



**SDLP Statement on
Decommissioning**

STATEMENT ON DECOMMISSIONING BY THE SDLP

I greatly welcome this opportunity to set out the views of the SDLP on the vexed issue of decommissioning. It is important to do so. Rightly handled, our work on this issue could deliver a goal the vast majority of our citizens fervently want to see, namely the removal of the gun from Irish politics, and a society where illegal weapons and the suffering caused by them are a thing of the past. Wrongly handled, it will not only fail to achieve this important goal. It will also frustrate the political process itself. That process simply cannot succeed if it is made irretrievably hostage to requirements which the great majority of parties around this table have little or no capacity to influence, still less to decide or deliver.

This issue gives rise to very deep and understandable emotions, given the great suffering caused by weapons. These emotions are all too easily exploited to prevent any realistic or even rational analysis of the issue. They can be whipped up to suggest that those who recognise decommissioning for what it is - one of the most complex issues of the whole process, requiring a correspondingly complex approach to solve it - are somehow callous toward that suffering or indifferent to violence and the primacy of democratic values.

To avoid such misrepresentation, let me recall that the SDLP was founded in active and resolute opposition to the use of physical force and that remains one of our overriding missions as a party. Since our creation in 1970 we have been unwavering in our commitment to the resolution of political differences by purely political means, and to the consequent removal of the gun from our island's politics for ever. We loathe and repudiate all violence, and we are, in common with all others sitting around this table, bitterly aware of the terrible toll exacted by violence from all quarters, and in particular by the paramilitaries, over so many years. We yield to no-one in our desire for peace, and our record shows we have worked tirelessly to achieve it. We are fully aware that the people of Ireland, irrespective of their political beliefs and aspirations, are united in wanting "lasting peace in a just society in which paramilitary

violence plays no part" - to quote the Report of the International Body.

Accordingly as we made clear at the beginning of these talks, in subscribing to the six principles of democracy and non-violence, we are totally and absolutely committed to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations, and we agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission.

The question is, therefore, how that goal of total and verifiable decommissioning is to be achieved. The starting point for any answer must rest in an analysis firstly of what precisely it is we here want to achieve, and secondly what motivates those who hold and use illegal weapons.

In the thousands - or is it millions? - of words from unionist representatives we have listened in vain so far for the simple acknowledgement which would make all the difference in ensuring a right and productive treatment of the issue and rather a wrong and sterile one. That simple acknowledgement - which is owed in all honesty to the unionist public no less than the nationalist one - is that the decommissioning we are talking about here is not a matter which can be imposed, or peremptorily dictated. Decommissioning in our context must be the fruit of an inclusive process of negotiation - a peace process in short, or it will not happen at all.

Of course there is room for a peremptory approach to decommissioning and a robust determination that there will be no negotiations, no room left for discussion, on this issue. That approach is already in force. It has been carried out by tens of thousands of security personnel throughout these islands over the last twenty-five years or more. No doubt they will continue and very rightly so. Those who insist on that imposed or peremptory approach owe no apology to anyone here - except perhaps on one point: they should be addressing their remarks or preconditions to the RUC and the Garda Síochána and the other security agencies, and not to this table. Even if they will not admit it, they are talking about a security process, not a political result that can be delivered by politicians who have neither guns to decommission nor the capacity to force decommissioning on those who do, where the security forces with all their

resources have failed.

The second point is that the paramilitaries whom we want to see decommission have not blown in from outer space. Their dreadful methods and systems have taken root in the space left by our political failures. However grotesque it must appear to democratic politicians, they see themselves, on both sides, as politically motivated. They could not exist if some people in both communities did not believe they had some relevance, however much a majority would disagree. They are unquestionably a product of the history of Northern Ireland. We must of course deal with law-breaking on security terms, but if we want to get to the root causes of terrorism on both sides we must, quite simply, achieve political success. We must find agreement to bridge the poisonous differences, both political and, especially since Drumcree, increasingly sectarian, which divide us.

There is a deep division in the hearts and minds of our people, leading to a profound absence of consensus not just about the institutions under which we govern ourselves, but also about the constitutional framework itself. The great majority in both communities believe that these divisions can only be healed, and a new beginning achieved, by exclusively peaceful means, but we would be dishonest if we did not admit that the evils of violence, coercion and threat have deep roots in our history. The ideologies, and psychologies, which permit killing in the name either of a united Ireland or the defence of the Union, are of course distorted and perverse: but they also reflect darker elements of both our traditions.

