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Meeting of the Assembly, 15/16 February 1999

Debate on the report and determination of the First and Deputy First Minister

- The two day debate was conducted in largely low-key and predictable terms. The only sign that proceedings might be of particular significance was a round of applause welcoming approval of the determination.

- In his opening remarks, David Trimble argued that decommissioning could not be evaded stressing that his party would 'stick together' in requiring progress before entering an Executive with Sinn Féin. Séamus Mallon contended that without the Agreement there was no context in which decommissioning would take place. Gerry Adams spoke of the 'new potential' offered by the Agreement (which divided people into 'pro' and 'anti' camps) under which David Trimble had the support of two-thirds of the Assembly. The PUP spoke in passionate terms of the damage fragmentation was causing to Unionism. DUP speakers sought to embarrass both the UUP and the PUP, denouncing the determination as a threat to the Union.

- While much of the debate was about the big picture, several parties, including Sinn Féin and the DUP, raised detailed concerns regarding arrangements for the Civic Forum. Sinn Féin suggested the proposals would result in the appointment of 'the great and the good' and would not address Northern Ireland's democratic deficit. The DUP contrasted unfavourably the 18 seats allocated to the voluntary sector with the 3 set aside for Agriculture and the 2 for victims. Sinn Féin also expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of a dedicated Department of Equality. The DUP attacked the increased number of government departments.

- When put to a roll-call vote, the report was approved by 78 votes to 28 and the determination by 77 votes to 29. UUP dissident, Peter Weir, voted in favour of the report but against the determination. There were no further UUP defections. Gerry Adams was not present for the vote as a result of his meeting with the Prime Minister in London.

The main points of the debate are summarised below:

First Minister (Designate), David Trimble, began his brief (seven minute) intervention with an apology for the late availability of the report - the result, he said, of a need to resolve detailed arrangements for the Civic Forum. He also suggested that some departments had engaged in a 'turf war', with civil servants resistant to change involved in a regrettable 'rearguard action' against the new departmental designations. He described the report as an important next step towards the transfer of powers. Decommissioning, he asserted, could not be evaded. People should be under no illusion as to what was required. He wanted to see matters 'progressing in an inclusive manner' but that could only happen when people carried out their obligations. He had to see 'a credible beginning of a process of decommissioning' before the appointed day and devolution. His party would 'stick together' on that requirement.

Deputy First Minister (Designate), Seamus Mallon, said it was a 'critical day' for the process - from now on there would be no time or space for delay or prevarication. We were moving towards the time when we would have to implement both the letter and the spirit of the

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Agreement or resile from it. He called for a debate without acrimony and one not overshadowed by decommissioning. That issue would be resolved by a voluntary act or not at all - and only within the context of the Agreement. If the Agreement was damaged, the prospects for decommissioning would be damaged. If the Agreement was lost, the prospects for decommissioning would be lost. It was a requirement that decommissioning take place, but not a precondition. However, without a resolution of the issue there would not be sufficient confidence for the institutions to work. He acknowledged strong feelings that might encourage some Unionists to vote against the report, but suggested that they weigh their feelings against the fact that without the Agreement there was no context for decommissioning to take place. He acknowledged the courage with which the leadership of Sinn Féin had faced challenges, and argued that it was time to stand by the Agreement in letter and in spirit.

Ian Paisley contended it was a bit late for the UUP to attempt to claim that they would not sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin without decommissioning - the opinion the British and Irish governments and the US Government would prove stronger than the determination of David Trimble. On the Civic Forum he observed that Agriculture, the largest industry, would have only three representatives and victims only two while the voluntary sector would have 18 (his colleagues suggested that these would include Breandán MacCionnaith and Gerard Rice).

Peter Robinson directed criticism towards the UUP benches - suggesting that David Trimble was agreeing to the setting up of an embryonic united Ireland. Replying to Seamus Mallon he suggested that the question was not whether decommissioning would happen or not, but whether it was right to have people in government who had failed to decommission. It was particularly a question for Unionists, all of whom had made electoral commitments. There were four steps towards Sinn Féin becoming members of the Executive - the determination (effectively made on 18 December); the Assembly's approval for the determination; provision of the Standing Order by the Secretary of State; and triggering of the appointment of the Executive by the Presiding Officer. The Assembly vote was the only one Unionists had control over. It was a decision with 'profound consequences' - a vote for the report was a vote for destruction of the Union.

