

‘PRISONERS, PARAMILITARIES AND THE  
DECOMMISSIONING OF WEAPONS – ISSUES OF  
CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN THE NORTHERN  
IRELAND PEACE PROCESS’.

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Oscar Wilde once said “Nothing is worth doing except what the world says is impossible.” Perhaps this is a good starting point to describe what we did in Northern Ireland on Good Friday, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1998. At 5.15pm that day, the leaders of eight political parties along with the British and Irish Prime Ministers declared that after two years of peace talks declared agreement. As one of the signatories to the Good Friday Agreement, I joined with the others in stating that

“We, the participants in the multi-party negotiations, believe that the agreement we have negotiated offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning.”

Brendan Mc Allister, a local mediator of our conflict, compares Northern Ireland to a relay race, run over stages. The first stage, from 1969, was conflict, chaos and violence. The second stage, from 1994, has been one of ‘conflict management’, during which we began to stabilise our situation. The next stage which we are now entering will be one of ‘conflict transformation’, through which we will begin to transform how we live with our differences. That will be the time of ‘reconciliation’ and will involve a process by which we will manage enmity and address estrangement. This talk concentrates on some of the main issues of conflict transformation in the Northern Ireland



peace process – prisoners, paramilitaries and the decommissioning of weapons.

More than 30 years of violence and hatred showed us what happens when we get it wrong. Everyday in my work in Belfast, there are lingering reminders of the devastation that is caused when we let mistrust and division triumph. We took many risks and continue to do so. A friend of mine has described our attempts to implement the Good Friday Agreement as like trying to tattoo a balloon. The Agreement is a substantial document, outlining a range of institutional and constitutional arrangements. It also deals with issues related to policing, demilitarisation, victims, criminal justice, rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity. We have established a 108 member legislative Assembly, with all key decisions requiring cross community consensus (interestingly a concept we adapted from the South African negotiators). We have also established a restructured Police Service ( with 50:50 quotas for all future Catholic/Protestant police recruits). Another interesting innovative civic institution which has come out of the Agreement is the establishment of a Civic Forum. This is a kind of people's forum made up of local community, business and church leaders as well as representatives of victims from both sides of the community. Experience has shown us that they have a great deal to offer during this process of conflict transformation. We have also established a Police Ombudsman, a Human Rights Commissioner and an Equality Commission. However, the most contentious issues of all were the release and re-integration of ex-combatants, the role of paramilitaries and the decommissioning of weapons and it is to these that I shall now turn.

When President Clinton, came to Belfast in November 1995, a month after the main opposing groups, the IRA



and the loyalist paramilitaries, had declared a cease-fire, he had this to say:

***“Those who renounce violence...are entitled to be full participants in the democratic process. Those who show the courage to break with the past are entitled to their stake in the future.”***

These were very powerful words and set the context for a discussion on the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the reintegration of former combatants<sup>1</sup>

It is not possible here to discuss the details of the history and causes of the Irish conflict; only its most general outlines can be sketched. It can, of course, be seen as an intra-state or “internal” conflict. As such, it might be thought to come within the terms of Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions, which deals with non-international conflicts. If that were the case, the relationship between the peace process and reintegration of former combatants would be clear. Article 6 (5) of the Protocol says:

*“At the end of hostilities, the authorities in power shall endeavour to grant the broadest possible amnesty to persons who have participated in the armed conflict or those deprived of their liberty for reasons related to the armed conflict.”*

In fact, though the UK Government ratified the Protocol in 1995, it has never accepted that the Northern Ireland situation came within its terms. The historic stance of the British state, and the Irish state for that matter, has been

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, the word “combatant” refers to a person who has been engaged in non-state, politically motivated violence, either directly or through logistical support, irrespective of whether he or she has ever been apprehended by state forces. The term is used to be inclusive of ex-prisoners and their comrades who were never caught. At a more general level, we argue that the “combatants” in the political conflict have included the state and its forces; the utility of the term in that discourse is as a neutral description of the protagonists in the conflict which avoids ascribing any particular legitimacy to one side or the other.



that the conflict was a criminal assault upon democracy and civilisation by small groups of terrorists. In that view, they have had the broad support of the Unionist-minded element of the population in Northern Ireland. Even those Loyalists (paramilitary groups on the Unionist side) who illegally took up arms regarded themselves as irregulars, forced by the timidity of the State to which they theoretically gave allegiance to "defend" it against insurgent enemies.

