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Statement by the Taoiseach, John Bruton TD. - 

I believe lasting peace will only come to the North of Ireland when there has first been a process of forgiveness, followed by reconciliation.

A peace agreement that does not include a prior process of forgiveness and reconciliation, is unlikely to be durable.

That is why I believe that the victims of Bloody Sunday must be heard. They must be allowed to tell their story of injustice, and have that injustice acknowledged by its perpetrators. Only then can forgiveness begin. And it is only when forgiveness has begun that reconciliation can commence.

But other victims must be heard too. The IRA's victims must also be heard, and the injustice to them acknowledged by the perpetrators. Apologies should also go in both directions across the political divide. That is what parity of esteem means.

Part of the problem with the political aspects of the peace process is that different participants have approached it with contradictory assumptions as to the nature of the discussions.

One potential participant sees itself approaching a military negotiation, with important political objectives and consequences. All the other participants see themselves approaching a political negotiation, with some paramilitary aspects that need to be sorted out to facilitate political agreement.

The Republican movement basically sees itself ultimately negotiating with the British Government. It might even be said it sees the negotiation as something akin to the peace process negotiations at Versailles, with the IRA on one side and the British Government on the other, and everyone else in between, as subjects of the negotiations whose interests must be dealt with, just as the interests of smaller nationalities were decided at Versailles. This is slightly to exaggerate the analogy, but it is valid for the purposes of illustration.

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Given the underlying assumption of the nature of the process on the part of Republicans, one can easily discern the rationale for their approach to decommissioning. After all, decommissioning did not take place before Versailles. It took place afterwards. Decommissioning was not a precondition at Versailles, they might say.

The difficulty is that all the other participants in the peace process, including the two Governments and the parties representing 85% of the Northern population, have radically different assumptions about the nature of the talks.

It all comes back to the principle of consent. Having accepted the principle of consent, all the other participants see the talks as a three stranded process, involving the two Governments and all the political parties, in which all these political parties must be treated with parity of esteem. They see the process as one where all the parties are negotiating with one another, without implicit threats of violence or guns under the table. They do not see the process as just a two-sided Versailles-style negotiation between Ireland and Britain, but as a process of multi-dimensional political consensus building, in which all the people have an equal right to be heard.

Given that the assumptions of the other participants about the nature of the negotiating process are very different from those of Republicans, it is easy to see that the rationale of their approach to decommissioning is very different.

If one of the participants in a multidimensional consensus-building process retains the right to hold and use guns to influence the outcome, that makes the job of reaching consensus more difficult. This, on the other hand, does not of course apply where the negotiations are approached with a predominantly military mindset. This is the core divergence of assumptions which is at the heart of the present difficulties.

My own strong belief is that the Republican movement must, sooner or later, accept the principle of consent. Once it does that, the problem of decommissioning will cease to be a roadblock, because, by accepting consent, Republicans will change the nature of their assumptions about the peace process, and decommissioning will be a natural concomitant of the new approach, not an imposed precondition.

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I acknowledge that, despite discouragements and inconsistencies, efforts continue to be made on all sides to find a basis to move towards an agreed political settlement. I acknowledge too that there are early steps that can be taken to build confidence.

But there must also be a proper analysis of the fundamental issue of consent by the Republican movement. That can unblock the door to progress.

ends 22 Feb 1997