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Summary

This report from Northern Ireland is once more dominated by the twists and turns of the 'peace process'. The preceding quarter saw the establishment and suspension of the political institutions arising from the Belfast agreement. As this quarter ended, the Ulster Unionist Party faced another fateful decision, as to whether it would countenance renewed participation with Sinn Fein in a devolved Executive Committee.

The suspension had come about because of the failure of the understanding reportedly arrived at the previous November in the review conducted by George Mitchell—that unionist engagement in power-sharing arrangements including SF would be followed by the onset of IRA decommissioning. This quarter saw the evolution of a new approach by the Dublin and London governments—though not without tensions—with the focus shifting to the context in which republicans would put arms 'beyond use'. Weeks of preparation of a joint position and talks with the parties ended with a formula remarkably similar to that proposed by SF to the original Mitchell review—his report on decommissioning—in January 1996. While not committing itself to the one-year timescale sought by the governments, the IRA did make the 'beyond use' pledge, conditional on political developments; it agreed meantime to open up some arms dumps to inspection.

The assumption of this position by the IRA did not come without internal difficulties. But SF was on a roll, with a significant council by-election victory and much publicity for its expected gains in the next Dail election. The Social Democratic and Labour Party meanwhile faced a highly critical internal review, the results embarrassingly leaked. And by far the greatest challenge was posed to the UUP leader, David Trimble--whose problems had been exacerbated at the post-suspension meeting of his party's ruling Ulster Unionist Council, when he narrowly defeated a leadership challenge and failed to stop a motion tying his renewed participation in government to preservation of the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Polls indicated that Protestant support for the agreement was just about holding up, albeit with growing unease. But two thirds of UUP identifiers said Mr Trimble should once more go into government with republicans. At the time of writing, he was seeking concessions from government on policing—strongly resisted by nationalists and Dublin--and on the SF-imposed ban on flying of the Union flag from government buildings in Belfast. The critical support of his deputy, John Taylor, was uncertain. And the Democratic Unionist Party was threatening to make life even more difficult by not taking up its places in a renewed executive, thereby placing unionists in a minority; there was even talk of a wider, anti-agreement unionist realignment.

If the UUP were to join at least the SDLP and SF in government, the next quarterly report should be more 'normal'. In theory.

Renewed animation

Back to the wordsmiths

Publicly, the decision by Peter Mandelson to suspend the institutions established by the Belfast agreement on February 11th precipitated a display of invective, as British-Irish and unionist-nationalist claim-and-counter-claim vied one with another. Nationalist Ireland attacked the Northern Ireland secretary for 'unilateral' action, but the Northern Ireland Act 1998 had reaffirmed—for better or worse--ultimate Westminster sovereignty over the region, following the repeal of the relevant sections of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 in genuflection to republican sensitivities. And the alternative was a collapse precipitated the next day by the Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble, which would have been much more difficult to rescue. His re-election as first minister would then have been necessary, a 'key decision' requiring not only majority support in the assembly but also a majority within the designated 'unionist' membership—by no means assured given the fragility of Mr Trimble's position within his own party, never mind the wider unionist bloc.

Yet, privately, the two governments were immediately at work in seeking to extract a more robust form of words from the IRA than that delivered to the commission on decommissioning chaired by Gen John de Chastelain that fateful Friday evening. Officials from the republic's government had been working for weeks with SF representatives, and evidently felt there was more potential for progress than was publicly evident in what the IRA had said. It was this sense that a basis was there on which to build which underlay Dublin's frustration with the suspension, and which quickly drew the British government back into the same process. A week afterwards, British sources were indicating that the IRA statement to the commission would have been sufficient to avert suspension had it been given formally, earlier and without the associated conditions (*Irish Times*, February 19th 2000).

A 'representative of the IRA' (more on that later) told the general, according to §5 of his report, that the organisation would 'consider how to put arms and explosives beyond use' in the context of the full implementation of the agreement and 'the removal of the causes of conflict'. Given the deputy first minister, Seamus Mallon, had defined the challenge to the IRA as to say *whether* it would decommission and, if so, *when*, this seemed to give an uncertain answer to the first question and only the vaguest to the second.

In the past, the IRA had concluded its campaigns with a 'dump arms' order of an obviously reversible kind (*Guardian*, February 16th 2000). Now, of course, the IRA's political representatives were in government, and, regardless of the merits of decommissioning as such, it was recognised, in Dublin as much as in London, that democratic power was incompatible with continued association with a private army. Indeed, on more than one occasion during the suspension, the taoiseach, Bertie Ahern,

was to make it clear there could no question of his Fianna Fail party forming a coalition with Sinn Fein *in the republic* should the next general election there lead to a hung Dail, unless and until SF had clarified its relationship with its paramilitary sister. Any other course would arguably be in contravention of article 15(6) of the republic's constitution, which states that only the Oireachtas can raise an army.

But in a rather more robust comment , the general said in §7 of his February 11th report that the 'representative' had indicated to him that day 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'. This 'will initiate' was apparently a more positive answer to the *whether* question than 'will consider how'. And the reference to 'maximum public confidence' hinted at the possibility of independent verification. And the final §8 said the commission believed there was 'the real prospect of an agreement which would enable it to fulfil the substance of its mandate'.

Mr Ahern was certainly inclined to see the glass as half-full, claiming in an article in the *Irish Times* the following Monday (February 14th 2000) that the commission believed it had 'a commitment from the IRA itself that decommissioning will happen'. He suggested he knew more than was superficially apparent: 'As someone who has worked long and late over the last few weeks on these issues, I can confirm, without breaking any confidence, the deep significance for the resolution of the decommissioning issue of the last two paragraphs of the de Chastelain report'.

He urged Mr Trimble to see the general to hear at first hand. The UUP leader duly did so, but meantime the IRA formally announced it was ending its co-operation with the commission and withdrawing its proposals, claiming Mr Mandelson had 'reintroduced the unionist veto'. So Mr Trimble emerged none the wiser from his meeting. It subsequently emerged (*Sunday Tribune*, February 20th 2000) that when, at 4.30 am on February 11th, the IRA told officials from the republic's government that it was prepared to make a new statement to Gen de Chastelain, it represented what Dublin officials described as a 'non-paper'. It was, according to British sources, hedged around with conditions:
• that the legislation threatening suspension be withdrawn;
• that Mr Trimble withdraw his post-dated resignation letter, due to be activated before the Ulster Unionist Council meeting the following day;
• that the UUC meeting be cancelled; and
• that the offer be communicated only to senior British and Irish ministers and officials and not be published as such by Gen de Chastelain.