On the other hand, Republicans accused the British state of illegally and undemocratically occupying part of the Irish nation. They therefore took up arms as, in their eyes, Irish soldiers fighting on Irish soil for the liberation of their country from foreign invaders. Broad Nationalist opinion, while eschewing violence and stressing the need for political agreement, would have supported the view that Northern Ireland was the undemocratic result of the forcible partition of the Irish nation.

These incompatible and antagonistic ideological currents still exist and influence attitudes, in spite of the peace process. Part of the challenge in designing reintegrative mechanisms is to avoid measures that make too overt a challenge to any of these competing paradigms.

In these circumstances of continuing ideological conflict, the essential pre-condition for a peace process is that all sides, for whatever reasons, recognise that no further significant political gains are likely to be made by violence. The state recognises that military victory over its enemies is unlikely if not impossible and the insurgents recognise that their violence has reached the limits of its effectiveness.



This precondition for a peace process implies that no side has gained a military victory.<sup>2</sup> The corollary is that there must be an accommodation or agreement between all sides, including the violent actors and the state. In a peace process, since no-one has won the war then all must be involved in winning the peace. So, whatever the gap between protagonists, they must, in the end, agree, do a deal, make a contract. This factor has profound consequences.

One of the most important is that the process must be inclusive: those who have taken up arms against the state must be represented around the negotiating table. The further implication of that is that room must be found in the future polity, and in social and economic life, for actual ex-combatant personnel as well as the politics that they represent. It is in this sense that reintegrative measures are an essential and integral part of the peace process. This is the necessary positive side to what is often seen as the negativity of prisoner release. Combined with this positive view of reintegration, prisoner release is simply the prerequisite for the building of an inclusive society. Rather than potentially contributing to violence by "letting criminals roam the streets," prisoner release and reintegration are necessary if violence is to be consigned to the past. Of course, this view can only make sense in the context of an overall peace agreement.

However, doing a deal is easier said than done when antagonistic ideologies and aspirations are so durable. A simple "compromise" will be difficult and, indeed, might be dangerous. Compromise, bargains and "fudge" may be required during negotiations, but a "solution" based on simple, pragmatic give and take contains inherent dangers. In an agreement that partially satisfies everyone,

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<sup>2</sup> See Gilligan and Tonge (1997) for a discussion of "peace" as the absence of war and as a dynamic process.



everyone is also partially dissatisfied. The danger is that the remaining dissatisfaction will amount to a continuing cause or occasion of violence.

The alternative is a solution that goes beyond and transcends the antagonistic positions. By this we mean a political construction or a formulation of a set of ideas and social practices, that may contain the essence or core of each position combined together in a new way. There can be no prescription for this, nor will the solution necessarily draw equally from both positions. What it must involve, however, is something new, a transformation of the old, a qualitative change, perhaps in the context in which positions are elaborated and perhaps in basic modes of thinking.<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly arguable that the Good Friday Agreement amounts to such a transcendent solution. Its complex system of institutions represents a new and inclusive set of definitions of identity, nationality, citizenship, the nature of government and the role of civil society that some believe has the capacity to transcend the categories of nationalist and unionist in a transformed and novel polity. Only time will tell whether that is a practical reality, but there can be little doubt that the aspiration of the Agreement is to resolve the contradictions between Unionism and Nationalism, between the continuing reality of British sovereignty over Northern Ireland and the full recognition of an all-Ireland national identity.

