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The Rocky Road to Decommissioning: Revisiting the Decommissioning of Irish Republican Army Weapons Part 1 – August 1994 to October 2001

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ABSTRACT

Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons formed a crucial part of Northern Ireland's peace process. But the decommissioning of Irish Republican Army (IRA) weapons (the most prominent paramilitary group) was protracted prior to their first decommissioning act in October 2001. Some scholars argue Republicans deliberately strung-out decommissioning to gain concessions. Others concur but also suggest additional factors, including Irish Republican anger at the slow delivery of British reforms. Using the latest Irish and UK archival releases alongside memoirs and interviews, I provide fresh insight into IRA decommissioning up to October 2001. The central problem was the initial lack of movement on political and security reforms by the British Government and Ulster Unionists. As the conflict ended in a stalemate, Republicans believed political and security reforms were required alongside decommissioning. The Good Friday Agreement also stipulated that decommissioning would be paralleled by other reforms. This article uniquely explains how a British Government sense of neutrality towards managing the peace process alongside the British Army's reluctance to demilitarise stalled decommissioning. It offers ideas on how *not* to introduce and initially manage decommissioning during peace processes.

KEYWORDS Irish Republican Army; Sinn Féin; decommissioning; peace process; Northern Ireland conflict

Introduction

The decommissioning of paramilitary weapons has formed a crucial aspect of peace processes globally (Mac Ginty, 1999, p.238). Jonathan Powell (chief of staff to Tony Blair's government, former CEO of Inter-Mediate and currently the British Prime Minister's National Security Adviser) believes

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decommissioning can demonstrate non-state armed groups' sincerity towards peace. Nonetheless, disarmament by paramilitaries as a unilateral concession is unlikely if a conflict ends in stalemate. Powell: 'Armed groups always worry that once they have given up their arms ... the government side will fail to deliver' on other reforms (Powell, 2014, pp.272-273, 296-297). In Northern Ireland, Powell recalls security reforms being required to facilitate Irish Republican Army (IRA) decommissioning. The IRA wanted to end 'the presence of the British army ... reform the RUC [the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's previously predominantly British Protestant police force] ... into a more balanced police force with 50/50 recruitment of Catholics and Protestants' (Powell, 2014, pp.297-298). This article argues that the British Government and Ulster Unionist slow implementation of security and political reforms primarily caused the IRA to delay starting to decommission its weapons until October 2001. It demonstrates how peace processes can become deadlocked if decommissioning by paramilitaries is not accompanied by state security reforms. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of paramilitaries is more likely if paralleled by Security Sector Reform (SSR) (Muggah, 2006, pp.192-197). It is contradictory that the British Government did not initially develop a roadmap for SSR to coincide with IRA decommissioning. British assistance to other peace processes on the African continent from the 1990s saw them link SSR with DDR (Bangura, Owusu and Quaye, 2024, p.7).

This article asks: why did it take seven years after the IRA's prolonged cessation in 1994, and three years after the Good Friday Agreement, for the IRA to commence decommissioning in October 2001? With Northern Ireland's peace process studied worldwide for peacebuilding after small-scale conflicts, this case study has wider resonance on how to (and how not to) attempt the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons as part of a peace process (a topic at the forefront of current efforts to end conflicts between Hamas alongside Hizbullah and Israel). I argue that IRA decommissioning was delayed because their opponents (specifically the British Government) did not at first deliver other reciprocal political and security reforms. The release of British and Irish state archival papers alongside new interviewee accounts sheds fresh insight into this area.

The existing literature presents three explanations as to why the IRA did not start decommissioning until October 2001. Whilst accepting the potential for splits within Republicanism before 1998 over decommissioning, authors including Moloney argue thereafter that Republicans held onto weapons to try to squeeze more concessions from their opponents. They suggest 9/11 forced the IRA to start decommissioning (for examples, cf. Moloney, 2007, pp.488-495, 505-509, 516-520, 536-548; J. Bew et al., 2009, 153-157, 160-166, 249; Dixon, 2008, pp.275, 292, 298; Dixon, 2019, pp.114-116, 175; O'Kane, 2007, pp.86-94, 100-101; Mitchell, 2010; Schulze & Smith, 2000). This article disagrees.

Other authors including English, for example, say Republicans felt '[John Major's] demand for prior decommissioning seemed ... a demand for the IRA to admit effective defeat'. The IRA would not acquiesce (English, 2012, pp.288-289). Despite the peace settlement in 1998, the Republican leadership remained 'anxious that neither unionists nor the British were honouring their side of the bargain'. Republicans wanted police and political reform alongside 'demilitarization' because 'decommissioning was part of a wider fulfilment of everyone's ... obligations under the Good Friday Agreement' (English, 2012, pp.326-331). English details six factors that influenced the IRA's incremental approach to decommissioning:

First, the ... destruction of weapons risked giving the appearance ... of surrender ... Second, decommissioning was a demand ... made by the IRA's enemies ... Third ... schism ... might result. Fourth, amid ongoing sporadic loyalist violence, some felt that weapons were required for possible defence. (English, 2012, pp.333-335)

These factors were indeed influential. But English adds:

Fifth ... republicans might ... postpone ... [decommissioning] for as long as possible ... to extract maximum concessions ... Sixth, a refusal to decommission ... generated ... division within Ulster unionism. (cf. English, 2012, pp.333-335; and O'Kane, 2010, pp.166, 170-172)

The latest Irish and UK archival releases suggest that these two reasons are overplayed. But these authors are right to say that whilst 9/11 influenced IRA decommissioning, it merely sped up the process (for examples of this view, see English, 2012, pp.288-289, 325-335, 386; Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, pp.20-21, 30-33, 55-69; O'Donnell, 2007, pp.133-134, 165-185; O'Kane, 2021, pp.62-171; Mac Ginty, 1998).

Within their work on other conflict-related themes, a third group of authors including Maillot and O'Leary briefly suggest that the IRA delayed decommissioning following slow movement by the British and Unionists on demilitarisation, political and policing reforms. Without these changes, Republican leaders struggled to convince their supporters that the conflict was over, and IRA splits might emerge (O'Leary, 2019, pp.161, 206-207, 214-222, 237-252; Maillot, 2014, pp.15-19; Smyth, 2004, pp.545, 564). Nevertheless, their observations were made before recent archival releases up to October 2001. They do not provide detailed analysis of IRA decommissioning, nor explain why the British stalled security reforms. A similar view is presented by Darby and Mac Ginty, but they do discuss decommissioning in detail before 2002. They make important observations including a 'synchronised programme of decommissioning and demilitarisation could have been agreed and prevented the wasteful dispute over IRA decommissioning' (Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, p.182). They recognise that Republicans viewed the British Government as a colonial power and how '[d]espite occasional

protestations to being neutral facilitators, both [the British and Irish] governments were clearly involved in the conflict' (Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, pp.62, 106-108). I concur. But they do not link slow British movement on demilitarisation to London's belief that it was a neutral facilitator. Furthermore, they argue '[m]uch of the peace process could be characterized as a contest between nationalist 'speedy maximalists' and unionist 'slow minimalists'' (Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, p.46, 77). This statement overlooks the British Government's pivotal role in the battle over a rapid or slow implementation of the peace agreement.

This article offers fresh insight on decommissioning by cross-referencing the latest Irish and UK state papers released up to October 2001 alongside interviews with and memoirs by Irish Republican, British Government and other involved but neutral observers of IRA decommissioning. Although IRA decommissioning was completed in 2005, state papers beyond October 2001 are not yet fully available. Consequently, this article focuses on the rocky road to the IRA's first decommissioning act in October 2001. Between August 1994 to October 2001, IRA decommissioning was gradual primarily because the British Government and Unionists did not initially provide schedules for when they would implement reciprocal political and security reforms. Between August 1994 and May 1997, the IRA refused to decommission because the British Conservative Government demanded weapons before talks. The IRA believed – accurately – that they were undefeated (for examples of this view, see Ó Dochartaigh, 2021, pp.195-211; Leahy, 2020, pp.138-248; English, 2012, pp.227-315), and refused to disarm unilaterally. Blair's Government at first accepted that decommissioning should instead happen alongside other reforms, including prisoner releases, police reform, demilitarisation and power-sharing. British and Unionist stalling of the latter three reforms led to the IRA delaying decommissioning. Once the British acknowledged that they needed to do more on these areas by October 2001, the IRA began decommissioning. 9/11 influenced the pace of decommissioning, but the IRA was moving in that direction anyway provided that other reforms were implemented (English, 2012, p.333; Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, p.69).

