

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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International Commission on Decommissioning

Statement by General John de Chastelain

1. Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning has been mandated to "monitor, review and verify progress on decommissioning of illegal arms" and to "report to both Governments at regular intervals". In the Agreement also, all participants reaffirmed both "their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations" and "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".

2. On 2 September 1998, Sinn Féin nominated Mr. Martin McGuinness, their chief negotiator in the talks process, to represent the party in its engagement with the Commission. In welcoming this at the time, the Sinn Féin President, Mr. Gerry Adams, said that "Sinn Féin believe that the wholehearted implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has the capacity to transform the existing situation through constructive and dynamic political development." The nomination of Mr. McGuinness was also welcomed by the British and Irish governments, and by the Ulster Unionist Party.

3. The Commission has over the intervening months had very worthwhile and extensive discussions with Mr. McGuinness, in the course of which

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significant progress has been made in clarifying various matters which are central to the issue of arms decommissioning. Mr. McGuinness has underlined the seriousness with which this issue has been approached by both the IRA and the republican community generally. On the basis of these discussions, the Commission has no doubt but that the republican movement is firmly committed to removing the gun from Irish politics and that this is for it one of the central objectives of the peace process.

4. The Commission has also had the benefit of receiving insights into the many and varied experiences of the different communities in Northern Ireland which were represented at the talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement. While it was enormously valuable to have these insights, it was sobering to realise that the experience of the same historical events can be so dissimilar. The issue of decommissioning brings those divergent experiences into very sharp focus.

5. Mr. McGuinness, for his part, has conveyed a very clear picture of what the decommissioning issue represents to the republican community. This perspective has been deeply coloured - and indeed in some ways effectively defined - by the experiences of that community just as the perspective of the Unionist community on decommissioning has been coloured by their experiences.

6. Mr. McGuinness has also pointed out that the most comprehensive account of the republican perspective on decommissioning was set out in the Sinn Féin submission of December 1995 to the International Body chaired by Senator George Mitchell, which was entitled "Building a

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Permanent Peace". At the time of this submission, Sinn Féin made clear that the issue of arms had to be settled "in the context of a negotiated settlement" and their view that, as part of that settlement, "those who have weapons will be persuaded to dispose of them." Sinn Féin further stated 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. The issue of arms must be settled to everyone's satisfaction".

7. The Commission, having examined Sinn Féin's document in detail, noted in it a clear consistency with the positions they have publicly adopted since and that have, indeed, informed their discussions with the Commission itself. For example, there is an absolute consistency on the point that decommissioning cannot occur as an act of surrender:-

> "A psychology of surrender is no more obtainable that an actual surrender. It is from that deeply ingrained and unshakable position that the "pike in the thatch" tradition persists and which, in more modern times, has been translated into rusting guns and forgotten caches; decommissioning by disuse and falling into disrepair".

And there is consistency about the *method* of decommissioning which might find acceptance:-

> "For all these reasons, therefore, we believe that as part of a peace settlement, the disposal of arms by those in possession of them is a method which may find acceptance. This is a decision for those

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who have the arms."

8. The Commission's discussions with Sinn Féin included consideration of the public safety aspect of arms, which the party's 1995 document had indicated had to be high on the agenda in any process. The Commission believes that, in itself, the retention of arms and explosives over an extended period of time in the context of a sustained peace constitutes a risk to public safety. Sinn Féin agreed that it was incumbent on all those holding such material to be satisfied, on an ongoing basis, as to its safety.

9. The Commission is in no doubt that the paramilitary organisations are fully conscious of the issues that arise in regard to arms holding, including the issue of safety. The Commission is also satisfied that the situation in regard to any material which may give cause for concern - because, for instance, of its location or current method of storage, or the possibility of accidental access, etc. - is kept under active review.

10. There has been a further development in relation to arms holding which we consider to be of considerable importance in terms of trust and confidence building. In addition to confirming that Sinn Féin is committed to the implementation of all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, Mr. McGuinness has, on the basis of his contacts with the IRA, confirmed that the implementation of the Agreement is the only strategy now envisaged for the attainment of political progress. He has further confirmed, on the basis of his contacts, that it is fully accepted that the use of arms is inconsistent with the attainment of political progress through the democratic route and would undermine the effective

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functioning of the proposed Executive and other institutions provided for in the Agreement. The establishment of these institutions, in accordance with the democratically expressed will of the people of Ireland, North and South, is an absolute priority. Arms will not be used now or in the future to determine or threaten in any way the functioning of these institutions as envisaged in the Agreement.

11. It is particularly worth recalling finally that, in its 1995 submission to the International Body, Sinn Féin argued that decommissioning needed to be situated in a "context where it is most likely to be achieved in practice" and, in this regard, pointed to a series of developments which would help facilitate this. In discussions with Mr. McGuinness, we agreed that each of the issues in question had been substantially addressed in the Good Friday Agreement. However, Mr. McGuinness registered his party's concerns at the pace of the implementation of the Agreement, in particular the failure to date to establish the institutions proposed under it.

12. Overall, based on these discussions and in particular Sinn Féin's acceptance of the comprehensive nature of the "negotiated settlement" that is the Good Friday Agreement, the Commission believes that the key to the removal of arms lies in the implementation of the Agreement in all its aspects. We take the view in particular that two areas of development set out in the Agreement are especially relevant: the establishment of the Executive and the North-South Ministerial Body, and a move to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland, in accordance with an overall political strategy. In this context, the Commission believes that

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the circumstances would exist which would enable Sinn Fein to use its influence, as set out in the Agreement, to achieve tangible and early progress on the issue of decommissioning.

13. In conclusion, and in my capacity as Chairman of the Independent Commission, I would respectfully offer the following judgement:

> In the light of the progress to date in the implementation of all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, and presuming in particular that the timetable for the establishment of the institutions provided for in the Agreement, as agreed by the Assembly on 18th January, is adhered to and that a forward looking normalisation strategy is published by the British Government at an early date, and also taking full account of the important public safety and misappropriation of arms dimensions cited above, the International Commission believes that Sinn Féin in these circumstances will, with confidence, be able to exercise its influence to persuade the IRA to dispose expeditiously of a quantity of the arms in its possession in a manner that will be sufficient to provide the widespread confidence now missing.

2 February 1999

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