Since the transcendent new polity is a goal for the future, not a current reality, it is hardly surprising that the

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<sup>3</sup> Johan Galtung's "TRANSCEND" approach to peace building is based, more or less explicitly, on such a dialectical approach (Galtung and Jacobsen 2000). The goal, in Galtung's conception is "a transcending outcome, not a compromise" (Galtung and Jacobsen 2000, 210). A compromise is achievable through bi-lateral negotiation, whereas a transcendent solution may require third party intervention and a complex process of dialogue that might be seen to involve many elements of translation between formally contradictory positions (Galtung and Jacobsen 2000, 206-227).



Agreement itself is still often described and supported in terms of both the dominant British/Unionist and Nationalist paradigms. It has been quoted as strengthening the Union<sup>4</sup>, and as opening the door to a United Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is a continuing battle to incorporate in the new polity as many features sympathetic to one side or the other as possible.<sup>6</sup>

It is this situation of contradictory views about the past and the future, only theoretically or potentially united in a vision of a novel and wholly untested political system, which leads to some of the obvious paradoxes of the Irish peace process. Most notably these are the facts that supporters of the Agreement hold otherwise completely contradictory political positions and that the deal, supported massively by the people, was done over three years ago and the process still lurches from crisis to crisis. The reality is that, on every major issue, those involved have to find formulations or structures that tend towards the transcendental – may contribute to the building of a new society – but are also compromises between contradictory views of the past conflict.

Unfortunately, the issue of prisoner release and reintegration is one that tends to highlight and exacerbate the differences between the dominant ideologies and where it is always a struggle to resolve these differences in a common vision of the future. The reason for this is that prisoners and ex-prisoners are the most obvious ex-combatants, the visible concentration of everything that people feel about the conflict. From the point of view of the state and its supporters, they are the perpetrators of

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<sup>4</sup> David Trimble, Unionist Party leader and now First Minister: "The Agreement was a disaster for Sinn Fein and the IRA and it strengthens Northern Ireland's position within the Union." Irish Times. 18.04.98

<sup>5</sup> Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein: "The cause of a united Irish Republic was given new hope and fresh possibility by the Agreement." Irish Times. 28.05.98

<sup>6</sup> The current debates about flags on government buildings, reform of the police force and of the criminal justice system are typical.



numerous atrocities and the enemies of democracy. From the point of view of the communities from which they come, they are the vanguard fighters, the standard bearers of all that they believe in. It is clear that these views are not easily reconcilable.

A way must be found, however, for it is clear from local and international experience that no peace process works without the prisoner issue being dealt with. In a report dealing with international and Irish experience, before the peace talks commenced, Gormally and McEvoy stated:

*“Our first and overriding conclusion is that the issue of early release of politically motivated prisoners is crucial to any peace process which follows a violent political conflict. Whatever the particular positions taken up by negotiating parties at any given time, we would argue that, until the question of the prisoners is agreed then nothing, that will create a final solution, is agreed.” (Gormally and McEvoy 1995)*

In Northern Ireland we have found, during the past few years, that the State's attitude towards prisoners is taken as a test of their sincerity and bona fides as regards the peace process as a whole. Whatever the developments in other areas, the prisoner issue has the capacity to make or break the peace process. In essence, the combatant organisations, and the communities from which prisoners come, want to know whether the State is sincere about a negotiated settlement or is the “peace process” counter-insurgency by other means? The attitude towards prisoners, and in particular towards prisoner release and reintegration is a litmus test of this.

On the other hand, to approach the question of making special, beneficial arrangements for politically motivated prisoners is the most difficult thing for government.



