

**REPORT FROM POLITICAL DIALOGUE DISCUSSION WHICH TOOK PLACE
17/18TH FEBRUARY 2000 IN NEWTOWNARDS**

The first thing that was different about this was the venue as these are usually held at Glencree Centre, Co Wicklow. The centre was booked that weekend, but it was felt that discussion should take place before the next scheduled one which is to be held 3rd/5th March. It caused problems for some of the delegates as Sinn Fein only turned up on the Saturday as they did not feel safe spending a night in Newtownards. For myself this was the most interesting one as it had a broad range of opinion which has often been missing before.

I for my part flagged up the issue of inclusivity, which was strongly supported by the representative from the PUP's. He stated that if there were to be a review called it was doubtful if they would take part. I was asked if this inclusiveness stretched to the DUP, but I stated that it was something we had always argued for and we would have no problem with everyone taking part. The British Government's representative in their closing remarks stated that this issue had come across very forcefully, the need to include all pro-agreement parties in discussions.

I will now keep this brief, I asked the Ulster Unionist if because the institutions had been suspended, that the May deadline could possibly be moved. I was told under no circumstances would the Unionists agree with this. I very much put questions to him, which Sinn Fein repeated verbatim the next day, that if there was another council meeting would policing be put on the agenda. In other words that it was not really decommissioning that was the issue, but deep down for many the idea of sharing power with Sinn Fein.

Sinn Fein on the other hand stated there would be no decommissioning without the institutions being set up and certainly not at the behest of the British Government or the Ulster Unionists. To get the last paper back on the table would take intense negotiations and some considerable time due to the mechanisms within the IRA as there would have to be a meeting of representatives from all thirty two counties.

The UDP spoke very well and actually recognised how far Sinn Fein had come in their change in constitution and direction. This I have to say surprised Sinn Fein greatly to hear them admit this.

The conclusions that we arrived at were as follows:

1) Both Unionists and Nationalists would have to state publicly and repeatedly how far the other had come. UUP said that Trimble had admitted that the way the state had been run may have contributed to our present problems. It was felt he had not said it often enough or loud enough. Sinn Fein stated that Gerry Adams had said previously the war is over, finished with, again it was not being said often enough. PUP admitted that it would be easy for them to go to a Nationalist area and address people, but that they would not be able to vouch for the safety of Sinn Fein members if they were asked to address a meeting in a Protestant area.

2) Unionists of all shades admitted that it had not been easy for them to sell the Agreement at the time and would prove nigh on impossible at the moment. They did not want to be put under pressure to try to sell it again.

3) Basically every opportunity should be taken to highlight the good points and the positive message.

The one reassuring thing to come out of it was that it was stated very clearly by all those with paramilitary links that there would be no return to violence.

Following the nuances of the whole thing I have stated before it is very much a man's club and I have to say they accept now that we are there, but still do not like it. The SDLP were very quiet and spent most of the weekend closeted with the representatives from Fianna Fail. The UUP rep, I have met many times before and he is a very quiet reserved man, on the Friday I must say before Sinn Fein arrived, I have never saw him so worked up or so angry he was literally red in the face and this was before anyone had criticised his party. Possibly because everyone was bemoaning the fact that the institutions had been suspended.