[In an interruption which clearly amused the DUP, **Martin McGuinness** objected to **Robinson's** use of the term 'Sinn Féin /IRA', suggesting that it was unparliamentary. **Lord Alderdice** responded that inaccurate, unflattering or uncomplimentary language was not necessarily unparliamentary. **McGuinness** argued that demonisation of his party endangered its members - some of whom had been killed in the past. **Robinson** said that he had not been aware that Sinn Féin was embarrassed by its connections with the IRA.]

Opening his speech in Irish, **Gerry Adams** was greeted by a campaign of 'coughing' from the gallery which drew the criticism of several members and a threat from the Presiding Officer that he would clear the galleries if it happened again. **Adams** pointed to issues in the report with which Sinn Féin were not happy - the absence of a dedicated Department of Equality; the fracturing of education into several departments; the lack of even a junior minister for children; dilution of North/South Bodies; and provisions for nominations to the Civic Forum. However Sinn Féin viewed the issue in a strategic way and would support the determination. It came at a important point for Unionists - their monopoly on power and influence was 'over, done with and gone'. Some Unionists knew and accepted it, others didn't know that the old days were over - the latter were more to be pitied than scorned. Some could accept change intellectually, but not

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emotionally. Republicans could understand that because, although from a different perspective, they too had been on a roller-coaster ride. But to focus on the UUP was to miss the point. The new dispensation under the Agreement divided people into 'pro' and 'anti' camps giving David Trimble the support of two-thirds of the House. That was the 'new potential'. It was difficult to find himself on the same side as the Unionist leader, but the Assembly had to look to the future and vote clearly and decisively for the report. This should be followed by 'speedy movement' - the shadow institutions had been awaited since last summer. His party remained committed to the implementation of all aspects of the Agreement.

Seán Neeson suggested that the report had arrived three and a half months late and hoped that by 10 March the Assembly would be well on its way to assuming the role for which it was formed - getting down to the 'bread and butter' issues. He said that to ensure a 'win-win' situation it was essential that David Trimble and Gerry Adams got around a table together.

David Ervine said that as a well known 'traitor' and 'betrayer' he supported the determination. He called on those opposed to it to remember how many of them had had 'long and meaningful debates' with him when he was a representative not of the PUP but of the UVF. He felt betrayed by those who had spoken to him but come only part of the way with him. He challenged them to identify the 'shifts' and 'schisms' between the ideology and the political reality of Sinn Féin and to admit that perhaps there was hope. We were, he said, all frightened and in uncharted waters, but if Sinn Féin were never tested 'we will never know' if they were sincere.

Monica McWilliams called for acceptance that the Agreement was the only way forward. Her party had concerns about aspects of the report but were willing to accept it in a spirit of compromise. Pointing to the inclusion of responsibility for women's and victims' issues in the Department of the First and Deputy First Ministers, she wondered how seriously these two people could address all the areas given to them. The provisions for the Civic Forum made it a good day for the Women's Coalition.

Robert McCartney suggested that, in approving the determination, Unionists would be throwing away the only influence they had, placing themselves in the hands of an unsympathetic Secretary of State. They would be fobbed off with promise of a review - but this would prove worthless. Once seated Sinn Féin would never be put out.

Martin McGuinness contended that there was no reason whatsoever why an Executive could not be formed within two weeks, no reason why devolution could not take place on 10 March. Sinn Féin had been working assiduously on the peace process for the greater part of a decade. It had built up relationships, including with the Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds and the US President, all of whom believed that the Sinn Féin leadership was serious about the process and could be trusted to press forward. Sinn Féin, as well directing all of its efforts towards an end to conflict, wanted to bring about the removal of all guns from Irish society. The UUP and Sinn Féin were not divided on this. Difficulty arose when the UUP 'misread' the Agreement to say that decommissioning was a pre-condition to participation on the Executive. All parties had responsibility in this matter. Sinn Féin was not going to take the singular burden of resolving the issue on their shoulders. There was a need for real engagement between the UUP and Sinn Féin. He recognised that the UUP saw Sinn Féin with a lot of baggage, but argued that his community had also experienced hurts including Bloody Sunday, gerrymandering etc.

