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cc see list below

PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)

**BRITISH - IRISH ASSOCIATION, 11-13 OCTOBER: THE
DECOMMISSIONING/EXECUTIVE FORMATION DEBATE**

As Mr Murphy missed the final plenary session he may welcome a summary of what turned out to be a very interesting panel discussion, and one which encapsulated the debate which had been running in the margins all weekend about the chronological relationship between the start of IRA decommissioning and the formation of a shadow Executive.

2. Michael McGimpsey, for the UUP (Trimble and Donaldson having left), reiterated David Trimble's opening position that it was "currently very difficult" to proceed to the formation of the shadow Executive Committee. Interestingly, McGimpsey was not as explicit about what this meant as he and Jeffrey Donaldson had been the previous day in the workshops when they had both insisted in terms that there must be a start to IRA decommissioning in order to give Unionists sufficient confidence in Sinn Fein's good faith to enable the shadow Executive to be formed without entailing the destruction of moderate Unionism. In this final debate McGimpsey restricted himself (despite being pressed) to saying that the key thing was the need for Republicans to live up to the commitment to democracy and non-violence in the Pledge of Office: he argued that the maintenance of a terrorist arsenal would be the antithesis of any such commitment but went on to say that Republicans needed to "show willing" and make a "substantial move".

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3. General de Chastelain (also on the platform) had previously alluded to the need for the Independent Commission to report regularly to the two Governments and his intention to consider whether such a report would be helpful after a further round of meetings with relevant parties. Michael McGimpsey commented that an "outline" agreement between Martin McGuinness and General de Chastelain on how the decommissioning issue should move forward would enable Unionists to be "more relaxed".

4. In an initially rather defensive contribution, Bairbre de Brun (having reminded everyone that Martin McGuinness was representing Sinn Fein in discussions with the Independent Commission, not the IRA) pointed out that the Agreement did not specify when decommissioning should start. ["The only difference between now and 10 April is that Jeffrey Donaldson was honest enough to walk out when he realised he hadn't got what he was looking for".] She went on to make the point that Sinn Fein had made huge compromises in signing up to the Agreement: the appropriate quid pro quo for the formation of a shadow Executive with Sinn Fein participation was not decommissioning but the fact that Sinn Fein had agreed to participate in a Northern Ireland Assembly and accept the Agreement in the first place. She concluded by reasserting that in Sinn Fein's view the shadow Executive Committee had to be formed before the shadow North/South Ministerial Council could meet, and that the Council had to meet in time to complete the work programme and agree on the initial implementation bodies and areas for co-operation by 31 October.

5. Seamus Mallon, typically, managed to acknowledge both sides of the argument while bringing out the stark point that a win/lose outcome, whichever way it went, would make it virtually impossible to implement the Agreement. On behalf of all the other parties (and the 72% of the population who supported the Agreement in the Referendum) he appealed to both sides to give each other space. Both sides needed to start tunnelling out of the holes they were in. He acknowledged that it might

be possible to find a way round the timetable problem for identifying North/South bodies (a reference to the view that "representatives of the Northern Ireland transitional administration" could be the First Minister and Deputy First Minister supported by an ad hoc group or Committee of Assembly representatives), but observed that this would not say much for the credibility of the political process in Northern Ireland.

6. Billy Hutchinson, endorsed by David Ervine, entered a note of realism by saying that he could not envisage UVF decommissioning before the formation of a shadow Executive Committee and did not believe the Republican leadership could deliver IRA decommissioning on that timescale either.

7. Having, as it were, pencilled in the main features of the issue, the debate also revealed some alternative confidence building measures:

- Michael McGimpsey reiterated the UUP's desire to meet the 31 October deadline for agreeing on implementation bodies and areas for co-operation and asserted that the UUP had signed up for the principle of entering Government alongside Sinn Fein.
- Sean Neeson appealed for an end to paramilitary assaults.
- Bairbre de Brun, as part of a thoughtful and effective second intervention, underscored Sinn Fein's commitment that any Sinn Fein Ministers would carry out their responsibilities conscientiously. This was part of a wider point that the formation of the shadow Executive would enable both Unionists and Republicans to demonstrate that fears on the other side of the community were unfounded: Unionists would thus demonstrate that they really were prepared to share power with Republicans, and Republicans would have the opportunity to demonstrate that they were ready to work institutions of government for Northern Ireland.

- She also glossed her previous position on the timing of decommissioning by acknowledging Seamus Mallon's points and accepting that Sinn Fein, like other parties, had to deal with political realities.

Comment

8. Although the debate started somewhat scratchily (and the Friends of Ireland tendency came in again at the end) the outcome and overall tone was, I thought, relatively encouraging. While David Trimble had begun the weekend by expressing the UUP's inability to move to the formation of a shadow Executive Committee without movement on decommissioning, the final formulation of what that movement had to be was somewhat softer than it had been earlier in the weekend.

9. The UUP's desire to find a way forward on North/South bodies in the absence of a shadow Executive was a constant theme throughout the weekend. (Jeffrey Donaldson assured Tim O'Connor of the DFA over dinner on the Saturday night that there would be "no difficulty" in agreeing on the bodies by 31 October and that he would be entirely happy to see the necessary discussions conducted on the Northern Ireland side by the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and a representative Assembly Committee involving the other Assembly parties.) Seamus Mallon's acknowledge of this kind of possibility could have been significant and was certainly logged by Michael McGimpsey. Obviously, movement here could reduce Republican suspicions of Unionist good faith about implementing the Agreement and possibly improve the prospects for securing "significant movement" on decommissioning.

10. Bairbre de Brun turned in an impressive performance and will have done her own credibility with Unionists no harm, although that may not rub off on her colleagues. While maintaining the party line on

decommissioning, she too seemed to be looking for alternative ways to reassure Unionists of Sinn Fein's good faith.

11. Within the obvious political constraints on both sides, they do seem to be trying.

(Signed)

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