

David Hutchinson Edgar - Scotland's for Peace - 21 September 2011

The Irish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is in some respects in the fortunate position that, unlike our sister organisations in the UK, which have to confront a government committed to the possession of nuclear weapons, we can work collaboratively and cooperatively with the Irish government, as opposition to nuclear weapons has been a constant strand of Irish foreign policy for decades. It was the Irish Foreign Minister of the time, Mr Frank Aiken, who first proposed what became the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (or the NPT), and Ireland was the first country to sign and ratify the Treaty.

Since then, Ireland has remained strongly committed to working to ensure the effective functioning of the NPT and furthering the momentum towards nuclear disarmament, engaging a policy of multilateral diplomacy to this end. In 1998, Ireland hosted the founding meeting of the New Agenda Coalition in the wake of India and Pakistan's nuclear tests and the 1996 opinion of the International Court of Justice that nuclear weapons states had an obligation to disarm. The Coalition played a leading role at the NPT Review conference two years later and in subsequent international negotiations on disarmament, and now comprises Ireland, Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden. At the 2010 NPT Review Conference, Ireland's track record in disarmament diplomacy was recognised in the appointment of the Director of the Disarmament and Non-Proliferation section in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Alison Kelly, as chairperson of the subsidiary committee dealing with the vexed issue of the Middle East. To the surprise of many, particularly given moves at the UN Security Council in the course of the conference by the United States to impose further sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear programme, the conference reached consensus on a plan to move forward the 1995 resolution on the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East.

The weaknesses of the NPT - in particular, its failure to achieve significant progress towards full disarmament, and its inability to deal with countries like India, Pakistan and Israel, which have not signed up to it and have developed nuclear weapons - pose the question for a state like Ireland as to the adequacy of the NPT to bring about nuclear disarmament. For now, the NPT may be the only show in town in terms of an agreed international framework with the goal of nuclear disarmament, but there is rapidly-growing support in Ireland for a Nuclear Weapons Convention as the logical conclusion of what the NPT aims towards. Within political circles, this view has perhaps most prominently been advocated by Michael D. Higgins, President of the Irish Labour Party, and if the latest opinion polls are to be believed, the frontrunner to become the ninth president of Ireland in the presidential election next month. And within civil society, the idea of a nuclear weapons convention is not only backed by Irish CND and other peace organisations, but is gaining strong support from among the churches, the trade union movement and other organisations.

Firm opposition to nuclear weapons in Ireland is part and parcel of an attitude towards militarism in Irish society which is grounded in the principle of military neutrality as one of the bedrocks of Irish foreign and defence policy. Ireland is not a member of NATO. As a neutral country, Ireland does not participate in wars of aggression

overseas, and international engagement by the Irish army is done within the context of UN peacekeeping missions. Such engagement requires an official UN mandate as well as approval by the Irish parliament. Ireland has a relatively small standing army, with less than 10,000 members of the permanent defence forces and military expenditure of about 0.6% of GDP, and the existence of a separate senior Ministry of Defence within the Irish cabinet was abolished following the general election in February this year.

Within this context, the Irish perception of military engagement, of defence commitment, is related not primarily to aggression, but to peacekeeping and international cooperation. Viewing nuclear weapons - and Britain's nuclear arsenal in particular - from this perspective, the utter absurdity of these weapons is pretty much self-evident. There is no situation in which their use seems morally or rationally or strategically justifiable. They are incapable of making any constructive contribution to combating the most significant threats to the security and wellbeing of the people of these islands. The expense involved in their maintenance, protection and potential replacement seems ludicrous. Further, the possibility of an accident or a terrorist attack involving a British nuclear installation throws up the dark shadow of serious health and environmental implications in Ireland. Irish people do not feel the slightest bit less safe in today's world because Ireland does not possess nuclear weapons, but if anything, we feel less safe because our nearest neighbour does possess these weapons.

So speaking from an Irish perspective, I would wish to encourage strongly Scotland's opposition to the UK's retention of its nuclear weapons, whether that opposition is articulated by civil society or by elected public representatives, and I would particularly urge elected representatives to take a lead in this regard. Working towards the creation of a nuclear weapons convention offers the best option, I believe, for bringing about the abolition of nuclear weapons. Scottish commitment to freeing the world - and this corner of it, in particular - from the horrendous threat they pose, will find a strong welcome from your friends and partners in all sections of Irish society.