

LEAVING THE PARAMILITARIES

Introductory Remarks

It seems rather certain that now and again there are people who wish to leave a paramilitary group to which they belong. Several such cases have been drawn to my attention; of people going to America and elsewhere; of people who have managed to leave and yet remain in Northern Ireland without fear (though I suppose that these cases are not all that common); and people who would most probably have been killed were it not for the intervention of former colleagues on their behalf.

The main question is: Is it possible to say something about the process of leaving in a general manner? Are there ways out without humiliation, fear and terror? Is it possible to leave a paramilitary group, not without risk but in any case with human dignity?

1. The Choice Between Romantic and Romanesque

It may well be that the person leaving falls into the romantic pit – ‘I am better than you who remain members are, because I wish to leave this murderous gang! Or: I cannot be a part of this any longer because my conscience forbids it – in fact I am no longer interested in any of it’.

Or the reverse: ‘I am simply afraid that I cannot stand the strain any longer. You are better than I am, being more courageous. I, as a coward, have to leave’.

I suppose that as long as this dichotomy of good and bad is used, violence is very near and fairly easily provoked.

One possibility is to handle the problem from the standpoint that all of us are as good and as bad. When I decide to leave the group it is not because I am better or worse than anyone who remains – it is because I have discovered that I can no longer agree with the ideology of the group (that there are better and worse) is no longer true for me. I am no better than you are, although I leave and you stay. Those of use who have left are no better than they who remain behind. Our ‘side’ is not better and no worse than the ‘other side’. My former assumption or belief, which gave me the freedom of conscience to kill them, is no longer true.

2. The Vertical Transcendence – the External Mediation

One needs a large degree of freedom to arrive at this state of mind and remain in it whenever one is confronted by former comrades and with who one had such a deep involvement. As soon as I come together with them, discussing reasons for change of mind or heart, I am immediately at risk from them, and the danger of being involved again become very much greater. At this point the personal risk tom myself is such that I may be attacked by them for refusing to rejoin, or I may be so fearful of what they can do to me that I resolve to do it to them first.

Thus, when confronted by this situation, one needs that large degree of freedom: One is, in effect, standing before a kind of court, which is prepared (perhaps only in one's own mind) to condemn one to death.

The only possibility that I can see which will allow one this freedom and to retain it is to have a faith or very strong conviction, resting upon a reality, which is outside of and greater than me, about humanity, justice, human dignity or whatever.

3. **The Solidarity**

I suppose that the step of leaving a paramilitary group can only be taken once one has come to the conclusion that there are no good and no bad people in the intrinsic manner. This means a feeling of deep solidarity with all human beings. **THIS WOULD INCLUDE A DEEPSOLIDARITY WITH FORMER COMRADES AS WELL!!**

The consequence of this is that one finds it impossible to betray one's former comrades. The point is not (or at any rate not in the first place) that one does not betray them because one is equally responsible for everything they did up to the time one left. This is, of course true – but not betraying them for this reason is exactly the same as safeguarding oneself. One's fears that one could be killed if one did betray them might be another reason, but a still less valid one.

One cannot betray them, and out of that one may then convincingly say to them – “I will not betray you because I now know that in the frame of mind I am now in, and my recognition that, as you are now, so I was then, I find it impossible to do so”. One's only chance is that, with the freedom one now has, one may convince them also.

I think that there are big questions here about civil justice. It might be that I, leaving the group, am still privy to certain plans to kill people or take other action. In such a case, it might be possible to say: ‘I will never betray you’ and ‘I will warn the people you are endangering’.

In any case there is a great deal of work yet to be done on this.

4. **I Never Come Back**

The last point is that, and it must be made perfectly clear, **ONCE I LEAVE THE PARAMILITARY GROUP I CAN NEVER COME BACK**. Freedom means that it is possible for one to take real decisions. Everything must be totally clear, but this last point especially so.

NB with regard to the Protestant Paramilitary people, there are one or two points, which might usefully be made here.

a) **The Specialist**

The specialist is one who is recruited for his or her special skills in any particular field. There comes a time when a specialist, for one reason or another, may find it necessary to leave, or who may wish to transfer interest to some other aspect of the work (i.e. Politics). Such a specialist does not, in the general rule, find it very difficult to leave because there is non-involvement in anything other than his or her own field, and there would be little contact with the rank and file. (Para.3) above would apply here, I think.

b) **The Converted**

The category of 'Converted' now means a religious conversion – whether this be in prison or whether it be as the result of some horror or act which has pushed that member over the edge. In general, people are skeptical of 'converts' anyway, and usually such conversions are not believed in, to any great degree. However, there is an acute danger in a case such as this for – if pushed far enough – the 'convert' must make a choice between new found obligation to tell the truth and loyalty to former comrades-in-arms. Such a person runs a very real risk of being shot out of hand (just to be on the safe side, as it were). Added to this is that strange compulsion which many converts have to 'confess and unburden themselves – rather like the Ancient Mariner – to anyone who shows the slightest degree of sympathy or understanding. The consensus appears to be '**DANGEROUS BOYS**'. As with the 'born again smoker', the 'born again drinker' and the 'born again sinner' – so with the 'born again terrorist'. It must always be kept in mind that these people, whilst no doubt many of them are honest in their new-found faith, can be of very real danger to themselves as well as to former comrades.

