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# Keynotes

## Cranfield CSSM Case Study Series

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Author: Hilary Pearce, CSSM, Cranfield University, Shrivenham  
Telephone: 01793 785 020 Email: [h.pearce@cranfield.ac.uk](mailto:h.pearce@cranfield.ac.uk)  
Authors contribute to the Keynotes Case Study Series in their personal capacity

### Northern Ireland Decommissioning 1997-2007

#### **Aim**

To present an overview of the decommissioning process in Northern Ireland between 1997 and 2007.

#### **Background and Scenario**

Northern Ireland has a long history of sectarian violence, the most recent phase of the conflict started alongside the civil rights movement of the 1960s; however, the roots of the struggle can be traced back some 800 years.<sup>1</sup> In its simplest terms the struggle is between two communities, the unionists, who favour British rule over Northern Ireland and the republicans or nationalists who favour a single country united with the republic of Ireland and home rule.

During the 1980s and early 1990s secret talks, between the paramilitaries and political bodies from both sides of the community and separately the Irish and British governments, opened up possible channels to brokering a peace agreement, and a series of open talks were held during the early 1990s between the British Government, the Irish government and representatives of the political parties of Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Map of Northern Ireland**



<sup>1</sup> see Darby, John, *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes*, USIP, Washington, 2001) p.16.

<sup>2</sup> An outline of the talks can be found at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/bmtalks/sum.htm> and <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/polit.htm>

## Key Facts – Northern Ireland

**Regional Capital:** Belfast

**Area:** total: 5,459 sq miles, 14,139 sq km  
Administrative Division of the UK defined in 1920  
by the Government of Ireland Act

**Population:** 1,685,000 (2003 est.)

**Religions** 53.1% Protestant, (Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist and other Protestant denominations), 43.8% Roman Catholic, 0.4% Other and 2.7% none.

**Political Affiliation:** Unionist: 40%, Nationalist: 22%, Neither: 35%.

**Main Political Parties:** Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Sinn Féin (SF), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP)

Although a ceasefire by the IRA was announced in 31 August 1994, the talks had effectively become moribund, of which decommissioning of arms was a major sticking point for both sides within the negotiations. As part of the process to unlock the talks, a 'twin track' approach was undertaken and the responsibility and the talks surrounding the decommissioning of arms was moved to a separate 'International Body' which would allow the substantive political talks to move forward unhindered by the highly sensitive arms issues.

The International Body was established in 1995 headed by Senator George Mitchell and set out to assess whether there was a willingness to disarm and the possible methods to achieve it.<sup>3</sup> In April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement or the Belfast Agreement<sup>4</sup> was signed by the British and Irish Governments and a referendum held of which 71.2% of the Northern Irish population and 94.39% of the Republic of Ireland's population voted in favour of the agreement. The Peace Agreement formally committed all parties to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations under a new body the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) whose mandate was to find a workable basis for decommissioning, monitoring and verifying the destruction of the weapons. The IICD was also tasked to report to both the British and Irish governments on the progress of decommissioning.

## The Decommissioning

A method for putting the arms beyond use was agreed between the Provisional IRA and the IICD in August 2001 and the first act of decommissioning by the Provisional IRA took place in October 2001.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently there followed three further acts of decommissioning, culminating in a statement in July 2005 made by the Provisional IRA that "all volunteers have been instructed to assist in the development of a purely political and democratic programme through exclusively peaceful means". In September 2005 the ICDD reported the Provisional IRA had met its commitment to put all arms beyond use in a manner consistent with the legislation.<sup>6</sup> In October 2006, the Independent Monitoring Commission reported that the IRA campaign of violence was over and that they no longer had the means by which to undertake a sustained campaign.<sup>7</sup> In February 2007 it was reported in the media that the Loyalist paramilitaries were ready to follow the IRA and fully decommission. Despite this picture of

<sup>3</sup> Mandate of the IICD 1995 <http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/docs/mitch.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Copy of the Belfast Agreement 1998: <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See First report of the IICD [http://www.nio.gov.uk/first\\_report\\_on\\_decommissioning\\_-\\_oct\\_2001.pdf](http://www.nio.gov.uk/first_report_on_decommissioning_-_oct_2001.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Report of the commission available [http://www.nio.gov.uk/iicd\\_report\\_26\\_sept\\_2005.pdf](http://www.nio.gov.uk/iicd_report_26_sept_2005.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> IMC Report: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/04\\_10\\_06\\_imc.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/04_10_06_imc.pdf)

success, decommissioning has been proved to be a rocky road, with large periods of inactivity and has been one of the key stumbling blocks in the peace process, playing a large part in the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the resumption of the total British rule from 2002 to May 2006<sup>8</sup>.