Republican leaders feared organisational splits and British duplicity if decommissioning was not accompanied by other reforms (English, 2012, pp.333-335; O'Kane, 2021, pp.114-115, 151-152). The British Government did not significantly advance security reforms before 2001 for multiple reasons. Crucially, Major and Blair believed their governments were neutral facilitators of peace, overlooking their role in needing to provide concessions to others. The British Army's ongoing suspicion of IRA intentions stagnated demilitarisation and decommissioning. Unionists resisted specific political and security changes too.

Section one examines the August 1994 and May 1997 period when debates on decommissioning commenced. Thereafter, I explore how a

peace settlement inclusive of Republicans by 1998 saw Republican leaders pledge to decommission if other reforms were delivered simultaneously. Section three argues that little progress initially on police reform, demilitarisation and power-sharing led to the IRA stalling decommissioning until October 2001. It was the British and Irish Governments' Weston Park Agreement in summer 2001 that convinced the IRA to start decommissioning (O'Leary, 2019, p.238; Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, p.56-57). Loyalists and smaller Republican groups were involved in decommissioning too. But IRA decommissioning was the focus. As Harold Good, former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland and an independent witness to the IRA's final decommissioning act in 2005 – explains 'unlike Sinn Féin, none of the loyalist political parties linked to paramilitaries commanded sufficient electoral support to qualify for a seat in the ... [power-sharing] Executive' (Good, 2024, p.132).

Irish and UK state papers including the latest releases have been consulted. These are cross-checked with interviews and memoirs by Republican and British state observers of decommissioning. Interviewees were selected according to their knowledge of decommissioning, or awareness of wider Republican community perspectives about it (inclusive of those opposed to Sinn Féin). Interviewees were granted anonymity (unless they asked to be named) to enable greater freedom of expression. All sources (archival and interviews) have weaknesses, including a tendency to view an opponent's behaviour as manipulative (West et al., 2025, pp.6-10). By cross-checking this rich material, I outline the consensus explanations on decommissioning up to October 2001.

Guns before talks, August 1994 to May 1997

In August 1994, the IRA called a prolonged ceasefire. The IRA's persistent campaign alongside Sinn Féin's sizeable minority of the northern Nationalist vote (approximately 35 percent by the 1990s) could not be ignored if their opponents wanted peace (Leahy, 2020, pp.199-225, 247). One factor motivating a ceasefire was the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993. For the first time, the British Government formally accepted future Irish self-determination. Republicans wanted a single all-Ireland vote to reverse undemocratic partition (Murray & Tonge, 2005, p.188). Nonetheless, they recognised that the British now accepted Irish people – north and south – deciding unification in future separate but concurrent referendums (O'Donnell, 2007, pp.106-117). Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin President at the time, felt: 'for the ... Declaration to address ... Irish national self-determination was a significant departure' (Adams, 2003, p.215). The British seemed willing to provide concessions to Republicans if peace emerged.

As English suggests, the IRA's campaign 'was effectively over' with their August 1994 ceasefire (English, 2012, p.314). If multi-party talks, acceptance

of future Irish self-determination alongside other political and security reforms emerged, the ceasefire would hold (cf. Moloney, 2007, pp.428-439). The IRA and Sinn Féin believed steps towards Irish unity would best achieve equality for Nationalists. That now appeared possible (Ó Dochartaigh, 2021). For all British public protestations afterwards, on 15 September 1994, Sir Patrick Mayhew, Northern Ireland Secretary of State, told colleagues that the IRA's ceasefire statement was 'better than expected' with no preconditions. The honeymoon was short lived. Major's government demanded to know if the ceasefire was permanent. He made a 'working assumption' that it was in October but wanted proof via decommissioning (Major, 2000, pp.459-460).

Major claims Republicans knew before August 1994 that decommissioning was essential (Major, 2000, pp.445, 470-472). Republicans disagreed (Adams, 2003, 272-273). Danny Morrison, former Sinn Féin director of publicity and author, argues Major's demand for decommissioning before talks:

made Republicans suspicious ... decommissioning was ... to humiliate us ... Given the fact that we did not feel we had lost, there was no way we could submit to a process that ... suggested that. (Danny Morrison, interview with author, Belfast, 29 May 2024)

Féilim Ó hAdhmaill, former Republican prisoner and lecturer, agrees: 'If you have not lost, why would you be giving up your weapons to the other side ... when the other side is not giving up their weapons' (Dr Féilim Ó hAdhmaill, interview with author, 9 July 2024). Harold Good recognised the 'key to success' with decommissioning 'was ... devising ... a methodology for the disposal ... that did not look like a surrender by republicans' (Good, 2024, p.134). In a stalemate situation, Republicans saw no need to decommission before others. David Donoghue, a senior Irish civil servant involved in the peace process, agreed that: 'the IRA had not been defeated militarily ... and now the unionists were requiring them, in effect, to come in with their hands up' (Donoghue, 2022, p.29).

From August 1994, Republican leaders were consistent in specifying the main reforms required to convince their supporters that peace was permanent and decommissioning was justified: demilitarisation with a timetable for when British troops would withdraw to barracks and conflict-related security installations would be removed; police reform; the release of paramilitary prisoners; multi-party talks; new political institutions, including cross-border institutions to recognise northern Nationalists' identity; and the principle of Irish self-determination being accepted. A former UK civil servant found that on security 'normalisation ... [Republican leaders] were pretty consistent ... You knew generally before meeting them what they would ask' (Former UK civil servant, interview with author, 30 May 2024). Once these changes were outlined with a timetable, the IRA could decommission

(O'Leary, 2019, pp.146-147, 161, 206-250; Cochrane, 2013, pp.145, 206-208; English, 2012, pp.326-331).

Republicans viewed the British Government as a colonial power who supported Unionism (Murray & Tonge, 2005, pp.187-188; Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, pp.12-16). Asking for guns before talks played into this narrative. Historically, British Protestants arrived in Ireland into the 1600s on behalf of British Protestant monarchs to prevent Irish Catholic rebellions and to rule the island. Republicans saw partition without consent in the 1920s as further colonialism (Adams, 2003, pp.438-439; Adams, 1986, pp.18-20, 39-40, 88-89, 97). In January 1996, Sinn Féin submitted their thoughts on decommissioning to a new international body led by American Senator George Mitchell (later chair of peace talks). They believed Northern Ireland 'was arbitrarily created' to create an artificial 'unionist majority and has been maintained by force of arms'. With self-determination and civil rights denied 'the IRA ... reorganised' in 1969. Republicans stated 'Britain's record in Ireland is not one of peacemaking ... Britain is a protagonist. It is not neutral'. That is why Sinn Féin said: 'disarmament by the IRA is but one strand of demilitarisation ... The British Government's willingness to demilitarise must be made clear' (UKNA, CJ 4/12381, 'Building a Permanent Peace: Sinn Féin Submission to the International Body on Decommissioning', January 1996, pp.5-10, 14, 17, 20, 24-25). They believed that a genuine peace process meant everybody provided concessions (English, 2012, pp.288-289, 325-335, 386; O'Donnell, 2007, pp.133-134, 165-170, 176-185).

