THE IMPACT OF DECOMMISSIONING ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

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BY

JOHN DE CHASTELAIN

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back in Toronto and to have the chance to address the Canadian Club once again. The last time I was here was in 1993, as Ambassador to the United States, and my subject was Canadian relations with the USA and the impending conclusion of the North American Free Trade Agreement. In the past seven years that Agreement has proved to be a great success and may even be expanded. Today I return as ambassador to nowhere, to talk about another unprecedented agreement -- one which has existed for two years but which has not yet delivered on all its promises.

It is five and a half years since the current process to end the conflict in Northern Ireland started, and a little over two years since the Good Friday Agreement set out a blueprint for a lasting peace. The euphoria which greeted that Agreement has now been replaced by a concern that what it achieved may be lost, and what it promised might never be delivered. A principal reason for the delay is the issue of the decommissioning of paramilitary arms.

In this address I will describe what part decommissioning has played in the peace process, and why it continues to delay the achievement of an inclusive government in Northern Ireland with devolved powers and the end of political violence. I will explain why decommissioning became an issue at the outset, how it held up the acceptance of an agreement for nearly two years, and the effect it has had on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement since.

I will confine myself to the facts and avoid personal opinion as much as possible. My fellow commissioners and I -- Brigadier Tauno Nieminen from Finland and Mr. Andrew Sens from the United States -- have for the most part avoided making public statements on the views of the parties involved in the peace process. Our role demands impartiality in our handling of our mandate, which is to facilitate the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. Making statements that could offend one side or the other would not be helpful to what we are trying to achieve

Background

For the sake of brevity I will assume you have some knowledge of the causes of the present dispute in Northern Ireland. In particular: human rights protests by Nationalists towards the end of the nineteen sixties; the reaction against them by armed Loyalists; the re-arming of the IRA; the subsequent intervention by the British army to restore order; the suspension of local government and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster; and the twenty-five years of internal conflict that cost over 3600 lives, with thousands injured, hundreds exiled and billions of pounds expended on damage and reparations, mostly in Northern Ireland but also in the Republic of Ireland, in Britain and on the continent.

Numerous attempts to address the conflict were made during the twenty-five year period following 1970, including a proposed agreement at Sunningdale in the early nineteen-seventies which brought the British and Irish governments together with a proposal that gave Nationalists and Dublin a voice in the affairs of Northern Ireland. But that proposal failed due to opposition by extremist elements in the Unionist community. Talks to work out a possible sharing of some responsibilities between north and south were held in 1992, under the chairmanship of Sir Ninian Stephen of Australia, but these too did not reach agreement.

The Downing Street Declaration of 1993 emphasized the acceptance by London and Dublin of the principle of consent: that is, there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland unless a majority of the people there wished it. Significantly, the British government made it clear in the 1993 Declaration that it had no strategic interests in Northern Ireland, and that if the majority there voted for union with the south, Whitehall would not stand in the way.

Back-channel talks began between Britain and the IRA in the early nineties, but it was predominantly the influence of three individuals that led to the 1994 IRA cease-fire, which, along with the subsequent Loyalist cease-fires, marked the genesis of the current peace process. John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin, and Albert Reynolds, the Taoiseach (or Prime Minister) of Ireland, proposed to the IRA that it was time to give politics a chance to achieve what they had not been able to achieve through the force of arms -- that is, in the immediate term, an end to perceived human rights abuses and a share in government for Nationalists, and in the longer term, the prospect of the unification of the two Irelands.

In August 1994 the IRA declared a cease-fire and in October of the same year the two main Loyalist paramilitary groups, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) did likewise. The scene was thus set for politics to replace violence.

But in early 1995 the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew, gave a speech in Washington, in which he expanded on a phrase in the 1993 Declaration in which the two governments accepted that " **democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the governments and the political parties on the way ahead"**

Mayhew emphasized that it was the British government's view that to demonstrate commitment to the democratic process, those parties associated with paramilitary groups would not be invited to the table until the paramilitary group concerned had demonstrated its willingness to disarm progressively, to accept an agreed practical understanding of the modalities of decommissioning, and to carry out the actual decommissioning of some of its arms to test the practical arrangements and to demonstrate good faith. In short, Sinn Féin and the Loyalist parties would not be invited to the talks until some decommissioning by the IRA, the UVF and the UFF had occurred.