It was in this light that Mr Mandelson arranged a meeting between Mr Trimble and Martin McGuinness of SF on the Friday afternoon, but, consistent with these reported IRA conditions, the latter did not enlighten the former as to what was proposed. Following the suspension, the withdrawal of the offer--described by Mr Mallon as 'a studied insult to the Irish people' (*Irish News*, February 17th 2000)--is consistent with this account.

One intriguing aspect of this affair was who actually 'represented' the new IRA position to Gen de Chastelain on February 11th. According to one report (*Sunday Tribune*, February 20th 2000), whose status is uncertain because it was written as hearsay, the veteran, and hard-line, IRA member Brian Keenan—famous for his comment that the only thing that would be decommissioned would be 'the British state in Ireland'--had refused to convey to the general the statement agreed in the early hours. It was further claimed that a frustrated 'senior member of the Sinn Fein leadership … who is also a member of the IRA's Army Council' had taken over, and had spoken on behalf of the organisation in its dealings with the general.

'Beyond use'

So what was it that Mr Ahern felt the IRA was willing to sign up for, which went beyond what was in the public domain? One aspect of the 'context' at which the IRA was hinting, it appears, was what it calls 'demilitarisation'. The Belfast agreement required the British government to 'make progress towards the objective of as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland, consistent with the level of threat'. The *Irish Times* (February 16th 2000) quoted 'sources close to the negotiations' indicating that what might have been on offer was decommissioning in tandem with a withdrawal of military bases from sensitive areas, implementation of the report on policing by Chris Patten and reform of Northern Ireland's criminal justice system. And the report referred to weapons being destroyed 'or otherwise put beyond use', with verification by the de Chastelain commission 'or other independent intermediaries'.

It was further suggested in a post-suspension report in the Dublin *Sunday Tribune* (February 20th 2000) that the deterioration in intergovernmental relations was related to a British refusal to endorse the demilitarisation side of the tacit deal. This was said to be because of police and army concerns, viewed sympathetically by Mr Mandelson, about implied 'equivalence' between the paramilitaries and UK state forces--a matter on which his government might well be more sensitive than the republic's--and the effect of dismantling the highly controversial observation posts in south Armagh on intelligence capacity against dissident republicans in the area. Relations between the republic's new minister for foreign affairs, Brian Cowen, and Mr Mandelson, were for the first time described as 'frosty'. The latter tried to distance himself from suggestions of foot-dragging by telling the *Observer* that day (February 20th) that since the agreement 26 army bases had been closed and patrolling had been reduced by two-thirds. Government sources followed this up by indicating a willingness to be 'flexible and imaginative on this issue' (*Irish Times*, February 21st 2000).

But an IRA briefing (*Guardian*, *Irish Times*, February 23rd 2000) ruled out any decommissioning-demilitarisation link, and said no timetable for decommissioning had been offered to the general and no gesture on decommissioning was envisaged. The goal for the IRA was clearly to coax the British side into maximising demilitarisation while minimising its own decommissioning. It was meanwhile clear, however (*Guardian*, February 23rd 2000), that the British government was prepared to stretch the concept of

decommissioning, which the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 defined as including 'making permanently inaccessible or permanently unusable', to embrace 'putting arms beyond use' and that the original timetable envisaged, with completion by May 22nd, could be extended if other elements of a deal were in place. The key difference is the dropping of the word 'permanent'--code for irreversibility. (The Downing Street declaration, issued by the two then premiers, Albert Reynolds and John Major, in December 1993, spoke of the need for a permanent end to the use of, or support for, political violence. Permanence continued to be sought by the British government at the time of the 1994 IRA ceasefire, when only 'complete' was offered; the IRA announced its 'complete cessation' was over just before the February 1996 Canary Wharf bomb.)

Politically, republicans were also playing hardball. The SF president, Gerry Adams, told an internal party conference, organised to review the 'peace process' and prepare for the elections, that in allegedly supporting the unionist stance on decommissioning the Labour government had made the biggest mistake since coming to power. Given how SF had written off the previous Conservative administration and invested such hope in new Labour, this was a significant comment. Mr Adams said he did not accept any special responsibility for achieving decommissioning and insisted there would be no 'surrender'. He even speculated that a further agreement might have to be negotiated beyond the Belfast agreement--now 'in tatters'--and implied that SF would seek to build its electoral strength to ensure any such agreement was invulnerable to unionist challenge (*Irish Times*, February 28th 2000).

The suspension in this sense had undermined his own credibility with some grassroots republicans, since he had sold the agreement as clearly transitional to Irish unity, which sceptics saw as incompatible with the principle of consent—redefined in republican parlance as the 'unionist veto'. And a few days later the first serious sign of internal dissent since the 'Real IRA' split became evident. An article appeared, in a new dissident republican journal, by the former IRA commander in Belfast and leader of republican prisoners in the Maze, Brendan Hughes. Mr Hughes expressed the classic rank-and-file republican scepticism about what politics--as against its pursuit by other means—can deliver (*Irish Times*, March 4th 2000): 'With the war, politics had some substance. Now it has none. The political process has created a class of professional liars and unfortunately it contains many republicans.' The Northern Ireland state, which republicans had sought to 'smash', still existed and the 'republican struggle' was not over. In a direct sideswipe at his former associate, Mr Adams, he wrote that a central plank of British 'counter-insurgency strategy' had been 'to mould [republican] leaderships that they could deal with'. But he admitted that dissidents were 'demoralised and disillusioned'.

The leadership's response to this internal dissent appears to have been a cynical one. The military organisation had not been wound down; indeed, an army source said the IRA's capability was higher than before the agreement (*Guardian*, February 14th 2000). But now 'punishment' beatings and shootings, which had been stopped by the IRA—thought not by loyalists--during devolution were renewed. This was interpreted as an attempt to assuage military hardliners within the movement (*Irish Times*, March 16th 2000).

Meanwhile, only prompt action by the police prevented two Real IRA attacks intended to embarrass the mainstream republican leadership (*Irish Times*, March 17th 2000).

If anything, however, this only added to the pressure on the British government to accommodate Mr Adams on decommissioning. In a later, *après moi le deluge*, comment, the SF leader said that 'if the war recommences … you will see the beginning of the end of the present Sinn Fein leadership's reign' (*Irish Times*, April 15th 2000). On March 8th, Mr Mandelson and Mr Cowen had a series of bilateral meetings with the pro-agreement parties at Stormont and chaired a round-table in the evening. Nothing tangible emerged but the next day in Dublin Mr Mandelson made public for the first time the underlying private trend of argument by calling for an end to the 'devolution-decommissioning stalemate', a call supported by his Dublin counterpart (*Irish Times*, March 10th 2000).

