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For Irish Times
13/7/95

Dr Garret Fitzgerald's column in last Saturday's Irish Times, including its title, "Decommissioning of arms has been fudged from the start", reflects a fundamental misconception regarding the development of the peace process.

The issue of decommissioning of arms has not been fudged from the start. If that were so it would have represented monumental incompetence and short-sightedness on all sides. This is not the case. The problem only arises because the British government has, subsequently, introduced the demand for a surrender of IRA weapons as a new precondition to all-party talks.

Last week Dr Fitzgerald wrote;

"Sinn Fein argues that, in the talks which led to the cease-fire, the decommissioning of arms was not made a precondition of subsequent talks. This assertion has not been convincingly refuted by the two governments involved".

This "assertion" has not been refuted because it is an accurate account of the situation before the IRA cessation.

The issue of decommissioning was raised explicitly in the intensive contact and exchanges between Sinn Fein and the Irish government which preceded the IRA cessation. The Irish government's clear, unambiguous and unfudged position was at all times that, in the context of a complete cessation of IRA activity, no obstacle or precondition would be placed in the path of Sinn Fein's involvement in all party talks, or any other form of political dialogue.

This was practically demonstrated by the Irish government when, within days of the IRA cessation, John Hume and I met the then

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London knew that there would not have been a cessation if this demand had been made a precondition for talks.

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It was clearly understood that decommissioning and the total militarisation of society could only be effectively accomplished as part of an overall political settlement agreed between, and acceptable to, all the Irish people.

There was no question of decommissioning being made a precondition to these talks.

For its part, the British government never made an issue of decommissioning in the run-up to the IRA cessation as they knew perfectly well that this was an unrealistic demand. Nowhere in public statements, nor in the course of the confidential dialogue and exchanges between the British Government and Sinn Fein over a two year period prior to the IRA cessation, was this made an issue either as a precondition or otherwise.

On the contrary the British government repeatedly gave assurances publicly and privately that, in the context of an IRA cessation, Sinn Fein would be free to engage in all-party peace talks. In the Downing Street Declaration, for example, the British government committed itself to encourage, facilitate and enable agreement through a process of dialogue and co-operation and said that the people of Ireland were free to determine the nature of such an agreement "without external impediment".

The British government is now asserting that the unionists have a veto over the commencement of negotiations, arising from a demand for the surrender of IRA weapons as a precondition to such negotiations. In doing so the British are encouraging rather than discouraging, unionist intransigence.

This was another key issue which we addressed in the immediate run-up to the IRA announcement last August. At that time the Irish government made clear that the next step in the peace process was all-party talks and that no party could have a veto over these talks or their outcome.

The position of a unionist veto over discussions was also dealt with in the clarification which the British provided to Sinn Féin on the Downing Street Declaration. In this document the British government stated; "No group or organisation has a veto over the policy of a democratically elected government".

So how do we get the unionist leaderships to engage in the peace process? The unionist people are both pragmatic and intelligent. I am confident that they will not allow their representatives to simply opt out of negotiations on issues which fundamentally affect their future. The involvement of both the UUP and the DUP in discussions with John Hume and their participation in the Washington conference demonstrated that, if they cannot prevent such inclusive debate and discussion, or where they are convinced that it is in their interests to do so, the unionists will become involved in dialogue.

If the unionist leaderships resistance to negotiations, which is consistent with their opposition to change, is allowed to become a veto over negotiations then negotiations will never happen as one precondition will follow another. However, it is unlikely that, once started, the unionists will remain outside a real process of negotiations.

The Irish and British governments have a duty to call all-party talks. The British government is now reneging on the commitment to all-party talks which it gave prior to the IRA cessation last August. It is clearly and blatantly acting in bad faith.

