

NEXT STEPS

One year on, those who felt most excitement at the IRA ceasefire, seem depressed by the current stand-off. From the early arguments over the semantics of its 'permanence' or 'completeness', to the current difficulties about de-commissioning, the word 'crisis' has been used to describe the inevitable problems which any peace process faces all along the way. Crisis, or not, we are at a turning point, and it seems worthwhile to take stock of the situation.

A decade ago, when the British and Irish Governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, its supporters thought it would outflank the republican movement, and that unionists would quickly come to the table. It is now glaringly evident, that its architects were at best too sanguine. It took six years to establish talks, in which unionists, nationalists and the rest of us, could begin to talk about a settlement. Those talks broke down in 1991, and again in 1992, and nationalists then embarked upon a separate process to bring the PIRA campaign to an end, before returning to the table with the rest of us, this time with Sinn Fein.

This development is often described as the Irish Peace Process, however it is more truly the Irish Nationalist Peace Process. Its purpose was to bring peace amongst the various elements in the Irish nationalist family. Hence, when the Joint Declaration was signed by the British and Irish Governments in December 1993, the acceptance of it by the Ulster Unionist Party was much less important than the Sinn Fein delay in responding, and ultimately rejecting its key commitment to the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. Naturally the success of the project is celebrated with reference to the leaders of Irish Nationalism who negotiated it, and with a complete absence of Irishmen or women of any other hue, because non-nationalists have no part in such an internal nationalist peace process. There should therefore be little surprise that others are less exuberant in their responses. The leaders of the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP have made clear that they see it, not as an improved opportunity for a settlement, but rather as the mustering of the forces of Irish Nationalism, here and in the United States of America, to bring the maximum possible political pressure on the British Government to abandon them, and cajole, deceive, and force them into a United Ireland, probably through an interim joint authority. Partition was the historic compromise as far as unionists were concerned, and any attempt to review the question is seen in itself as bad faith. Calls for immediate all-party talks in advance of de-commissioning, are construed as a way of cornering and marginalizing unionists.

Of course, we should try to move to All-Party Talks, but the completion of the Irish Peace Process is not the only element

required in picking up where the earlier set of talks was abandoned in 1992. Those talks were concerned with the much more fundamental issue of building a settlement acceptable to Irish Unionists, Irish Nationalists, and that increasing body of Irish men and women who no longer feel moved by nationalism, whether British or Irish. Returning to that table, especially when it is extended by the inclusion of others who have supported the use of terrorism, will involve the building of trust. After twenty-five years of relentless murder and destruction, trust is in short supply. There are many people in Northern Ireland who cannot bear the thought that those who represent terrorists on either side, should be treated as the equals of democratic politicians, and in the clamour for talks, the release of prisoners and the building of a new future, we must not forget those who can never be released from a brokenhearted past, created by some of those who are currently the centre of attention.

What can be done to help build trust? Nationalists need to understand that de-commissioning is important, not just because of the weapons themselves, which could easily be replaced, but because after twenty-five years of murder, unionists do not trust their words. They want to see deeds. Let us not forget too, that we have yet to hear from republicans, a clear renunciation of violence as a means of achieving political ends. Indications that violence has been set aside for tactical advantage is quite a different thing from the rejection of violence as a legitimate political instrument. This is especially so when we have daily warnings that the campaign might resume.

On the unionist side, an immediate announcement by the new Ulster Unionist leader of an early meeting with the Dublin government, would be a development of great significance. No issue of principle is involved for there have been previous meetings, but that single step would bolster sagging nationalist belief that there was a wish for a peaceful settlement on the unionist side.

It is also reasonable for us to look to the two governments for a lead, at their up-coming summit. The British and Irish Governments must inject new life into the network of discussions which already involves all the parties, through a much more energetic programme of bilateral meetings. The British Government is already meeting and talking with Sinn Fein, and I see no difficulty in ministers exploring, in their talks with Sinn Fein, key issues such as the principle of consent and the future of Northern Ireland, and North-South relations. This too would be a step forward.

At the same time, we must be clear that the issue of de-commissioning, as it has become known, will not go away. That it why it is so important that the two governments establish, with urgency, a task force on de-commissioning.

This body would be much strengthened by international participation. I am optimistic that it could win wide acceptance for its work, and that such parallel treatment of the political and arms issues can help overcome the current hurdle.

Finally, we must understand, that no matter how successfully we overcome the current obstacles, there will be almost continual crises until we reach a settlement, and perhaps even beyond. These should challenge our imagination and acumen, not our commitment to the process. There is no need to betray the future, because of our fears of the past, or the problems of the present.

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