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STATEMENT BY SÉAMUS MALLON MP ON THE ISSUE OF DECOMMISSIONING

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The political talks in Stormont have most of the ingredients necessary for success - save one. They lack the political will to make them work. Three and a half months after their launch we have not begun substantive negotiations. We have not even agreed an agenda for the opening plenary, not to speak of the negotiations themselves.

It is a matter of fact and record - and not of any polemics - that this delay is due overwhelmingly to the position taken by the three unionist parties. It is they alone who block the route to substantive negotiations.

There are many reasons for this, some perhaps understandable, others less than admirable. Unionist leaders have always competed to own the fears, rather than the hopes of their community. The challenge of the talks process is bringing this disedifying spectacle sharply to the fore, to the point where it threatens to eclipse everything else on the unionist political agenda. The rest of the population are its victims.

In one respect, however, the unionists are struggling with a difficulty not entirely of their own making. The "decommissioning issue" was honed to its full obstructive capacity in London. Intended as a device to help elements of the British establishment to check the momentum of the peace process, it succeeded all too well. It now threatens to undermine political negotiations as well. Not for the first time, a tactical expedient from Westminster has taken on a malign life of its own in Northern Ireland.

The decommissioning issue is so potent because it touches such a deadly serious issue - illegal weapons and the havoc they have wrought. To question the decommissioning issue, or even the way it has been tactically manipulated, is to

lay oneself open to attack as somehow making light of all the human suffering due to these guns.

Unlike so many parties whose origins lay in physical force, the SDLP was founded in active and resolute opposition to it. The political record of my colleagues - and my own - has never wavered on that point, whatever the personal cost. I will rely on that record against those who will no doubt seek to distort my motives or position on this issue now. It is not those who brandish the potent symbolism of decommissioning who serve the cause of anti-violence, but rather those who try to prevent it blocking the road to political progress. That road alone will lead us, in Senator Mitchell's phrase, "to decommission the mindsets", without which any physical decommissioning will be illusory.
It is high time to inject some tests of reality into a debate where this quality has been in very short supply.

Firstly, no-one has convincingly argued that decommissioning is a decisive security measure, however desirable it might be. Indeed, security personnel are clear - mostly in private, but some in public - that this is essentially a political issue, and never part of any realistic security strategy.

Secondly, it is a voluntary exercise, which logically and necessarily requires the cooperation of those holding the weapons. The Governments and their vast security apparatus have been pursuing a decommissioning policy for years, seeking out and confiscating illegal weapons wherever they can be found. They will of course continue this, and very rightly so. Unionists should not confuse their public by conflating two entirely different exercises.
They want to treat decommissioning as a matter that can be peremptorily imposed on the paramilitaries, irrespective of political confidence or context. That is in itself a perfectly valid approach, but it is for the security forces, not for a political process.

When will unionist leaders explain to their followers that the Mitchell report they professed to accept involves a process of negotiations, and a commitment to engage and persuade those who hold weapons that the political path alone is the way forward?

Thirdly, decommissioning in the sense of the Mitchell report will never happen unless as a by-product of political progress. The Mitchell report is absolutely clear that political progress and confidence must come first. That is in any case a matter of common sense to anyone who considers the context in which the paramilitaries on both sides operate. After a summer when these conditions

were gravely set back, making a precondition of this issue makes no sense whatever, unless as a political road-block.

Fourthly, any decommissioning will have to be on a "mutual" basis as between both sets of paramilitaries, as the Mitchell report itself again makes clear. Therefore decommissioning can only come from a fully inclusive negotiating process. Those who say they want to see decommissioning must demonstrate their sincerity by working actively for an inclusive process. Those who oppose an inclusive process should stop pretending to want decommissioning.

The unionist leadership now is demanding from a process which does not include Sinn Fein an outcome which can only be achieved, if at all, from a process which includes Sinn Fein and the loyalist parties. Either they are deliberately setting an impossible test for the present process, or else they have no faith whatever that the present format can last, or deliver a result.

One of the many inconsistencies of the decommissioning debate is that those who were loudest in protesting the primacy of politics perversely engineered a decommissioning precondition which must have been the paramilitary quartermasters' dream. The British Government handed those quartermasters a veto over the political engagement of their associates. The unionist leadership now seems intent on ensuring the same thing happens in the political negotiations as a whole.

There is a valid and genuine debate about how to handle the paramilitary dimension to the politics of Northern Ireland. It is legitimate and necessary to ask searching questions about whether paramilitary elements can be brought within the ambit of exclusively democratic politics, and will agree to abide by its demanding requirements of patience and compromise. The subject is sufficiently crucial to warrant an honest and open debate and to be tested in its own right. To shrink the issue into a precondition of physical decommissioning is to guarantee that it will be distorted, tactical and unreal. Who can possibly have an interest in that?