## **Assessment of the Decommissioning Process**

### **Twin Track**

The 'twin track' process was fundamental in allowing the substantive political issues to progress within a separate environment, detached from and unhindered by the highly sensitive issue of decommissioning. Although the Good Friday Agreement had formally committed the political parties involved to decommissioning, the paramilitaries in possession of the arms, had not signed the agreement. Channelling decommissioning through a separate body allowed the IICD to engage directly or by proxy with the paramilitaries to gain agreement to concept of decommissioning<sup>9</sup>. This method avoided the controversy which might be labelled "negotiating with terrorists" if undertaken in a political arena. Gaining the paramilitaries agreement to decommission was fundamental to actually achieving decommissioning; however, the first step to securing the willingness to decommission was to build a bond of trust between the IICD and the paramilitaries.

### **Trust and Independence**

It was highly important that the international body be seen to be independent and unbiased by all sides within the political arena, including the British and Irish Governments and also within the Northern Irish population. It was vital that the members who constituted the decommissioning commission were agreed by all sides and that their conduct continued to be seen to be unbiased throughout the process. As such the commission kept public comments on the decommissioning process or external events to an absolute minimum<sup>10</sup>, as public statements are readily open to mis-interpretation and perceptions of bias. The importance of words used during all peace processes and the examination which they will be subject to, must be keenly understood by those involved in the process.

Ensuring that the commission was seen to be unbiased through out the process was seen to be a step in building the trust of the political parties and the paramilitaries and this was absolutely 'fundamental'<sup>11</sup> to the success or failure of the whole process. The time taken to build this trust and therefore a workable relationship must not be underestimated. In turn building trust and confidence through decommissioning assisted the substantive political talks in moving forwards.

An essential part of trust is showing respect for other parties and the paramilitaries needed to feel they had the respect of the IICD and the wider population. Incorporating procedures which maintain respect for paramilitaries within a peace process or decommissioning process may seem an anathema to the affected population, especially when memories of their brutal

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<sup>8</sup> The current Assembly does meet to discuss issues but it has no power to pass legislation which remains with the Northern Ireland secretary. See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4987424.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4987424.stm)

<sup>9</sup> Gen De Chastelain highlights that it is important to get parties into the 'mindset of decommissioning' as a first step to decommissioning.

<sup>10</sup> De Chastelain, John, 'The Northern Ireland Peace Process – A perspective on the Outside Involvement' RUSI, August 2006, Vol. 151, No.4.

<sup>11</sup> General John De Chastelain speaking at the UK Defence Academy, April 2001.

and violent acts remain very much alive and may even continue sporadically. A loss of weapons may amount to a loss of dignity, respect or credibility, amongst those who have traditionally supported the paramilitaries and those who have opposed them, and may prevent them from doing so. A secret or non-public event may allow those who have given up weapons to do so without a loss of public face. Furthermore, keeping a cache of weapons secret may avoid the weapons themselves becoming a controversial issue. If the details of the weapons are made public the size of the arms involved or the number might either cause embarrassment to the demilitarising party if the weapons are sub-standard, or of less quantity than had been expected or may become controversial if a cache of weapons includes controversial weapons like cluster bombs or chemical weapons.

### **Decommissioning Mindset**

It is noteworthy that this decommissioning process was intended to take two years, which might have been viable, considering the relatively small number of arms involved and the small geographic area involved; however this 'modest' decommissioning exercise has taken over a decade to complete. It must be remembered that the Provisional IRA and the political parties associated with the paramilitary groups have a mental barrier which must be overcome before they are able to give up arms, this can be termed the 'decommissioning mindset'. The theory of disarmament is relatively straight forward – a matter of decommissioning small arms and light weapons, the reality is that it is a much larger mental and societal process for all parties in the peace process and must be considered as such. Arms symbolise power and can be a negotiating tool, an army without arms is defunct, therefore the laying down of arms meant the effective end of paramilitary organisations, and a great deal more than merely the handing over of arms. Therefore decommissioning was an extremely sensitive act within paramilitary communities.

