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Article by **David Trimble, Ulster Unionist Party Leader**, written for the *Irish Times*, 15 July 1999

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The following is the full text of the article written by Mr. David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, on Decommissioning, published in the Irish Times, 15 July 1999

Over recent weeks a concerted attempt has been made to short-circuit the political process, which so many people hope will soon lead to peace and democracy. From painful experience I know there are no short cuts to peace.

The deadline, arbitrarily imposed by the British and Irish ministers, is unrealistic. I can understand the prime ministers wish to move quickly to devolution. I share this wish. I, too, am impatient to restore government in Northern Ireland to those elected by the people of Northern Ireland. There is much we wish to do to improve people's lives.

Devolution must, though, be based on democratic principles. All that counts in a democracy is people's votes. Threats of violence can play no role. Nor can any party with a private army and a huge capacity to wage war expect democrats to view their position as anything other than threatening.

Mr Blair's deadline was based on a belief that a seismic shift had occurred in the attitudes of Sinn Féin and the IRA towards violence. Unfortunately, no evidence has come forward to support this belief. Mr Adams' article in yesterday's Irish Times made it clear that the IRA has made no commitment to decommissioning.

When asked why the British government is so certain that decommissioning will take place shortly after the executive is formed, he nonchalantly says this is a question that only the British government can answer. He himself is unwilling to confirm the Prime Minister's belief. Our information is that there is no objective basis for the belief.

The Bill which went through the House of Commons yesterday is based on the conviction that the IRA is committed both to starting decommissioning within weeks of devolution and completing decommissioning by next May. Now that these beliefs have been undermined by Mr Adams, it has become obvious just how flawed this legislation is.

The legislation contains no certainty that the IRA will decommission after gaining power in the new executive, and few details on what timetable will be expected of the IRA. While I have every faith in Gen de Chastelain as a person, I know his terms of reference are focused on facilitating decommissioning, not on setting timetables. I am well aware of how procedures can be exploited and how timetables can be stretched.

The British government's failsafe mechanism is flawed and unfair. Unfair because if Sinn Féin fails to deliver its obligations, everyone in the executive and Assembly will be ejected from office - the innocent to be punished along with the guilty, and democrats to be treated as though they were indistinguishable from terrorists.

Nor are all institutions treated equally. The institutions most valued by unionists will be suspended, but the Human Rights and Equality Commissions, the Commission on Policing and the review of criminal justice will remain, and the cross-Border bodies will linger on for an uncertain period. This is one-sided. If the institutions of the agreement were to be suspended it could only be on the basis of one out, all out.

Decommissioning must be mutual. It is something which obviously has to involve all paramilitary groups. It would not be realistic to expect republicans to go through with decommissioning if loyalists refused to reciprocate. It is a grave flaw in the Bill as it stands, that only republicans face a sanction for failing to decommission. In their case they would be ejected from office along with the democratic parties. For loyalists the sanctions are much weaker and in several cases are non-existent.

No loyalists will be in the executive, and several loyalist groups have no representatives in the Assembly. Several fringe republican groups are in the same position. The only sanction that could be applied to such groups is a halt to prisoner releases. This must be made automatic to give clarity and confidence to all involved that the government means business. Any failure on this account would provide a wealth of further excuses to delay decommissioning.

In parliament on Tuesday, all of my party's attempts to deal with these major flaws in the legislation were rejected by the government. I now hear that some amendments may be possible, although as of last evening I still have no details.

In this deeply unsatisfactory position it is not possible for me to recommend the arrangements to my party. Some have said that even with major flaws there is nothing to lose in forming a government and testing republican willingness to behave exclusively as democrats. The prize of an inclusive, democratic, devolved government is worth taking risks for, and we have repeatedly taken risks. However, the risks of jumping now without any commitment to decommissioning and an inadequate safety net remain dauntingly large.

Sinn Féin/IRA still appears to retain hopes of bringing its armed movement into the heart of government. This would carry the danger of creating a mafia state in Northern Ireland while the IRA retains a future option on finishing the job. I can quite simply illustrate the problems that could arise. It is possible that we could have, for instance, a Sinn Féin health minister in charge of anti-drugs policy while associates in the IRA used armed force, perhaps even on ministerial advice, to exploit the supply of illegal drugs.

I have not been able to understand why republicans have not been prepared to move with us on this matter and to take up my fair offer of jumping together. The fact that no co-operation has been offered deepens our concerns about Sinn Féin's true intentions.

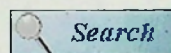
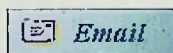
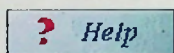
The most direct way to overcome these difficulties, in the event of a continued Sinn Féin refusal to cooperate, is for the SDLP to join us in excluding from government any party involved in failure to decommission. Regrettably, it has not been possible to persuade the SDLP to join us in this. It is disappointing that the SDLP remains unable to muster the political courage it exhorts us to use.

My party took calculated risks in assenting to the Belfast Agreement. The agreement divided unionism. I thought that as the benefits of the agreement came through, support for it would grow. Instead, over the past 15 months the perception of unionism has been that matters have not improved.

Nonetheless, I consider that what I did then was right. I still want the agreement to succeed, but I remain to be convinced that the right way to do it is through this hastily concocted scheme, which clearly has not been thought through.

We must take account of the possibility that individuals or a movement are in the process of evolution, and that, given time and space, could change. If there was a clear, watertight scheme, in which there was at the outset an unequivocal commitment to change and a process that genuinely guaranteed to deliver that change, we would have to consider whether a scruple over a period of days could be justified.

All should seriously consider whether the haste with which this measure has been presented is really needed, or whether it would be better to have more time and to proceed on a sounder basis. I have no doubt that more time would be a better way to proceed, just as I have no doubt that we should all tell the paramilitaries that the right way forward is not for democrats constantly to have to bend to the requirements of paramilitaries but for paramilitaries to accept the opportunity this process offers them of becoming fully and genuinely partners in the democratic process.



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