



Decommissioning:
What do YOU think?



A Voice for Community and Voluntary Groups!

Introduction

The 'D' word. A bad word. Boring. A switch-off. Not what you wanted to talk about over the Christmas dinner. Right?

Well, yes. But the problem exists. And if we don't solve it we are going to be in one bad mess.

Should the IRA have to start decommissioning before they can join the Executive? That's what David Trimble wants.

Or should Unionists first join the Executive with Sinn Fein and then see about decommissioning? That's what Gerry Adams says.

What do you think? How much does the issue matter to you?

Community Dialogue are a group of community workers from across the divide. We don't take positions on political issues, but we believe that to make peace in Northern Ireland we have to talk. Not just any old talk: rather talk that involves questioning ourselves, listening to others, and trying genuinely to see new angles on things.

We invite you to meet with others to discuss this issue and let us know your conclusions. Groups can meet on a single identity or cross community basis. Either way, we will pass on your views to the politicians and to the Decommissioning Body.

Decommissioning is only part of the Agreement. Progress has been made in many other areas: the Assembly is working in shadow form. It has appointed different committees. Nearly 200 prisoners have been released. North-South bodies don't seem to be such a block. But if we don't find some way to handle decommissioning, the Agreement will fall.

In the next two sections we list arguments put by both sides. They are not our arguments, but see what you think of them.

Some arguments put by those who think decommissioning must precede Sinn Fein's entry into an Executive:

- Decommissioning is part of the Agreement so Sinn Fein have to do it if they want to be part of the Government.
- You can't be part of a government and have a private army.
- The only way to know the war is over is if paramilitaries start to decommission.
- People say they need arms to defend themselves, but people were murdered in places like North Belfast while the paramilitaries were well armed. Private armies don't protect people.
- It is immoral to retain weapons.
- Other clauses in the Agreement have been fulfilled. Republicans see their prisoners released. Yet the IRA refuse to make the one visible gesture that Unionists need.
- If voters thought the Agreement meant the IRA would not have to decommission they would never have supported it.
- If Republicans are committed to peace why do they need weapons?

Some arguments put by those who think decommissioning need not precede Sinn Fein's entry into an Executive:

- The Agreement does not require this. It is quite specific that the Executive and North-South structures have first to be appointed, and that decommissioning has only to be dealt with over a two year period.
- Sinn Fein have cooperated with the Decommissioning Body by appointing Martin McGuinness to liaise with it.
- If Unionists first appointed the Executive then Republicans might be able to deal with decommissioning.
- Decommissioning is irrelevant. What matters is that guns are silent. If Unionists push decommissioning too far they will wreck the Agreement.
- The issue is a false one. If paramilitaries handed over all their guns tomorrow they could re-arm the next day. The only reason Unionists are pushing this issue is to delay sharing power with Sinn Fein.
- For the IRA to decommission would mean surrender. This will never happen.
- The IRA will never decommission because that would leave their areas undefended.
- When the political conditions are right, then decommissioning will happen.

What is your Response?

Community Dialogue invite you to look at each of the above arguments and assess them honestly. You might ask yourself:

- What difference does it make to YOU if decommissioning takes place or not?
- Many Republicans think David Trimble could join an Executive with Sinn Fein without prior decommissioning. But suppose Republicans are wrong? Suppose that if David Trimble did this his party would replace him? What then?
- Many Unionists assume Gerry Adams could persuade the IRA to decommission. But again suppose they are wrong? Suppose Gerry Adams simply has not the power to do this? What then? Assumptions at this stage can be dangerous. They may be wrong. What if the Agreement fails?

If we fail to handle this issue and the Agreement fails here are some of the consequences:

- The Assembly will be terminated,
- No Executive will be appointed, so neither Unionists nor Nationalists will govern Northern Ireland. Direct rule will continue. Civil Servants will still have massive influence.
- The Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Maryfield Secretariat will remain in place.
- The British Government will work even more closely with the Dublin Government because this helps it internationally when there are controversial incidents.
- The Patten Commission on policing will probably make its recommendations anyway.
- Early release of prisoners is likely to continue as long as there are ceasefires.
- Decommissioning is unlikely to take place.
- There will be no North-South Ministerial Council.
- The South's territorial claim over Northern Ireland in Articles Two and Three will remain in place.
- There will probably be an increase in violence.
- It may be decades before ten political parties - Unionist and Loyalist, Nationalist and Republican - together with the two Governments, accept a new Agreement.

Questions for those who support the Agreement:

Which is more important to you: maintaining your position on decommissioning or having the Executive appointed? If it is decommissioning, will the pain and sacrifices that many endured to win the Agreement go to waste?

If you think the Agreement is more important what can you do?

- You can talk to people in your own community and say that whatever happens the Agreement is vital.
- You can say to Sinn Fein people: Look, you signed up to the Agreement so should you not give strong leadership to Republicans and find some way to get rid of weapons?'
- You can say to the UUP: Should you not go ahead with the Executive and then see if Republicans decommission within the two year time-frame?'

Questions for those opposed to the Agreement:

- Are you sure you want to bring it down on this issue?
- Can you see other ways of reaching agreement in Northern Ireland?
- Have you thought out what will happen if the Agreement fails?

Questions for Republicans:

Most Republicans think decommissioning is not an issue. But it is for Unionists. If we want to make peace we have to take the other side seriously. That means taking their issues seriously.

- How can you do this?
- Why do you need guns, since the people of Ireland have voted for peace?

Questions for Unionists:

Decommissioning is a problem for Republicans in part because they fear being excluded in the Northern Ireland of the future.

- How can you convince them this will not happen so that decommissioning will not be such a problem?
- What do you mean by decommissioning? Handing over some, or all, the weapons? What difference will this make?

Community Dialogue says:

Whatever your position, make your voice heard. But first think about the issue and check it out with other people, especially those with whom you disagree.

Community Dialogue is a cross-community group which encourages dialogue on political issues particularly in the community sector throughout Northern Ireland.

Contact us at: 373 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DG.

Tel: 01232-329995; Fax: 01232-330482; Mobile (0410) 741963.;

e-mail: commdial@ibm.net;

Executive: David Holloway (Chair), Anne Carr, Noreen Christian, Roy Garland, Bronagh Hinds, Bernie Laverty, John Loughran, P.J. McLean, Billy Mitchell, Roisin McDonough, Christine Nesbitt, Andrew Park, Mary Lavery.

Coordinators: Ernie Carroll and Brian Lennon.

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