The whole structure of the decommissioning process was built around supporting this 'decommissioning mindset'. The process was deliberately called decommissioning as a politically correct euphuism for disarmament, which was seen as an unfavourable term by the paramilitaries. The whole process was a voluntary process and the commission were careful to avoid any connotations that decommissioning was in anyway a surrender by the paramilitaries. There was to be an amnesty for anyone who handed in weapons and no forensic tests were to be made of the arms, which would suggest surrender.

As the whole process was voluntary, the commission therefore allowed the paramilitaries to determine how the decommissioning process would take place, i.e. in secret without publicity or otherwise. The paramilitaries were able to determine how the arms were destroyed, for example, by the paramilitaries with verification by the IICD, or that the paramilitaries provided information which led to the arms which would then be destroyed by the IICD with minimal involvement of the paramilitaries, or some more joined-up effort. In the case of the Provisional IRA, the method for destruction of arms has to date been kept secret, with the IICD typically alluding only to "a significant quantity" being put beyond use. The loyalist paramilitaries preferred to attract publicity for the destruction of their arms, and the first decommissioning act undertaken by the Loyalists in 1998<sup>12</sup> was a highly publicised event, most likely to again gain community approval for their acts, where the arms were spread out to look perhaps greater in volume than they were in reality. The different approaches used

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<sup>12</sup> Report of the Commission available [http://www.nio.gov.uk/iicd\\_report\\_2jul99.pdf](http://www.nio.gov.uk/iicd_report_2jul99.pdf)

highlight the flexibility of the IICD to incorporate alternative wishes of the parties and maintain a 'decommissioning mindset'.

### **Internationalisation of the process**

The internationalisation of the decommissioning process was both important and rare<sup>13</sup>. It is rare that two countries with wealth and international standing of the UK and Ireland would involve an international body in what are essentially domestic affairs<sup>14</sup>, however the nature of the conflict, which had become very bitter and entangled benefited enormously from an 'external umpire'. General De Chastelain, however, noted that although an external independent body could move the process along, where previously it might have collapsed or become deadlocked, the settlement can only be made and adhered to by the affected population<sup>15</sup> and therefore an international body must take its lead from the paramilitaries and the host population, it must respect their wishes regarding how the resolution of the conflict will take place and avoid imposing what it considers to be the correct solution,

### **Practicalities**

Finally, on a purely practical level, General De Chastelain reported<sup>16</sup> that a small room is much more conducive to furthering negotiations than a large room. In a small room parties are forced to sit alongside each other, are less likely to be offensive to one another, and are forced by human nature to share pleasantries and 'social' space with one another. A large room, where parties are able to separate into 'camps' creates a much more confrontational atmosphere and less conducive to settlement.

### **Conclusion**

The decommissioning process in Northern Ireland has been a success. However, it has been heavily criticised for the length of time it has taken and has been variously accused of pandering to the Provisional IRA, and allowing them to avoid decommissioning. However, the critics have been proved wrong; many lessons can and should be learnt from this successful process, above all, a conflict which has been on-going in various guises for several hundred years ought not to be seen as a failure, if there is a delay even amounting to several years. Those involved in an intricate and frustrating process such as decommissioning should seek to see the bigger picture and an independent commission may be able to distant itself from the tangled web of blame and retribution to find a path to decommissioning and ultimately peace.

### **Questions**

- Identify the successes and failures within the decommissioning process – and try and find alternative examples within other programmes.
- Identify the actors involved in the programme and identify the role they played.

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<sup>13</sup> De Chastelain, John, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process – A Perspective on the Outside Involvement* RUSI, August 2006, Vol. 151, No.4.

<sup>14</sup> As a comparison, an international body is unlikely to ever be invited to act as umpire between Chechnya and Russia

<sup>15</sup> De Chastelain, John, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process – A Perspective on the Outside Involvement* RUSI, August 2006, Vol. 151, No.4.

<sup>16</sup> General John De Chastelain speaking at the UK Defence Academy, April 2001.

## Issues for Discussion

- Consider how this process might be applied in the Spanish context of ETA or the Nepalese context of Maoists and a possible disarmament process in both instances.

## Further Research

Darby, John, *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes*, USIP, Washington, 2001)

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