

January 5, 1961

Seán MacEntee, 'Nuclear Weapons: Proposed Declaration. Statement from the Minister for Health'

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Summary:

Frank Aiken was primarily responsible for originating the non-proliferation concept in 1958. He propelled the campaign with a heavy personal investment of time and energy in it. Although a senior and longstanding member of the Fianna Fáil government, closely aligned with the party's elder statesman Eamon de Valera, his non-proliferation initiative was not immune from senior internal criticism. Seán MacEntee was another Fianna Fáil veteran and occupied the position of Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) from 1959. He formulated a cogent critique of Aiken's non-dissemination designs in January 1961 that foreshadowed later criticisms of the NPT. MacEntee's observations were pertinent to the constitutionalization of nuclear non-proliferation, and posed fundamental questions about national sovereignty, inequality, real politik, and implementation as Aiken entered his fourth year of advocacy for a treaty based on the Irish resolutions. Aiken had encountered such criticisms already and was relatively unperturbed. He overcame this divergent voice in the Cabinet to continue his efforts and persuade the incoming John F Kennedy Administration to support the drive for an NPT later that year.

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS: PROPOSED DECLARATION.Statement from the Minister for Health

- (1) I cannot see that Ireland can gain any true advantage from the course recommended by the Minister for External Affairs. On the contrary I am doubtful of the wisdom of continuing to associate ourselves so prominently with a proposal which many believe is not realistic and is in principle inequitable.
- (2) In theory all member States of the United Nations are equal in status and in rights. The proposal under review is not consistent with this fundamental conception. On the contrary it seeks to divide the member States into two classes and to deny to those in one class a right which is already possessed by the other. Member States within the latter category, being States that have been rich and powerful enough to have developed nuclear weapons and now possess them, will not be touched by the motion. By contrast with these, all other States, mainly the weaker ones, which do not have nuclear weapons already are not to be permitted to have them at all. In other words the proposal accepts and proposes to give effect to the doctrine that might is right.
- (3) Apart from the basic weakness of the proposal, an argument has been used in support of it which I think is unacceptable. It is that if nuclear weapons were to come into the possession of States which do not have such weapons now, there would be a real danger that such States would use the weapons less responsibly than would the powers who are armed with them already. Admittedly it is within the infinite possibilities of the universe that this could happen; but only if the highly-developed nations into whose possession such weapons came were to retrogress until they became as impulsive as, say, the Congolese. The point, of course, is that not only are nuclear weapons most expensive, to purchase and maintain; but it requires highly organised and educated technical skill to assemble them for action and to operate them effectively. In short they are not the sort of weapons that States which are not highly developed economically and technically are likely to possess. Therefore, in substance, the proposal is based on the assumption that those States which do not yet possess nuclear weapons, but have the skill and knowledge which are essential to maintain and use such weapons, are not to be trusted with them, because they would use them less responsibly than Russia, the United States or France. Such an assumption, which cannot be justified from historical experience, is absurd. Indeed it would be more reasonable to contend that Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Belgium et al., if they had such weapons would be much less likely to resort to them than Russia or the United States - not to speak of both Chinas. In essence the proposal put forward by the Minister for External Affairs is based on the contrary view.

/Apart from

(2)

(4) Apart from objections in principle like those recited above, the proposal is unrealistic. Should those great powers which already have nuclear weapons think fit to arm their allies or satellites with them, what power has the resources to deter them from doing so? Now that Great Britain and Germany are about to follow the example of France, United Nations will not find it politic to prevent them. If Red China were to procure nuclear weapons would United Nations be able to prevent India or Pakistan from procuring these also - or indeed would U.N. be justified in trying to do so. It is true that the proposal to restrict the possession of nuclear weapons to those who have them already has received an almost unanimous measure of apparent support. But this in itself is an indication of the cynicism with which it is regarded. It is not believed that the proposal will ever come to anything and so those who might be concerned about it, if they thought otherwise, do not bother to argue it on its merits or to vote against it. I do not think that it will enhance our prestige to continue to press the proposal and I suggest it should be allowed to drop. Whatever usefulness it had as a 'gimmick' to attract attention is rapidly dwindling.

(5) For the reason set out in the foregoing paragraph (4) an important fact of the division on the Irish motion of the 20th December last, and one which the Government should have before it when considering the present proposal, is the list of States which abstained from voting. It is also worthy of note that no European State joined with Ireland in sponsoring the motion, though the smaller powers of Europe are as much concerned and alarmed as Ireland is at the development and dissemination of nuclear weapons. They realise that nuclear weapons have come to stay and must be lived with and that platitudes will not prevent their development.

Seán MacEntee.

5th January, 1961.

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