

Commissioning politics

28/06/2006

IRA DECOMMISSIONING is of profound practical and symbolic significance. It would have been better had it happened years ago. The stretching out of this issue helped to destroy David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party, and it has exacerbated Unionist suspicions of the Republican movement. So, decommissioning now is a matter of two cheers not three.

IRA decommissioning is, hopefully, the end of something; it represents an implicit recognition of the futility of violence which has meant over 3,000 deaths. Therefore it is appropriate to remember the victims of violence, while we hail this step. Nevertheless we must look forward. This means making politics work in Northern Ireland (there is also the little matter of loyalist decommissioning).

Making politics work means focusing on a shared future in Northern Ireland. It means that relationships are central, not being winners and losers.

Over the period of the ceasefires we have had less violence, but more social segregation and more peace walls. The conflict mutated into cultural wars, fights about the meaning of the past (who were the real victims, etc.) and struggles over parades. We moved from a half-war to a half-peace, but there was still no reconciliation.

The challenge of reconciliation is now the central one for Northern Irish society, and it will be a 30- to 40-year task, for it means changing the patterns of relating between the two main communities. This task is not only for politicians but for the whole of civil society, churches, trade unions, voluntary organisations and so on.

The challenge of moving forward also means accepting responsibility for making society work. It will mean politicians (and others) ceasing to blame the British government (or other people). It will mean Sinn Féin accepting responsibility for policing. It will mean the creation of a more enterprising economy and stopping the duplication of services between the two main communities.

So, the decommissioning of weapons is but a start; next step the decommissioning of mindsets on everyone's part. To change the metaphor we are simply in the foothills, the real climbing starts now.

David Stevens

WEB EXTRA:

Copies of all the statements issued by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) can be found on the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) web site at: www.nio.gov.uk. For additional information on decommissioning see the CAIN web site (Conflict Archive on the Internet) at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission.htm>. A copy of the joint statement issued by Revd Harold Good (a former Corrymeela Centre Director) and Fr Alec Reid, the two independent witnesses to the September decommissioning, is available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission/hgar260905.htm>