

ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY

THE MITCHELL REPORT

24 January 1996

The issue of the prior decommissioning of paramilitary weapons derives from paragraph 10 of the Downing Street Declaration which refers to the need for parties to "establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods".

It is a disappointment that the International Body chaired by George Mitchell was unable to find a way in which this requirement of the Downing Street Declaration could be met immediately.

We note that the Report says that the insistence on prior decommissioning is reasonable. The Report, however, says that it will not be achieved. We note that it is not a case of "cannot" but "will not". In other words the obstacle is simply the unreasonable obduracy of the paramilitaries. In the light of the clear public endorsement of prior decommissioning by 83% of all the people of Northern Ireland, an endorsement shared by 74% of SDLP supporters, it would be unthinkable to simply abandon this requirement.

The Report requires careful study. It does not call for immediate inter-party talks without so-called preconditions. It does not recommend that the requirement of prior decommissioning be dropped. It merely suggests what it calls a compromise, namely decommissioning alongside "talks". This suggestion is not in fact included in their recommendations.

The recommendations recognise the need to build trust and set out certain principles and confidence building measures that might create that trust. It calls on parties to affirm their commitment to these principles. It adds that "these commitments wher

made and honoured, would remove the threat of force, before, during and after" talks. The use of the term "honoured" implies more than a merely verbal commitment to them. So the Mitchell Report envisages actions by paramilitaries and others prior to talks in order to build the necessary confidence.

We can wholeheartedly endorse the principles, which do not depart from the principles of the Downing Street Declaration. We call on all paramilitaries to affirm their total and absolute commitment to these principles and to honour them before, during and after talks. Those principles are peace, democracy, the total independently verifiable disarmament of paramilitaries, the renunciation of violence and the threat of violence, a willingness to adhere to any agreement and a renunciation of any attempt to change agreements by other than democratic and exclusively peaceful means and an end to "punishment" killings and beatings.

We underline the need to honour these commitments before, during and after all party talks.

We welcome the reference to the concept of an elected body as a confidence building measure.

We agree that it is a way of building confidence. Indeed, we see it as the only way in which confidence can be built in a commitment to the democratic process. We note that an elected body as a way forward is endorsed by 70% of the people of Northern Ireland, including 68% of SDLP supporters.

As we have said, if parties related to paramilitary organisations obtained an electoral mandate and took their seats in an elected body, we would recognise that mandate and include them in debate within that body. As we have said, that is the only way in which there can be a form of dialogue in advance of the beginning of a process of decommissioning, which we would still regard as a necessary preliminary to substantive negotiations.