



Community  
Dialogue

What  
Price  
Peace?



A Voice for Community and Voluntary Groups

# WHAT PRICE PEACE?

*Over 71% of the people of Northern Ireland voted for the Belfast Agreement. In it there is a procedure for reviewing progress and finding ways to deal with difficulties. Community Dialogue invite you to take part in this assessment and let us know your conclusions.*

Let's start by asking: what progress has been made so far in the peace negotiations?

## **Achievements so far in the Peace Negotiations**

- Official ceasefires have been declared by almost all the paramilitaries. Many lives have been saved as a result.
- In the Agreement eight political parties, including some linked with paramilitaries, agreed for the first time about the future of Northern Ireland and committed themselves to use exclusively peaceful means to achieve political ends.
- They also committed themselves to a fresh start and saw this as the best way to honour victims.
- 108 members were elected to the Assembly.
- The First and Deputy First Ministers were appointed.
- Ten Northern Ireland departments were agreed, three each to be held by the UUP and SDLP, two each by the DUP and Sinn Fein.
- The areas of work for the North-South Bodies have been agreed.
- Sinn Fein, the PUP, and the LVF appointed representatives to mediate with the Decommissioning Body.
- In the past year there has been more evidence of the political stability required for inward investment.
- The Victims' Unit, the Patten Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the Criminal Justice Commission have all been set up.

## Major concessions made by different groups

All the parties supporting the Agreement made very difficult concessions. Other groups, however, often failed to see just how difficult those changes were.

### Unionists accepted:

- North-South structures.
- An Executive including Sinn Fein, assuming that all aspects of the Agreement — including decommissioning — were in their view implemented together.
- A commission on policing which is likely to lead to major changes.
- The early release of prisoners.
- A statutory duty placed on the Department of Education to facilitate Irish medium education.
- An Equality Commission.

### Nationalists accepted:

- Full recognition of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland until the majority of people North and South decide otherwise.
- Limited North-South structures.
- Changes in Articles Two and Three.
- No certainty that the policing issue would be resolved to their satisfaction.
- A commitment to use any influence they had to bring about decommissioning.

*What do you think were the most difficult concessions made by your opponents? Do you know what these cost them?*

## Problems

Over the years we have solved seemingly intractable problems. The Agreement itself is the most notable example. Naturally, after 30 years of violence, there are still outstanding issues. At the moment one block is decommissioning, but there will be others in the future. Unless politicians are able to handle disagreements without holding the whole process to ransom the Agreement itself will always be the victim.

*Here are questions for both Unionists and Nationalists to consider about decommissioning:*

### Questions for Unionists:

- Are there other ways than decommissioning of showing that IRA violence has ended? David Trimble has said that if there were he would accept them.
- If you had to choose between going ahead with the Executive without decommissioning or seeing the whole process fail over this particular issue, which would you choose?

### Questions for Nationalists:

- Unionists argue there is a problem with Sinn Fein members being Ministers in the new Government if they are perceived to have a link with the IRA, unless a start is made on decommissioning. Have they a point? Or do you believe we have to live with this ambiguity as part of the price of moving away from violence? How then can Sinn Fein persuade Unionists that IRA violence is over?
- The decommissioning clauses in the Agreement are vague. There is no requirement for it to take place before the appointment of the Executive. But other clauses are equally vague, and many Republicans would want these implemented in a generous way. Could Sinn Fein fulfill the greater spirit of the Agreement by giving a new lead over decommissioning?



## What are some consequences of the failure of the Agreement?

- Direct rule by the British Government will continue, but with the likelihood of much greater input from Dublin. This may amount in practice to a form of joint authority.
- The Assembly will be folded up and the possibility of a directly elected government in Northern Ireland will have gone.
- Northern Ireland will continue to be run to a large extent by civil servants.
- Early release will continue for paramilitaries on ceasefire.
- There will be no decommissioning.
- Articles Two and Three will remain in the South's Constitution.
- Nationalists and Unionists will have failed yet again to build a political relationship with each other.
- New inward investment, along with the jobs it will bring, is likely to stall.

## Possible ways out of the decommissioning impasse

How would you get around the decommissioning issue? The following suggestions might help, but why not think of better ones? If you send them to us at Community Dialogue we will pass them on to the politicians.

- Would Unionists go ahead with the Executive if the IRA said the war is over and that they would decommission within an agreed timetable?
- Could paramilitaries show General de Chastelain some arms dumps and let him revisit them periodically to see that the weapons are not being used?
- Why not make a sculpture of a peace memorial out of weapons? Something like this has been suggested both by a leading Republican and by Archbishop Sean Brady.
- Use the steel from decommissioned weapons to make wheel chairs.
- The majority of Nationalists and Unionists want an end to violence and a new start in Northern Ireland. Does this mean that many are learning to live with ambiguity, to take risks, and not to box each other into impossible positions? Do people see this as the best hope for the future?

*Community Dialogue is made up of community workers from across the divide. As a group we do not take positions on political issues. However, 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 make your voice heard. Why not discuss the questions in this leaflet either on your own or with your friends or work colleagues? You could also invite people from backgrounds different from your own to join you in discussion. If you wish, you can send your answers, ideas and other suggestions to us at Community Dialogue and we will send them on to the relevant authorities, or politicians.*

**Remember: it is up to us to  
make the future!**

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