Generally, the state's whole anti-terrorist position is based on the claim that their enemies are simply criminal and are prosecuted and imprisoned only for the violent acts they have committed, not because of their politics. The early release of such prisoners and special reintegrative mechanisms for them represent massive breaches in this position. Although all kinds of legal and administrative contortions are gone through to avoid formal acknowledgement of it, these actions amount to the recognition of the political motivation of the prisoners. This opens up the way to an analysis of the conflict as about certain political difficulties, which opens up the possibility of their solution and, indeed, a negotiated solution to the historic conflict as a whole.

Progress on reconciling these incompatible positions could not be made by simple political dealing. We noted earlier that a "safe" resolution of antagonistic positions in a peace process involved a transcendence of them both rather than a simple compromise between them. This is an interpretation of the idea that a peace process involves a transformation of society, not simply a pragmatic deal. It is only within the overarching concept of a peace process that prisoner release can be made sense of. It is only within a discourse that refers to an inclusive, negotiated end to violent political conflict that formally incompatible positions on prisoner release can be reconciled.

The Good Friday Agreement itself became the transcendent context of the release process. The very clear statements on prisoner release in the treaty document made the issue a central, and highly controversial, element of the overall settlement<sup>7</sup>. Remarkably, for many, the text foresaw the release of all

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<sup>7</sup> Prisoner release was probably the most argued-over element of the Agreement during the referendum campaign to endorse or reject it. "The prisoner release issue has emerged as arguably the strongest bone of contention in the Agreement both North and South." Irish Times editorial. 12.05.98



qualifying prisoners by two years after the document was signed. The Agreement, seen as an attempt to transcend division and establish a new kind of polity on the island of Ireland, made sense of and resolved the antagonistic positions on prisoner release.

This should not be seen simply as a victory for those arguing for prisoner release. The mechanism fell far short of an amnesty and release was subject to conditions. If individual prisoners were re-convicted of relevant offences or became clearly re-involved in terrorism, they could be brought back to prison<sup>8</sup>, a power since used on a number of occasions. Furthermore, if the organisation to which they claimed allegiance broke its cease-fire, all its prisoners would be liable to re-arrest. For the prisoners and their supporters, however, the great prize was early release itself.

More recently, the British government has also agreed pardons for a small number of prisoners who had escaped from jails or who had absconded during court hearings. The outstanding warrants for arrest have now been dropped and the individuals have been allowed to return home to Northern Ireland. It might be argued that their case, referred to as the prisoners 'On The Run', was raised as part of the negotiations leading up to the decommissioning of IRA weapons.

### ***Reintegration of ex-prisoners***

Reintegration of politically motivated ex-prisoners differs in a number of important respects from the "normal" process of reintegrating ex-offenders. We will deal with these particular aspects under the heading "political reintegration." We must not forget, however, that ex-combatants require all the training and job opportunities

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<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998



necessary to play a full part in the economy and society. In Northern Ireland these have been provided largely through use of the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and other funds such as the American Ireland Fund.

Reintegration of politically motivated prisoners cannot be a one-way street with prisoners having to abandon their pasts and “go back to school.” The “two-way” reintegration process we are describing, involves the state and society changing as well as ex-prisoners. The process is really one of building a new society, neither fitting people into the old one nor insisting that society change to accept sectional, self-interested positions. The whole concept is therefore predicated on an original peace process that was fully inclusive, where all sides had an opportunity to sketch out the design of the new society, and on a continuing process that allows and encourages ex-combatants to pursue their aspirations peacefully but effectively.

We have argued that a peace process has to include the major ex-combatants to be successful. A pre-condition of that is, of course, that all are prepared to explore peaceful ways forward. The commitment to peace, of all sides, state and illegal armed organisations, is a matter that can only be resolved, to the satisfaction of all, by the long-term success of the process itself. On the way, the progress of de-militarisation<sup>9</sup> on the one hand and de-commissioning of illegal weapons on the other, will be used as tests of that commitment. The process also demands, however, that effective routes for peaceful activism are opened up.