The IRA regarded this suggestion as a precondition that had nothing to do with their voluntary cease-fire, and by the fall of 1995 the cease-fires seemed likely to fail. Thus even before the peace process had started, the issue of decommissioning seemed about to prevent it from doing so.

In October the two Prime Ministers, John Major of Britain and John Bruton of Ireland, launched a twin track process to get the political discussions underway. The first track was to involve a three-man International Body that would report on the decommissioning issue. The second was to involve multi-party political talks to recommend a form of internal government for Northern Ireland (referred to as Strand One), the relationships to exist between north and south (Strand Two), and the relationships to exist between Dublin and London (Strand Three).

The International Body

The International Body was to comprise three individuals, with one from each of the United States, a Scandinavian country and a Commonwealth country. Senator George Mitchell had retired as majority leader of the United States Senate at the end of 1994, and had worked since then as the President's adviser on economic affairs in Ireland. He was named Chairman of the Body. Harri Holkeri, the former Prime Minister of Finland, accepted to be one of the members and I accepted to be the other.

We were given a two-month mandate to address two issues -- the willingness of the paramilitary groups to decommission, and how to do it -- and to report to the British and Irish governments by the middle of January 1996. The two governments would then convene multi-party talks to address the three strands, and other requirements to establish in Northern Ireland an inclusive and democratic government with devolved powers, free from the use, or threat of the use, of violence.

The work of the International Body was conducted through interviews with the two governments, with the political parties in Northern Ireland, with the security forces north and south, and with numerous special action groups and human rights organisations. It was clear to us from the outset that the crux of the difficulty facing decommissioning was one of a lack of trust, and that this mistrust extended to the lack of willingness on the part of some political parties to engage in dialogue with others.

The Unionist view was that Unionist parties could not sit in government with parties that had armed groups at their back, until these first renounced violence and gave tangible evidence that they would decommission their arsenals.

The Nationalist view was that decommissioning was only one issue in the whole agenda of setting up an inclusive democratic government. While it was important, it should not hold up the implementation of the overall political process. Further, some Nationalists believed that some Unionists were using the excuse of decommissioning to avoid sharing government with them.

To overcome the lack of trust the International Body recommended six principles of democratic government and non-violence, adherence to which subsequently became a requirement for parties wishing to engage in the talks. On the issue of the willingness to decommission, the Body noted that the main paramilitary groups indicated they would consider doing so, but not prior to the start of the talks. The Body suggested that once the talks began, and as confidence built, a start might be made on decommissioning, which might then continue as growing confidence led to further progress around the table.

On decommissioning itself, the Body proposed six factors it thought were important if a process of voluntary decommissioning were to succeed. The first of these was that the process must not indicate surrender or defeat, since no one was surrendering and no one had been defeated. The choice of the very word "decommissioning", rather than "disarmament", was evidence of the sensitivity of this issue. The other five principles included: completeness; mutuality; safety; verification by an international commission; and the requirement to exempt decommissioned arms from forensic testing and to prohibit evidence from them being used in prosecution. While

this last provision was not popular in some circles, it was clear no one would voluntarily hand in arms that could link them to crimes.

As to methods of decommissioning, the International Body recommended four. These included: the transfer of arms; the provision of information leading to the discovery of arms; and the depositing of arms for collection. These three involved destruction by either an international commission or representatives of the governments. The fourth method involved destruction of arms by the paramilitary groups themselves. This method required verification by an international commission, as did the first three.

The International Body presented their report to the two governments on 22 January 1996 and it was published two days later. While neither government was obliged to implement the recommendations, the report was generally well received by both.

In Northern Ireland the report was greeted with varying degrees of enthusiasm or dismay, unsurprising given the contentious nature of the issues and the bitterness of the conflict it was intended to help resolve. Unionists were disappointed their demand for decommissioning before negotiations had not been supported. Nationalists were disappointed by the emphasis the British government placed on the suggestion of an elected body. Less than three weeks later the IRA bombed Canary Wharf in London and their cease-fire was over.

