

Interview with Irish peace facilitator Alec Reid about the Spanish-Basque conflict:

The Irish priest Alec Reid played a major role in the Irish peace process. Most time he remained in the background. His role as a facilitator became publicly known, when in September 2005 Alec Reid and the Methodist minister Rev. Harold Good confirmed, that the IRA had decommissioned their arms with the two church men witnessing the destruction.

For years Reid has been involved in the Basque / Spanish peace efforts. Up to now he remained silently in the background as well. But with the mass arrests of the leadership of the Basque party Batasuna in Segura on October 4th, he decided to appear before the public with his views on the conflict and its resolution. The interview was conducted by two Basque journalists Gari Mujika (GARA) and Xabier Martin (Berria).

Brought up in Ireland in County Tipperary, Reid spent almost 40 years in the Redemptorist Clonard monastery in Belfast. In the late 1980s, Reid facilitated meetings between Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams and SDLP leader John Hume. Reid then acted as their contact person with the Irish Government in Dublin from 1987 up to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

The interview is a translation of the Spanish version, published in GARA (<http://www.gara.net/>).

Reid: *“No one can call Spain a democratic state”*

by Gari Mujika, GARA



Donostia / San Sebastian, October 7, 2007: for several months the Irish priest Alec Reid has not been giving interviews on the failure of setting up a negotiating process in the Basque Country nor has he articulated his opinion publicly. But after yesterdays' arrests of senior leaders of the pro-independence left he appeared in public again. Contrary to his attitude during the ETA ceasefire, this time he criticises the attempts of the Spanish Executive to try to eliminate *“an essential”* party, the pro-independence left, from the equation as *“political madness”*.

The day after the arrests the priest shared his thoughts about the necessary ingredients to a solution of the country's political conflict with (the Basque newspapers) GARA and Berria. From his point of view, the accusations made against members of the leadership of Batasuna after their arrests on Thursday's night *“have been constructed”*, because they are only charged with participating in a meeting or in a demonstration.

“I would have never thought, that something like this could happen anywhere in Europe - except in Turkey - ”, Reid states at the beginning. Such behaviour is an *“abuse of human rights”* and impossible in a democracy. And he is very concerned about the fact, that the representatives of the pro-independence left are being treated *“as criminals”* because of their political activity: *“Something like this would be unthinkable and unacceptable in Ireland or England”*.

Dialog and human rights

“I start to think that no one can call Spain a democratic State, not on the basis of standard definitions of a democratic country”, Reid sharply states. He notices that his opinion will probably not be well received by the Spanish State. He clarifies, anyway, that *“whoever comes to Spain from Ireland, England or Germany, for example, would agree with me”*.

He identifies one of the cultural problems at the very heart - in his opinion – of *“Spanish politics”* and *“perhaps the Basque one too: there is no culture of dialog”*. In addition to that, the Irish priest emphasizes the lack of commitment to human rights.

After the developments of recent months Reid confirms his view that the conflict in the Basque Country is a political conflict, lasting for decades and centuries, and that the existence of ETA is *“proof”* of it. However, the Irish priest is absolutely sure *“that you cannot solve a conflict like this with arms; you cannot do it”*. And he emphasizes his opposition to the use of weapons. *“To solve a conflict like the Basque or the Irish one, you need to have a discussion; a dialog, in which all parties participate. There is no other way”*, he decisively states.

From the Irish experience, in which he played a major role, he concluded that dialog is the *“most powerful”* means to make conflict resolution possible in a *“democratic way”*. Why? For the simple reason that it respects and it accommodates the rights of all participants. Rights. This is what Reid considers to be the roots of conflict: the lack of respect and the violation of democratic rights.

Another lesson from the Irish experience is, that *“any effort of the authorities to end”* a conflict of political nature, *“where people take to the streets, (by using emergency or security measures) fails.”* He mentions in that context the measures against ETA and continues with the acknowledgement, that *“the reality is that you cannot defeat an organization like ETA or the IRA”*.

Reid explains: *“If you do not identify the human rights of all parties and have a program to remove any violation of human rights within the state, you will not solve the problem and you will not get rid of those who use weapons to defend their rights”*.

