

28 June 99

Blair's 'deal'

Firstly, a few words about the Agreement and the deadline. The use of deadlines is useful and it is very true to say that the deadline for the Talks was a real factor in achieving the Agreement. However, deadlines are a thin alternative to a healthy process and this deadline has been imposed at a time when the preceding year has taken any semblance of process out of the equation. The past year has been a political vacuum in which the space has allowed for the unpicking and reworking of the agreement. This has resulted in the 'package' disappearing and instead we are once again (as before the peace process began) those able to set the political and news agenda have done so in their own image and in their own interests. There are two lessons to draw on from this.

1. The government must keep movement going in the process, and ensure that no political vacuum is allowed to establish itself.
2. Regardless of this deadline, the Belfast Agreement achieved a greater political mandate than any political party in Northern Ireland or the Prime Minister himself. Someone with the power to deliver has to defend that mandate - far from bringing the Agreement down, the government must work directly with the people in its implementation. This means taking a far more proactive stance with regard to the media and vis a vis other parties.

There appears to be three components to the Blair deal.

1. SF 'guarantees' the decommissioning of all weapons by the date May 2000
2. Executive is set up and devolution proceeds
3. If decommissioning does not occur the executive will be revoked and ? (an executive is re-formed excluding SF)

(The role of de Chastelain is central - with a preliminary establishment of what requires to be decommissioned and the final word that this has indeed been accomplished).

On the face of it it seems fine, and it may indeed provide a way out of the current impasse. However, for once lets take a view six months or a year down the line.

We know that the Ulster Unionists have always wanted to proceed without Sinn Fein, this was evident during the Talks and has been ever since. We also know that it is important in terms of SF leadership's influence over the wider republican movement that they not fall fowl of the UU's 'veto'-type approach. It is also important in terms of their need to be able to prove that 'politics pays'.

This being the case there is a raft of problems associated with Blair's proposals. The singular focus on the requirement for IRA to decommission ignores the 'real world' of loyalist weapons, particularly those that are waging a fairly relentless campaign against Catholic families right across Northern Ireland. These activities, whilst not envisaged by the Belfast Agreement, undoubtedly undermine the environment that would allow for the pursuance of a general process of decommissioning. But what does come into the equation is the role of political parties (such as the DUP) who at least facilitate such activities, through the use of inflammatory rhetoric and abuse of position.

We are also aware of the long-term expression of concern from parties such as SF, UDP and PUP that the attitude and approach of some parties (principally the UUs) towards decommissioning acts to make it less likely and possible. Clear statements over a long period of time from David Ervine evidence this argument.

It is therefore reasonable to consider that these parties are in breach of the decommissioning requirements of the Agreement, which does not require the paramilitary-linked parties to achieve decommissioning, but ALL parties. If Blair wants to be wedded to the Agreement (as evidenced by the ALL statement) than be wedded to it, and not in a highly selective way. He has to consider the scenario in which the Ulster Unionists - for example - break this aspect of the agreement and therefore whatever sanctions are being proposed must in fact be ranged against all parties, including them.

Not only does it go against the spirit and word of the Agreement to consider some parties essential and others expendable, it is highly destructive of the developing political environment and the peace process in particular.

Given this, the fact that the Blair proposals focus on decommissioning and prospective sanctions against SF, without considering the possibility that other parties, such as the Ulster Unionists will be responsible for the failure of decommissioning to happen is very unhelpful. It also sets the ugly precedent which says that it isn't the Agreement which determines future events and developments, but the unequal access to power of the various political groupings in Northern Ireland. You might say that this is politics, but this form of politics singularly fails in a Northern Ireland context and must not be allowed to prevail - it will destroy the peace process. The Belfast Agreement was designed to over-ride it.

In terms of practical considerations, a number of questions prevail. What does ALL mean? This is an important question, particularly since 'sanctions' have been attached to it. Whilst it may be in the Agreement, Blair is being 'precious' about the meaning. The Women's Coalition could point out a great deal of the Agreement which has yet to make it to the stage of debate (the references to women's equality are an obvious example). If Blair wants to be precious about the Agreement, he is due a mile-long shopping list, all requiring sanctions to be ranged against those who have failed to act in good faith.

What will happen if decommissioning has happened by May 2000, even with substantial gestures, but not ALL? Will the process be brought down in those circumstances? Will the Ulster Unionists 'choose' to pick the issue up at that stage and run with the exclusion notion. Past experience tells us that they will do that and that they will be successful in establishing the environment in which it will come to be seen as essential, if regrettable.

What if de Chastelain is happy to declare that what has been received does amount to ALL and it is not accepted by the Unionists? We cannot rely on the fact that they, now, are to be bound by what de Chastelain declares. All they have to do is threaten, or actually leave the Executive (the exercise of the famous veto, again which the Agreement is supposed to have superceded) - what would happen in these circumstances?

Republicans have indicated a willingness to decommission but their ability to deliver is also linked to the existence some other force which the community has confidence in. In this case decommissioning is also linked to the issue of police reform. What will be the reaction of Unionists to the Patten Commission's report? This reaction is part of the environment in which decommissioning will or will not seem possible to those people and communities for whom this is an issue they appear to be expected to deliver on - alone.

There is also a huge difficulty in the asymmetric nature of the whole decommissioning issue. It is not only about republicans, but also loyalists. And it is not only about these two because each community is also acutely aware of the presence, and current unpredictability of dissident and anti-agreement groups on each side. As well as that, the issue of legal weapons, both in the hands of security forces, but also the, largely unionist, community, is a factor. There is little point in asserting that there is no equivalency between legal and illegal, when in the minds of much of the nationalist community, there clearly is. It is a good illustration of how 'just because you say something doesn't make it so!' That is why HOW this impasse is resolved is as important as its actual resolution.

Regardless of what parties agree to in the immediate and short term, government has a responsibility to look down the line and consider the implications of what is decided now.

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