Why did Major insist on the IRA decommissioning before talks? The IRA had previously targeted the Conservatives, including via the Conservative Party conference bombing in 1984, killing Ian Gow MP in 1990 and mortaring Downing Street in 1991 (Walsh, 2013, pp.318-319). Unionists were pressurising Major too. An Ulster Unionist Party (the UUP – the leading Unionist party at the time) delegation told British officials on 3 November 1994 that they 'would not sit at any table with Sinn Féin with guns under the table' (UKNA, CJ 4/12192, Keith Jagelman, 'Meeting with UUP Delegation', 3 November 1994, pp.6-7). Major also claimed:

In ... [October 1993], Patrick Mayhew said ... the IRA would have to make available its guns and explosives ... Dick Spring [Irish Tánaiste] ... told the Irish Parliament [in 1993]: 'We are talking about the handing up of arms'. (Major, 2000, pp.470-471)

Various authors concur (English, 2012, p.325; J. Bew et al., 2009, pp.128, 133-140; O'Kane, 2007, pp.81-87; Dixon, 2008, pp.241-252). Nevertheless, O'Donnell points out that British expectations on decommissioning were 'blurred ... the British ... did not emphasize the point ... prior to the ceasefire' (O'Donnell, 2007, pp.130-132). Donoghue believes: 'the disposal of weapons had not been mentioned by either Government in the run-up to the IRA ceasefire'

(Donoghue, 2002, p.29). Albert Reynolds, Irish Taoiseach in August 1994 (Reynolds, 2010, pp.486-487) agreed. Fergus Finlay, advisor to Dick Spring the Irish Labour leader during their coalition governments, adds: 'we ... explained to the British ... again and again ... public demands for [decommissioning before talks] would be seen as tantamount to demanding surrender', something an 'undefeated IRA' would reject (Finlay, 1998, pp.236-237, 288).

Major wanted decommissioning primarily for two reasons. First, by-election defeats and Conservative divisions over Europe meant Major relied on UUP support in Westminster. The UUP sought decommissioning, meaning that Major's government was not impartial (O'Leary, 2019, pp.162, 173-174; O'Kane, 2007, pp.83-93; Dixon, 2008, pp.229-239). In July 1993, Irish Government officials 'warned' their British counterparts about 'the consequences of the supposedly 'neutral' British Government' treating 'Northern Ireland as a political football at Westminster' (Irish National Archives (INA), Justice 2021/103/10, 'Political Talks', 2 July 1993, p.1). Blair believed '[u]nder Unionist pressure, John Major ... agreed ... for the IRA ... to decommission' (Blair, 2011, pp.163-164). Finlay and Ahern agree (Finlay, 1998, p.186; Ahern, 2010, p.176). The second reason is that the British Government saw itself as a neutral facilitator. This perspective ignored how their understanding with Unionists and Britain's role in Irish history suggested otherwise to Republicans. Major claimed 'impartiality': 'Other participants ... could take a partial view ... the British government would not take sides' (Major, 2000, pp.436, 440-441). On decommissioning, Major did take sides.

Republicans would decommission *if* multi-party talks and a timetable for other reforms emerged to demonstrate to them that the conflict was over. On 16 January 1995, Sinn Féin representatives protested to British officials '[Army] patrols had increased in south armagh' (UKNA, CJ 4/12377, Jonathan Stephens, 'Exploratory Dialogue with Sinn Féin: Third Meeting', 16 January 1995, pp.2-4). South Armagh alongside west Belfast and the Bogside in Derry were IRA heartlands (Leahy, 2020, pp.29-48, 81-102, 138-172, 186-191, 238-240). Martin McGuinness felt that the British sought 'the IRA's surrender' before peace talks. He added 'arms [removal was] ... a crucial issue in the proper context ... the removal of the reasons for conflict' (UKNA, CJ 4/12377, Jonathan Stephens, 'Exploratory Dialogue with Sinn Féin: Third Meeting', 16 January 1995, pp.5-6). Throughout 1995, Republican leaders repeated this argument. On 17 March 1995, Adams told the Washington Press Club: '[w]e want a negotiated settlement ... constitutional and political change ... demilitarisation'. On decommissioning, Adams accepted 'decommissioning ... all ... weapons ... British, unionist, loyalist and republican' (UKNA, CJ 4/12372, 'Speech by Gerry Adams at Washington Press Club', 17 March 1995, pp.1-3). He was responding to Mayhew, who, on 7 March 1995 in Washington, revealed three preconditions for the IRA to act on before Sinn Féin could enter talks: accept the principle of decommissioning; create a timetable for

it; and permit some disarmament before talks (CAIN, 1995). Republicans agreed to decommission if the British delivered talks alongside timelines for other concessions. What they rejected was decommissioning before others or prior to a political settlement (Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, 99). Protestant British Loyalist paramilitaries agreed. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) called a ceasefire in October 1994. In December 1994, David Ervine, former UVF volunteer and spokesperson told British officials that ‘resolution of the arms problem was ... down the road; what had to come first was good Government ... building ... trust’ (UKNA, CJ 4/11583, W K Lindsay, ‘Note for the Record: First Meeting of Loyalist Exploratory Dialogue’, 15 December 1994, p.7.). This quote questions Major’s suggestion that Loyalists were more constructive on decommissioning in 1995 (cf. Major, 2000, pp.476-477).

Adams believes ‘negotiation with your own side’ is critical to peacebuilding (Adams, 2003, pp.137-138). Adams and McGuinness had to show Republicans that unarmed strategies produced results. Otherwise, the repeat pattern of Republican splits might reoccur. Splits happened in the 1920s after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, in 1969 over abstentionism and in 1986 after Sinn Féin and the IRA ended abstention to Dáil Éireann (English, 2012, pp.105-108, 250-252). Tommy McKearney, former Republican prisoner, author and dissenter, argues the risk of splits was real: ‘the leadership ... knew decommissioning too early would almost certainly have caused a split’ (Tommy McKearney, interview with author, 20 May 2024). A former UK civil servant felt that before 1998 leading Republicans: ‘were very concerned about taking their movement with them ... they did face genuine constraints’ (Former UK civil servant one, interview with author, 30 May 2024). Dublin felt ‘progress towards all-party inclusive political dialogue must be the first priority’ because that was ‘the only way that Adams can win’ over Republican sceptics (Finlay, 1998, pp.291-292).

With the peace process deadlocked in 1995, the Irish Government grew restless (Walsh, 2013, pp.312, 316-323). The Irish suggested ‘involvement of a third party’ to break the decommissioning impasse (UKNA, CJ 4/12028, ‘Taoiseach’s comments on arms decommissioning’, 9 March 1995, p.1; Finlay, 1998, pp.289-290). With no other strategies working, the British agreed. Senator Mitchell explored how decommissioning could be unlocked. On 10 January 1996, Sinn Féin submitted their thoughts to Mitchell. The IRA would decommission following ‘agreement on ... withdrawal of British troops ... release of ... political prisoners’, police reform and a political settlement (UKNA, CJ 4/12380, Sinn Féin Press Release, ‘Building a Permanent Peace in Ireland’, 10 January 1996, pp.1-2). Mitchell’s report was released on 22 January 1996. An independent commission would oversee decommissioning during negotiations and whilst implementing a peace agreement. In meantime, Mitchell outlined principles of non-violence that all parties had to accept before joining the talks (CAIN, 1996). The IRA had said in December

1995, 'there is no question of ... a surrender of IRA weapons' (UKNA, CJ 4/12380, Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, 'IRA Statement', 8 December 1995, pp.1-2). But they did not dismiss decommissioning (cf. J. Bew et al., 2009, pp.132, 137-138). They just would not countenance it *before* a political agreement. Arms remained in case others did not deliver reforms. Adams:

those who have ... weapons will only be persuaded to give them up when they have confidence ... there is substantial movement on Constitutional issues, on political issues, on broad demilitarisation, on the prisoners' issues. (UKNA, CJ 4/12380, 'Interview with Gerry Adams on RTE Radio 1', 8 December 1995, pp.2-3)

Outside observers agreed. Reflecting in 1998, General De Chastelain, who worked with Mitchell and later the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), stated: 'there was ... willingness to engage in decommissioning, but only after a settlement' (De Chastelain, 1998, p.16).

Major was accused by Republicans of 'binning' Mitchell's report by suggesting an election in Northern Ireland before talks (Adams, 2003, pp.287-288). Finlay agrees that Major 'ignored virtually the entire report' (Finlay, 1998, pp. 300-301; Walsh, 2017, p.61). Republicans feared more stalling tactics. In response, on 9 February 1996, the IRA bombed London Docklands. Powell believed: 'Republicans had been patient for eighteen months ... but ... convinced themselves they needed to give the British government a short sharp shock' (Powell, 2008, pp.85-86). Republicans felt the British needed reminding that a political agreement before decommissioning was non-negotiable. Bertie Ahern believed: 'if the British government had handled the process right ... the ceasefire would never have broken down ... failure to get all-party peace negotiations started 16 months after the initial ceasefire was indefensible' (Ahern, 2010, pp.177-178). O'Leary recalls other 'incidents' derailing the ceasefire. British soldier Lee Clegg was released in July 1995. He had 'served just two years ... for the 1990 murder of a Catholic "joyrider"'. Later in July 1995, clashes emerged during the Orange Order's marching season. Nationalists on the Garvaghy Road in Portadown protested to prevent the march entering their area. The RUC initially agreed. But as more Unionists protested, the march was permitted. In the meantime, there was little movement on reforming the RUC (O'Leary, 2019, pp.160-162).

