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<th>The Northern Ireland peace process and the impact of decommissioning</th>
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THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS AND THE IMPACT OF DECOMMISSIONING

John de Chastelain

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THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS AND
THE IMPACT OF DECOMMISSIONING

John de Chastelain

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THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS 
AND THE IMPACT OF DECOMMISSIONING

This paper examines the impact that the decommissioning of paramilitary arms has had, and continues to have, on the Northern Ireland peace process. It selects the beginning of the paramilitary group cease-fires in 1994 as the beginning of that process, and examines how decommissioning has affected progress in it up to the present date. It looks at the involvement of the Independent Body, the International Chairmen and the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning throughout the whole period. It notes why the unionist community seeks the decommissioning of paramilitary arms as fundamental to democratic government, and why unionists regard it as the principal issue currently preventing the full implementation of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. It looks at why the nationalist and republican community regards as equally or more important the installation of a police force attractive to all elements of the community, and the removal of those military structures and installations which are offensive to nationalist feelings and deemed unnecessary while the guns of the main paramilitary groups remain silent. The paper assesses that a satisfactory conclusion to decommissioning, and to the issues of policing and demilitarisation, are fundamental to the future of an inclusive government with devolved powers in Northern Ireland, with all that that implies for an end to violence and for participatory relations North and South and East and West.

Publication information

General John de Chastelain has had a distinguished career in the Canadian Army where he rose to the rank of General and the position of Chief of the Defence Staff. He also served as Canada’s ambassador to the United States. Since 1995 he has been involved in the Northern Ireland peace talks which led to the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. He is currently Chairman of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning in Northern Ireland.
THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS
AND THE IMPACT OF DECOMMISSIONING

John de Chastelain

I must make clear from the outset that my role in the implementation of the decommissioning mandate limits what I can say here. Indeed, it precludes my participation in the discussions following the other presentations. I am sure you will agree that it would be inappropriate for someone involved in the continuing process to offer opinions or personal views on issues which remain central to it.

I have been involved in the process for more than five years, and for nearly the past three my involvement has been exclusively in the area of decommissioning. While my colleagues and I have avoided giving press conferences on our work, I have found it appropriate on occasion to give background briefings on the significance of decommissioning in the process. I have given such background talks to a number of audiences here in Ireland, in Northern Ireland, and in England, the United States and Canada. It was for this reason, and to provide this conference with a platform for any discussion you may have on decommissioning, that I accepted the invitation to present this paper.

For the purpose of today's discussion I will categorise this peace process as having started in 1994. I recognise this is an artificial date inasmuch as there have been several attempts to broker a lasting political settlement in Northern Ireland since the Troubles began at the end of the 1960s. The Sunningdale Agreement of the early seventies, the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1985, the Strand One and Two talks of 1991 and 1992, and the Downing Street Declaration of 1993, all represented significant moves in a process to establish peace. But I choose to start my examination in 1994, because that was when the back-channel talks and the work of political leaders led to the paramilitary cease-fires which initiated the current process, and when soon afterwards decommissioning became a significant issue.

My thesis is that decommissioning has been a principal issue running through each phase of this current peace process, and that its satisfactory resolution is essential to the success of that process. I propose to talk about it in the context of several distinct periods.

The first of these stretches from the IRA and loyalist cease-fires of 1994 through to February of 1996, after the International Body on Decommissioning had delivered its report and the IRA had broken their cease-fire. The second runs from the beginning of the talks in Belfast in June 1996 to the general elections in Ireland and the United Kingdom in 1997. The third, from the resumption of the talks in September 1997 to the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998. The fourth, from the summer of 1998 and the beginning of the implementation of the Agreement, to the failure to form an Executive in July of 1999. The fifth covers the period of the Mitchell Review from September to November of 1999. The sixth, the initial implementation of the
Review from November to February 2000 when the Executive was suspended. And finally the seventh, from that suspension up until today.

