



CAIN Web Service

Article by David Trimble, UUP Leader, written
for *The Belfast Telegraph*, 6 July 1999

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The following is the full text of an article written by David Trimble for the Belfast Telegraph, published on Tuesday 6 July 1999.

Last Friday was described in some quarters as a great day for democracy. It was anything but that.

In fact it was more a reflection of the fact that paramilitary groups have defaulted on the commitment made in the Belfast Agreement to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations.

More than this it was a reflection of the threat of IRA and loyalist violence which the two Governments believe will follow any refusal to accommodate Sinn Féin.

The Prime Minister is asking unionism to make some very difficult choices. He wants devolution to occur before the process of decommissioning has started and before any weapons are actually handed in.

For me to accede to his wishes would require my party to change its well established policy of requiring the IRA to begin a credible and verifiable process of decommissioning before unionists agree to serve alongside Sinn Féin ministers in the government of Northern Ireland.

Very good reasons would be needed for my party to consider such a change.

The Prime Minister has two arguments. The first is that his proposed process leading to full decommissioning by May 2000 is better for unionists than a demand which focuses on a start to decommissioning.

There is some logic in this view, but only if there can be certainty that decommissioning will start soon and be carried through to completion by May 2000.

We have insisted on a start to decommissioning precisely because we need to give the people of Northern Ireland confidence that Sinn Féin is serious, that it will not continue to wriggle and to deceive.

Mr Blair's second point aims to answer these doubts. He says that there is no need to take the word of Sinn Féin, or indeed of any politician. He says he has designed a process which will be automatic.

This is an improvement on the situation in regard to prisoner releases which had depended on the judgement of the Secretary of State, but we will need to study the proposed legislation very carefully. Unfortunately the automatic process which he suggests will lead to the suspension of all the institutions of the Belfast Agreement the Executive, Assembly, the cross-border bodies, and the Civic Forum — rather than simply excluding those who default on their obligations.

This unfair sanction has caused more resentment than almost anything else. Many people ask why the innocent should be punished along with the guilty. In truth Mr Blair has no answer to this.

He merely states that if the Executive and other institutions are suspended then we are back to where we stand at present. This is, of course, not quite true, since suspending an administration is not the same as never forming it.

It would help to convince unionists if the unfairness in these arrangements could be rectified. Not only are the new proposals neutral as between those who default on their obligations and those who do not but there is no satisfactory sanction should parties aligned with loyalist paramilitaries default.

It is necessary for the Government to reopen the question of prisoner releases if the proposals are to be an effective discouragement to both. loyalist and republican bad faith.

The Prime Minister has been persuaded to give some extra latitude to those to whom many in Northern Ireland find it almost terminally difficult to give their trust. In last week's talks we repeatedly questioned the wisdom of this approach, and the question of trust remains at the core of our difficulties.

I have to say that some statements made by republican spokesmen since last Friday have done little to build the necessary confidence.

While Mr Blair's arguments are not without foundation, he is asking a great deal of those who have suffered so much at the hands of the IRA. For many people he is asking one concession too many. The unionist community has been both conciliatory and patient. Even if that patience is not yet exhausted it is not inexhaustable.

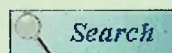
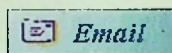
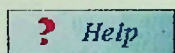
In his *Belfast Telegraph* article yesterday the Prime Minister told us that the IRA will be required to begin the process of decommissioning within days of devolution by informing General de Chastelain of when, how and what they intend to deliver in the first and subsequent stages of disarmament.

I am waiting to see if the Bill to go before Parliament makes this crystal clear without loopholes. I shall, of course, also examine carefully the rules by which General de Chastelain issues certificates to confirm that actual decommissioning has taken place.

Above all, I will require absolute certainty that any failure to decommission will result immediately and unequivocally in a suspension of Sinn Féin's ability to remain in government.

Unlike other unionist parties, the Ulster Unionist Party will not reject the Prime Minister's proposals out of hand.

We will give them careful consideration, weighing the potential consequences of rejection for devolution, for the future of the RUC, and for the international standing of unionism against the change of well established policy involved.



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