c) **The Reluctant**

There are many folk who, mainly because they need to be part of a group, find themselves members of an organization – not because they believe particularly in its ideology but because all their friends are in it. These are generally classed as 'reluctants'. If spotted in time such people are generally given other work to do which will make them feel useful and valuable. Whether spotted or not the time will come when they wish to leave. How do they go about it?

As in Paragraph 1 above, it may be that they 'crack up'. They are probably in great danger at such a time. However there is a way. All P.M. groups, apart from their membership-at-large, have two other category of person about whom they will be concerned. These are prisoners and the families of prisoners. Most have some kind of prisoners' welfare service, and this requires volunteers to collect money for prisoners' dependants. The 'reluctant' would generally go to his comrades and state that he or she has very strong feelings about these prisoners or their families, and wants to work with and for them in the field of social welfare; such a request for transfer is rarely turned down, since this is not work that many are suited for or capable of. From here, it is a small step to ceasing to be a P.M. altogether and becoming a welfare worker full-time.

d) **The Thinker**

There are many members of organizations who tend to think more about what they are doing and why they are doing it. Such people are often to be found either at the top of such organizations or at the very least in positions of responsibility or command. It seems fairly certain that with such people in charge there is often more discipline enforced and less pressure on the people they believe require their protection. The incidence of criminality as such and 'wildcat' operations is very much reduced by such people, who generally plan their moves well ahead of operational requirement. What happens when the 'thinker' having analysed his situation and the general situation around him, decides that he cannot continue (perhaps because he no longer believes in it) as in Para. 2 above; or because his analysis of the situation tells him that he cannot succeed and that further activity is of no further use? Let us say that he decides, in any event, that the time has come to go. How does he do it?

Being the thinker that he is, he generally sticks close to form and plans his moves well ahead, taking care that he is in full possession of every detail of knowledge he will need. His moves are:

i) He makes sure that he knows everything there is to know about what is going on and who is involved. **KNOWLEDGE IS BOTH POWER AND PROTECTION.** He may be able to bargain with it later on should it be necessary.

(ii) He knows that he cannot leave precipitately because this will immediately give rise to suspicion among his comrades that he has either betrayed them or is about to. Thus, he cannot go to ground. Instead, he must take a step to the side of things, **AND HE MUST HAVE A CREDIBLE REASON FOR DOING SO. HE MUST, IN EFFECT, HAVE A REASON AND NOT AN EXCUSE.**

There are many good reasons he may use. Illness is always a good one, since it is always evident to his comrades that he is unfit for the work. A better one, however, is the illness of a relative or a requirement for him to spend large amounts of his time elsewhere. Whatever his reason he must make it clear to his comrades, and they must be able to accept it. If possible, he should not drop out of sight more often than usual. He uses the time gained to plan further moves.

(iii) He gets busy making friends or cementing friendships, which are already there. He may need these people later on.

(iv) Whenever he is ready to proceed, he goes to his superiors in the organization and explains how he feels, and convinces them that **HE WILL BE OF NO DANGER TO THEM – AND NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THAT HE STILL REGARDS THEM AS COMRADES WHOSE GENERAL BELIEFS COINCIDE WITH HIS STILL.** In a number of cases, this is as far as people have needed to go. To keep a man longer than he wishes to stay is asking for trouble, and generally the assurance that a man will not betray the organization is sufficient.

(v) To stay well within the 'safety margin' he will more than likely decide that he does not sever his ties with the organization at all, he simply ceases to be active, and instead takes up other work which keeps him in touch with things and with his (by now) ex-

comrades. Within a short time they will accept him in his new role, and probably respect him nonetheless for his honesty to them.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

Given everything that has been said above, it is generally recognized that it is possible to leave an organisation with some degree of safety, but there are some points to remember: These are:

These must be absolute and complete honesty between oneself and ones former comrades. This is vital since, not only are they depending upon one to keep faith, the converse applies as well.

In general, members of an organization may forgive a man for changing his mind **ONCE** but never **TWICE!** This would apply to the people as well (see 4) above. In the normal course of events, once a man has left an organization he is not welcome back into it.

The most important point of all to remember is that, once a man has left he is **NEVER ONE HUNDRED PER CENT SAFE**. There is always that change that enemies will try to do him some damage, and so he must never relax his vigilance. At such a time, the information he has and the friends he has made will be of great value, and so he retains and constantly updates the one and cultivates the other as a matter of course.