Continuing the ceasefire without political negotiations was too risky. Sections of the IRA's Executive attempted to remove the leaders that had supported peace, although failed in October 1996 (Murray & Tonge, 2005, pp.193-194). Adams recalls 'Some of the leadership were against a cessation' (Adams, 2003, p.229). In March 1996, a British civil servant noted: 'A ... poll ... suggest[s] ... 85 per cent of delegates [at Sinn Féin's conference] supported ... end[ing] the ceasefire' (UKNA, CJ 4/12375, 'Sinn Féin Ard Fheis', 25 March 1996, pp.1-2). To ignore this growing disquiet risked the Republican leadership being overthrown.

Nonetheless, Republican leaders still sought peace (Powell, 2014, pp.125-127; cf. O’Kane, 2021, pp.76-80; Bew et al., 2009, pp.137-140). Before the ceasefire collapsed, senior Republicans privately contacted Harold Good and other Protestant clergy to request that Major meet with Sinn Féin leaders in London to convince Republican doubters that the peace process remained viable. Good told his British contacts:

we did not see this ... as a threat but ... pleas from those ... committed to the search for peace ... facing the reality that without ... ‘good faith’ from the government there would be those who would take matters into their own hands.

The clergy’s request was refused because: ‘Although John Major personally was not unsympathetic ... he could not proceed with such a meeting owing to pressure from his backbenchers’ (Good, 2024, pp.188-190). In *An Phoblacht*, the Republican newspaper, in March 1996, the IRA wanted peace talks revived but cautioned: ‘There will be no decommissioning ... *The IRA will under no circumstances leave nationalist areas defenceless this side of a final settlement*’ (UKNA, CJ 4/12383, *An Phoblacht*, ‘IRA Says British Good Faith Required for New Peace Process’, 7 March 1996, pp.1-3 (my italics)). One reason the IRA gave for its existence since 1969 was to protect Nationalists from state forces and Loyalist attacks (English, 2012, pp.326, 335; O’Leary, 2019, p.222). McKearney explained: ‘Arms were seen as defensive ... preventing pogroms ... as had happened against the Nationalist community in the 1920s and 1960s’ (McKearney, interview with author, 20 May 2024). Decommissioning may have been symbolic for others. For Republicans, it had to be matched by security sector and political reforms to demonstrate that weapons were no longer required for defensive purposes.

In Mitchell’s report he outlined principles of non-violence for political parties to accept before talks, including agreeing to decommission (CAIN, 1996). In May 1996, Adams supported these principles if Sinn Féin were included in talks. But British ministers remained wary following the IRA’s Manchester bombing in June 1996. Other factors equally influenced British trepidation. In May 1996, UUP leader David Trimble told Major that disarmament should only be delayed for a ‘few ... weeks’ following an IRA cessation. In private, Mayhew admitted: ‘We are coming under unionist pressure’ (UKNA, CJ 4/12255, ‘Cabinet Ministerial Committee on Northern Ireland: Decommissioning: The Way Ahead’, 13 May 1996, pp.1-10). In July 1996, even Loyalists felt the peace process was ‘a sham’ because of the UUP ‘refusing to negotiate with Sinn Féin’ (UKNA, CJ 4/12384, David Campbell Bannerman, ‘Urgent Update on Loyalist Ceasefire’, 24 July 1996, pp.1-3).

Nonetheless, by November 1996, Republican leaders sought a renewed ceasefire if Sinn Féin could enter talks promptly thereafter. Donoghue remembers ‘the republican leadership were keen to restore the ceasefire’ (Donoghue, 2022, p.35). But on 6 November 1996, Taoiseach Bruton told

Major that the British reply and suggestion of a three-month quarantine period for Sinn Féin after a ceasefire 'was not reasonable'. Major remained defiant (UKNA, CJ 4/12387, John Holmes, 'Telephone Call with the Taoiseach', 6 November 1996, pp.1-5). Unionist pressure alongside Major's suspicions towards Republican intentions meant he would not yield. Despite his anti-IRA credentials Finlay became exasperated that Dublin was 'trying to include, they [the British] were trying to exclude. We were trying to make peace among undefeated enemies' (Finlay, 1998, pp.293, 301-302). For Dublin, Donoghue recalls: 'We became less confident that a serious effort to reach a balanced overall settlement would be made ... under this British Government' (Donoghue, 2022, p.35).

Major claims that under Blair conditions to bring Republicans into talks were different (cf. Major, 2000, pp.492-494). Generally, they were not. By May 1997, the IRA persisted (it did so until July 1997). The difference was Westminster arithmetic. Labour's majority did not rely on UUP votes (O'Kane, 2007, pp.100-101). Major also claims peace slowly emerged because the 'problem was too long and bitter' (cf. Major, 2000, pp.493-494). Yet his actions saw decommissioning and peace stall. As Powell suggests 'removing weapons guarantees nothing, because armed groups can always acquire more' (Powell, 2014, p.296). The conditions for agreement on decommissioning were present under Major. His government let the opportunity slip away.

Guns and talks, May 1997–April 1998

On 2 May 1997, Adams congratulated the new Prime Minister Tony Blair, adding: 'Sinn Féin is totally committed ... to a negotiated settlement'. He requested multi-party talks promptly following a renewed IRA ceasefire (UKNA, Prem 49/108, Gerry Adams, 'Letter to Tony Blair', 2 May 1997). Following Blair's assurance of a speedy entry into talks and parallel decommissioning, the IRA called another ceasefire in July 1997. There was not simply a change in style with Blair. The substance of when decommissioning was expected and when Republicans could enter talks differed (O'Leary, 2019, pp.168-170; O'Kane, 2021, pp.128-130; cf. J. Bew et al., 2009, pp.137-140; Dixon, 2008, pp.262-263). The talks also had a deadline which prevented Unionists from engaging in endless negotiations, a key Republican concern (O'Brien, 2019, pp.170-171). As Mac Ginty suggests, Blair offered 'a substantial change' on decommissioning (Mac Ginty, 1999, p.240).

With Labour's majority, they could diverge from Unionists (Walsh, 2013, p.320). The UUP tried to convince Blair otherwise (Kane, 2007, pp.86-87). On 6 May 1997, they still demanded 'a significant tranche of IRA weapons ... decommissioned before Sinn Féin ... join ... negotiations' (UKNA, Prem 49/108, D.J.R. Hill, 'Northern Ireland Political Talks: Resolving the

Decommissioning Impasse', 6 May 1997, pp.3, 8). Later, on 30 May 1997, John Holmes, Private Secretary in Downing Street, advised Blair to accept parallel decommissioning instead because 'Unionists ... are by nature unreasonable' (UKNA, Prem 49/109, John Holmes, 'Northern Ireland', 30 May 1997, pp.3-4). With Dublin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party supporting the Republican position on decommissioning, British options to suggest otherwise were limited. Powell admits pan-nationalist pressure: 'made it clear ... they could not move forward without ... Republicans' (Powell, 2014, pp.27-28; Powell, 2008, p.17). Labour also recognised that decommissioning was not a security necessity. The IRA had various home-made explosives and global contacts for weapons. Mo Mowlam, Northern Ireland Secretary, told Blair that decommissioning was 'a political issue' (UKNA, Prem 49/109, Mo Mowlam, 'Northern Ireland: Moving the Process Forward', 30 May 1997, p.9). Powell agreed (2014, 297). Mowlam also felt leading Republicans 'were serious' about peace (Mowlam, 2003, p.114). Blair concurred (2011, p.164).