I. THE PARAMILITARY CEASEFIRES AND THE INTERNATIONAL BODY

Paramilitary ceasefires

In August 1994 the Irish Republican Army (IRA) declared a cease-fire and in October the two main loyalist paramilitary groups, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) did likewise. They did so on the basis of giving politics a chance to settle issues which the use of arms by either side had failed to do, that is, on the republican side the formation of a united Ireland, and on the loyalist side the guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the United Kingdom. The scene was set for political talks to decide on the form of an inclusive government with devolved powers in the North, on the relations to be put in place between North and South, and on the relations to be established between Dublin and London—Strands One, Two and Three.

But in early 1995, in a speech in Washington, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State suggested it would be necessary for paramilitary groups to give a demonstration of their peaceful intentions by decommissioning some of their arms before their associated political parties could take part in the political discussions.

The IRA regarded this suggestion as a precondition that had nothing to do with their voluntary cease-fire, and by the fall of 1995 the cease-fires seemed likely to fail. Thus even before the political talks started, decommissioning seemed likely to prevent them from doing so.

In October the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach—John Major and John Bruton—launched a twin track process to get political discussions underway. The first track called for a three-man International Body to report on the decommissioning issue. The second, was a series of talks involving the two Governments and the Northern Ireland political parties to deal with the three Strands, with the British Government and the Northern Ireland political parties involved in Strand One, with the two Governments and the Northern Ireland political parties involved in Strand Two, and the two Governments alone involved in Strand Three.

The International Body

The International Body comprised former Senator George Mitchell of the United States who was named Chairman, the former Prime Minister of Finland, Harri Holkeri, and myself. We were given a two-month mandate to report on two issues: the willingness of the paramilitary groups to decommission their arms, and how to do it.

The United States was asked by the Governments to chair the Body. That this was so recognised President Clinton's active interest in assisting in the search for a solution, and Senator Mitchell's year-long experience as the President's adviser on economic affairs on the island of Ireland. The Irish Government wished to choose a
distinguished individual from a Scandinavian country, and the British Government wanted someone with military experience from a Commonwealth country.

Our conclusions, after two months of study and interviews, was that paramilitary groups on cease-fire would consider decommissioning, but not before the talks started.

We so reported in January 1996, and at the same time answered the question on how it could be done. But we also sensed that a lack of trust between political parties, within paramilitary groups and within the general population would also need to be addressed.

We moved outside our remit and addressed the lack of trust between political parties by suggesting six principles of democracy and non-violence which the parties could be invited to adopt if they were to take part in the talks. We also suggested that a number of confidence-building measures could be addressed to answer the concerns within the population as a whole. And to address the lack of trust within paramilitary groups, we listed six principles we felt would have to apply if decommissioning were to be successful. These included avoiding the perception of surrender or defeat, proscribing the forensic testing of decommissioned arms for the purpose of prosecution, and insisting that the process of decommissioning should be complete, safe, mutual, and verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent Commission.

As to methods of decommissioning, we proposed four, while not insisting that these were meant to be exclusive. They were:

• the transfer of armaments to the Commission or to the designated representatives of either Government, for subsequent destruction;

• the provision of information to the Commission or to designated representatives of either Government, leading to the discovery of armaments for subsequent destruction;

• the depositing of armaments for collection and subsequent destruction by the Commission or by representatives of either Government; and

• destruction of arms by the paramilitary groups themselves.

As noted in the six principles for the conduct of decommissioning, we recommended that whatever method was used, verification would have to be provided by the independent Commission if the process were to be convincing.

We presented our report to the two Governments on 22 January 1996 and two days later made it public at a press conference in Belfast. Some republicans believed that the British Government gave it inappropriate attention and the IRA broke their cease-fire with a bomb attack on Canary Wharf in London two weeks later.
II. THE BEGINNING OF POLITICAL TALKS—JUNE 1996

In spite of the IRA’s return to violence, the political talks went ahead on 10 June 1996 with the two Governments and nine political parties participating. Sinn Féin was excluded based on the lack of an IRA cease-fire. The three members of the International Body were invited back to chair meetings of the Plenary Committee, the Business Committee, the Strand Two talks and any Sub-Committees where both governments were represented.