We in the SDLP abhor guns. We want to see them all removed from the political process. The sooner that happens, the better. Every gain and advance - even of one pistol - is welcome, whenever and however it can be achieved.

It is because we are deeply serious about realising that objective that we are anxious to work for it in the only way we, or any other democratic political

leaders can, namely by creating the political context where it can realistically come about.

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The difference between an objective and a precondition is that you yourself work to achieve an objective. A precondition enables you to do nothing but throw all the onus on somebody else. That is why preconditions are so beloved by the unionists. That is why they cling so tightly to decommissioning as the mother of all preconditions. Carefully nurtured, it could ward off indefinitely the tiresome expectations of the outside world, that they might one day negotiate a better future for everyone, including themselves, with the nationalists who share this island with them.

In order to overcome the impasse generated by the "Washington Three" precondition, the two Governments had recourse to the outstanding skills of Senator Mitchell and his colleagues. Their report was a model of reason and good sense, and of scrupulous fairness to both sides of the decommissioning debate. It pruned away the wilder growths of wishful thinking. It set out a potential common ground in terms of principles and modalities.

It is worth recalling some key points:

The Mitchell report is clear that "even modest mutual steps on decommissioning" can only come "as progress is made on political issues" (para. 35).

It makes clear that decommissioning needs a context where those who are called on to decommission are reassured 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" (para 35). This crucial point was singled out for endorsement in the February communiqué by the two Governments, which set the present process in motion.

The report also makes 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 or defeat", and 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 unionist leader deny that, whatever the fine-print, these stipulations at all events must involve a complex stream of negotiation in parallel with, and taking its impetus from the political process ?

To seek to restore the notorious "Washington Three" condition by the back door is to throw away the dedicated and painstaking work done by Senator Mitchell and his colleagues to build a bridge over this morass. It makes a mockery of any claim to support the Mitchell report.

The SDLP position is simple and clear.

We stand ready to join with the two Governments and all other willing parties to work to implement all aspects of the Mitchell report, as far as it relates to us or we have a contribution to make.

We will put this on record in our opening address on the decommissioning issue. That will not take long. For the rest we shall listen to what other parties have to say.

We will then carefully consider the prospects, in the light, firstly, of the positions of the unionist parties, and, secondly, of the two Governments.

In listening to the unionist contribution, we will seek to determine, very simply, which of two options the unionist leaders now offer:

Are they potential partners in advancing all aspects of the Mitchell Report? Are they, on the contrary, so opposed to inclusive negotiations on the basis set out by the two Governments in their February communiqué, and by the British Government in its legislation, that they are determined to smother the present process simply out of fear that it might one day become inclusive?

In this respect we will look to a number of litmus tests:

- Do they accept the way forward is to implement all aspects of the Mitchell report, or is theirs an a 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 ?

In the absence of reassurance on these and related points we - and indeed the world - will draw our own conclusions.

It will be necessary for the two Governments to draw their conclusions also. They are the custodians of the yearning of all the peoples of these islands to see peace, stability and good order replace this conflict. They surely cannot share any blinkered view that the certainties of conflict are preferable to the risks of peace, or the delusion that political immobility will do anything except make us the victims rather than the masters of change.

The Governments must now gauge the degree of partnership they can expect from the unionist leadership in pursuit of fundamental goals of great importance to the whole society. If the evidence becomes overwhelming that the various unionist leaderships are too mired in rivalries to agree on anything but the old shibboleths and total immobility, what becomes of the Governments responsibility to the desires and needs of the wider public? Does the decommissioning debate prove that the Ulster unionist leadership is merely the flagship of a convoy whose pace and direction are determined by the slowest and most erratic vessels in it. If the unionist agenda is for paralysis, will the Governments join in this paralysis, in a political version of the Drumcree syndrome, or will they use their resources to overcome it?

These are potentially dangerous times, which I believe will be very crucial in deciding whether we struggle onward to a better future for all, or fall back into fresh, and worse cycles of despondency and conflict.

If I have said harsh things about present unionist postures, it is in the hope that

by speaking frankly to each other, and our respective publics, we can even at this late stage join to breathe life into the negotiating process by moving to substance.

We need negotiations. We need to find common ground. Unionist leaders must know that the refurbishment of the decommissioning precondition is bound to be interpreted as a simple refusal to meet all the other parties who stand on the solid ground of the Mitchell report.

Would it be such a calamity if there were inclusive negotiations on the basis of an unequivocal restoration of an IRA ceasefire, if that could ever be achieved? Why should unionists destroy the process by insisting on unreal preconditions before or at the table, when they could have the support and solidarity of all parties to make decommissioning a precondition for rising from the table, and thus embark on the best prospects of actually achieving this goal?

Surely in the matter of negotiations it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. The present negotiations have been a very feeble candle so far, but I would appeal to the unionist leaders not to plunge us into total darkness again.