Multi-Party Talks

Notwithstanding the end of the IRA cease-fire, the two governments persevered with the second track of their plan to hold multi-party political talks. In June, nine Northern Ireland political parties, along with representatives of the British and Irish governments, convened in Stormont under the chairmanship of Mitchell, Holkeri and me, to address the three strands, the decommissioning of paramilitary arms, and other outstanding confidence building measures.

Given that the IRA was not on cease-fire, Sinn Féin was excluded from the talks. But since the UVF and the UFF continued to maintain their cease-fires, their associated political parties -- respectively the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) -- were included.

Other than an agreement on rules of procedure to conduct the talks, the next ten months produced nothing but talk. Again, the holdup was the decommissioning issue. In negotiations to get agreement on an agenda for the talks, Unionists wanted decommissioning discussed first. They had reluctantly entered the talks without decommissioning having begun, and they looked to see it discussed early and started while the talks progressed, as the International Body had suggested. For their part, Nationalists wanted political issues discussed first and not sidetracked by a subject they felt was important but subsidiary.

The whole process was interrupted by elections in May 1997, including council elections in Northern Ireland and general elections in both Britain and Ireland. In the council elections, Sinn Féin gained ground over the SDLP, and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) of David Trimble -- which had reluctantly accepted to enter the talks without prior decommissioning -- lost some ground to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of the Rev Dr Ian Paisley, which had initially refused to do so.

In the national elections the Conservative Party of John Major was replaced by the Labour Party of Tony Blair, and the Fine Gael Party of John Bruton was replaced by the Fianna Fáil party of Bertie Ahern. The two new Prime Ministers immediately announced they would place a priority on expediting the Northern Ireland talks, and they called for these to be completed by June 1998, one year away and two years after they started.

In July 1997 the IRA declared a new cease-fire and when the talks reconvened in September, Sinn Féin joined them. The DUP walked out and a small unionist party, the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) did likewise. Thus the talks re-started with eight political parties, the two governments, the same chairmen, and a mandate to wrap it all up within a year. Senator Mitchell later refined this target to have the talks completed by Easter 1998. He did this in an attempt to ensure the necessary decisions were made before the beginning of disruptions that usually surrounded the start of the traditional marching season.

With the talks back in session, agreement was swiftly reached on the agenda. On decommissioning, the two governments acted to finesse the issue. They had separately passed legislation in February 1997 calling for the setting up of an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, and during the summer break they had agreed to implement it. In September, they did so.

The Good Friday Agreement

With the agenda in place, and despite numerous setbacks in the negotiations, and renewed killings and violence by dissident paramilitary groups on both sides, the talks led to the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998.

On Strand One issues, the Agreement called for an elected Assembly with a First Minister appointed by Unionists and a Deputy First Minister appointed by Nationalists. An Executive with ten additional members would head up ministries in each of the areas devolved to the Assembly by Westminster.

On Strand Two, six cross-border bodies were approved including ministers from the north and south, to rule on areas of interest agreed between both governments. On Strand Three, an Intergovernmental Conference was agreed between London and Dublin to meet as required at prime ministerial level, and regularly at ministerial level. Further a British-Irish Council was agreed, calling for meetings of the First Ministers from England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and including representatives of the Isle of Man and the Channel Isles.

The Agreement also dealt with a number of separate issues including: policing reform, release of prisoners, de-militarisation, human rights, criminal justice and decommissioning. Significantly, Britain committed to repeal the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, which guaranteed Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom, and Ireland committed to repeal Articles two and three of its Constitution which laid claim to the north.

On May 22nd referendums north and south endorsed the agreement, with 72 percent support in the north and 94 percent in the south. The way was then clear for the installation in Northern Ireland of an inclusive government with devolved powers. An election under the proportional representation system followed and the Assembly was formed. This historic achievement had occurred despite the fact that no decommissioning had yet taken place.

The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning

When the two governments brought our Commission into being in September 1997, they determined that its national composition should reflect that of the International Body and the Independent Chairmen. I was named Chairman, to do double duty with the Commission and to continue in the political talks. Brigadier Tauno Nieminen was named as one commissioner by Finland, and Ambassador Donald Johnson was named as the other by the United States. Johnson was replaced twenty-two months later by a former State Department officer, Mr. Andrew Sens.