Each of the parties participating in the talks was required to state its acceptance of the six principles of democracy and non-violence suggested by the International Body—the Mitchell principles. But there was initial resistance by the political parties to the ground rules, the agenda, and the rules of procedure developed by the two Governments, and the talks started on an unofficial basis until such a time as rules of procedure and an agenda had been agreed.

Agreeing on rules of procedure was to take almost two months, but progress was then impeded by failure to agree on the agenda. Again, decommissioning was the reason. Unionists wanted decommissioning to be the first subject addressed. They argued there could be no place in democratic talks where parties at the table had armed groups at their back. Unionists had reluctantly agreed to take part in the talks without prior decommissioning, but they wanted to ensure this issue was addressed before the political ones.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) agreed that decommissioning was important and that it had to be addressed, but its members noted that the talks were about political issues, and these should not be held up by a failure to agree on decommissioning.

The impasse lasted for more than a year. It was not until September 1997, after general elections in both Ireland and the UK, and after the declaration of a second IRA cease-fire and the inclusion of Sinn Féin in the talks, that an agenda was finally agreed. Then it was only after the new Taoiseach and the new Prime Minister (Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair) agreed that the talks must end within a year—and after they put in place the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning authorised in legislation in the Dáil and in Parliament the previous February—that the talks were able to get down to substantive discussion of the three Strands.

III. TALKS LEADING TO THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning

When the talks resumed in September 1997 it was without the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP). These two parties left the talks when Sinn Féin took their seats around the table. Thus the talks started with eight political parties, the two Governments and the three Independent Chairmen constituting the Plenary Committee, with the first priority being to agree on the
agenda. This was swiftly done, with a program of discussion for the three strands scheduled by a Business Committee enabled for that purpose. Meanwhile the decommissioning body began its work independent of the political discussions.

The International Independent Commission on Decommissioning included commissioners from the same three nations involved in the International Body and the Independent Chairmen, that is Finland, Canada and the USA. Brigadier Tauno Nieminen from Finland, and Mr. Andrew Sens from the United States, are two of the commissioners. I am the third. The task given us was to consult, recommend, execute and report, and our channel of communication to the Plenary Committee was through a sub-committee on decommissioning chaired by Prime Minister Holkeri.

The February 1997 Decommissioning Acts called for the destruction of paramilitary arms, and destruction was further defined as meaning making them "permanently inaccessible" or "permanently unusable." It was with this direction in mind that the Commission began its consultation.

Working from offices in Dublin and Belfast, we informed the parties that the only way we could carry out our task was through the appointment by each paramilitary group of a representative with whom we could work out the details. Almost immediately the UVF named a member of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), Mr. Billy Hutchinson, as their representative. The IRA and the UFF declined to do so.

After consultation with those we believed could represent the views of the IRA and the UFF, and having received the views of the UVF, we proposed that two methods of decommissioning gave promise of being accepted by the paramilitary groups, and we recommended that these should be incorporated into schemes and regulations by the Governments. These were two of the four that had been recommended by the International Body. They included: information leading to the discovery of arms for subsequent destruction, and destruction by the paramilitary groups themselves, both with verification by the Commission.

The Decommissioning Sub-Committee of the Plenary, which included representatives of each of the parties in the talks as well as the two Governments, approved the recommendations, and these were then submitted formally to the two Governments to be formalised in a scheme and regulations.

**The Good Friday Agreement**

The Agreement addressed decommissioning by saying, in part:

> … the resolution of the decommissioning issue is an indispensable part of the process of negotiation

> … 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.

Some aspects of the Agreement were left imprecise to assure cross party approval. Significantly, the date by which decommissioning was to be completed was specified, but the date by which it had to start was not.