The only way in which political violence will finally be eradicated from our society is through the achievement of a lasting, just and balanced political settlement, which respects the rights of all our people and reflects the rights of all our people and reflects equally the aspirations and identities of both traditions. Let me stress again, this is not, for a moment, to undervalue the continuing importance and necessity of the work of the security forces in both parts of Ireland and in Britain to counter violence from every source, working in the fullest co-operation with one another. But it must be obvious that security measures alone, while they may have effectively countered and

contained elements of the threat posed by violence, have not been, are not, and cannot be, sufficient in themselves.

If the achievement of a political settlement is the only means by which we can underpin and secure a durable peace, then it is only through working for such a settlement that we can expect to achieve the total and verifiable decommissioning which all democrats seek. It is only alongside and in the context of fully inclusive negotiations that decommissioning is in fact achievable. As the Mitchell Report pointed out, if we wish to persuade those holding arms that the justification they have relied on in their own minds no longer exists, we must create a different and better political climate.

Decommissioning, in the sense in which it has come to be understood, is, therefore, primarily a political objective. It is so for a number of reasons.

First, while decommissioning is no doubt a desirable and valuable security measure, it could not be decisive in itself. Weapons and explosives can always be acquired, or made from everyday materials, by those with necessary skills and determination to use terror as a political instrument. Unless you decommission the mindsets, you will not decommission the frightening expertise which already exists in that respect. Security personnel are clear that decommissioning is less the centrepiece of a security strategy than a political issue.

Secondly, decommissioning in the sense we are called to deal with is essentially a voluntary exercise, which logically and necessarily requires the co-operation of those in possession of the weapons. It should not be conflated or confused with the continuing work of the security forces. The seizure of illegal weapons by the police should continue, but this is not the same as the decommissioning of remaining arsenals. Decommissioning in the sense we are discussing cannot be peremptorily imposed on the paramilitaries, irrespective of the political context. I would plead again for unionist leaders not to foster confusion on this basic reality.

Thirdly, and in consequence, decommissioning will only happen alongside, and as a by-product of, political confidence, and the development of trust. Conversely, we recognise the absence of that trust, and the important role the decommissioning issue has in creating it. The Report of the International Body identified the necessity of a dynamic interplay between the two, but makes clear that progress on political issues necessarily comes first. Decommissioning will evolve out of a process of negotiations: and that process must involve a commitment, on all our parts to engage seriously with each other and with the fundamental issues, in order to demonstrate to those who hold weapons, and those who have supported the use of violence, that the political path is the only way forward.

Fourthly, any decommissioning will have to be on a mutual basis as between both sets of paramilitaries. By definition therefore, all political parties must be present in a fully inclusive negotiating process if decommissioning is in fact to come about. This reality now appears to be widely accepted. Therefore, those who want to achieve decommissioning

must be in favour of an all inclusive process; while those who oppose an inclusive process should stop pretending that they want decommissioning. It is impossible to square talk of locking parties permanently out of negotiations with the obsessive emphasis which has been placed on the importance of decommissioning, unless of course decommissioning is being used as a mere tactic to forestall any possibility of an inclusive process. The unionist leadership have been demanding from a process which does not include Sinn Féin an outcome which can only be achieved from a process which includes Sinn Féin and the loyalist parties. If decommissioning is being used as a mere tactical lever, it is to devalue the goal itself and the wishes of the many who want to see it achieved, even at the cost of a long and difficult process.

The SDLP has worked long and hard to encourage Sinn Féin's participation in mainstream politics, not in our narrow party interest, but in the interests of peace and agreement. We too have felt bitter dismay and anger at the IRA's ending of its ceasefire and at the terrible atrocities which have followed. We fully accept, and we are satisfied, that Sinn Féin's entry to these negotiations must depend on an

unequivocal restoration of the IRA ceasefire, and that the party must then follow all of us in making clear its total and absolute commitment to the principles of democracy and non-violence. We also recognise that each successive atrocity deepens the credibility gap which Sinn Féin must address.

