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brief 22

Burying the Hatchet

*The Decommissioning of
Paramilitary Arms
in Northern Ireland*

initiative on conflict resolution and ethnicity

INCORE

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Republican mural in Barcroft Park, Newry, Co. Down (December 2000).
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Kris Brown*

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Preface

Burying the hatchet may become the most tangible symbol that the war is over. The concrete circumstances under which protagonists of civil strife become prepared to “put their arms beyond use” depend on a variety of factors: the history and the political roots of an armed conflict, the cultural heritage of those who have taken up arms, and the means and provisions of the peace settlement. Sometimes, a window of opportunity may be opened from the outside, serving as a catalyst generating a solution for a seemingly intractable situation.

When we started our research on the topic of *Demilitarisation in Northern Ireland—The Role of “Decommissioning” and “Normalisation of Security” in the Peace Process* (DINI) in early 2000, the Belfast Agreement was almost two years old, a promising child in the international arena of conflict settlement that was struggling enormously hard to learn how to walk. The issue of decommissioning paramilitary arms had become the seemingly insurmountable stumbling block on the road to the Agreement’s full implementation. Between the Ulster Unionist position of “no guns, no government” and the Republican stand of “no surrender” no bridge of trust and compromise seemed possible. Interrupted only by short moments of hope—after the review of the Agreement in autumn 1999 and the third party inspections of IRA arms dumps in summer 2000—one serious crisis was followed by another. In autumn 2001, a dangerous mix of a political vacuum at the governmental level and a rise of violence in the streets made a collapse of the whole peace process appear imminent.

The joint project of BICC and INCORE aims to monitor the implementation of the Belfast Agreement and to analyse the governing provisions of the peace accord with

particular emphasis on the role of the domestic and international actors involved. The case study assesses the potential of a satisfactory process of demilitarisation* to foster peace building and prevent further violent conflict in a post-war society. In particular, two relevant sections of the Belfast Agreement lie at the core of our analysis:

- the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms and the (re)integration of related personnel,
- the normalisation of security arrangements and practices, such as the reduction of the numbers and role of the state armed forces, the removal of security installations and the redevelopment of former military areas for civilian needs.

In a comparative attempt we hoped to offer a key set of lessons applicable as a door opener into the Northern Irish impasse, and vice versa, to draw universal lessons from the Northern Irish situation that can benefit comparable international peacemaking and disarmament initiatives.

The scope of this publication was determined by the fact that decommissioning remained the dominant issue throughout the period of research. We hope to continue our research on the other related fields of demilitarisation.

Like many other colleagues working on Northern Ireland, we were often tempted to procrastinate, waiting and hoping for a breakthrough to present a more original and optimistic perspective.

The shattering atrocities of September 11, beyond what any of us could have imagined, created a change in the climate of international relations that induced the Republican movement to make their decisive start to bury the hatchet. On 23 October 2001, the IRA—following the encouragement of

the leadership of Sinn Fein—publicly declared that the organisation had begun to put its arms permanently and verifiably beyond use, and by doing so, significantly contributed to the reinvigoration of the deteriorating peace process. It would go beyond the scope of our analysis and not do any justice to the issue, if we attempted either to draw lessons from Northern Ireland for the “war against terrorism” or vice versa—such ill-advised and careless analogies tend to blur and distort the actual subject matter and the lessons that can be derived from it. The careful reader, though, may find food for thought upon which to base further research.

This comprehensive publication on decommissioning, the first following the breakthrough of 23 October 2001, analyses the reasons that made the arms issue in Northern Ireland such a difficult obstacle for the peace process. We assess the attempts to solve the sensitive arms issue, both the failures and the process of confidence building that provided success.

The recognition that the issue of paramilitary arms carried a symbolic value and weight that went far beyond its military potential, serving as the political foundation upon which both conflicting parties anchored their positions, is one of the most pivotal findings of this research paper.

Part 1 of the brief describes, from the perspective of the various players, how the issue of decommissioning historically originated, developed, and became institutionalised, from the early days of the peace talks in 1993 to the Agreement, and further on to the deep crisis of the summer of 2001. Part 2

* Demilitarisation is the term normally used by BICC in its research covering issues of disarmament, demobilisation and conversion at a national and international level. In the Northern Irish debate, demilitarisation predominantly describes the reduction of state forces and their security installations.

analyses the underlying factors and patterns of the peace process that influenced the way decommissioning was handled: the twin track approach of the Agreement, the role of external involvement, especially of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), and the problem of proliferated violence—in short, the bigger issues behind the small arms.

The process of taking the bullets and the bomb out of Northern Irish politics has only just begun. Our findings are not intended to stir up a recurring political debate that, in the near future, should be pursued in less troubled waters. We intend only to widen the scope of knowledge by which further disarmament and a new cross-sectarian and mutually agreed understanding of security and peace in Northern Ireland can be achieved.

Acknowledgements

Without a series of interviews with stakeholders in the Northern Irish peace process, i.e. relevant personnel from the British and Irish governments and from the Independent International Commission On Decommissioning (IICD), and with representatives from the Assembly parties, spokespersons for paramilitary organisations, community authorities, and civic groups, this research would not have been successful. We want to thank all those who agreed to engage in confidential dialogue that helped to make Belfast a familiar place and allowed us to look behind the infamous walls of sectarianism. A number of excellent resources, virtual and otherwise, are available to research the Northern Irish conflict, including the CAIN Web Service, the Linen Hall Library, and the NEWSHOUND.

Special thanks go to the director of INCORE, Mari Fitzduff whose warm hearted support went far beyond setting up an efficient framework of co-operation; to Roger Mac Ginty, one

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I should also like to thank my colleagues at BICC: Moira Davidson who edited part 1 of the brief; Svenja Bends responsible for the layout, shortly before giving birth to her first child; and Mark Sedra, whose knowledgeable input was enjoyable and useful far beyond the language editing of part 2. All of these individuals made the completion of this publication not only possible but also very presentable while under severe constraints.

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UNU/INCORE, a centre for International Conflict Research, was set up in 1993 by the University of Ulster and the United Nations University to undertake research and policy work that is useful to the resolution of ethnic, political and religious conflicts. Currently, INCORE's research focuses mainly on post conflict issues, issues of governance and diversity, and research methodology in violent societies. UNU/INCORE seeks to inform and influence national and international organisations, including governments and UN agencies working in the field of conflict. While UNU/INCORE's primary focus is on international conflict, it also works with policy makers and organisations in Northern Ireland, addressing issues of conflict in a comparative context.

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Zusammenfassung

German Summary

Das Problem der Abrüstung der paramilitärischen Waffen (*Decommissioning*) hat in den vergangenen vier Jahren seit der Unterzeichnung des Belfast Abkommens zu scheinbar unüberwindlichen Blockaden im nordirischen Friedensprozess geführt. Zwischen den Hauptkonfliktparteien, der protestantischen Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) und der katholisch-republikanischen Sinn Fein, schien kein Kompromiss möglich. Die Frage, wie das Kriegsbeil zu begraben sei (*Burying the hatchet*), entwickelte ein politisch-symbolisches Gewicht jenseits des militärischen Potenzials, an dem beide Seiten grundsätzlich den Erfolg oder Misserfolg des im Friedensprozess Erreichbaren maßen. Keine Regierungsbeteiligung für eine Partei, die mit einer Privatarmee verbunden ist, so die Position der Unionisten, keine Unterwerfung für eine unbesiegte Formation des Bürgerkrieges, so das Credo der Republikaner.

Abgesehen von einigen hoffnungsvollen Momenten - nach der Überprüfung des Abkommens durch US-Senator George Mitchell im Herbst 1999 und der Kontrolle einiger IRA-Waffenlager durch unabhängige Inspektoren im Sommer und Herbst 2000 - folgte Krise auf Krise. Wichtige andere Vorhaben, wie die verstärkte Nord-Süd-Kooperation mit der Republik Irland, eine weitere Entmilitarisierung der Provinz sowie die Justizreform und die Reform der protestantisch dominierten Polizei verzögerten sich.

Der politische Tiefpunkt war im Sommer 2001 erreicht: Bei den Wahlen zum britischen Unterhaus und den nordirischen Kommunalgremien im Juni hatte Sinn Fein die gemäßigte SDLP überrundet und war die stärkste nationalistische Partei geworden, die UUP hatte größere Einbußen an die Abkommensgegner in der DUP hinnehmen müssen. Ein Abrüstungs-

angebot der IRA im August, bestätigt durch die Unabhängige Internationale Abrüstungskommission (IICD), ging der UUP nicht weit genug. Der Erste Minister der nordirischen Regionalregierung, David Trimble (UUP), löste durch seinen Rücktritt am 1. Juli eine schwere Regierungskrise aus. Heftige Gewaltausbrüche, seit Monaten vor allem von protestantisch-loyalistischen paramilitärischen Gruppen provoziert, eskalierten in den gemischt-konfessionellen Arbeitervierteln von Nord-Belfast zu einer Schlacht um die Schulkinder von Ardoyne.

Unter dem Druck der veränderten Weltlage in Folge der Terrorangriffe des 11. September entschloss sich die IRA nach einer Aufforderung durch die Sinn-Fein-Führung, ihr Abrüstungsangebot vom August in die Tat umzusetzen und damit den drohenden Kollaps des Friedensprozesses abzuwenden. Am 23. Oktober erklärte die IRA, dass sie begonnen habe, „ihre Waffen verifizierbar und auf Dauer unbrauchbar zu machen“. Der Schritt der IRA wurde in der internationalen Öffentlichkeit als historischer Durchbruch gewertet; diesmal schuf die offizielle Bestätigung der geheim durchgeführten Aktion durch die Abrüstungskommission ausreichend Vertrauen, um die Unionisten zur Wiederaufnahme der Regierungstätigkeit in Belfast zu bewegen.

Der vorliegende BICC *brief Burying the Hatchet—The Decommissioning of Paramilitary Arms in Northern Ireland*, der im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojektes zur Bedeutung der Entmilitarisierung im nordirischen Friedensprozess entstanden ist, untersucht die Vorgeschichte und die Faktoren, die zu der spezifischen Blockade durch die Waffenfrage geführt haben, die Ursachen für die Beendigung dieser Blockade sowie die Handlungsstrategien und Perspektiven der

internen und externen an der Steuerung dieses Prozesses beteiligten Akteure.

Wir hoffen, dass die in der Studie zusammengefassten Analysen sowohl für die weitere Friedenskonsolidierung in Nordirland als auch in anderen Konfliktregionen von Nutzen sein werden.

■ Nordirland ist ein Beispiel für einen überpolitisierten ethnischen Konflikt mit großem historischen Ballast; die Frage der paramilitärischen Waffen und ihrer Abrüstung erhielt im Zuge des Friedensprozesses einen symbolischen Stellenwert, der weit über das militärische Potenzial der Waffen hinaus ging und in den diametralen politisch-ideologischen Gegensätzen der Hauptkonfliktparteien wurzelte.

■ Diesem Umstand wurde während der Friedensverhandlungen und im Belfast Abkommen zwar durch ein zweigleisiges Vorgehen (*Twin track*) Rechnung getragen, das die politisch-konstitutionellen Aspekte der Übereinkunft von den militärisch-sicherheitspolitischen trennte und die Lösung der letzteren teilweise einer unabhängigen internationalen Abrüstungskommission (IICD) übertrug. Die Waffenfrage sollte so zugänglicher werden („*Fudging*“ *the arms*), wurde aber de facto in die Umsetzungsphase des Abkommens verlagert.

■ Für die Unionisten mag es rückblickend eine fragwürdige politische Taktik gewesen sein, die Waffenproblematik als Veto gegen eine Regierungskoalition mit den Republikanern zu handeln und damit alles auf eine Karte zu setzen, die sie selbst nicht spielen konnten. Für die Republikaner kam mit dem deutlichen Zugewinn an politischer Akzeptanz und demokratischer Legitimation durch die Wahlen die Zeit, den Ballast der Waffen über Bord zu werfen.

■ In einem ideologisierten Konflikt kommt dem Instrument der Vertrauensbildung, der Abrüstung in den Köpfen, eine besondere Bedeutung zu. Das nordirische Beispiel unterstreicht die positive neutralisierende Funktion internationaler Vermittlung in Momenten der politischen Krise, und mehr noch für das sensitive Waffenthema selbst: Die Kontrolle der IRA-Waffenarsenale durch zwei international und in Nordirland anerkannte Inspektoren unter Anwendung eines „Zwei-Schlüssel“-Systems markierte einen innovativen Weg in die Abrüstung ohne größeren Gesichtverlustr. Dass der eigentliche Akt des Unbrauchbarmachens (*Put beyond use*) eines ersten Teils der IRA-Waffen im Oktober 2001 glaubwürdig vermittelt werden konnte, obwohl die Einzelheiten der Methode und des Umfangs der Abrüstung geheim blieben, ist wesentlich der vertrauensbildenden Rolle der unabhängigen Abrüstungskommission unter Leitung des kanadischen Ex-Generals John de Chastelain zu verdanken.

■ Ein weiterer relevanter Faktor war die Veränderung der Verhandlungsstrategie seitens der britischen und irischen Regierung, die in Nordirland in einer ambivalenten Doppelrolle als Moderatoren und Konfliktparteien agieren. Parallel mit dem Beginn der IRA-Waffeninspektionen im Sommer 2000 wurde eine Paketlösung für die weitere Implementierung des Abkommens vorgeschlagen, die die Lösung des *Decommissioning* in den Kontext der anderen sicherheitspolitischen Problemkreise, vor allem der Entmilitarisierung des überdimensionierten staatlichen Sicherheitssektors und der Polizeireform stellte. Damit wurde der einer Konfliktlösung nicht zuträglichem Umgang mit dem

Decommissioning als einer Forderung, die vorrangig und als Vorbedingung die IRA-Abrüstung im Visier hatte, relativiert und Elemente eines gegenseitig akzeptierbaren Sicherheitsverständnisses eingeführt.

■ Auch für Nordirland existiert das Problem, dass nach einem vielversprechenden Abkommen historisch gewachsene Gewaltstrukturen - des für Nordirland typischen *Sectarianism* - als Störfaktor fortwirken bzw. ihre Ausdrucksformen ändern und neu generieren. Die oft rückwärtsge wandte und eindimensionale Debatte über *Decommissioning* ließ wenig politischen Spielraum für das parteienübergreifende Argument, dass die Abrüstung der paramilitärischen Waffen auch ein wichtiger Schritt zur Eindämmung der aktuellen Gewalt ist. Heute gehen mehr als zwei Drittel aller paramilitärischen Aktivitäten vom loyalistischen Lager aus, das bisher keine Bereitschaft zur Abrüstung signalisiert hat; antikatholische Aggressionsakte mischen sich mit Alltagskriminalität wie Drogenhandel und anderen Märkten der Gewalt. Infolge des Schulkonflikts in Nord-Belfast entsteht jedoch eine neue Sensibilität für das Problem, dass eine Friedensdividende insbesondere in den depravierten Teilen der protestantischen Arbeiterviertel noch nicht erkennbar ist.

■ Die politische Integration und Partizipation, die das Belfaster Abkommen für die Republikaner gebracht hat, steht für relevante Teile der Loyalisten noch aus. Soziale und kulturelle Identitäten, die sich in Nordirland auch in der Zugehörigkeit zu den traditionsreichen paramilitärischen Organisationen ausdrücken, sind dabei zu zerbrechen. Der Beginn des *Decommissioning* könnte im weiteren Kontext der Friedenskonsolidierung die Tür öffnen für eine längerfristige Transformation oder Konversion

dieser Strukturen, ein Element der Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Zukunftsgestaltung, das die Kreativität und Sensibilität der nordirischen Politik und Zivilgesellschaft gleichermaßen fordern wird.

Es ist zu hoffen, dass die zu Jahresbeginn im britischen Unterhaus vorgelegte Gesetzesnovelle, die eine Fristverlängerung für das *Decommissioning* bis zum Jahr 2007 vorsieht, dazu beitragen wird, den größten Blockadestein der vergangenen Jahre in weniger angespannter Atmosphäre und im weiteren Kontext des nordirischen Weges zum Frieden zu beseitigen. Optimistisch stimmte die staatsmännische Erklärung von Sinn-Fein-Präsident Gerry Adams vor dem World Economic Forum in New York im Februar diesen Jahres: „Ich glaube nicht, dass wir die Unionisten in ein vereinigtes Irland zwingen können, das nicht ihre Zustimmung findet und ihren Vorstellungen von Sicherheit entspricht.“

1

The History of the Decommissioning Debate



Republican mural in West Belfast (1999). Photo: Corinna Hauswedell



Of Arms and the Men: Origin and Initial Development of the Issue

Introduction

The question of the disarmament of paramilitary organisations proved a considerable block in the developing peace process in the first year following the IRA (Irish Republican Army) ceasefire of August 1994. For the British government and Ulster Unionists, decommissioning of weaponry represented the most concrete assurance that paramilitary organisations had turned away from violence and would henceforth pursue political aims democratically. Without this assurance, all inclusive negotiations involving the political representatives of paramilitary organisations could not take place. For the Irish government, the constitutional Nationalists of the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and the Republicans of Sinn Féin, this assurance amounted to an ill-judged pre-condition to all-party talks and a dangerous impediment in the development of a fragile peace process. Decommissioning was an issue best tackled within negotiations, not an entrance exam to determine suitability.

It might seem that the issue was merely a question of timing and choreography but, in truth, it reflected deep divisions within the two broad views. The demand for decommissioning prior to substantive talks reflected the scepticism and suspicion Unionism felt about Republican intentions, and the British Conservative government was

to remain acutely attuned to these feelings. Disarmament was seen as the logical development of the ideas expressed by both governments—in the Joint Declaration of December 1993—that only parties committed to “exclusively peaceful means” could fully engage in the political process. For Republicans, prior decommissioning represented a belated pre-condition introduced by the British to curry favour with Unionists, so that they might continue to prop up a slim government majority in Westminster. It was also seen as a psychological tactic, the continuation of war by other means, as the British were perceived to be sowing dissent within Nationalist Ireland in an attempt to isolate Sinn Féin. Unionist insistence on decommissioning was seen by Sinn Féin as nothing more than a reactionary fear of constitutional change inherent in a future settlement. The SDLP and Irish government were more muted in their criticism: it was less a case of Albion being perfidious than being somewhat politically illiterate about what really mattered, the need to help a changing Republican movement along the road to peaceful politics; inclusive talks would cement the ceasefire whilst pre-conditions would merely prove self defeating and corrosive.

The Irish government's initial approach

Was decommissioning a reckless pre-condition jammed into the peace process by calculating hands or did it represent a myopic inability to focus on more important goals? Was it a very necessary basis for future negotiations that had been well signposted in advance? Tracking the development of the issue leads to a more nuanced view than any of these positions provide. In fact, the question of disarmament grew into the process at an early stage, albeit fitfully and from unexpected directions. Disarmament was raised as early as May 1993 in a document entitled “Steps Envisaged,” which had been sent to the Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams by the then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Albert Reynolds. The document formed part of a series of clandestine soundings of the Republican movement by the Irish government and stated that, once public confidence in any peace process had been established, “every effort would be made to deal expeditiously” with issues such as prisoner releases and “arms and equipment” in order that “the legacy of the past 20 years and the cost could be put behind [everyone] as quickly as possible” (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 175). At this stage it is unlikely that it was ever intended that disarmament should serve as a pre-condition to negotiation, but it demonstrates that weaponry was factored into the political equation, at an early stage, by the Irish government itself.

Official Irish underlining of the need for disarmament continued around the period of the issuing of the Joint Declaration in December 1993 (Joint Declaration, 1993). The Declaration made no specific reference to paramilitary weaponry but it did open the door to Sinn Féin's involvement in the political process. Paragraph 10 stated that:

“The British and Irish Governments reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the Governments and the political parties on the way ahead.”

Dick Spring, the Irish Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), was quick to put flesh on the bones of that statement in the Irish parliament on the very same day as the Declaration was released. The Irish government was talking about a “permanent cessation of violence” coupled with “the handing up of arms”; there was to be “no equivocation” in the two governments’ opposition to any tactical ceasefire (*Irish Times*, 16 December 1993). The direct linkage between disarmament and fitness to participate in the political process was beginning to develop. This view was echoed by John Bruton, leader of the Fine Gael party and future Taoiseach, who stressed that any cessation must be verified by the visible destruction of weaponry as “people who retain access to large caches of arms . . . could hardly be considered to be normal participants in political dialogue” (*ibid.*). Indeed Spring, under close questioning and just three months before the IRA ceasefire, went so far as to say that it was “not possible” for Sinn Fein to participate in political dialogue without demonstrated disarmament by the IRA (Dail Debates, Irish parliamentary debates, Vol. 443, Col. 1023, 1 June 1994).

The issue of disarmament was also highlighted by Paddy O’Brien, the President of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, who stressed that paramilitary weaponry could not remain “out there to be used by future subversive or criminal groups” regardless of a ceasefire (*Belfast Newsletter*, 30 March 1994). Decommissioning seemed to be firming up within the Irish establishment as a very necessary indicator of peace months before the IRA ceasefire was even called. Public appearances, however, may have proved deceptive. There was a degree of nervousness too within the Irish government about discussion surrounding the handing over of armaments and Dermot Nally, the Secretary to the Government, is reported to have voiced his concern that Republicans would “walk away if we persist with this kind of talk” (Duignan, no date, p. 136).

The issue was indeed a delicate one given that the Irish government’s first priority was to bait the hook sufficiently so that the Republican movement could be slowly reeled towards a ceasefire. Erratic and premature movements, such as open discussion of what would happen to the guns, would simply scare the fish away. This was the view which crystallised when the IRA announced its ceasefire; the question of disarmament was to soften and be seen as an evolving part of the process rather than a verifiable indication of peaceful intent. Writing in late 1995, Reynolds felt that Spring’s interpretation of disarmament was “too hardline and sweeping to be sustained” and he declared that by January 1994 he had come to the conclusion that it was “impracticable and unattainable to seek an ‘advance’ gesture” on disarmament. A disarmament pre-condition would “tip the delicate balance of the debate in the IRA against a ceasefire”; what was achievable was the inclusion of the question within an evolving process providing for “a mutual process of

demilitarisation through confidence building on all sides” (*Irish Times*, 9 December 1995). Disarmament remained “essential to the creation of a totally demilitarised situation and to the consolidation of peace”, but the Irish government felt that giving Republicans “an exam they couldn’t pass” would only lead to the isolation of Sinn Fein from the process and the breakdown of the ceasefire—something which did not fit the game plan (Albert Reynolds in Dail Debates, Vol. 446, Col. 500, 25 October 1994, quoted in Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 349).

A card up the sleeve? The British attitude to disarmament before the ceasefire

As previously stated, in the wake of the ceasefire the British government held to the view that substantive negotiations with Sinn Fein could only occur with prior decommissioning of weaponry. The British government was to constantly reiterate that this had always been their outlook, whilst Republicans have always insisted that it was a belated pre-condition, but a careful tracking of public (and private) statements emanating from the British government leads to a more nuanced view. Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, first flagged the issue of disarmament in October 1993, when he confirmed that any IRA cessation would need to be accompanied by a weapons handover and stated that “nobody would be impressed unless there was some practical action taken to demonstrate that violence was over” (*Irish Times*, 11 October 1993).

There is no doubt that Sinn Fein were fully aware of the flagging of this issue by Mayhew and the wider British government, even after the publication of the Joint Declaration which made no explicit reference to disarmament. Gerry Adams voiced his concerns forthrightly, in January 1994:

Figure 1: Electoral support for Northern Irish political parties, 1996–2001

In percent

Source: Nicholas Whyte, 2001. "Northern Ireland Elections: 7 June 2001." 13 June 2001. Available via www.explorers.whyte.com.

Note: In the 1998 Referendum on the Belfast Agreement, 71.1 percent of the population voted in favour in Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland the figure was 94.4 percent.

	<i>Northern Ireland Forum Election</i>	<i>Westminster General Election</i>	<i>Local Government Elections</i>	<i>Northern Ireland Assembly Election</i>	<i>European Parliament Election</i>	<i>Westminster General Election</i>	<i>Local Government Elections</i>
	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2001</i>
<i>UUP</i>	24.2	32.7	27.9	21.3	17.6	26.8	22.9
<i>SDLP</i>	21.4	24.1	20.6	22.0	28.1	21.0	19.4
<i>DUP</i>	18.8	13.6	15.6	18.0	28.4	22.5	21.4
<i>SF</i>	15.5	16.1	16.9	17.7	17.3	21.7	20.7
<i>ALL</i>	6.5	8.0	6.6	6.5	2.1	3.6	5.1
<i>UKUP</i>	3.7	1.6	0.5	4.5	3.0	1.7	0.6
<i>PUP</i>	3.5	1.4	2.2	2.6	3.3	0.6	1.6
<i>UDP</i>	2.2	-	1.0	1.1	-	-	-
<i>Independents</i>	-	-	3.8	-	-	-	6.6
<i>Others</i>	4.3	2.5	5.4	6.3	0.2	2.1	1.7

- ALL Alliance
- DUP Democratic Unionist Party
- PUP Progressive Unionist Party
- SDLP Social Democratic Labour Party
- SF Sinn Fein
- UDP Ulster Democratic Party
- UKUP United Kingdom Unionist Party
- UUP Ulster Unionist Party

“Mr. Mayhew goes on to say ‘... the exploratory dialogue will be so we can discuss with Sinn Fein how the IRA will hand over their weapons’. So I say to myself: ‘This is what they want. They want the IRA to stop so that Sinn Fein can have the privilege 12 weeks later, having been properly sanitised and come out of quarantine, to have discussions with senior civil servants of how the IRA can hand over their weapons’. And then I hear that reiterated again and again; by Douglas Hurd, by John Major, by Patrick Mayhew” (Irish News, 8 January 1994).

However, even setting aside the fact that there had been no explicit reference to disarmament within the Joint Declaration, the picture is complicated by the absence of any mention of disarmament in the secret communications between the British and Sinn Fein during 1993. The British view was that disarmament was implicit in the secret communication of 5 November 1993 in which it was stated that both sides would “examine the practical consequences of the ending of violence” during exploratory dialogue. For the British, this meant implementing measures to normalise security with the *quid pro quo* that Republicans would move on decommissioning (*Irish Times*, 15 July 1995). The clarification of the Joint Declaration made by the British at Sinn Fein’s request in May 1994, reiterated this need to examine the “practical consequences” of any ceasefire in exploratory dialogue but again made no specific reference to disarmament. Although of necessity vague, it did throw into partial relief the choreography which Britain wished to see in the developing process. A “public and permanent” renunciation of violence, followed by a decontamination period of three months was necessary before entry into exploratory dialogue could take place. These preliminary negotiations would simply be a means to exploring the “basis upon which Sinn Fein would come to be admitted to an inclusive political talks process” (*Irish Times*, 20 May 1994).

Decommissioning had thus ceased to be flagged as an indicator of peaceful intent, but the door had been left open to its inclusion within exploratory dialogue. This clarification by the British hardened and elongated the provisions in paragraph 10 of the Joint Declaration to a degree, but the Irish government, for its part, expressed its satisfaction with the British response to Sinn Fein (Bew and Gillespie, 1996, p. 53). The British government appears then to have been speaking in different tones on different occasions regarding the matter of decommissioning. In the period around the issuing of the Joint Declaration, the necessity of disarmament was publicly voiced, but in private communications with Sinn Fein, omitted. The picture is complicated further by the fact that the British government and Sinn Fein published differing accounts of these contacts. Five months after the Declaration was unveiled, the British publicly clarified their understanding of its provisions, again omitting an explicit reference to disarmament but skilfully leaving the way open to its introduction. It was a card placed up the sleeve, but one that Republicans knew they possessed.

The initial Republican response

Irish Republicans, of course, regarded any suggestion that disarmament might be a necessary test of democratic fitness as anathema. This did not mean that they were altogether shy in discussing the matter in the pre- and immediately post-ceasefire period. However, in their view it was best seen in a much wider context, one of “demilitarisation” and a matter that would be resolved as a part of the process rather than a condition of entry to it. As Adams made clear in the months before the Declaration, he wanted a process to develop that would “see an end to the IRA”, indeed for some time Sinn Fein’s policy had been

“... total demilitarisation. We want to see all the forces in the conflict setting aside their weapons—right now, today. What we’re involved in is an initiative which will hopefully lead to a process. As that develops the various armed forces—crown forces, loyalist, republican—will see fit, at a time of their own choosing to demilitarise” (Belfast Telegraph, 22 October 1993).

In the days following the ceasefire, Adams again reiterated the belief that “there must be a process of demilitarisation” and that the task before the actors was to “create a climate so that all engaged in armed action” would be “demilitarised” (*Irish Times*, 2 September 1994), but he did not see the issue of the handing over of IRA weapons as a “stumbling block on the way to peace” and pointed to the fact that most of the guns in the conflict lay in the hands of the British Army. Martin McGuinness, who was to become Sinn Fein’s leading negotiator in the peace process, expressed optimism that “a total demilitarisation” could be brought about quickly (*Irish Times*, 3 September 1994).

Aside from public pronouncements, Sinn Fein are reported to have given tacit assurances to the Irish government that the issue of weaponry would have to be dealt with and that paramilitary guns would have to be “banjaxed” [destroyed] (Duignan, no date, p. 151). As Albert Reynolds was to recollect in his dealings with Republicans at that time, he was assured that in return for not pressing the matter or prior disarmament, decommissioning “implicitly going beyond the approach of the ‘pike in the thatch’ would be dealt with during the process of reaching a negotiated settlement” (*Irish Times*, 9 December 1995).

Disarmament was clearly a matter that Republicans realised they would have to face up to at some stage in the process, but not one which they believed should be used as a tollbooth supervising entry to political talks.

They had been reassured of this by the Irish government, and although they were aware that Britain had raised the matter of prior decommissioning publicly, there seemed to be a tendency within the Republican movement to view these public statements as mere posturing (Patterson, 1997, p. 264).

Unionist scepticism

Unionists, who were to view disarmament as a most necessary test of paramilitary commitment to peaceful means, proved to be reticent to discuss arms decommissioning in the period before the ceasefire. As one commentator has asserted, disarmament was raised on only a handful of occasions by Unionist politicians in the six months before the IRA cessation (Mac Ginty, 1998, p. 29). This probably reflected Unionist scepticism that a genuine, prolonged ceasefire was ever likely; the matter existed on a hypothetical plane and had not bedded down as a political imperative. The announcement of the ceasefire was to catapult the issue firmly into the Unionist consciousness. Indeed in the week before it came into effect—a period of intense media speculation about the prospects of peace—Reg Empey, a senior figure in the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) asserted that only a handover of weapons would convince Unionists of Republican *bona fides*. Anything less would be “useless” (*Belfast Newsletter*, 23 August 1994).