Blair's faith in Republicans was repaid. Sinn Féin accepted a political compromise with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. IRA prisoners would be released on license by 2000. Republicans supported Lord Patten reviewing policing. Future all-Ireland self-determination on a north and south separate but concurrent basis was permitted. Power-sharing with a cross-border dimension via the North South Ministerial Council was agreed. To facilitate decommissioning, Republican leaders insisted that the same political and security reforms they had requested since 1994 needed timetables for implementation: demilitarisation, political change and police reform. In return, Republicans accepted the principle of decommissioning. The Good Friday Agreement sought decommissioning 'within two years ... *in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement*' (CAIN, 1998). Donoghue reiterates this exact point (Donoghue, 2022, p.200, 206). Decommissioning would parallel other reforms. It was British and Unionist slow implementation of political changes, RUC reform and demilitarisation that prevented decommissioning by 2000. On demilitarisation, the agreement promised '*a published overall strategy*' (CAIN, 1998). Initially, it was not forthcoming.

The peace agreement did not demand decommissioning *before* power-sharing (Walsh, 2017, pp.61-63; O'Kane, 2010, pp.158-159). The UUP argued otherwise because of Blair's private letter. It was provided to secure UUP support for the peace agreement in April 1998. Trimble claimed Blair's letter said decommissioning must commence before power-sharing (O'Kane, 2021, pp.100-101, 111-112). Blair disagreed; as did the peace settlement (Blair, 2011, p.175). Donoghue said the letter 'had no legal standing' and contradicted the agreement (Donoghue, 2022, p. 244, 262). Rather than Blair deceiving Unionists, they misled themselves (cf. O'Kane, 2021, pp.100-101,

111; Dixon, 2019, pp.272-274). Other British ministers concur. Mowlam: 'Decommissioning was not ... a precondition to ... taking up ... executive office' (Mowlam, 2003, p.227). But she found that 'the British government was not willing to stand up to the hardline element in unionism' (Mowlam, 2003, pp.347-348). Republicans (justifiably) felt that Unionists' guns before government policy breached the agreement (Adams, 2003, p.451).

From May 1997, Republicans continued arguing that decommissioning depended on political and security reforms emerging with a timetable. On 16 May 1997, one British official recognised 'Sinn Fein will look for assurances that the Government is committed to early positive action on prisoners, police reform, demilitarisation'. He explained: 'Sinn Fein needs to be able to demonstrate to its supporters that dialogue with the Government produces results' (UKNA, Prem 49/109, David Brooker, 'Sinn Fein: Meetings with Officials', 16 May 1997, pp.4-8). Donoghue also remembers for Republicans decommissioning required in return 'prisoner release ... serious reform of policing ... 'demilitarisation'' (Donoghue, 2022, p.76). On 27 November, during a speech in Dublin, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said the British Government needed 'a comprehensive plan' for demilitarisation (INA, Taoiseach 2021/99/26, Bertie Ahern, 'Speech by the Taoiseach Mr Bertie Ahern at the Fianna Fail President's Dinner, Burlington Hotel Dublin', 27 November 1997, p.6.). During a meeting with Blair, Mowlam and Alistair Campbell on 27 April 1998: 'Adams and McGuinness ... make clear that change on the ground ... could make a big difference to republican opinion':

they referred to helicopter patrolling in ... Armagh and Fermanagh; the security towers in West Belfast and Derry ... army checkpoints ... at border crossings ... and ... soldiers on the streets in west Belfast and Armagh.

Holmes reflected: 'Adams and McGuinness ... did not make wholly unreasonable demands, concentrating ... on smaller measures' (UKNA, Prem 49/412, John Holmes, 'Sinn Fein', pp.1-4.). British ministers and officials knew what 'smaller measures' Republicans needed before decommissioning. Adams argued:

The lack of progress on demilitarisation ... was putting us under pressure ... We were determined to ... take the gun out of Irish politics, but this needed a collective effort ... so ... those with guns could be persuaded ... they were no longer needed. (Adams, 2003, pp.391, 396-398, 433)

Republicans would decommission if demilitarisation, power-sharing and police reform were actioned (Powell, 2008, p.39). The complex relations between the IRA, Sinn Féin and the wider Republican community meant the Republican leadership felt they had to demonstrate progress. Good reflects from his engagement with Republicans that the 'genius' of the Republican leadership was being able to 'bring their people with them,

even ... doubters' (Fuller, 2023, pp.435). These 'doubters' represent the 'pressure' that Adams mentions.

Republicans' fear of splits remained and caused more perceived 'pressure' (English, 2012, pp.333-335; Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, pp.46, 64-66, 92-94; O'Kane, 2021, pp.114-115, 151-152; cf. Moloney, 2007, pp.488-518; J. Bew et al., 2009, pp.153-158; Dixon, 2019, pp.114-116, 175; O'Kane, 2007, pp.86-101). Mowlam pondered whether this fear 'was a ploy to maximize their negotiating position' (Mowlam, 2003, pp.172-173). The emergence of the Real IRA shifted her opinion in 1997: 'McGuinness and ... Adams had been telling the truth about their struggles to keep the movement together' (Mowlam, 2003, pp.240-241). The Real IRA were a Republican splinter group opposed to the peace process. On 26 February 1998, Taoiseach Ahern told Blair he was 'worried' about the Real IRA (UKNA, Prem 49/407, John Holmes, 'Meeting with the Taoiseach', 26 February 1998, p. 2). Powell confirms Adams and McGuinness wanted 'to avoid ... future splits' (Powell, 2008, p.44). The Republican movement and leadership consisted of various regionally organised components (Leahy, 2020, p.239). As Ó Dochartaigh suggests, the Republican leadership were therefore 'not in a position simply to command ground-level activists to pursue a course of action that they strongly opposed' because the 'movement was always heavily dependent on strongly localised networks' (Ó Dochartaigh, 2015, pp.214-215).

London did not grasp Republican frustrations on decommissioning in part because of a continued belief that they were neutral facilitators. Blair:

you might think [British] involvement relatively selfless: the conflict was the issue in Northern Ireland (no Labour votes there) ... Yet ... the good faith of the government ... was in question. (cf. Blair, 2011, 162)

He was not alone. Mowlam accepted '[w]e are clearly part of ... why the problem exists ... we divided the island' (Mowlam, 2003, p.299). But 'now the British government had to be ... a referee' (Mowlam, 2003, p.164). Powell believed '[o]ur task was to ... be a neutral intermediary' (Powell, 2008, 58). The inability to recognise that Republicans continued viewing the British as a colonial power who deferred to Unionism was a significant obstacle to achieving decommissioning. Blair's government did not fully appreciate that it was a *participant* in the peace process with obligations to fulfil.

From stalemate to breakthrough, May 1998 to October 2001

Prisoner releases were conceded before 2000 alongside the principle of Irish self-determination. With RUC reform, an initial delay was expected. Lord Patten's Independent Commission only reported in September 1999 (CAIN 1999a). Initial minimal policing reform thereafter was the problem.

Power-sharing also did not begin until December 1999, with multiple suspensions afterwards. With demilitarisation, there were some troop reductions and security base closures already (Smyth, 2004, pp.545-546). But there remained no overall demilitarisation plan. British military commanders remained sceptical towards the IRA, delaying demilitarisation. RUC reform and power-sharing was hampered by the UUP. The other factor remained a British sense of neutrality. On decommissioning, Blair believed 'the IRA were ... going to wait to see if the Unionists delivered their side of the bargain' (cf. Blair, 2011, p.189; Dixon, 2019, p.5). Yet Republicans also held onto weapons until the British Government, their principal adversary, delivered 'their side of the bargain'.

Shortly after the peace agreement was signed, Sinn Féin leaders pressed the British to produce a demilitarisation timetable and police reform. Eamonn McKee from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs met with Sinn Féin in Belfast on 27 April 1998. Republicans present – Alex Maskey, Aidan McAteer and Bairbre de Brún – remained 'keen' on demilitarisation. McKee 'had been surprised to see a joint Army/RUC patrol on the Falls Road'. He explained 'Alex Attwood [from the SDLP] reported ... the RUC were seen in [Republican] west Belfast walking down the middle of the road stopping cars ... viewed by locals as an insulting act of bravado' (INA, Jus 2021/108/9, Eamonn McKee, 'Meeting with Sinn Féin in Belfast on 30 April 1998', 1 May 1998, pp.1-2). In response, on 28 May 1998, Irish officials 'underlined the urgency of concrete ... [demilitarisation] steps'. They argued: 'The Agreement sets out a clear obligation on the British Government' to demilitarise. Otherwise, minimal demilitarisation 'will ... be used as a pretext for not decommissioning ... given the consistent Republican emphasis on the linkage between decommissioning and demilitarisation' (INA, Jus 2021/108/9, 'Meeting on Security Strategy Statement', 28 May 1998, pp.1-2). Morrison agrees Republican 'demands for demilitarisation were in parallel' to decommissioning (Morrison, interview with author, Belfast, 29 May 2024). Laurence McKeown, former Republican prisoner and author, concurs: 'If people saw no change ... they were going to say well ... why have we packed it in?' (Dr Laurence McKeown, interview with author, 9 April 2024).

