

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS HELD AT
DUBLIN CASTLE ON FRIDAY, 29 SEPTEMBER, 1995

Chairperson: Judge Catherine McGuinness

I hereby certify the following to be a true and accurate transcript of my shorthand notes of the above-named proceedings.

Maol MacArdair
Michelle Coffey.

Doyle Court Reporters,
2 Arran Quay,
Dublin 7.

Telephone: 8722833
2862097 (after hours)
Fax: 8724486

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. I will now go on to Dr. John Alderdice for the Alliance Party.

DR. ALDERDICE: Thank you, Madam Chair. I think it might be of some value for us at this time, we are trying to return to the political process and draw the strands together again for a new political season, to look back a little bit and see how we have

come to the current position, to the current stand-off.

In 1991 and '92 a number of those who are around this table were involved as members of Irish Government or as members of political parties in Northern Ireland in a series of discussions which also involved the British Government, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. The purpose of those discussions was to try to address the historic and deep divisions between the Unionists and Nationalists in this island. And when those talks broke down, a new and separate strategy was espoused, particularly by the Irish Government, and that strategy was to try to address another deep division, the division within nationalism, to try to enable those who had espoused physical force for republicanism to understand that there were other ways and a better way of addressing political problems- a thoroughly democratic one. That indeed was where the Downing Street Declaration came from. The view was that if it were possible to enshrine a set of principles agreed by the two Governments, that this would put a clear signpost in front of everyone as to the direction in which we must all move if we are to achieve a settlement. In the event, that was an excellent declaration and one which we fully support, a declaration which provided the basis for the framework documents which are an excellent basis for further discussion. And indeed, I believe that it was the Downing Street Declaration that created a context in which we have moved towards the two cease-fires. This is very welcome indeed.

But one must understand that it came from an intent within nationalism to persuade one section of the Nationalist community which regarded violence as a legitimate political instrument, to give up that course of action and to espouse only democracy. Now, this was important but we now come back to a joining of the

streams with the original attempts in '91, '92- and indeed before that- that address the fundamental division between Unionists and Nationalists and their aspirations. And it is important to understand that when we try to address this, we are going to face hurdles, we are going to face a real obstacle. Some of the onward movement that had been possible through the Downing Street Declaration and so on is going to run into a bit of an incline.

Now, this is made a little more difficult, I have to say, when there is continued talk of crisis and the possible end to the Peace Process, rather than seeing it as a natural, and indeed predictable obstacle or hurdle which we must overcome in the course of the Peace Process. And I have to say too that there is a depth of anxiety when ever such talk about an end to the Peace Process comes without any reassurance that there has forever been a renunciation of the use of violence as a legitimate political instrument.

And that is why I would want to call on Gerry Adams to make it clear that Unionist consent is as necessary as Nationalist consent and that when the majority of people, north and south, do at the end of all of this process make clear their decision in referendums, north and south, that this must be respected, and indeed that he and his colleagues in Sinn Fein would not countenance or support any return to violence by anyone- but of course, particularly by republicans, on the basis of dissatisfaction with the decisions of the Irish people, north and south.

I think that such a clear understanding, such a clear commitment would go some way to decommissioning the fears of many Unionists who still have difficulty accepting the completeness of Sinn

Fein's commitment to democratic politics as the only legitimate instrument of change.

I am not questioning his personal commitment, but I do think we must recognise in reality that there are others who do and this brings us back to the question of how we might move forward into the future together. And I am convinced that progress was made because the two Governments worked together and also because in recent years, both Governments have shown increased sensitivity to all sections in the community in Northern Ireland.

I do have to say, mind you, that perceptions in recent times, and not least over the last week, perceptions have been created in Northern Ireland because of the actions of the British Government on return of prisoners to Northern Ireland and, particularly, perhaps the stance of the Home Secretary, Mr. Howard, over quite some period of time. And also recent comments by Mr. Spring have created a perception that there is a slipping back towards partisanship.

Now, perceptions or not, that is not a helpful kind of position if we are going to move forward. It will be on the dynamic which helped us in the past, the two Governments working closely together.

Now, there are calls for all-party talks, and of course anyone with any sense wants all-party talks to take place. But all party talks does, as the Taoiseach rightly said earlier today-mean all parties there. Let's not forget that in our talks in '91 and '92, that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed and, indeed, agreed by everybody. You can't have such all round agreement if a significant, indeed very large section, of the

population is not even prepared to sit down at such talks.