The significance of these comments was that the outcome of the Mitchell review was precisely premised on the need to see devolution and decommissioning as mutually dependent. It was thus that Mr Mitchell had made plain to SF, repeatedly according to an SDLP former minister, the 'understanding' underpinning the review—that if devolution was to begin, decommissioning had to follow. Now Mr Mandelson was in effect saying that linking guns and government had led to no guns and no government.

On the 'demilitarisation' issue, the Northern Ireland secretary chose Washington on the eve of St Patrick's Day to announce a further withdrawal of 500 troops, leaving no army battalion resident in Belfast for the first time since 1969. And he said (*Irish Times*, March 17th 2000): 'I suspect there will be other decisions of a similar kind taken in the weeks and months to come.' On St Patrick's Day itself, Mr Trimble—also in Washington for the now annual Irish political caravan—told reporters he could envisage a 'fresh sequence' for re-establishing devolution which did not involve 'arms up front'. Anti-agreement unionists reacted angrily but, in the same city, Mr Ahern said the UUP leader's remarks were 'very helpful' and, hinting at the need for a response from republicans, said there were issues 'others must declare on' (*Irish Times*, March 18th 2000).

In Dublin a few days later, Mr Mandelson continued the shift of position. In a speech which made no reference to decommissioning, he clearly implied acceptance that the latter would not happen when he directed at republicans two questions quite different from--and rather more convoluted than—those proffered by Mr Mallon's 'will you?' 'and, if so, when?'. He asked (*Irish Times*, March 22nd 2000): 'How can we all be sure, now that the guns are silent, that they will stay silent and that any threat of a return to war has gone for ever? And how can we maintain the political progress made under the Good Friday agreement so that all parties feel it is being implemented in ways that are consistent with the principle of consent?'

Misanthropic Protestants

Inevitably, however, in Northern Ireland's zero-sum political culture—which has survived the transition from 'hot' to 'cold' war intact—Mr Trimble's support was

weakened by these now-public efforts to woo republicans once again. His Washington comments, albeit in response to reporters' questions, rattled supporters back home (*Observer*, March 19th 2000). The sometimes misanthropic individualism characteristic of the Protestant community, allied to the highly democratic nature of its principal, Presbyterian, component, means no unionist leader can ever safely take his support for granted, or even appear so to do. And the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council was just days away. Frank Millar, formerly chief executive of the party, now London editor of the *Irish Times*, wrote (March 20th 2000): 'As an exercise in party management, certainly, Mr Tirmble's timing alone beggared belief on all sides.'

So when Mr Trimble faced the UUC on his return, he met two serious rebuffs. First, despite the suspension of the institutions in February—which Mr Mandelson had hoped would shore up his leadership—Mr Trimble faced a leadership challenge from the 69-year-old Rev Martin Smyth, described by the *Economist* (April 1st 2000) as 'strikingly inarticulate', in which he fared badly. True, he won, but his endorsement of 57 per cent—a similar proportion as had backed his decision to go into government with SF in November 1999—was by no means a ringing one and was well below what the 'Trimbleistas' had envisaged (*Sunday Tribune*, March 26th 2000). Worse still, a motion proposed by his former ally David Burnside, making a return by the party to government with SF conditional on retention of the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary--in the face of the plans by Mr Mandelson, following the Patten report, to the contrary—was passed despite leadership opposition. As one wag commented, the first motion had tied Mr Trimble's hands; the second had cut them off.

But the two governments continued to discourage a focus on decommissioning any time soon. Mr Ahern told the Dail that there was 'not a hope' of achieving it by May 22nd (*Irish Times*, March 29th 2000). And Mr Mandelson told the Alliance Party conference in Carrickfergus (*Irish Times*, April 10th 2000) that an 'unmistakeable signal' of peaceful intent on the part of the IRA 'would be worth a lot more than a one-off gesture of token decommissioning'. Unionists had always insisted that actions spoke louder than words in this regard—to some extent a reflection of the literalist theology with which most Protestants are familiar. Growing unionist scepticism was reflected in remarks by the UUP deputy leader, John Taylor, to the effect that Mr Mandelson was 'being dishonest with the Ulster people' and the agreement was 'dying' (*Irish Times*, April 11th 2000). But it was becoming clear that Dublin and London were evolving a quite different approach.

It began with a draft by Dublin of a paper intended to detail the result of full implementation of the agreement across a range of issues. (The British side was discomfited to discover the draft had been shown to SF.) Accepting that there would be no decommissioning before May 22nd, and accepting that the IRA would not say that 'the war is over', the ambitions of both governments, the paper reported, had been reduced to securing a firm commitment that arms would be put 'beyond use' and a definition of the circumstances in which this would be done. At that stage, London was supposed to be holding out for a timescale (*Irish Times*, April 8th 2000). The document, to be put to the parties, would present an 'audit' of implementation of the agreement to date as well as a plan for the outstanding items (*Irish Times*, April 10th 2000). The aim was thus to put

pressure on republicans to be more specific than in the February 11th report to Gen de Chastelain on the how and the when (*Irish Times*, April 12th 2000). The two governments arrived at an agreed position on April 14th, Mr Ahern reported to the Dail the following week (*Irish Times*, April 19th 2000).

On April 18th Mr Blair met the main pro-agreement parties at Hillsborough—and had unscheduled second meetings with the UUP and SF—before seeing Mr Ahern in Dublin. The *Guardian* (April 19th 2000) confirmed that both governments had given up on even a start to decommissioning by May 22nd and said the key plank of their emergent approach was to persuade the IRA to issue a statement to boost UUP confidence. Mr Blair described as 'nonsense' Mr Adams' claim that the agreement was 'in tatters' but, avoiding any direct reference to decommissioning, said: 'The basis of the Good Friday agreement remains. There was an issue there revolving around how we make sure that there is proper confidence that violence is a thing of the past.' And he said: 'It is an issue that remains and still has to be dealt with.'

In its traditional Easter announcement, the IRA said it wanted to see 'a permanent peace' but identified the 'causes of conflict' as 'British involvement in Irish affairs, partition and the injustices which flow from that'. It said: 'The British government can not hide behind or underwrite unionist intransigence, or those who seek a military victory over the IRA.' It was simultaneously reported that internal opposition to decommissioning, or to any 'appeasement' of unionism, had reached the 12-member IRA executive (which elects the seven-man army council), the seat of the earlier, Real IRA, split within the organisation (*Irish Times*, April 20th 2000). Mr McGuinness bluntly told the Easter commemoration in Dublin (*Irish Times*, April 24th 2000): 'Decommissioning was deliberately injected into the peace process as a stalling mechanism. And not by unionists but by a former British government. The farce, this absolute farce, of demanding IRA surrender must stop and it must stop now.'