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Peter Weir described the report as a curate's egg with reasonable proposals for the 'necessary nonsense' of the Civic Forum, but with danger in making a determination which would move Sinn Féin closer to government. In agreeing the determination now the Assembly would throw away its strongest card. That was why, in conscience, he would vote against.

Billy Hutchinson delivered an impassioned speech, criticising those who were opposed to the report. Calling on people to 'get real', he contended that there were those outside the Assembly who were prepared to take up a gun on the basis of what was said within it. The PUP would stand over the Agreement even if people were being killed in the streets - his children's future lay with the Assembly. Defending his Britishness, he claimed that if he had to die for it at the hands of Republicans he would. He called on Sinn Féin to recognise that when they attacked Unionists they attacked all Unionists. Selling the Agreement as a route to a united Ireland damaged people like himself and David Ervine. There would never be a united Ireland. The Agreement was an accommodation, a half-way house. The PUP were in the Assembly to accommodate, not to be lectured to by Republicans about their hurts. To Sinn Féin he said that while he did not necessarily trust them, he did accept that they were trying to find a way forward. To the DUP he said that while Unionism might be fractured it was their love of the Union that drew them together. However the Union had to change to survive.

Summing up, **Seamus Mallon**, acknowledged that it had been difficult to get the balance right in the Civic Forum - but it was a worthwhile body. The six appointments to be made by the First and Deputy First Ministers would enable them to redress any imbalances that arose. To those who suggested that 18 representatives of the voluntary/community sector was too many, he asked who they would suggest dropping - the aged, youth, women, the disabled? He denied that equality belonged to any one party or section of the community, if it was not kept at the centre cross-departmental fertilisation could not take place. He suggested that the costs associated with increasing the number of departments were more in the order of £8m than £90m. **David Trimble** said that additional costs would be off-set by rationalisation elsewhere. He called on the Assembly to remember the positive aspects of the process. The Assembly brought together all shades of elected opinion for the first time ever. We were now nearing the end of the transitional phase. People who had done terrible things in their past had the opportunity to come into the political process - to leave the armalite behind and to rely on the ballot box alone. He wanted to move forward, he wanted power transferred, but it had to happen on a basis that maintained integrity. He hoped that by 10 March there would have been 'serious progress on decommissioning..... a credible start'. He commended what appeared to be an end to punishment beatings by Republicans and hoped it was substantial. He noted the reduction in the numbers of beatings by the UVF, hoped it was significant and called on all others to follow suit.

OTHER SPEAKERS INTHE DEBATE

- **SDLP**

Seán Farren suggested that decommissioning remained an issue on which hardly any progress had been registered. While it was not a precondition, neither was the rest of the Agreement a precondition for progress on decommissioning. **Carmel Hanna** focused on the SDLP's view of arrangements for the Civic Forum calling for it to be as broadly based and representative as possible. **Brid Rodgers** commended the report as another step in implementing the Agreement.

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The 85% of people in Ireland who had voted for the Agreement as a compromise had a right to see it working in the letter and in the spirit. She called on pro-Agreement members to rededicate and recommit themselves to what they had signed up for. **Alban Maginness** suggested that the report offered a way forward and condemned the negativity of the DUP. **Danny O'Connor** quoted Martin Luther King suggesting that while 'we're not where we want to be, thank God we're not where we used to be'. **Joe Hendron** argued that the sooner departments were set up the better. The greatest danger to the Union, he suggested, came from the 'abominable no men' of the DUP. **Eddie McGrady** condemned the 'petty pointscoring which had characterised much of the debate. Those who were opposed to the report had no alternative to suggest. He felt that keeping equality at the centre was the best way to drive it forward. **Patricia Lewsley** said that because her party attached great importance to equality issues, they believed they were best served by being at the centre and not part of a 'party political shoot-out'. **Mark Durcan** said that people had to be realistic about the burden of work that would be carried out by departments when criticising the increase in their number. He suggested that increased costs of £90m had been 'plucked out of the air'.