On demilitarisation, the British Army's General Officer Commanding (GOC) urged caution. On 11 June 1998, Irish civil servants wanted 'significant troop withdrawals ... the dismantling of security installations, especially in South Armagh' (INA, Jus 2021/108/9, 'Dinner with the GOC', 11 June 1998, pp.1). Powell observes 'South Armagh ... was home to the most proficient IRA brigade' (Powell, 2008, pp.174-176. See also Leahy, 2020, pp.95-102, 165-173, 186-191). If the IRA there could be convinced that the British were fulfilling the agreement, decommissioning became feasible. Ó hAdhmaill recalls: 'The removal of those installations ... was really important in ... building confidence in those border areas towards the peace process' (Ó hAdhmaill,

interview with author, 9 July 2024). Whilst GOC Rupert Smith accepted troop reductions, he 'drew a sharp line' on 'the South Armagh' watchtowers. He claimed dissident Republicans made demilitarisation difficult alongside 'the risk of a resumption of IRA violence'. On the watchtowers, Smith remarked 'you'll not get me off those hills'. His reluctance was partly motivated after being injured by an IRA bomb there in 1978, which 'would not have happened if the Army forts had been there'. Irish officials challenged him:

We pointed to the chicken-and-egg factor ... the continuing oppressive presence of these installations while an IRA ceasefire is being fully maintained will play into the hands of the dissident groups ... undermining the prospects for lasting peace.

In response, Smith 'emphasised ... his responsibility' to protect British forces (INA, Jus 2021/108/9, 'Dinner with the GOC', 11 June 1998, pp.1-4). A former UK civil servant says his government had to tread carefully: 'to retain the confidence of your ... security forces and their families'. They felt continuing Loyalist and dissident Republican activity alongside the IRA retaining its weapons made a demilitarisation timeline unwise (Former UK civil servant, interview with author, 30 May 2024). In contrast to the peace settlement, the British expected the IRA to advance decommissioning before London produced a demilitarisation plan.

The decommissioning stalemate continued into 1999. IICD representatives met Mowlam on 9 March 1999. De Chastelain said power-sharing and a demilitarisation timeframe were 'key elements ... which Sinn Féin ... expect to see included in any context setting' for decommissioning (UKNA, Prem 49/923, N Perry, 'Meeting with Decommissioning Commission', 9 March 1999, pp.1-4). In April 1999, Adams told Republicans' Easter Rising commemoration 'In the Good Friday Agreement, the British Government committed itself to publicise an overall strategy dealing with the removal of Crown Forces ... We are still ... awaiting ... this strategy' (INA, DFA 2022/45/521, Sinn Féin, 'Gerry Adams Easter Address', 4 April 1999, p.3). The challenges with power-sharing arose partly from Unionism. On 30 June 1999, Alastair Campbell records how Republicans 'were going to make a historic statement' on decommissioning. The UUP were lukewarm. Blair 'was getting close to the view that deep down [the UUP] just didn't want to share power with Catholics'. McGuinness told the British: 'he would decommission 'the day before yesterday' ... but ... their people [were] feeling they were giving all and getting nothing' (Campbell & Stott, 2007, pp.409-414). In contrast, a former UK civil servant felt:

everyone's task including Trimble's would have been so much easier if [Republicans] ... made a few gestures early on ... They were very keen to ask for things, but not so keen to do things ... there remained the risk that they could turn [violence] back on. That made decommissioning the issue that it was. (Former UK civil servant, interview with author, 30 May 2024)

Good suggests ‘republicans [at first] believed that their political interests would be better served by stringing things out indefinitely’ on decommissioning (Good, 2024, pp.133-134). Nevertheless, the Good Friday Agreement stipulated that decommissioning would occur alongside other reforms. Republican leaders could not make significant gestures without reciprocal action by others, or risk splitting the IRA. Meanwhile, other matters disrupted progress. In the summer of 1999, four Republicans were arrested for allegedly gun running from Florida (Powell, 2008, pp.157-158). These incidents assisted UUP refusal to power-share with Sinn Féin before decommissioning. But the UUP disliked various reforms anyway (Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, p.50). In September 1999, for instance, Trimble called Patten’s policing reforms ‘shoddy’ (CAIN, 1999b), raising questions about the UUP’s commitment to police reform (cf. O’Kane, 2010, pp.167-168).

To try to kickstart power-sharing, the peace agreement’s implementation was reviewed by Senator Mitchell in November 1999. He believed power-sharing should commence (CAIN, 1999b). On 17 November, the IRA responded by calling the Good Friday Agreement ‘significant ... its full implementation will contribute to ... lasting peace’. With political institutions forthcoming, the IRA appointed ‘a representative to enter into discussions with’ the IICD (CAIN, 1999c). The UUP’s ruling council supported starting power-sharing on 27 November 1999 by 480–349 votes; questioning Trimble’s previous claim that Unionists needed guns before government (CAIN, 1999b). Power-sharing began in December 1999, although further suspensions followed.

Now, it was primarily slow British demilitarisation that prevented decommissioning (O’Kane, 2010, p.166). In November 1999, Adams told Powell that all Republicans needed was a sense of when total demilitarisation would happen. Powell sensed ‘Adams and McGuinness ... did ... have real problems with the IRA’. He believed further demilitarisation should occur because it was ‘fairly trivial’ if peace was permanent. Powell was sympathetic to Republicans because they ‘had delivered everything’ for Trimble by November 1999 (Powell, 2008, pp.161-164). In 2005, Adams suggested ‘our success can only be judged by the amount of change we bring about’ (Adams, 2005, p.14). Decommissioning was difficult for Republican leaders to deliver before ‘change’ emerged with political and security reforms. The Provisional IRA also came into existence to defend their community. Leaving themselves unarmed before reforms were enacted was unlikely (English, 2012, pp.81-119, 326, 335). Decommissioning was more than just symbolic for Republicans. It was a question of whether the peace process enabled them to feel secure enough to relinquish their weapons. As a former UK security force member recalls:

the visibility of troops on the ground ... was playing against Republican leaders getting the message to their people that there was a new pathway forward ...

when they saw soldiers on the ground ... the watchtowers ... [t]hey would say it was still colonialism. (Former UK security force member, interview with author, 30 May 2024)

Republicans needed demilitarisation to verify British sincerity towards peace. When asked if the wider Republican community were unhappy with the slow demilitarisation after 1998, McKearney commented: 'Of course ... There were still armed patrols, armed policing' (McKearney, interview with author, 20 May 2024). Adams suspected a British 'strategic alliance with unionism' and that they let Unionists 'set the pace' of change (Adams, 2005, pp.63-64). The Blair side letter to Trimble in 1998 alongside the British tolerating UUP resistance to police reforms reinforced this perspective. Republicans kept the IRA armed to ensure that their opponents delivered concessions in practice, not just in principle.

Why did the British hesitate on political and security reforms? First, Trimble remained reluctant to accept changes that could destabilise his party and with which he disapproved (Smyth, 2004, pp.550-555). The UUP as the pro-agreement Unionists could try to veto elements of the agreement that they disliked, citing the risk of DUP gains (who rejected the agreement). In June 1999, Trimble claimed that if the British 'push too far we risk the UUP falling to ... extremists' (Campbell & Stott, 2007, p.410). Mowlam believed: 'unionists ... slow[ed] the process down to avoid outcomes they weren't keen to see' (Mowlam, 2003, pp.267, 348). Nevertheless, Unionists did not control demilitarisation. A timetable for the latter was being delayed due to British military scepticism towards Republicans. Bass and Smith outline how the 'strategic aims' of the British Army's continuing presence after 1998 were 'the termination of the IRA' alongside disrupting dissident Republicans (Bass & Smith, 2004). The British Government's ongoing sense of being a neutral facilitator helps explain why Blair did not initially challenge the Army (cf. Blair, 2011, p.189).

