

## Fine Gael National Press Office

## Press Statement

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## Paper on the Peace Process by John Bruton TD, Leader of Fine Gael

This morning in the Dail I wished the Taoiseach well in the Northern Ireland negotiations next week. I believe we must have inclusive institutions set up quickly, with the participation of all eligible parties, including Sinn Fein.

I also said that, this time, it was vital that clarity, certainty and accountability be achieved in regard to how, when and by whom paramilitary weapons would be put beyond use.

This clarity, certainty and accountability was not achieved at the time of the Good Friday Agreement and this gap is at the heart of the current difficulties.

Accountability for putting weapons beyond us is particularly important. If the political parties associated with paramilitaries are not able or willing to accept this accountability, then someone must be found who will be accountable for putting weapons beyond use in accordance with the Agreement.

I will set out why this issue must be tackled, once and for all, this time.

Before doing so, I would like to say that I accept that the issue be dealt with within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

I believe that General de Chastelain will be able to play a very helpful role in producing a robust formula that can overcome the current impasse in a manner that shows respect for the legitimate concerns of all parties. The peace process is about everybody moving together. It is not about surrender or defeat for anyone.

I also believe that other issues will have to be dealt with in a way that gives the confidence necessary to facilitate disposal of weapons. Legally held weapons are disproportionately in the hands of one community. Once peace is established, many of these licences should be withdrawn.

Policing needs to be acceptable and I believe the Patton report will point a way forward on this issue that will be difficult, but tolerable, for both communities.

Loyalist attacks on Nationalists are designed to increase sectarian tensions and make a settlement of the weapons issue harder to agree.

The Loyalist political parties have to convincingly demonstrate that they are providing all necessary help to the police to bring those responsible for the murderous attacks on Catholics to justice.

But for the Agreement to work, both sides must agree. That is the way it is designed. It is not practical politics to deal with everything else first, and leave the disposal of paramilitary weapons to be dealt with last.

Unionists are conscious of the fact that the British Prime Minister in a letter of 10th April 1998, said "I confirm that in our view the effect of the decommissioning section of the Agreement, with decommissioning schemes coming into effect in June, is that the process of decommissioning should begin straight away". That was over a year ago, no one can really argue that the process has yet begun, so it is not only Nationalists who can argue that there has been foot-dragging on an important element of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement will only work if both Unionists and Nationalists agree to operate it. Everything about the Agreement is one that requires the consent of both communities at all times.

The First Minister comes from one community and the Deputy First Minister from the other. If either the First Minister or the Deputy First Minister cease to hold office, whether by resignation or otherwise, the other shall also cease to hold office. This key provision means that everything must be done by agreement. Thus, concerns about weapons, if they exist, must be addressed by all participants.

A clear issue of democratic politics is at stake on the paramilitary weapons issue.

It is very important that political decisions be seen to be influenced solely by the preferences of citizens as expressed freely through the ballot box.

A legitimisation of paramilitarism in politics would change the nature of Irish democracy in a radical way. It would undermine a key element in our Constitution.

Our Constitution, approved by the people in 1937, states at Article 15.6.1 that

**"The right to raise and maintain military or armed forces is vested exclusively in the Oireachtas".**

Article 15.6.2 states

**"No military or armed force, other than a military or armed force raised and maintained by the Oireachtas, shall be raised or maintained for any purpose whatsoever".**

I believe in pragmatism in politics. But there are certain parameters within which pragmatism should operate. I believe that the role of the gun in politics is one on which a clear parameter should be set.

In light of recent statements by yourself and the Prime Minister, I am not clear what parameter is now being set on this matter by the Irish and British Governments.

Agreeing publicly to postpone a start to decommissioning until after the executive is set up, without a corresponding public concession by Sinn Fein, the PUP or the UDP, is hard to understand given that all these parties agreed long ago that this issue would have to be tackled.

First, prior to the talks all parties, including Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party, had signed up to the Mitchell Principles in order to participate in the talks.

One of these principles to which both Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party agreed in 1997 was that they gave their **"total and absolute commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations"**. That was absolutely clear. In signing up to the Mitchell Principles, Sinn Fein were giving their **"total and absolute commitment"** to the disarmament of the IRA. The Progressive Unionist Party were giving their **"total and absolute commitment"** to the disarmament of the Ulster Volunteer Force. That was something that they did before the negotiations even started.

Secondly, on 24 September, 1997 a resolution was adopted in the talks, and accepted by all parties including both Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party, which said **"the resolution of the decommissioning issue is an indispensable part of the process of negotiation"**.

Thirdly, on Good Friday of 1998, all parties, including both Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party, reaffirmed their commitment to disarmament as follows :-

**"all participants accordingly reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. They also confirm 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 decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the Agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement"**.

These successive and repeated commitments mean that Sinn Fein and the Progressive Unionist Party have agreed that they will use all the influence they have to achieve the decommissioning of **all** paramilitary arms within two years following the endorsement of the referendum. In other words both of them agreed that all of the arms belonging to the IRA, and all of the arms belonging to the UVF, will be put beyond use within a two year period ending in May of next year.