A need for substance? Unionism and the demand for decommissioning

Unionist reaction to the IRA ceasefire was not one of celebration, instead the mood was one of profound mistrust. According to one Ulster Unionist MP it would be “extremely foolish” to take the ceasefire at face value; the hardline Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) saw it as merely a “cynical piece of peace

propaganda” designed to “blackmail” the British government (*Belfast Newsletter*, 1 September 1994). Ian Paisley, the leader of the DUP, pictured the IRA as “dancing on the graves of Ulster’s dead” whilst James Molyneaux, the Ulster Unionist leader, could only muster the anodyne hope that “everyone [would] be pleased” if the IRA cessation was permanent.

In fact, the taciturn Molyneaux was masking a deep sense of shock and confusion which echoed throughout Unionist political thinking. Writing some years later, Molyneaux expressed the belief that the IRA cessation “started destabilising the whole population in Northern Ireland. It was not an occasion for celebration, quite the opposite” (quoted in the *Independent*, 10 July 1999). As journalist (and former Ulster Unionist insider) Frank Millar observed, Molyneaux’s grand political plan had been to “reverse the assumptions underlying Anglo-Irish policy as it had developed over the preceding twenty years. It foundered on the rock of peace” (*Irish Times*, 29 August 1995). Rather than seeing any sort of decoupling of Irish government involvement in the political process, Unionists now perceived the building of a pan-Nationalist consensus. For all the talk of commitment to exclusively peaceful means, Unionism was less than happy that Sinn Fein’s Mitchell McLaughlin was now calling for the withdrawal of “psychological, political and military support” from Unionists (*Belfast Newsletter*, 1 September 1994); Unionists could also readily recollect a statement by Martin McGuinness at the beginning of the year that “anything short of a withdrawal from Northern Ireland” was “unacceptable” and his assertion that a three-month ceasefire would be “particularly long” (*Sunday Business Post*, 2 January 1994).

It was becoming clear that a rudderless Unionism needed to at least increase its ballast in the uncharted waters of the cessation for fear of being swamped. The dead weight of decommissioned weaponry would prove a valuable

political commodity. Even the Ulster Unionist grandee, John Taylor, whose “gut instinct” was that the ceasefire was “for real” advised only cautious progression while the IRA continued to “retain their means of destruction and killing” (*Belfast Newsletter*, 10 September 1994). In essence, Ulster Unionist thinking was typified by David Trimble, who asserted that the “dismantling of the IRA military machine” was even more important than an absence of violence:

“One has not established a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods if one maintains a secret army. Soon the IRA arsenal must be effectively disposed of or surrendered. . . . The best way of proving that there is a permanent cessation is to give these [weapons] up. Until that happens, no one can honestly say they are confident that there has been a permanent cessation” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 September 1994).

The DUP went further and declaimed that they would “not negotiate with the IRA, with its guns or without them. . . . Sinn Fein’s legitimacy as a political party would not be achieved simply by the hand over of the IRA’s weaponry. The IRA must disband and be no longer in existence” (*Irish Times*, 27 November 1995). In fact, the DUP had “nothing to talk to them about. . . . There is no common ground with them, so even if we were inclined to sit with them it would be a fruitless exercise” (*Irish Times*, 17 July 1995).

For the Ulster Unionists, arms *then* talks remained the political mantra, but several different stratagems were to be grafted onto this central tenet over the coming year. One UUP policy paper sent to the British government in January 1995, proposed the setting up of an international commission to deal with the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. This idea was eventually taken up and evolved into the Mitchell Commission, but, at the time it was presented, it was seen less as a means around the

decommissioning impasse, than as a spotlight which would illuminate Republican intransigence. The paper commented that “being seen to be unwilling to co-operate with US and other international commissioners will portray the IRA as it really is” (*Irish Times*, 7 March 1995).

Unionism often viewed the matter of disarmament in terms of confrontation and pressure to be applied to Republicans; in David Trimble’s view “concessions would merely be pocketed as the IRA proceeded, through violence or the threat of violence, to demand greater concessions” (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995). Confrontational politics was not the sole response of the UUP to the question, however. John Taylor stated that just as the IRA had accepted that they could not win, “Ulster Unionists must accept that the IRA was not beaten” and that consequently movement would be required from both sides (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995).

The Loyalist ceasefire, initiated in October of 1994 also provided Unionism with a new means of approaching the issue. The leading Unionist Chris McGimpsey suggested that Republicans emulate the “no first strike” clause appended to the Loyalist ceasefire in August 1995 as a way of moving the process forward (*Irish Times*, 9 November 1995). Trimble, however, took a somewhat different tack and sought to apply greater leverage against Republicans by publicly calling on Loyalists to

decommission unilaterally and so “deprive the IRA of any possible scintilla of justification for holding on to their weapons” (*Irish Times*, 4 December 1995).

One aspect of the decommissioning question, which perturbed Unionists, was the fact that key discussions were taking place above their heads, which magnified their mistrust. In the Unionist view, Sinn Fein wished only to engage with the British government and hoped that whatever deal could be struck could be foisted on Unionism. The Irish government was perceived as wobbling on the question of guns and “unsure about the solidity of its bottom line” in dealings with Republicans (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995).

A new Unionist stratagem duly emerged in the shape of an elected assembly, the purpose of which would be to discuss future constitutional proposals and help take the peace process forward. Unionists could sit in such an assembly with Republicans and be obliged to respect their new, post ceasefire mandate, although formal interparty talks would still be dependent on disarmament. The benefits to Unionism would be obvious. The process would shift from the unstable high wire of intergovernmental diplomacy to the familiar ground of a local forum, a forum in which Unionists would form the largest bloc and—they assumed—be able to control the pace of events. It was a means of sidelining the question of decommissioning—but to the

Unionists’ benefit; the process could be moved forward “not through the large scale media circus of all party talks, but slowly and quietly one confidence building step at a time. Through the open and transparent forum of an assembly, the traditional fear of a back door sell out could be allayed” (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995). It was not a proposal which inspired Nationalist or Republican confidence. Even the Unionist-inspired notion of a commission to examine the issue was now seen by them to be “lacking credibility” and to be merely a mechanism by which the governments could push “on to the back burner the crucial issue on which they have disagreed, in other words when illegal weapons will be decommissioned”. (*Irish Times*, 18 October 1995, 29 October 1995). What mattered was the slowing down of the political pace and the transferral of the main stage to more familiar local ground.

Testing times: The British insistence on decommissioning

The British government shared the gradualist outlook of Unionism. This may be explained by several factors. Firstly, there is some evidence that the government was initially caught on the hop by the extent of the IRA ceasefire; intelligence information expected only a conditional truce or time-limited ceasefire and not the “complete cessation of military activities” that was proffered. The feeling was one of suspicion rather than optimism; this was clearly a gift horse that required a thorough dental examination (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 329). Secondly, although secret channels of communication had been maintained with Republicans over a number of years, Sinn Fein still remained something of an unknown quantity to the British, particularly in terms of dialogue that would be carried out in the full glare of the media spotlight. As Michael Ancram, the Northern Ireland Office minister stated, dialogue between Sinn Fein and the government



Republican graffiti on the Pantridge Road, Belfast (February 2002). Photo: Jonathan McCormick

was bound to have a “distinctive character” all its own, something which was “inevitable” given their sharply antagonistic history. Since there was no “shared history of debate and negotiation”, dialogue would be a difficult road to traverse and would require a period of tentative exploration (*Irish Times*, 10 May 1995). Finally, and most importantly, there was the need to keep Unionism on board. This may have encompassed a degree of self-preservation on the part of the Conservative British government, as their parliamentary majority was slim and slipping away and Ulster Unionist votes would provide a necessary support. However, it was essentially a matter of keeping Unionists within the process by mirroring many of their concerns. If the peace process was to be kept alive, it would certainly need Ulster Unionists within it, and as Mayhew stated, he was not about to call for round table political talks if it meant there would be “a large number of empty chairs” (*Irish Times*, 5 September 1995).

There are certainly indications that intelligence filtering up to the British government stressed that decommissioning was unlikely to happen and was relatively unimportant in terms of gauging Republicans’ commitment to peace in any case (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, pp. 350–351). This implies that a hard line on disarmament was not an intrinsic imperative within the higher elements of government and the security apparatus. British policy was essentially related to maintaining a Unionist interest in the process by pressuring Republicans on the question of disarmament. For the British government, the process remained brittle while the question of weaponry remained an unsolved part of the peace equation. This fragility had been exacerbated in British eyes by the inability of the Republican movement to categorise their ceasefire as permanent, despite repeated public calls from

the government. Eventually the British made a “working assumption” that the IRA ceasefire was a permanent one (Bew and Gillespie, 1996, p. 74), but the political cost was to be the underlining of the decommissioning issue as a priority.

The ‘Washington 3’ Test

The demand for decommissioning had become most explicit in March 1995 in the form of the Washington Test criteria, announced by Mayhew during a trip to America. This called for a “willingness in principle to disarm progressively”, a practical understanding of the modalities of decommissioning, and the actual decommissioning of some arms as “a tangible confidence building measure and to signal the start of a process” (*Irish Times*, 8 March 1995). The overt packaging of the decommissioning demand in this way made the government’s position easier to defend (Mac Ginty, 1998, p. 34) and impossible to ignore. Whilst Nationalists and Republicans viewed the third part of the test, ‘Washington 3’, as a unilateral pre-condition, for Unionists it represented a capitulation since it necessitated the decommissioning of only some weaponry prior to talks. The British too viewed it as a “concession, a weakening of the government’s position” (*Sunday Tribune*, 10 September 1995), albeit a necessary one.

The issue was now impossible to evade, given the emphatic trumpeting of the Washington criteria, but the dilemma now facing the government was that Republicans were failing to bite at this concessionary hook; instead the British themselves became impaled. Dislodging Washington 3 from their political skin would simply result in further Unionist disenchantment and accusations of governmental weakness.

Similarly, assurances from the British Prime Minister that the advancement to inclusive political negotiations would “accelerate beyond belief” following a symbolic decommissioning fell on deaf

ears (*Irish Times*, 22 September 1995). Even the question of exploratory bilateral negotiations between Sinn Fein and the British government was dogged by the decommissioning issue, as the British insisted on the primacy of disarmament in any discussions, whilst Sinn Fein wanted a wide-ranging exchange of views. Eventually a compromise was reached in the form of a semantic fudge, which allowed Britain to raise decommissioning as the first and separate topic of discussion, after which Sinn Fein could refer to any subject they wished (*Irish Times*, 25 April 1995).

The search for a British-Irish consensus

While this sort of semantic wrangling allowed progress to occur in exploratory dialogue, it seemed that there could be no getting round the blunt terminology of Washington 3. The British view was that Sinn Fein’s disqualification from substantive talks was “self imposed” and there was no enthusiasm for finding a means to help Republicans negotiate their way round the obstacle of prior decommissioning.

The idea that the question of decommissioning could be separated from substantive talks was seen as a dangerous chimera: there was “no twin track process. There [was] only a single track. Some parties are further down that track than others because they have never been associated with violence. Those that have been associated with violence can catch them up if they take off the brakes that they themselves have applied” (*Irish Times*, 21 June 1995). In this view, decommissioning was to be the direct evolutionary leap into political respectability; a more circuitous route, even if it could be started speedily, would simply not do.

However, the British government was not operating in a political vacuum and had to take serious heed of its partner

in the process, the Irish government. An underlying necessity within the process dictated that the two governments must be seen to be moving together in the same direction as much as possible. Any diplomatic impasse in British–Irish relations filtered down into the Northern Irish parties and made progress especially difficult. An Irish resuscitation of the earlier Unionist idea of establishing an international body to examine the question of decommissioning was consequently accepted by the British at the end of June in 1995.

Although Britain may have harboured suspicions that an attempt was being made to side-step the issue by pushing it down a separate track, this was less important than being seen to be moving jointly with the Irish government away from an extended impasse (Finlay, 1998, p. 289). An “almost wholly agreed” deal between the British and Irish governments on the remit of an international body and its connection to the Washington 3 Test, began to emerge in the autumn of 1995 (*Irish Times*, 6 September 1995).

Decommissioning goes international

A commission, to be chaired by the former US Senate leader George Mitchell would be established to deal with paramilitary decommissioning but its remit would be confined to soliciting willingness in principle to decommission and examining the necessary practicalities of carrying that out—in other words Washington 1 and 2. A fudge on Washington 3 was to be agreed in that, although bilaterals and trilaterals between the governments and Sinn Fein could take place, all-party substantive negotiations would only take place when the “appropriate conditions” had been met. However, replacing the blunt criterion of Washington 3 with a vague reference to “appropriate conditions” was not an

effective way of baiting the hook, particularly given that the British government reserved its right to publicly proclaim that prior decommissioning was still a necessary test for Republicans. Peace processes thrive on semantic fudges, but not when they are accompanied by blunt restatements of what was meant to have been fudged.

The British–Irish summit meeting in September, at which a joint agreement on an international commission to deal with decommissioning would have been announced, was cancelled at the last minute by the Irish government after officials ultimately failed to overcome outstanding differences. If the British felt that they could not explicitly retreat from the demand for prior decommissioning for fear of a Unionist evacuation from the process, the Irish had become aware that Republican anxiety about the planned fudge, and Irish compliance in it, could actually jeopardise the ceasefire itself. The shepherds could move no faster than their respective flocks. However, both governments’ need to maintain a progressive working relationship and their desire to court American influence in the process, pushed discussions on the establishment of an international decommissioning body forward.

The idea of a twin track approach

A Joint Communiqué issued a scant two days before President Clinton’s visit to Northern Ireland on 30 November 1995 formally launched the beginning of a twin track process. The main ingredients of the initiative included the “firm aim” of both governments to achieve all-party talks by the end of February 1996; the opening of “intensive preparatory talks” in which all parties would be

invited on equal basis; and the setting up of an international body to conduct an “independent assessment” of the decommissioning issue. The body’s purely advisory brief would include establishing the commitment of paramilitary groups to the principle of decommissioning and working out “a suitable and acceptable method for full and verifiable decommissioning” (*Irish Times*, 29 November 1995). The International Body comprised former US Senator George Mitchell as chairman, the former Prime Minister of Finland, Harri Holkeri, and the former Canadian Chief of the Defence Staff General John de Chastelain. Although a target date for substantive talks had been announced in this package—something which was designed to ameliorate Nationalist and Republican anxiety—the crucial test of Washington 3 remained unaffected by the initiative. As John Major said: “We haven’t changed our position on Washington 3. We won’t be asking the international body to question that position” (ibid.).

The Communiqué was something of a fudge, in that both governments had trumpeted what had never been in dispute between either of them, and had agreed to disagree on the rest. Such was the nature of the process that it was important to be seen to be moving ahead together, even if activity was designed as much to distract attention from obstacles as find a way round them.

British strategy: Picadorism or the creation of room to manoeuvre?

Republican opponents of the British strategy on decommissioning felt that the British had either “no strategy” and were simply operating under “short term” considerations (*An Phoblacht*, 31 August 1995) or were using the issue as a form of psychological warfare to sow confusion within the Republican base (*Irish Times*, 21 April 1995). Even

Michael Oatley, a former controller within the British Secret Intelligence Service who had served as a back door channel to Sinn Fein, felt that the Major government was engaging in “picadorism at its most provocative” in using decommissioning as a barb with which to antagonise Republicanism (*Sunday Times*, 31 October 1999). However, these analyses do not examine British strategy deeply enough. The British government was fully aware that there was a need not to antagonise the Republican base, as Mayhew stated:

“To some extent we have got to help Mr Adams carry with him the people who are reluctant to see a ceasefire, who believe they might be betrayed by the British government. If the hard men say, ‘What did Gerry Adams do, we have called a ceasefire but got nothing sufficient in return?’ Then Mr Adams will take a long walk on a short plank and be replaced by someone much harder” (*Observer*, 8 January 1995).

Of course, reconciling this observation with the need to keep Unionists within the process meant squaring the proverbial circle. In essence, decommissioning was a confidence-building issue and, from early 1995, Unionist confidence in the process, and in Britain, was sorely lacking.

In February the British and Irish governments had launched the Framework document, a broad outline of how they expected a constitutional settlement might look. The perceived nationalist agenda within the document sent Unionism into apoplexy, a fact which initially encouraged Sinn Fein (Bew and Gillespie, 1996, pp. 86–89). In large measure British determination to stick with the Washington 3 test, announced two weeks after the release of the Framework document, can be seen as a means of redressing the balance. Also, British strategy was not working to a speedy timetable; in fact it seems clear that time itself was regarded as an ally in the process. The more prolonged the negotiation in a period of comparative peace, the more

political space might be opened up for movement between the parties.

There is some evidence that the British envisaged that it would take two years to bring all concerned to inclusive, substantive talks with the interim occupied by the downsizing of security and “getting Sinn Fein up to scratch” (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 338). This timescale was not one widely shared by other participants in the peace process, particularly the Irish government.

Softly, softly . . . The Irish government’s approach

A year into the ceasefire, and six months after the introduction of the Washington 3 test, it was becoming apparent that London and Dublin were separated on the question of decommissioning by a wide cultural, psychological and political gap. A general consensus within Nationalist Ireland was that the British were not sufficiently attuned to the complexities of the Irish situation or the particular psychology of the Republican movement (*Irish Times*, 7 September 1995). This was clearly understood by officials within the Irish government itself who felt a keen sense of exasperation at the perceived ham-fistedness of the British government. As one anonymous official stated:

“We were practically on our knees to the British asking them to, for God’s sake, watch the psychology of it. The psychology was very simple on their side: the IRA were in the box and the British pronounced confidently they could never go back to violence again—problem solved. We kept telling them that it wasn’t going to be like that, that there was a psychological dimension and they were getting it wrong, one thing after another. We were dealing with people who genuinely were a bit illiterate in terms of the currency of politics in Ireland. They were very reckless in the weight

they put on the process” (Mallie and McKittrick, 1997, pp. 366–367).

The view of the Fianna Fail-led government, which collapsed at the end of 1994, had certainly been that, although decommissioning was important, it would be “wrong to ask the IRA to surrender its weapons before talks” and that Sinn Fein were right to view the question of arms in terms of “total demilitarisation” (*Irish Times*, 13 December 1994). However, the incoming Fine Gael-led government, with John Bruton as Taoiseach, exhibited a more nuanced view of the decommissioning question. This is hardly surprising given that Fine Gael had always been associated with a virulent anti-Republican stance and were disinclined to automatically project Sinn Fein concerns. Initially, Bruton had stressed the axiomatic line that decommissioning was not the only item on the agenda and that it “shouldn’t be a blocking item for dealing with others” (*Irish Times*, 14 January 1995). But by March 1995, after Britain had formally announced the Washington Test, he was putting subtle pressure on the Republican movement to fully address the matter. Bruton stressed that decommissioning could not be left to the end of the agenda and that it was up to Sinn Fein to “go beyond mere general statements of their willingness to talk about arms some time and to come up with concrete proposals”; such a “gesture” could not be delayed (*Irish Times*, 14 March 1995).

The Taoiseach also called directly on Gerry Adams to use his “tremendous influence” to get the IRA to move on the question of arms, although he underlined the fact that Republicans must take the decision “in their own time, in their own way and with their own modalities” (*Irish Times*, 18 March 1995). Subtle pressing of the need to decommission was applied from different angles by the Irish government; Bruton called on Loyalists to take a “more advanced position” on

decommissioning in the hope that Republicans might follow suit (*Irish Times*, 23 March 1995) and felt that the paramilitaries and their political representatives should make their own proposals to break the impasse “rather than saying it is a matter for the governments to come up with a solution” (*Irish Times*, 21 September 1995). It would be erroneous to presume however that the Irish government were taking a one-sided approach in this phase of the process, as they sought to balance criticism of Republican indolence on the question of arms by stressing that Republicans were “earnest in their commitment to the democratic process” (*Irish Times*, 29 August 1995) and that doubts about Sinn Fein’s intentions were “unjustified” (*Irish Times*, 15 July 1995).

Furthermore, the Irish were all too aware that time was not on the side of peace and that elements within Republicanism were pushing for a harder political line, one which might result in the resumption of violence if the impasse continued. As Fergus Finlay, political adviser to the Irish Tanaiste Dick Spring, observed in a government memorandum, there was an “identity of interest” between the Irish government and Gerry Adams, “unpalatable” as that might be. Adams and the political leadership of Sinn Fein were seen as the most progressive elements within Republicanism and had to be protected from the more hawkish backwoods element within the IRA. The government’s “first priority” had to be movement towards all-party inclusive talks as this was the only way Adams “could win through”.

The proposed body on decommissioning was seen by the Irish as a means of softening the “irreconcilable” positions of both the British and Sinn Fein, by helping them to deal with the matter “in ways that remove it as a precondition, after a period of time and voluntary co-

operation”. In the Irish view, the body represented the best hope of easing pressure and slowly drawing into negotiation all the interested parties; their view of British intent was less benevolent, as they felt that British strategy was short-sighted and its tactics reflexively Machiavellian. Britain could not be allowed to use the body as a lever on Sinn Fein or a means of clouding the issue; rather the conflict-resolution model epitomised by the Irish approach had to be vigorously defended (Finlay, 1998, pp. 291–293). As Spring underlined, the insistence on prior decommissioning “ignores the psychology and motivation of those on both sides in Ireland who have resorted to violence, and the lessons of conflict resolution everywhere”; the key to success lay in “a respected and objective outside agency” which could “authoritatively and credibly” underscore confidence-building assurances (*Irish Times*, 28 September 1995).

The Fine Gael-led government was obviously obliged to weave a meandering course, sometimes pressuring Republicans on disarmament, sometimes responding decisively to their anxieties, as was the case when Bruton cancelled the summit of September 1995. Indeed, at times, this meandering transformed into a sharp veering, for amidst the wreckage of the planned summit the Taoiseach insisted that decommissioning was an “urgent priority” and sent a coded signal that the two governments could do a deal on the matter without ensuring Republicans were on board (*Irish Times*, 8 September 1995). This ‘trimming’ policy by the Irish government was difficult to maintain, particularly as doubts were emerging within Republicanism about the deleterious effect it was having on the hidden bedrock of their ceasefire strategy—the maintenance of pan-Nationalist consensus (*Sunday Tribune*, 10 September 1995).

The government’s difficulties were exacerbated by vocal pressure from Bertie Ahern, the Fianna Fail leader. Ahern called on the Irish government to “shame the British government before the world” over its “absurd and indefensible” insistence on prior decommissioning (*Irish Times*, 28 November 1995) and accused the British of “trying to divide the nationalist consensus, which brought about and has sustained the ceasefire” (*Irish Times*, 7 September 1995). Criticism of this calibre, which resembled much of the thinking of Sinn Fein and came from the largest party in the Irish Republic, was hard to ignore. The Taoiseach’s own view was that “going on the warpath” was a counterproductive strategy within British–Irish relations (*Irish Times*, 15 July 1995).

The Irish government’s ‘trimming’ and positive faith in an international body as a means of softening positions was based on Bruton’s analysis that the present period of the peace process, the movement towards inclusive talks overshadowed by Washington 3, was “inherently more difficult than the earlier phase because it [required] simultaneous movement by a wider range of parties than were needed to make a move at the earlier stage” thus a considerable amount of brokerage was necessary to get the right conditions. “If moves are made by one side, and then not reciprocated, the process could actually go backward. It will not stand still” (*Irish Times*, 8 September 1995).

No surrender: Republican resistance to decommissioning

For Republicans, decommissioning was not simply a strategic difficulty within the peace process but also an historical impossibility. The Republican view was that there was no precedent in Irish history for disarmament by insurgents either voluntarily or under pressure, a view which existed alongside the



Republican graffiti in Andersontown Road, Belfast (1999). Photo: Jonathan McCormick

concern that any handover of arms would be seen as an acknowledgement of the IRA's own "inferiority and illegitimacy" (Schulze and Smith, 1999, pp. 21–22). More specifically, Sinn Fein saw even the very introduction of the decommissioning question in a particularly hostile light. On one level, it was simply a propagandist ploy by the British government to "humiliate" the IRA (*Irish Times*, 21 June 1995), on another, the pre-condition of decommissioning was simply "the ambush up the road", an attempt to protract the process of 'decontamination' of Sinn Fein by a government for whom "negotiation is war by another means" (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 353).

In Adams' view, the British were misusing the peace process "to pursue an IRA surrender—the real purpose of the decommissioning demand and something which the British failed to achieve in 25 years of war" (*Irish Times*, 14 July 1995). Another part of the Republican analysis asserted that the wrangling over decommissioning simply represented "a smokescreen of confusion" under cover of which the

British could drive a wedge between the various components of the Nationalist consensus and once again dictate policy on Northern Ireland (*Irish Times*, 7 September 1995).

This struck a particularly raw nerve, given that the IRA ceasefire had been predicated on the creation and maintenance of a strong consensus between the Irish government, the constitutional Nationalists of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and Sinn Fein (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 381–383).

Another component of the Republican analysis asserted that decommissioning was simply "the latest in a series of technical barriers which the British [had] created to slow or stall the momentum of peace" (*Irish Times*, 14 July 1995). By this reckoning, the British had developed a strategy extending the period of hiatus indefinitely as a means of sapping the political will of Republicanism. Republicans had little understanding of British insistence that Unionist

concerns needed to be addressed via prior decommissioning, and viewed the British position as actually encouraging Unionist intransigence. Sinn Fein speculated that the decommissioning pre-condition represented the victory of the more obscurantist and confrontational elements within the British establishment, in which the most reactionary tendency was the "spook constituency" (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, p. 353), and Republicans were concerned that "military strategists" had now gained control of the agenda (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995). Since the Republican analysis of decommissioning was simply that it represented covert, tactical warfare, they were determined that they should put up the most resilient defence possible.

Republican responses of various kinds

Republicans formulated various responses to the question of disarmament. One of their most insistent was that Sinn Fein was itself an unarmed organisation "neither a conduit nor a proxy for the IRA" (*Guardian*, 16 December 1995) and that it was unfair "that [its] commitment to real peace [had] to undergo some type of test" (*Irish Times*, 14 August 1995). Another Sinn Fein response was to stress that disarmament was a "necessary and achievable objective", indeed after a settlement the disposal of weapons would be a "simple matter", but one that it would be "unrealistic" to deal with outside of inclusive negotiations (*Irish Times*, 30 September 1995, 7 March 1995, 13 March 1995). Yet another tactic involved expanding the issue to include opponents and underlining the fact the IRA were not the only armed organisation in the conflict; what was needed was a process of demilitarisation taking into account the security forces, all paramilitary groups, and the thousands of legally held firearms in Northern Ireland which were mostly in Unionist hands (*Irish*

Times, 13 March 1995, 18 March 1995). Other responses included calling on the Irish government to “face up to” the British on the issue (*Irish Times*, 28 August 1995), appealing to the international community to pressurise Britain and kick start the process (*Irish Times*, 2 October 1995), calling for widespread street protests (*Irish Times*, 17 April 1995), writing off the present British government and waiting for a Labour administration (*Irish Times*, 26 July 1995), and hinting that calls for decommissioning were jeopardising the ceasefire (*Irish Times*, 17 April 1995).

Republicans also mirrored the British tactic of stressing the immutability of their position on decommissioning. Sinn Féin stated that the decommissioning question was “pointless” and that they had “no room to manoeuvre” on the issue; moreover, as Martin McGuinness claimed, even if the IRA surrendered only a tiny percentage of its weaponry, “Believe me when I tell you the communities where we come from would see the IRA as a laughing stock” (*Irish Times*, 17 October 1995, 5 September 1995; *Sunday Independent*, 10 September 1995). The IRA was even more succinct: “The new and unreasonable demand for a hand over of IRA weapons” was “ludicrous” (*Irish Times*, 30 September 1995).

Republican response to the proposed international commission to examine the question of arms was less than exultant. Reaction varied from lukewarm commitments to seriously consider the proposal (*Irish Times*, 28 August 1995) to suspicion that the commission might be used as a device to achieve the surrender of IRA weapons (*Irish Times*, 1 September 1995). Similarly a statement from the IRA after the proposal was formally launched by the two governments stated that “British bad faith and Unionist intransigence have raised a huge question mark over the potential of the twin track approach”; following from this there was to be no “surrender of IRA weapons either through the

front or back door” (*Irish Times*, 8 December 1995).

This reflected a rapidly growing unease within the Republican rank and file, that the peace process was a “sham” and going nowhere (*Irish Times*, 29 August 1995, 28 September 1995). All through the ceasefire, the IRA had maintained its organisational integrity and underlined the fact that it had not left the ‘battlefield’ by conducting ‘punishment’ attacks against alleged criminal elements; in fact the number of ‘punishment’ attacks by Republicans had doubled in the fourteen months after the ceasefire (*Irish Times*, 7 December 1995). Such displays of enduring militancy were no longer sufficient in themselves in a period of decaying Republican confidence, and between April 1995 and January 1996, six alleged drug dealers were killed by the IRA. These actions, it is suggested, resulted from a changing balance of forces within Republicanism (Bew and Gillespie, 1996, pp. 145–146), one which had never been entirely sold on the peace, and which was particularly incensed by the ever-present question of decommissioning.

On the spotlight’s edge: Ulster Loyalism and decommissioning

In contrast, Loyalists carried out fewer ‘punishment’ attacks in the period after the ceasefire than before it. Although they were as insistent as Republicans that it was “naïve” to consider the disposal of weaponry at this stage of the process (*Irish Times*, 14 March 1995), the issue was not such a vexing one for them. Certainly, less pressure seems to have been exerted on them to decommission. In part, this was due to the nature of their own ceasefire, which differed from the IRA’s in a number of ways. Loyalists had publicly expressed “abject and true remorse” to the families of its innocent victims and had also underlined that they would “not initiate a return to war. There

[would] be no first strike” (Bew and Gillespie, 1996, pp. 72–73, 114).

These moves served to deflect criticism and inspire a good degree of confidence in their ceasefire, despite the fact that they had killed more people than Republican groups in the years 1993 and 1994. Loyalists were self-consciously portraying themselves as a strategically reactive force that would only be activated if Republicans returned to war or if there was a sell out by the British government. Given that the upbeat prognosis of Loyalist groups was that the union was safe, this meant that their ceasefire would last as long as the IRA wanted it to. Another Loyalist response to the demand for decommissioning was to simply point the finger at the IRA and state that it was “inconceivable” for Loyalists to decommission whilst there existed a “fully operational, heavily armed Republican war machine intact and refusing to relinquish their arsenals” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 25 August 1995); thus there could be “no movement until Republicans address the fears which exist within [the Loyalist] community” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 3 November 1995).

