

## **Choices To Be Faced**

The most critical political issue at the moment is whether there is to be an end to links between political parties and paramilitary organisations. It is so fundamental an issue that it must be answered in the clearest possible way. It can no longer be ignored and left to undermine the political process, as it has done for the past seven years.

Is Sinn Féin going to maintain its links with an organisation so deeply involved in criminal activity as the IRA is known to be and still claim the benefits and privileges of a democratic party? The same question must be posed to the loyalist parties and politicians who maintain similar links with the UDA, the UVF the UFF etc., all likewise deeply involved in criminal activity.

The Northern Bank robbery underlines the absolute necessity that this question be answered without any further vague promises or delaying tactics. In light of that robbery the question is at last being put in the bluntest possible terms by both governments in ways that require it to be properly answered.

When the Irish people, North and South, voted for the Good Friday Agreement they voted for an end to paramilitarism in all its forms. They also voted for the decommissioning of paramilitary organisations to be completed by May 2000. Almost seven years and several fruitless negotiations later, that part of the bargain still remains unfilled.

Now we find ourselves in a situation where not only have the paramilitary organisations not decommissioned but, since the agreement was endorsed, their wholesale involvement in fuel, cigarette and liquor smuggling, diesel laundering, protection rackets, drug peddling, and prostitution as well as raids such as at the Northern Bank and at the Makro store, has grown to Mafia like proportions.

To much of this both governments turned a blind eye in the hope that the prize of ending paramilitary activity would bring with it an end to such criminality as well. Events have proved this to be a very false hope. The result is that politics is in stalemate and progress is almost impossible until the key issue is resolved one way or the other.

Democracy and criminal behaviour are mutually exclusive. So, if paramilitaries are intent on continuing with their criminal behaviour, then the time has come for political parties with a democratic mandate to say they can no longer have any link with such groups. Otherwise they remain part of the same criminal conspiracies as the paramilitary gangs themselves.

However, there are lessons which we can learn from the past. Irish history has several examples of similar links between political parties and paramilitary groups being broken. The largest party in the South, Fianna Fail broke its links with Sinn Féin and the IRA in the nineteen twenties. In more recent times Democratic Left emerged to signal the break with Official IRA criminality.

A similar crunch point has been reached in our own time. If paramilitaries are not going to go away, then links between Sinn Féin and the IRA, and between loyalist

paramilitaries and parties like the PUP must be broken and be clearly seen to be broken. Failure to break such links leaves such parties, whatever their mandates, hypocritical in their claim to be democratic and unworthy of full participation in democratic institutions.

This demand goes beyond unionism and nationalism. It is a demand that lies at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement which pledged the parties and both governments to 'exclusively democratic and peaceful means' of resolving differences.

Parties and both governments need to remind themselves of that commitment and begin restoring the hope which it brought. Otherwise we condemn ourselves to a long period of 'cold war' politics in which communities drift further and further apart and we lose all chance of controlling our own affairs.

*Seán Farren MLA SDLP*