**IV. ATTEMPTS TO IMPLEMENT THE AGREEMENT 1998-99**

Shortly after the Agreement was approved, the two Governments put in place a scheme and regulations formalising the two decommissioning methods we had proposed. But there was no progress on setting up the political bodies approved by the Agreement—that is, the Executive and the North/South bodies. Once again the reason was decommissioning.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) refused to sit in the Executive with Sinn Féin in the absence of a start on decommissioning. They noted that while prisoners were being given early release, the Patten Commission on policing had begun its work, and the British Army had begun the process of normalisation (or de-miniaturisation), there was no movement on decommissioning by either republicans or loyalists. Unionists reiterated once more their reluctance to sit in government with parties that had private armies.

Republicans and nationalists pointed out that the Agreement’s statement on decommissioning talked in terms of it taking place in the "context of the implementation of the overall settlement", and noted that two years had been contemplated for the decommissioning process. It was thus expected to be completed by 22 May 2000. They insisted that it was only by setting up the approved political structures, and by having an inclusive government with devolved powers being seen to be working, that the conditions in which decommissioning would happen would likely be achieved.

Once again, the Commission appealed to the IRA and UFF to name points of contact. Once again they opted not to do so, although Sinn Féin named Mr. Martin McGuinness as that party’s representative to the Commission.

Over the period of the next year there was no progress on setting up the political institutions and none on decommissioning, except for one small event on 18 December 1998 in which some Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) arms were publicly decommissioned. This event was conducted in front of the cameras, at the LVF’s insistence, and while the amount of weapons, ammunition, explosives and detonators was small, it was sufficient to give the Commission an opportunity to practice its methods of destruction.

During the first half of 1999 the Taoiseach and Prime Minister made several attempts to break the deadlock: at Hillsborough in April, at Downing Street in May and at Stormont in June. None had the desired result of getting the political bodies set up and decommissioning started. But at Stormont at the end of June the Com-
mission was asked to produce a progress report in which, among other points, we were invited to define when we believed the process of decommissioning was deemed to have started. Citing, in part, statements in the Governments’ decommissioning scheme and regulations, we said we believed the process started when a paramilitary group:

- named a representative
- gave an unambiguous commitment to decommission, and
- met with us to work out the details of how that would be done.

We said we believed that it should only be a matter of days between the nomination of a representative and a first meeting with us, and only a matter of weeks between that meeting and the start of decommissioning.

In July 1999, in an attempt to break the deadlock, the Secretary of State convened the Assembly. Doing so required the Presiding Officer to call for the four major parties to nominate their candidates for the Executive. But the UUP refused to do so and boycotted the Assembly meeting. The Secretary of State’s attempt collapsed. Both Prime Ministers invoked the review clause of the Agreement and invited Senator Mitchell back to conduct the review.

V. THE MITCHELL REVIEW

Senator Mitchell conducted his review over a three month period starting in September 1999 and he based it on three issues:

- an inclusive government with devolved powers
- decommissioning by 22 May 2000, and
- decommissioning to be carried out in a manner determined by the Commission

Thus the need to find a solution to the decommissioning issue remained at the forefront.

Mitchell's review consisted largely of bilateral meetings between himself, the UUP, Sinn Féin and the SDLP. At the review's end in November an agreed solution prescribed a number of choreographed events:

- agreement by the UUP to set up the Executive and the North/South bodies
- the naming by all the paramilitary groups of a representative to the Commission
- a meeting between the Commission and the representatives, and
• a report on those meetings from the Commission to the Governments in December

The Commission's principal role in the review was to meet with Mitchell and to provide him with an assessment of the decommissioning situation. After the review was complete, we believed that while there may have been no firm agreement on decommissioning, there was an understanding that substantive discussions on it would start in December, and lead to actual decommissioning in a matter of weeks. Given the Christmas break, that realistically meant decommissioning starting in January 2000. Thus our December report was expected to include a commitment to report again at the end of January.

VI. IMPLEMENTING THE REVIEW AND SETTING UP THE INSTITUTIONS

Devolution

The Executive was set up at the end of November 1999 and powers dealing with six main areas were devolved to it by Westminster. After nearly thirty years Northern Ireland not only had its own government again, but now it was an inclusive one.

