

# Arms issue at the very heart of democracy

News Letter - 20<sup>th</sup> May 1999

Dear Prime Minister,

You display much effort, determination and commitment in your difficult task as Prime Minister in a complex, ever changing and shrinking world. Your Government has brought freshness to many aspects of politics, both nationally and internationally.

I am very conscious that your party strongly recognises the importance of human rights. In your party document, 'Bringing Rights Home' (February 1997), it stated: "Parliament itself should play a leading role in protecting the rights which are at the heart of a parliamentary democracy."

Your commitment to human rights is most clearly demonstrated in your approach to the Balkan crisis where you have been in the vanguard of an international commitment to human rights.

Since your government places human rights at the heart of its foreign policy, how much greater is its responsibility to ensure that these are honoured within the United Kingdom itself?

Here in Northern Ireland, most people wish to live in peace with their neighbours while recognising the right of those neighbours to be different from a cultural, linguistic, educational or religious perspective.

I believe, as you clearly do, that democrats throughout Europe should accept that the best foundations for peace and justice are laid by effective democratic government and a shared understanding and observance of human rights.

I also believe that we have made real progress in endeavouring to resolve our central problem where community identity and allegiance do not coincide with the State. There are of course other aspects to our situation but they are only facets of this central problem of conflicting national identities.

I believe our problem is soluble but what threatens to make it insoluble is pretending that Northern Ireland is so unique within democratic Europe that it can be tackled only by permitting a fudge between democracy and terrorism.

I firmly believe that The Agreement goes further than any other European settlement of conflicts in reflecting the international principles for the creation of stable political structures. I am mindful of your statement in Belfast on 14<sup>th</sup> May last year when you stated that you believed "most people would be ready to accept even the hardest parts of The Agreement if they had genuine confidence that the paramilitaries were really ready to give up violence for good."

The majority of the Unionist community - if not the whole community - has by a large margin accepted what is for them perhaps the hardest part - prisoner releases - but remains to be convinced that paramilitaries will keep their bargain to end the violence for good.

The Agreement specifies that all parties must be committed “to exclusively democratic and peaceful means” and oppose “any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose.” It adds that Ministers shall “observe the spirit of the Pledge of Office” which includes commitment to non-violence. Most strongly, all participants re-affirmed “their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations”.

My party supports structures that involve all eligible parties participating in democratic government. We agree that Sinn Fein, as the political representative of the Republican movement, has a right to be in the government of Northern Ireland as long as it divorces itself from all violence.

In this context there is no place for ambiguity towards violence or the threat of violence. The right to be in government carries with it the responsibility to demonstrate absolute commitment to peace and democracy.

It is, however, well beyond the universally accepted norms of democracy for a political party to participate in government when its para-military wing has done no more than declare a cease-fire, and retains an undiminished capacity to return to violence.

Our position is not one of Unionism making demands upon Republicanism. Nor is it merely about the implementation of The Agreement. It is much more fundamental than that. It is about an issue that goes to the very heart of democratic values, the protection of democracy against the threat of violence.

I understand your eagerness to make progress on devolution in Northern Ireland. We all share that eagerness. Your deadline of the 30th June reflects a desire for the devolution of power in Northern Ireland to start at the same time as in Scotland and Wales on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1999.

Parity of esteem between traditions is an oft-quoted phrase in Northern Ireland, but what about parity across the United Kingdom? The political representatives of the separatist movement in Scotland are not being given a place in government. However, in Northern Ireland we have gone further than this because we wish to be as inclusive as possible – but within reason.

We have been, are, and will remain committed to universally accepted standards of democracy. I wonder Prime Minister, is it too much to ask that all parties involved in Northern Ireland, and opinion formers, subscribe equally to these standards, and make it clear that all those who have waged a terrorist war for 30 years must demonstrate their commitment to a peaceful future by commencing the process of credible decommissioning now?

**Dermot Nesbitt**