In one analysis, Loyalists felt less pressured on matters like decommissioning because they were treated differently by the British, who reserved an “evolutionary” and “clinical” approach towards Loyalism that was lacking in their more “emotional” attitude to Republicans (Mallie and McKittrick, 1997, p. 384). Furthermore, Loyalists never subscribed to the Republican view that the Washington 3 test represented diplomatic warfare or Unionist intransigence, but rather understood Unionist concerns about IRA intentions; decommissioning was not seen as political bludgeon but rather a natural, if naïve, reflex. Ultimately, Loyalism preferred to watch the disarmament wrangling from the shadows of the political stage, confident that it was the Republicans, with their superior arsenal, who were caught in the spotlight.

Institutionalisation of Decommissioning, 1996–1998: From the Mitchell Principles to the Agreement

The erosion of pre-conditions

The International Body on Decommissioning, chaired by George Mitchell received submissions from both governments and all of the Northern Irish parties excepting the DUP. Its report at the end of January 1996 concluded that paramilitary organisations would not decommission arms prior to all-party negotiations and suggested the compromise of some decommissioning during the process of substantive negotiations.

This would undoubtedly be a bitter pill for Unionists to swallow but the Commission also recommended that parties to negotiation should affirm their commitment to six principles of democracy and non-violence. These stipulated that the parties should commit themselves to democratic and peaceful means of resolving issues, support the total disarmament of paramilitary organisations, agree that decommissioning should be independently verifiable, renounce the use or threat of force as a means of influencing negotiations, agree to abide

by the terms of any agreement and take effective steps to oppose ‘punishment’ attacks (*Irish Times*, 25 January 1996).

The Unionist idea of an elected convention also received some support as a confidence-building measure, as long as it was “broadly acceptable” within the community. However, the British government rejected the compromise of parallel decommissioning during talks, as the Prime Minister saw no reason why paramilitary groups could not decommission prior to talks, and stated that he would maintain the pressure on them to do so. Instead he suggested the Unionist-sponsored idea of an elective body as a means to enter talks (*Irish Times*, 25 January 1996).

The Republican response to the British position was the ending of the IRA ceasefire in mid-February 1996 with a bomb explosion at Canary Wharf in London, in which two people died. An IRA statement said that the ceasefire had originally been called on the basis of a “clear and unambiguous understanding” that all-party talks would begin rapidly, but that it was now clear that “the surrender or

political defeat of Irish Republicanism was the actual agenda for the tactical engagement by the British government in the Irish peace initiative” (*Irish Times*, 16 February 1996).

In retrospect, and although it represented a severe crisis in the peace process, the ending of the IRA cessation can also be seen to have galvanised activity between the two governments. At the end of February, the governments announced a firm date for all-party talks and made clear that Sinn Fein could attend once the IRA reinstated its ceasefire. No explicit mention of the need for prior decommissioning was made and instead the need for Sinn Fein to sign up to the six Mitchell principles was underlined (See Box A for an excerpt from the Mitchell report). The International Body’s proposals for decommissioning would also need to be addressed at the start of negotiations (*Irish Times*, 29 February 1996). Similarly, when provisional ground rules for negotiations were published in April, the British simply emphasised that a ceasefire would be necessary for Sinn Fein’s inclusion and insisted that decommissioning would not inevitably create a log jam (*Irish Times*, 17 April 1996). John Major expanded on this in May, asserting that he wanted Sinn Fein to be part of negotiations and that its route to this lay in acceptance of the Mitchell principles, an IRA ceasefire, and the early discussion of the decommissioning proposals by all the parties. Crucially, Major stated that agreement on how to take decommissioning forward could be reached “without blocking the negotiations” (*Irish Times*, 16 May 1996).

Talks about talks: Starting the Twin Track

In early June, as multi-party talks were about to begin, the ground rules for negotiation agreed by the governments seemingly pushed the notion of prior decommissioning off the edge of the

horizon; following open plenary discussion of the International Body's proposals and once the chairman of the talks was satisfied of the participants good intent to work towards disarmament, decommissioning would be referred to a subcommittee which would conduct its deliberations in parallel to the rest of the constitutional talks (*Irish Times*, 7 June 1996). This was the fruition of the 'Twin Track' approach.

These actions indicated a considerable departure from the conditions of Washington 3, but although the insistence on prior decommissioning began to fade, like the Cheshire cat, its grin remained hanging in the Republican field of vision. Their suspicion that the Unionists or the British might yet resuscitate the decommissioning obstacle to Sinn Fein's entry proved difficult to erode. The movement away from the need for prior decommissioning on the part of the British government is best explained by four factors. Firstly, the British wanted to entice Republicans back to a ceasefire mode. Secondly, they wanted to be seen to be pushing the process onward, so that pressure would accrue on Republicans on the need for a ceasefire in order to get into talks before they got left behind. In a period of IRA violence, the British also wished to put their relationship with the Irish government on the firmest footing, so as to strengthen the moral authority and leverage of both governments in pressing for a cessation. This entailed a radical toning down of their differences with the Irish on decommissioning. Lastly, in a post-ceasefire period, the discussion of decommissioning became something of an abstract debate with fewer of the pitfalls that would have existed if Sinn Fein had been firmly integrated into the process.

Compromises can be more easily promoted if your opponents are not able to start picking at them because they are in post-ceasefire sackcloth. However, even with Sinn Fein's absence, it took until October for the Northern Irish parties to agree on a

mechanism for allowing progress on decommissioning, effectively pushing it into a strand outside other negotiations (*Irish Times*, 15 October 1996). Republicans however did not feel that they had to restore a ceasefire in order to catch up with snail-like progress. Yet, if the British government was now content, for the moment at least, to let decommissioning slip into the background, this did not mean that it was hesitant in testing the credibility of Republican *bona fides* in other ways.

Prime Minister Major's attention now focused on the sincerity of any future IRA ceasefire and he suggested a rather more gradual phasing of Sinn Fein into the talks process, albeit one which omitted any mention of prior decommissioning. Major described the last ceasefire as a "fake" and whilst asserting that he would welcome a new cessation he was "sceptical about how credible it would be" (*Irish Times*, 29 November 1996). Consequently any ceasefire would have to be accompanied by other confidence-building factors such as no targeting, surveillance or weapons preparation and a declaration by the IRA that the ceasefire was unequivocal "with the stated purpose of the conflict being permanently ended" (*Irish Times*, 29 November 1996). Even then Sinn Fein would first have to engage with the British government in exploratory dialogue about assurances and confidence-building measures, then sign up to the Mitchell Principles, and finally wait until both governments had held consultations with all the parties regarding the structure and time frames of the negotiations before being formally invited into the talks process.

Sinn Fein's response was that the British proposals were nothing more than a "stalling device" and introduced "a whole new raft of pre-conditions" (*Irish Times*, 29 November 1996). The obvious concern of the British had been to bolster Ulster Unionist faith in the process and they had sought to do this by surrounding any future IRA ceasefire with numerous tripwires and phasing Sinn Fein entry into talks. These procedures were unpalatable to

Republicanism; instead Republicans needed political space and a quickening pace, so that they could sell a ceasefire to their grassroots as providing maximum room for manoeuvrability and fast results.

Adams publicly set out the criteria which he believed could secure a renewed ceasefire in February of 1997. At the forefront was the need to remove all pre-conditions to, and in, negotiations. Additionally, a "realistic, indicative timeframe" was the "only way to generate the necessary urgency and momentum towards agreement." Adams singled out the question of decommissioning specifically, since "given its destructive effect, the decommissioning pre-condition needs to be removed and in a way which prevents the erection of this obstacle at some point in the future" (*Irish Times*, 22 February 1997). Crucially however, the Sinn Fein leader acknowledged that the removal of the gun from the political equation was a "clear objective of a lasting peace settlement" and that the "issue of disarmament [needed] to be resolved but without blocking the negotiations" (*Irish Times*, 22 February 1997). This represented an acknowledgement that decommissioning was not going to leave the political agenda and the concern that it should not be used to impede negotiation.

Decommissioning no longer blocked the entrance to negotiation, but Sinn Fein did not want it cluttering up the hallway either; if it could not be thrown out of the building, it could at least be placed in storage. Decommissioning was certainly not going away, in fact the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act came into force in late February of 1997. The act provided a statutory basis for the disposal of paramilitary weaponry, and disallowed forensic examination of decommissioned arms. Whilst an arms handover seemed as far off as ever, legislative action like this nonetheless served to partially reassure Unionists that decommissioning could not be wished away.

A new British government

When a Labour government was elected with an overwhelming majority in May 1997, a new sense of dynamism was quickly injected into the political process. There was no question of Unionist votes having a disproportionate effect in Parliament given Labour's resounding victory, and, consequently, Labour had no need to look over its shoulder when formulating Northern Irish policy. Beyond this, a new administration meant an infusion of new blood, untainted by years of grubbing at the coalface of Northern Irish politics and invigorated by its success at the polls.

Within days, Marjorie Mowlam, the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, visited the province and shifted the tone of the decommissioning debate with

characteristic bluntness. Decommissioning was now "secondary to actually getting people into talks. That is what is important" (*Irish Times*, 10 May 1997). Whilst the Conservative position had moved from prior to parallel decommissioning, it had never been expressed so frankly or succinctly. Furthermore, Mowlam's statement was an emphatic signal that decommissioning would not be allowed to block progress in talks. The pace of progress quickened notwithstanding continued IRA violence. On the 13 June, Tony Blair, the new British Prime Minister sent an aide memoire to Sinn Fein offering the party admittance to the negotiations six weeks after the declaration of a new ceasefire and expressing the desire to see a swift resolution of the decommissioning issue to the satisfaction of all parties (*Irish Times*, 23 June 1997).

The British government also worked speedily with the Irish government in forging a common institutionalised approach to decommissioning, using the Mitchell Report as the cornerstone. In June of 1997, a London–Dublin agreement on decommissioning was presented to the parties at the negotiations. Specifically, the agreement asked the parties to commit in good faith to implement the Mitchell report, including the proposal for decommissioning to occur during talks.

The governments further proposed that decommissioning be made the responsibility of an independent commission working alongside a committee of the "plenary" of the all-party talks. The independent commission would operate in both jurisdictions, be provided with technical and legal advisers and have access to the expertise of Irish and British security forces. The commission would consult with the governments and parties, present proposals for decommissioning schemes and facilitate, observe, monitor and certify decommissioning as required. Two subcommittees of the Plenary, one dealing with decommissioning and the other with confidence-building measures, would report to the Plenary Committee and assist with all aspects of the Mitchell report (see Box A).

These proposals were accepted by the SDLP but rejected by the DUP, and only accepted with reservations by the Ulster Unionists. Gerry Adams stated that the IRA would not hand over any weaponry (Bew and Gillespie, 1999, p. 343). The strategy behind the British and Irish governments approach was simple: prior decommissioning was "simply not a political reality" but the Unionist concern that "the latent threat of the weaponry remaining in the possession of the organisations concerned [would] be used to influence the course of negotiations" was "central and valid" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17 July 1997). The governments attempted to assuage Unionist fears by pointing out that the structure of the

Box A: An excerpt from the Mitchell Report

...

19) To reach an agreed political settlement and to take the gun out of Irish politics, there must be commitment and adherence to fundamental principles of democracy and non-violence. Participants in all-party negotiations should affirm their commitment to such principles.

20) Accordingly, we recommend that the parties to such negotiations affirm their total and absolute commitment:

a) To democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;

b) To the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;

c) To agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission;

d) To renounce for themselves, and to oppose any effort by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations;

e) To agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree; and,

f) To urge that "punishment" killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions.

...

Source: *Report of The International Body on Arms Decommissioning*, 24 January 1996, <http://www2.nio.gov.uk/mitchrpt.htm>.

negotiations made it “impossible for any agreement to be reached without the positive support of parties representing majorities in each main part of the community” and underlined their belief that progress on decommissioning in parallel with substantive political talks would lead to a “benign dynamic” of growing confidence and a mutually acceptable outcome (*Belfast Telegraph*, 17 July 1997).

The British government had already been at work in trying to build Republican trust by effectively removing the decommissioning issue as a possible block in inter-party negotiations. On the 8 July 1997, Blair sent a letter to Martin McGuinness stating his commitment to moving as “rapidly as possible to an agreed political settlement”. “The situation in Northern Ireland means that delay is not acceptable”, he wrote. It was not necessary for the IRA to hand in weaponry in order to keep Sinn Fein in the process as “the only ground for exclusion once a party has joined the negotiations” was a dishonouring of the Mitchell Principles on non-violence (*Irish Times*, 18 July 1997).

IRA ceasefire reinstated

This commitment from the British successfully secured a reinstatement of the IRA ceasefire on the 19 July. Unionism reacted with rage, and the DUP and the smaller United Kingdom Unionist Party withdrew permanently from the talks process. Although unhappy with the governments’ position, the Ulster Unionists took a more pragmatic approach; as one negotiator commented: “The IRA has called a tactical ceasefire, so we should engage in tactical talks” (*Irish Times*, 26 September 1997). The Ulster Unionists thus engaged in only indirect contact with Sinn Fein during the talks in order to insulate themselves from criticism. Despite the lack of decommissioned weaponry, walking away from negotiations was judged to be a risky

venture which would portray Unionism as the spoiler of hopes for peace, and weaken Unionist input. The Union could not be defended “long distance” (*Irish Times*, 26 September 1997).

Sinn Fein duly signed up to the Mitchell Principles on non-violence in September and gained admittance to the talks process. Comforting language for Unionism came in the form of a joint declaration by the British and Irish governments that decommissioning was an “indispensable part of the negotiation”, a phrase which resurfaced in an agreed procedural motion at the all-party talks which opened the way to substantive constitutional negotiations (*Irish Times*, 16 September 1997, 26 September 1997). Yet a substantial question mark hung over Republican intent; the IRA made clear that it would have “problems with sections of the Mitchell Principles” and concluded that “decommissioning on our part would be tantamount to surrender”. To the IRA, questions about disarmament led up a blind alley and smacked of bad faith as “those with a genuine interest in developing a peace process which has the potential for producing a just and lasting peace will have no interest in decommissioning beyond the point where all guns are silent” (*Irish Times*, 12 September 1997).

The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD)

If that was the case, what was to be the point of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), instituted a matter of weeks later? The Commission included commissioners from the same three nations involved in the International Body, General John de Chastelain from

Canada, as Chairman, Brigadier Tauno Nieminen from Finland, and Mr. Andrew Sens from the United States. The IICD had been tasked, in line with the British and Irish Agreement of June, to facilitate the process of the destruction of arms and to liaise with the subcommittee on decommissioning at the negotiations.

It is significant that no clear agreement on the question of decommissioning was reached at the otherwise successfully concluded negotiations. As one commentator has emphasised, the decommissioning issue was not an important focus within the talks proper, indeed it was “submerged in the sub-committees—literally parked” (Mac Ginty, 1998, pp. 40–41). In terms of decommissioning, what the talks participants agreed to was a fudge: the key paragraph relating to decommissioning in the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 simply stated that the negotiators affirmed their commitment to paramilitary disarmament and would use their influence to achieve decommissioning within two years (see Box B for the decommissioning clause in the Agreement). The IICD would however act in support of this and its mandate enabled it, *inter alia*, to consult with the governments, paramilitary representatives and the political parties, present proposals and reports relevant to decommissioning, and monitor and verify the actual decommissioning of weaponry (see Agreement on the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, 26 August 1997 at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dec26897.htm>). Further to this, on 30 June the two decommissioning schemes (as set out in the British and Irish Decommissioning Acts of 1997) came into effect, allowing the disposal of weaponry to be undertaken either by the Commission or by the paramilitaries themselves. The schemes prohibited the forensic examination of armaments, and rendered them inadmissible as evidence in court (*Irish Times*, 30 June 1998). There were no explicit timetables or definite guarantees that disarmament would

Box B: An excerpt from the Agreement

Decommissioning

1. Participants recall their agreement in the Procedural Motion adopted on 24 September 1997 "that the resolution of the decommissioning issue is an indispensable part of the process of negotiation", and also recall the provisions of paragraph 25 of Strand 1 above.
2. They note the progress made by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning and the Governments in developing schemes which can represent a workable basis for achieving the decommissioning of illegally-held arms in the possession of paramilitary groups.
3. All participants accordingly reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. They also confirm their intention to continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and to use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement.
4. The Independent Commission will monitor, review and verify progress on decommissioning of illegal arms, and will report to both Governments at regular intervals.
5. Both Governments will take all necessary steps to facilitate the decommissioning process to include bringing the relevant schemes into force by the end of June.

Source: The Agreement, 1998, <http://www.nio.gov.uk/issues/agreement.htm>

occur but a tentative deadline of the end of May 2000 was established for the completion of decommissioning. Yet the institutionalisation of the decommissioning issue, as represented in the IICD and the subcommittee on decommissioning, had played its part in helping to achieve agreement, if only in the rather negative sense of allowing the matter to be eased out of the line of sight of the talks participants. The two governments, and to a lesser extent Ulster Unionists, could argue that the matter was being given attention, whilst Republicans could take comfort in the fact that the issue had been squirreled away during negotiations and could not be used as a blocking mechanism.

A necessary "fudge"?

At this stage, institutionalisation shed little effective light on how to solve the problem, but it served to sap heat from its discussion. Putting it bluntly, decommissioning was put into cold storage during the substantive negotiations. The rather vague fudge

contained within the Belfast Agreement was the net result; but before the ink was dry on the document, the question of decommissioning began to quickly thaw out.

Although 71 percent of the Northern Irish electorate endorsed the Agreement in a referendum, the absence of decommissioning proved a considerable sticking point for Unionism, alongside the issue of the phased release of paramilitary prisoners. The constitutional provisions of the Agreement, which included the setting up of a devolved power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland, a council for consultation between Northern Irish and Irish ministers, and a consultative forum spanning the British Isles seemed to attract less barbed criticism.

Anti-Agreement Unionists focussed on the more emotive questions of guns and prisoners. The thought of sharing power with Sinn Fein whilst its armed

wing maintained its arsenal was a particularly painful and disconcerting one for even pro-Agreement Unionism.

The British government was immediately aware of Unionist difficulties over decommissioning within the Agreement. Unionism wanted the sanction of expulsion from government to be used against Sinn Fein if the IRA refused to decommission, but the cross-community nature of the Assembly rendered this an improbable tool.

In a letter to David Trimble during the endgame of negotiations, Blair asserted that the "process of decommissioning should begin straight away" and that, if a party was not honouring its commitments in the Agreement, he would take unilateral action to remove them from office if cross-community action failed (Bew and Gillespie, 1999, p. 358). Although again rather vague, the assumption which Unionism was meant to take was that if the IRA did not begin decommissioning, Sinn Fein would pay the price. The trouble was

that this would inflame Nationalist and Republican sentiment; neither was it a provision of the Agreement. Its main purpose was to buy time and placate Unionist feeling before the referenda and elections to an Assembly. Blair sought to further soothe Unionist feeling over the lack of decommissioning by setting up a list of criteria with which to judge the sincerity of paramilitary-linked parties to the Agreement in “an objective, meaningful and verifiable way” (*Irish Times*, 15 May 2000). These included an unequivocal statement that the “so called war is finished”, an end to targeting, surveillance and paramilitary beatings, the “progressive abandonment and dismantling of paramilitary structures”, full cooperation with the IICD and a commitment that no other organisations would be used as proxies for violence (*Irish Times*, 15 May 2000).

Declarations like this bought time for pro-Agreement Unionism, and partially balanced the difficulties Unionists had felt in signing up to an Agreement void of any practical disarmament. What they did not do was bring a structured approach to the solving of the problem. Perhaps one did not appear possible. The IRA did not wish to decommission and felt no pressing need to, as it was not a signatory to the Agreement. On the other hand, Unionists demanded its disarmament.

The genius of the Agreement, indeed of the peace process itself, had lain in the use of vague language which the various parties could mould into their own image, thus allowing both sides to claim victory, or at least honourable compromise. Disarmament is neither an abstract concept nor a woolly form of words, to be endlessly parsed and interpreted. Disarmament exists in the concrete world of gunmetal and cordite, and as such, has proved difficult for the politics of the peace process to digest. Yet upon it rests the success of the Agreement.

British strategies, 1996–1998

During the tenure of the Conservative government, a gradual erosion took place in their insistence on decommissioning prior to negotiations. Indeed the dropping of the pre-condition began to become apparent in late February of 1996. Statements from the government had become even more explicit by November of that year and it seemed clear that prior decommissioning would not be required to gain entry into talks. However, sceptics felt it more accurate to say that the decommissioning pre-condition had simply moved from the entrance way to somewhere behind the front door. Major may have stipulated that the only qualification for entry to negotiations (aside from subscription to the Mitchell Principles) was the unequivocal maintenance of a ceasefire, but it was clear that, within talks, decommissioning would feature prominently and that substantive negotiations could not begin without all-party agreement on the issue.

The British plan was to set up an all-party committee at the negotiations to review the problem of decommissioning, and only when there was agreement on how to take the matter forward could the parties move beyond the opening plenary session. Thus the weapons issue was not to be easily separated from all-party negotiations (*Irish Times*, 18 May 1996). As John Wheeler, the security minister for Northern Ireland stated, the commitment to decommissioning was the most important of the many “keys on the key ring” that would unlock the door to peace (*Irish Times*, 14 June 1996). Major had claimed that decommissioning need not prove a “stumbling block” in negotiations, but it appeared to Republicans that excessive focus would be given to it and that it would soon re-emerge as a blocking mechanism.

The incoming Labour government approached the question of decommissioning with a sense of urgency and flexibility not seen in the previous administration’s handling of the matter. Getting inclusive talks started was seen as the overwhelming priority. This new tone was given a more concrete form as the Labour administration explicitly removed decommissioning as a pre-condition within talks. Decommissioning was certainly to be discussed within the talks but there was to be no requirement for it to occur and this realignment of policy secured a reinstatement of the IRA ceasefire. Rather than being placed as a central focus of the negotiations, the creation of certain structures enabled disarmament to be set to one side.

Institutionalisation of the decommissioning question in the form of the IICD and the subcommittee on decommissioning, allowed the issue to be effectively compressed into a rather lonely fourth strand of the negotiations. Whilst the DUP and the UKUP (United Kingdom Unionist Party) balked at negotiations with Sinn Fein without decommissioning, the institutionalisation of the issue at least provided cover for Ulster Unionists, who could feel reassured that decommissioning was not going to be pushed away for long, given the creation of specific structures to deal with it. The benefits of institutionalisation for Republicans were seen in the compression of the issue into discreet fora, which enabled substantive negotiations to progress without fear of blockage.

At times, the new government would apply pressure to Sinn Fein; Blair warned Republicans that he would move the process ahead without them if they dithered on the calling of a ceasefire (*Irish Times*, 23 June 1997). This threat of being left out in the political cold was applied to Unionists in more surreptitious fashion a few weeks later; it was asserted that the two governments would pursue “rapid

progress to an overall settlement” should the talks process fail. The clear implication was that if Ulster Unionists immobilised the talks over the absence of decommissioning, then a deal would be cut without their input (*Irish Times*, 18 July 1997). Not that Labour was unsympathetic to the Unionist viewpoint. As Mowlam asserted, decommissioning was “not an arbitrary or unreal issue. It is, and always has been, an issue of trust and confidence” (*Irish Times*, 22 July 1997). Having conceded all decommissioning pre-conditions in order to get all-inclusive talks, the Labour government set about promoting the necessity of decommissioning in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement. The strategic balance had now shifted to Unionist concerns, and the need to maintain majority Unionist consent for the accord.

The government was exhibiting a policy of trimming, of shifting the political ballast this way and that in order to maintain an even keel, rather than a structured and progressive problem-solving approach. This may have been the only realistic way forward. Decommissioning remained a highly emotive and symbolic issue within the process, representing deep concerns amongst the protagonists about the nature of the process itself.

Irish strategies, 1996–1998

Initially, the Irish government was uncomfortable with the British government’s stance. Major’s emphasis on an electoral process, and his effective sidelining of the Mitchell Report was seen as a deflection away from the process of negotiations. As Bruton saw it, elections would “accentuate divisions . . . polarise opinions . . . cause diversion away from points of agreement to points of disagreement” (*Irish Times*, 25 January 1996). Furthermore, the Irish Tanaiste, Dick Spring, was chafing at Britain’s handling of Irish officialdom, which he

felt amounted to Machiavellian “divide and conquer” tactics (*Irish Times*, 30 January 1996).

Clearly British–Irish relations, in substance and style, were at a low ebb. However, as we have seen, the ending of the IRA ceasefire galvanised the process a little and put an onus on effective partnership with the British. The Irish government had begun putting together a “package” to convince Republicans to resume their ceasefire little over a week after the IRA’s bombing of Canary Wharf in London, and were stressing the need for inclusivity, timetables and the need to avoid pre-conditions in all negotiations (*Irish Times*, 19 February 1996).

By May, the British–Irish relationship was back on a firm footing, as Major had softened his line on decommissioning, allowing the Irish to apply stronger pressure on Republicanism. Bruton and Spring urged Sinn Féin to “consider their position” given that there was now in place a fixed date for all-party talks and strong assurances from the British, Irish and American governments that decommissioning would not be a block in the negotiations. The clear and subtle implication was that it was now up to Republicans to make a positive move, and that attempts to drive a wedge in the new consensus would be fruitless. Spring also introduced a carrot, in the form of his suggested “fourth strand” option as a means of discussing decommissioning in negotiations. Decommissioning would be isolated from the substantive negotiations, and placed in a separate strand of the talks (*Irish Times*, 17 May 1996).

The murder of the Irish policeman Jerry McCabe, in a bungled IRA robbery, soured the Irish governments relations with Sinn Féin particularly given the latter’s reluctance to condemn the killing, a recalcitrance which Bruton believed was “deeply worrying” (*Irish Independent*, 12 June 1996). Henceforth, the Irish government presented a much tougher

face to Republicanism. This was echoed even by the Fianna Fail opposition party, a party traditionally more sympathetic to Republican ideology. By early 1997, the Fianna Fail leader Bertie Ahern called on the Republican movement to stop blaming the British and face its own responsibilities in building trust; if Sinn Féin did not “make the best of what is on offer”, it would face increasing isolation. Furthermore, he signalled that the next ceasefire had to be unconditional, “real, not a sham”, and that “on-off violence” could not be used as an option whenever blockages arose in the process (*Irish Times*, 24 February 1997).

Bruton went further, choosing to attack the ideological foundations of the Republican movement’s approach to peace. What could remove the decommissioning obstacle, was Republican acceptance of the principle of consent in Northern Ireland, something which would “change the nature of their assumptions about the peace process” away from a “predominantly military mindset” (*Irish Times*, 24 February 1997). Stinging criticism of this nature was designed to underline to Republicans that they would be increasingly isolated from the major political forces within the Irish Republic.

Once the IRA ceasefire had been reinstated, the Irish government naturally took a less confrontational stance. When the IRA omitted the word ‘permanent’ from its new ceasefire declaration in July 1997, Ahern, whose Fianna Fail party had been elected to government in June, fully understood the ideological reasons behind this and refused to make a great deal of it (*Irish Times*, 21 July 1997). This reflected a rather different tone from that exhibited in February.

This sensitivity, designed to nurse a participant along at a crucial period, was not projected solely in one direction. The Fianna Fail government exhibited sensitivity towards Unionist

concerns about decommissioning in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement. Ahern stated that he looked forward to the decommissioning of arms “later in the summer” (*Irish Times*, 13 April 1998) and that decommissioning was “not an issue that was going to go away” (*Irish Times*, 2 May 1998). The Taoiseach added that “parties associated with paramilitary organisations who want to hold executive office have the responsibility to ensure that guns remain silent and out of commission, and that the ceasefires do in fact represent a total and definitive ending of violence” (*Irish Times*, 2 May 1998).

The Irish government—as well as the leaders of the other political parties in the Republic—made repeated calls for the IRA to state, in the clearest possible terms, that the war was over. As Ahern underlined: “People are entitled to an absolute assurance that the conflict is over, that weapons will not be used again either by the parties owning them or allowed to fall in the wrong hands, and that they will be safely and verifiably disposed of” (*Irish Times*, 15 May 1998). This seesawing approach of applying pressure to Republicans, then expressing sensitivity to their ideological contortions, then applying pressure on Republicans again in order to reassure the rather touchy pro-Agreement Unionists, resembled the approach of Britain’s Labour administration, albeit in a slightly more mollified form. Both governments’ actions thus exhibited the same approach to the question of decommissioning in this phase of the process, that of trimming.

Republicanism and decommissioning, 1996–1998

One of Sinn Fein’s most comprehensive treatments of the decommissioning question was given in

their submission to the Mitchell commission in January 1996. In many ways it was a rather Janus-faced document pointing at once to the old rigidities and also to new possibilities. The demand for decommissioning was castigated as a “stalling device and a bogus argument created by the British to avoid the commencement of all party talks”; a disarmament gesture would “symbolise an IRA surrender” something which was “hardly a reasonable or justifiable demand” and would “ignore nationalist fears of a repeat of 1969.” Even the distinction between paramilitary and security force weapons was held to be mischievous as “this distinction between legal and illegal is subjective, dubious, lacks moral credibility and is particularly insulting to the many victims of Britain’s ‘legal’ violence”. There were however substantial chinks of light piercing some of the old certainties. The document noted repeatedly that the issue of arms “must be settled to everyone’s satisfaction” and asserted that, given the right political scenario, the actual modalities of decommissioning could be agreed “in a matter of hours”. Sinn Fein also asserted the belief that “in any democratic society all guns must come under democratic authority and control” (*Irish Times*, 11 January 1996).

Republicans accused the British of turning an objective of the peace process—disarmament as a natural consequence of a peace settlement which removed the causes of conflict—into a Machiavellian obstacle to progress. In their view, Republicans had already made the one real piece of progress in taking the gun out of politics by securing the IRA ceasefire; “the big achievement has been to silence the weapons so that a negotiated settlement can be achieved and as part of this that those who have weapons will be persuaded to dispose of them” (*Irish Times*, 11 January 1996). Thus, the ball was not in their court. This attitude was hardened by Major’s treatment of the Mitchell report which Adams accused him of having “effectively dumped” (*Irish Times*, 25

January 1996); the Republican belief was that Britain had deliberately taken the process “off at a tangent” in order to forestall progress (*Irish Times*, 27 January 1996).