In early December the IRA named a representative to the Commission and the UFF did likewise. Shortly afterwards we held separate meetings with each of them, and we provided the Governments with a written report on the meetings.

That report reflected the fact that each of the UVF and UFF had confirmed their willingness to consider decommissioning their arms, but the UVF specified they would not do so until the IRA said "the war is over", and the UFF said they would not start before the IRA did so. The IRA's representative gave us a re-affirmation of their intent to maintain their cease-fire, and their commitment to a peaceful and democratic path to achieve their goals, but he did not address the technical aspects of decommissioning.

That the IRA was not more forthcoming at this first meeting may have been their reaction to the announcement by the UUP that the Ulster Unionist Council would meet at the end of January to review the situation, the impression being given that if there had been no move on decommissioning by then, the UUP would reconsider its involvement in the Executive. Republican and nationalist reaction to this announcement was negative, and pointed out that such unilateral reviews were not part of the Agreement.

Institutions suspended

Through the month of January 2000 we met on several occasions with the IRA, UVF and UFF representatives. Representatives of the latter two agreed with us on methods of decommissioning and on general supporting issues, but they maintained their position of not moving before the IRA's intentions were clear. The IRA representative re-iterated the IRA's commitment to the cease-fire and the peaceful resolution of the issues. They also issued a statement in which they noted they
were not a threat to peace. But they would not discuss actual decommissioning, although they did not rule it out.

We so reported to the Governments at the end of January, noting we had made no progress on actual decommissioning and adding that if at any time we believed decommissioning would not happen, we would recommend that we be disbanded.

We repeated a point made in our December report in which we said we would inform the Governments when we approached the date by which we felt we had to start decommissioning, if we were to complete the process by 22 May, the target date. Having been given estimates of the paramilitary groups’ arms inventories by the security forces North and South, and the opinion that these were in all likelihood held in widely dispersed locations, we also said we would announce the kind of timetable we felt would be necessary to ensure completion by the required date.

The UUP deferred their Council meeting to 12 February and in the intervening time the Governments, the parties and the Commission worked to seek a more positive response on decommissioning from the IRA and loyalist groups alike. On 11 February, in a meeting with the IRA representative, we were given a statement which we felt offered some promise of 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 that this is a necessary objective of a genuine peace process" 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 by any of the paramilitary groups, 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 withdrawing the proposals given us to date. Days later he announced publicly that he had done so.

Once more decommissioning was the issue holding back political progress.

VII. RE-INSTATEMENT OF THE INSTITUTIONS TO THE PRESENT DAY

Involvement of the Prime Ministers

Over the next two months strenuous efforts to bring the process back on track were led by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. In a statement made on 5 May 2000 both Governments asked the Commission to investigate whether decommissioning
methods, other than the two they had approved, might more readily achieve the mandate for arms destruction they had given us. Furthermore, both Governments joined in saying they believed that all aspects of the Agreement could be brought to completion by June 2001 and committed themselves to that goal.

The next day the IRA announced they would re-open contact with the Commission. They also said that, as a confidence building measure, they would open some of their arms dumps to international inspectors, who would report on their findings to the Commission. Significantly they stated:

... 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 mis-appropriation by others and ensure maximum public confidence.

One significance of this announcement, as compared to the 11 February one, was the addition of the two adverbs "completely" and "verifiably"—words that echoed recommendations made in the International Body's 1996 report on the requirements for decommissioning.

**Institutions re-instated**

On 29 May the British Government restored the Executive with its devolved powers and the Assembly re-commenced sitting on 6 June. Later in June the IRA representative phoned the Commission, re-opening contact, and the two inspectors—Cyril Ramaphosa of the African National Congress, and former President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland—reported to us that they had inspected IRA arms dumps and put in place measures to ensure they would know, when they next saw them, if the arms in them had been used. The inspectors also told us that prior to conducting their inspection, they had consulted weapons experts to ensure they knew what to look for. We so reported to the Governments.