The bilateral meetings with the main pro-agreement players continued at Downing Street on May 2nd. Asked if he had any expectation of a new IRA statement, Mr Adams said: 'None whatsoever'—a sure sign, on past experience, that one was imminent (*Irish Times*, May 3rd 2000). Dublin government sources indicated that the plan was that publication of the joint paper by the two governments would be followed up by an IRA statement, giving 'clarity and certainty' to unionists; the UUP, in turn, would agree to take part once more in government with SF. But it appeared that at that late stage there were still inter-governmental differences on big issues—policing, demilitarisation and decommissioning (*Irish Times*, May 4th 2000).

No hype at Hillsborough

Mr Blair arrived once more at Hillsborough on May 4th. There had been little attempt by officials in either government to play up the prospects of success—quite the contrary— and there was a cynical journalistic view in Northern Ireland that the prime minister was simply trying to get away as far away from Ken Livingstone as possible on the day of the

London mayoral election. Moreover, a well-timed grenade was thrown into the process with the leak, via a moderate UUP figure—not a predictable 'no' unionist—Chris McGimpsey. Mr McGimpsey had been passed by a civil servant an extract from a memo allegedly written by a senior British government official: an unconfirmed report referred to the British ambassador to the republic as the source. The memo described a 'vigorous exchange' between Mr Mandelson and Mr Cowen over dinner in Dublin on April 18th, curtailed by the arrival of the two premiers at the table (*Irish Times*, May 5th 2000):

> Cowen's line appeared to be that, beyond the constitutional acceptance that Northern Ireland remained part of the UK, there should be no further evidence of Britishness in the governance of Northern Ireland. It was an argument presented with all the subtlety and open-mindedness that one would expect from a member of Sinn Fein.

This explosive charge did not, however, blow the Hillsborough talks off course. Mr Blair, praising his personal relationship with Mr Ahern--which is undoubtedly as warm as that between their juniors is ice-cold—played down the significance of 'bits of paper … floating around' (*Irish Times*, May 6th 2000). And as the talks went into a second day it became evident that a formula involving the securing of arms dumps was emerging (*Irish Times*, May 5th 2000). Late that night, a result was secured—though not, it later emerged, a complete one. Up to four hours of inconclusive talks from 8pm took place on the vexed issue of the name change to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, with three separate suggestions as to how it might be finessed, including by adding 'incorporating the RUC' after the new 'Police Service of Northern Ireland' (*Sunday Independent*, May 7th 2000).

The two governments duly issued a joint statement, enlarged upon in a letter sent to the Northern Ireland parties the following morning (*Irish Times*, May 8th 2000)—which, by the by, referred unembellished to the 'Police Service of Northern Ireland'. It said they believed 'the remaining steps necessary to secure full implementation of the agreement' could be achieved by June 2001. 'Subject to a positive response' to the statement, the devolved institutions would be restored on May 22nd 2000. It called on paramilitaries urgently to say 'that they will put their arms completely and verifiably beyond use'. In response to that, and depending on the 'level of threat', the British government would 'take further substantial normalisation measures' on security by June 2001. The de Chastelain commission would be asked urgently to consider, consulting paramilitary representatives, 'whether there are any further proposals for decommissioning schemes which offer the commission greater scope to proceed in more effective and satisfactory ways with the discharge of its basic mandate'. Finally, were these arrangements to fail, the two governments would initiate a formal review of the agreement.

An IRA statement duly followed, which was remarkable in how it spoke to two audiences simultaneously. On the one hand it reassured the grassroots. It began by denouncing those whose 'abuse of the peace process' with 'the aim of defeating the IRA' had tested the latter's commitment to peace. It went on to list the litany of 'causes of conflict'--British involvement, partition etc—and effectively denied the constitutional nationalist claim that the Belfast agreement represented Irish self-determination. But it continued in language

which suggested that all the ills IRA volunteers bemoaned could be removed by political means. It claimed that 'full' and 'irreversible' implementation of the agreement would provide a political context over time 'with the potential to remove the causes of conflict'. In such a context, republicans and unionists could 'as equals pursue our respective political objectives peacefully'--though the underlying assumption was clearly that demographic and other factors favouring northern nationalism would mean the balance would tilt in only one direction. Ms de Brun had told an Easter commemoration republican rally in south Armagh that social, economic and demographic realities made a united Ireland inevitable (*Irish Times*, April 24th 2000).

'In that context,' the statement said, 'the IRA leadership would 'initiate a process that will completely and verifiably put arms beyond use. We will do it in such a way as to avoid risk to the public and misappropriation by others and ensure public confidence.' The IRA would resume contact with the de Chastelain commission and would 'put in place within weeks a confidence-building measure to confirm that our weapons remain secure'. It said that 'a number' of arms dumps would be inspected by 'agreed third parties' reporting to the commission, with regular re-inspections to ensure weapons remained disused. It was suggested subsequently by republican sources that 'a number' would equal three, that these dumps would be 'major' and that all others would be gradually made available for inspection over the coming year (*Sunday Tribune*, May 7th).

Déjà vu, again

An extraordinary thing about the statement, as the northern editor of the *Irish Times* discovered (May 8th 2000), was how precisely it mirrored the SF submission to the Mitchell commission on decommissioning in January 1996, strongly suggesting that the Adams/McGuinness leadership of the republican movement had envisaged something along these lines as the eventual endgame when 'irreversible' political gains had been set in train. That submission asserted that 'the disposal of arms by those in possession of them is a method which may find acceptance.' And it said: 'The entire issue of arms will be dealt with in a way which imbues and maintains public and political confidence. An independent third party could prove to be of assistance here. This would, of course, have to be agreed by those in possession of weapons. Public safety considerations must be high on the agenda of any process. Adequate safeguards against misappropriation of arms by others is clearly an important matter.'

It was not decommissioning in the sense defined in the legislation—though it was clear neither government had any intention of saying so—given the absence of permanence. *This* was not irreversible, and the IRA had in no sense relinquished its weapons. In theory they could be retrieved at any time; if the 'war' was over it had not been so conceded. Yet there were two major advances here on what the IRA had said before which placed in question whether the IRA could any longer be said to be in *de facto* control of its weapons: the opening up of at least some of its dumps, and their periodic independent verification. The bulk of the IRA arsenal, mainly accounted for by shipments from Libya in the mid-80s, is in the south-west of Ireland—under the watchful eye of its 'southern

commander', a Belfast republican figure who had defeated an extradition attempt several years earlier (*Boston Globe*, May 11th 2000).

Nor was there any commitment to the extended, one-year, decommissioning timetable set out in the two premiers' statement. But the longer-term (if untimed) commitment to putting all arms 'beyond use' in the context of implementation of the agreement implied an awareness that any reversion to violence would be politically unproductive.