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<sup>9</sup> In the Northern Ireland context, “demilitarisation” tends to refer to the reduction of the level of state security forces present and active on the ground. “Decommissioning” is the term generally used for the equivalent process by non-state armed elements, especially the disarmament of their weapons.



This can be seen as the particular solution that the Northern Ireland peace process has arrived at in dealing with the peculiarities of the situation of ex-combatant armed groups. These groups have not been militarily defeated, but neither has the state recognised the legitimacy of their past actions. There has therefore been no real question of the personnel of these illegal armies being formally integrated in the state structure nor given any special place in the political arena, as has happened after conflicts in other places. At the same time, the structure of paramilitary organisations still remains and, at the time of writing, while the IRA has begun a historic process of de-commissioning, they retain many of their weapons. Political reintegration has therefore to take place – in the absence of a formal programme of demobilisation - within the context of civil society and that society is challenged to make that possible.

Experience in Northern Ireland suggests that one major part of the project of opening up routes for peaceful political activism is that political parties representing the aspirations of former combatants are established, legalised and facilitated to operate in political society. Again, the history and role of relevant parties in Northern Ireland is a matter for another study, but it is worth noting a couple of points. First, the election process for those accredited to participate in the peace negotiations was specially designed to ensure representation of the major paramilitary-aligned political parties.<sup>10</sup> It was also significant that this electoral system brought new parties such as the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, of which I am a member, into the political process for the first time.

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<sup>10</sup> Northern Ireland: ground rules for substantive all-party negotiations (Cm. 3232) Northern Ireland Office 1996. A similar process was not adopted for the elections to the Assembly itself and the Ulster Democratic Party, associated with the Loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association, failed to gain representation in the Assembly. The consequences of this for the peace process were not good. Factional feuding and anti-agreement dissidents within that organisation have caused numerous problems during the implementation process. The lesson is to pay more attention to electoral arrangements following peace agreements.



In addition, the structures of the Government and Assembly are designed, on an inclusive basis, to reflect party strength – which means that Sinn Fein, the party led by Gerry Adams, based on its mandate was entitled to its places in government. Having recognised these points, we should also note, however, that the “special” character of the paramilitary-aligned parties has its downside. Their involvement in negotiations and, now, involvement in the institutions of government were and are dependent on the maintenance of a cease-fire by the relevant armed group. This is another example of contradictory views of the same phenomenon. From one point of view, these restrictions are a defence of democracy against those who would try to coerce others by the possession of “private armies.” From the opposite point of view, the restrictions are anti-democratic in ignoring the electoral mandate of the parties and relegating their voters to second class citizens.

In more specific terms, the active role of prisoners and ex-prisoners in the peace process opened their way to political reintegration. It is arguable that the experience of compromise and negotiation in the prisons from the mid-eighties on laid one basis for the peace process.<sup>11</sup> Virtually all of the negotiators representing paramilitary-aligned parties during the peace talks were ex-prisoners. The parties recognise ex-prisoners as the backbone of their political organisation not only because of their habits of discipline, but also because of the respect many have in their constituencies.

The other major route for political activism, apart from political parties themselves, is within the community sector. Northern Ireland has a high level of community

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<sup>11</sup> See Gormally, McEvoy and Wall, 1993 for an analysis of the development of prison management policy, and NIACRO 1995b for statements from ex-prisoners about their prison experience.



organisation,<sup>12</sup> particularly in the working class areas, urban and rural, from which the members of combatant organisations mainly come and which have suffered the brunt of the violence. Ex-prisoners have found this a natural arena for political activism, although the issues are rarely subject to party political strife. It is, furthermore, an area where jobs are available for which the main qualification is the ability to lead and motivate the community.

