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# The Faith and Politics Group

## The Issue of Decommissioning

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Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons has been a source of continuing argument since the ceasefires of 1994. It bedevilled the talks process and is now the major blockage to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Decommissioning, while important in itself points to a number of underlying issues:

- has there been a decisive move away from violence by the paramilitaries or not? Unionists tend to see decommissioning as proof of a genuine conversion to democratic politics.
- the fear-threat relationship between the communities. There is both a fear and a threat that force of arms or force of numbers will prevail. There is a lack of confidence that political dialogue and negotiation alone will produce an acceptable outcome. Underlying this is the question: What do democracy and politics mean in a divided society? Violence, or its threat, subvert the norms of democracy. However, minorities are always at risk of exclusion, injustice and being left defenceless in bitterly divided societies when they have to rely on the power of the ballot box alone.
- lack of trust. The decommissioning issue symbolises the Unionist community's total lack of trust in the Republican movement. But it also symbolises the Republican movement's view that the Unionist community seeks its defeat or its political marginalisation. In the first position Republicans see decommissioning as an acknowledgement of defeat. In the second decommissioning is seen by Republicans as a pretext: even if there were to be decommissioning Unionists would find another obstacle to prevent Republicans participating in power.
- each community's felt need of protection from the other. This is part of the fear-threat relationship between the communities referred to above. The question of who will protect us from the other community's violence has been an important issue over the last 30 years - and has been answered in different ways. Significant in this regard is the different relationship the two communities have had to the state and the forces of law and order. Thus the issue of decommissioning is linked to the problems of policing and demilitarisation.

The goal has to be political arrangements which are supported by a broad political consensus in Northern Ireland, and where the state, governed by the rule of law, has the monopoly of force. This situation has never been the case in Northern Ireland and, given this history, we cannot move overnight to such a situation. Nevertheless, this has to be the goal. Violence and the threat of violence must be squeezed out of the Northern Ireland community by political arrangements which have the support of the vast majority of people, by the removal of the gun