And yet it must be possible for us to move forward and the twin track approach of an international commission to deal with the weapons' issue and an expanding development of the political talks, must, I think, be the way forward.

Could I in passing say that I think at times there is a bit of a revision of history when, for example, say that the issue of arms has never been a problem before. It was a big problem after the 1920s. It was a major source of dispute between the parties on the two sides in the Civil War. It was some considerable time before they found it possible to sit down and work together, and only after some developments in positions. This is not a new issue, nor could anybody seriously dream that it was. But if it possible to take that weapons' issue into an international commission of some kind, how is it possible for us to move forward on the talks?

Well again, I have to wonder. I would like to believe that we could have all parties agreeing everything, but you will forgive me if I find some difficulty in seeing a context in which Dr. Paisley and all of his colleagues, and even some who are perhaps feeling that Dr. Paisley is a little too open minded at times, right through Mr. Adams and all of his colleagues, some of whom perhaps feel that he is a little too open minded at times, that all of these people are going to reach unanimity in this life- or perhaps even in the next- I have some difficulty on that particular one. Indeed, in South Africa, the notion of

"sufficient consensus" was developed to indicate that there were contexts where the overwhelming majority of people on all sides reached an agreement but that there were some who, for whatever

reasons, felt it not possible to go along with this.

Now, that implies some differences in the amount of support for various views in various parties. That means that we have to take account of democratic mandates- and Sinn Fein have pointed out that their democratic mandate sometimes does not receive the attention that they feel it merits. Therefore, I think that it is perhaps worth considering as part of a process of moving forward, whether democratically mandated parties could achieve new post- cease- fire mandates and enter into discussions if it were clear that such a constitutional convention would involve all parties- that those who were prepared to enter into it must commit themselves to being prepared to talk with all the parties who were there. That part of the commitment would be to address all the relationships involved- would it not perhaps be interesting if such a constitutional convention broke through the barrier of meetings between Unionists and this Forum, on the basis that the north/south relations could be seen and explored through a joint meeting of such a constitutional convention after the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation here- that would go even further than the meetings between Unionists and the Irish Government, for it would include all the parties in the North and all the parties in the south exploring the question of how we move forward north and south.

I think that there are a number of possibilities here and indeed there are others around. And it is important for us at this turning point, this crucial juncture, we seize the opportunity, we take advantage of every arrow in the negotiating quiver, that we grab all the reins and strands and bind them together into a Peace Process where all of us can truly be participants, where all of us can truly move forward and where all of us are prepared to give a

little as well as take a little in the service of peace.

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: Mark, would you take a point of information in relation to that? The legislation is not specifically in respect of prior, there is other legislation the 73 legislation which is of course the SDLP did take part in and also the legislation in which the constitutional convention was established in 1975 which again was something that was not such an issue. And I think that one shouldn't also assume that it's purely a matter of the legislation and not other things established, such as the Forum, but it's not an assumption that the prior assembly is the legislation at all.

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: Thank you Madam Chair. I certainly would want to be careful about the currency of the language I use, though I have to say to Mark that given the rows and splits that the discussion of a single currency has caused within Europe I am not sure that trying to find a single currency in language will necessarily be helpful.

But let me pick up the point that Jim raises because there is a fair enough question, why is there such a concentration on the place that Sinn Fein takes, I think it deserves an answer. He says we should be concentrating on establishing or looking towards the establishment of reconciliation and mutual trust in Ireland I agree. He says that it's really not fair that no one has the right to question Sinn Fein's sincerity in this matter, well I have to say that Sinn Fein finds it o.k to question other people's sincerity in the matter, notably perhaps British government and Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party and so on. But let's look at why there is a concentration in this Forum on

the position of Sinn Fein.

In 91 and 92 we had talks involving the Northern Ireland parties except for Sinn Fein and the British and Irish government at that point those talks did not include Sinn Fein because of their position and the IRA campaign which was still continuing, and indeed the position of SDLP leader was people shouldn't be involved in negotiations with guns on the table, under the table an outside the door. And they were very much around at that time.

