

Comment on the Current Situation

Different readings of the Belfast Agreement - 9th March, 2000

As Christians we have been involved with many others in working for peace in Northern Ireland. We therefore share the disappointment, sadness, and at times anger, at the suspension of the devolved government. Devolution was important not only because it brought government closer to the people but also because it gave us greater responsibility for decision making.

Like others, we have been tempted to give up and also to start blaming others. Yet we recognise these as temptations to be resisted. We are still called to make peace with each other, to find ways to understand and make space for each other, and to build a political relationship which will provide the context in which we can live in peace.

Unionist Perceptions

'Republicans know nothing about Unionists if they thought for one minute we would stay in government with them without decommissioning. Sinn Fein want new laws on equality and rights, and the RUC reformed. Yet on the IRA they say: 'Leave that to us. We will handle them over the next decade or so. This simply is not good enough. If Republicans are not going to use the guns why do they need them? We have given everything, Republicans have given nothing. The silence of the Catholic Church and the Irish Government has been deafening.'

Republican perceptions

Unionists also need to hear the Republican case: 'We feel let down: Unionists failed to keep their word. Just when we had the political structures in place to convince our military people to put weapons beyond use Unionists tore down the structures. It might have taken 10 to 15 years to get rid of weapons. In the meantime

the guns would have been silent, we would have worked together with Unionists in government, and Nationalists would have begun to hope for a fair deal in Northern Ireland. Suspension ended all that. Many Republicans now wonder was David Trimble simply trying to isolate Republicans. There is nothing in the Agreement about 31 January as a deadline. If Unionists were not going to keep it, why did they sign it? Do Unionists know how much it cost us to accept the principle of consent, a Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont, becoming Ministers in a British Government, very limited North,,South bodies, and all this before policing reform? Now Unionists want to rewrite the decommissioning clauses in the Agreement.

Our view

We believe each side has an entirely valid case within their own framework. Their perceptions are genuinely held. Secondly, both sides have stretched themselves immensely in recent years. Thirdly, both sides have made massive changes which the other side has not recognised sufficiently. Fourthly, the vast majority of Unionists, Nationalists and others want

to get back to Devolution but are genuinely stuck on decommissioning. Blaming each other will not help us.

Ambiguity

Republicans are correct in a literal reading of the Agreement that there is no mention of any deadline other than the 22 May in the Agreement and that even this clause is vague: participants promised to 'use any influence they may have' to complete decommissioning by this date. Further, decommissioning is set within 'the context of the implementation of the overall settlement. With the political institutions suspended this condition is not now being fulfilled. In our view, therefore, Republicans, have no obligation *under the Agreement* to move on decommissioning while suspension continues.

On the other side, however, it is a valid moral principle that a party should not be part of a democratic government while linked to a private army, and Unionists are correct to insist on this.

The Agreement is ambiguous. On the one hand it is clear participants committed themselves to 'the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations (and Republicans need to acknowledge the clarity of this clause). On the other hand the completion of the process within two years is framed as an aspiration. Other parties to the Agreement, such as the British Government, could have been slower to implement their obligations, for example on prisoner release but nonetheless went ahead with it. In the end the Republican position, while correct from a literal reading of the Agreement, does not help to build relationships; nor did the Unionist delay in setting up the Executive.

This is the core of the problem: the relationship between Unionists and Republicans is not broad enough or deep enough. While their leaders have met their constituencies have not. Without such a dialogue neither side can know or understand the other. The political leaders need to make decisions but if they do not build a new relationship between their followers they will not be able to implement these decisions.

George Mitchell remarked recently that there were many elements in the Agreement which both sides told him they could not accept, but in the end did. We have to find a way through the current impasse and we will, if we stay at it.

The political reality in Northern Ireland reinforces this spiritual insight: we can only exist in peace if we work together. We can only have Devolved Government restored if the UUP and SF together find some way to resolve this issue.

We pray every day that the Father may 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We are all sinners in need of God's grace. We need to approach each other with humility, recognising that while they have caused us pain, so too we have caused them pain.

Our prayer this Patrick's Day is that, through a new relationship with each other based on the understanding and respect which can flow from dialogue, we can once again agree with each other.

