

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Minister's Meeting with the Alliance Party, 6 March 2000

rcd 13.3.00

1. At their request, the Minister met with a delegation from the Alliance Party, led by party leader Seán Neeson and including Assembly Members David Ford and Eileen Bell and party policy worker Stephen Farry. The Alliance's main purpose in seeking the meeting was to explain further their recent proposals for breaking the current impasse (copy attached) and to urge the involvement of all of the parties in round-table meetings to seek a way forward.

2. In explaining his party's proposals (essentially a six-step process culminating in a "day of reconciliation" on which decommissioning would occur and the Executive would reconvene), Neeson allowed that they did not represent a blueprint for progress. However, he believed that they could provide a basis for discussion between the parties and that there was merit in simply putting something on the table.

3. Both Neeson, and other members of the Alliance delegation, expressed their belief that there was some openness on the part of Unionists to accepting progress on decommissioning short of actual product. However there was also a strong sense among many Unionists that they had jumped in December and had not been followed by Republicans. Nonetheless, Neeson felt that guarantees on decommissioning might be sufficient to Trimble's needs. From his contact with Sinn Féin, he also felt that the IRA offer of 11 February could, in the right context, be returned to the table.

4. In response, the Minister thanked the Alliance for their paper which the Government would look at seriously. However, he suggested, the "quid pro quo" approach to decommissioning and devolution had not worked to date. The Government wished to see the full implementation of the Agreement -

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including decommissioning - but, to have a realistic chance of achieving it, the context in which decommissioning is considered would have to be broadened.

5. There were a number of issues, including Patten and normalisation, where advances could create a dynamic towards progress in other areas. Clarity of intention in these areas could assist in achieving clarity on decommissioning. It was also the case that change on the ground through normalisation would greatly assist Republicans seeking to convince their community that politics could deliver.

6. The Minister concluded that it was important at this time to get a realistic assessment of parties' bottom lines - the meetings in Belfast this week would be important in this regard. If we could reach an assessment of whether there was a deal on or not, we could then look at how to move forward.

Helen Blake

7 March 2000

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Alliance Party Proposals to Break the Deadlock in the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

The Dilemma

At present the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement seems to face a catch-22 stalemate. Unionists are not prepared to see the restoration of the political institutions in the absence of sufficient progress on decommissioning. Republicans are insistent that there cannot be any progress on decommissioning until the institutions are restored. Loyalists seem reluctant to move on decommissioning until Republicans have started, or according to some reports until Republicans have actually completed decommissioning.

In contrast, there is an overwhelming desire on the part of the community in Northern Ireland for progress to occur on both the issues of devolution and decommissioning.

As the positions of Unionists and Republicans directly contradict each other, there is a need to introduce a sufficient number of elements to create the potential for a series of linkages or sequencing of events to be created, while avoiding introducing unrelated issues that will only serve to create new preconditions and further blockages.

The deadlock in the peace process is not caused by the fundamental contradictions in the issues of devolution and decommissioning themselves, but a lack of will to move. There is a major lack of mutual trust and confidence between the political parties, especially between the Ulster Unionists and the Republican Movement. A series of sequenced steps allows this necessary trust and confidence to be progressively restored.

Proposals for Possible Sequencing of Steps

Alliance recommends that the following sequence of steps could break the deadlock.

Step One

The pro-Agreement parties would collectively restate their commitment to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

This should be a relatively easy first step for all the pro-Agreement parties to take. It would serve a useful purpose in helping to restore confidence for the 71% of the people of Northern Ireland who voted for the Agreement, plus the Agreement's supporters in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and internationally that all the parties remain committed to the process. Ideally, this would be carried out in a meeting convened jointly by the British Prime Minister and the Irish Taoiseach.

Step Two

Both Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries should provide a new form of words that makes clear that they have completely renounced the use of violence for both 'military' and 'non-military' objectives.

All of the political parties supporting the Good Friday Agreement have renounced the use of violence both as part of that Agreement and previously in their adherence to the Mitchell Principles. The paramilitary groups currently on ceasefire have not produced a

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form of words to express their renunciation of the use of violence. There is also a significant concern in the community as to the breadth of the ceasefires, in that certain activities such as so-called 'punishment attacks' and murders have occurred notwithstanding the presence of official ceasefires.

An appropriate form of words from the paramilitary groups could provide greater confidence in the totality of their respective ceasefires, and provide a context for progress towards decommissioning. It would provide a better security environment for the British Government to make progress on normalisation, and give both sets of paramilitaries, Republican and Loyalist, confidence that each other's intentions are genuine, again helping to improve the context for decommissioning.

Step Three

The British Government should accelerate the process of 'normalisation' in Northern Ireland.

The Mitchell Report (1996) rightly refuses to make any formal linkage between the weapons of the state which are used to protect the wider community from terrorism, and those held by paramilitary groups to inflict violence upon society. It is important that the level of security reflects the assessment of the threat to the community by professional security experts.

In the light of positive statements from Loyalists and Republicans with respect to their renunciation of the use of violence, as suggested above, it should be possible for the British Government to take steps to accelerate the process of 'normalisation', subject to security assessments.

Progress towards normalising the level of security provision in Northern Ireland could help to provide a better context for paramilitary groups to make progress towards decommissioning.

Step Four

Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries should intensify their engagement with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, and in particular provide information regarding inventories and timetables for decommissioning. In this context, the IRA may reinstate the commitments that they had made to the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) prior to the suspension of devolution and elaborate upon them.

These actions should hopefully provide sufficient confidence to reinstate the political institutions.

Step Five

The political parties would collectively agree to a meeting of the Executive and the first acts of decommissioning occurring on a fixed date to be determined. This step should be sufficient for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to rescind the order suspending the political institutions.

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With this consensus, the Secretary of State would be in a position to reinstate the political institutions, providing the legal basis for a meeting of the Executive and a context for decommissioning to begin. The Ulster Unionists would be able to return to Executive business virtually simultaneous to the first acts of decommissioning. Republicans would be able to commence decommissioning in a context in which the institutions were operative.

Step Six

On the appropriate date - the 'Day of Reconciliation', the Executive would reconvene and the first acts of Republican and Loyalist decommissioning would occur. Further progress on decommissioning would continue according to timetables and modalities agreed with the IICD.

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