

# WHAT NEXT

As the IRA finally begins decommissioning weapons, two commentators give their

## The day Sinn Fein/IRA realised the game was up

By Ruth Dudley Edwards

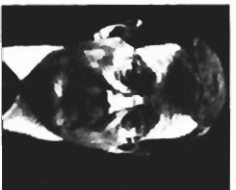
**D**ecommissioning of the IRA's weapons began because of the courage and brains of David Trimble and the implacable hostility to terrorism of the Bush administration. To believe otherwise requires one to be a party for republican propaganda, which is presenting the late, grudging and partial fulfillment of a long-standing obligation as proof of a dewy-eyed and principled commitment to peace.

"Never give a sucker an even break" is the philosophy by which Sinn Fein/IRA have throughout conducted their approach to the peace process and the implementation of the Belfast agreement. The suckers who let them get away with pocketing innumerable concessions without honouring their decommissioning obligations were primarily the British and Irish governments who, along with Bill Clinton, consistently yielded to republican obduracy: threats and misleading promises.

Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness — the able leaders of both Sinn Fein and the IRA — are pragmatists. In their ruthless pursuit of a united Ireland controlled by themselves they are held back by neither old-fashioned republican theology nor the demagogic morality. Had the governments stood by Tony Blair's promise that prisoners would not be released and paramilitary front men would not be in government unless weapons had been put beyond use, violence had ceased and private armies disbanded, then Adams and McGuinness would have compiled long ago: they have elections to win, north and south, and they will do whatever has to be done to win the necessary votes.

But at every stage the suckers blinked first, so to their almost incredulous delight, Sinn Fein were allowed to go into government and their movement flourished electorally by combining democratic flourish with fascist methods: they overtook the SDLP, John Hume's party, through hard work, efficiency, street politics and electoral fraud, while relying on the IRA to provide the useful backup of intimidation, vigilantism, mutilation and — now only occasionally — murder. And steadily, they built up their support in the Republic: a party with a history of murder and robbery shamelessly based its electoral pitch on opposing the financial seize of Flanna Fáil, the party of the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern.

Money was no problem: Irish-American suckers made Sinn Fein — whom they believed post-agreement to be wedded to peace — the richest political party in Ireland. The IRA helped, too, with some of the proceeds of smuggling, racketeering and fraud: Sinn Fein advice centres, staffed mostly by full-time volunteers whose state welfare benefits are



TRIMBLE

augmented by the party, proliferated in deprived areas. And so supine were the suckers that when IRA agents were found buying arms in Florida, the Clinton/Blair/Ahern response was to look the other way. It was not just, as David Trimble once remarked to a storm of protest, that Sinn Fein were not "house-trained"; it was that the governments who were supposed to be training them in the ways of democracy were ignoring the damage that their unreconstructed habits were doing.

Understandably, the Sinn Fein/IRA leadership wanted to hold on to the full apparatus of the IRA for as long as possible: after all, without the threat of the army, the supply of concessions might have dried up. Again, to their incredulous delight, a large number of voters, north and south, seemed relaxed about voting for an armed political party. In September, however, Adams and McGuinness realised the game was up. That they

began to put weapons beyond use was for four main reasons: Trimble is not a sucker; the Bush administration is not gullible; the discovery of two IRA members and one Sinn Feiner training Colombian narco-terrorists infuriated the US State Department; and the atrocities of September 11 made Irish-America

realise what terrorism means in practice. To make the agreement work, Trimble has taken innumerable risks that threatened the very survival of his party. Let down time after time by his own government, which alienated the Unionist community by doing a succession of squalid deals with armed republicans, he finally made a stand which faced Sinn Fein with a stark choice: begin the process of decommissioning or destroy the Northern Ireland Executive.

Adams and McGuinness would have been relaxed about wrecking the agreement if Unionism could be made to carry the can; for Trimble, whom they fear to lose the leadership of his party to his hardliners would be a bonus. But Colombia rattled even their most devoted supporters in the US and the nothing-to-do-with-us-guy line did not wash with US ambassador Richard Haass, already in Ireland on September 11 to tell Sinn Fein that they would be held responsible for what the IRA was up to in the global terrorism network.

When the planes crashed into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the republican leadership realised that only a huge gesture would save their reputation. They began decommissioning to save their financial and electoral necks.

