

## Breaking the Impasse

The Good Friday agreement is a total package. It aims to achieve as inclusive an involvement of parties as is possible. In other words all parties with the appropriate mandate can expect to play a role according to that mandate in the institutions to be established under its terms. Only if a party chooses not to, or is in breach of the agreement's requirements will it not play that role.

To achieve these aims all elements of the package must be implemented. Therefore, a degree of progress on each towards its goal and completion date was a legitimate requirement from the outset. Failure to progress a particular element could be expected to inhibit, if not endanger the agreement's overall implementation. This does not mean that any element is a precondition for any other. It simply recognises the essential link between all parts of the agreement.

Progress on the implementation of the agreement shows that all of the political institutions are now ready to become operational. Prisoner releases have proceeded to the point where approximately half of those qualifying are now free. The commissions on police reform and for human rights and equality are functioning. Even on what the agreement refers to as the "normalisation of security arrangements and practices", i.e. a scaling down of troop patrols and the removal of military installations, progress has been evident.

In light of this evidence, it is hardly surprising that the absence of significant progress on the only confidence building measure not on this list, the decommissioning of loyalist and republican arms, is causing problems.

The critical question is what was intended by the agreement as far as decommissioning is concerned. Was it intended to be merely a matter on which best efforts would be made to persuade paramilitaries to decommission? Or was the obligation to ensure that decommissioning would actually be achieved within the timescale of the two years set down in the agreement?

The agreement states that "the resolution of the decommissioning issue" was indispensable to the negotiations – surely an indication that it was intended to happen. The agreement also indicates that failure to uphold the "commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means...and opposition to any use or threat of force by others for any political purpose..." would result in exclusion or removal from office. This principle must imply rejection of the threat posed by the existence of heavily armed, non-accountable paramilitary forces. The establishment of the International Commission on Decommissioning to "monitor, review and verify progress on decommissioning of illegal arms" could only have further underlined that actual decommissioning was expected. Finally, setting a two-year timescale within which "to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms", was the clearest indication that all signatories had accepted that decommissioning should happen.

Decommissioning is not about surrender. Still less is it an attempt to humiliate or to suggest defeat. From the paramilitaries' perspective, decommissioning could be viewed as a reduction of their armed might to parallel security forces' 'normalisation' measures. Gradual decommissioning could also be seen by the paramilitaries as an honourable and significant contribution to the peace process.

Affecting attitudes towards decommissioning are people's fears about their own security. These fears exist in both communities. They are sustained by punishment beatings, by attacks on homes, by the tensions in Portadown, by the renewal of the Harryville picket and by brutal murders like that of Rosemary Nelson. Such fears

must be addressed as part of the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. But in themselves they cannot be excuses for not progressing decommissioning or any other part of the agreement. On the contrary they reinforce the need to get the political institutions working and to establish a fully acceptable policing service to guarantee people's rights as well as their security.

To break the current impasse it should be recognised that the critical stage for this phase of the agreement's implementation is not the formation of the Executive, initially to be without power. Instead it will be when both governments decide that power can be transferred to the new political institutions, especially to the Executive and to the North-South Ministerial Council. This decision will not be automatic. Legislation requires satisfaction that sufficient progress has been made in implementing all elements of the agreement. Without all-round satisfaction neither government could risk transferring the range of responsibilities together with the expenditure of vast sums of taxpayers' money envisaged under the agreement.

Assessing this progress will require, among other evidence, progress reports on decommissioning, responsibility for which lies with General de Chastelain and his Independent Commission. They alone have this responsibility. It is not, therefore, for any party to prescribe either the pace or the manner of that progress.

Achieving the necessary progress will be a real test of commitments not just to the agreement, but also to carrying out the will of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people, North and South. At that point a day of reconciliation could effectively mark the true beginning of the new political era envisaged by the Good Friday agreement.

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