Mr Blair and Mr Ahern in turn responded quickly to the IRA statement, indicating that the inspection of dumps would be carried out by the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, who had been at the heart of the negotiations to end the war in Kosovo, and Cyril Ramaphosa, former secretary-general of the African National Congress. The ANC connection was critical to the republican movement, which had modelled its 'peace strategy' on the South African transition and developed close alliances with ANC figures in the process. In particular, Mr Ramaphosa has 'street cred' with the critical Mr Keenan (*Boston Globe*, May 7th 2000).

An early difficulty to emerge, however, was an expression of pique from the main loyalist paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (aka the UDA). Via its political wing, the Ulster Democratic Party, the UFF said it would be making no reciprocal statement, complaining, according to the UDP spokesperson, Garry McMichael, that it had not been involved in the 'choreography' leading to the IRA announcement (*Sunday Independent*, May 7th 2000). And while the Progressive Unionist Party, political representative of the Ulster Volunteer Force, welcomed the IRA announcement, it did not propose any reciprocation either (*Guardian*, May 11th 2000).

The prime minister was upbeat in the aftermath of the weekend's events, telling the *Times* (May 8th 2000) that they represented 'potentially a big breakthrough'. But he cautioned that 'we have been in a situation before where potentially big breakthroughs do not yield results'. And it emerged (*Belfast Telegraph*, May 11th) that the government had put a number of 'confidence-building measures' to republicans during the talks. These reportedly included the standing down of the IRA's 'England Department' (responsible for Canary Wharf), an end to arms buying (the trial was meanwhile taking place in Florida of those allegedly involved in a gun-running operation to the IRA from the US the previous year), and a halt to 'punishment' beatings and shootings. These last, however, continued unabated at the time of writing, as did loyalist attacks.

Meantime, the 'demilitarisation' agenda was accelerated. The chief constable, Ronnie Flanagan, announced plans for the demolition of two army bases west of the Bann, the evacuation of two observations posts in Belfast and, critically, the construction of an observation post and a sangar in south Armagh (*Irish Times*, May 10th 2000). This would still, however, leave 12 observation posts strung across the republican heartland. They represent the touchstone of 'irreversibility' for the army, which does not believe there would be the political will to reconstruct the posts should there be renewed republican violence (*Irish Times*, May 9th 2000). Mr Flanagan said there would be a review of

security in three months—thus rendering further 'demilitarisation' measures dependent on IRA (and dissident) behaviour.

The Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches all backed the proposed arrangements, though the Presbyterians remained reserved. The 'G7' civil-society grouping, representing employers, trade unions and the voluntary sector, said the choice was to 'accept the challenge to shape our own destiny' or to 'remain the only part of the United Kingdom whose politicians will exercise no executive authority over its affairs' (*Irish Times*, May 10th 2000).

Uneasy Unionists

But unionist restiveness quickly accumulated. Anti-agreement UUP members, like the young pretender Jeffrey Donaldson, predictably denied that this was decommissioning (*Irish Times*, May 8th 2000). After meeting his assembly party in the wake of the IRA statement, Mr Trimble called for 'clarification' (a dread word in the Northern Ireland 'peace process'). While describing the IRA statement as 'very interesting', the UUP leader said he needed to know more about the dump inspections and how weapons would be secured (*Irish Times*, May 8th 2000). More importantly, he went on: 'And then we want to be sure that this process of inspection is part of an overall process leading to full and complete decommissioning, and that when the IRA say they will put their guns beyond use completely and verifiably, that it is complete, that it is permanent.'

In pursuit of the irreversibility *he* wanted to see, Mr Trimble challenged the Northern Ireland secretary in the Commons on the Monday to confirm that the process of putting arms 'beyond use' would indeed mean decommissioning and that the 'confidence building measure' would not be 'the end result'. Mr Mandelson replied that the process was 'a start, not an end'. But he refused to predict what might have happened by June 2001 (*Irish Times*, May 9th 2000)—a suggestion that he did not want to leave any hostages to fortune.

Yet, if diverted on the issue of decommissioning the counter-state of the IRA, the irresistible force of unionism met the immovable object of republicanism as the former sought to shore up the 'Britishness' of the state in Northern Ireland. The two, related, targets of unionist displeasure were the simmering argument over the reorganisation of the RUC and the flying of the Union flag over government buildings at Stormont. SF would not brook, on the first, any dilution of the Patten report—republicans complained it did not go far enough—and, on the second, any flying of the flag, anywhere, any time.

Morale in the RUC has reportedly been poor in the wake of Patten, with one symptom a remarkably high absenteeism rate of around one in ten (*Belfast Telegraph*, February 29th 2000). Nor was this assuaged by deadlock in the negotiations over severance arrangements for the large number of officers expected to leave the force to allow a smaller, yet more representative, service to be established (*Belfast Telegraph*, April 8th 2000). Talks with the Northern Ireland Office were broken off in early May by the

Police Federation, who were demanding a meeting with the prime minister (*Belfast Telegraph*, May 3rd 2000).

Opening a debate in the Commons on Patten in early April, the UUP leader described the proposed changes in name and symbols as a 'grievous insult'. Mr Trimble, as an academic lawyer, takes a legalistic view of the Belfast agreement, concluding that the constitutional provision in the agreement for Northern Ireland clearly to rest within the UK entails that the accoutrements of the state reflect this. Yet this is not compatible with the 'parity of esteem' which the agreement, on political grounds, elsewhere invokes. The Patten report went for a neutral name and symbolism, but the Northern Ireland secretary said he was not entirely convinced of this with regard to the harp-and-crown badge. This seemed to imply that he might shift on the latter. And he said he shared the view on the name that a way might be found to commemorate the title and service of the RUC (*Irish Times*, April 7th). Six days later, the George Cross was awarded by the queen to the force. In obvious mimickry of Mr Trimble, it was now the turn of Ms de Brun of SF to claim a 'grievous insult' (*Guardian*, April 13th 2000).

But the stalemate continued, with publication of the Policing Bill incorporating Patten delayed. A draft leaked to the BBC referred only to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Mr Trimble's failure to secure a change in the long night of negotiations at Hillsborough meant he revisited the issue quickly thereafter. The following Sunday he warned that his ability to bring his party into the renewed power-sharing arrangements depended on the response to its concerns over the name and emblems of the force (*Irish Times*, May 8th 2000). But Mr Mandelson said he had no intention of maintaining 'the RUC' in or alongside the title of the service (*Irish Times*, May 9th 2000). And republicans were implacable. 'Any tampering with Patten would be a recipe for disaster', said the SF vice-president, Pat Doherty, after a meeting of the party's ruling ard chomhairle (*Irish Times*, May 10th 2000).