If party political activity and community activism are routes for the translation of paramilitary action into peaceful participation in building a new society, it is clear that the process is not yet complete. Violent punishments continue, though at a reduced level, and the recent feud between Loyalist paramilitary organisations has seen 158 families expelled from their homes in the Shankill area.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the British Government has recently declared that the cease-fire of the Ulster Defence Association – the biggest Loyalist paramilitary organisation – is void. However, in reintegration terms, and in the interests of the overall peace process, the issue is whether to support clearly peaceful activities or to assume that paramilitary leopards will never change their spots and oppose any extension of their influence.

### ***Decommissioning – the result of political change***

"We have witnessed an event which we regard as significant in which the IRA has put a quantity of arms beyond use. The material in question includes arms, ammunition and explosives."

<sup>12</sup> The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) maintain a list of some 5000 organisations on their data base. See also NICVA, *The State of the Sector II: Northern Ireland Voluntary Sector Almanac 1998* (1998) and Department for Social Development, *Consultation Document on Funding for the Voluntary and Community Sector* (April 2000) which suggests that the sector provides employment for 33,000 people and has a gross annual income of £500 million.

<sup>13</sup> Northern Ireland Housing Executive statement, 14 September 2000.



This was how General John de Chastelain, head of the international de-commissioning body, announced the beginning of IRA disarmament on 23 October. It was an historic move, not because of its military impact but because of its political significance.

Of course, this act of de-commissioning allowed the Unionist Party to re-enter the devolved institutions, thus saving the structures of the Belfast Agreement. But it also marked a fundamental re-assessment of the goals of republicanism. In trying to explain the reasons why the IRA took this decision, many commentators have pointed to the arrest of three persons in Columbia and the September 11 events as triggers. They say that the world-wide revulsion against terrorism, and the implication that IRA members were involved in that in Columbia, meant that the political pressure on republicans was irresistible.

Maybe all that is true, and I have no special knowledge of the decision-making processes of the IRA. What I do know is that republicans are used to political pressure. Such a fundamental shift would not have occurred simply under the duress of immediate politics. Unless the republican leadership was convinced that its historic goals were within reach, it would not have begun the process of standing down the IRA.

Armed struggle is not just a tactic for republicans. Some of the reasons are, first, the IRA is not, historically, the armed wing of a political party. Sinn Fein, though it has gone through various manifestations, has always been a political party operating in parallel to the IRA, never controlling it. Today, there is some common membership between the two organisations, but also many IRA volunteers who have never been Sinn Fein members and Sinn Feiners who have never been in the IRA. The



relationship has never amounted to a situation where “the Party” could control the gun and, in many circumstances and on many issues, the contrary has been true.

Second, the question of overall popular support has not been a particularly serious issue for Republicans. Of course, they need the minimum level of support amongst Northern Ireland’s Catholic population to maintain their existence and operations and have never lacked for that. As regards the total Irish population, however, they have regarded the Partition of the country as a fundamental restriction on the ability of the people to exercise their right to self-determination and no test of opinion on a partitionist basis is recognised.<sup>14</sup>

But we also have to remember that Irish history is littered with the examples of those who, at crucial junctures, have “betrayed” the armed struggle position and taken the “constitutional” path. Usually they have been the majority, always they have left behind a sufficient minority capable of re-igniting the flames of military “resistance” when the demand from a people – still subject to a distorted polity – rises again. This is the nightmare of any Republican leader – to be accused of betraying “the Republic” by “going in” to any institutions that are not those of the new nation state.

The present leadership of the Republican movement have already “gone in” to some institutions – the Dail, the British Parliament (though unable to sit through refusing to take the Oath to the Queen) and, of course, the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. But the price of these huge steps for Republicans has been their unswerving support for the IRA. The present leadership had no desire to lead the majority, even a big majority, of their adherents into

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<sup>14</sup> Republicans have accepted the authenticity of the vote, on both sides of the Border, for the Good Friday Agreement, which they, of course, helped negotiate and support, but have, so far, refused to grant it the status of an exercise of self-determination.



peaceful politics but leave "the soul" of the IRA behind – even if it were to be a depleted or newly created rump. As a leading republican stated: "This was an IRA leadership initiative. If it had been left to the organisation on the ground, this would not have happened." All the indications are that the rank and file are remaining loyal, but there is no doubting the difficulty of the issue.

