

No peace with private armies

Sunday Life - 20th February 2000

Tánaiste, Ms Mary Harney, said last week that “the idea of having a private army is not compatible with the peace process.” I think this summarises the view of the vast majority of people on the island of Ireland. I still believe that the Belfast Agreement is the vehicle to achieve lasting peace and stability.

The essence of the Belfast Agreement was an offer of fully inclusive government - unionist, nationalist and republican - in return for a complete end to all politically motivated violence and an exclusive reliance on democratic methods. Decommissioning is an integral part of that accommodation.

Unionism has tried to be as flexible and pragmatic as possible because we realise the potential that the Agreement holds out for an end to 30 years of conflict. All communities in Northern Ireland have suffered and long for the certainty of lasting peace. That is why when Sinn Fein said that we all needed to create the correct environment - by providing inclusive government - in order to convince its grassroots of the primacy of politics, we delivered.

This was based on a clear, shared understanding, via the Mitchell Review, that devolution without decommissioning could not last indefinitely. Unfortunately, despite the appointment of an IRA interlocutor to the de Chastelain Commission, no substantive discussions about actual decommissioning were conducted before the second de Chastelain Report of 31st January. As one who believed that all parties would deliver on the above understandings, I feel let down.

In these circumstances, the Secretary of State was right to suspend the institutions before they collapsed. Despite repeated calls for clarity, certainty and commencement regarding decommissioning, none of these was received prior to suspension.

In the absence of answers to Seamus Mallon’s questions - will the IRA decommission? - and, if so, when? - we have a duty to seek clarification. At the conclusion of last Saturday’s meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council at the Waterfront, David Trimble asked the same questions.

Many unionists have concluded that the offer by the IRA was merely a ruse, an attempt to muddy the waters and create a powerful lobby of nationalist opinion against suspension. For my part, I simply do not know because Sinn Fein and the IRA have refused to spell out the details either publicly or privately.

The burden of duty now rests on the IRA and Sinn Fein to make clear to us all whether the second de Chastelain report really did provide the clarity and certainty which are necessary for the institutions to be revived on a durable basis.

Suspension and the re-introduction of Direct Rule advantages no one. During the ten weeks of devolution unionism proved its willingness to co-operate with nationalists

and republicans. The benefits of devolved government were beginning to be felt across the community.

We did not seek to undermine any aspect of the institutions: we participated fully in the North-South Ministerial Council. I ask that Republicans and loyalists alike: would you now take the gun out of politics in Northern Ireland, once and for all?

If that willingness is there, we have another opportunity to put aside old enmities and focus on building a healthy society and a strong economy: a Northern Ireland where human rights of all sections of the community are sacrosanct.

That is the future unionism wants. Do republicans want to help create this future? I believe that they do and the IRA should unlock progress to that shared destiny.

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