- **UUP**

Esmond Birnie spoke approvingly of the report. He praised the proposed structure of the Civic Forum, suggesting that it had avoided what Stanley Baldwin might have described as 'power without responsibility'. He called for a 'parity of esteem' between the BIC and the NSMC in terms of scale of Secretariat etc. **Sam Foster** said that the UUP position was absolutely clear - they would not sit with Sinn Féin ministers until decommissioning had begun. Republicanism was reneging on the Agreement. **George Savage** that the only way forward was through trust - trust that people would do what they had undertaken to under the Mitchell Principles. **Sir John Gorman** said that he wanted an Executive with real powersharing, but not with those who still had weaponry. **Billy Armstrong,** a potential dissident, said that decommissioning had to take place, but that the day was about setting up structures for better government. **John Taylor** suggested that the additional costs of the extra departments would be offset against savings elsewhere. He commended the choice of Armagh for the inaugural meeting of the NSMC. He was disappointed that there was less progress on the BIC than on the NSMC.

- **Sinn Féin**

John Kelly argued that equality, not decommissioning, was central to the success of the Agreement. That was why a dedicated Department of Equality was the only way to advance an all-Ireland equality agenda. **Dara O'Hagan** suggested that David Trimble could not be trusted with equality issues given the situation in Portadown. **Mary Nelis** spoke of Sinn Féin's disappointment with provisions for the Civic Forum. The 'fundamental flaw' was that it would not address the democratic deficit. Sinn Féin had argued for nominations from 'constituency panels' which would have been more representative than the 'exclusive' and 'predetermined' list of organisations designed to meet the needs of the First and Deputy First Minister. **Barry McElduff** suggested that there should be no delay in the establishment of the NSMC and the Executive. He hoped that victims of British state violence would have a voice in the Civic Forum. **Pat McNamee** expressed concern both at the arrangements for the Civic Forum and at the range of issues responsibility for which was being given to the office of the First and Deputy First Ministers. **Sue Ramsey** spoke in favour of a junior ministry for children. **Mitchell**

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McLaughlin looking at the number of functions that had been retained by the First and Deputy First Ministers, wondered if there had been a trade off between them on junior ministries. Any idea of a 'kitchen cabinet' would be unacceptable. He pointed to the impact of rising Nationalist expectations since the 1960's and suggested that the resulting renegotiation and restructuring in the North had destabilised parts of Unionism. The process had yet to reach the required point of political equilibrium. Those who were unable to change would be forced into political limbo.

- **DUP**

Gregory Campbell anticipated that some token action would be taken which would allow David Trimble to claim that there had been progress on decommissioning. **Sammy Wilson**, in characteristically robust form, described the determination as a time-bomb which the Secretary of State had no intention of defusing. It would explode, destroy democracy and destroy the Union. **Ian Paisley jnr** suggested that nothing in the report would lead to good governance - the number of departments was a question of 'snouts in the trough'. The Civic Forum was a waste of space and resources. **Jim Shannon** suggested the peace was not one of compromise, but part of a Sinn Féin strategy moving us towards a united Ireland. **Mervyn Parry** was mystified by the suggestion that only the Agreement could deliver decommissioning. **Nigel Dodds** contended that the report was a staging post on the way to a united Ireland, paving the way for the IRA to enter government. **Edwin Poots** suggested that General deChastelain had failed in his duty in not delivering a report as yet. **William McCrae** suggested that the report represented decadence and self-indulgence and jobs for the boys. The process was, he contended, built on deception.

- **Alliance**

Eileen Bell said that the Civic Forum would complement the organs of democracy and represented a threat to nobody. **David Ford** pointed to the absence of a Department of Equality and Community Relations.

- **Others**

Paddy Roche contended that the report fell into the IRA's armalite and ballot box strategy. **Cedric Wilson** suggested that former paramilitaries were those who should be branded as 'wreckers' not those who opposed the Agreement. **Boyd Douglas** argued that under the Agreement it was possible for a thug or a racketeer to sit in government, whereas in local government a bankrupt could not sit on a council. **Roger Hutchinson** said that the report represented a further weakening of the Union. **Fraser Agnew** agreed. **Norman Boyd** said that the report contained further Unionist concessions to Nationalists.

Jane Morrice suggested that the debate was 'history in the making' but it did not feel like it. She suggested that people had forgotten how far they had come in the past 18 months. Yes, progress had been slow, but walking a tightrope meant taking small steps.

Helen Blake
Anglo-Irish Division
17 February 1999

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