Old shibboleths were quick to return to Republican tongues; the analysis of British policy on decommissioning was simply that it was being formulated by “slow learners” and a “particular mindset within a certain clique of the British establishment” besotted with memories of empire (*Irish Times*, 19 February 1996). The decommissioning obstacle was a Machiavellian ploy to “micro manage” the conflict, to reduce the pace of change so that it could be more easily regulated from London. Indeed, it was a plot to wear down Republicanism utterly by continually playing for time. As Adams said:

“Mr Major and his advisers calculated that if the peace process was stretched and stretched and stretched the IRA would find it impossible to go back to war. In other words the IRA would be defeated. The British would then only have to make the minimal changes necessary to underpin this ‘new’ situation” (*Irish Times*, 15 October 1996).

Barbed language like this represented a defensive strategy, it served to rally the troops during a period of low momentum in the process and sought to deflect criticism of the IRA’s renewed, if sporadic campaign. The IRA was even stonier in its utterances. They refused to “leave nationalist areas defenceless this side of a final settlement” and promised “no surrender of IRA weapons under any circumstances and to anyone. Disarmament of all the armed groups is only viable as part of a negotiated settlement and nobody knows that better than the British. We will accept no pre-condition whatsoever” (*An Phoblacht*, 7 March 1996). At least a

glimmer of light was visible in that disarmament after a settlement had not been ruled out, but the strategy remained one of holding fast.

Linking decommissioning, demilitarisation and security sector reform

When the new Labour administration effectively dropped any decommissioning pre-condition relating to negotiations, the scene was set for a more measured consideration of the question of disarmament by Republicans. During the political negotiations, Sinn Fein submitted the document *Rendering Weapons Obsolete*. Whilst blaming ‘securocrats’ and Unionists for introducing decommissioning as a stalling device and means of psychological warfare, the document nevertheless underlined that “a clear and absolute objective of a lasting peace settlement is the removal forever of the gun from the political equation in Ireland. This is an absolute requirement” (Sinn Fein, 1997, p. 4).

Republicans, however, sought to broaden the issue of disarmament out into the question of the “demilitarisation of a society which is highly militarised”. This meant that there had to be agreement on the withdrawal of troops, the creation of a new unarmed police service, criminal law reform, a review of legally held weapons amongst the general population, the release of paramilitary prisoners, and an investigation into alleged collusion between the security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries (ibid., pp. 4–8).

This negotiating linkage had several benefits. It reassured the Republican grassroots that fundamental concerns would be articulated; it attempted to shift the harsh spotlight of decommissioning away from Sinn Fein by widening the focus of debate, and it

provided a shopping list of possible concessions that might be traded for moves towards disarmament by the IRA. Whilst Sinn Fein’s participation in the talks allowed for a more positive approach to the question of decommissioning, particularly given the fact that the issue was effectively parked away from the substantive constitutional negotiations, problems arose which would prohibit Republican room for manoeuvre on the issue of disarmament in the future.

A number of sceptics within Sinn Fein and the IRA balked at the former’s endorsement of the Mitchell Principles on non-violence and the general trend of the process which they saw as leading inexorably to Republican disarmament and a partitionist settlement (*Irish Times*, 7 November 1997, 12 November 1997; *Irish Independent*, 6 November 1997). Although the IRA had stated that it had “problems with sections of the Mitchell Principles” (*Irish Times*, 12 September 1997) and Martin McGuinness had declared that Sinn Fein’s agenda in the negotiations was to “smash the Union” (*Irish Times*, 7 October 1997), dissent was clearly beginning to develop within Republicanism.

Whilst admitting that the negotiations would not lead directly to Irish unification, Gerry Adams underwrote the Republican credentials of Sinn Fein’s negotiating position by asserting that the “bottom line” included powerful cross-border institutions operating independently of any local assembly, the total disbandment of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), policing and the courts coming under the control of cross-border institutions, and the maintenance of the territorial claim to Northern Ireland within the Irish constitution (*Ireland on Sunday*, 8 March 1998).

The problem for Sinn Fein was that not one of these minimum demands was met in the Belfast Agreement. At a special conference, 96 percent of Sinn

Fein delegates backed the Belfast Agreement, and even though it was stressed by the leadership that it was regarded as a transitional arrangement (*Irish Times*, 11 May 1998), this represented a divestment of much of Republican principle, particularly with regard to recognition of a Northern Ireland Assembly. With much of traditional Republican rhetoric and principle unravelling, there remained little leeway for compromise on decommissioning.

In fact, retention of IRA weaponry may have served as a useful political fig leaf, a badge showing continued revolutionary legitimacy and continuity with the past, whilst many of Republicanism’s tenets were quietly mothballed. For example, an IRA statement noted that, whilst the Agreement was a “significant development”, it fell short of presenting a basis for a lasting settlement and made it clear that “there will be no decommissioning by the IRA” (*Irish Times*, 1 May 1998). Yet, at the same time, it was reported that the IRA had voted at a special convention to allow Sinn Fein members to take their seats in a Northern Irish Assembly, a move which overturned an historic and strongly held abstentionist policy (*Irish Times*, 2 May 1998). It now seemed that Republicanism was moving towards a de facto recognition of the principle of consent. Unsurprisingly, decommissioning remained a prickly subject for Republicans in the period after the signing of the Agreement, especially since the British government had begun underlining—by the Blair letter and other means—the necessity of disarmament in an attempt to settle wavering Unionists. Adams asserted that although Sinn Fein would work towards removing the gun from politics, the IRA had made it clear that they would not surrender their guns to anyone. Sinn Fein was not the IRA and was armed only with its mandate. Consequently, “efforts to resurrect the issue of decommissioning as a means

of undermining the rights of voters or this party is a nonsense (sic)" (*Irish Times*, 11 May 1998). Adams also insinuated that the IRA's weapons had already been "taken out of commission" by having been placed in dumps (*Irish News*, 21 May 1998). Alex Maskey, a leading member of Sinn Fein, poured cold water on any hopes of a start to disarmament by disbelieving that "anyone on the island of Ireland expects decommissioning to begin by any organisation" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 25 May 1998). However, a piece of political kite flying was undertaken by an unexpected Republican source in June. Padraic Wilson, the IRA's leader in the Maze Prison, believed that "a voluntary decommissioning would be a natural development of the peace process" if the Agreement was properly implemented and being seen to work (*Financial Times*, 17 June 1998).

Perhaps the retention of weapons was still a useful, steadying influence within Republicanism at a time of difficult political shifts, but a signal was being sent that the prospect of disarmament could be used as a spur to the speedy implementation of the Agreement and as a means of extracting possible future concessions. Weaponry provided a form of security blanket, an assurance of continuity, but it could also be used as currency, an incentive to ensure change.

Appointing a Sinn Fein representative to the IICD

A chink of light had appeared in the debate, one which widened in September 1998, when Martin McGuinness was appointed as Sinn Fein's representative to the IICD. McGuinness, however, was not officially representing the IRA, a move designed both to insulate Sinn Fein from connection with the IRA, and the IRA from undue pressure to decommission. At the same time Adams, in an important statement,

asserted Sinn Fein's commitment to "exclusively peaceful and democratic means Sinn Fein believe the violence we have seen must be for all of us now a thing of the past, over, done with and gone" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2 September 1998). This was widely seen as the closest Republicans would come to saying that the war was over.

The timing of these last events was important. Just a fortnight before, 29 people had died in Omagh as a result of a bomb attack by Republican dissidents, the Real IRA. Such was the universal outcry against these Republican militants that pro-Agreement Republicans naturally sought to put as much distance between themselves and the taint of militarism as was politically practical.

Actual decommissioning by the IRA remained a far off prospect. It was reported that an IRA convention had decided in December that the conditions for decommissioning did not yet exist (*Belfast Telegraph*, 8 December 1998). The following month, an IRA statement voiced "growing frustration" at Unionist attempts to resurrect the "old pre-conditions" of decommissioning. Unionism was simply engaged in the "politics of domination and inequality" in blocking the speedy implementation of the Agreement, in particular the devolution of the power-sharing Executive, with decommissioning merely serving as a useful excuse. Consequently, Unionist demands had to be "faced down" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 7 January 1999). Clearly, the IRA was not about to compromise on this issue. The effect on Unionists was deeply unsettling; they took the IRA statement to be a threat to return to war.

Unionism and Loyalism, 1996–1998

Ulster Unionism's reaction to the Mitchell Commission's report had been lacklustre to say the least. Whilst Trimble viewed it as "worthy of consideration", his essential judgement of it was that it changed nothing and that it had "simply reaffirmed" the

UUP's belief in elections as the only way forward (*Irish Times*, 25 January 1996). This dismissive attitude was spawned by a continuing distrust of Republicanism's real intent and was reinforced by the weak Conservative government's reliance on Unionist votes in Westminster. Even after elections, the UUP would only enter into what amounted to exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein; substantive negotiations would only sprout from a weapons handover by the IRA (*Belfast Newsletter*, 2 February 1996).

However, the end of the IRA ceasefire curiously softened, rather than hardened, the UUP stance on the Mitchell compromise. Trimble stated that "Mitchell is the thing"; that adherence in word and deed to the Mitchell Report summed up his conditions for negotiating with Sinn Fein and that if Ulster Unionists had "reasonable commitments" on the idea of parallel decommissioning then they could move in that direction (*Irish News*, 1 March 1996).

Indeed, Unionism was fighting a war of position; whilst mollifying their position on parallel decommissioning, they vigorously protected their flank by attempting to move the British government beyond its requirement for the reinstatement of the 1994 ceasefire as the initial stepping stone for Sinn Fein's entry into talks. The ceasefire criteria would have to be stepped up. As one source disclosed: "If we haven't received a redefinition of ceasefire in such a way that keeps Sinn Fein out, then our position [on decommissioning] is as was" (*Irish Times*, 16 October 1996).

All the while of course, the position remained that it would take the physical handover of munitions before the UUP could engage in substantive negotiations with Republicans (*Irish Times*, 25 June 1997). When Sinn Fein

Box C: Paramilitary groups

Irish Republican Army (IRA)

Also known as the *Provisional IRA* or *Provos*. The Provisional IRA was established in 1970 following a split in the IRA into two competing factions, the leftist Official IRA and the more traditionalist Provisionals. Thereafter, the title IRA became synonymous with the Provisional IRA. It quickly became the largest of the Republican paramilitary groups and prosecuted a campaign of violence in Northern Ireland that lasted over 25 years. There have been a number of IRA ceasefires including the cessation from August 1994 to February 1996 and the ceasefire called in July 1997, which still held at the time of writing. Sinn Fein are acknowledged as the political wing of the IRA. The IRA is held responsible for over 1,700 deaths.

Irish National Liberation Army (INLA)

The INLA was set up in 1975 as the military wing of the tiny Irish Republican Socialist Party. Its initial strength came mainly from ex-Official IRA members angry at the latter's ceasefire of 1972, but it was also believed to have gained recruits from the Provisionals. The INLA has been riddled with internal and bloody feuding throughout its history. This group has been responsible for approximately 125 deaths. The INLA called a ceasefire in August 1998, which still holds.

Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA)

This splinter group first emerged in 1996 and is also known as the *Continuity Army Council*. The CIRA is opposed to the Provisional IRA's ceasefire and Republican engagement in the peace process. It has been linked to the political party Republican Sinn Fein, which broke away from Provisional Sinn Fein in 1986 when the latter voted to end abstention from the Irish parliament,

Dail Eireann. It has been responsible for a series of attacks although none have as yet resulted in fatalities. It is not on ceasefire.

'Real' Irish Republican Army (RIRA)

This dissident splinter group primarily emerged from the Provisional ceasefire of 1997, and Sinn Fein's signing of the Mitchell principles and the Belfast Agreement. It is composed of those who see the Provisional engagement in the peace process as a sell out of Republican principle. The 32 County Sovereignty Committee is widely seen as the political group close to the thinking of the 'Real' IRA. In August 1998, the 'Real' IRA bombed the town of Omagh killing 29 civilians. This attack, coming so soon after the signing of the Agreement, caused widespread revulsion. Unprecedented popular pressure, backed by threats from the Provisionals, forced the 'Real' IRA to call a ceasefire in September of that year. Although the 'Real' IRA has not formally broken its ceasefire, it has been implicated in a number of attacks in recent times and has leached some support away from the Provisionals.

Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)

The modern Ulster Volunteer Force was formed in 1966, mainly by ex-servicemen, and in opposition to the growth of a more liberal Unionism. A much smaller paramilitary group, *Red Hand Commando*, has been closely associated with the UVF for some years. The UVF has close political links with the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) which currently holds two seats in the Assembly. The UVF declared a ceasefire in October 1994. It has been responsible for over 500 deaths in the conflict.

Ulster Defence Association (UDA)/Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF)

The UDA was founded in September 1971 as an amalgam of various Loyalist vigilante and defence groups. The

UDA is the largest of the Loyalist paramilitary groups and in the early 1970s could boast a membership of 40,000 although its current active membership is now a small fraction of this. The party most closely associated with the UDA is the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) which is not electorally represented. The UDA/UFF declared a ceasefire along with the UVF under the auspices of the Combined Loyalist Military Command in October 1994. Although the UDA and UVF have cooperated in the past, they have also engaged in violent feuding. The UDA/UFF has been responsible for over 400 deaths.

Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF)

This small group originated from dissident members of the mid-Ulster UVF who were expelled from the latter organisation in 1996. The LVF opposed the peace process but called a ceasefire in May 1998 and urged people to vote 'no' in the referendum on the Belfast Agreement. It then made statements in June and August 1998 declaring its ceasefire to be unequivocal and that its war was now over. It decommissioned a small amount of weaponry the following December. It has killed more than a dozen people.

Orange Volunteers/Red Hand Defenders

Two other dissident groups, the Orange Volunteers and the Red Hand Defenders, emerged in 1998. They are believed to be composed of disgruntled members of the main paramilitary groups unhappy with the peace process. Both groups are small, and their membership may overlap. These dissidents have engaged in sporadic attacks on Nationalists and their homes.

Sources: Dunn and Dawson, 2000; Elliott and Flackes, 1999; McKittrick, 2000

were allowed into the talks process, without the obligation of decommissioning of any sort, Unionist rage was palpable. Vociferous attacks were made upon both the British government and Sinn Fein. Ken Maginnis, the UUP's security spokesman, lamented the fact that, after the UUP had "most reluctantly accepted" the Mitchell compromise, the government felt secure enough to elevate "an evil Mafia" to the conference table by "sleight of hand" (*Irish Times*, 24 September 1997). Trimble called for the expulsion of Sinn Fein from the talks after the IRA announced that it had difficulties with the Mitchell Principles, a move which he described as a "contemptible little trick" (*Irish Times*, 12 September 1997).

Similarly, the Unionist leader took delight at the SDLP's support for the principle of consent in the talks and Sinn Fein's objection. This marked "the start of the process of the marginalisation of Sinn Fein and the break up of the pan-nationalist front" (*Irish Times*, 25 September 1997). This rhetoric reflected more bark than bite. Sinn Fein had gained entry into the talks despite Unionism's insistence on decommissioning; yet Ulster Unionists could not bring themselves to walk out of the process, a move which would brand them as spoilers and cost them influence with the two governments. Consequently, there was a need to insulate themselves from the criticism of Unionists fervently opposed to the process. Engaging Sinn Fein only through proximity talks was one means, another was to adopt the most vocally confrontational stance against Republicans. Such criticism could only intensify following the signing of the Agreement, especially since Republicans did not hand in weaponry even after the negotiations and endorsement of the Agreement in referenda north and south of the border.

The UUP took a firm line on the question of forming an executive with Sinn Fein in their manifesto released shortly before the elections to the new Assembly. For Sinn Fein to take up

their ministerial posts, there would have to be a statement that the war was over, an end to punishment beatings, the progressive dismantling of paramilitary structures, and complete disarmament within two years (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 June 1998). The Unionists were compromising in the short term, but issuing a costly post-dated cheque that would have to be cashed in the near future. By projecting strict terms into the future, pro-Agreement Unionists were playing for time against those who opposed the deal in the here and now. It was a tactic which would be resurrected through the next phase of the process.

Loyalist dealings with the IICD

Whilst both the PUP (Progressive Unionist Party) and UDP (Ulster Democratic Party) had signed up to the Mitchell principles, developments within Loyalism pointed to a mixed attitude to decommissioning. On the one hand, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) were quick to appoint the PUP's Billy Hutchinson as their direct liaison with the IICD (*Belfast Telegraph*, 25 May 1998). Both the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and UVF fully supported the Belfast Agreement whilst even the extremist splinter group, the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), declared a ceasefire. In December 1998, this latter group actually handed in a small number of munitions to the IICD; the first and so far only act of voluntary decommissioning (*Belfast Telegraph*, 18 December 1998). This move was prompted more by short term considerations than any commitment to a process of disarmament; in particular the need to secure the early release of their prisoners.

UDA/UDP electorally unrepresented

Movement sometimes appeared likely from the largest Loyalist group. John White of the Ulster Democratic Party

(UDP) stated that he would recommend that the UDA should make the first move on disarmament and so pressurise Republicans to follow suit (*Belfast Telegraph*, 21 June 1998). But there were certain indications of a more complex picture. Firstly, the UDA did not appoint a liaison to the IICD and it seemed unlikely that they would begin the process of disarmament. In fact, several months before the Agreement, the UDA had broken its ceasefire in retaliation for the assassination of the Loyalist Volunteer Force leader Billy Wright. They had a reputation as the most volatile of the two main Loyalist paramilitary groups, a volatility that proved difficult to assuage given that the UDP failed to gain a single seat at the Assembly elections. Even those linked to the UVF ultimately felt that decommissioning was unlikely to happen even in a benign scenario. As Billy Hutchinson said, "if the IRA decommission that doesn't mean the UVF will. It's not in the UVF's interests to decommission. It's in the UVF's interests to ensure that Loyalist areas remain protected" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 10 October 1998).

Loyalist decommissioning seemed a long way off, set somewhere in the hazy distance. A message from the UVF Command Staff stated that "the Ulster Volunteer Force will retain their weaponry, regardless of political expediency, until such times as the people of Ulster are guaranteed a future safe from the despotism of armed Irish Republicans" (*Combat*, December 1998). There were to be no olive branches. As Gerry Kelly, a leading Sinn Fein negotiator and long-time adversary of Loyalism would say, the Belfast Agreement was a "contract between opponents" (*An Phoblacht*, 15 April 1998); behind its words lay mistrust, not a sense of partnership or reconciliation. How would decommissioning be resolved against this backdrop?

Guns and Government, 1999–2000: Disarmament and Difficulties in Implementing the Agreement

The Hillsborough Declaration, March and April 1999

An agreement had been reached, but serious question marks hung over its implementation. Ulster Unionists refused to form an executive power-sharing government with Sinn Féin while Republicans held on to their weapons. Republicans saw this demand for decommissioning as an ill-disguised attempt to discard their mandate and exclude them from government at all costs. In their eyes, the functioning of the Belfast Agreement was too important to be barricaded by the demand for weaponry—instead the prospects for decommissioning would only be enhanced by a speedy implementation of the accord. In any case, as Sinn Féin constantly insisted, they could not be held accountable for the actions of the IRA. Similarly, there remained little movement from Loyalists on the issue. The SDLP, meanwhile, steered a middle course through the negotiating gymnastics. Decommissioning was an obligation of

the Agreement and not a prerequisite of its functioning. This view frustrated those Unionists who sought to use the weight of constitutional nationalism as a lever against Republicanism. From the beginning of the year, decommissioning dominated the political agenda. It seemed at first that a very firm line was being taken on the issue by the British and Irish administrations, one of no guns, no government. As Bertie Ahern stated:

“Our view is that decommissioning in one form or another has to happen. I am on record in recent weeks and months as saying that it is not compatible with being part of a government – I mean part of an executive—that there is not at least a commencement of decommissioning. . . . That is what we need to achieve” (*Sunday Times*, 14 February 1999).

This emphatic line from the Irish government both reflected and encouraged the Unionist analysis. Unionism believed that if dealing with weapons was a problem then that implied a lack of genuine commitment to the Agreement on the part of Republicans (*Irish Times*, 22 March 1999, 30 March 1999). Republicans, for their part, believed Unionism to be

working to a purely exclusionist agenda, using decommissioning as a hook to trip Sinn Féin up; the issue of disarmament probed deep into the Republican psyche and the question remained “fundamental and theological” (*Irish Times*, 10 April 1999). The disarmament of the IRA whilst Ireland remained partitioned simply cut against the grain of Republican principle. Despite these deep-seated difficulties, the mood of the governments was to spur the process on.

A joint statement by the British, Irish and American governments served as a prospective pep talk, pointing to the gains made since the signing of the Agreement and encouraging the full implementation of all its aspects (*Irish Times*, 19 March 1999). The feeling, certainly within the Irish government, was that any “parking or stalling” of the Agreement would simply be “reversing” (*Irish Times*, 18 March 1999). Seamus Mallon of the SDLP felt that momentum could be regained by the dropping of the demand for weapons up front, in return for a definitive agreement spelling out “that it [decommissioning] will be done, how it will be processed, and that it will be completed within the time specified by the Agreement” (*Sunday Independent*, 28 March 1999).

It was against this backdrop that the two governments formulated the Hillsborough Declaration of 1 April (see *Irish Times*, 2 April 1999); it was an imaginative attempt at providing a precise choreography, synchronising the formation of an executive with a form of decommissioning, all against the backdrop of harmonious and reconciliatory mood music. The Declaration asserted that decommissioning was not a precondition but an “obligation” of the Agreement and proposed that Executive members would be nominated on a date to be set but would not take up office immediately.

A “collective act of reconciliation” would take place within a month of the nominations, during which some arms would be put beyond use in a process verified by the IICD, and ceremonies of remembrance to the victims of violence would take place. At the same time, powers would be devolved to the Executive (*Irish Times*, 2 April 1999).

This was decommissioning and the implementation of the Agreement as a sombre quadrille. The SDLP fully endorsed the Declaration. For Sean Farren, one of the party’s leading negotiators, decommissioning was never meant to be an “optional element”; the Agreement was quite clear on this, as it had stipulated that a failure to commit to exclusively democratic and peaceful means would lead to exclusion from office. Thus, “acceptance of this principle must imply rejection of the threat posed by the mere existence of heavily armed, non-accountable paramilitary forces” (*Irish Times*, 13 April 1999).

Unionist and Loyalist reactions

As such, the Declaration was simply a reiteration of the commitments within the Agreement. Decommissioning represented a line being drawn under the conflict; it was “essentially about creating trust and enabling people to believe that political violence is being left in the past” (*Irish Times*, 13 April 1999). Ulster Unionism reacted positively too; Trimble felt that although the Declaration embodied a “rather complex form of sequencing”, it nevertheless had the potential to resolve the outstanding problems satisfactorily (*Irish Times*, 2 April 1999). It even appeared that the DUP, the Loyalist party linked to the UVF, were staunchly in favour of the proposed compromise. David Ervine, the party spokesman, stated that the Declaration was “extremely significant. . . . What we are seeing here is the crumbling of the pan-Nationalist front, an Exocet being fired, not at Gerry Adams, but

directly into the IRA Army Council” (*Irish Times*, 3 April 1999). Others were less effusive. The anti-Agreement DUP simply derided the Declaration as “an April Fool’s charter” stuffed with “fancy semantics and spin-doctoring” (*Irish Times*, 2 April 1999).

Republican response

The Republican response to the Declaration was the most crucial. But there was severe scepticism amongst the Republican ranks about the direction the process was taking. One leaked Sinn Fein document asserted that the Irish Taoiseach had become the “biggest danger” to the peace process because of his increasingly strident views on the necessity of decommissioning (*Sunday Independent*, 7 March 1999). Indeed, Republicans were irritated at the harder line being taken by, of all things, a Fianna Fail government. As one anonymous Republican put it, “they galloped faster than the Brits up that alley” (*Irish Times*, 1 April 1999). There was a fear that the Republicans were being isolated from a major source of potential support, the Dublin administration. Coupled with this was a sense of being squeezed by the conflicting demands of the Agreement and the Republican rank and file; the latter were concerned that disarmament would criminalise the Republican struggle, encourage Unionists into thinking they had gained victory, and weaken bargaining power. It appeared to one senior Republican that the leadership had to choose between their political careers and a possible split in the movement (*Irish Times*, 13 April 1999).

As the journalist Deaglán de Bréadún argued, it seemed that the IRA had been “well and truly snookered. At its back it hears the growing clamour from the Republican grassroots over . . . the continuing attacks on Nationalists in their homes. In front of it is the

demand to dispose of weapons as the price of Sinn Fein’s advance” (*Irish Times*, 2 April 1999). Adams had stated that the peace process had “stretched the flexibility of the Irish republican constituency” but had also indicated that it could be stretched further (*Irish News*, 27 March 1999). This now seemed increasingly unlikely.

After all, whilst the Belfast Agreement had been presented to the Republican grassroots as a strategic advance, its tenets had little resonance within Republican ideology. As Adams articulated, “Before the Good Friday document, the six county state was an undemocratic, illegitimate and failed political entity and after it, it remains so” (*Irish Times*, 27 March 1999). The Republican leadership may not have sincerely held this view, but many in its base did. Would the institutions of the Belfast Agreement thus be worth the price of a convulsion within Republicanism brought on by decommissioning?

Clearly the leadership thought not. The Republican hierarchy described the Hillsborough Document as a “vague proposal”, and the issue of decommissioning as a “provocation”, a “surrender” and an “unreasonable” demand (*Irish Times*, 5 April 1999). Martin McGuinness captured the mood in saying that “the history of Republicanism from time immemorial shows they are not going to bow the knee to the demands of elements of the British military establishment or Unionism, particularly if their assessment is that this is seen as an issue which can divide Republicanism on this island” (*Irish Times*, 8 April 1998).

Sinn Fein formally rejected the Declaration in mid-April because of their stated belief that it moved away from the Belfast Agreement and made the transfer of power conditional on the delivery of IRA weapons (*Irish Times*, 14 April 1999). There was to be

no room in the Republican belly for the swallowing of pre-conditions. Republicans felt themselves to be “victims of [their own] success”; the fact that they had sold their base on matters such as the ceasefire, the removal of Ireland’s constitutional claim to the North, and participation in a ‘partitionist’ Assembly had lulled the British and Irish governments into thinking that progress on decommissioning would be just as easy (*Irish Times*, 7 April 1999). In actual fact it looked as if the retention of weapons was the hinge on which all other compromise turned.

The PUP also rejected the Declaration, although its given reason was that in the collective “act of reconciliation” the illegally held weapons of the IRA would be equated with those of the RUC and British army, a situation intolerable to Loyalists (*Irish Times*, 14 April 1999). This undoubtedly deflected some of the criticism away from Sinn Fein, not something the PUP would have liked, but there may have been deeper reasons for their rejection. In March 1999, the UVF leadership had indicated that, in the absence of Republican decommissioning, their bottom line was that the IRA should declare their war to be over. This was the only means of instilling confidence and trust. If the IRA refused, then Sinn Fein should not be permitted to hold Ministerial positions in any executive (*Combat*, March 1999). However, the IRA was clearly of no mind to make such a statement or to decommission and so, to the UVF, the Declaration was dead in the water. The UVF were also averse to any decommissioning on their part at this stage. As its leadership stated: “You can rest assured that the UVF and Red Hand Commando will not hand over guns to get Sinn Fein into office” (*Irish Times*, 9 April 1999). The thought of Martin McGuinness ascending to office on a ladder partially built of Loyalist rifles, set their teeth on edge.

David Trimble may have believed that the Declaration offered “realistically the only way forward” (*Irish Times*, 16 April 1999), but to those who held the illegal weapons, it resembled only a *cul-de-sac*.

The Way Forward? June/July 1999

Sinn Fein maintained a firm stance on the Unionist demand for guns up front. In their view, Unionism was engaged in the politics of exclusion with decommissioning merely acting as a fig leaf; non-implementation of the Agreement suited the Unionist interest, they simply did not want change. As Martin McGuinness argued, “Don’t fool yourself that it is about the issue of decommissioning. It’s about more than that. It’s because they don’t want to see a Fenian in government” (*Irish Times*, 21 June 1999). McGuinness felt that a serious flaw in the negotiations had been the failure of the IICD to “effectively stamp” its authority on the process, which had led to Unionism seizing the issue and using it as a “weapon to beat Sinn Fein over the head”. The solution was simple; the removal of the causes of conflict via the collective implementation of the Agreement by all parties. Once that process was “unstoppable”, the “issue of how you remove the guns becomes very straightforward” (*Irish Times*, 24 June 1999).

Unionists of course saw the matter differently. Trimble accused paramilitaries of engaging in a “confidence trick”, of talking peace and benefiting from prisoner releases whilst continuing to surreptitiously use violence. Consequently, mere declarations of intent regarding

decommissioning were “unacceptable”, what was needed was “recognisable, quantifiable” disarmament. This remained the only way of proving that the war was over (*We must all stand firm on decommissioning*, 28 June 1999, www.uup.org.)

Although Unionist and Republican remained poles apart, there did appear to be some movement from Sinn Fein in early July. Whilst they underlined that prior decommissioning was “not within the gift of Sinn Fein to deliver” and not part of the Agreement in any case (*Irish Times*, 1 July 1999), they did acknowledge the need to “create space” for pro-Agreement Unionism; consequently Sinn Fein declared their belief that all the participants “could succeed in persuading those with arms to decommission them in accordance with the Agreement” (*Irish Times*, 2 July 1999).

This decommissioning was to be in the manner set down by the IICD. Although this statement appeared rather woolly, the British and Irish governments were eager to seize upon it as a coded assurance that Republicanism would disarm given the implementation of the Agreement. As Blair put it, the Sinn Fein declaration represented “historic seismic shifts in the political landscape in Northern Ireland” (*Irish Times*, 2 July 1999). A report from the IICD was similarly upbeat, and the latter body expected that “Sinn Fein’s proposal [would] be endorsed by the IRA and reciprocated by Loyalist and other Republican groups” (*Irish Times*, 3 July 1999). The IICD also stated that the “process of decommissioning should begin as soon as possible” and defined the beginning of this “process” as firstly the giving of an “unambiguous commitment” by a paramilitary group that it would complete decommissioning by May 2000, followed by the commencement of discussions with that group on the modalities and methods of

decommissioning. The IICD also anticipated the creation of a timetable for decommissioning which would be worked out with paramilitaries; one which they would be “expected to adhere to” to ensure completion by May 2000 (*Irish Times*, 3 July 1999).

