



CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
Legislation and Politics (NI) Sub-Committee

Statement of Priorities

Following a comprehensive round of meetings with the Northern Ireland political parties, and Northern Ireland statutory and other bodies, in early-2003, the Committee issued a Press Release of its findings, found in the detailed report below. The Statement was the basis for much of the Committee's work in 2003/4.

Meeting with the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs

On June 6, 2003, the Committee held a meeting in Church of Ireland House, Belfast, with Mr Brian Cowen TD, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs. The 70-minute meeting included a presentation by the Minister in which he emphasised the urgent need to repair the deficit of trust and confidence in both communities. He expressed the hope for an end to paramilitarism and the delivery of acts of completion, and for growth in trust and confidence between both communities. He said the emphasis must be upon building a new, inclusive, secure and peaceful future for everyone rather than trying to resolve the deep-seated disputes of the past. The Minister was told that the Northern Unionists felt a sense of abandonment by the Republic of Ireland. The Committee stressed to the Minister the need for transparency in the building of trust, which was critically important if Northern Ireland was to enjoy the kind of political stability anticipated in the Belfast Agreement. The Minister was optimistic that pro-Agreement people would be available after the election to re-activate the institutions.

Meeting with Cllr Alex Maskey

In October 2003, a meeting, requested by Sinn Fein, took place at Belfast City Hall between Councillor Alex Maskey, former Lord Mayor of Belfast and Canon Walter Lewis, Committee, Chairman. The meeting focussed on Sinn Fein's interest in a structure of meetings with the Church of Ireland which is not crisis-driven, and on acts of completion by the IRA to persuade the Unionist community that the war is over. Canon Lewis identified a "sympathetic engagement" in the meeting

Meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

On November 11 2003 a meeting was held in Church of Ireland House, Belfast with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy. The meeting coincided with the Armistice Day remembrance. The Secretary of State took part in a short Service of Remembrance.

The Secretary of State talked about his understanding of the political situation in Northern

Ireland in advance of the Assembly elections on November 26. He described himself as an optimist by temperament and did not view the elections and their outcome – whatever that might be – negatively. He observed a seriousness of intent by all parties here to engage in political discussion; and a preference by all parties for devolved self-government rather than direct rule.

Looking back to his days here as a Junior Minister, he pointed out that there had been positive political development - new investment, increased employment, a more relaxed atmosphere for everyone, and people going about their ordinary business. He said that much still needed to be done for areas of deprivation and neglect, and that that will be a priority for the future. He pointed out that there is still some way to go to build up trust and transparency in the political and peace processes.

The Rt. Hon, Paul Murphy made a special point of acknowledging the invaluable work of the Churches in their practical efforts for understanding, dialogue, reconciliation and peace at local level and between the Church leaders.

Lord Clyde Criminal Justice Review Oversight Commissioner – CI Representative

In September 2003, the Committee was asked by the Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Rev RHA Eames, to nominate a Church of Ireland representative to meet Lord Clyde, the Oversight Commissioner for the implementation of the Criminal Justice Review. Mr Ben Stephens, QC, a member of the Committee, was appointed and is part of a Churches' group which meets with Lord Clyde, whose task is to monitor the implementation of the Criminal Justice Review recommendations, and to make comments on how the recommendations, once implemented, are working in practice. The Committee welcomes suggestions of any matters which specifically need to be raised with Lord Clyde.

Draft Betting and Gaming Order – Response

The Archbishops and Hon Secretaries of General Synod asked the Committee to provide a Response to the 'Proposal for a Draft Betting and Gaming (Northern Ireland) Order 2003' from the Department for Social Development and the Department for Employment and learning. The Committee's response in December 2003 was as follows:

'The retention of the legislative status quo which prevents the operation of casinos is particularly welcome. Any change in the law permitting the operation of casinos would represent a substantial shift towards a gambling culture. The relaxation of statutory controls permitting betting on Sundays is a matter of concern. Sunday is an important religious day for worship and rest. The further erosion of Sunday observance is a matter of regret.'

'A Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland' – Response

The Archbishops and Hon Secretaries of General Synod asked the Committee to provide a response to the Pre-Consultation document on 'A Charter of Rights for the Island of Ireland' which was produced jointly by the Human Rights Commissions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee sees value in a Charter of Rights for the Island which is 'Declaratory' and not legislative. The Committee, however, would have problems giving clear support to a Bill of Rights for the Island in the absence of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland and a Bill

of Rights for the Republic of Ireland. It seems reasonable that those two building blocks should be in place before anything can be constructed for the whole island. There is also the question that, if a Charter carries legislative powers, as opposed to being of a purely declaratory – and, therefore, non-legislative – nature, which Court rules on the application of the Charter in specific cases North and South?

Meeting with Sinn Fein

A meeting with Sinn Fein took place on February 6 2004 in Church of Ireland House Belfast. The Sinn Fein representatives were Mr Conor Murphy, MLA for South Armagh and Leader of the Sinn Fein ‘Review’ team at Stormont, and Mr Michael Ferguson, MLA for West Belfast. This was the first in a new series of ongoing meetings with the Northern Ireland political parties which is not crisis-driven.

