

The Lisburn bombing was a deliberate effort by the IRA to provoke loyalists to break their cease-fire. The location of the bombs and the timing of the attack point clearly towards a calculated attempt to inflict maximum carnage for optimum political effect.

I am thankful that the CLMC has not readily responded to the IRA's provocation. I believe their approach to this crisis should be applauded as should the strength of resolve with which they have applied themselves to the peace process as a whole.

Robert McCartney said in his article on Tuesday that the CLMC refusal to give in to provocation demonstrated "a new loyalist appreciation of their attempted manipulation". To him this appreciation appears new, but for loyalists the suggestion that their eyes have somehow been closed all this time and that they have been unable to see the Provos for what they are is somewhat patronising. It seems that some feel uncomfortable at the sophistication of loyalism. For middle-class unionism, loyalists are manipulated by the IRA. For republicans they are the surrogates of the British Government. Loyalism, it appears, is not expected to be able to think by itself.

Loyalists have not suddenly had a road to Damascus type experience. They have understood fully the strategy of the IRA for a long time. Republicans are in fact somewhat more predictable than loyalists will ever be. The present republican strategy is recognisable to loyalists as similar to that pursued in the run-up to the ceasefire in 1994.

At that time republicans executed a programme of calculated sectarian violence. This was designed to provoke a loyalist backlash in the hope that loyalists would find themselves in a position where it was impossible to reciprocate an IRA ceasefire when it came and would trundle on in isolation, usefully providing an escape hatch for the Provos if they did not find the democratic process to their liking.

The IRA murdered UDP chairman Ray Smallwoods, knowing that he was a lynch-pin in the ongoing negotiations to secure the loyalist ceasefire at the time. They, along with the INLA, murdered other loyalists in particularly brutal attacks. Pubs and clubs in loyalist areas were bombed, marking a return to a tactic not seen since the 1970's. They attempted to kill the Rev William McCrea, and also tried to murder me days before their ceasefire announcement.

The Combined Loyalist Military Command refused then to be driven by the IRA agenda, and so it

Loyalists not blind to Provo tactics

By Gary McMichael
UDP chairman



is today. Loyalists should not let the Provos off the hook, they must be allowed to wilt on the vine. However, the loyalist position is not one which should be taken for granted.

The primary reason why the loyalist community rose in armed defence at the beginning of the trouble was because of a failed security response to the republican threat. The community was under fire from violent nationalism and left defenceless by a Government whose policy was one of containment, not removal of the terrorist threat.

John Major must acknowledge his Government's responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland and engage a strong security policy to deal with the IRA threat. He must also accept that unionist parties are united in our view that a simple restoration of the 1994 ceasefire is not an adequate basis for Sinn Fein's entry to negotiations. He must make clear what he considers would constitute a dependable ceasefire, and redefine the interpretation of the current legislation.

Additionally, while it is argued that the Government could foist Sinn Fein upon us if they so desired, and it is asserted by Bob McCartney that they could not be removed again, one must recognise the basic principle that if Sinn Fein were to be thrust into

talks without the concerns of unionists being addressed, there would be no talks process, because Sinn Fein would find themselves talking to rows of empty seats.

Mr McCartney has directed his attention to the decommissioning issue and how a requirement of physical disarmament should be applied to loyalists. He has couched this argument recently in terms which suggest that if loyalists fail to do so they are weakening the pro-union position and giving republicans a free entry to talks. He argues that loyalists should therefore voluntarily and tactically decommission a significant portion of weapons order to set the conditions for Sinn Fein. That loyalists should be the crash test dummies for Sinn Fein and in doing so they demonstrate to the Provos what is required of them and force them to either accept or reject the democratic process.

He is effectively suggesting that while the IRA is bombing its way around the United Kingdom, loyalists must disarm in the face of an intense threat to the lives of those in our community.

I think that the CLMC have made it clear in the past and I have no reason to believe this position has changed. There can be no unilateral decommissioning. The decommissioning issue is largely about commitment and

good faith. It is obviously unacceptable that democratic politicians should be expected to have to sit around a table with people who are trying to kill them or who if they do not reach their political objectives shall resort to violence. That is why the requirements for Sinn Fein entry to negotiations must be addressed now. But in no way can loyalists be punished for the sinister actions of the IRA. No question can reasonably be raised about the commitment of loyalists to the democratic process. If anything, over the past six months and particularly since the Lisburn bomb that commitment has been emphasised.

Loyalists have earned the right to take part fully in substantive negotiations. The good faith of the loyalist position has been clearly demonstrated. For fellow unionists to argue for expulsion for a failure to unilaterally disarm is to deny the real politik of the situation and to deliberately weaken unionism within the negotiation process.

Loyalist paramilitaries do not threaten the course of negotiations with violence nor do they threaten the democratic rights of the people. Loyalist possession of arms does not impact in any way upon the course or outcome of negotiations. The CLMC has publicly upheld the core principle of consent. There is no prospect of the loyalist paramilitaries seeking to force their political objectives upon the people through violence. But that is exactly what the IRA is doing, and for that very reason loyalists shall not disarm while that threat remains.

We are discussing the decommissioning issue at this time at Stormont, and the UDP is fully committed to the objective of total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The decommissioning issue must be addressed to the satisfaction of all participants and that the validity of each participant's commitment to the democratic process is acceptable to all others.

The talks are the only hope the people of Northern Ireland have left. The IRA are currently intent upon shaking the whole process apart and leading us all back towards civil war. Let us concentrate our minds towards moving the process into substantive negotiations and away from the Provos.

If we allow it to fail on the decommissioning issue at a time when it is irrelevant in practical terms while the IRA is outside the process, then they will have won. Bob McCartney and others must remember the real enemy is outside not within.