

Decommissioning and the Belfast Agreement

There is a variety of views in relation to the status of the issue of decommissioning and whether or not it is connected to the establishment of the Executive and the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. These issues have taxed people for some considerable time.

The Hillsborough Declaration by the two PMs has proved ineffective as a way of addressing, or getting around the issue, although it is still being presented as the only alternative. Sinn Fein rightly highlights that its substance amounts to a 'renegotiation' of the decommissioning element of the Belfast Agreement. This is something that we know the Ulster Unionists wanted to do during the final stages of the Agreement and which they were prevented from doing at the time (particularly in the context of the whole agreement with everyone giving and taking). If this had been the text contained within the Belfast Agreement would any of the paramilitary-linked parties have been able to support it?

This has been able to happen because the UUs have successfully, as some have already stated, determined the media agenda and the pursuance of this issue, so that it has come to be seen as 'paramount' in a way that was not envisaged in the Agreement.

I believe there is a need to highlight related and key issues, which I feel have been lost in the discussions and in the context where political thinking revolves around how to get past this impasse, at the cost of being centred on the longer term view.

Perhaps the greatest failure of the Hillsborough Declaration is that whilst it highlights the importance of mutuality and the need for choreography, it nevertheless goes on to highlight actions amounting to movement from paramilitaries (with Sinn Fein specifically mentioned). It also talks about a 'day of reconciliation', mutual gestures and incorporates the view that British armed forces could also be part of this 'bargain' (in terms of 'demilitarisation')

It seems to me that the obvious problem yet again is that whilst the deadlock involves Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists, the gestures involve Sinn Fein, with no specific 'gesture' being required by the Ulster Unionists. The establishment of the Executive is not in the gift of the Ulster Unionists, but the Secretary of State. The Declaration therefore fails the 'mutuality' test immediately (never mind the issue of 'renegotiating the agreement').

****REMEMBER, WE KNOW FROM UNIONISTS DURING THE TALKS THAT THEIR VIEW WAS ALWAYS THAT 'DECOMMISSIONING IS NOT ABOUT DECOMMISSIONING' - THEREFORE IS IT IMPERATIVE THAT WE WORK ON WHAT THE ISSUE MAY BE IN REALITY.**

I believe the gesture that is required of the Ulster Unionists is that they admit that they carry a degree of responsibility for what has been occurring in Northern Ireland over the last thirty years. Their focus on paramilitary decommissioning reflects their view that the paramilitaries have been to blame (they can certainly share the blame with the rest of us) and therefore it is they who have to state 'the war is over'. However, the Agreement requires ALL parties to play their role, including in the decommissioning issue, not just paramilitary linked parties and thus highlighting that the decommissioning of illegal weapons is not the issue or action required (all parties have a responsibility to address the conditions for decommissioning to take place).

Unlike the mantra of the SDLP, this is NOT about 'apportioning blame' (of-course it is as far as unionists are concerned), it is about the sustainability of the agreement.

If the reciprocal gesture from unionists were to be a sharing of the culpability for the last thirty years, what flows from this (and what flows from their failure to make that gesture?)

We can laud the success of the Ulster Unionists in their ability to determine the 'agenda'. They have succeeded in reducing the agreement to a discussion about decommissioning, which they were able to do even before the Stormont Talks began. Again, this reflects the view that violence has been the problem, therefore violent people are to blame (this insulates those not involved directly in violence from any sense of culpability).

The Ulster Unionists have been able/allowed to portray themselves as 'defenders' of democracy - some how 'role models for those who have yet to aspire to join them in the 'ranks of democracy'. This is not only Dermot Nesbitt sounding like a broken record, but is a widely held belief.

However, this refusal to admit that there are fundamental problems in the way Northern Ireland has been governed in the past means that people have no basis for understanding the need for change, or the need for particular issues to be addressed. An example of this is the early release of prisoners. If people see these prisoners as though they are prisoners like any other, (and not an issue related to the existence of a conflict, or a peace process), then there is no basis for releasing prisoners, indeed it is a singularly anarchic and illogical thing to do.

The whole of the Stormont Talks was infected by the confusion, or lack of consensus, as to whether we were engaged in a peace process or a political process - those of us involved in a peace process understood how and why these issues were fundamental to the agreement. Others who were engaged in a 'political process' saw these issues as 'peripheral' - 'appeasement', 'gestures', or things to be tolerated but not condoned. I remember the last meeting I was involved in with the Alliance party when Steven Farry stated clearly, 'I am not

involved in a peace process, if I was, I would have been at war - and I have not been at war.' I don't think we should underestimate the implications of this position, the lack of consensus and the extent to which it now 'pollutes' the attempts at processes to deal with on-going problems.

If this remains unresolved and somehow a way is found around it (as occurred on Good Friday last year) what are the implications?

The experience of the Parades Commission gives us a clue. Again, unionists call for the commission to be abolished and continue to refuse to recognise its role or its legitimacy. This is an institution (nothing to do with the Belfast Agreement) which was established to deal with the particular problem of conflict over certain parades, particularly routes. Note that although nationalists have objected to a range of decisions taken by the Commission, they have not called for it to be abolished in the same way as unionists have - why the different approaches?

For unionists, there is no recognition that any of the objections to parades are a reflection of 'genuine' difficulties - instead the interpretation is that nationalist objections are part of a 'political conspiracy' to undermine orangeism (and therefore Protestantism), unionism and the police. Therefore, to take seriously the concerns of residents (as the Commission is obliged to do, it is effectively defining itself as 'pro-nationalist'). We know that parades as an issue is a microcosm of wider political conflicts, but the failure of unionists to recognise it as a 'legitimate' problem effectively blocks the possibility of addressing it as such. In other words, the attitude 'if its not broken, don't fix it' prevails and the attitude that these are not 'problems', just 'propaganda' is sustained.

This is not confined to parades and the work of the Parades Commission. Consider the attitude of the Ulster Unionists to the issue of the Patten Commission on Policing. Unionist statements revolve around the need to 'protect' the RUC from those people with a 'political agenda' to 'destroy' it. The 'few rotten apples' attitude and the failure of unionist spokespersons to debate the potential for wider and more endemic problems - well established not only in the minds of a range of political parties and national and international monitoring organisations considerably reduces the possibilities for change and innovation.

It is not only the Patten Commission, there is also the work of the Criminal Justice Review Body, the work of the Human Rights Commission, the work of the Equality Commission (requiring input from the office of the First and Deputy First Minister). There are also the investigations pending in relation to Bloody Sunday, Pat Finucane and Rosemary Nelson. The danger is that each of these is seen as 'concessions' to nationalists, the result of a 'victory for nationalist propaganda'. With one issue after another, this will 'undermine the confidence and position of Protestants/Unionists, which will therefore require some form of 'meeting half-way' for issues that do not really allow for such an approach.

All of these bodies will be constrained in their ability to work when there is no consensus that there are major problems to Northern Ireland to be addressed. Until people come to accept that these problems do exist, then those who raise them can only be understood in terms of being 'propagandists'.

Conclusion

At the very start of the troubles, the biggest chasm of understanding between unionist and nationalist people was the acceptance or rejection of the notion that Stormont had been flawed and that discrimination and prejudice was endemic. This chasm of understanding still exists and will always undermine political development in Northern Ireland and threaten instability. It is for this reason that the current 'crisis' should not be seen simply in immediate terms and that the resolution of the current impasse should not be seen in immediate terms but also in the context of the long-term sustainability of the Agreement. In other words, its not just about resolving this crisis, but now more than ever it is about HOW it is resolved - fire-fighting must cease to be an option.