The stalemate in the peace process around the issue of decommissioning does not, therefore, result, as Dr Fitzgerald argues, from a misunderstanding on the issue of decommissioning. The stalemate arises, simply, because the British government has now placed a new precondition on Sinn Féin's involvement in all-party talks. In so doing it is discriminating against our electorate which has a democratic right to be represented in political negotiations on the future of this island. But this block on all-party peace talks also denies to the rest of the Irish people the right to enter into inclusive negotiations. All parties, not just Sinn Féin, are excluded. It is this policy which has created the present impasse - the vacuum and the dangers this is provoking. How do we prevent this from deteriorating into a crisis?

It was the efforts of nationalist Ireland which created the peace process and brought about the enormous opportunity which we now have. The Sinn Féin peace strategy, the Hume/Adams dialogue, the Irish Peace Initiative and the IRA cessation generated a new political climate in which, for the first time since partition, a real prospect of a negotiated settlement and a lasting peace, exists.

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In all of this the strength of nationalist and democratic opinion in Ireland and among our exiled population, especially those in the United States, has been a force for progress. This positive force must again be harnessed to ensure that the potential created in Ireland is not now squandered by a reluctant British government. It is the responsibility

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In all of this the strength of nationalist and democratic opinion in Ireland and among our exiled population, especially those in the United States, has been a force for progress. This positive force must again be harnessed to ensure that the potential created in Ireland is not now squandered by a reluctant British government. It is the responsibility of all of us, and most particularly the Irish government, to fill the vacuum created by the British government and to bring about the negotiations at which we can work out our own future. Negotiations without precondition or vetos, at which everyone is at the table and everything on the table.

All-party talks are the obvious next step.

If the peace process is to move forward the dithering, the stalling, the blocking has to be replaced by a real commitment, on all sides, to find a settlement.

The entire logic of a peace process is that through substantive all-party peace talks we arrive at a peace settlement which removes the causes of the conflict and takes the guns, forever, from Irish politics.

The British block on negotiations needs to be removed, not explained or justified. All-party peace talks should be initiated as a matter of urgency and within an agreed timeframe.

There needs to be positive and effective action by those, in Ireland and abroad, who support this peace process to move the situation forward. There needs to be a pro-active and planned approach by the Irish government, a strategy for all party talks.

Real peace talks need to commence so that those of us who are committed to building peace can get on with the work of building peace.

Once started the nature and structure of peace talks must then ensure the efficient examination and resolution of all of the many inter-related issues required to move the process forward. No one issue can be dealt with in isolation, nor can movement on one issue be demanded as a precondition to the negotiations process at which all these issues will be addressed. Negotiations need to address all issues on a comprehensive basis.

The issue of decommissioning is not, therefore, a real barrier to all-

party peace talks. It is only the latest in a series of tactical barriers which the British have created to stall or slow down the momentum of peace. Decommissioning is not preventing all-party talks. It is simply the British excuse for this.

The case of Paratrooper Lee Clegg, released after serving only two years for the murder of a 17 year old Irish girl, illustrates that despite the desire in Ireland for a new beginning that the British government adheres firmly to the old agenda.

The British retain one law for themselves and another for the Irish. This is the historic reality. 11 months into an IRA cessation it remains the contemporary reality.

This weeks curfew of the Lower Ormeau area is a timely reminder of the continued reality of the nationalist nightmare. The British are not yet prepared to change that reality. They must be convinced, persuaded, pressurised if necessary to do so. A peaceful strategy for change, for achieving democracy and justice has to deal directly and effectively with the realities of injustice and inequality.

It cannot be dependant on the willingness of the British to change. The British cannot be allowed to sit on their hands. The British have no right to squander the present, unprecedented opportunity for a negotiated settlement. Most crucially they cannot be allowed to misuse the Irish peace process to pursue an IRA surrender - the real purpose of the decommissioning demand and something which the British failed to achieve in 25 years of war.

