

July 99 Barbara
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Review of the Agreement - Some Thoughts for the NIWC

Decommissioning and the Executive:

1. The aim of having a tight and time-limited review may be understandable, but also has problems attached to it. This 'closed' debate has been going round in circles for a long time. There must surely be limited potential in repeating the exercise - particularly when the Ulster Unionists have stated their inability, or unwillingness, to move from party policy and adhere to the terms of the Agreement.
2. The narrowness of the debate does not reflect the architecture of the Agreement, so from that point of view, there is little reason to confine discussions. The same narrowness, whilst it has reflected the differential power of parties to determine the political agenda and public discourse, distorts views about the implementation of the Agreement.
3. The future implementation of the Agreement was entirely ignored by the process which produced it. From the very beginning, implementation has been handled in an unstructured, disorganised and unbalanced way. The current impasse is not the only problem in relation to implementation, it is just the most problematic at present.
4. It is also worth remembering that the very elevation of the decommissioning issue to the status it currently enjoys reflects the same differential power to determine political discourse around the Agreement, its meaning and its implementation. It would go some considerable way to achieve the implementation of the Agreement if this issue were to be aired.
5. The Agreement does not allow for decommissioning to happen outside the context of its implementation. There has been very limited success in implementation over the last 15 months and the failure to meet actual and presumed deadlines makes it unrealistic to imagine that decommissioning will happen as envisaged by the Agreement. Those who have argued most strenuously for decommissioning to happen other than in a way that does not follow the letter of the Agreement carry a major responsibility for the failure of the decommissioning process to develop in the way it was outlined in the Agreement.
6. If decommissioning is to be discussed in a way that takes it out of the terms of the Agreement (notwithstanding the anger that this move would rightly inspire) than this may allow for addressing the issue in practical and realistic terms, and not just theoretical and symbolic terms.

For example, decommissioning is a very different issue, depending on whether it is considered symbolic, or practical in nature. Each requires a different approach, involves different dynamics and raises different associated influences.

The key problem with seeing the issue as one of symbolism is that it raises questions about 'surrender'. Not only does this not reflect the reality of the situation, it also undermines the process which can only survive on a win-win basis.

The 'problem' with seeing decommissioning as a practical and 'real' issue is that it requires material progress. However, there are also positive and advantageous aspects to the issue. A 'real' discussion about how actual and real decommissioning could happen, allows for the examination of factors which influence the ability and willingness of holders of weapons to consider setting them aside.

Such a 'real' discussion is much more likely to facilitate a process of decommissioning as opposed to the 'hermetically sealed' and unrealistic version of decommissioning as it appears in the Belfast Agreement.

A whole range of issues ACTUALLY interact with decommissioning - whether or not they are flagged up in the Agreement as such.

Issues include:

1. The differential views about decommissioning within the various groups equipped with illegal weapons.
2. The continuing activities of dissident paramilitaries, particularly on the loyalist side, and with a sustained series of attacks on Catholics cross Northern Ireland.
3. The absence of a review of hand-gun legislation as it applies (it does not) to Northern Ireland.
4. There has not been a report and assessment on the use of emergency legislation as yet.
5. There has not been a report on the review of policing in line with the provisions and remit set out by the Belfast Agreement as yet.
6. The failure of the Ulster Unionists to acknowledge their own armed history, which does not include decommissioning.
7. The standing of the leaderships of the relevant parties and their security (both physical and of tenure)
8. Decommissioning...
 - a. in the sentiment of the Agreement
 - b. in the practical discussions during the Stormont Talks (decommissioning was located within the subsidiary context of confidence-building measures and not as a substantive aspect of the Talks process)

c. and as outlined initially by the the Report on Decommissioning of
1996

requires action by ALL parties, particularly in the context that
decommissioning of MIND-SETS is the most important and central
requirement.