So far, neither organisation has put any arms at all beyond use, and we are more than half way through the two year period.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the IRA and the UVF have now have adopted a position of principle that they will either never disarm, or at best that they will not even make a start on fulfilling their Good Friday Agreement obligation to disarmament until every other obligation in the Agreement on every other party has been fulfilled in total by those other parties. This is untenable.

The Loyalists and the Republicans are asking everybody else to do everything on trust for them, while they will do **nothing** at all about weapons on trust for anyone else.

Commitments have been given on disarmament but no-one is willing to accept accountability for a failure to live up to those commitments. If the commitments meant nothing then they should not have been given.

Sinn Fein say that they are not the IRA, and that all they can do is **"work constructively and in good faith"** and **"use any influence they may have"**. They are not prepared to be accountable for the issue.

If they are separate from the IRA and not accountable for them, then Sinn Fein should be free to publicly disagree with and disown the position of the IRA when the IRA refuse to countenance any disarmament.

Yet Sinn Fein have not done this. Sinn Fein have allowed their own **"total and absolute commitment to disarmament"** in the Mitchell Principles, to be set aside by the position of the IRA Army Council. This leads inexorably to the conclusion that, on this issue, Sinn Fein are not in practice independent of the IRA at all.

Why do we need disarmament by paramilitaries ?

First, in Ireland we frequently have Coalition Governments. If you have one of the parties in a Coalition which has an association with a paramilitary organisation, and which is refusing in principle to disarm itself, that party is liable to rely implicitly in its Coalition negotiations on something more than just the weight of the votes it has in the Dail. That is wrong.

Second, the paramilitaries' stockpiles of arms are very large. It is important that they do not fall into the wrong hands. Splinter Groups could obtain them and use them for sectarian murders or to destabilise the new institutions. Sinn Fein Ministers would hardly want to see IRA guns used by splinter groups against the institutions of which they themselves were members.

Third, the arms in question are saleable. Nobody would want to see those arms being sold to international terrorist organisations from the Middle East or somewhere else like that.

Only if the weapons are put beyond use, can we be sure that they are not going to be sold to organisations that would use them for international terrorism elsewhere in the world. That must surely be a special concern to the US Government.

Fourth, the weapons could, if no longer being used for a political purpose in Ireland, find their way into the hands of criminal organisations. Organised crime is a major threat. Protection rackets already exist. Witness intimidation by paramilitaries is a reality.

It would be a very big risk for a democratic Government to allow large stockpiles of arms to exist in its jurisdiction, which were outside its control.

Fifth, opinion polls have repeatedly shown that an overwhelming majority of Irish people want decommissioning to start. No democrat can ignore the will of the people.

Finally, one must also ask the fundamental question - if the war is over, what do the Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries need the guns for ? Why are they so insistent on keeping the guns ? Is it because they want to have the option of returning to violence at some future stage ? Any viable agreement must provide a reassuring answer to these questions.

The Good Friday Agreement was specifically designed to put a permanent end to violence. All the signatories to the Good Friday Agreement accepted that. Therefore it is not reasonable for any of those signatories to argue that a paramilitary organisation should continue in existence after the Good Friday Agreement has been fulfilled in other respects.

While the Taoiseach's objectives remain clear on this issue, his strategy has changed dramatically in the past few days. This creates a doubt which must be dispelled.

In February this year, in an interview with the Sunday Times the Taoiseach said the following:

**"I am on record in recent weeks and months as saying that it is not compatible with being part of a government - I mean part of an executive - that there is not at least a commencement of decommissioning, and that would apply in the North, it would apply in the South. That is what we need to achieve".**

When asked if "the practical politics are that there can be no executive without a start to decommissioning" the Taoiseach answered: **"Yes, I mean that is the practical politics....."**

This week in the Dail the Taoiseach radically reversed this position, and accepted the Sinn Fein policy that Sinn Fein would have to be in the executive before any question of actual decommissioning would even arise. He said **"it is first essential to establish all the institutions"**.

Despite the subsequent claim in the Dail of Minister of State Cullen that "there is no change in the Government's position" and that this was "categorical and unequivocal" the Taoiseach statement of this week and his statement of last February contradict one another.

In February he said that decommissioning should start first, and yesterday he said that the executive should be set up first.

The issue of paramilitary weapons is, as I have demonstrated by quoting Article 15 of the Constitution, a fundamental constitutional issue for this state. It is not a matter on which a tactical concession of this magnitude should have been made without a quid pro quo. The Republican movement has not so far given any public indication of a quid pro quo for the Taoiseach's public reversal of position on the timing of a start to decommissioning.

This new approach by the Government means that if all IRA guns have not been put beyond use eleven months from now as required by the Good Friday Agreement, the only course open to this Government would be to suspend the institutions set up under the Agreement. This would be a very big step and there would need to be very great clarity as to how and when such a step would be contemplated. No one should be left in any doubt as to the Government's intentions.

I do not underestimate the difficulty of the current Northern Ireland negotiations. I wish the Taoiseach and the other negotiators well, but I would urge the Taoiseach to make a clear distinction in his mind between tactical and timing issues on which concessions can be made, and a fundamental issue on which no concession should be made.

**ENDS**