently taken among fellow ministers around the province. From the Protestant heartland around Ballymena, apathy and indifference prevail; Enniskillen, approximately split down the middle in its sectarian profile, is shrouded in suspicion and wariness. In North Down, a bastion of the Protestant middle class, there is recognition that both communities feel threatened.

Gallagher and Good suggested that Sinn Fein/IRA and the British government do not understand each other's psychology. Good noted that the British have to be concerned about broader movements of subversives. Softness towards the IRA would be a bad signal.