The mandate of the Commission was fourfold: to consult widely on decommissioning schemes and then to recommend preferred ones to the two governments for their approval; to facilitate the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms; and to report regularly to the governments -- as well as to the participants in the talks, while these continued.

Following weeks of consultation, the Commission recommended to the governments two of the methods proposed by the International Body -- information leading to the discovery of arms for subsequent destruction, and destruction by the paramilitary groups themselves, both with verification by the Commission. The decommissioning legislation defined "decommissioning" as being the "destruction" of arms, and further defined "destruction" as making arms "permanently unusable or permanently inaccessible". Our assessment was that complete destruction, including disposal of the residue, comprised the best way of making arms permanently unusable or inaccessible.

We also recommended that each of the paramilitary groups name a representative to work with us. By the end of 1997 only the UVF had done so.

On decommissioning, the Good Friday Agreement had affirmed that **"... the resolution of the decommissioning issue is an indispensable part of the process of negotiation"** and it called on all participants to **"reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. They also confirm their intention to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and to use any influence they have to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums north and south of the Agreement, and in the context of the implementation of the overall Agreement".**

Thus it was anticipated that decommissioning would be completed by 22 May 2000, two weeks ago today. It was also anticipated that the institutions would soon be in place, the Executive established, the north south bodies named and empowered, and all other aspects of the Agreement swiftly implemented. But this did not happen.

Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

A start was made on the early release of prisoners, the British army began a reduction in the number of troops deployed in Northern Ireland, and another Commission was set up under former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten -- with one member being Canadian Professor Clifford Shearing from Toronto -- to recommend changes to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to make it more acceptable to both communities in the province.

But on decommissioning there was no movement. The IRA and UFF declined to name representatives to the Commission, although Sinn Féin named their chief negotiator, Mr. Martin McGuinness, as that party's representative. But the Executive was not set up, the institutions not empowered, and devolution not actioned. Once again, the delay was the lack of decommissioning.

Unionists pointed out they had entered the talks without prior decommissioning on the basis that it was expected to start during them, and it had not. The Good Friday Agreement held that decommissioning was indispensable, and other aspects of the Agreement were proceeding but decommissioning was not. They re-iterated their argument that a democratic assembly was no place for political parties with private armies, and affirmed they would not sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin until the IRA started to decommission their arms. While the same argument applied to Loyalist arms, the Loyalist parties had no seats in the Executive. These were awarded on the basis of seats the party had won in the Assembly, and the PUP had not won enough. The UDP had won no seats at all in the Assembly.

Nationalists agreed that decommissioning was indispensable, but they pointed out that the Agreement called for it to occur in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement. They noted that none of the provisions had yet been fully implemented. They felt that the political bodies should be set up right away to demonstrate that politics worked, and that decommissioning could then follow. Again, some Nationalists asserted that decommissioning was a red herring, used by Unionists to avoid sharing government with them.

One unexpected event occurred in December 1998 when one of the Loyalist paramilitary groups, the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) -- which had not been on cease-fire until May of that year -- declared a cease-fire and offered to decommission some of its arms. On 18 December a nominal amount of the LVF's firearms, ammunition, explosives and detonators were destroyed in front of the cameras. But other than demonstrating that decommissioning could happen, and giving the Commission an opportunity to practice its procedures for dealing with each of these different types of arms, little more was achieved.

Attempts in early 1999 to set up the agreed political institutions encountered the same conflicting arguments and no progress was made. There then followed a period of concerted involvement by the two Prime Ministers to break the impasse. A joint declaration at Hillsborough Castle on April 1st sought to see guns put beyond use in the context of an act of reconciliation involving all armed groups, but this found no favour with Republicans. A subsequent attempt, leading to a joint proposal in Downing Street in May, was objected to by Unionists. Finally, in June the two Prime Minister's held meetings at Stormont, separately with the political parties and with our Commission, and at the beginning of July they produced a document entitled "The Way Forward", designed to appeal to both sides.