The peace process cannot stand still. If it is not moving forward it is in danger of moving back. It must be moved forward if it is to be sustained and brought to fruition. The absence on any movement towards negotiations and therefore towards a negotiated settlement is at the heart of the growing frustrations and tensions on the streets. The British government has no conflict resolution strategy, they have no plan to consolidate the new situation. Instead they pursue the failed policies of exclusion, discrimination and repression.

In a situation which requires flexibility and compromise, the British government, in blocking political dialogue, is denying us the vehicle for flexibility and the forum for compromise. They are, in fact, forcing

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The political vacuum has to be filled. In fact, it demands positive and effective action from those who are committed to the success of this peace process; to the securing of a negotiated settlement in Ireland. The peace process does not belong to the British government. It belongs to the Irish people. We who have created the opportunity for peace, who have built the peace process and who support the creating of a process of peaceful change, we need to remove the obstacles to forward movement.

This is our responsibility in Ireland, in Britain and in North America. Peace in Ireland cannot simply sit and wait until the British government is ready and willing to move. We need to move the peace process into negotiations - into all-party peace talks as the only way to secure an agreed political settlement and therefore a sustainable peace. That is the unfudged commitment the London and Dublin governments made publicly prior to the IRA cessation. It is the responsibility of the political representatives of all the Irish people to ensure that the British do not renege on this commitment, it is our responsibility to remove unnecessary obstacles, to resist preconditions and to move the peace process forward into all-party peace talks.

It is of crucial importance that this is our agreed position and that the signal we send is a clear and unambiguous one which the British government cannot misrepresent or misunderstand.

A peace process, to bring about a peace settlement, requires peace talks. This is the essential next step.

Peace cannot be made unless and until the British and the unionists engage positively in the peace process. Unfortunately, London's commitment to peace in Ireland has been fudged from the start.

Key British Comments on the Peace Process.

British Message to Sinn Féin, 17 July 1993

'We remind you that this process of dialogue leading to an inclusive political process can only start after we have received the necessary assurance that organised violence had been brought to an end.'

British Message to Sinn Féin, 3 Sept 1993

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Downing Street Declaration (paragraph 10)

British and Irish governments: 'They confirm that, in these circumstances, 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'.

John Major, 15 Dec 1993

'What is in this document is the clearest possible indication that providing the IRA are prepared to renounce violence for good, then Sinn Fein will be able to join exploratory talks preparatory to entering the main talks, that is perfectly clear in the document.

John Major - David Frost Programme, 9 Jan 1994

'We've offered them a route into the democratic talks themselves. That is what is on offer. All they have to do is give up violence ... there's one question of overriding importance and it's a very simple one. Will the IRA give up violence in order to enter into talks in the democratic process?'

John Major. Belfast Newsletter, 4 Jan 1994

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British Message to Sinn Fein, 3 Sept 1993

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John Major - House of Commons, 13 Jan 1994

If he (Mr. Adams) wishes to enter into discussions he know how he may do it. He can decide to give up violence, after three months he can enter into exploratory talks and then he will be able to enter into the democratic talks process itself. That is the route ahead. And the only question that needs to be asked is .. of Mr Adams. Will he stop the violence and enter the democratic process or will he not?'

Patrick Mayhew - Speech to International Press Institute 27 Jan 1994

'The government say this ...'Give up the justification of violence, let those you represent politically abandon it for good: and you can join in the process, a process where all the interlocking issues will be considered with no outcome ruled out. We have assured you that you hold the key. We are not going to change the lock'.

Patrick Mayhew - New York, 12 April 1994

'That's not going to require any surrender, the ending of that armed conflict.'

British government clarification to Sinn Fein, 19 May 1994

'Acceptance of the Joint Declaration is not a precondition for entering the talks process. What is required is a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence.'

John Major, Press Conference, 26 May 1994

'There is an opportunity for him (Gerry Adams) to give up violence and then in a short while to enter the constitutional talks. Now that constitutional avenue is open to him and I do not believe any amount of talking will please anyone until such time as he says the violence can end and we can begin to talks. That is what I am waiting to hear from him'.