Throughout July and August there was no movement on decommissioning, unsurprising given the activities of the marching season and the summer hiatus. But in early September the Commission made efforts to re-engage with each of the paramilitary representatives. Our aim was to find out exactly what the IRA meant by "putting arms beyond use", and to ascertain if it met our mandate to facilitate the complete destruction of paramilitary arms. We also wanted to find out if there had been any change in the position of the two loyalist paramilitary groups, particularly given the feud that had erupted between them during the summer.

**Autumn 2000**

By October we had not been able to persuade the representatives to meet with us. Political parties explained why they believed this was so. In the IRA's case it was suggested that insufficient implementation of the Patten report on policing, and the slow pace of demilitarisation by the British Army, as well as concern over the future of former IRA members still sought by the Governments, was preventing them from re-engaging with us. In the loyalist case it was believed the ongoing feud was the reason for non-engagement.
We made it known to the paramilitary groups that we would be submitting a report to the Governments towards the end of October and that we hoped for engagement with the representatives by then. Such an engagement would allow us to make the report as complete and informed as possible. But only the UFF representatives met with us. These assured us of their continuing commitment to the peace process and to decommissioning, but they reiterated their insistence on making no move before the IRA, and they made it clear that the ongoing nature of the feud made early decommissioning unlikely if not impossible.

In October the Inspectors carried out a second inspection and verified that the arms they inspected in June remained undisturbed. The IRA subsequently confirmed publicly that the inspection had taken place and that the reason they had not re-engaged with the Commission was their concern over the British Government's slow implementation of the Agreement's other requirements. They said they would re-engage with us as soon as they believed that doing so would be helpful to the peace process.

We reported the inspection to the two Governments on 26 October but noted that we had made no progress on actual decommissioning.

The Ulster Unionist Council met again on 28 October and voted to bar Sinn Féin members from participating in meetings of the North/South Council. They also called on the Commission to be more proactive in meeting our mandate, specifically by insisting on meetings with the paramilitary representatives, by setting deadlines and schedules, and by producing more frequent written reports to the Governments.

Towards the end of the year senior officials from both Governments held intensive meetings with political parties in a bid to resolve the issues of policing, demilitarisation and decommissioning. They did this against the background of an imminent visit by President Clinton to Ireland and Northern Ireland, and continuing efforts by dissident republicans to carry out attacks on government targets and the security forces. In December the UVF and UDA announced an end to the loyalist feud, and on 12 and 13 December President Clinton visited Dublin and then Belfast. The visit was generally well-received, but it led to no breakthrough on the problem issues. Government parties maintained their talks until 21 December and then broke off for the Christmas period.

On 22 December the Commission produced an end of year report to the Governments in which we noted we had still not met with the IRA representative, though a meeting with the UVF representative and discussions with UFF representatives confirmed the loyalist paramilitary groups' earlier commitments on decommissioning. We reiterated a point made in our report of a year earlier, to the effect that sufficient time still remained for decommissioning to be carried out by June 2001. But we also pointed out once again that we would specify the date by which we felt we would have to start decommissioning, if we were to carry it out in time, and the schedule that would be needed to do so.
The year 2001 to date

The new year began with continued efforts by government officials to resolve the three main issues. But concern was expressed that if these had not soon been addressed successfully, the lead up to Northern Ireland Council elections, and an anticipated British General Election in the Spring, might lead to a diversion of the political parties' attention and possibly to a suspension of the institutions. Moreover, a hiatus until June, with the prospect of the imminent marching season and the summer break, meant that the June target for decommissioning would not be met and substantive re-engagement on the issues might not be possible until September.

In mid-January, and still with input from officials of the outgoing Clinton administration, the two Prime Ministers became personally engaged in the negotiations, with Prime Minister Blair visiting Belfast on 17 January and making public his ongoing contact with the Taoiseach. A meeting of the Council of the Isles, scheduled for 23 January in Dublin, was postponed to allow maximum concentration on resolving the issues, and a second planned meeting on 5 February was postponed for the same reason.