Between 2000 and mid-2001, little progress emerged. In January 2000, the IRA's new year statement condemned Trimble for publishing a power-sharing resignation letter just in case the IRA did not decommission in a few weeks. They also criticised the British, noting the 'failure ... to ... implement ... demilitarisation' (CAIN, 2000a). By 11 February 2000, with no IRA decommissioning commencing, Peter Mandelson, Northern Ireland Secretary, unilaterally suspended power-sharing. The executive remained suspended until 30 May 2000. But Powell sensed a demilitarisation timetable could kickstart decommissioning. On 10 April 2000, Powell, Blair and Mandelson met British Army and RUC leaders. Powell found British General Wheeler 'outspoken': 'He ... could not remove the towers in South Armagh while the dissident threat remained'. In contrast, Powell found RUC 'Chief Constable ... Ronnie Flanagan ... more reasonable, but his force did not run the towers'. He was

shocked that Blair 'didn't try to overrule the military'. Powell reflected: 'It made me see the army in a new light. I did not like their attitude ... in a democracy, the army ... do what the politicians decide'. He believed '[c]hanging the attitude of [Republican] people' required 'reducing ... army patrols ... removing the towers' (Powell, 2008, pp.174-177). In contrast, a former UK civil servant empathised with the Army's predicament because the IRA 'were still training ... targeting' (Former UK civil servant, interview with author, 30 May 2024). The peace agreement, however, proposed a security normalisation plan being delivered by 2000. Its absence prevented decommissioning.

Powell was left having to 'woo' British commanders to try to obtain more on demilitarisation. On 17 April, he met McGuinness and Adams in west Belfast: 'McGuinness gave me a list of military installations they wanted taken down ... on ... Divis ... flats ... the towers in the walls of Derry and ... in South Armagh'. But: 'Tony [Blair] ... moved slowly ... allowing pressure to build up on the military ... so he did not have to confront them ... it left me in a very difficult negotiating position ... with ... Sinn Féin' (Powell, 2008, pp.176-178). This quote raises questions about British government and military power dynamics. Smyth points out it was a relatively new phenomenon for the British military and government to contextualise security considerations politically on Republicanism (Smyth, 2004, pp.545-549, 559-563).

To move matters forward, on 6 May 2000, the IRA pledged to 'initiate ... completely and verifiably' putting 'IRA arms beyond use'. Beforehand, 'the IRA ... agreed to ... confidence-building measure to confirm that our weapons remain secure'. International figures – Cyril Ramaphosa (former ANC General Secretary now South African President) and Martti Ahtisaari (former Finnish President) – would inspect IRA weapons. The IRA remained adamant that 'the British government fulfil their commitments' (CAIN, 2000b). Power-sharing recommenced on 30 May 2000 (CAIN, 2000c). The IRA permitted arms inspections.

Now, Republicans expected a British demilitarisation plan. On 4 July 2000, Adams told Blair that with 'demilitarization ... there appears ... a minimalist approach ... your government is not keeping its side of the deal' (UKNA, Prem 49/1462, Gerry Adams, 'Letter to Tony Blair', 4 July 2000, pp.1-2). On 5 July 2000, Powell outlined to Blair how on 'demilitarisation I have bullied the army' into removing more security infrastructure. But 'we will need further steps' (UKNA, Prem 49/1462, Jonathan Powell, 'Northern Ireland', 5 July 2000, pp.1-2). The British Army remained cautious. On 10 July 2000, Lieutenant General Sir Hew Pike wanted further changes in south Armagh delayed because of dissident Republicans (UKNA, Prem 49/1462, Lieutenant General Sir Hew Pike, 'Letter to Peter Mandelson MP on Borucki Sangar', 10 July 2000). However, dissident activity was limited there, questioning his

reasoning (CAIN, 2000c). Powell pleaded with Blair, warning that future meetings with Republicans ‘will be a disaster’ (UKNA, Prem 49/1462, Jonathan Powell, ‘Northern Ireland’, 10 July 2000). His apprehensions were accurate. McGuinness met the Northern Ireland Secretary in August 2000 and ‘became increasingly heated in his denunciations of [British] ‘inaction’ ... on demilitarisation’ (UKNA, Prem 49/1465, Nick Perry, ‘Meeting with Martin McGuinness’, 25 August 2000, pp.1-4). Later, in winter 2000, Powell recalls that ‘Adams walked out of ... [a] meeting because I couldn’t reveal what we would do on demilitarisation’. ‘Tony’, Powell writes, ‘was ... making my life a misery’. Mandelson was also ‘very reluctant ... [on] security normalisation’ (Powell, 2008, pp.183-184), ignoring how the peace agreement pledged demilitarisation alongside decommissioning. By December 2000, Adams told Blair there remained ‘huge gaps still on important issues – policing, demilitarisation’. On normalisation, Adams sought ‘a beginning, a middle and an end’ (UKNA, Prem 49/1473, Michael Tatham, ‘Telephone Conversation with Gerry Adams, 22 December 2000, pp.1-2). There was no unrealistic expectation of instant demilitarisation. In late December, the British provided their plan. The catch was that the IRA had to decommission some weapons beforehand (Powell, 2008, p.186). Again, the Good Friday Agreement stated otherwise. Demilitarisation and decommissioning were supposed to be delivered simultaneously. Demilitarisation delays convinced Adams that ‘securocrats’ were at work: ‘Britain’s various military and intelligence agencies. Their idea of peace was the defeat of republicanism’ (Adams, 2003, p.213).

Republican concerns remained about splits emerging if decommissioning came before a demilitarisation timetable. Anthony McIntyre, former Provisional turned critic, wrote in February 2000: ‘the leaders do what they can get away with before their ... bases pull them back into line’ (McIntyre, 2008, pp.61-62). McKearney concurs ‘there was opposition ... people took a lot of persuading’ (McKearney, interview with author, 20 May 2024). Supporters of the movement agree. Morrison: ‘I was a supporter of the Republican movement ... I took some convincing’. He saw decommissioning as a ‘very difficult decision that probably contributed to some people walking away’ (Morrison, interview with author, Belfast, 29 May 2024). For McKeown, Irish history showed how ‘quickly splits could happen’. He believes ‘when people did leave that was partly because of daily constant stuff on the ground in ... local areas’ (McKeown, interview with author, 9 April 2024). British security patrols and infrastructure remaining constituted this ‘daily constant stuff on the ground’. Resolving demilitarisation would reduce the risk of splits. Loyalist activities against Nationalist also remained (CAIN 2000c). Republicans required political and security changes to demonstrate that they could be protected without weapons. Otherwise, fear remained about the repetition of Loyalists burning out some Nationalist houses as

had occurred in Belfast in 1969 (Smyth, 2004, pp.554-555). McKeown recounts:

I was in Clonard hall in Belfast for an update on the peace process ... There were various old guys present ... They said ... do not give up the guns ... leaving us defenceless like we were in 1969 ... When people decided to join the IRA, it was not just about troops coming in. It was ... the experience of 1969.

McKeown adds that 'confidence building measures ... allowed people to see ... things were changing', making decommissioning feasible (McKeown, interview with author, 9 April 2024).

Reasons for British insistence on decommissioning prior to demilitarisation plans remained similar. As Unionists were the majority in 2000, the path of least resistance for the British Government was placating them by delaying certain reforms. Crucially, divisions within the state were evident into 2001. Blair's fears about confronting the military alongside the government's sense of neutrality allowed the military to determine demilitarisation. In January 2001, Blair met with GOC Irwin and RUC Chief Constable Flanagan. He was: 'very upfront ... about wanting to concede something on ... demilitarisation ... but ... if they had genuine security concerns, he would not press' (Campbell and Stott, 2007, p.490). Blair overlooked that the IRA kept its weapons because it believed the British Government and military would resist demilitarisation for colonial reasons.