As the stand-off on the RUC appeared to be going nowhere, an initially supportive John Taylor, Mr Trimble's deputy, began to wobble, warning that the deal could 'unscramble' unless the policing issue was resolved to the party's satisfaction. And Sir Reg Empey, a former minister and Trimble ally, also demanded assurances that the Union flag would fly over government buildings on designated days (*Irish Times*, May 9th 2000).

Unionist nerves were further jangled by the announcement that an order in council would be laid before Parliament to undo the suspension of the institutions in time for May 22nd. This was, of course, inevitable, but the UUP deputy leader, John Taylor, revising downwards his running personal odds on success, said it was going down 'very badly' and he cautioned against being 'bounced into calling a premature council meeting' (*Belfast Telegraph*, May 11th 2000).

Next day, however, the party officers decided to go ahead with the UUC meeting slated for May 20th. But Mr Trimble made clear no one should conclude from this what advice

he would give delegates. That, he hinted, would depend on what was on offer in the intervening week.

Conclusion

So was Mr Hughes right? Had the Adams/McGuinness republican leadership succumbed to the process of *transformismo* set out in the last report, coming to terms with partition and British sovereignty? This seems an implausible claim.

What, more subtly, has been happening (*Boston Globe*, May 11th 2000) is a struggle for supremacy within the republican movement between the military and political wings (accepting that senior members of the latter are also senior members of the former), a process which has had a long gestation. A strategy of 'republican realism' began in the late 80s to replace the 'armalite and ballot box' that had gone before (Bean, 1994). The former is associated with the primacy of politics, building alliances (including internationally) and making incremental gains towards the ultimate goal. The latter entailed 'armed struggle', frequent isolation and a millenarian hope in a victory never realised. Indeed the 'realists', led by Mr Adams, can argue that their way is much more likely to achieve a united Ireland than futile militarism. But, as Mr Adams himself made clear, this does not imply acceptance of the legitimacy of the 'failed political entity' that is Northern Ireland, even after the Belfast agreement, which itself is preceived as only 'a transitional phase' (*Irish Times*, March 12th 1999).

After the suspension the former UUP minister Sam Foster told party colleagues that Mr Trimble had 'trapped Sinn Fein into an internal political settlement'. But, senior SF figures responded, that view was based on the belief that Messrs Adams and McGuinness could deliver the IRA on decommissioning (*Irish News*, February 29th 2000). Far from complying with UUP intentions on that regard, Mr McGuinness told the BBC around this time: 'We can drive the political agenda on the island of Ireland …' (*Irish Times*, February 21st 2000).

And what of the Trimble claim that the constitutional provisions at the beginning of the Belfast agreement mean nationalists must recognise 'the legitimacy of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland'? (*Irish Times*, April 14th 2000). In his view, Mr Patten illegitimately concluded that Northern Ireland was to be 'a neutral state, with neutrality between Britishness and Irishness'. On the contrary: 'It is one sovereignty, and the symbols of British sovereignty flow from that. That is why the agreement subsequently talks about sensitivity in the use of symbols in public purposes because the symbols used in public purposes will be British symbols.'

In that sense, unionism in Northern Ireland has traditionally tended towards a 'conservative nationalism' of a Powellite kind (Powell became, of course, a popular Ulster Unionist MP after he became *persona non grata* in the Conservative Party). As Miller (1995: 124) defines it,

At the core of conservative nationalism stands the idea that national identity integrally involves allegiance to authority. To think of oneself as British [in this view] is *ipso facto* to acknowledge the authority of institutions such as the monarchy which form the substance of national life.

The flip side of this conservative unionism is its republican counterpart. And however choleric the style of the memo leaked to Mr McGimpsey, there seems indeed little to differentiate Fianna Fail and SF on the desirability of a 'hollowing out' of the Britishness of Northern Ireland.

Linda Colley, identifying herself as 'part Welsh, part Irish, part English', gave an end-of-millennium lecture in Downing Street on 'Britishness in the 21st century' (Colley, 1999). Homogenising 'cool Britannia' metropolitan hyperbole was inappropriate, she argued, to 'a multi-national, multi-cultural, infinitely diverse polity'. And she told the prime minister:

I am not advocating giving up on Britain as a political unit, nor ceasing to re-think it … I propose to you a crucial distinction which is often insufficiently understood: that between identity and citizenship. Instead of being so mesmerised by debates over British identity, it would be far more productive to concentrate on renovating British citizenship, and on convincing all these inhabitants of these islands that they are equal and valued citizens irrespective of whatever identity they may individually select to prioritise.

From an Irish perspective, Colley's argument allows the understated reference in the Belfast agreement (NIO, 1998: 2) to citizens in Northern Ireland being 'accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose' to be given its real significance.

But, within an ethno-nationalist perspective, it is impossible to be *both*. It can only be either/or. And nor can one choose, any more than one can choose one's blood type. On that, alas, both Northern Ireland's competing nationalisms are at one.

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Devolved government

Ministers return

Suspension of the devolved executive at Stormont inevitably entailed a reluctant re-embrace of power by the Northern Ireland Office ministerial team. But not only had this team been reduced from four junior ministers to two to accompany devolution, but the number of departments had been increased from six to 10 (to ensure SF would secure two under the d'Hondt allocation rule). With Mr Mandelson taking over the functions of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister, this meant the two remaining junior ministers were left responsible for fully five departments each:

Adam Ingram	George Howarth
Enterprise, Trade and Investment	Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Agriculture and Rural Development	Education
Finance and Personnel	Culture, Arts and Leisure
Higher and Further Education and Training	Social Development
Regional Development	Environment

Clearly this was not a sustainable arrangement, representing a parody of the 'democratic deficit' by which direct rule had long been condemned. Mr Mandelson was given to making light of it—describing Northern Ireland as now governed by three men and a dog—but it was clear the government had no intention of signalling to anybody that renewed Westminster rule was anything less than temporary.

Official change

On May 10th the long-awaited appointment of the new head of the Northern Ireland civil service was announced. Gerry Loughran, permanent secretary at Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is to replace John Semple in August on the latter's retirement. Mr Loughran will be the first Catholic to occupy the position, but at 58 his own retirement is imminent in less than two years. According to a senior official, the first and deputy first minister were happy with what is in effect an interim appointment but would want more involvement in the decision as to Mr Loughran's own successor.

The position is a somewhat awkward one as, under devolution, the holder is also secretary of the Executive Committee. This means in effect combining a strategic political perspective with an internal organisational focus—the NICS employees 23,000 civil servants—and raises the question as to whether the roles should be split. There is also a question as to whether such a key appointment should be by internal trawl or by open selection.