These developments spurred the British and Irish governments into issuing a joint statement, *The Way Forward* document (see *Irish Times*, 3 July 1999), which set out how decommissioning and devolution could be achieved. *The Way Forward* stipulated that the Executive would be set up and powers devolved to the Northern Irish Assembly in mid-July—an effective deadline. Shortly afterwards, “within days of devolution”, as Blair was to put it (*Irish Times*, 5 July 1999), the IICD would confirm a start to the process of decommissioning as defined in their report and have “urgent discussions” with the paramilitaries’ points of contact (*Irish Times*, 3 July 1999). The IICD would then specify that actual decommissioning was to start within a specified period. There was also a failsafe clause in that the governments promised to suspend the institutions of the Agreement, if commitments on either decommissioning or devolution were not kept. Regarding the former, it was to be left to the IICD to determine whether paramilitaries were fulfilling their commitments on decommissioning (*Irish Times*, 3 July 1999).

What did Unionism make of The Way Forward?

In June, as a leaked UUP document showed, there had indeed been some debate about the possible merits of dropping the policy of prior decommissioning and instead adopting what it called Blair’s “preferred strategy of putting the main pressure for decommissioning onto Sinn Fein after devolution rather than prior to devolution” (*Sunday Tribune*, 4 July

1999). The document argued that Republicans would be unlikely to actually decommission in the near future and would consequently incur blame for the lack of progress, putting the UUP in a favourable position. This argument did not however carry the day, as *The Way Forward* proposals were seen to be too vague and risky. As Trimble stated:

“The demand of the IRA is government first and then, maybe guns. How can democrats in Britain, America and Ireland ask that we do this? If we agree to put democracy at the disposal of a secret cabal of committed terrorists, in advance of them giving up arms, we are not acting like democrats but like delinquents” (*Sunday Times*, 11 July 1999).

The failsafe mechanisms were “flawed and unfair” whilst the decommissioning scheme was greatly weakened by the lack of an explicit timetable (*Irish Times*, 14 July 1999). The UUP would only countenance letting Sinn Fein into government without prior disarmament if two conditions were met. Firstly, if there was a default on decommissioning, Sinn Fein should be expelled rather than the institutions suspended, as at present the arrangements would “punish the good and guilty alike”. Secondly, the SDLP would have to commit themselves to supporting the Executive without Sinn Fein’s presence (*Sunday Times*, 11 July 1999). There was little likelihood of either condition being met, particularly given the SDLP’s view that the UUP was using the impasse to “bleed more concessions out of the governments. To bleed this process dry” (*Irish Times*, 16 July 1999).

Unionism did not feel that it had the room to manoeuvre on decommissioning, so it decided to stonewall. The knowledge that, in a recent European Parliament election, 12 out of 13 Unionist voters had opted for parties with a ‘no guns, no government’ policy, may have weighed heavily in the UUP mind (*Irish Times*, 19 July 1999).

The fact that these negotiations had taken place in the summer, Northern Ireland’s marching season and a time of especially heightened tension, did not help matters either. When the 15 July came and the nominations were put forward to the Executive, Ulster Unionists stayed away. As only Nationalist and Republican ministers were nominated, the Executive contravened the Agreement’s rules on cross-community inclusivity and so immediately expired, in scenes reminiscent of a farce. Emotions ran high and there were bitter words from all sides in the following weeks as the blame game was played. With the Agreement stalled, the process now slipped into a period of review.

The review: Autumn/Winter 1999

There had been considerable emotional fallout in the weeks after the stillbirth of the Executive, a set of circumstances compounded by wrangling between Unionist, Nationalist and Republican over the release of the Patten Commission’s report on proposed policing structures. For Republicans, the proposed reforms did not go far enough but for Unionists, the proposals threatened the future security of Northern Ireland and represented a slap in the face to the Royal Ulster Constabulary’s record of service. Trimble described the report as a “shoddy piece of work” (*Irish Times*, 10 September 1999). By the autumn, a recognition of harsh political realities had emerged. There was a growing sense that deflections or evasions from the goals of decommissioning and devolution could not be tolerated. Although the IRA had murdered a suspected informer and had been caught smuggling a sizeable quantity of arms from America, this did not automatically dishearten the British and Irish governments. Whilst they condemned these IRA actions, they appeared to accept that both the smuggling and the assassination had been approved by the Republican

leadership to assuage the grassroots in the wake of earlier concessions on decommissioning. Neither of these actions was to be taken as a breach of the ceasefire (*Sunday Tribune*, 22 August 1999). The painful need to face up to certain realities was also underlined by David Trimble, who bemoaned those who talked of “so called alternatives” to dealing with Sinn Fein; the UUP would “not achieve progress without agreement with Nationalists and this includes Republicans. . . .the problem we face now is inescapable while Sinn Fein maintains substantial electoral support” (*Sunday Tribune*, 10 October 1999).

A sense of necessary compromise was also stressed by the IICD in a statement of the 15 November which noted that time was now very short if decommissioning was to be achieved in the stipulated time frame and that consequently urgent progress was now needed. The Commission was convinced that decommissioning could only be achieved in the context of the Agreement being implemented and reminded the participants that they had a “collective responsibility” in this regard. The appointment of authorised representatives by paramilitaries to liaise with the IICD was described as an “urgent” and “significant” confidence-building measure. Clearly, the Commission now felt that it was time it assumed a “more proactive role” (*Irish Times*, 16 November 1999).

The urgency of the IICD statement was not so much a spur to compromise as a reflection of the degree of achievement already reached in the review conducted under the chairmanship of George Mitchell. From the outset, the focus of the Review had been a narrow one, concentrating specifically on breaking the deadlock over decommissioning and the formation of a government (*Irish Times*, 7 September 1999). This tight focus had served to prevent incursions from emotive issues such as policing, which might bog down the

process. The negotiations, which had been conducted under a tighter veil of secrecy, were blossoming out into a highly choreographed affair. Both the UUP and Sinn Fein welcomed the statements from the IICD and shared the view that the body should adopt a more proactive and central role (*Irish Times*, 7 September 1999).

This choreography culminated in a series of confidence-building speeches by the parties to the negotiations. The most important came from Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists. The latter explicitly recognised and accepted that it was “legitimate for nationalists to pursue their political objective of a united Ireland by consent through exclusively peaceful and democratic methods.” The UUP also committed itself to the principles of “inclusivity, equality and mutual respect” in government. They had also partially retreated from the ‘no guns, no government’ pledge. Only a “genuine and meaningful response” to the IICD report was required before the way was clear for the establishment of the political institutions. This effectively meant the IRA’s appointment of a representative to, and dialogue with, the IICD (*Irish Times*, 17 November 1999). The *quid pro quo* from Sinn Fein was a statement stressing their belief that the issue of arms would be “finally and satisfactorily settled” under the aegis of the IICD and that the party was committed to “discharging its responsibilities in this regard.” Sinn Fein also underlined their commitment to peaceful means and opposition to “any use of force or threat of force by others for any political purpose” (*Irish Times*, 17 November 1999).

Building trust

These statements were designed to have a galvanising effect in building trust. Unionists were saying that they were not interested in excluding Nationalists from government while Sinn Fein had put light years between itself and the rhetoric of the armalite and ballot box. This was the nearest

that Republicans could get to admitting that the war was over. The Republican commitment to discharging their responsibilities on decommissioning was also crucial and one of the final pieces of the jigsaw; the appointment of an authorised IRA representative to the IICD, was slotted in soon after (*Irish Times*, 18 November 1999). Interestingly, the IRA statement announcing the appointment also acknowledged the “leadership given by Sinn Fein throughout this process”, a phrase which appeared to be an implicit signal that Republicanism was firmly on the political path and that if Sinn Fein discharged its responsibilities, the IRA would follow their lead. Needless to say, for Republicans, any prospect of decommissioning would ultimately depend upon the full implementation of the Agreement.

Despite the confidence-building measures, Adams continually warned that no one should underestimate just how far Sinn Fein had stretched itself in the Review (*Irish Times*, 19 November 1999, 25 November 1999). That Republicanism had stretched itself at all began to appear in some doubt, when senior Sinn Fein negotiators were reported as stating their belief that the IRA would never disarm (*Irish Times*, 19 November 1999, 20 November 1999). However, Sinn Fein were quick to rebut the accuracy of these reports, and described them as misleading (*Irish Times*, 22 November 1999). If Republicans had stretched themselves, pro-Agreement Unionists felt even more exposed. Stepping into an executive without a beginning to disarmament seemed a bold move.

There was however more than one safety net. Firstly, Peter Mandelson, the Northern Ireland Secretary who had replaced Mowlam in October, initiated legislation in Westminster to suspend the Executive and other institutions if there was any default on decommissioning or devolution (*Irish Times*, 23 November 1999). The Irish

government also indicated its support for the suspension of devolved government if there was any failure to implement the Agreement (*Irish Times*, 24 November 1999).

The second safety net involved the UUP's own capacity to set terms. Trimble was aware of Unionist concerns about an "open ended [decommissioning] process, where you get sucked along and get hung out to dry" (*Irish Times*, 26 November 1999) and prepared accordingly. Trimble successfully sold the notion of entering government before arms decommissioning to his party's ruling body, the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC), in late November.

The deciding factor seems to have been post-dated resignation letters Trimble had drafted in which he and other prospective UUP ministers promised to vacate the Executive if no IRA decommissioning had occurred by the end of January (*Irish Times*, 29 November 1999). Only 58 percent of UUC delegates had supported this change from the 'no guns, no government policy' and it was evident that a deep fissure was running through Ulster Unionism, despite Trimble's expectation that disarmament would follow devolution "as night follows day" (*Irish Times*, 27 November 1999).

Of course, Republicanism bridled at these "safety nets"; in their view the Agreement made no mention of default mechanisms such as the British were now legislating for, whilst Trimble's resignation letter merely introduced a unilateral deadline which sought to "dictate and totally undermine and contradict" the agreed role of the IICD (*Irish Times*, 17 November 1999).

2 December: Devolution—Finally

The fissures within the UUP, and Republican disquiet at the measures taken to minimise this fracturing, were disturbing portents of the future. This did not however stop the setting up of an executive on the 2 December. Northern Ireland now had a power-sharing government comprising Ulster Unionist, SDLP, DUP and Sinn Fein ministers. The North-South cross-border bodies and the rescinding of Ireland's territorial claim to the North quickly followed. The UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters) nominated a representative to the IICD on 8 December.

There was a general air of euphoria as the Agreement was quickly implemented, but there may also have been a sense of unreality. Each of the parties in the Executive had rather different views on how decommissioning should best be pursued, and this was a question on which the sustainability of the Executive appeared to rest. Moreover, the increasing vulnerability of the UUP meant that an answer would need to be found quickly.

Suspending the Agreement: January– February 2000

Although the institutions of the Agreement were up and running, they existed under a Damoclean sword. Ulster Unionist Party Assembly members warned that they had "stretched [their] constituency to breaking point" and that a peace process without decommissioning was not worth "a penny candle" (*Statement by the UUP*, 1 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>).

Republicanism appeared to remain unmoved. Adams felt that the decommissioning crisis was merely a case of "tactical manoeuvring" by the "No' men of Unionism" who were engaged in a "clumsy attempt" to inflict a defeat on Republicans. The Sinn Fein leader stressed that nobody should doubt that Republicanism had already stretched itself considerably in reaching out to Unionists, as the ending of abstentionism had been an "unprecedented decision" by Republicanism. Unionism would simply have to be "patient" in waiting for decommissioning.

Adams emphasised that there had been a "clear understanding" in the Review that Sinn Fein could not deliver disarmament in the terms now being demanded by Unionists. Instead, the Republican analysis was that decommissioning should be handled in a "mechanism . . . outside the political process", in other words the IICD (*Irish News*, 28 January 2000). In attempting to separate politics from disarmament, they were hoping to remove a powerful irritant.

The Unionists' resignation deadline

The trouble was that, for the UUP, decommissioning was fundamentally political. It touched on questions of political principle and affected political considerations in relation to electoral competition with other Unionist parties. Most pressingly, decommissioning had struck deep into the internal politics of the party creating cracks and fissures. Consequently, and as Trimble made clear, "the formation of the Executive without a start to actual decommissioning was an unsustainable position in all but the short term." Sinn

Fein's complaint that the Unionist ministers' post-dated resignation letters amounted to an artificial and unilateral deadline was a "patently false notion. All that [had] been asked of them [Republicans] [was] to fulfil the basic democratic condition and to choose between the party and the army" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2 February 2000).

Unionism was not alone in expressing impatience with the unhurried Republican approach to decommissioning. A rather negative report from the IICD at the end of January curtly noted that it had received "no information from the IRA as to when decommissioning [would] start." The report also disclosed that the UFF would not begin decommissioning until the IRA started to disarm. Similarly, the UVF would not begin the process of decommissioning until the IRA had emphatically declared its war to be over. The report pessimistically concluded that, given the quantities of arms in paramilitary hands, it would soon be "logistically impossible" for the IICD to complete its task by the Belfast Agreement's deadline of 22 May 2000 (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2000).

Obtuse signals from the IRA

An IRA statement of 1 February attempted to pour oil on these troubled waters, but it said little; that the "peace process was under no threat from the IRA" was the basic gist of the message and no mention of decommissioning was made whatsoever (*Irish Times*, 2 February 2000). This obtuse IRA statement and the negative report from the IICD set alarm bells ringing in the British government. Peter Mandelson found the IRA's position "totally

unacceptable" and held the view that without "clarity over decommissioning", confidence would quickly "ebb" from the institutions which relied heavily on cross-community trust (*Statement by the Secretary of State*, 3 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>)

To put it more bluntly, Britain realised that Republican failure to move on decommissioning would force Unionists out of the executive. Given that Unionism had already moved from its position of 'no guns, no government', it was Republicanism's turn to feel the pressure. Republicans were indeed highly irritated at the increasing demand for decommissioning which Adams referred to as the "hypnotic, all pervasive drumbeat now rising to deafening loudness and drowning out all other logic" (*Irish News*, 3 February 2000). Mandelson's responsiveness to Unionist concerns and willingness to suspend the Executive if decommissioning failed to occur, were taken as "a slap in the face to the Sinn Fein leadership" (*Statement by Gerry Adams*, 3 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>). An IRA statement of 5 February showed just how far off decommissioning appeared, as the IRA underlined that it had "never entered into any agreement or undertaking or understanding at any time whatsoever on any aspect of decommissioning". The IRA did however state that the issue of arms could be "resolved", but not by "British legislative threats" to suspend the institutions (*Irish Times*, 7 February 2000).

11 February—the eleventh hour?

Negotiations continued in a pressure cooker atmosphere. By 11 February, Sinn Fein reported a new proposal from the IRA of "enormous significance" which they believed could "finally resolve" the matter, although no details of the plan were actually

disclosed* (*Statement by Gerry Adams*, 11 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>). However, the proposal came at the eleventh hour of the negotiations and was too late to prevent the suspension of the institutions on 11 February as Mandelson acted to prevent what he felt was an inevitable: Unionist evacuation from the process. Suspending the institutions provided a softer landing than watching Unionists bring the peace architecture down by resigning their posts in the absence of progress on disarmament. Mandelson's prime directive at this point was to prevent the haemorrhaging of pro-Agreement Unionism, which he considered to be "running on empty" (*Statement by the Secretary of State*, 23 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>). The IRA proposal, as Mandelson understood it, did not offer the "real definition and clarity" necessary to prop up the UUP (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2000).

However, a report issued by the IICD in the hours after the suspension of the Executive, did point to a significant shift in the Republican position,

* The details of the proposal were not disclosed by the Republican leadership as they did not feel that they could publicly commit to the proposal until they had a) time to sell it to their grassroots and b) a commitment from the British to withdraw the legislation allowing the suspension of the Executive. The British government were made aware of the IRA proposal on the morning of 11 February, although the proposal was not made public for some months. The IRA proposal, codenamed 'Angel', ran thus:

"The peace process contains the potential to remove the causes of conflict and to deliver a durable peace if the political will exists. This can be advanced by full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. In the context of a process that will progressively and irreversibly remove the causes of conflict, the leadership of Oglaiigh na hEireann [IRA] will initiate an internal process subject to our constitution that will finally and completely put IRA arms beyond use. This process will be designed to avoid risk to the public and misappropriation by others. The leadership of Oglaiigh na hEireann will facilitate verification of this. This will be done in such a way to ensure public confidence and to resolve the issue of arms in a complete and verifiable way" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 20 September 2000).

although details again remained sparse. The IICD viewed as “valuable progress” an assertion by the IRA representative that they would consider putting arms beyond use in the context of both the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement and the rather vague phrase, “the removal of the causes of conflict”. The IRA representative also talked of a “comprehensive process to put arms beyond use in a manner as to ensure maximum public confidence” and recognised that the resolution of the arms question was “a necessary objective of the peace process.” The IICD interpreted the IRA representatives statements positively and asserted that these held out “the real prospect of an agreement” on decommissioning (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2000).

The IRA proposal, unspecified as it was, enjoyed only the briefest existence in any case. Following the suspension of the Executive, the IRA withdrew this proposal and cut off contact with the IICD, citing bad faith on the part of Unionists and the British government. The message was clear; the political process was not to be made conditional on the disarmament of the IRA (*Irish Times*, 16 February 2000).

In fact, Sinn Fein appeared to be reassessing their political options too. Adams felt that the suspension had “subverted” the electoral mandates of the pro-Agreement parties and that the Agreement itself had now become “subject to Unionist terms”. This was taken to be the fault of the British as they had stepped out of the Agreement’s framework “before the ink was even dry” and introduced Blair’s side letter on decommissioning. This represented a “virus that had infected the process.” The overall Sinn

Fein response appeared to be that the Belfast Agreement was probably lost and that Republicanism’s new goal should be to back off from the process, and build up their political strength so that, when it came to future negotiations, they would have an increased mandate and increased bargaining power (*Gerry Adams’ keynote address*, 27 February 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>).

From Crisis to the Rubicon? 2000–2001

11 February 2000: hope and trust suspended

The severe crisis that occurred in February 2000 revealed what had *not* been achieved by the peace process since the signing of the Agreement in 1998: some kind of mutual understanding among the main conflicting parties in the North, the UUP and Sinn Fein. Such an understanding could have created confidence and resulted in the establishment of a language capable of communicating the political objectives and real concerns of the leaders and their constituencies. The actual events of 11 February—when Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson triggered the suspension of the Executive in order to preclude David Trimble’s resignation as First Minister—may at some time in the future be interpreted as a set-back of historical significance. At the crucial moment of implementing the institutional core piece of the Agreement, the act signalled a fundamental withdrawal of trust. Accusations from the Nationalist and Republican side ranged from “faulty decision” (Seamus Mallon) to “greatest disaster” (Martin McGuinness).

Apparently the crisis occurred in spite of a rather successful first two months performance of the power-sharing experience, when people in Northern Ireland learned that—with their new ministers at work—the media had started to focus on schools, health and equality issues rather than on bullets and bad guys. Moreover, the crisis occurred in spite of cautious steps towards decommissioning: the IRA

had begun to cooperate with the IICD in December 1999, while De Chastelain’s report of 12 February 2000 contained the statement that there was “a real prospect . . . to fulfil the substance of its mandate” (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2000). In its report, the IICD referred to a first time commitment of the IRA to decommission “[putting] arms and explosives beyond use in the context of the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement”, a move welcomed by both governments “as a development of real significance” (*Irish Times*, 12 February 2000). While David Trimble indicated that progress could not be too quick, if he was to free himself from the narrow margin caused by a considerable number of dissenters in his party, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams stated that, with the suspension, the British government had capitulated to Unionist pressure and deadlines instead of testing the new IRA position to overcome the decommissioning impasse.

In the following weeks, the famous blame game was played out. While intensive, behind-the-scenes talks started between Sinn Fein and the two governments to defrost the decommissioning ice block, public attention moved to the other controversial issue of how to introduce a new police force into Northern Ireland. Unionist frustrations and fears were that full implementation of the Patten Commission’s recommendations on policing (www.belfast.org.uk/report.htm) would lead to an unbearable loss of identity for the RUC. Conversely—and with slightly different frontlines than over decommissioning—Nationalists and Republicans jointly voiced their criticism against the upcoming legislati-

ve process on policing which they feared did not take all Patten principles on board and would therefore make joining the new police unacceptable for members of the Catholic community.

The debate during those months indicated that policing was in many respects to become the more far-reaching and important issue: unlike decommissioning, reform of the police force would not only deal with the impending remnants of the past but would be about a whole new definition of security—concept and structure—for the province. Thus another even more complex field of counting the other side’s gains and losses had now been opened. This was the time when a shift in negotiation strategies was attempted in order to move the contentious security issues forward. Next to decommissioning and policing, the downsizing of state security—termed “demilitarisation” by the Republicans and “normalisation” in the Agreement—started to move into a new package deal to accommodate the interlocked, but divided, concerns about the future of security in Northern Ireland.

The IRA initiative: opening arms dumps to third party inspections

On 7 May 2000, a Joint Statement of the British and the Irish governments was published containing a new plan for the full implementation of the Agreement in relation to the unsettled issues and one which was to be achieved by June 2001 (see *Sunday Times*, 7 May 2000, for full text). In parallel, the IRA issued a statement saying:

“For our part the IRA leadership is committed to resolving the issue of arms. The political responsibility for advancing the current situation rests with the two governments, especially the British government, and the leadership of the political parties. The



The two international arms inspectors and two of the three commissioners of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). From left to right: Martti Ahtisaari, General John de Chastelain, Cyril Ramaphosa, and Andrew D. Sens. Photo: dpa

full implementation, on a progressive and irreversible basis by the two governments, especially the British government, of what they have agreed will provide a political context . . . with the potential to remove the causes of conflict, and in which the Irish Republicans, and Unionists can, as equals pursue our respective political objectives peacefully. . . .

The IRA leadership will initiate a process that will completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use. We will do it in such a way as to avoid risk to the public and misappropriation by others and ensure maximum public confidence. . . .

In this context, the IRA leadership has agreed to put in place, within weeks, a confidence-building measure to confirm that our weapons remain secure” (RTE news online, 6 May 2000).

This IRA statement ended the three-month crisis which had followed the suspension of the power-sharing institutions in February. It came as a surprise to most political commentators, and seemed for a short time to exhibit the potential to move the stalled peace process ahead by

unilateral and creative action of one of the most exposed partners within the conflict. The Rubicon had apparently been crossed, and this view was reflected in all kinds of official reactions. One significant aspect of the statement, as compared to that of 11 February, was seen in the addition of the two new adverbs “completely” and “verifiably”, words that in the opinion of General de Chastelain echoed recommendations made in the International Body’s 1996 report on requirements (De Chastelain, 2001, p. 10) The two governments saw the IRA statement as a “landmark”; US President Bill Clinton commented on it being a real “breakthrough” in the frail political and psychological situation. David Trimble stated that the IRA offer “[appeared] to break new ground” (Irish Times, 8 May 2000) and by that, acknowledged the confidence-building effect of the statement; in his initial assessment, he argued that a process to put arms beyond use could actually be tantamount to decommissioning thus going further than he had ever gone before (Hennessey, 2000, p. 213).

The IRA statement included resumption of contact with the IICD and—more prominently—was followed by the initiative of an opening of a number of IRA arms dumps

(apparently situated in remote farmland in the Republic of Ireland) to international third-party inspection.

The first inspection was carried out in late June 2000 by the ex-ANC Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa and the former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari. The two inspectors were understood to have used a “dual-keys” system, similarly pioneered in the UN-assisted El Salvador peace process in the early nineties, which ensured that the arms dumps remained secure and could not be opened unilaterally by the IRA (Guardian, 2 July 2000). A re-inspection in late October 2000 was followed by the inspectors’ report to the IICD saying that they had consulted with “independent specialists in the field of arms control” and that the “substantial” weaponry they had seen “remained secure” (Report on the Second Inspection of IRA Weapon Dumps, 26 October 2000).

The IRA gesture—unprecedented in the history of Irish armed conflict—provided the creative potential to control tools of violence in a post-conflict situation. Although the confidence-building impact of the inspections only unfolded in part, the measure most importantly helped restore the Assembly on 22 May 2000 and the Executive in the following days. In terms of security normalisation, the IRA initiative was responded to by a number of minor downsizing measures by the British Army: the scrapping of 5 of its 71 military installations, such as bases in Derry and Cookstown and two observation posts perched atop civilian apartment buildings in nationalist areas of Belfast (*Boston Herald*, 10 May 2001).

A more indirect impact was reflected in the report of the IICD in late October when “the Governments also called on the Commission to consider urgently . . . whether there [were] any further proposals for decommissioning

Box D: Paramilitary weapons estimates

Irish Republican Army

- 2.6 tonnes of Semtex explosive
- 588 AKM assault rifles
- 400 other assorted rifles
- 10 general purpose machine-guns
- 17 DSHK heavy machine-guns
- 3 0.50 calibre heavy machine-guns
- 9 Sam-7 missiles
- 46 RPG-7 missiles
- 11 RPG-7 launchers
- 7 flame throwers
- 115 hand grenades
- 600 handguns
- 40 submachine guns
- 31 shotguns
- 1.5 million rounds of ammunition

This list does not take into account the IRA's capacity to manufacture its own explosives or other ordnance.

Loyalist Paramilitary Groups: Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association/ Ulster Freedom Fighters

- 74 VZ58 assault rifles
- 674 handguns
- 20 RPG-7 grenades
- 185 RGD grenades
- 80 submachine guns (including home made)
- 33 shotguns
- Unknown quantities of Powergel commercial explosive

A report in the *Irish Times* of May 1998 stated that sometime between 1996 and 1998 the UVF and UDA smuggled hundreds of assault rifles, submachine guns and pistols into Northern Ireland. The report estimated that the UDA and UVF each had 200 assault rifles/submachine guns.

The breakaway *Real IRA* has a small number of rifles, handguns, machine-guns, unknown quantities of Semtex, detonators and home-made mortars. The *Continuity IRA* has small quantities of rifles and pistols and a small amount of Semtex. It has recently acquired an M79 grenade launcher. Both the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA have the ability to manufacture their own explosives.

The *Irish National Liberation Army* has dozens of automatic weapons and pistols. It has circa 100 kilos of commercial explosives.

The *Loyalist Volunteer Force* has only a small number of rifles and handguns, and a limited amount of commercial explosives.

Sources: Magill, June 1998; *Irish Times*, 14 May 1998; *Guardian*, 8 May 2000

schemes which [offered] the Commission a greater scope" (IICD Report, 26 October 2000).

One might expect that such a review of the Decommissioning Schemes—which had previously reflected a somewhat technical mandate for the IICD and had mainly focused on two weapon destruction methods—might lead the Commission to reassess the creative potential of inspections. A process of redefining decommissioning might come under way describing a procedure according to which stocktaking, arms control and verification could precede the actual measures of destruction, the sealing or otherwise reliable means of "putting weapons beyond use".

However, the initial euphoria resulting from the unexpected IRA move faded rapidly; a violent intra-Loyalist feud erupted in the Shankill area of Belfast in late summer, expelling 70 families from their homes and again throwing darkness over the North. The feud had

nothing to do with decommissioning, but it took place at a time when it was becoming obvious that neither the Unionist mainstream nor the Loyalist paramilitaries seemed satisfied with the approach exercised through the inspections, arguing that the IRA initiative was not tantamount to disarmament. The largest Loyalist paramilitary groups, UVF and UDA, as well as the second largest, UVF, decided against reciprocating the IRA initiative, while none of the paramilitary organisations held meetings with the IICD at that time.

The return of distrust: sanctioning Sinn Fein ministers

On 28 October 2000, after a UUP Council meeting that again left David Trimble hanging on with a very slim majority, the First Minister—and party leader of the UUP—imposed a package of sanctions, including a ban on Sinn Fein ministers from cross-

border meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council. Through this he hoped to push the IRA to move further on decommissioning. The carefully orchestrated steps of the summer in this new phase of institutionalising the peace process came close to collapse in autumn because of a return to the policy of deadlines and ultimata which had already failed before. Banning the Sinn Fein ministers from those parts of the institutions of the Agreement which were supposed to foster closer links between the North and the South of Ireland—and which were hence of particular significance to Republicans—was perceived as a painful variation on the "no guns, no government" stance of the Ulster Unionists. In reaction to Trimble's sanctions, Sinn Fein stepped up their demands that the British government fulfil its commitments to further scale down security installations and to fully implement the recommendations of the Patten Commission on policing. Sinn Fein also took the banning of



David Trimble at a press conference following a UUP Council Meeting at the Waterfront Hall in October 2000. Photo: Corinna Hauswedell

their ministers to the High Court, where the ban was deemed unlawful. However this decision did not impress the Unionist leader nor prevent him from reinforcing the sanctions.

In the context of Bill Clinton's last visit as US President to Northern Ireland in December 2000, all players intensified their endeavours to save the peace process and the institutions by designing a package to link the most contentious issues in the fields of decommissioning, demilitarisation and policing more closely.

The IICD report of 22 December noted that there had not yet been any progress concerning contact with the IRA, but that there was still enough time left to carry out decommissioning by the new deadline of June 2001.

The first two months of the new year, during which time Peter Mandelson resigned as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and was replaced by John Reid, attempts were made to rebuild the elements of trust which had got lost. The British Prime Minister and the Irish Taoiseach became personally involved in the negotiations. However, the talks took place against the background of increased paramilitary violence:

Loyalist groups continued their bomb attacks in and around Belfast, though the UFF and the LVF maintained that their feud had not been reopened. In fact, in the first months of 2001, Catholic homes were the target of more threats and bomb attacks than in any of the three years before. On the other side, the dissident Republican group, the Real IRA, stepped up their campaign by targeting Ebrington Barracks in Derry, Londonderry in February and the BBC building in London in early March. The RUC, once more with major support from the British Army, was faced with the challenge of keeping law and order in a difficult three-folded balance typical of the Northern Ireland security situation.

Policing moves up-front

Recruiting for the new Northern Ireland Police Service started in February in spite of the fact that both Catholic parties, the SDLP and Sinn Fein, were still opposed to relevant parts of the new Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 (www.hms.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/20000032.htm). Core demands for legislative amendments from the Catholic side related to:

- The neutrality of the symbols of the new police force
- The restrictions on flags flying over police stations
- The powers which the police Ombudsman had to reinvestigate former killings in which there had been alleged collusion of RUC officers and Loyalist paramilitaries
- The extent of autonomy enjoyed by the Policing Board and the district partnerships vis-à-vis the Northern Secretary and Chief Constable
- The contested use of plastic bullets
- Whether ex-paramilitary prisoners were allowed to join the district policing partnerships.