But two weeks later the setting up of the Executive and the other political institutions seemed no closer. In an attempt to break the deadlock and implement "The Way Forward", the then Secretary of State, Dr Marjorie Mowlam, called the Assembly into being and invited the four main parties to bid for their places on the Executive. The Ulster Unionist Party boycotted the meeting. Although the Presiding Officer proceeded with the nominations, the lack of Unionists present caused the Assembly to collapse.

Senator George Mitchell had left the process after the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998, but he was now invited back by both governments to conduct a review of it and to seek a way out of the impasse. Over a period of two months, from September through November 1999, he conducted a review based on three objectives: the implementation of an inclusive government with devolved powers; decommissioning to be completed by 22 May 2000; and decommissioning to be conducted under the direction of the Independent Commission.

Working principally with officials from the two governments and representatives from the UUP and Sinn Féin, and consulting as necessary with us, Mitchell brokered an agreement that saw the UUP accepting to set up the Executive and participate in the institutions, while the IRA agreed to name a representative to the Commission and to enter into discussions with us.

In late November the Executive was set up, powers were devolved, the IRA named a representative to the Commission, and the UFF then did likewise. We then began discussions separately with the representatives of each of the IRA the UVF and the UFF in December, and we reported to the two governments on those meetings before the Assembly broke for Christmas.

There was a belief among many of the participants that Mitchell's review had called for a start to be made on decommissioning by the IRA and the Loyalist groups in January, and we had agreed to report on progress at the end of that month. To secure the support of his party to sit in the executive with Sinn Féin, David Trimble had been required to call a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council for the end of January to review the situation. The intention seemed to be that if decommissioning had not started by then the UUP would walk out. Nationalists pointed out there was no provision in the Agreement for such a unilateral review, but the Ulster Unionist's plan stood.

In the event, our report on 31 January noted that while the IRA had confirmed the stability of their cease-fire, re-affirmed their willingness to support the political process, and stated that they constituted no threat to peace, they had given us no commitment on actual decommissioning. The Loyalist parties, on the other hand, had generally agreed with us on methods of decommissioning and supporting issues. But the UVF said they would move no further until the IRA declared the war was over, and the UFF said they would not disarm until the IRA started to do so.

The Ulster Unionist Council meeting was delayed until the 12th of February and in the intervening period the two governments worked to defuse what seemed likely to be a critical moment for the process. Late on the 11th the IRA gave us a series of statements that seemed to indicate a change in their intentions on decommissioning. Among these were an assertion by their representative that the IRA **"will consider how to put arms and explosives beyond use, in the context of the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, and in the context of the removal of the causes of conflict".** We also reported that the representative indicated to us **"the context in which the IRA will initiate a comprehensive process to put arms beyond use, in a manner as to ensure maximum public confidence".**

We concluded that **"This commitment ... holds out the real prospect of an agreement which would enable [the commission] to fulfil the substance of its mandate".**

The late nature of the IRA's statement to us, and a lack of clarity in some of their assertions, were unconvincing to Unionists and to the British government. The Secretary of State suspended the

Executive and the political institutions on the evening of 11 February. Four days later the IRA representative broke off contact with the Commission and took off the table the commitments previously made to us.

During the next three months the two governments and the White House made concerted efforts to repair the situation and to get the Executive set up again. During the seventy-two days of devolved government, it was generally agreed that the system had worked well and that members of the Executive had carried out their functions professionally and effectively. Satisfaction in the north that the people there were now in charge of most of their affairs was palpable. In the south there was satisfaction that the north south bodies had been set up and were seen to be working.

The need to get back to implementing the Agreement was made more evident by a spate of bomb attacks carried out by dissident Republican paramilitary groups. A marked increase in so-called "punishment beatings" by both Loyalists and Republicans, underlined the urgency of implementing the findings of the Patten Commission on policing. At the same time it had become apparent that the May 22nd target for decommissioning would not be met.

In early May the two Prime Ministers became personally involved in the discussions once again. The task facing them was even more difficult than before the suspension. Nationalists questioned the Secretary of State's authority to suspend the institutions unilaterally, and wondered why he had done so, given the positive statements passed to us by the IRA on 11 February.

Unionists questioned the clarity of those statements, noting that the IRA had only said they would **"consider putting guns beyond use"**, without stating what that meant. They also noted the condition that the IRA would only do so in the context of the resolution of the causes of conflict, which they understood to mean British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and the union of north and south. Unionists were also upset that the Patten Commission on policing had recommended a change in the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and that limits were to be placed on the flying of the Union Jack over government buildings.

