

No fanfares to mark the end of a squalid war

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It was history in the making all right, but more Holywood, Co Down, than Hollywood, California. What right had we to expect a squalid war would come to a conditional end with fanfares, glorious sunsets and dancing in the street?

If there was little sense of occasion in Belfast outside the confines of Stormont, television pictures from Dublin suggested that the much-heralded dropping of the territorial claim to the North had left the populace neither shaken nor stirred.

But David Andrews made a fine speech, despite some overeagerness to thank everyone in sight. He gave the best definition to date of the developing relationship between nationalists and unionists when he said they were "on a continuing voyage of mutual self-discovery".

Cynics will dismiss it as an Iveagh House chat-up line but it is an accurate description of what could happen if the dynamic inherent in the Belfast Agreement comes properly into play.

Mr Andrews also gave a very useful definition of the agreement itself when he said it was "not a blueprint but a framework - a framework for co-operation and common action, for reconciliation, for mutual respect and for partnership".

The sense that the reality of what was going on had still not bitten into the Republic's psyche continued with the low-key, almost apologetic manner in which the Taoiseach announced the demise of the old Articles 2 and 3. But there is a strong case for believing that without his drive, ambition and daring we would not be where we are today. The Taoiseach and his Northern adviser, Dr Martin Mansergh, deserve considerable credit, along with Mo Mowlam, Tony Blair, Gerry Adams and Martin Mc Guinness, for securing the crucial second ceasefire of July 1997.

Perhaps as he made his way through yesterday's epoch-making announcement, the Taoiseach's mind went back to the white-knuckle ride on the way to that cessation, especially the weekend in mid-June 1997 when the IRA killed two policemen in Lurgan, Co Armagh, thereby placing in jeopardy the British government's concession three days before that Sinn Fein would be in talks within six weeks of a renewal of the ceasefire.

Unionists were entitled to some satisfaction over the detoxification of Articles 2 and 3. It was an issue which concerned few of them until it was drawn to their attention. Then it became a shibboleth, not unlike decommissioning in the current phase.

If they had been told in the early stages that the offending Articles would be traded for cross-Border bodies with a multimillion pound budget and an army of bureaucrats beavering away at their tasks, it might have stayed their hand.

There is some scepticism about the nationalist analysis of the peace process but, if it proves correct, the unionists will be accused of making the worst deal since Manhattan was sold to Dutch settlers for \$24.

Little attention was given to London's part of the deal, namely, the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920. In their excellent book, *Explaining Northern Ireland*, John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary pointed out that the 1920 Act expressed "unqualified Westminster sovereignty over Northern Ireland".

Dropping it has made Westminster's sovereignty "clearly conditional upon the consent of a majority of

the people of Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom".

In that sense, Gerry Adams had a point when he said yesterday that the new dispensation represented a "loosening of the knot" with Westminster.

Then the action shifted to room 21 at Parliament Buildings, Stormont, location for the first meeting of the devolved Executive but minus Mr Peter Robinson and Mr Nigel Dodds of the DUP who held a news conference at the same time to explain their absence. One wonders how long they can preserve the cordon sanitaire between themselves and Sinn Fein: perhaps a dinner in Winfield House should be arranged.

After some apparent hesitation, it was decided to admit the cameras to record the moment for history.

The hard financial realities were immediately brought to the attention of Northern Ireland's new rulers. Although the meeting was businesslike, it took place against a backdrop of anxiety with some political insiders even worrying if Mr David Trimble would turn up: he has pulled surprises in the past.

The fate of the new administration may depend, not on the ministers, but on Gen John de Chastelain. His skill and adroitness, not to mention that of his advisers in the two governments, may be tested to the limit in the coming months. The dream that he will emerge mud-spattered from some paramilitary bunker at the start of the new year, to report that the IRA has done the business still looks problematic.

The events of the weekend contributed to the uncertainty: republican sources report there is scepticism about the widespread belief that it was a political necessity for Mr Trimble to set an implicit February deadline for decommissioning to win Saturday's vote. The only explicit deadline in the agreement, republicans point out, is May 2000.

While the comments from "an IRA source" this week expressing concern about fresh preconditions evoked a remarkably relaxed response from the Ulster Unionists, there was nevertheless a disturbing sense that the newly created and fragile trust which emerged from the Mitchell review had suffered something of a setback.

The best reported comment of the day came from a republican who, responding to a question on the decommissioning issue, said: "We'll burn that bridge when we come to it."