TROUBLED TIMES



DEVASTATED: The aftermath of the



WRITING ON THE WALL: Loyalist ter



CONFLICT: RUC officers do battle

# INTERVIEW?

views on what lies behind the move and where the troubled province goes now

## How the agreement won through despite Trimble

By Brendan O'Leary

The Belfast agreement was achieved through arduous, imaginative endeavour, but was ill received by those for whom Sinn Fein and the IRA could never change their spots — especially English and Irish conservatives.

Implementation has proved harder than conception. Opponents (Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party, the Orange Order, irritated leadership sections of the police and the army, Conor Cruise O'Brien) were predictable. Worst were the dissident Republicans, the Real IRA, authors of the Omagh massacre. Yet the greatest difficulties occurred within four pro-agreement forces.

One: "Yes Unionists." The Ulster Unionists were deeply divided, and in 1998-99 sought to make executive formation conditional upon prior IRA decommissioning. Trimble later abandoned this strategy, but encouraged Peter Mandelson — in breach of the 1999 British-Irish treaty — to suspend the new institutions in February 2000.

The Ulster Unionist Party rejected the Patten report on policing, mandated by the agreement, lobbying for its dilution. Later, Trimble illegally barred Sinn Fein ministers from their duties on the North-South Ministerial Council, and throughout has used the threat or the reality of resignation and withdrawal from the executive to bring Sinn Fein "to heel".

Two: The UK government. Mo Mowlam implemented the agreement in good faith, as did John Reid. Mandelson assumed the right to reinterpret or ignore the agreement, its commissions and the treaty. His mendacious attempts to eviscerate the Patten report encouraged the worst conceptions of UK governments. The UK was understandably slow to move on demilitarisation, given Real IRA and IRA intransigence. Less understandably, it delayed on reform of criminal justice and the police. Its comparative indifference to loyalist breaches of the ceasefire suggested insufficient "rigorous impartiality".

Three: Republicans. Sinn Fein and the IRA insisted others fulfil their obligations on schedule, while negotiating to avoid obligations on decommissioning. They placed a higher premium on organisational unity than on helping pro-agreement Unionists. David Trimble's behaviour and Mandelson's low-life Machiavellianism helped them. Some Republicans favoured a return to war; others tried to keep the war machine humming, hence those Colombian activities.

Four: Loyalists. The Progressive Unionist Party and UDP made no significant electoral gains from the agreement, unlike Sinn Fein. Loyalist leaders ignored the moral high ground of preceding the

IRA on decommissioning, and have latterly exceeded the IRA at intimidation.

Things now look better. The IRA has begun to decommission, satisfying the international commission, doing so in the interests of Sinn Fein, and to save the peace process. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness persuaded republicans that their arsenal serves no strategic purpose.

In summer 2001, Downing Street finally began full implementation of Patten. The UUP denied decommissioning, began undermining the new institutions. Trimble resigned as First Minister, triggering a new set of suspensions, then withdrew his ministers. All looked bleak.

But the fall-out in the US — unauthorized adventurism in Colombia by Irish republicans and September 11 — provided the shift wanted by Sinn Fein's leaders, that the party should replace the army. But what will happen?

The UK government moved fast on demilitarisation. It must stress that a new administration of justice will flourish, and its own part in stabilising the institutions of the agreement.

Hardline Unionists say it is "not enough" but UUP ministers have returned to the executive and may accept that Trimble's actions on the North-South Council were unlawful. If loyalist paramilitaries do not reciprocate, they will be vulnerable to prison recall.

Yet there is a sting in the tail. The Assembly must re-elect new First and Deputy First Ministers, under rules requiring both to be supported by a majority of registered nationalists and Unionists. Two members of the UUP dispute General de Chastelain's assessment of decommissioning, leaving Trimble and Mark Durkan (succeeding John Hume as SDLP leader) short of their majorities.

If the UUP rebels stick, Dr Reid must call assembly elections. In such elections Sinn Fein will probably do very well — as it should in the Republic.

The outcome of elections for Unionists is more problematic, though preliminary decommissioning should assist Trimble's party against Paisley's DUP. Northern Ireland is being transformed, slowly and painfully, through the agreement. Those championing the whole agreement — not just the bits they like — should feel proud. They are its unstung heroes, the SDLP and the Women's Coalition. □

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agh massacre



ist turned artist Michael Stone (right)



loyalists over Holy Cross School