Although, at times, the SDLP blamed Sinn Fein for using the policing issue to distract from their responsibility for IRA disarmament, their combined front on these demands was neither seriously shaken by attempts on the part of the Ulster Unionists to win the moderate nationalists over to a middle-ground position nor by the new Secretary of State John Reid, who made it clear that he envisaged the Police Act coming into full force by June (the deadline set in May 2000 for the full implementation of the Agreement); Reid, as well, had hoped that the SDLP would more readily compromise than Sinn Fein.

Hillsborough Roundtable: "parking" the deal

With the British General elections and the local elections looming in spring 2001, and the foot and mouth epidemic further absorbing political activity, there was an urgency for all politicians to try to wrap up the possible elements of a deal before things got out of hand again.

On 8 March, the governments met with the pro-Agreement parties for round-table talks at the well-known venue of Hillsborough Castle to consider a way forward by means of possible compromises. That same morning, the IRA had announced that they would re-open contact with the IICD and renewed their statement of 6 May 2000 regarding the circumstances under which they would consider decommissioning. Such contact was indeed re-opened a few days later and has been kept open since. This surprising move on the part of the IRA again worked as an immediate defroster of the icy atmosphere of the previous weeks, in which belligerent rhetoric and actual violence had clouded a solution of the impasse. However, a statement given by Gerry Adams made it clear that Sinn Féin expected the British government to honour its commitments of May 2000 before Republicans would move any further on decommissioning (*Irish Abroad*, 9 March 2001). On the other hand, David Trimble simply saw the IRA statement as a propaganda trick.

Commentators in the media tried to encourage political leaders to grasp the opportunity, “take a risk” and jump unilaterally in order to solve one of the disputed issues. This was especially addressed to the SDLP, as their Stormont ministers Seamus Mallon and Sean Farren had expressed serious concerns as to whether the actual momentum could be sustained until after the elections, when time would be running out with the deadline for a start to decommissioning looming in June (*Irish Times*, 8 March 2001).

Speculations about what kind of ‘mini-deal’ had actually been achieved at Hillsborough continued to hang in the press for the next weeks. John Reid’s summary on the occasion of the St. Patrick’s Day celebrations most probably came closest:

“The peace process is nearer its goal than ever. But we are not there yet. We still have to complete the job on four key issues:

The decommissioning of weapons—
We need to find ways of putting paramilitary weapons beyond use and taking the gun out of Irish politics forever.

Policing—*We must arrive at a point where everyone feels able to support the new Police Service of Northern Ireland as an accountable policing service representative of the whole community.*

Normalisation—*We must return Northern Ireland to normality, a process which includes scaling down the security measures in response to a decreasing terrorist threat.*

Devolved government—*We have to make sure that all the institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement are working at every level, including the cross-border agencies.*

As the political parties agreed when they met with the British and Irish prime ministers two weeks ago in Northern Ireland, it is not a question of picking or choosing any one of these four areas. We have to make progress in all four simultaneously if we are to move forward together. Only by making real progress in each area will we ensure that everyone’s concerns are met” (*Boston Herald*, 20 March 2001).

Underlining these four issues as the cornerstones of a future deal and not suspending the institutions over the unsolved situation was seen as “parking” the process until after the elections, which were now set for 7 June. The four issues essentially described the substance of the interim deal achieved at the Hillsborough meeting.

The June elections and Trimble’s resignation

It did not come as a surprise to most observers that the election campaign was not the time for seeking further compromises but that each party narrowed down its agenda to the specific concerns of the constituencies.

For the beleaguered leader of the Ulster Unionists in particular, serious worries about losing further ground to the anti-Agreement DUP caused a movement away from the four-cornered package and a refocusing on the arms issue. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Trimble warned that the institutions of the Agreement were “not stable” in their current form and that “crisis could come before the general elections” unless there was movement from the IRA on disarmament (*Financial Times*, 19 April 2001).

Two weeks later, Trimble armed himself psychologically by casting his threat to resign as First Minister on the 1 July into the pre-electoral political arena. This move stunned the Deputy First Minister of the SDLP, who had only been informed at the last moment, as well as the two governments in London and Dublin, who decided to try to carry on with negotiations on the unsolved issues despite the difficulties caused by the elections. The prospect of the institutions collapsing on the eve of the peak marching season in early July could hardly have been gloomier. Decommissioning was back as the top stumbling block to the peace process—and the careful choreography of Hillsborough was in ruins.

The elections on the 7 June, which brought a victorious Tony Blair back to Westminster, left Northern Ireland in a highly precarious situation: Ian Paisley's DUP had increased their Westminster representation from 3 to 5 seats at the expense of UUP who had only won 6 seats against the 10 won in 1997. Sinn Fein gained 4 seats compared to 2 in 1997 and became the strongest Catholic party, overtaking the SDLP for the first time (See Figure 1). The smaller parties, such as the Alliance, NIWC (Northern Ireland Womens Coalition) and PUP, lost a considerable number of votes. This trend of polarisation towards the more radical ends of the party spectrum and the weakening of the moderate middle ground was also reflected in the results of the local elections. Saving the stalled peace process had not become easier.

What would increased pressure on David Trimble from the Unionist 'no'-camp mean for the resumption of talks on full implementation of the Agreement? In which direction—in terms of decommissioning—would the considerably strengthened Republicans face, with Sinn Fein's electoral success ironically proving both the efficacy of the political peace strategy at the ballot box as well as the psychological backing for a "no surrender" position.

When arms dumps which had already been visited were inspected for a third time and the IRA reaffirmed both that the "resolution of the arms issue was a necessary step in the peace process" and that they had met with the IICD four times since March, Trimble's only comment was that he saw "no substance in it at all" (*BBC News*, 31 May 2001). For the shattered Unionist leader, there seemed to be no room to manoeuvre anymore.

Back to decommissioning

Consequently, the last two weeks in June involved intensive talks between the two prime ministers and the political parties in the North, mainly focused on putting all kinds of pressure on the IRA to move further forwards on the arms issue. The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and the SDLP leader, John Hume, for the first time played the so-called "green card" by unequivocally stating that sitting in a government with a private army was actually incompatible with the Irish constitution and democratic terms. Official and semi-official proposals on practical measures for disarmament, which had partly been in the air before, circulated in the media: the broadening of the inspections to include more dumps; the sealing of inspected dumps by means of concrete; the introduction of the idea of additional inspectors, and so on. But the higher the pressure, the less likely it became that Republicans would dance to the Unionists' tune.

Against the background of the most serious street fighting and rioting Belfast had experienced in years, with hundreds of civilians and police officers injured at the Ardoyne "peace line" and the later murder of a young Catholic allegedly carried out by a Loyalist paramilitary gang of the UDA/UFF who no longer supported the Good Friday Agreement, the issue of arms became even more crucial but even less easy to solve by making unilateral demands on the IRA.

On the 23 June, David Trimble was re-elected party leader at the UUP council meeting but only at the price of maintaining his decision to resign as he later did on 1 July. As the provisions of the Agreement stand, a First Minister must either be re-elected within the following six weeks or the institutions will be suspended and a call for new elections can be made.

A new effort of intensive talks chaired by Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern in Weston Park in the British Midlands during the second week of July failed to find a solution to the deep crisis of the Northern Ireland peace process. A "take-it-or-leave-it" package to be put to the parties before the 12 August is in preparation.

2

Small Arms— Bigger Issues



Loyalist mural in the Lower Shankill area (2002). Photo: Mark Sedra



The Time Had Come: Burying the Hatchet

After July 2001, the closing date for the history section of this paper, almost three months passed without any major progress on the outstanding issues in Northern Ireland. The emergence of a political vacuum at the governmental level and increasing uncertainty and violence in the streets created a dangerous combination that placed the peace process in jeopardy and generated the most serious crisis in the province since the signing of the Belfast Agreement.

A profound breakthrough came on 23 October 2001 when the IRA—following the encouragement of the leadership of Sinn Féin—publicly declared that the organisation had begun to put its weapons permanently and verifiably beyond use (see Box E). When the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), who had witnessed the ceremony, confirmed that the IRA’s move was “significant” (see Box F), trust between Northern Ireland’s political actors was renewed and the suspended institutions reinvigorated. David Trimble’s euphoric reaction to the breakthrough—“the day we thought would never come”—conveyed the readiness of moderate Unionism to embark on a new era in the power-sharing government with the Republicans.

Without a doubt, the sea-change in the IRA’s fundamental approach, exemplified by its credo, “not a bullet, not an ounce”, resulted from a longer journey from violence to politics. The actual timing of the IRA move, however, was influenced by American pressure imposed after the discovery of an IRA-FARC connection in

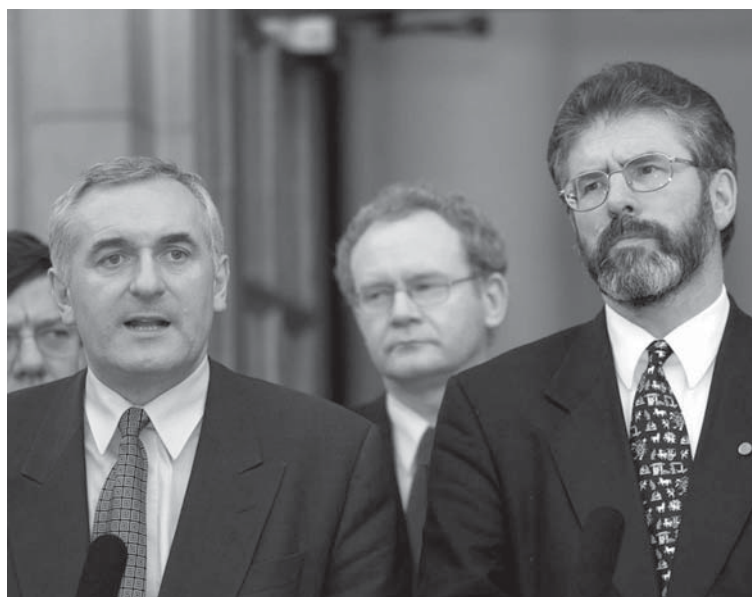
Colombia in August, and more significantly, the changes in the international political climate in the wake of the September 11 atrocities in the United States. Responding to the augmented international awareness of terrorism that followed the launch of the “war against terrorism”, and the enhanced pressure on perceived terrorist groups that accompanied it, the Republican movement seized the opportunity to make its long expected move to “bury the hatchet”, a gesture that contributed significantly to the revitalisation of the deteriorating peace process.

A closer look at the history of the decommissioning debate, including the months of crisis that preceded the breakthrough, may reveal some of the factors which made decommissioning such an intractable obstacle for the peace process. It appears that there were bigger issues at stake behind the

“small” arms. The majority of the findings identified in the subsequent analysis will likely remain unchanged when the long-awaited decommissioning process begins, therefore it is important to mention that the following analysis does not purport itself to be a “now-that-we-know-better” approach. Many of the cul-de-sacs of post-Agreement Northern Ireland may, in retrospect, appear to have been historically unavoidable, resulting from the more or less productive ambiguities endured by many current peace processes. But assessments will gain more depth of field in the brighter light afforded by the actual beginning of the “farewell to arms”, which has already uncovered cracks in the sectarian walls and barriers that have perennially inhibited conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

Comparison limited

There were political circumstances in Northern Ireland that gave the issue of paramilitary weapons, a subject accorded extraordinary political attention, the heightened significance it gained during the peace process—a significance greater than in most other comparable cases of peace settlements



The Day After: Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern with Sinn Féin Education Minister Martin McGuinness and Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams (from left to right) holding a press conference in front of the Dail buildings in Dublin, the day after the IRA’s historic announcement on decommissioning (24 October 2001). Photo: dpa

Box E: The IRA arms statement in full, 23 October 2001

The IRA is committed to our republican objectives and to the establishment of a united Ireland based on justice, equality and freedom.

In August 1994, against a backdrop of lengthy and intensive discussions involving the two governments and others, the leadership of the IRA called a complete cessation of military operations in order to create the dynamic for a peace process.

'Decommissioning' was no part of that. There was no ambiguity about this.

Unfortunately there are those within the British Establishment and the leadership of unionism who are fundamentally opposed to change.

At every opportunity they have used the issue of arms as an excuse to undermine and frustrate progress.

It was for this reason that decommissioning was introduced to the process by the British Government. It has been used since to prevent the changes which a lasting peace requires.

In order to overcome this and to encourage the changes necessary for a lasting peace the leadership of Oglai na hEireann has taken a number of substantial initiatives.

These include our engagement with the IICD [decommissioning body] and the inspection of a number of arms dumps by the two International Inspectors, Cyril Ramaphosa and Martti Ahtisaari.

No one should doubt the difficulties these initiatives cause for us, our volunteers and our support base. The Political process is now on the point of collapse.

Such a collapse would certainly and eventually put the overall peace process in jeopardy.

There is a responsibility upon everyone seriously committed to a just peace to do our best to avoid this.

Therefore, in order to save the peace process we have implemented the scheme agreed with the IICD in August.

Our motivation is clear. This unprecedented move is to save the peace process and to persuade others of our genuine intentions.

Signed: P O'Neill

Source: BBC News, 23 October 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/northern_ireland/newsid_1615000/1615957.stm.

during the 1990s. Reviewing patterns and mechanisms by which the process of negotiation and implementation of disarmament initiatives was fostered or hindered offers a number of lessons for both the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland and for other conflict-stricken regions confronting comparable dilemmas.

In search of solutions to problems of post-war consolidation, such as how to find ways out of protracted violence, studies of the varying methodologies for managing peace processes have become increasingly popular in international peace and conflict research, with particular emphasis on the case study of Northern Ireland (Darby and Mac Ginty, 2000, and 2002). Benefits and limitations of the comparative perspective have, with respect to Northern Ireland, recently been explored in a comprehensive

academic publication (McGarry, 2001). Partisan studies drawing dubious parallels, with instrumental advantage for one of the respective sides in a conflict, have been a common feature of the ongoing political debate and dialogue surrounding the peace process in Northern Ireland (Magginnis, 1999). For example, the difficulties encountered by the South African peace process in putting paramilitary "guns beyond use" has—for all parties in Northern Ireland in different ways and at different times—served as an alluring precedent from which to draw lessons (O'Malley, 2000).

Placing Northern Ireland in an international context to show that decommissioning was not a problem unique to the province of Ulster and to demonstrate how others "got it right" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 19 May 2000) only

does limited justice to the historical, regional and political specifics of a particular case. We are taking the reverse approach here. With the knowledge of comparable cases of international conflict resolution in mind we want to return for a moment to look at the specific dilemmas plaguing Northern Ireland and begin our assessment from there.

Guns out of politics or politics out of guns?

After the end of the Cold War, disarmament of paramilitary and militia groups as well as state forces has been crucial to almost all efforts to end internal conflict in parts of Africa, Central America and Southeast Asia. Decommissioning, which in some cases has been incorporated into programmes to demobilise and

reintegrate former combatants, has customarily been treated as an important issue, but the heightened status it has received in Northern Ireland, where it became the core issue of dispute between rival sectarian groups during an eight-year period, is virtually unprecedented. “The success of any decommissioning scheme, as evident from examples of conflict resolution in Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Panama, depends on a variety of factors, including the recognition that debates on disarmament and demobilisation should be prevented from becoming too highly politicised” (Schulze and Smith, 2000, p.83).

The missing link of decommissioning mindsets

How can the specific problems of Northern Ireland, relating to the issue of taking guns out of politics, be explained? One may indeed argue that the discussions about decommissioning in Northern Ireland have been heavily politicised. But what does this imply? Protagonists on both sides of the sectarian divide tended to overload the issue of weaponry with the political

symbolism of the thirty years of suffering and tumult that comprised the Troubles, thereby making it more difficult to disarm. Partisan attitudes towards both perceptions of security and the legitimacy of political change have been reflected through the arms issue. For the Unionists it functioned as a scapegoat issue that they exploited to apply pressure on the Republicans and to compensate for political setbacks and failures incurred on other issues; for Republicans, it served as a bargaining tool to press for political concessions. Since the inauguration of the peace process in 1994, the positions on decommissioning espoused by the two main conflicting parties clearly conveyed their deep rooted mutual distrust: Unionists held decommissioning as the essential factor underpinning their resentment of a power-sharing government in which they were forced to legislate alongside a party linked to private army; Republicans argued with great vehemence that arms had never been handed over in the long history of the Irish armed struggle. “The issue became a metaphor for basic positions on the peace process and attitudes towards political opponents...a symbol for the limits of surrender of both sides” (Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, p. 105).

Making the well being of the whole process dependent on the success of decommissioning did not contribute to the central overall requirement of building a stable peace. For the Unionists, staking everything on that one card which they could not properly play, and thereby pushing the Republicans in the most painful corner, may in retrospect not have been a very wise tactic. We agree though with the assumption made by Mac Ginty and Darby (*ibid.*) that if decommissioning had been resolved other issues of security concern such as policing reform or demilitarisation would have likely assumed an air of intractability and created a new impasse. Why, in an attempt to break the deadlock of decommissioning, issues of similar security concern became more closely linked, will be discussed among the themes below.

Behind the debate about how and when to disarm the “hardware” of civil strife, much more complex problems of how to decommission the mindsets of the main players come to light. Decommissioning efforts in Northern Ireland became almost indistinguishable from efforts to discover ways out of the historically deep-rooted sectarianism that remains the main obstacle to non-violent

Box F: Report of the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning, 23 October 2001

Almost three hours after the IRA had announced that it had put some arms beyond use, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) issued a short statement confirming the IRA’s move:

1) On 6 August 2001 the Commission reported that agreement had been reached with the IRA on a method to put IRA arms completely and verifiably beyond use. This would be done in such a way as to involve no

risk to the public and avoid the possibility of misappropriation by others.

- 2) We have now witnessed an event which we regard as significant in which the IRA has put a quantity of arms completely beyond use. The material in question includes arms, ammunition and explosives.
- 3) We are satisfied that the arms in question have been dealt with in accordance with the scheme and regulations. We are also satisfied that

it would not further the process of putting all arms beyond use were we to provide further details of this event.

- 4) We will continue our contact with the IRA representative in pursuit of our mandate.

Source: *BBC News*, 23 October 2001, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/uk/northern_ireland/newsid_1615000/1615957.stm.

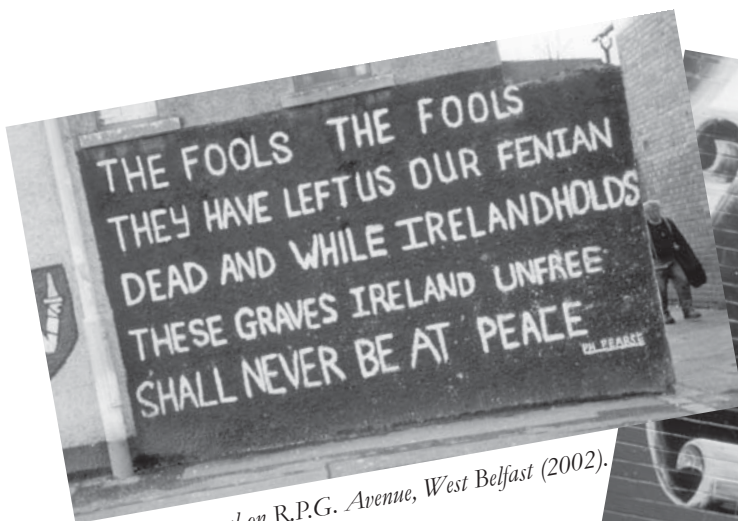
conflict resolution. That may explain why the issue became such an intractable and prolonged matter. In an overly politicised environment like Northern Ireland, where the road to remove guns from the political arena is barred, new routes to separate the issue of weapons from the sectarian patterns of the province must be explored. Along these routes, mutually acceptable, cross-partisan approaches to disarmament must be developed. The underlying goal should be a new understanding of “common security”.

The way decommissioning was dealt with in many phases of the peace process fostered, rather than helped to

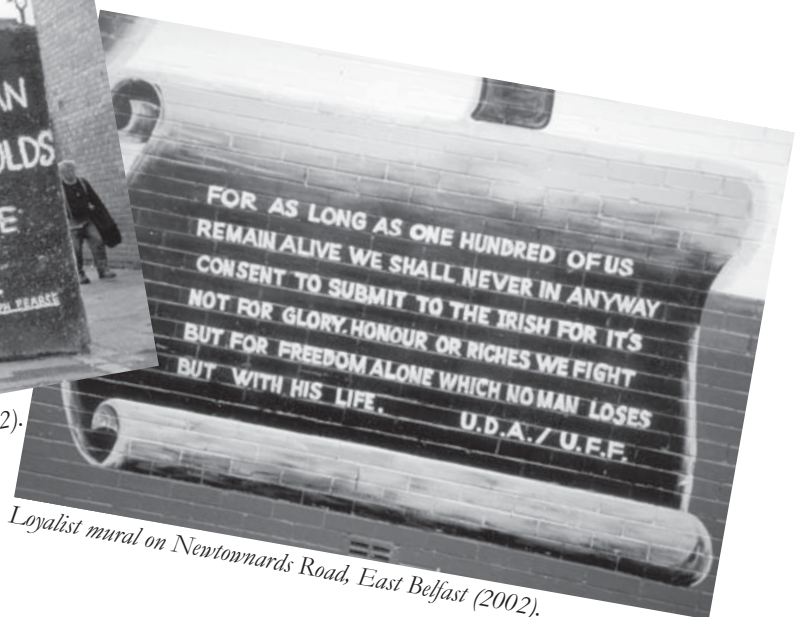
overcome sectarianism: The Agreement established a promising constitutional framework, but its twin track approach “fudged” the arms issue. A unique instrument of third party involvement was created in the form of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), but a difficult mix of external and internal players greatly impeded the Commission’s performance. In the post-Agreement phase of peace building, too little attention was paid to measures that would build trust and confidence; the role of civil society suffered from the top down approach of the Agreement. The spoiler effects and changing patterns of continued violence were “criminally”

underestimated. Consequently, our assessment of the factors that hindered or helped “good governance” in relation to the decommissioning controversy will focus on the following issues:

- the ambiguities of the Agreement
- the confidence-building capacities of external and internal involvement
- the problems associated with the proliferation of violence.



Republican mural on R.P.G. Avenue, West Belfast (2002).



Loyalist mural on Newtownards Road, East Belfast (2002).

Mindsets, as well as bullets, bombs, and guns, must be decommissioned for the peace process to move forward. These contrasting murals, utilizing similar rhetoric that emphasizes the steadfast resolve of each side to continue the armed struggle, exemplify the ingrained reluctance of both sides to lay down their arms. Photos: Mark Sedra

The Twin Track Approach of the Agreement— “Fudging” the Arms

Trying to reach a valid compromise in a peace agreement that can be sold as advantageous to all conflicting parties and their constituencies creates complex dilemmas, which have, not without deliberate euphemism, been described as “constructive ambiguities” (Guelke, 2000; Stevenson, 2000). This statement appears to be particularly appropriate when analysing the decommissioning debate in Northern Ireland since the 1994 peace talks.

The Belfast Agreement, a settlement of an ethno-national conflict achieved after inclusive negotiations that endeavoured to incorporate the protagonists of an armed struggle, is considered to be one of the most comprehensive peace accords in the international arena, primarily due to its utilisation of a “twin track” approach. This approach encapsulates a specially designed strategy that facilitates the implementation of the political and security aspects of the settlement in two parallel corridors. While the constitutional provisions of the accord, its consociational and confederal devices (Brendan O’Leary, in Wilford, ed., 2001, pp. 49–83), seemed to offer a firm and unequivocal road to solve the political dispute over the province’s future, the devices dealing with the vital security issues of disarmament and demilitarisation were phrased in an intentionally vague fashion, highlighting the emerging reality that decommissioning would only be solved “... in the context of the implementation of the overall

settlement” (Agreement, section 7, para.3, see also Box B). The Agreement itself did not make disarmament a precondition to the establishment of governmental institutions. The original deadline to achieve decommissioning, “within two years following the endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement” (ibid.)—in May 2000—became flexible in accordance with this interpretation of how the overall implementation would progress.

The governments in London and Dublin introduced the “fudging” of the arms issue as a brokering strategy intended to get the peace process back on track. The establishment of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) in 1997, the successor to the International Body on Decommissioning, that was authorised by special legislation of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act (<http://www.nio.gov.uk/issues/decomm.htm>) was a unique example of third party involvement in a non-UN-brokered peace accord. Equipped with a practical mandate, the IICD was formed to regulate and limit the “fudging” of the technical aspects of disarmament—a task difficult to fulfil given the more fundamental problems and ambiguities embodied in the accord.

This “art of the fudge” (Stevenson, 2000, p.9) kept the peace process alive throughout the crises of the last few years, but after the electoral losses

suffered by the moderate Unionist and Nationalist parties to their counterparts occupying the radical poles of Northern Ireland’s political spectrum in the election of 7 June 2001, it became obvious how fragile the compromise of “constructive ambiguities” had become. The First Minister’s resignation in July 2001 coupled with the Secretary of State’s repeated attempts to rescue the power-sharing institutions by mothballing the cabinet and later by borrowing smaller parties votes to compensate for missing Unionist support—events that transpired amidst intensifying street violence orchestrated by anti-Agreement Loyalists—generated a crisis serious enough to place the whole peace process in jeopardy.

In recent months, discussion and debate on the limitations of the fundamentally consociational nature of the Agreement (including an electoral system for the Assembly based on proportional representation of both the Protestant and Catholic communities, and the power-sharing concept of government) has become more prevalent and lively (McGarry, ed., 2001)). “Since so few severely divided societies have opted for a fully consociational path, it is difficult to foresee how these issues will play out” (Horowitz, in: ibid., p. 104). We are inclined to endorse the ideas of Adrian Guelke, an acknowledged insider and expert on the Northern Ireland peace process, who with particular reference to the major changes in Republican thinking, stated in autumn 2000: “Yet, despite the weaknesses of the agreement—its ambiguity, its fragility, and its vulnerability to deadlock because of its mechanisms for ensuring that major decisions enjoy widespread support across the province’s sectarian divide—there remain grounds for expecting the Northern Irish peace process to survive all its travails” (Guelke, 2000, p. 21). While such optimistic

assessments are certainly encouraging, critical views, such as those frequently expressed in the non-partisan Northern Irish left-liberal magazine *Fortnight*, cannot be omitted. According to an editorial of the magazine published in the summer of 1998, “the institutionalized sectarianism of the Assembly will make permanent the catholic/nationalist versus protestant/unionist paradigm” (*Fortnight*, Editorial, 372, July-August 1998, p.5).

One may assume that the consociational structure of the agreement, which has shown a tendency to cement sectarianism, was adopted regardless of the decommissioning and security issues that engendered the establishment of the twin track solution. The power-sharing model seems to have been the only real governmental option since 1973. We want to limit, however, our observations and findings to the impact the ambiguities of the Agreement had on security related issues. In this context, we will touch on the rarely discussed problem of the prevailing partisan approach towards decommissioning, and thereafter assess the attempts to develop a package deal during the implementation process by linking other disputed matters of security, such as demilitarisation and police reform, with the sensitive issue of decommissioning.

Double standards and hypocrisy: the partisan approach towards decommissioning

Unlike other post-conflict governments, such as those in Lebanon or South Africa, the power-sharing executive in Belfast was not conceived to be a government of reconciliation or of social transformation. Instead, a far more pragmatic approach was employed, which simply aimed to assemble all relevant political actors

around the governmental table; this is a more imposing task than it sounds for many of these individuals had never really talked face-to-face until their first day in office. Security issues were not to be dealt with around this table as responsibility for such matters rested with the British authorities. The twin track approach helped to circumvent the establishment of mechanisms to deal with the problem posed by the continued availability of arms among the conflicting parties in the province. The matter of ending the war by abandoning the tools of violence remained the exclusive domain of British security forces and the IRA, despite an intensification of violence, predominantly carried out by disillusioned Loyalists. The difficult and sensitive process of restructuring the state’s monopoly of power in post-Agreement Northern Ireland included disarmament of paramilitary organisations (with a focus on the illegally held weapons), downsizing of state forces, and the reform of police and justice. The fact that the new power-sharing government had legitimate stakes but no authorised responsibilities in this process, prepared the ground for hypocrisy of all kinds and permitted the emergence of biased approaches and double standards, especially in the controversial field of decommissioning

Most players, during negotiations and the post-Agreement implementation phase, focused on the decommissioning of IRA weapons when considering disarmament—a rather narrow interpretation of the provisions on decommissioning within the Good Friday Agreement. This tendency was also reflected in public opinion, which could be discerned in the innumerable newspaper articles written on the issue between April 1998 and December 2001; over 90 percent of these articles referred to decommissioning as a requirement for

Republicans. There were, of course, reasons behind this imbalance. “The significance of decommissioning lay in that it was made the touchstone for placating the unionist community throughout the peace process” (Schulze and Smith, 2000, p.81). The Unionist position of not joining a government with a party linked to a private army, and the state’s threat perception, shaped by the quantity and quality of the IRA arsenal (see Box D), may have justified the establishment of this one-sided approach towards decommissioning, but was it a politically wise strategy considering that the removal of all paramilitary weapons was the final goal? “Threats to the peace process have come mainly from dissident groups such as the Real IRA, the Continuity IRA, the Loyalist Volunteer Force, and the Red Hand Defenders, which have no political representatives, are not parties to the Good Friday Agreement, and therefore would not be subject to the unionist requirement of decommissioning” (Stevenson, 2000, p.15).

One may argue that the limitation of the decommissioning demand to those groups with political representation reduced the credibility of the issue as a whole, and in the same vein represented a subtle admission that neither of the two major Unionist parties felt they possessed the necessary clout and support to “use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms”, as stipulated in the decommissioning paragraph of the Agreement. This unbalanced and “partisan” approach to disarmament limited the potential of cross community conflict resolution initiatives, such as addressing the removal of the tools of violence on both sides, as an adequate response to ongoing violence. The strategy developed its own momentum, fostering accommodation in the sectarian trenches and re-invigorating the fundamental complexities of the specific Northern Irish conflict

triangle: Unionists – British Government – Republicans.

For Republicans it was easy to adhere to their demand for demilitarisation, defined as the withdrawal of British security forces, while rejecting calls for paramilitary disarmament at the sectarian frontlines, for they perceived this rigid position as the primary means by which they could underline the legitimacy of their armed struggle. Even in the summer of 2000, the time of the unprecedented unilateral gesture of the IRA on arms dumps inspections, Republican sources did not make any statement, publicly or privately, demanding Loyalist reciprocation. Republican reluctance to make such linkages may have also stemmed from their perception of the UDA as turning more and more into a criminal organisation one would not like to be equated with.