When those talks ended, and I referred to this earlier on the major preoccupation right up until the end of the 93 was specifically how to find a form of words, an approach, a set of principles which would enable Sinn Fein and the Republican movement to find a way into the talks process. Now, I cannot think they regard it as unfortunate or unsatisfactory that so much time and effort was put into trying to construct an arrangement by which it was possible to move forward towards inclusive talks, a lot of effort went into that. Indeed all the other talks went on hold in order to create that, and indeed this Forum in which we are sitting is actually based on that Downing Street Declaration, that is where it comes from. Despite the fact that we are sitting in this Forum based on the Downing Street Declaration there is only one party here which doesn't accept the declaration on which the Forum is based. A Forum based on a declaration, the purpose of which was to move us away from violence towards all inclusive talks, it is precisely because Sinn Fein has not accepted the basis on which even this Forum is established that people beg the question.

People beg the question because there is a lack of trust and I have to say that when you are saying let's look at establishing

trust, we must be honest and say many people do not trust Sinn Fein and the Republican movement, not to encourage or condone a return to violence should the outcome of any talks not be to their taste. Why is that? It is because when the question of the Downing Street Declaration came up and it was made clear in it that violence was not a way forward, consent was the principle, here was the principle of consents and described it, people were very cheery after 25 years and they said look, tell us is this permanent? At the time I have to say that I tried to make clear in my view we should not get hung up on the semantics and see how the things developed. But precisely because the declaration wasn't accepted and there was not a preparedness to give dependable persuasive reassurances that no matter what would happen in the future that there was not going to be a return to violence, people began to say look let's look for other persuasive reassurances. The question of decommissioning arose because people began to say, look if we go down that road then we will feel a degree of persuasion. That has not proved a particularly fruitful road to date, so today I have mentioned some other possibilities, some other ways in which there could be a persuasive reassurance.

Mr. Trimble has indicated for him there would be some degree of persuasiveness in adopting a post cease fire democratic mandate, others take the view that might be very interesting but would it involve North/South discussions it would obviously have to, the three sets of relationships must be part but, we could negotiation on that issue and try to find a way forward. Maybe that is not the persuasive reassurance, maybe there is another form of persuasive reassurance. I have said, is it possible for Mr. Adams to say maybe at this meeting tomorrow, look we accept that the people of Ireland are going to have to make decisions, everybody

else is making it clear we need referendum in North and South and if the Irish people at the end of the process accept the majority of people in the North and majority of people in the South making a majority, overwhelming, whatever that outcome is not only will we accept it, not only will we regard that as permanent, but we would give no sucker, we would be opposed to anyone who would consider that dissatisfaction with such an outcome could possibly be a form of justification for a return to violence, that there maybe those who won't accept it but they must involve themselves in the democratic process. That has never been said.

What I am simply saying is if you feel surprised that not just one party or two parties but all parties are saying to you look please you don't even accept the basis upon which this Forum is founded, you don't accept the reassurance, the set of principle put in place in order to enable you and your colleagues to move away it, there have been various other possibilities come forward, none of these have proved to be possible from your point of view. Can you find a way of producing persuasive reassurances, and that is what Father Fall asked for, he said the duty is on the Republican movement to persuade Unionist people that this is for real and they are going to stick with it. It is to you and we look tomorrow. We look to tomorrow for you and your colleagues to give those persuasive reassurances in whatever way is persuasive and possible for you, and I think if you could please try to regard other suggestions put forward as not an attempt it make life difficult, but to produce any number of creative and imaginative opportunities, that we can move forward together without pretending that the last 25 years has not actually happened, and that the next 25 years will be other than based in reality, the reality is underlined in the Downing Street Declaration and indeed I have to say, in much of the Framework Document too.

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: I have to say, Madam Chair, I am not happy about a dilution of the process by interventions which give instruction to us in relation to this. I made it clear and I stand over it, that I will be looking to what Mr. Adams says tomorrow and what Mr. McGuinness says tomorrow, I will not be waiting until this time next week to find out how the waters have been able to be muddied in the interim.

The fact of the matter is it not a matter of the whole of the rest of the Forum here coming to a compromise with Sinn Fein, the rest of the Forum have all accepted the Downing Street Declaration, it is not going to be a matter I have to say of everything moving in that particular direction, and I feel I must say that, you know, I have made clear a political position and I do look, whatever your own view of it is in relation to us waiting around to next week, I will be looking tomorrow to see what comes out from Sinn Fein, because I think it is off crucial importance at this time, which they have described as crisis which they described as an end of the Peace Process. And I think it is disturbing if at a point whenever, from a political point of view, clear views have been given that there is a diluting or blurring of that, and I have to say with apologies.