Public attitudes and identity

Introduction

Surveys of public opinion are necessarily snapshots of attitudes at just one point in time and, frustratingly, events in Northern Ireland are moving at such a pace that there are never enough snapshots to monitor fully public reactions to specific events. The results reported here rely on two sources in the main: first, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey covering the two months before the establishment of the executive and the first six weeks or so of its life; secondly, the BBC Northern Ireland *Hearts and Minds* poll conducted on May 9th (PWC, 2000), immediately after the IRA statement on opening its arms dumps for international inspection. Over 2,000 adults were interviewed in detail as part of the 1999 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. Some of the findings below are taken from a series of articles by Roger Mac Ginty and Rick Wilford for the *Belfast Telegraph* in February 2000.

The agreement

The extent of fluctuations in support for the Belfast agreement continues to be fiercely debated between pro and anti-agreement parties. But, despite the widely-held belief that unionist support largely disappeared in the immediate post-Patten months, the Life and Times Survey suggests this was not the case. If the May 1998 referendum were to be re-run, 67 per cent of those interviewed at the end of 1999 said they would vote 'yes'. However, support in the Protestant community was on a knife-edge: 47 per cent said that they would vote 'yes', 48 per cent would vote 'no' and 6 per cent were undecided. The *Hearts and Minds* poll in May 2000 indicated lower support— 62 per cent overall--and suggested that 39 per cent of unionists would now vote 'yes' (though this result should be treated with caution, given that the poll appears to have under-represented the original 'yes' voters[1]).

But even if support for the agreement as a whole is mostly holding up (insofar as many unionists still refuse to reject it), attitudes are nonetheless volatile. In the summer of 1998 the Northern Ireland Election Study measured support for the agreement and found that 24 per cent of respondents thought nationalists had benefited a lot more than unionists. This figure dropped to 19 per cent in the autumn of 1998, but only a year later soared to 27 per cent as unionist resentment gathered momentum following Patten and other political developments perceived as favouring nationalists.

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[1] Of the *Hearts and Minds* poll respondents, 64 per cent said that they had voted 'yes' in May 1998. Of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey respondents, 72 per cent said that they had voted 'yes' in May 1998.

The overall message seems to be that support is just about sustaining *despite* strong reactions from unionists in the face of perceived losses. This is borne out by a particularly vivid sense of frustration emanating from 'yes' voters in general. At the end of 1999, a full 72 per cent said that they were angry with paramilitaries, and 64 per cent were angry with politicians, for 'blocking progress on the Good Friday Agreement'. Only 16 per cent were prepared to agree that 'I don't blame anyone for the lack of progress on the Good Friday Agreement'.

Decommissioning

Public opinion on decommissioning is complicated and rarely given quite the detailed attention it deserves. Broad-brush measures indicate relatively unequivocal support for decommissioning: 85 per cent had said they wanted to see some, or total, decommissioning before an executive was put in place. The *Hearts and Minds* poll set about putting this in context by asking people to choose the most 'crucial' factor and found that, for unionists, 'maintaining the ceasefires' came far ahead of 'decommissioning by paramilitaries' (37 per cent versus 28 per cent).

The Life and Times Survey similarly contextualised the decommissioning issue. It first asked what 'day-to-day' issues were most important, followed by a question on what 'political' issues were most important for the assembly to address. The answers were illuminating, though it must be borne in mind that the public do not necessarily see it is the job of the assembly to deal directly with political issues. The health service was the prime day-to-day issue (named by 42 per cent) while 'bringing about decommissioning' was the foremost political issue (named by 57 per cent). But when asked to choose whether it was more important for the assembly to spend its time dealing with day-to-day issues or political issues, nearly half wanted day-to-day issues to take precedence, 39 per cent thought 'both equally' and only 11 per cent thought that political issues (of any description) should take precedence over the day-to-day work of the assembly. In fact, less than 10 per cent of both Catholics and Protestants would put decommissioning as the single most important issue for the assembly to address.

Reform of the police

Results from the last Life and Times Survey reiterate the problem that Patten was faced with originally: while 57 per cent of the population think both Catholics and Protestants are treated equally by the police, 28 per cent feel Protestants are treated better.[2] Moreover, the latter figure has hardly varied since 1989.[3] The religious breakdown re-emphasises the problem. Only a third of Catholics think that treatment is equal and 57 per cent feel Protestants are treated better. A full 73 per cent of

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[2] Five per cent think that Catholics are treated better and 10 per cent don't know.
[3] According to the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Surveys of 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993 and 1995 where a different question wording was used but the results are highly consistent.

Protestants feel treatment is equal, with 8 per cent feeling Protestants are treated better and 9 per cent feeling Catholics are treated better. Of course, more critical is future change on this issue. A new time-series question in the Life and Times Survey is designed to monitor this.

Suppose a close relative of yours was thinking about becoming a police officer here in Northern Ireland. Would you encourage them to join, discourage them from joining, or neither?

	Protestant	Catholic	All
	%	%	%
Encourage	55	28	43
Discourage	12	33	21
Neither	23	23	24
It depends	5	13	9
Don't know	4	3	4

Despite the fact that a full 57 per cent of Catholics feel that Protestants are treated better by the police, only a third would actively discourage a close relative from joining. Encouraging for the reformers perhaps, but within this is there is a strong age effect which is not mirrored among Protestant counterparts: nearly half of young Catholics would discourage a close relative from joining the police.

Catholic respondents who would 'discourage' a close relative from becoming a police officer in Northern Ireland

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
	%	%	%	%	%	%
	46	42	37	26	21	14

Devolved government and the future

Before the suspension of the executive, the Life and Times Survey indicated that the population was highly cautious about the prospects of success: only 54 per cent thought the assembly would still be in place in 2003, the date billed for its next elections. After the IRA statement on arms-dump inspections, about half of all unionists and two thirds of UUP supporters would have the party re-enter government with Sinn Fein, according to the *Hearts and Minds* poll.

The joint leadership of David Trimble and Seamus Mallon, short-lived though it was, was uncontested in terms of public opinion before the suspension. If they were allowed a personal choice, 41 per cent of Catholics and 57 per cent of Protestants (48 per cent overall) would choose Mr Trimble as first minister, four times as many as the

nearest alternative--John Hume. And 48 per cent overall would choose Mr Mallon as deputy first minister. Whether this is a strong endorsement, or simply an acceptance of the logic behind the selection of these two in the first place, is a moot point.

The latest readings indicate that a majority (56 per cent) wants Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, but this is the lowest figure for ten years. Repeated measures can be the key that allows a subtle time-series to become visible while its year-on-year changes are continually non-significant. The Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Surveys, carried out from 1989 to 1996, the Election Study of 1998 and the two most recent Life and Times Surveys have all managed to capture a subtle time-series (in terms of constitutional preferences) that would not have been obvious without repeated measures. While the direction of trends around the 'big' constitutional question--united Ireland *versus* retain the union--is still open to interpretation, there has been a slow, but steady, increase over the years in the number who do *not* choose one of the two major options. From 7 per cent in 1989 to 23 per cent in 1999, these changes are very small year-on-year, but convincing because of the number and regularity of readings taken. This will continue to be monitored.