However, we are convinced that the lesson of the eighteen-month ceasefire is that these very real concerns will not be satisfied through the creation of new preconditions. The tests set by the Government were not set against a background of peace, but against a background of conflict. They remain valid in the present depressing climate of continuing atrocities. We must carefully insist on them. It is right to maintain our insistence that without an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire Sinn Féin representatives cannot be at this table. We must however distinguish between defending that position and any tendency to assume that it can be a good or desirable thing for any significant constituency to be kept away from the table. Even if the IRA continues to prevent Sinn Féin leaders participating in negotiations, that constituency will continue to exist and cannot just be ignored. It would be helpful if unionist leaders could make clear that they do acknowledge this distinction and have no such intention. The contrary impression is created by a refusal to acknowledge, as the Mitchell Report did, the simple reality that the psychology and history of the republican movement are such that a call for decommissioning prior to entry into substantive and meaningful negotiations, will just not be met. To insist on such a call risks being seen as a deliberate attempt to set in concrete the present circumstance of Sinn Féin's exclusion because of IRA activities, and to make it harder for them ever to correct their course and return to political negotiation.

Again, both objectively and particularly in the republican movement's own terms, the steps which are already required of them, and not least the total and absolute commitment to the six principles, are substantial. Moreover, there would be ample opportunity, after the entry of Sinn Féin to these negotiations, to scrutinise the good faith of their words and actions. If, as unionists understandably fear, Sinn Féin cannot ultimately bring themselves to agree to an honourable settlement founded on the principles accepted by the great majority of the Irish people, including consent; and if,

as is again a deep and legitimate fear, the paramilitaries prove incapable of meeting the requirements of patience and political compromise, then this will become patently and transparently clear, and the appropriate conclusions will be drawn on all sides. On the other hand, establishing unrealistic preconditions which can be seen simply as road-blocks and obstacles will simply foster continued resentment and a mentality of victimhood, and will delay the day when republicans face up honestly to difficult democratic choices.

There is a stark difference between objectives and preconditions. You yourself must contribute to the achievement of an objective. A precondition places the onus on somebody else. It is the negation of dialogue and political engagement. That is why we should be so sparing of preconditions if we want to pool our efforts in the search for a way forward.

In order to overcome the impasse generated by the Washington Three precondition, the two Governments sought the assistance of our three Independent Chairmen, acting as the International Body. Their report was widely recognised as a model of reason and good sense, which was scrupulously fair to both sides of the difficult decommissioning debate. In that spirit we immediately made clear our unconditional acceptance of the report on its publication in January. We continue to be completely committed to it. It offers a way forward - in our view almost certainly the only way forward - to the actual achievement of decommissioning. It would be unwise and imprudent to unpick it now or resile from it. We would see a very heavy onus of proof on those who assert they can achieve decommissioning - as opposed to rhetorical postures - some other way.

It is worth recalling some key points in the report.

It made clear, in paragraph 35, that "even modest mutual steps on decommissioning" can only come about "as progress is made on political issues" In the same paragraph it emphasised that there is a need for all participants in negotiations including those called on to decommission to have reassurance that "a meaningful and inclusive

process of negotiations is genuinely being offered to address the legitimate concerns of their traditions, and the need for new political arrangements with which all can identify." This crucial point was singled out for endorsement in the two Governments' February communiqué, which set the present negotiating process in motion.

The report also made clear that "the details of decommissioning, including supporting confidence-building measures, timing and sequencing, have to be determined by the parties themselves"; that the "process should suggest neither victory nor defeat", and that decommissioning should be verified by a commission appointed by the two Governments "on the basis of consultations with the other parties to the negotiating process."

Can any party here deny that these stipulations must point to a complex set of discussions alongside, and taking its impetus from the political negotiations?

To seek to restore the notorious "Washington Three" condition by the back door is to throw away the dedicated and painstaking work of the International Body to find a way through the morass of contention in which we have become bogged down.

The SDLP's position is straightforward. We have no arms or explosives to decommission. But we accept that, in an inclusive process, the problem of illegal arms must be resolved alongside and in the context of wider political agreement. The only realistic basis on which to seek that objective is that of the International Body's report. For that reason we agree unreservedly with the proposals of the two Governments as published on 1 October that all participants, including ourselves, should agree to work constructively and in good faith to secure the implementation of all aspects of the report, in the context of a dynamic and inclusive process. We support the establishment of a Committee charged with furthering this objective; and we agree that there should be periodic reviews in plenary session of progress in negotiations as a whole, including the work of the Committee. We believe unionist leaders should accept that decommissioning, in the sense relevant to us, must be the fruit of some negotiating process. If they have a more efficient process in mind, we

will of course consider that. We will not however join in the pretence that it can be achieved without a negotiating process, even though many unionists seem in an extraordinary state of denial on this obvious point.

We further appreciate, and accept that, as the two Governments put it, "a reality for all present and future participants in the negotiations is that progress in the negotiations will only be possible on that basis."