Growing Unionist opposition to re-entering the Executive, without prior IRA decommissioning, was demonstrated by another meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council in March, and the narrow margin of support it gave to David Trimble's continued leadership – only 57 percent supported him. Some Ulster Unionists, who had voted in favour of the Agreement in 1998, were now having second thoughts. Given that three other Unionist parties were against the Agreement, that did not augur well for the speedy restoration of the institutions.

With the media reporting no progress and gloomy predictions for the survival of the Agreement, the two prime ministers surprised everyone by publishing a statement on the evening of 5 may in which they said they believed **"that the remaining steps necessary to secure full implementation of the Agreement can be achieved by June 2001"**, and that **" subject to a positive response to this statement the British government will bring forward the necessary order to enable the Assembly to be restored by 22 May 2000"**. They went further and called on us to continue our task and to pursue **"further proposals for decommissioning schemes which offer the Commission greater scope to proceed in more satisfactory and effective ways with the discharge of its basic mandate and to report".**

Finally the governments said that once the suspension was lifted, and if there were further difficulties in arms being put beyond use or institutions not operating in good faith, **"the two governments will, in consultation with the Assembly and the Executive, carry out an immediate formal review under the terms of the Agreement".**

The next day the IRA reciprocated with a statement in which they said they would **" resume contact with the IICD and enter into further discussions with the Commission on the basis of the IRA leadership's commitment to resolving the issue of arms"**, and that they would **"initiate a process that will completely and verifiably put guns beyond use".** They also committed to a confidence building measure to take place within weeks in which **"the contents of a number of arms dumps will be inspected by agreed third parties who will report that they have done so to the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. The dumps will be inspected regularly to ensure that the weapons have remained secure".**

The governments then announced that the third party inspectors would be the former President of Finland, Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, and Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, the former Secretary General of the African National Congress and one of the architects of the successful South African peace process. These two men visited Belfast shortly afterwards to confer with the governments, with us and with the pro-agreement parties.

While it was anticipated that David Trimble would meet with the Ulster Unionist Council on 20 May to confirm whether his party would accede to setting up the Executive two days later, as the governments had proposed, he postponed that decision by a week. As a consequence, and having announced that he accepted the IRA's statements in good faith and supported the idea of a return to government with Sinn Féin on the basis of testing the Republicans' commitment to disarm, he spent the week in marshalling support among his members for that view.

The Ulster Unionist Council voted on 27 May, and by a count of 53 to 47 percent , David Trimble was mandated by his party to rejoin the executive with Sinn Fein. This level of support was four percent less than that which had approved his continued leadership two months earlier, and it indicated the depth of concern that still existed within the party over the IRA's intentions.

Peter Mandelson immediately put in place a restoration order bringing to an end the suspension of the devolved institutions, and calling for them to be renewed as of midnight Monday May 30th. The Executive then met on 31 May, less the two DUP members, to plan the resumption of the devolved powers and to prepare for the recall of the Assembly on Monday June 5th.

Subsequently, the DUP voted to return their members to the Executive, but on the basis that the party would seek from the Assembly the thirty votes necessary for a motion to expel Sinn Fein. Even if the thirty votes are found, the forty- percent of Nationalist votes necessary to carry the motion may not be forthcoming. Nonetheless, the DUP's plan is evidence of the continuing split across Unionism over the Agreement.

That is the situation as of today, 5 June. All parties look to see that the confidence building measure of the arms dumps' inspections will begin soon, and all look to see the IRA renew their contact with the Commission and discuss with us their commitment to put their arms completely and verifiably beyond use.

It is clear that the roller-coaster ride of the Northern Ireland peace process has not yet reached its conclusion. But the commitment made by the two governments on 5 May to move ahead with the full implementation of the Agreement's remaining measures, and the expectation that the paramilitary groups on both sides will now engage in meaningful discussions to allow decommissioning to proceed, give the hope that the end of the road is not far off.

The coming months will tell, of course. In the meantime the return of devolved government in Northern Ireland will be a source of satisfaction to the majority on both sides of the border.