

IRISH TIMES ARTICLE

It is glazed-over eye time again as politics in Northern Ireland plunges into yet another crisis. Just as you thought it was safe to raise a tentative glass to political good sense and self-interest, the malign legacies of historical mistrust manage to upset the millennial celebrations. But then, you might well shrug, what else can you expect – it is Northern Ireland that we are talking about, or trying to ignore, as the case may be. As the Celtic tiger claws its way into the 21st century, the population of the north-east corner resort to the practice of all 57 varieties of saying 'No' in English, Gaelic and Ulster-Scots. 'Sin e', as Gerry Adams might say. Excuse then, if you can, the naivety of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition who still suggest that the Good Friday Agreement is as good as it gets, and the implementation process can still be fixed.

RE-AFFIRMING THE ISSUES

Despite the professional pessimism of anti-Agreement politicians the past five years have seen seismic shifts in the political landscape of our beleaguered region. In essence the Good Friday Agreement provided a fresh philosophical and practical framework for a new political order. It was a carefully balanced document which recognized that the divided nature of northern society was not merely a figment of fringe republican imagination, and that the violence that the North had suffered was not simply the aggravated crime wave that had been portrayed by some. For the first time the Agreement effectively challenged the long-held British Government position which denied the military side of the conflict as being political. In addition, the Agreement went on to design a system of governance that was based on acceptance of the fact that the consent of the governed was an essential ingredient for the stability of any political settlement – and that cross-community consent had to take precedence over simple majoritarianism.

Ratified by the referenda of May 1998, the Good Friday Agreement looked set to start off with the fair wind of local acceptance and international acclaim. A warning of the dangers ahead were already apparent however, as Prime Minister Blair offered a gloss on the interpretation of the Agreement with an eye to the reservations of Unionist voters. It was in anticipation of this very situation that the Women's Coalition had called for a negotiated management of the implementation process in a document circulated in October 1997. We further argued that a crisis management approach would not provide an effective solution to the potential difficulties ahead.

From long hours of negotiation since 1996, the Women's Coalition accepts that Unionists are experiencing very public – and also very real – problems of bringing a sufficient number of their constituency to accept the uncomfortable demands of political change. We also recognize that Sinn Fein faces internal, but no less difficult problems in moving its constituency from militant defenderism to a progressive strategy of peaceful political change. There is the added issue for these parties, and others, of the lack of trust and understanding in a political context that is still raw and angry.

Again, it was for this very reason that the NIWC made the following statement as one of its core Principles and Requirements for negotiation in October 1997 –

'There must be a willingness to address people's fear of change and assist in the leadership and management of change, rather than exploit fears for political ends'. This recognition of the need to manage people's expectations about political change is a challenge for Sinn Fein, but has been a particular problem in the Ulster Unionist Party. In contrast to management, the latter have relied on the exaggeration of republican 'gains' as both a bargaining counter with the British and Irish Governments, and a means of consolidating their own constituency. This tactic has, in effect, returned to haunt David Trimble, albeit he has exploited his very vulnerability to elicit the protection of the British Government.

DESIGNING THE CONTEXT FOR MOVEMENT

The challenge to hand is to design a context for movement that can go beyond the negotiating straitjacket of the devolution for decommissioning equation. However it is also important that any such context should build on the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement rather than seeking to unpick them. It has always been the Coalition's view that there is no clear linkage in the terms of the Agreement between prior, or timetabled, decommissioning and the establishment of an Executive. We do, nevertheless, accept the critical importance of the provisions contained in the Decommissioning section of the Agreement, and we hold strongly to the requirement that all parties must 'use their best efforts' to bring about decommissioning. For the Coalition compliance with that requirement has entailed an active examination of the circumstances and context that will allow for decommissioning to be achieved in practice. It is our analysis that the creation of such circumstances are not helped by the imposition of unilateral deadlines; the use of political position to prevent the implementation of other aspects of the Agreement; or indulgence in the politics of blame and marginalisation.