The SDLP abhor all guns and explosives, and we want to see them removed permanently from the political equation once and for all. But statement of that objective should not be confused with its achievement, nor commitment to it measured by bellicose rhetoric alone. It is only by building an inclusive process, and by engaging seriously and constructively with the political issues, that decommissioning will occur. That places an obligation on all of us who actually want to achieve decommissioning, to do the utmost, consistent with democratic principles, to make these negotiations fully inclusive. We may or may not succeed: it is outside our power. If we fail, we must, of course, press on determinedly to reach agreement. But we must not make decommissioning a block to political progress rather than an essential aspect of it.

We now find ourselves in a decommissioning debate which the Irish News acidly called "surreal" in the present circumstances. The fact that it strikes many as at least unreal, does not lessen its very real capacity to wreck this process. It will quite inevitably do so if significant parties use it as a tactical lever, to set other parties exams they know very well they cannot pass, because they deal manifestly with things quite literally beyond their power.

As I said at the outset, whether this process grinds to a standstill on this issue will depend on whether there is a collective willingness to deal with it honestly and realistically. In a statement on 1 October, the Deputy Leader of the Party, Séamus Mallon, suggested a number of litmus tests in this regard, and we are applying them to what has been said, and is being said around this table, particularly by unionist

spokespersons. Let me repeat them.

- Do they accept that the way forward is to implement all aspects of the Mitchell Report, or is theirs an *à la carte* approach to salvage the unreal preconditions which Mitchell sought to overcome?
- Will they explain to their own public the difference between imposed decommissioning, which is for security forces, and the Mitchell goal of voluntary disarmament, which would flow from political progress and negotiations?
- Do they accept that such decommissioning requires an inclusive process, and if so, what are they doing to advance this necessary condition for their goal of decommissioning?
- What are they doing to advance the other Mitchell criterion that a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiations is genuinely being offered?
- Will they accept that all conceivable interpretations of the Mitchell Report involve a process of negotiations on this issue, and are they willing to engage in good faith on this, in parallel with the political negotiations?

I have to say that some of the contributions we have heard to date, in spite of ranging so far and free, somehow avoided answering these basic questions. I have to say frankly that they have given us little comfort so far that this debate will get real, or emerge from the mystifications and tactical posturing which has clouded it so far.

If or when this debate does get real, the SDLP stands ready to do everything in our power to advance this goal. We will not however be investing our energies in any form of pantomime or make-believe, if it appears plainly that what is being sought is not actually a resolution of the very grave issues of weapons, but rather an insuperable road-block to prevent inclusive negotiations. We will not support what we believe

would be very short-sighted tactics to ensure that irrespective of any ceasefires, and the political engagements given, and the legal basis of these talks, that a particular constituency can be kept permanently at bay from the negotiating process. Neither will we lend ourselves to any proxy role in unionist infighting, and especially not to that which appears to want to engineer the political humiliation or even expulsion of parties here whose influence may be important in maintaining the loyalist ceasefire, and who may have given offence to some by dealing with this issue on the basis of realism and common sense, rather than through tactically serviceable myths and fantasies.

Because we are deeply serious about the goal of decommissioning, we believe this issue must be solved as part of the process of accommodation. The whole record of our party is one long guarantee of sincerity and commitment in that respect. We want to see the problem approached honestly, as a truly challenging difficulty which we should actually work and negotiate to solve, not as an infinitely fertile resource for polemics and blockage.

We believe we have the best possible road-map to hand in the Mitchell Report. I would predict with great confidence that if any common ground is ever found between us on this issue, it will be on that basis. We stand ready to cooperate in the implementation of all aspects of the Report. We would ask other delegations to make the same commitment and not to discard the great potential asset of the work of the International Body. We cannot deliver actual decommissioning as we are at this table. We certainly cannot do the work of the police and we should not play at being policemen. We can do very useful work to advance aspects of the agenda, provided some other delegations agree to abandon their marked preference for cursing the dark, and help light a candle instead.

Above all, we must recognise that the greatest boost we can give to the decommissioning agenda is to create and advance a healthy process of substantive negotiations. Decommissioning, in the sense relevant to our work will come, if at all, only as the fruit of a political process. It may well take time for such a tree to bear

fruit, but it can never do so unless we plant it first. That is our primary task at this table. I ask other delegations to begin the work through the immediate transition to substantive negotiations on the political agenda. That is our true purpose here. In doing so, let us take forward the decommissioning agenda as well, to the best of our present capacity, on the clear, objective and realistic basis of the Mitchell Report.

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