

For Belfast Telegraph
24 Feb 1997
870 words

This article is submitted on condition that the paper publishes tomorrow the following letter from me

Dear sir,

I am surprised at the journalistic ethics revealed by your frontpage headline on Saturday. I gave an interview to the Irish American Post a month ago. It contained neither a vow nor the phrase you headlined last Saturday. It was a serious attempt to explain a complex issue to American readers. It was not news and I assume it was the absence of real news that led your sensational treatment of it. It may have filled your front page, but it was not responsible journalism.

Sincerely

David Trimble

ARTICLE

I was encouraged by the headline for John Bruton's recent article in the Belfast Telegraph. It read, "We won't wait for Sinn Fein." Like many others my reaction was. "It's about time he stopped waiting for them!"

It would be an important change of policy if Mr Bruton stopped waiting for Sinn Fein and allowed the talks to go on without them. For ever since the beginning of the inter-party talks the Irish government's approach has been dominated by a desire to make it as easy as possible for Sinn Fein to enter the talks.

This is seen in their approach to the issue of the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. When the talks were announced in February 1996, the government made it clear that at the beginning of the talks decommissioning would have to be addressed. The Irish government's stratagem was that addressing decommissioning would merely be the referral of the issue to a committee of the talks. Consequently the talks would move into substantive negotiations, alongside which there would be, not actual decommissioning, but merely talking about decommissioning.

Of course this was quite unacceptable to the Ulster Unionist party. The talks require unanimity or at least a substantial consensus. So there would be no agreement in this committee unless both the Irish and the SDLP agreed. With Sinn Fein insisting that there be no decommissioning and with the

SDLP and the Irish anxious to please them, we could be sure that their vetoes would be exercised to prevent any decommissioning.

We have insisted that there can be no movement into substantive talks until we are satisfied that decommissioning will be dealt with properly. There is actually very little that needs to be done for the Mitchell report does deal with it in detail. Its key proposals are the creation of an International Commission to verify actual decommissioning which would be done in accordance with statutory schemes. We said that the legislation should be passed as soon as possible, the schemes published and the Verification Commission put in place. There would also have to be agreement on the procedures to be followed if and when Sinn Fein entered the talks in order to make sure that actual decommission occurs alongside the talks, but not in any way linked to them, for there is no question of trading weapons for political concessions.

To make sure that there was no misunderstanding, we published our position in October and from that position we have not deviated. Consequently it is surprising to hear some say that they do not know what our position is on decommissioning. One wonders if they have forgotten how to read. But some are so anxious to spread untruthful rumour and innuendo that they carry their avoidance of knowledge to the point of refusing to take up offers for briefings.

The position we set out did not involve any hardening of our position or any change in the basic terms of the talks. Instead it was an insistence that the original terms for the talks be actually carried out. The position of the Irish and the SDLP amounted to an attempt to water down the decommissioning requirement and change the terms of the talks so that Sinn Fein would not have to make a genuine commitment to peaceful means. As a result a stalemate has developed.

If the Irish were now to conclude that Sinn Fein are not serious about peace and democracy and if Mr Bruton and Mr Hume were to decide that the time for waiting is over and it is time to move on without Sinn Fein, then there will be little difficulty in agreeing to set up the necessary machinery and moving on into substantive talks. Certainly this is what we have been inviting them to do for months now.

But unfortunately the text of the Bruton article does not reflect the headline, for it has the character of a begging letter to Sinn Fein and there has been no sign of sensible action from Bruton despite continuing republican violence. It is the same with John Hume. Last week he denounced Sinn Fein in terms that he should have used at least a year ago. But it only took a few words from Adams and Hume has

returned to an over-optimistic interpretation of Sinn Fein's intentions. Even the leader writer for the Sunday independent is worried. Its editorial yesterday was headlined, "Hume must not be duped again". But among the few things that are certain since this process began is, to quote Kipling, that "the burnt fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the fire."

We have all waited too long for what all should be able to see is a clearly unreformable terrorist gang. The political process must go on without those who are manifestly incapable of accepting the prerequisites of peace and democracy. It is possible for there to be a settlement which, while respecting the wishes of the greater number, will enable the people of Northern Ireland to work together comfortably in an amicable relationship with their neighbour. But it does require Mr Bruton and Mr Hume to stop waiting and to face up to their responsibilities to sustain the democratic process.