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Finance

Financial decision-making was of course once more placed under official, ultimately Treasury, control during the period. But one interesting financial question was aired from the prior period of devolution.

Ian Paisley Jnr, a DUP opponent of the Belfast agreement, asked a question in the week after suspension as to how much the 72 days of devolved government had cost. Including the costs of the assembly, plus the reorganisation of the departments from six to 10, plus the establishment of the other institutions linked to devolution, the total came to £33.4 million. As the *Belfast Telegraph* headlined the story (February 19th 2000), 'Devolution may cost taxpayers £500,000 a day'.

Mr Paisley commented: 'Obviously we opposed this process because of the political costs—prisoner releases, policing, terrorists in government—but the hidden cost, the financial cost, was huge.'

Meanwhile, the chair of the Police Authority, Pat Armstrong, claimed that there could be a £33 million deficit in the policing budget for 2000-01 (a reserved matter) of £647 million. This had not been increased to account for inflation and made no provision for the possibility of 'widespread public disorder'--a reference to the anticipated renewal of engagements at Drumcree in Co Armagh in July. Mr Armstrong warned of 'real financial pressures' early in the new financial year (*Irish Times*, March 28th 2000).

Political parties and elections

The rise and rise of …

The negative reaction to the suspension amongst nationalist voters rebounded to SF's advantage in the only electoral test of opinion in the period. The party doubled its vote to win a by-election on Omagh District Council (*Irish Times*, April 14th). Its candidate, Barry McElduff, polled 3,757 votes, more than twice as many as his nearest rival and 2,300 more than the SDLP candidate. The vacancy had been caused by the resignation of an SF councillor but the SDLP had fancied its chances. And Mr McElduff had been at the centre of the controversy in the area over the intimidation of Mgr Denis Faul by republicans, arising from his more conciliatory attitude to the RUC.

Matters worsened for the SDLP when an internal party review was leaked to UTV. It warned that the party's 'pre-eminent position within constitutional nationalism has been eroded to the point where it is now a thing of the past' (*Irish Times*, April 27th 2000). An associated poll found SF running neck and neck with the SDLP amongst younger voters. And the *Hearts and Minds* poll found very strong support for an electoral pact among both nationalist parties in the next Westminster election—a pan-nationalist approach which SF had previously urged but which the SDLP had hitherto resisted.

A triumphalist leader in *An Phoblacht* (March 2nd 2000) said that the prospect that SF would 'supplant the SDLP as the leading nationalist party sooner rather than later' was looking 'more and more probable'. The Westminster elections may provide that opportunity in 2001 and the party is already looking forward to Dail elections in 2001 or 2002--conceivably precipitated earlier by the anti-corruption tribunals currently sitting. The paper highlighted claims in the Dublin media that big gains for the party were expected.

Meanwhile, stances were hardening on the other side, too. Peter Weir, a UUP member who had sided with the anti-agreement bloc in the assembly and had the party whip withdrawn, won the selection battle for the North Down Westminster constituency (*Irish News*, March 31st 2000). North Down is an exceptional seat, notable for a peculiarly right-wing though superficially non-sectarian unionism. But Mr Trimble's troubles were added to by the resignation of the whip in the assembly in April by Pauline Armitage, another dissident (*Irish Times*, April 14th 2000). Were she to side with the 'no' bloc, the latter would command the 30 seats needed for the disruptive exercise of the 'petition of concern' arrangement under the agreement, turning any substantive vote into a 'key decision' requiring 'parallel consent' or 'weighted majority' cross-community support in the chamber.

Demagogic Unionists

The intergovernmental statement and subsequent IRA announcement posed immediate questions for the political strategy of the Democratic Unionist Party. During the 72 days of devolution, the party had exploited the absence of collective responsibility in the Executive Committee—the flip side of inclusivity—to absent itself from executive meetings and to treat its two departments as personal fiefdoms for the ministers, Nigel Dodds (Social Development) and Peter Robinson (Regional Development). But this half-in-half-out stance became significantly harder to justify given the party's bitter attacks on the UUP for entertaining the idea of going back into government with, in the DUP view, no prospect of IRA decommissioning, ever.

The party announced 'a fundamental review' of its position because of the 'radical change' which had taken place (*Irish Times*, May 9th 2000). At the time of writing, no decision had been taken—and of course the executive had not been re-formed. But the body language of leading DUP figures suggested a reversion to opposition was likely. (Indeed abstention from the assembly itself was not being ruled out.) The party leader, Rev Ian Paisley, and Mr Robinson, had a sterile engagement with the prime minister on May 10th. Mr Paisley afterwards declared that 'the people of Northern Ireland' were 'determined to stand up to an imposed settlement'.

Departure from the executive could, in theory, marginalise the DUP over time, were the administration to settle down successfully. Its two seats would be redistributed to the UUP and Alliance under the d'Hondt rule, but Mr Trimble's five UUP members would then be slightly outnumbered by the six nationalists (SF + SDLP) and his right flank would be unprotected in the assembly. And no one has ever suffered in Northern Ireland by pursuing a strategy of ethnic outbidding.

A nightmare scenario for Mr Trimble was reported in the *News Letter* on the day of his crucial rendezvous with the UUC (March 25th 2000). While the story may have been inflated by the moderate-unionist paper to frighten wayward UUC delegates into line, it painted a picture of a progressive takeover of the party by the anti-agreement faction, the latter creating a new alignment with the DUP. The strategy included further defections from the UUP assembly party to a 'unity front' controlled by the DUP and the selection of 'unity' candidates in the Westminster election. The *Hearts and Minds* poll also found very strong support for an electoral pact between the anti-agreement UUP faction and the DUP.

Mr Trimble plans to bring proposals to reform the party on a one-member, one-vote basis to its rules revision committee in June (*Irish Times*, April 17th and April 18th 2000). His supporters believe that by removing the bloc votes attached to the Orange Order and the Ulster Young Unionist Council, strongholds of the anti-agreement faction, they can reinforce his leadership. But it would undoubtedly have been more timely for Mr Trimble to have grasped this nettle soon after his election in 1995—linking it to Tony Blair's party crusade against clause four as a signal of 'modernisation. Now it can be presented by his opponents as gerrymandering.

As our last report made clear, inbuilt into the 'peace process' from the outset, paradoxically, was communal polarisation. In the light of the travails of the SDLP, one commentator remarked that the party had been 'well and truly screwed by the peace process' (Moloney, 2000). Taking developments in the round, another wrote: 'With the Alliance Party's terminal decline, these events mark the slow death of the democratic centre.'

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