Right to consent and dissent

The priest bases his statements on the similarities between the Irish reality and the Basque one. And he discusses options to solve the conflict. Reid understands, that the Basque Country is the reflection of the existence of *“an historical, political community with a separate identity”* in conflict with *“another historical, political community with a separate identity”*, the Spanish one. He goes back again to the Irish case. In the North (of Ireland), the conflict existed between the Nationalist community and the Unionist one. The Unionists, in spite of being a minority (in Ireland), have had genuine human rights, emanating from their historical and cultural identity, in this case, the British one. The successful resolution of the Irish conflict is, according to Reid, based on the respect and acceptance of the human rights of Unionists. That actually means, that arrangements, which affect the political life of both communities cannot be carried out without *“the consent”* of Unionists. The major community in Ireland, the Nationalist, recognizes and accepts *“the right of consent”* of the Unionist community.

Extrapolating the Irish case to the Basque Country, Reid understands that *“some people within the Basque community have a cultural, political and historical own identity. And this means that the Basque community has its human rights, which arise from that identity”*. Therefore he stresses, that - like in Ireland - arrangements, which affect the political life of all, cannot be reached without the *“consent”* of the Basque community.

Reid continues with a comment on the duration of the political conflict: *“The conflict started, when the Spanish Constitution was written without recognizing the own human rights of the Basque community”*, which emanates from their cultural, historical and political identity. However, the Spanish Carta Magna recognizes the rights of the Spaniards. Reid comments on this by saying, that the Nationalist community in Ireland would not want an arrangement, in which only their rights are accepted: *“They would think this to be an immoral arrangement.”*

“You cannot organize Spain without respecting the right of the Basques to consent to or dissent from arrangements, which affect them. It is a matter of human rights. And this causes the conflict and has given ETA the reason of its existence”, he adds as a conclusion.

Participation of Batasuna is essential

In Alec Reid's opinion there is only one possibility to solve the Basque conflict: dialog among all the parties.

Commenting on the repressive events, he calls the actions of the Spanish Government *“political madness”* and an error. The Irish priest notices, that Batasuna has significant support in the society and that it is *“an essential”* party at the dialog table. (Batasuna's participation) is essential, because without its presence no agreement, which accommodates the rights of both communities, and no democratic solution will be found.

Reid adds, that *“if the Government wants to remove ETA from the equation of the conflict, the only people, who can do that (to tell ETA to stop) are the leaders of Batasuna.* Nobody else has the power or the influence; only the leaders of Batasuna. Arresting them, as the Spanish Government has done, is political madness; it is madness!”, he insists.

He states: *“All these things are common sense”,* but continues with the clarification, that *“the Spanish Government is not equipped with much common sense”.*

But even in the worst situation Alec Reid points at the positive aspects. And in this case he leaves no doubt about his approval of the political proposals of the pro-independence left. In particular, he mentioned the proposal *“Democratic Frame”,* which was presented during the talks in Pavilion Anaitasuna. He says, this proposal has the capability to bring about a democratic process and that *“not only ETA would stop, but also would lay down its arms, as the IRA did”.*

And he goes even further and argues, that the position maintained by the pro-independence left is the correct one and the necessary one: *“The pro-independence left says, that negotiation is the only way. It is important to have in mind, that - in my opinion - the pro-independence left maintains a very democratic position in this conflict resolution process. And this includes ETA. Because it has the view, that agreement has to be reached among all the parties, and that the agreement has to respect the rights of the Spanish community that lives here too, including the right of consent”.*

With the raid and the arrests in Segura talks are again off the agenda. But Alec Reid knows that the arrests of the leaders of the pro-independence left will not stop, only delay a decisive agreement.

The interview is a translation of the Spanish language version, published in **GARA**. Translation into English language was done by an unknown source and improved by us with limited knowledge of the Spanish language.

The original Spanish and Basque language versions can be found on the internet:

Berria (Basque language version):

http://www.berria.info/testua_ikusi.php?saila=euskalherria&data=2007-10-07&orria=014&kont=007

GARA (Spanish language version):

<http://www.gara.net/paperezkoa/20071007/41898/es/Reid-Uno-no-puede-decir-que-Espana-sea-Estado-democratico>

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