This reinforces the view that the republican leadership is playing for the big prize. Their aspiration is to "remove the causes of violence," or, in other words, achieve a final settlement of the "Irish problem."

That is, in essence, the core of the question of decommissioning: does the Good Friday Agreement remove the causes of violence? Of course, the preliminary answer to this question is that the Agreement has not yet been implemented in full and so we cannot say. Indeed, Republicans still have the suspicion that the Unionists do not want to implement the Agreement and so it could turn out to be just a piece of paper, not a settlement at all. This is why they made sure that leading Unionists were kept informed of the progress of the debate on decommissioning and that they would respond positively to an IRA initiative.

Yet what if the goal has changed? Has the debate within nationalism gone as far as to say that national identity may be asserted in ways other than the nation state and freedom for the people of this island may be achieved in structures other than a United Ireland? Do Republicans agree that people of different national identity or allegiance can share the same territory? Do the structures of the Agreement sufficiently enshrine and give scope to develop the all-Ireland character of the Irish national allegiance? Have state and social structures in Northern Ireland been sufficiently transformed to guarantee justice,



equality and social inclusion for those with an Irish national identity?

I believe that the answer to all these questions lies in the affirmative. The Agreement is a new way of dealing with national identity and allegiance that transcends the narrow – dare I say, obsolete – boundaries of the nation state. I believe that the republican leadership, and many of their rank and file, have not just understood that, but actively embraced these ideas. It is now not uncommon for republicans to refer to “our Unionist brothers and sisters.” That is language before unheard – accepting that fraternal solidarity can exist while recognising distinct national identities.

I also believe that many Loyalists also grasp these realities. The problem of Loyalist de-commissioning – and indeed the continuance of the republican initiative – remains. Again, simple tactical political arguments are unlikely to work. We have to argue for Loyalist disarmament also in terms of the transcendent structures and ethos of the Agreement.

Decommissioning happened at this time because there was an urgent need to insert some momentum back into the peace process. When Gerry Adams asked the IRA publicly for this, he knew it would happen. The ground work had been done. He also knew the process was in danger of collapsing. As Senator Mitchell once said “Violence takes away lives, but intransigence takes away hope”. Once the process stalled, then the pain like the gain would be felt by all. We had come too far and too many expectations had been raised, for the process to start unravelling. If the route map had been created for the fulfilment of their political aspirations, then the road to decommissioning had to be opened up by Sinn Fein so as to keep the dynamic in place.



The body set up to deal with this, the Independent International Body on Decommissioning, works in confidence with the interlocutors of the paramilitary organisations. It decides the methods by which to make the weapons obsolescent and only the Commissioners are involved in overseeing the event. The Commission makes a report on whether or not it is satisfied with the process and everything else is kept confidential. Only this body determines whether the requirements as stipulated by the Agreement have been met and in this way it avoids endless discussions of how much material has been decommissioned.

October 23<sup>rd</sup> is a day that should go down as one of those momentous occasions in our history. The method of destruction is insignificant. What is important is that those weapons of destruction will now 'Rust In Peace'. This move, 'putting weapons beyond use', has broken new ground and brought Northern Ireland into a new era. The IRA has declared its faith in the political process. I have argued throughout that peace was a process - not an event. Within that context the act of voluntary disarmament had to take place. Now that it has we are still savouring the significance of it. We have to ensure that those who demanded it are not permitted to belittle it.

We have interrupted the culture of failure in Northern Ireland. What we need now is that we negotiate our way from the past to the future with the kind of courage and creative thinking that has taken place over the last few years. The possibility of a country that is peaceful and democratic is now there. For our bit of the world, therein lies the future.

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