Regarding the Review of the Assembly and its institutions, the Northern Ireland parties have differing expectations. Sinn Fein hope to see the institutions restored soon.

Sinn Fein made the following points:

- They are committed to conflict resolution, and to ‘the peace process’ which they regard as irreversible.
- They are committed to the success of the ‘Review’.
- They are committed to Irish unity.
- The Sinn Fein leadership has invested much time and effort in communicating the value of the Belfast Agreement to their constituents, resulting in widespread support for it in the republican community.
- They regretted that there had not been a comparable process in the unionist community.
- Direct Rule is not acceptable.

The Committee made the following points:

- There is widespread frustration in the Northern Ireland community – not only among unionists – that the decommissioning of all IRA and Loyalist weapons which, under the Agreement, should have been completed by May 22, 2000, has not yet happened.
- Failure of the IRA to decommission transparently is the key element in the breakdown of trust which has led to the current political impasse.
- The imperative in the Christian faith to love neighbour and enemy should be a significant factor in encouraging both communities to overcome the absence of trust.

It emerged from the meeting that the absence of trust is at the heart of the present political difficulties. People must be convinced not only that the war is over but that all parties to the Agreement are committed to building trust. It is only when these factors are in place that there will be any prospect of the functioning of the institutions of the Belfast Agreement.

The Committee and the Sinn Fein representatives agreed that the exchange of views was important and have agreed to meet again at an early date.

1. Dialogue With Political Parties and Statutory Bodies

Since January 2003, the Committee has met delegations from the Northern Ireland political parties – Ulster Unionist, SDLP, DUP, Sinn Fein, Women’s Coalition, UKUP, Alliance - and from statutory and other bodies – the Policing Board, Parades Commission, Human Rights Commission, Equality Commission, Loyalist Commission, International Commission on Decommissioning and the Community Relations Council.

The meetings have been most informative and constructive in helping us to gain firsthand insight into the thinking of the political parties, and into the work and progress of the statutory and other bodies. We regard the meetings as the start of an ongoing dialogue which, we hope, will be mutually beneficial. We believe it is right for the Church to be engaged with the political process and with public agencies which have direct impact on people’s daily lives.

Christians have a mission to strive for an inclusive community in which nobody feels a victim of discrimination or an outsider.

2. Support for Democratic Inclusive Institutions

We regard the Belfast Agreement (1998) as providing the best available framework for promoting a more inclusive community. We believe that a democratically working Assembly and Executive has the potential to provide effective, devolved Government for all the people of Northern Ireland. It also brings the electorate and politicians into closer contact with each other and makes for enhanced political accountability.

3. Transparency Essential

We encourage all political parties to work for the re-establishment of the suspended institutions and the return of devolved government. We appreciate the concerns which resulted in suspension, and appeal to all parties to demonstrate transparency in their commitment to democracy. The key feature in building an inclusive society in which every person feels valued is trust between people who have been divided. The costly lessons of the divisions of the past point to the need for co-operation, understanding and solidarity for the future - the core building block of which is trust. Mutual trust is critically important if we are to enjoy the kind of political stability anticipated by the Belfast Agreement.

1. Clear Evidence that the War is Over

We are aware that in a society like Northern Ireland, which has experienced three decades of paramilitary violence, trustworthiness must be demonstrated. It is clear that the political process will only operate satisfactorily when people enjoy a secure environment free from violence and the threat of violence. In the spirit of the Belfast Agreement we encourage all paramilitary organisations to demonstrate by word and deed that their wars are over. There is no justification for the existence of paramilitary organisations or paramilitary weapons. This has been stated recurrently by all the Churches in Ireland since the start of the recent Troubles.

In particular, we urge the IRA, as a matter of urgency, and in order to rebuild trust, to declare their war is over and to resume contact with the International Commission on Decommissioning.

We welcome the recently announced commitment of the Loyalist paramilitary organisations to a one-year ceasefire. We encourage the Loyalist organisations to honour this commitment in full: and, further, to make it permanent by disarming, and to find a way forward politically by exclusively peaceful methods.

Street confrontations, intelligence gathering, shipment of arms and the discovery of illegal weapons have served only to deepen mistrust and divisions. Great efforts must be made to repair the damage which has resulted. Truth, integrity and transparency are essential in the task of building a new future together.

2. Welcome for Community Policing

In our judgment, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is a professional police force, whose clear policy is to serve all the people of Northern Ireland. We welcome steps to ensure that the makeup of the PSNI will be reflective of the Northern Ireland community as a whole: and recognise that steady progress has been made in that direction.

We are encouraged that the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the District Policing Partnerships command the support of the political parties: and urge Sinn Féin to take their seats on the policing bodies. We welcome the commitment of PSNI to work closely with the local community, and view that as essential to good policing. We are impressed with the good and mutually beneficial relations between the NI Policing Board, the Oversight Commissioner and the Police Ombudsman.