For the Loyalists, the lack of pressure and scrutiny applied to their paramilitary activities appeared to bolster their determination to avoid decommissioning until “real steps” were taken by the IRA, a position that remained unchanged even after the beginning of IRA decommissioning in October 2001. Historically, in the context of the Irish armed struggle, it is not surprising that the Loyalists have been as reluctant as Republicans to make arrangements for the disarmament of their weapons. In an allusion to the unknown number of arms caches that were buried, but never handed over, after the Irish Civil War and the northern “Troubles” of the early 1920s, David Ervine, leader of the PUP, the political party related to the UVF, has frequently stated that “rust” would probably be the best solution to the problem of decommissioning.

To summarise an important lesson of the Northern Irish peace process: Partisan approaches to arms do not address the security concerns of all sides party to the conflict. One can say that singling out the arms issue in such a manner, by first separating disarmament from other relevant security concerns and then applying a biased or one-sided approach to the arms, deepened division and mistrust between the parties at a time when confidence building and cross sectarian initiatives were required. The strategy virtually guaranteed failure and led to the process’ degeneration into deadlock.

***The package deal:
Linking issues for a
mutually assured
security***

At a pivotal juncture during the October 2001 crisis, George Mitchell, a central facilitator of the peace process at various critical stages, explained that while he understood that disarmament remained a difficult issue for the North’s parties, he urged them to adopt a more broad-based approach: “It [disarmament] will have to occur, of that I have no doubt. And if there is going to be any progress there has to

also be progress on the other issues that remain—police reform, so-called demilitarisation and other aspects. We have got to proceed on a broad front.” (*Irish Examiner*, 8 October 2001)

Linking decommissioning, downsizing of state forces, and police reform in a more coherent framework for negotiation—in response to the IRA’s unilateral gesture to open its arms dumps to inspection—was undertaken by the two governments in summer 2000. Although this strategy signified their renunciation of the mindset that the decommissioning issue should be singled out and approached in relative isolation, the package approach was not immediately and readily accepted as the new norm. The cornerstones for this new approach, formulated at the Hillsborough Roundtable on 8 March 2001 (see p. 45), were placed in cold storage pending the outcome of the subsequent general election. They re-emerged in August 2001 in the form of a take it-or-leave it letter from the two governments that was addressed to all the Northern Irish parties:

“...As we said in Weston Park, while each of the issues—policing, decommissioning, normalisation and the stability of the institutions—is best addressed in its own terms rather than being seen as a precondition



Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers preparing to escort Catholic school children and their parents to Holy Cross Primary School through a fierce Protestant demonstration during the initial days of the Holy Cross dispute (06.09.2001). Photo: dpa

for progress on any other, the Agreement could only succeed if all parts of it are implemented together. In this context, these proposals set out the steps we would take as part of a package to secure the full implementation of the Agreement” (Northern Ireland Office/Department of Foreign Affairs, Implementation of the *Good Friday Agreement*, 1 August 2001).

The package delineated a new strategy to end the crisis of deadlock that gripped the peace process. It demanded mutual respect and joint action of the parties—something that in the following weeks would only be delivered in a gradual piecemeal fashion.

On 6 August 2001 the IRA offered a new disarmament plan reaffirming its determination to put its arms completely and verifiably beyond use, a move that was welcomed by the IICD and positively reflected in the international media (*Washington Post*, 7 August 2001). It pledged to cooperate in good faith with the IICD by providing further details on schemes and methods of decommissioning. In retrospect, it turned out that the method of decommissioning used on 23 October 2001 had, in actuality, been already agreed upon with the IICD in August. At that time, however, David Trimble rejected the IRA offer on the grounds that it was not enough to satisfy his party’s demands, a move that prompted the IRA to withdraw its proposals.

Since there was no positive response to the package deal before the 12 August deadline for the re-election of a First and Deputy Minister, Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid suspended the institutions for twenty-four hours, only to reinstate them thereafter; this gave the parties another six weeks to act on the proposed package. A positive signal came in August when the SDLP signed up to the Policing Board, thereby consenting to the new implementation plan for the police. This courageous decision compelled the UUP and DUP

to follow suit a couple of weeks later, whereas Sinn Fein maintained its boycott, demanding further amendments to the police reform bill.

Confronting the most contentious issues with what can be described as a “package” approach, permitting gradual and unilateral steps on all issues as well as the reciprocation of aims, promotes a better understanding of the security concerns of all sides. One can describe this approach—using a distant analogy to conflict resolution experienced in the détente phase of the Cold War—as a reaching-out for a mutually assured concept of “common security”. In the case of Northern Ireland, this may appear to be overly optimistic, as the package is still lacking universal acceptance within the province.

The surprising start of decommissioning in October 2001 must also be explained through an analysis of several other factors. A solution to the disturbing rise of Loyalist violence has not been incorporated into the package, as of yet. However, a credible pattern of implementation for the Belfast Agreement has been established through the Weston Park package. One day after 23 October 2001, in an immediate response to the IRA move, the Prime Minister’s official spokesman announced that four security installations would be dismantled “logistically and physically as quickly as possible” (*BBC News*, 24 October 2001). The statement, indicating the Government’s intention to fulfil its pledge to intensify demilitarisation in response to IRA concessions on decommissioning, was referring to an army/RUC base in Magherafelt near Cookstown, three bases in South Armagh, the army /RUC base in Newtownhamilton, and the watchtowers in Sturgon and Camlough.

Matters of Trust: External and Internal Involvement for Disarmament

Northern Ireland serves as a superb example of how a peace process can be influenced and affected by a complex interplay of exogenous and endogenous stimuli. External governmental and non-governmental actors, and internal players, whether they be the conflict's principal political protagonists or elements of civil society, have interacted in a manner that has produced a tenuous division of labour that has exhibited severe imbalances during various phases of the peace process. We would agree that this interplay, which can be described as first-, and second-track diplomacy (Fitzduff, 2001), has been vital in developing trust and dialogue across sectarian lines between 1994 and 1998, and, most importantly, for achieving a political settlement to the enduring conflict with the signing of the peace accord in April 1998. Nonetheless, the post-Agreement implementation phase, which can be described as the crucial second phase of peace-building, suffered a great deal from the lack of new impulses for confidence-building.

What happened? An impact of the Agreement, which can be elucidated as the top-down effect, curtailed the flexibility of both external third parties and internal bottom up initiatives: The prominent outside facilitator of negotiations, former US-Senator George Mitchell, left the stage, abandoning the Commission on

Decommissioning, which, with a limited mandate, was grappling with the most contentious issue of the peace process. Civil society, after numerous creative interventions during the peace talks that were not always enthusiastically appreciated by local politicians, including its profound public appeals in the "Yes Campaign" that ultimately led to the referendum of May 1998 (Oliver, 1998), were deprived of their influence on policy when the implementation process was narrowed down to the unproductive "guns versus government" controversy.

Outsiders: How neutral can they get?

The specifics of external involvement in Northern Ireland (Mac Ginty, 1997; Arthur, 2000; Grove, 2001; Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, pp. 106-122)—the British-Irish guardianship forming a unique "tandem" model of bipartisan conflict management inaugurated by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, emergent American interventionism during the Clinton administration in response to the impassioned exhortations of the Irish-American diaspora, and the Special Support Programme of the EU since 1994—have given the conflict a distinctly

international aura. It is somewhat paradoxical that a conflict which has never posed a genuine threat to international security and never been subjected to UN mediation or intervention would become so internationalised. Outside involvement in Northern Ireland would prove its relevance predominantly for the unsolved domestic security issues of a protracted low-intensity conflict, and in particular for the solution of the impasse surrounding decommissioning. The most evident examples are George Mitchell's brokering role for the peace accord and the review process of the Agreement in autumn 1999, the Agreement's provision for independent international commissions on decommissioning and policing, and the role of the international inspectors visiting IRA arms dumps since summer 2000.

The manner in which a concert of powerful outsiders assumed guardianship of the peace process should not necessarily be equated with genuine third party intervention. Most external actors chose to adopt an approach emphasizing facilitation rather than intervention; the "neutrality" of third parties was regularly contested by local politicians in Northern Ireland; "they had to be approved by the British and Irish governments and yet retain enough distance from the governments to be regarded as truly independent" (Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, p.120). Nationalists and Republicans have, above all other groups, demonstrated an ardent determination to internationalise the conflict. The premise upon which this position has been based is that the ultimate overarching political goal of a united Ireland can only be achieved with Irish and US involvement in the peace process. In contrast, Unionists and Loyalists, endeavouring to reaffirm their British identity, have been wary of placing faith or trust in initiatives

facilitated by the United States, and especially those that involve Ireland; they doubt their capacity for impartiality. Several channels of communication were opened between the Dublin government, the Ulster Unionists and even the Loyalist paramilitaries in the mid-1990s to overcome these reservations and build confidence; however, these efforts dissipated during the post-Agreement period, leading to a renewal of sentiments of alienation among Protestants (Fitzduff, 2001, p.115). They clearly expressed their fear of possible joint authority exercised by an ever-strengthening London-Dublin axis, which they perceived to be looming over the province at times of crisis such as that which transpired in spring 2000 (*Irish Times*, 20 May 2000).

A reality of most conflicts in which identity is defined in terms of ethnicity, nationalism or religion is “that the role played by international actors is affected by how domestic actors perceive, cultivate, and bring attention to the linkages between the two spheres” (Grove, 2001, p. 357); Northern Ireland is no different. The leadership of each party tends to seek external backing that is most amenable

to their own particularistic goals. Accordingly, the positive, neutral and moderating effects of international reputation and third party credibility may become overruled by domestic partisan interests. We intend to focus on the effect of the third party initiatives established to facilitate the implementation of the decommissioning provisions of the Agreement. Specifically, we will analyse the work of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) and the international arms inspectors who began their examinations of IRA arms dumps in the summer of 2000.

About mandates, methods and mindsets: Commission and inspection

As stated earlier, the IICD was formed through a unique provision of the peace accord in order to supervise—through consultation, recommendation, execution and report—the disarmament process without disturbing the general political settlement. In one of his rare public

statements, the Chairman of the Commission, Canadian ex-General John de Chastelain, wrote in 1998:

“Our principal usefulness to the process must lie in our impartiality and neutrality. As we stated in the report of the International Body in 1996: We have no stake in Northern Ireland other than an interest in seeing an end to the conflict and in the ability of its people to live in peace. Our role is to bring in an independent perspective to the issue” (De Chastelain, 1998, p.15).

The Commission’s mandate to “monitor, review and verify progress on decommissioning of illegal arms, and (will) report to both Governments at regular intervals” was institutionalised in the Agreement (Agreement, section 7, para.3, see also Box B), simultaneously highlighting the great extent of British-Irish control of the process and the need for additional independent third party involvement.

The Commission enjoyed broad based acceptance across the political divide at the time of its implementation, when all paramilitary organisations were required to appoint representatives to liaise with the commission. However, as the decommissioning process lapsed into paralysis, the Commission’s support base gradually dwindled, especially among sceptical Ulster Unionists. Apart from the handing in of a smaller number of LVF munitions in December 1998, no progress on actual decommissioning was made throughout the whole year of 1999. It was one of the paradoxes of the peace process, that following unprecedented growth of optimism in January 2000 (after the successful review of the Agreement’s implementation by George Mitchell and the setting up of the governmental institutions), the actual low point of trust would be reached between the dominant political players, culminating in the suspension of the Stormont executive on 11 February by Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson.



The three commissioners of the IICD. From left to right, General John de Chastelain, Brigadier Tauno Nieminen, who left the commission in November 2001, and Andrew D. Sens (01.11.2001). Photo: Aaro Suonio/IICD

In spite of an intensification of the Commission's efforts and activities, exemplified by several meetings held with IRA, UVF and UFF representatives and its release of three reports between the end of December 1999 and 12 February 2000, its actual capacity to positively influence the distrustful mindsets remained limited. The first two reports contained conflicting information concerning the level of commitment displayed by the paramilitaries and uncertainty in regard to the timing and methods by which the process would be initiated; in their January 2000 report the Commission added, "that if at any time we believed decommissioning would not happen, we would recommend that we would be disbanded" (De Chastelain, 2001, p. 9) Embodied in this statement was a twofold message: it recognised the inherent obstacles inhibiting the process and asked for confidence in any realistic assessment by the Commission. The latter seemed difficult to achieve even after the Commission's third report of 12 February, following the IRA's last minute, though significant, announcement to put arms beyond use.

The Commission's difficulties to guide the process through crises were never more apparent than in February 2000 following a significant setback. John de Chastelain provides a vivid description of this episode and his impressions of its impact in the following passage:

"On 11 February, in a meeting with the IRA representative, we were given a statement which we felt offered some promise on movement. This was to the effect that the IRA would 'consider a process to put arms beyond use' in the context of the overall implementation of the Agreement and the resolution of the causes of conflict. While the statement did not say the IRA would decommission, and while it seemed to put political conditions on their doing so that were outside our mandate to consider, it nonetheless contained words the representative had not used before. In our report that day we

welcomed 'the IRA's recognition that the issue of arms needs to be dealt with in an acceptable way ...' and their apparent willingness 'to initiate a comprehensive process to put arms beyond use, in a manner as to ensure maximum public confidence'. Given the lack of an unconditional agreement to start decommissioning ... the Secretary of State suspended the Executive and re-imposed direct rule. Shortly afterwards, the IRA representative contacted us and said he would soon announce that he was breaking off contact with us and withdraw the proposals given us to date" (De Chastelain, 2001, pp. 9–10).

Within John de Chastelain's sober recollection one can sense his profound disappointment and frustration with the Commission's inability to restore confidence in the peace process at such a critical juncture. Indeed, the conditions regarding overall implementation that were established in the IRA's statement went beyond the primarily practical mandate of the Commission, making it exceedingly difficult for the IICD to assume a more proactive approach. The failure of 11 February 2000 demonstrated, yet again, the salience of one of Northern Ireland's central political tenets, that the implementation of technical methods and schemes of disarmament should only occur after a sustained period of confidence building.

In the end, it was the urgent need for a fresh start, for more creativity and flexibility in regard to the political and the technical aspects of confidence-building, which produced, after weeks of arduous behind-the-scene-talks with the two governments, a promising third party initiative that aspired to breathe new life into a seemingly hopeless situation. The involvement of two international arms inspectors, the former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, with a long career in diplomacy within the United Nations, and the ex-ANC Secretary-General Cyril Ramaphosa, who was the chief-negotiator in the talks that spawned the new South African constitution, fulfilled two parallel requirements:

First, they possessed international reputations robust enough to receive the endorsement of both Unionists and Republicans, and secondly, they brought with them a strategy of decommissioning that was soft enough to respect Sinn Fein's concerns about propagating the image that they had surrendered, an image that had the potential to divide and enflame their constituency.

The introduction of two supervisors noted for their skill in confronting thorny cases of conflict resolution—Martti Ahtisaari lately as a mediator in the Kosovo crisis—underlined the decisive influence of the South African case study on the thinking of Northern Ireland's party leaders. Having met central South African figures, including Cyril Ramaphosa, in Arniston, South Africa in May 1997 (O'Malley, 2000) during a crucial phase of the Northern Ireland peace process, Unionist and Republicans alike appropriated a deep reservoir of lessons derived during the South African conflict to draw upon and apply in Northern Ireland, one being to accept impartial support from outside. Although enthusiasm faded after the first positive reactions to the inspections and distrust returned on the Unionist side in autumn 2000, it was, in retrospect, an unprecedented act of externally-supported confidence-building—a way in which the Republicans could declare that "the war is over" without actually saying it (*Irish Times*, 13 May 2000)—that got the peace process back on track.

The creative potential of the inspectors' method, a "dual-keys" system similarly pioneered in the UN-assisted El Salvador peace process (Laurance and Godnick, 2001), which ensured that inspected arms dumps could not be opened unilaterally, worked as a door opener of a different kind. It can be safely assumed that the inspections served as a catalyst for the emergence of more in-depth consideration of practical methods to

put the arms beyond use. The IICD, which had to confirm the successful execution of the inspections, made a point of reminding observers that it was solely a confidence-building measure and the actual process of decommissioning would have to follow. It was in the aftermath of the first arms inspection, though, that the two governments began to encourage the Commission to investigate “further proposals for decommissioning schemes which offer the Commission a greater scope to proceed in more effective and satisfactory ways with the discharging of its basic mandate” (De Chastelain, 2001, p. 13).

The process of confidence-building, furthered significantly by the inspections, stimulated a redefinition of the concept of decommissioning; it assumed a meaning encapsulated in the phrase, “putting arms beyond use”. The actual methods of arms destruction, accorded little attention and importance when the issue first attained prominence, gradually came to be viewed as critical. The inspectors, who revisited the same two arms dumps two more times, in October 2000 and in May 2001 (<http://www.nio.gov.uk/press/010530dca-nio.htm>), became closely linked to the actual pursuit of the Commission to find and communicate a means of decommissioning satisfactory to all players.

Speculation arose that it was the inspected locations, supposedly containing half of the IRA’s entire arsenal (*Sunday Independent*, 26.8.2001) that was the subject of the IRA’s historic statement of 23 October 2001 (see Box E). Since the process was confidential, the actual scheme that was implemented, a method the IICD had agreed upon in August, was not made public. The Commission explained in its report “that it would not further the process of putting all arms beyond were we to provide further details of

this event” (see Box F). This referred to the method, quantity and visual evidence of the arms that were put beyond use. In an effort to compensate for the process’ lack of transparency—confidentiality was a condition set by the Republicans—De Chastelain invited Ulster Unionist leaders to a special meeting in order to assure them that the decommissioning event was significant. A transcript of the meeting was released to the public thereafter (*UTV Internet*, 26 October 2001). In an act that served to reassure the population of Northern Ireland and the international community, the media reported extensively on this meeting:

“Mr. Trimble said Gen. John de Chastelain of Canada, head of the disarmament panel, had told him he had personally witnessed the destruction of the I.R.A. weapons and was assured that they could ‘never, ever be used again.’ Mr. Trimble said the panel had a complete list of the incapacitated weaponry and that the secret method of destruction was convincing. It is much more than the concrete capping over of arms dumps that some have described,’ he said” (*New York Times*, 24 October 2001).

At the time, it seemed not to matter how exactly the hatchet was buried. Convincing Ulster Unionists that the manner in which it was carried out was “a matter of trust” (*Sunday Independent*, 28 October 2001) was as important to the Chairman of the Commission as the actual act of implementation. For the process to continue, the Commission had to satisfy Northern Ireland’s “core triangle” of conflicting parties: Ulster Unionists, Republicans and the British Government. The fact that most of these parties bestowed their trust on the Commission in spite of the secrecy surrounding the details of the act reinvigorated its third party position in the process, a role that had been questioned at times of crisis. DUP leader Ian Paisley’s affirmation that “he [De Chastelain] and the decommissioning body are nothing more than a pawn being used by the

IRA and the two governments” (*Irish Times*, 8 September 2001) appeared to be archaic rhetoric that belonged to a past generation. In contrast, the British Government’s statement following the 23 October 2001 pointed to the tasks that laid ahead:

“Today’s report reinforces and confirms the Government’s view that it is only through the IICD that the putting of paramilitary arms beyond use can be achieved. The IRA’s move represents by far the most significant progress in the resolution of the arms issue. All paramilitary groups need now to play their part to build on this progress. We are grateful to the IICD for their patient work” (<http://www.nio.gov.uk/press/011023gov.htm>).

Lessons learned

It seems too early to write a history of the Commission, especially since the process of removing the gun and bomb from Northern Irish politics is far from being over. And many details of those hours, which “the Canadian general spent waiting patiently, keeping open lines of communication which might have been severed were it not for his quiet perseverance” (*The Herald*, 24 October 2001), may never be revealed. One may assume though—without underestimating other factors—that the third party capacity of the Commission to develop, over the years, a deeper and more empathetic understanding of the historical and political nature of the Northern Irish arms game was a key to its successful efforts to kick-start the process.

It was not only an unprecedented act in Irish history, but may, in the context of conflict resolution, provide a few lessons for the international debate on problems of small arms availability, methods of controlling their access and demand, and schemes for disarmament:

- Making disarmament a condition for political participation or inclusion may lead to no-go-situations, while political and social empowerment may serve as incentives for disarmament.
- In a case of protracted distrust among conflicting parties, setting up a mutually agreed control mechanism such as the regular inspection of “surplus” weapons that have been rendered obsolete may be a crucial step of confidence-building prior to substantive disarmament.
- Disarmament itself can have many features and should be shaped in accordance to the political history of the gun holders and the conditions necessary for the overall settlement of the conflict.
- Secret dismantling procedures or the sealing of arms arsenals under third party observation may be as symbolically valuable and satisfying as public acts of destruction. Confidence-building may be advanced by confidentiality.

The road ahead

Rather than saluting the Commission’s achievement with a farewell address, it was acknowledged that their role would remain substantial for the foreseeable time ahead. The IRA move would not be regarded as a one-off event but as a start for further acts of putting paramilitary arms beyond use. However, the refusal of Loyalist groups to consider reciprocating moves on their arms is a harbinger of the profound obstacles that lie ahead. The target date for the completion of decommissioning has been moved. Current legislation stipulates that Republican and Loyalist groups are obligated to legally put their weapons beyond use under the supervision of the Independent International Decommissioning Commission by 26

February 2002. However, Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid has asked the Commons to back the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning (Amendment) Bill to extend the deadline for another year, with the option for further extensions up to 2007 (*BBC News*, 9 January 2002). This move has aroused resounding criticism from anti-Agreement Unionists such as North Belfast DUP MP Nigel Dodds who has claimed that the purpose of the initiative is to “bury the issue so that no deadlines will cause the government or David Trimble any immediate problems” (*ibid.*).

A remarkable comment came from former Irish Fine Gael leader John Bruton, who set up the decommissioning body in agreement with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997: “There is a difficulty if the State, in any long term basis is ‘subcontracting’ its obligations, to ensure there is no illegal army in the State, to another body—namely the international commission which is not disclosing information to the Government ... An international commission [was] a ‘valid enough mechanism’ on a short term basis only” (*Irish Independent*, 28 October 2001). The prospect of Sinn Féin becoming a substantial force on the Irish political landscape after the Republic’s next general election, a conceivable outcome according to early polls, has filled Ireland’s traditional parties with apprehension and put them on the offensive (*Irish Examiner*, January 9, 2002). The IRA may consider their next move to put arms beyond use ahead of the Irish elections. The implementation should further rest in the reliable hands of the Commission. To prepare for possible domestic challenges, Irish politicians should not deliberate over releasing “the subcontractor” and throw over board the overall positive experience of the third party involvement of the Commission.

The lessons learned in the last few years about how to take the gun out of Irish politics must still be applied to a large number of silent, loud, buried,

and free floating arms within the stocks of both Republicans and Loyalists. Burying the hatchet may take different routes. The history of the conflict shows that this will not be a task that can be tackled solely by either of the two “godmothers” in London and Dublin. Further external support, increased involvement of civil society in anti-sectarian initiatives, as well as patience and creativity in the development of new methods of disarmament are required for progress. Tackling the problems of handguns, automatic rifles, and the components used to make petrol bombs may demand different strategies than those used to confront the dilemmas posed by sophisticated weaponry like SAM-7 ground-to-air missiles and Semtex explosives (see Box D).

John Reid, whose leadership on the overall implementation of the Agreement was apparently more successful than his predecessor’s in stimulating change on the arms issue, assessed the standing of the peace process following the IRA move: “It won’t be finished for a generation. Ultimately, it is culture and the mindset that has to be decommissioned” (*Sunday Telegraph*, 28 October 2001).

Proliferation of Violence and the Momentum of Arms

The start of decommissioning in October 2001 has not yet helped to halt the proliferation of violence that has burdened the Northern Irish peace process over the last eighteen months. Deriving a connection between decommissioning and the level of paramilitary violence may seem odd at first glance, however, a closer examination reveals a distinct correlation between the two. The object or purpose of decommissioning is not limited to the physical removal of paramilitary arms from Northern Ireland; it also aims to obliterate the culture of violence that engulfs this divided, war-torn society.

In the following passage Darby and Mac Ginty provide a superb analysis of the omnipresent threat that violence poses to peace processes:

“The most obvious threat to any peace process is that violence may start up again. Indeed it seems likely that a combination of factors would make its return inevitable: an entrenched culture of violence; the continuing presence of arms; failure to move towards successful negotiations and compromise; and unwillingness to remove the security apparatus erected during the period of violence. The key question then is the resilience of the peace process itself, and its ability to continue, despite a resumption of violence ...” (Darby and Mac Ginty, 2000, pp.12–13).

Like most societies emerging from a protracted, violent conflict, Northern Ireland has faced a continuation, and at times a proliferation, of violence after the declaration or resumption of cease-fires—in 1994 and 1997—and even after the settlement of the peace accord of 1998. As the interests and priorities of the conflicting parties in

the peace process changed, diffused, and fragmented, the nature of violence altered accordingly. The form of violence that has evolved in the province has proved to be more difficult to tackle than the mainly politically motivated violence that prevailed prior to the Agreement.

Top level political debate and crisis management regarding the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement seemingly left little room to address these new problems in an adequate manner. Somewhere along the road from the Agreement’s negotiation to the beginning of its implementation phase, the distinction between the overarching commitment to non-violent means outlined in the Mitchell principles (see Box A), and the method of handling the decommissioning issue in a broad cross-sectarian context of confronting violence, was blurred.

One of the significant findings of this study is that the arduous decommissioning debate rarely touched on the problems that have emerged as a result of the gradual metamorphosis of violence since the signing of the Agreement. The proliferation of violence did not become a major public argument in favour of an intensification of decommissioning. Demands for decommissioning were rarely expressed as a means to halt the escalating violence. A wall of paradoxes seemed to separate the two debates. The availability of arms, an evident linkage that has been acknowledged as a factor that created its own momentum in the vicious circle of violence by virtually every interview partner on both sides of the political

spectrum, was apparently perceived to be less relevant than other factors. We will attempt to peer behind this paradoxical wall to analyse why there has been such difficulties in dealing with post-Agreement violence, particularly in relation to the issue of decommissioning.

Diversification of inter-, and intra-sectarian violence

John Darby identifies a diverse array of types and patterns of violence that pose a threat to the transformation period of a conflict:

- the changing role of state violence;
- paramilitary violence with a possible return to politically motivated violence, the use of “tactical” violence, the spoiler dilemma of zealots versus dealers, and intra-paramilitary forms of “family feuding”;
- violence in the community with ethnic rivals returning to the streets, resulting in a rise in “ordinary decent crime”;
- the emergence of new security related issues in negotiations (Darby, 2000).

A combination of the second, third, and, to a certain degree, the last type of violence appears to be relevant in the case of Northern Ireland, particularly in the post-Agreement period.

The outbreak, late in the summer of 2000, of a violent intra-Loyalist feud between the two major paramilitary groups, the UDA/UFF and the UVF, over territorial claims in Belfast’s Shankill area caused the deaths of at least seven people and led to the expulsion of more than 70 families. In spring 2001, the Loyalist “family feud” spilled over the sectarian divide in the form of threats and attacks on Catholic homes in Belfast, the most

severe anti-Catholic violence of the last three years. At the same time, dissident Republican groups such as the Real IRA stepped up their spoiler campaign, targeting British army barracks in the province and the BBC building in London.

However, the most bitter return to violence in the community occurred in September 2001 when Protestant residents of the small religiously mixed North Belfast community of Ardoyne attempted—by hurling abuses and throwing pipe bombs—to block Catholic parents from walking their children to Holy Cross Primary School. The Ardoyne school dispute, which at the time of writing was on a slow and cautious path towards a settlement, primarily due to the provision of mediation and an improvement of security precautions, provoked horror and dismay in Northern Ireland and throughout the international community; it vividly reflected the deep-rooted sectarian hatred and fear, as well as the overall “culture of violence” that obdurately remains entrenched in these communities.

Although the Ardoyne situation is far from typical in terms of the manner in which the Protestant and Catholic communities interact in today’s Northern Ireland, one can find similar trends emerging in analyses of general statistics on casualties caused by paramilitary-style attacks (<http://www.psnl.police.uk/stats/securitysit.shtml>): The year 2001 witnessed a disturbing statistical rise in sectarian attacks: there was a total of 331 casualties; (1998: 216; 1999: 207; 2000: 268), 186 shootings and 145 assaults, the latter mainly of the variety referred to as “punishment beatings”. The statistics also demonstrate that Loyalists were responsible for a disproportionately large share of the attacks; they carried out twice as many attacks as Republicans. It was reported in November 2001 that the overall number of paramilitary-related violent acts carried out in that year, including

intimidation, racketeering, and violence, stood at more than 840. After releasing these figures, Northern Ireland Security Minister Jane Kennedy revealed that “loyalist paramilitaries have been responsible for three times as many terror attacks as republicans this year” (*BBC News*, 7 November 2001).

Two dominant trends, an increasing intra-Loyalist confrontation, and an aggravating anti-Catholic campaign in which the assassination of the Catholic postal worker Daniel McColgan in January 2002 was the latest heinous act, illustrates the growing resolve of the UDA, the largest Loyalist paramilitary group, to turn its back on the peace process. The UDA campaign, greeted with concern and condemnation by both politicians and the Northern Irish public, has given rise to many political and security related reactions.

The British Government decided in October 2001 that the UDA cease-fire was over. The Northern Ireland Secretary appealed to the victims of the expulsions and their families to cooperate with the reformed police service in Ulster to lift the death threats issued by the paramilitaries (*The Independent*, 6 January 2002). Since a heightened level of violence endured, recruitment into the new Police Service

of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was two thirds higher than planned (*UTVNET*, 30 January 2002). Speaking about police reform, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams complained about the lack of prosecutions against Loyalists for their “campaign of violence against the nationalist community, in certain sectarian flashpoints such as north Belfast” (*UTV Internet*, 20 February 2002).

On 18 January 2002, tens of thousands of people turned out for rallies in Belfast, Derry and other centres to protest against sectarian violence. The demonstration supported by the trade unions and the pro-Agreement parties was one of the largest rallies seen in Northern Ireland. A resolution put forth at the demonstration called for an end to any form of bigotry and sectarianism and exhorted paramilitary organisations to disband; John Reid said “that it was now time for people to reclaim society from those who were filled with hatred” (*Irish Times*, 18 January 2002).

It is clear that the winds of change are blowing, not in the form that the violence has taken but in the willingness of people to accept ownership of it. What is behind this development? What is impelling the silent majority, whose voices have, for



A Republican mural depicting the Holy Cross crisis in a Catholic district of the religiously mixed Ardoyne area of North Belfast (2002). Photo: Mark Sedra

the most part, been dormant throughout the years of the decommissioning deadlock, to enter the political fray and raise objections to the proliferation of sectarian violence?