The Coalition has also argued that if all parties are to 'use their best efforts' to achieve decommissioning then an over-reliance on exclusive bilateral and trilateral negotiation between the two Governments and the big three parties (Ulster Unionist, Sinn Fein and the SDLP) can be counter-productive. In real terms it has undermined the collective sense of ownership of current problems and the overall implementation process. We believe that we need to reframe the problem if we are to achieve the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. We need to move away from the posturing over the 'real' democrats with legal weapons as compared to sinister elements with illegal arms which fails to take account of the causes and legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland that the Good Friday Agreement dealt with so well.

A more useful context would be to posit that the referenda of 1998 has created a new political dispensation for both unionism and republicanism – as well as the two Governments. Basic to the creation of a shared, peaceful society is the removal of all weapons – thus bringing the issue of demilitarisation and the huge number of legally held guns into the political equation. Similarly, the emphasis should be placed on the removal of weapons – i.e. putting them beyond use - rather than on specific measures of destruction.

The Coalition believes that it would be helpful for the IRA Army Council to recognise that the 1998 referenda marked a point of transformation of their struggle for an united and independent Ireland. It must be accepted that this was the first occasion

when all the electorate of the island voted together since 1918. It is clear that there is now a popular mandate for peaceful change, even if the nature of that change is still an issue for political debate and struggle. It was in large part the silence of the guns that propelled the political process that led to the Good Friday Agreement. It will require continued peaceful political struggle to ensure its full implementation. Actions based on expressions of pique during periods of political crisis do not move the situation forward. If the IRA sees itself – as it does – in conflict with the British military presence in Ireland, then it should proactively move to build confidence in the Agreement by responding positively to the limited level of demilitarisation to date, and to any future demilitarisation planned. Either the IRA itself, or else through the medium of Sinn Fein, also owe the Unionists a sense of clarity about what they view is the context for effective inclusive decommissioning and indeed in terms of the meaning of their sometimes less than clear public statements. They must recognise that they are now addressing a number of audiences, and that speaking in code will no longer suffice.

Equally, however, the Women's Coalition does not see decommissioning being achieved as a direct response to David Trimble's bungee-jump last November. The reality was that the Secretary of State very skilfully walked the Ulster Unionists through their responsibility to establish an Executive. What is now clear is that he both held their political security rein and lit the fuse under the artificial January deadline. With the benefit of hindsight this can now be seen as an understandable, if unjustifiable, exercise in short-term crisis management. To make matters worse there was no implementation process put in place to underpin the misunderstood agreement reached by a small number of political leaders through the Mitchell Review.

OUTLINING THE STEPS TO BE TAKEN

What is now required is –

- The creation of an implementation mechanism which will encompass the two Governments and all the pro-Agreement parties to discuss on the basis of inter-party and multi-party talks the re-instatement of devolution and the political context for decommissioning.
- The acceptance that the context of discussion of decommissioning must move beyond the current unhelpful obsession with IRA guns and most address the broader issues.
- The development of a more realistic time frame to allow these issues to be addressed given the amount of time that has been lost since the referenda of May 1998, and the level of confidence-building that is now required.
- The public acceptance by all parties to the Agreement that all the pro-Agreement parties are, and have, used their best efforts to achieve decommissioning, and that future energy should be focused on how to maximise the impact of each others efforts rather than political point scoring.
- A collective focus by the pro-Agreement parties on how to manage the necessary political change that is still required if both the intent and provision of the Good Friday Agreement is to be achieved in full.
- The establishment of the Civic Forum to offer a more participative framework for the consideration of a range of divisive issues.

It is interesting to note that in discussion with some members of the Ulster Unionist Party it has been suggested recently that if Sinn Fein and the IRA adopted the course of the Workers' Party, then everything might be achievable. While not questioning the potentially useful role that contacts between representatives of the Workers' Party and related organisations, with the Unionist Party may have played, perhaps this contact puts in context both the timeframe of confidence-building and the feasible option of weapons rusting rather than being physically destroyed.