February saw a continuation of intense discussions conducted between officials from the two Governments and the parties particularly concerned. These were carried out against the background of a change in government in the USA, and the question of whether the new Republican administration would place the same emphasis on seeking a resolution of the Northern Ireland situation as the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton had done. They also occurred against the background of an increase in dissident republican attacks on targets in both Northern Ireland and England, including a mortar attack against Ebrington Barracks in Londonderry in February and a bomb attack outside the BBC building in London in early March. The period also witnessed a continuation of loyalist bomb attacks in and around Belfast, although UVF and UFF leaders maintained that the loyalist feud had not re-opened.

Sinn Féin’s appeal against the Ulster Unionist ban on their participation in the North/South Council was upheld, although that decision was subsequently appealed by David Trimble. With that second appeal still under consideration, a third North/South Council meeting was postponed on March 2nd. And while nationalist and republican opposition to the policing legislation in its present form still continues, recruiting for the new Northern Ireland police service began in February and continues today.

On March 8th the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister met with the pro-Agreement parties at Hillsborough. The same day the IRA announced they would re-open contact with the Commission and later the same day they reported that in a telephone call they had done so. After the Hillsborough meetings the two Governments reported in part:

In a statement on 6 May 2000, the IRA undertook to initiate a process that would completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use. Today, they have announced that they will enter into further discussions with the IICD, on the basis of their earlier
commitment. This is a welcome development. Discussions should now start promptly and lead to agreement on the ways in which IRA arms will be put completely and verifiably beyond use. We look forward to early and positive reports from the IICD about progress made. It remains vital that all paramilitary groups engage fully and actively with the IICD, so that the issue of paramilitary arms is definitively resolved.

The two Governments believe that once the IICD reports that, as a first step, the IRA will agree with the IICD a scheme for putting IRA arms beyond use to enable the Commission to discharge the mandate given to it by the two Governments in May (i.e., to consider "whether there are any further proposals for decommissioning schemes which offer the Commission greater scope to proceed in more effective and satisfactory ways with the discharging of its basic mandate"); and that it expects agreement to be reached before long, this will have helped create the context in which the objectives set out in the two Governments' statement of 5 May 2000 can be secured.

On March 14th the IRA announced: "On Thursday 8 March the IRA leadership announced that we would enter into further discussions with the IICD on the basis of our commitment to resolving the issue of arms as contained in our statement of 6 May 2000. The IRA representative has since met with the IICD and set out the basis for discussions. The IRA has honoured its commitments and will continue to do so."

That is the situation as it stands today, Friday 23 March 2001.

Conclusion

Along with the issues of demilitarisation and policing, decommissioning remains a principal obstacle to the final implementation of the peace process. Both nationalists and republicans continue to express concern that the Policing Act of November 2000 inadequately implemented the Patten recommendations. Supported by some senior members of the Catholic Church they are reluctant to recommend to nationalists that they join the new police force, until their concerns about the legislation are addressed. They are similarly reluctant to nominate members to the Police Board until that is so. They feel as well that insufficient progress has been made on demilitarisation, particularly in the area of South Armagh, and they believe that the Unionist ban on Sinn Féin attendance in the North/South Council should be immediately withdrawn.

For their part unionists maintain that nearly three years after the Agreement there has still been no decommissioning, and they insist that the issue must be actively addressed immediately, with the IRA representative re-engaging productively with the Commission. Unionists feel the legitimacy of this conclusion is underlined by the increasing attacks on the security forces by dissident republican paramilitary groups, and the continued pipe-bomb attacks and beatings, for the most part ascribed to loyalist paramilitary groups. They also suggest that further demilitarisation and further reduction in the strength of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) is premature in view of the increasing violence by dissident groups, and the continued violence by loyalists.
Yet again, and nearly seven years after the beginning of the current peace process, decommissioning remains a principal issue in the forward movement of that process. Difficulties notwithstanding, the Commission continues to do what it can to implement its mandate. Now that the IRA has re-engaged with us, we are anxious to find out what their commitment to put arms beyond use involves and whether it meets the mandate we have been tasked to carry out.

We will continue to work towards that end as long as we feel there can be a successful outcome.
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