Not included: Loyalist dilemmas

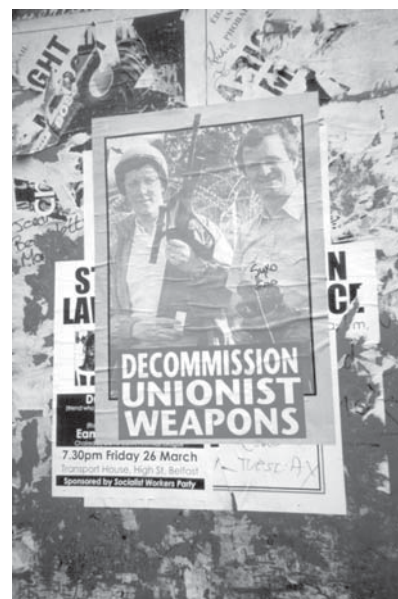
The UDA demonstrated its growing identity crisis, engendered by the changing political landscape, in their immediate defiant response to the IRA's historic decommissioning announcement: "We'll keep our guns... The IRA will never hand over their weapons. Nobody will. They'll hand over some as gesture, but that's it" (*The Times*, 23 October 2001); Jackie McDonald, a former commander of the UDA who spent ten years in the Maze prison for terrorist offences, said that the paramilitaries would keep their weapons to defend Loyalist communities against the threat of Republican attacks (ibid.). The ardent determination of Loyalists to hang on to their arms is reinforced by their conviction to maintain a "narrative of defence" (Zurawski, 2001), an outdated pattern of identity that serves to justify incitement, retribution, and retaliation, and thereby encourage the perpetuation of the self fulfilling cycle of violence.

A broad public debate has been triggered, due to the continued sectarian tension and confrontation in the Ardoyne and elsewhere, about the deep-rooted frustration that exists within Loyalism. The shift in attention towards the grievances, fears and disillusionment that are commonplace within impoverished Protestant working class areas, should be interpreted as a positive reflex of the Northern Irish peace process. Moving beyond the customary provision of sympathy for the victims and the issuance of stern condemnations of the perpetrators, efforts to encourage public understanding of the root causes of violence is a relatively new and progressive approach to the complexities of peacemaking.

The demise of the UDA's political arm, the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) on 26 November 2001 signalled—in a highly disturbing fashion—the inability of a dominant strand of the Loyalist movement to achieve legitimate and credible political representation. The feeling of political irrelevance and exclusion has haunted working-class Loyalists since the beginning of the Troubles; electoral failure strengthened those forces within the UDA who were unhappy with the political direction the peace process had taken, writes commentator Jack Holland. According to Holland:

"The UDA, never as well organized as the Ulster Volunteer Force, began to fragment. A faction under Johnny Adair wanted to resume violence while using the UDA's resources to run a profitable drug-smuggling operation. Several "brigades" threatened to go independent. ... The respectable Protestant working-class vote eluded it, and there was never any chance that middle-class Unionists would be tempted to a party with such criminal links. In the end, the UDP manifested all the contradictions that were inherent within the UDA from the start ... and men who aspired to real politics stood alongside pure criminals. Unfortunately, it was this, the dark side of the UDA, that finally won the battle for the soul of the organization" (Irish Echo, 14 December 2001).

One hopeful aspect of this kind of public analysis is that some of the central findings are gaining increasingly mainstream acceptance, both internationally and within Ulster Unionism. In early 2002, President Bush's envoy to Northern Ireland, Richard Haas, called for more "sensitivity" towards Loyalist violence, as it stemmed "from painful transition"; Haas warned of the dangers posed by a reversal of historical trends, creating a "cold house" for Protestants (*Irish Independent*, 10 January 2002; *Guardian*, 12 January 2002). Personal advisors to David Trimble, such as Alex Kane (*NewsLetter*, 4 February 2002) and Steven King, have recently stressed the political relevance of the socio-economic aspects of the Loyalist



A poster campaign to reverse the focus on Republican arms (1999). Photo: Corinna Hauswedell

dilemma, which have traditionally been overlooked and neglected in Northern Irish society:

"For a whole swathe of young working-class Protestants, rioting provides an exciting interlude in otherwise hopeless lives.... Economic prospects are correspondingly poor. Housing conditions are, arguably, worse in the Protestant areas. The relatively flourishing Catholic community is growing numerically while the Protestant community contracts. What many middle-class Protestants can rationalise as symbolic issues marginal to the constitutional position are seen by poor Protestants as erosion of their intrinsic identity" (Irish Times, 17 January 2002).

The Protestant middle class opted out of the gloomy and sloping route through the Troubles. For the Loyalist working class—who joined paramilitary organisations in larger numbers than their Republican counterparts—it was this route that served to scatter the community and dilute its identity. This route led the community into social and political exclusion, transforming its fundamental outlook and purpose from one that valued the honourable calling of "defending the community" into one, devoid of morality and ethics, which engaged in ordinary crime. While a

growing sense of political and social inclusion has helped draw Republicanism into the peace process and has made them more amenable to the prospect of putting their arms beyond use, the underlying sentiment within Loyalism, that the process is unfair and owes them essential rewards, persists.

“Cultures” and “markets” of violence

The remaining challenges and hurdles that face the peace process are not limited to Loyalist dilemmas. We are confident that assessments of relevant sociological aspects of diversified violence in transitional Northern Ireland will prove to be valuable for the ongoing peace process. Placing the arms issue into the broader context of demilitarising and civilising post-conflict society will create space for an indispensable debate on the transformation of paramilitary organisations (see Box C).

When tackling the problem of violence, the mistake of approaching the arms issue in a partisan manner should not be repeated. “Cultural paramilitarism” is a decades old paradigm of Northern Irish history on both sides of the ethno-political divide; people have accustomed themselves to its structures, whether out of sympathy, fear, or revulsion. Its main pillar, a macho-type surrogate police structure of vigilantism with a strong anti-state attitude, was erected during the Troubles and maintains an “alternative” model of order and control in the community (Zurawski, 2001) that has been fundamentally questioned by the peace process.

“Paramilitary groups [appear] more influential than politicians”, according to a headline of a recently carried-out research paper conducted for the Belfast City Council. (*Irish Times*, 9 January 2002). The survey’s results, which are based on the responses of 1,583 residents to questions regarding the political influence of

paramilitarism, has not yet been released. One may assume, though, that next to the already mentioned social and “cultural” pillars of paramilitarism, economic resources developed over the years of violent conflict have become an increasingly crucial factor sustaining paramilitary power; it possesses the potential to escalate violence and augment the availability of arms. Drug dealing—some observers affirm that since the mid-90s there has been a 500–1000% increase in drug usage within Protestant working class areas—as well as trade in tax-free petrol and other profitable goods has fuelled the development of a self-sustaining paramilitary economic base. To get an accurate picture of this problem, it may become necessary to analyse characteristics of Northern Ireland’s “markets of violence” (Elwert, 1999), a concept used to frame research on the economic dimensions of protracted civil wars. The fact that among recent paramilitary-related assassinations, suspected drug dealers were high on the list, and that here, as in many other paramilitary assaults, perpetrators could not be convicted, illustrates the difficulties for both the community and a new police force struggling to implement fundamental reform posed by the existence of opposing paramilitary agendas. Northern Irish society is now faced with the imposing task of combating new patterns of “ordinary crime” that have precariously positioned themselves between the traditional political boundaries of the conflict.

The necessity of transforming paramilitarism

The time has come to rethink the role of paramilitarism as a whole, its ideological, social and structural roots, as well as its basic framework. With the IRA starting to put their arms beyond use, weapons that were silent and not readily available on the streets, a window of opportunity has been

opened to jump-start the process. Northern Ireland’s peace is entering a critical phase in which its security related roles and identities are undergoing a transformation; this sweeping change will affect virtually every aspect of the peace process, from personal and community based perceptions of safety to the state’s monopoly of power. Efforts and consultations aiming to build a mutually agreed “common security” approach in Northern Ireland have begun but remain at a rudimentary stage of development—in a community like Ardoyne, it simply does not exist. Literally caught between sectarian lines, the RUC was criticised by both sides for its handling of the school dispute. Regardless of the efficacy of the RUC’s strategy to confront the crisis, it was much too serious and volatile to lend credence to North Belfast DUP MP Nigel Dodds’ assessment: “If we did not have this excessive security presence I’m sure the girls could walk safely to school” (*Washington Post*, 4 September 2001). Republican reluctance to join the new Policing Board at a time when they feel that accountability to the community provided by the Patten recommendations has not been secured, also stems from the existence of an inherent and entrenched resistance to change within the police force, aptly described as a “‘police culture’ ... [with] a sectarian overlay” (Mc Ginty and Darby, 2002, p. 102). Sinn Fein’s security spokesman, Gerry Kelly, recently re-affirmed his party’s concern that “the baleful influence of the Special Branch [of the police] and their relationship with the UDA remain intact” (*Irish Times*, 19 February 2002). On the other hand, the full support of Republicans is urgently required for the nascent police structures to function properly in a new cross-sectarian way.

Transformation rather than disbandment was the term chosen for police reform by Chris Patten in 1999. One can envisage a similar approach

being used to facilitate the conversion of paramilitarism. What has been stated about the arms issue, namely that the symbolic value of guns surpasses their inherent military potential, is also true for Northern Ireland's paramilitary organisations. It will require a high degree of sensitivity from inside and outside the organisations to adequately deal with their cultural legacies and devastating past, and to define routes into civil society. Apart from the experience of ex-prisoners' (re)integration during the Troubles, and particularly in the context of the 1998 Agreement's early release formula (Gormally, 2001), no comprehensive approach towards alternative civilian options for members of paramilitary groups has been developed in Northern Ireland. Unlike several other post-conflict scenarios in Africa and Central America, the decommissioning debate occurred in the absence of any concept or programme of demobilisation or ex-combatant reintegration; neither was there any relevant demand for the integration of ex-militants into Northern Ireland's security forces, a policy implemented in South African, where former paramilitaries were subsumed into the army (MacGinty and Darby, 2002, p.101).

The transformation and conversion of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland—a peace dividend not yet redeemed—may take on various characteristics and features in the future:

- From inside, the positive elements within the paramilitary organisations will have to develop more strength and creativity to civilise their culture and confront violence by means of community awareness and community watch operations instead of vigilantism; voluntary forms of community based arms control may lay the groundwork for further decommissioning.
- Civil society, both organisations and individuals, may be asked to more proactively take "local ownership" of this process, especially at the interfaces of the two communities.

- Politicians must endeavour to enhance political inclusion, augment social and economic integration, and develop a more efficient system to sanction and prosecute crime. Economies which fuel violence have to be dried out.

Silent spring 2002?

For 2002, the overall picture for Northern Ireland's peace process does not appear all that gloomy after all. This is especially apparent when one compares the relatively tranquil spring of 2002 with the crisis-ridden springs of previous years. Although the beginning of 2002 was rife with problems, they were not monolithic or intractable in nature; it appears that a more relaxed atmosphere has descended over the province. There have been many encouraging signs in recent months that the peace process is gaining momentum: January rallies have shown civic society's potential to intervene; the emergence of a Loyalist "think tank" indicates a new political voice that may present alternatives to violence (*Sunday Tribune*, 20 January 20, 2002); and the dissident Republican group INLA has recently offered to "talk peace with the UDA" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 10 February 2002).

Accordingly, questions whether it is "time for an Ulster truth commission" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 10 February 2002) have been raised more loudly. The changing atmosphere in the province was reflected in a significant statement of Gerry Adams at the World Economic Forum in New York: "I don't think we can force on unionism an all-Ireland state that doesn't have their assent or consent and doesn't reflect their sense of being comfortable" (*The Irish Times*, 5 February 2002).

Four years after the Good Friday Agreement, there is no doubt that the process of burying the hatchet has commenced. Leaving behind violence during a peace process is not only about arms, the bad guys that use them, or the victims who suffer from them; it is about the roots of a conflict that has hindered the political representation and inclusion of divided identities; about the achievement of political goals which were partly pursued by violence, about the recognition of these goals that spurred the armed struggle; about justice and the healing of wounds inflicted by violence and violations of human rights; and about the adoption of a new approach to the past with the purpose of building a better future.



A Divided Society: A "peace line" in Belfast (2001). Photo: Corinna Hauswedell

Conclusions

The difficulties of decommissioning

In years to come, as the history of the Northern Irish peace process is further researched, commentators will likely marvel at the relative speed with which agreement was reached on constitutional issues such as the establishment of a power sharing government and the setting up of cross border bodies. For decades, the constitutional question had been presented as being not merely thorny, but practically intractable. The thought of Unionists and Republicans sharing the government of Northern Ireland, indeed even the notion of Sinn Fein being involved in a “partitionist” Assembly, would have seemed the stuff of fantasy a decade ago.

The ease with which some of the parties slipped into the constitutional clothes of the new political structures contrasts sharply with their handling of the question of disarmament. Decommissioning dogged the process from the outset, creating numerous blockages, cul-de-sacs and governmental spats. Decommissioning was the quicksand in which the pro-Agreement Unionist leadership frequently began to disappear, a nagging irritant for the Republican grassroots, and a useful stick with which anti-Agreement Unionists beat their counterparts.

Why the Unionist insistence on decommissioning already silent weapons? Why the Republican reluctance to decommission even a meagre amount of material for so many years? **Guns have had a profound importance for Unionists and Republicans, far beyond their military potential. The deeply symbolic and psychological**

significance of guns in Northern Irish society ensured that any concerted effort to remove them from the province would also require the decommissioning of the mindsets of the populace on both sides of the sectarian divide.

Guns, symbolism and political ballast

The peace process involved undoubted difficulties for Unionists and Republicans; tactical and strategic concessions were commonplace, ideological tenets were remoulded and decades worth of political rhetoric jettisoned. Decommissioned weaponry was valuable for Ulster Unionists in that it provided a foundation upon which to anchor both their place in negotiations and their subsequent position in government. It would provide a very concrete symbol of Republican intentions to move beyond armed struggle, and prevent Ulster Unionists from being undermined by the continuous buffeting of those within their constituency opposed to any rapprochement with Republicanism. The fact that no disarmament occurred during the peace negotiations served to further inflate the importance of the issue when it came to actually sitting in government with Sinn Fein. The goal of decommissioning was held to be critical within pro-Agreement Unionism as it would serve to allay fears that Sinn Fein’s commitment to peace might only be tactical; without this assurance, the compromise made in the Belfast Agreement would have been perceived as a sign of fundamental weakness, leading only to future political instability.

Weaponry also had a great symbolic importance for Republicans through the trials and tribulations of the peace process. The symbolic value of munitions ensured that they would

hang on to their weaponry even as chunks of traditional Republican ideology were hollowed out. Whilst the Belfast Agreement gave Sinn Fein access to the levers of power, it also involved an end to abstentionism, and with it, an outright, meaningful rejection of British rule in Ireland. It was, in traditional Republican terms, a “partitionist” settlement which enshrined the principle of consent, ended the Republic of Ireland’s constitutional claim to the North, and provided for cross-border bodies which, while not being flimsy, were far from being engines of Irish reunification. These major ideological concessions required a counter-balance. Republican reluctance to decommissioning underwrote and insulated the new political strategy within the grass roots. The struggle was not being sold out or delegitimised, as its historical cutting edge would be sheathed but intact. In this way, the symbolic importance of retaining weaponry served as political ballast, its purpose being to steady the Republican movement while it jettisoned much of its traditional ideology.

One thing Ulster Unionists and Sinn Fein share in their political history is an understanding of the debilitating nature of political splits and the wounding power of allegations that they are “selling out”. **In large part, the decommissioning impasse can be seen as a tussle between pro-Agreement Unionism and pro-Agreement Republicanism for the political dead-weight of weaponry, which could prevent them from being toppled by internal or external critics.**

Why did decommissioning occur?

Although weapons had a political value for Republicans, the leadership was also aware of the costs accrued from delaying on disarmament. The failure to decommission periodically engendered unwelcome pressure from the British and Irish governments; it also helped fracture Unionism to such an extent that the institutions of the Belfast Agreement would themselves be imperilled. The political value of holding on to weapons centred on easing the Republican movement's arduous transition, but this did not mean that arms would need to be retained indefinitely. If the question of decommissioning could simply be stretched out for as long as it is advantageous, then the grassroots could be reassured through the period of ideological adjustment during which their recalcitrant stance on disarmament could be quietly deconstructed by the leadership. Republicans could seek concessions on issues such as policing or demilitarisation in return for gradualist movement on decommissioning. These advances, alongside the continued electoral growth of Sinn Fein, would improve morale at the movement's base, making actual decommissioning all the more likely.

Republican movement on disarmament was clearly discernible from May 2000; the inspection of several arms dumps amounted to a designation of these weapons for actual decommissioning at an unspecified future date. In response to this, a more propitious framework for decommissioning was developed by the two governments—decommissioning was increasingly seen as being linked to other issues of security such as demilitarisation and policing.

Perhaps the greatest boost to decommissioning was given by the electoral results of June 2001. In these elections Sinn Fein nosed ahead of the SDLP to become the largest Nationalist party. Simply put, Republican bullets have been decisively superseded by the ballot as a political tool. Weaponry has no real use and may actually be an impediment to further electoral growth; it certainly presents a clear danger to the Belfast Agreement which Sinn Fein supports.

It may be helpful to revisit certain tenets of Republican military strategy to assess just how far they, and the peace process, have come. Republican violence had several components. The first component was to act as a costly irritant to the British state. The second, to draw attention and publicity to the question of partition, a form of propaganda by deed. The third, to foil attempts by the British, Unionists, and constitutional Nationalists to reach an internal settlement. IRA violence could act as a partial veto on any prospective settlement; it tended to act as a corrosive and partial solvent on any possible rapprochement. The attempt to harry and harass the British until they withdrew from Ireland failed as the state simply dug itself in for the 'Long War'.

Armed propaganda is unnecessary—and of course, prone to backfire bloodily—when Sinn Fein is being feted by political leaders worldwide for having moved on to the road of peace. The partial veto deriving from IRA activity has now been replaced by the very real veto inherent in being the largest Nationalist party. In terms of traditional Republican strategy, guns are of no use and only serve to expose Republicanism to political attack from its opponents. **The electoral success of Sinn Fein has proved the efficacy of Sinn Fein's peace strategy and has given them the political space to disarm without appearing to have surrendered.**

These internal circumstances favouring an act of decommissioning were already crystallising when unforeseen external factors greatly accelerated the process. Revelations about IRA involvement in the training of the Marxist FARC paramilitaries in Colombia soured Republican relations with the US government and large swathes of Irish America. Soon after, this embarrassment was compounded by the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. To be associated with an organisation which the US State Department viewed as terrorist, and to have the residual taint of terrorist methods, threatened to place Republicanism outside the political pale. Although these circumstances underlined the need for decommissioning within Republican thinking and accelerated its progress, the process was already underway.

Loyalism and decommissioning

At first glance, the prospects for Loyalist decommissioning do not look bright. The political outlook within Loyalism differs from that of Republicans on the merits of the peace process, and appears less consistent. IRA decommissioning was fuelled by a strong adherence to the survival of the institutions of the new political dispensation; the political space to decommission was created by their electoral success.

In contrast, many Loyalists feel that the new dispensation has done little for them or the working class areas in which they live. Loyalism's political concerns, the thinking goes, have been overshadowed by the more media savvy and electorally successful Sinn Fein. The Loyalist presence in the electoral arena is weak, and thus does not act as a powerful incentive to relinquish weaponry. The PUP has only two seats in the Assembly while the UDP failed to win any Assembly seats

and has recently dissolved. In any case, the UDA has been seen as being detached from the political process for some months; following a spate of pipe bomb attacks and occasional assassinations, its ceasefire was declared to be over. The Loyalist paramilitary response to IRA decommissioning has been far from effusive. One UDA commander stated that his organisation “couldn’t consider decommissioning at least for another 10 years” (*The Times*, 27 October 2001).

The more impressive political performance of the PUP has undoubtedly helped keep the UVF more firmly in the process, but even while acknowledging that the issue of decommissioning should be “honestly addressed” (*Combat*, April 2001) the UVF seems unlikely to disarm. Wholesale decommissioning obviously entails either a partial or all-encompassing transformation or conversion of a paramilitary organisation and the UVF envisions a continuing role for itself as an armed group while any Republican paramilitary group exists.

Both the UVF and UDA are extremely wary of each other following their feud in 2000, and this also provides a compelling reason not to show weakness by decommissioning. More hopefully, the quasi isolation of Loyalism has been challenged from within. The UDA has found a new voice in the Ulster Political Research Group, which aims to articulate the concerns of working class Loyalist communities. Mainstream Unionism has a responsibility to help groups like the UDA achieve credible political representation; only through the provision of such guidance, succour, and support can the paramilitary groups be brought out of the darkness of violence and into the light of the peace process. **A growing sense of political inclusion has helped draw Republicanism into the decommissioning process. Only a similar sense of ownership and inclusion in the political process**

would assist Loyalists in moving along a similar path. Achieving this will be a difficult and sensitive task given the hindrance of Loyalism’s relatively unsuccessful performance at the polls.

Loyalist alienation may not simply be a factor inhibiting the decommissioning of Loyalist weaponry. There has been no attempt by Republicans to link further decommissioning to a Loyalist response, and indeed Gerry Adams has warned about making Loyalist paramilitaries jump through the same hoops as Republicans (*Irish Times*, 25 October 2001); nevertheless, a failure by Loyalists to decommission could act as a brake on the disposal of IRA weaponry. This appears particularly true given the rise of communal tension in parts of Belfast. It should not be forgotten that Republicanism owes much to the memory of both sectarian pogroms and the ham fisted security measures taken by the state. These psychological chords, easily struck at the political base, are almost completely resistant to ideological or strategic argument. **Violence at sectarian interfaces does not settle nerves, and if Loyalists hang on to their weaponry, Republicans will find it more difficult to disarm.** Although many commentators have focussed on the Republican leadership’s ability to bring the grassroots along, a much more imposing task for their Loyalist counterparts, it would be a mistake to underestimate the power of the movement’s political base.

Taking the process forward

Two factors are at work which seem likely to push disarmament forward. The first is external to the decommissioning process; namely, the forthcoming general election in the Republic of Ireland. The second reflects the new internal political environment in which decommissioning is pursued; an environment which has little of the pressure cooker atmosphere in which previous debate took place.

The general election in the Irish Republic may act as a lever on Republicans, further easing them into disarmament. Currently, Sinn Fein has one representative in the Dail, and their electoral stock has been rising. Even in early 2000 there was speculation that Sinn Fein could win 3 or 4 seats at the next election (*Magill*, March 2000); this figure may now seem rather conservative as recent polls indicate that they are well positioned to secure 8 per cent of the vote (*Irish Times*, 1 February 2002). In this light, it is conceivable that Republicans could be the power brokers in a future government coalition. Although Sinn Fein have been coy about the prospect of earning a place in a governing coalition, the prospect of holding power in both jurisdictions must be extremely tempting for what is undoubtedly the most anti-partitionist party in all of Ireland.

Indeed, in their recent Westminster election manifesto, Sinn Fein committed itself to seeking a form of representation for Northern Ireland’s MPs in the Dail. There is, however, a formidable catch. No Irish party is willing to accept Sinn Fein in government while the link with the IRA remains. The Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, has been emphatic on this point, and has repeatedly stressed, for over a year and a half, that the existence of private armies conflicts with Article 15.6 of the Irish constitution. This is an immovable demand. The implication is clear: unless Sinn Fein “resolve[s] its relationship with the IRA”, effectively amputating its armed wing, it would not be welcome within the corridors of power (*Irish Times*, 9 January 2001; *Irish Independent*, 18 February 2002). This presents a difficult leap for a movement which has always sought to minimise internal splits. A possible counter to the finger-wagging threats and warnings of the established Irish parties may be further IRA decommissioning. In the short term this might circumvent electoral attacks

on Republican militarism, boosting Sinn Fein's image as a peacemaker. In the long term, a process of decommissioning may serve as a form of substitute decontamination, obviating the need for a sharp break with paramilitarism, instead, taking the route of gentle transformation.

Sinn Fein probably do not expect to form a coalition anytime soon, but they will seek to boost their representation in the coming election and may also hope to widen the path leading to government seats on both sides of the border. Decommissioning may be a means to achieving this goal. **The electoral benefits of the peace process for Sinn Fein are such that the breadth of political inclusion that they offer seems to be continually expanding; this acts as a continuous draw, pulling Republicanism towards further decommissioning.**

The second factor relates to the attenuation of the decommissioning process. The Arms Decommissioning (Amendment) Bill recently introduced by the British government, has pushed the disarmament deadline back another year, and includes the option for further extensions of this deadline until the year 2007. Although this decision has provoked outcry from anti-Agreement Unionists, criticism from the pro-Agreement wing has been relatively muted. The single action of decommissioning has had a mollifying effect on the Unionists, who perhaps recognise that a very significant rubicon has been crossed by the Republican movement and a very concrete symbol that "the war is over" has been secured.

The lengthening of the process might be seen negatively as an attempt by the two governments to indefinitely suspend action on decommissioning in the hope that it will not re-emerge into the political arena. A more benign view

would see the elongation of the process as an attempt to elevate it to a different level, one in which it will be less of a high stakes game. Under these circumstances, the discussion of decommissioning would be stripped of some of its emotional rhetoric, political face or prestige would not be risked, and more importantly, the lurch from crisis to crisis could be averted. **The IRA gesture, by mitigating the counterproductive tension and rancour generated by the decommissioning debate, has given the conflicting parties in the peace process more flexibility and room to manoeuvre on other contentious issues; it has also advanced efforts to forge a mutually agreed vision of security.** Both Unionists and Republicans have every reason to remain in this extended process of decommissioning.

Disarmament and peacemaking: Lessons from Northern Ireland

■ A fact which stands out in researching the Northern Ireland peace process, is that paramilitary weaponry can have a value beyond its limited military potential, beyond even its potential worth as a bargaining chip to extract political concessions. **Weaponry had a symbolic, ideological value. This made the question of decommissioning resistant to political deal making; both Unionists and Republicans had anchored their positions in the peace process on the issue of arms.** For Republicans, guns lying in bunkers were proof positive that there had been no sell-out, despite many political shifts. For Unionists, decommissioned weapons were a powerful symbol that the war was over, that no future paramilitary campaign would be waged by those with whom they now shared power.

In short, it served as incontrovertible proof that pro-Agreement Unionism had not been hoodwinked, and accordingly could not be presented as such by its opponents within the Unionist family. **The profound psychological significance of the gun and the bomb to both Unionists and Republicans signifies that before the tools of violence can be put beyond use the mindsets of the rival sectarian communities must be decommissioned.** A clichéd homily of the conflict resolution business is the adage that "one makes peace with one's enemies, not with one's friends". The truth is that the successful peacemaker makes peace with an enemy while remaining circumspect of friends—all the while making sure that as many are engaged in the process for as long as possible. In this respect, weaponry could play an important pacifying role for both Unionists and Republicans. Unfortunately, the symbolic, ideological value of the gun did not lend itself easily to pragmatic solutions, and the result was a paralysing tussle for some years.

■ In seeking a way to transform this tussle, the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) played a valuable role as a third party interlocutor; although critics would have preferred that the IICD adopt a more proactive stance, the meticulous, incremental approach of the Commission achieved a certain degree of success. Lessons for other processes of small arms disarmament can be highlighted. **The confidence building nature of the independent inspections of arms dumps, a crucial element of external involvement, was an imaginative step which**

served to ease an armed group into actual decommissioning. It avoided the political pain, and symbolic sensitivity, of immediate disarmament by advancing towards it incrementally. The “dual-key” system implied that the armed group still retained possession of the weapons, even though the dumps had been compromised, and would be further compromised with each inspection. The inspections acted as a surrogate process of decommissioning, allowing political movement to take place, which advancing the chances of a full blown decommissioning event. **The efforts to redefine decommissioning as a process that, rather than endeavouring to surrender and hand over weapons seeks to “put them beyond use”, exemplifies the type of creativity needed for the peace process to move forward.**

■ When weaponry has substantial symbolic value attached to it, confidentiality is key to the process. A certain degree of secrecy about the method of disposal and the quantity of arms decommissioned allows armed groups some protection against internal criticism and the cries of triumphalism from their political opponents. To put it more bluntly, it allows them to save face. Secrecy about the disposal of illegal weaponry may seem distasteful in an open democracy, but if disarmament is achieved than the end justifies the means. **There is, however, an important proviso to this: confidentiality will only be accepted if disarmament is verified by a credible independent body which has the trust of the participants in the political process.** In this regard the IICD has certainly performed well. Although highly secretive, the IRA act of decommissioning had sufficient credibility, due to the trust

accorded to the IICD’s verification procedures; the symbolic import of the event was thus relatively untarnished by its secrecy, allowing Unionists to return to the Northern Ireland Executive.

■ A final word might be said about the application of political pressure on armed groups in attempting to achieve their disarmament. Few political groups, regardless of their hue, move from entrenched positions without the application of some pressure. But in attempting to build an inclusive state in which

armed groups and their representatives can have no mandate to support the use of force, the weapon of political exclusion is a double-edged sword. **It should not be forgotten that constitutional participation, or other forms of political empowerment, provide the space in which disarmament can more easily be undertaken. Exclusion, while it can act as a lever that pressures the representatives of armed groups, simultaneously cuts away at their political room for manoeuvre.** It might imbue Sisyphus with more strength and leverage, but it narrows the road up the mountain.

The cure at Troy

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker’s father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home

History says, *Don’t hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there’s fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means, once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

Seamus Heaney

Glossary

ANC	African National Congress
CIRA	Continuity Irish Republican Army
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
IICD	The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
IRA	Irish Republican Army
LVF	Loyalist Volunteer Force
NIWC	Northern Ireland Womens Coalition
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
RIRA	Real Irish Republican Army
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SDLP	Social Democratic Labour Party
SF	Sinn Fein
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDP	Ulster Democratic Party
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UKUP	United Kingdom Unionist Party
UUC	Ulster Unionist Council
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
Unionists	Primarily consisting of Protestants, Unionists support the continuation of Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain.
Loyalists	Loyal to the British crown and committed to the continuation of Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain, the Loyalist movement vehemently resists any political settlement that would result in an all-Ireland state.
Nationalists	Identifying themselves as Irish, not British, the Nationalists aspire to achieve an all-Ireland state. They are predominantly Catholic.
Republicans	Emphatically endorsing the political goal of a united Ireland, the Republican movement, which primarily consists of Catholic Nationalists, has traditionally adopted radical tactics to achieve this political goal.

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