Early 2001 enhanced IRA concerns about weapons being needed to defend their community. On 5 February 2001, Loyalists bombed a Nationalist home in north Belfast. And on 19 June 2001, the Catholic Holy Cross Girl's Primary School in Ardoyne faced Loyalist protests. The Loyalist blockade there lasted until 29 June 2001, resuming in September 2001 (CAIN 2001a; Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, pp.62-64). De Chastelain told British officials in July 2001 he: 'doubts whether the IRA are likely to make a major move now ... with the situation ... in North Belfast' (UKNA, Prem 49/2162, Bill Jeffrey, 'Conversation with John De Chastelain', 31 July 2001).

Despite the gloomy context, the IRA put some weapons beyond use in October 2001. What had changed? Multiple authors cite the arrests of Republicans in Colombia on 13 August 2001. The speculation was that they had visited FARC members to share expertise (CAIN, 2001a). More importantly, 9/11 saw the US Government turn against armed groups (Moloney, 2007, pp.489-491; O'Leary, 2019, pp.238-239; Bew et al., 2009, pp.244-245). Powell suggests 'the IRA would have decommissioned even if there had been no 9/11 ... But events in New York speeded up the process' (Powell, 2008, pp.202-203). McIntyre agrees: '[w]hat changed everything was ... September 11th' (McIntyre, 2008, p.65). With the Colombia arrests, similar arrests in Florida in 1999 did not result in the IRA decommissioning. 9/11 was

influential, but not the determining factor (English, 2012, pp.333-336; O'Kane, 2021, pp.134-135).

The crucial factor was the Weston Park Agreement in 2001. It tried to resolve disagreements about the delivery of reforms (Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, pp.56-57). Talks took place in Weston Park in England between 9 and 14 July 2001. After meeting all parties, the British and Irish Governments announced that they would resolve outstanding issues on 1 August (CAIN, 2001a). The British claimed that they had 'taken ... significant normalisation measures' but conceded 'the pace ... remains ... contentious' (UKNA, Prem 49/2158, 'Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement', July 2001, pp.1-3). They reaffirmed their willingness to implement:

the Patten Report ... normal security arrangements ... In the event of a significant reduction in the level of threat ... [there will be] demolition of the super-sangar at Newtownhamilton Police Station ... demolition of Magherafelt Army base; demolition of the observation tower on Sturgan Mountain; demolition of one of the observation towers on Camlough Mountain ... Both Governments reaffirm ... full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is a collective responsibility. (CAIN 2001b)

This agreement gave momentum to decommissioning. A former UK security force member and civil servant viewed this agreement as 'important' because 'Weston Park ... help[ed] [Republicans] see there would be earnest in labour' if they started decommissioning (Former UK security force member, interview with author, 30 May 2024). For Brown and Hauswedell, it recognised publicly that 'joint action' by *all* parties was required (Brown & Hauswedell, 2002, pp.56-57).

The IRA's response was swift. On 6 August 2001, De Chastelain announced an IRA proposal that 'will put IRA arms completely and verifiably beyond use' (CAIN, 2001a). An IRA statement on 9 August agreed the method for decommissioning (CAIN, 2001c). The Weston Park agreement had pleased Republican leaders with its promises to fully deliver 'all four outstanding issues – policing, normalisation, the stability of the institutions and decommissioning' (CAIN 2001b). Policing changes would continue, albeit not initially to Republican satisfaction. But as the SDLP and Irish Government supported the policing plan announced on 17 August 2001 (CAIN, 2001a), Sinn Féin lacked a veto. On demilitarisation, there remained no end date outlined but the British provided more specific changes and could be held to account. Ó hAdhmaill suggests Republican leaders had to keep things moving forward: 'The longer [the peace process] stalls, the more likelihood that people might join one of the dissident groups'. 'Republicans', he explains, 'saw themselves as ... the ones that wanted changes ... who had to push things' (Ó hAdhmaill, interview with author, 9 July 2024). Sometimes that meant acting first if their leaders were convinced that the British and Unionists would reciprocate.

It still was not a smooth path to the October 2001 decommissioning event. The UUP rejected the IRA's August statement. Republicans temporarily withdrew their offer (CAIN, 2001d). But by 20 September 2001, the IRA re-engaged with the IICD. They expressed 'sympathy' with America, acknowledging 9/11's influence. At the same time, the IRA reiterated: 'Progress will be directly influenced by the attitude of other parties ... especially ... the British Government'. '[P]eace making' was 'a collective effort' (CAIN, 2001e). IRA decommissioning had to be matched by British and Unionist actions on power-sharing and demilitarisation. On 8 October 2001, De Chastelain told British officials that 'the IRA were serious' (UKNA, Prem 49/2162, William Fittall, 'IRA Meeting with De Chastelain Commission', 8 October 2001, pp.1-2). He was right. On 22 October 2001, Adams publicly asked the IRA to commence decommissioning. A day later, the IRA said decommissioning had begun (CAIN, 2001f). The IICD were satisfied (CAIN, 2001g). Despite some UUP members fearing a 'one-off gesture', Trimble temporarily returned to power-sharing inclusive of Sinn Féin (CAIN, 2001a).

The urgency for further demilitarisation remained. In south Armagh in December 2001, scuffles between Republicans and British forces arose during a Republican demilitarisation protest (CAIN, 2001a). A local farmer whose land was 'overlooked' by a watchtower in October 2001 voiced his anger: 'The government talks about decommissioning and demilitarisation – so what is this monstrosity doing here?' (*The Guardian* 2001). The need for more demilitarisation remained across Republican areas (Nash et al., 2013, pp.109-144).

Conclusion

By 1995, Republican leaders accepted that decommissioning was needed to obtain Unionist and British state acceptance of an inclusive peace settlement. But Republicans required their adversaries to commit to a peaceful co-existence via a demilitarisation timeline, police reform, prisoner releases, accepting the principle of Irish self-determination and new political institutions. The IRA disputed the sequencing of when decommissioning would happen. Major's government wanted guns before talks until January 1996, partly as they relied on the UUP's support in Westminster (O'Leary, 2019, p.162, 173-174). Major also genuinely thought that the British were neutral facilitators of peace. Asking the IRA to unilaterally decommission consolidated Republican's colonial perspective of the British Government. The IRA returned in protest between February 1996 and July 1997.

Initially, Blair accepted decommissioning during and after peace talks inclusive of Sinn Féin, if the IRA returned to ceasefire. The IRA obliged. The Good Friday Agreement saw Blair's government accept that decommissioning would be accompanied by political and security reforms. The British

accepted prisoner releases and the principle of Irish self-determination but stalled other reforms. In retaliation, the IRA delayed decommissioning until October 2001. Whilst police and political reform was influenced primarily by Unionists, the British military stalled demilitarisation due to distrusting IRA intentions. Blair initially avoided challenging the Army. What facilitated decommissioning in October 2001 was 9/11 and, more crucially, the Weston Park Agreement. The British finally signalled that they would address their obligations on demilitarisation. To fully comprehend why the IRA finished decommissioning in 2005 we must await further Irish and UK state archival releases.

This case study provides ideas about how to start decommissioning following small-scale conflicts; with the caveat that as Donoghue observes ‘no two conflicts in the world are identical’ but ‘some elements and principles ... are of near-universal value’ (Donoghue, 2022, p.267; see also J. Bew et al., 2009, p.239; Powell, 2011, p.21). I offer five reflections. These are timely given that decommissioning of armed groups forms part of current international discussions to end conflicts involving Hamas and Israel in Gaza (with Hamas reportedly accepting decommissioning certain weapons) (*Al Jazeera*, 2025a), Hizbullah, Lebanon and Israel (Hizbullah recently rejected disarming unilaterally) (*Al Jazeera*, 2025b), and the disarming of the Kurdish PKK involving Türkiye (*Middle East Eye*, 2025). As Powell is the British Prime Minister’s National Security advisor, his Northern Ireland experience may influence British policy on decommissioning processes elsewhere too.

First, international facilitators in Northern Ireland made decommissioning possible (Walsh, 2017, p.79, 180; Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, pp.81-82, 172). Powell found ‘it useful to have independent bodies to referee particularly difficult aspects of the process’ (Powell, 2008, p.319). Walsh points out the secrecy the IICD maintained enabled the IRA to see decommissioning as a goodwill gesture (Walsh, 2017, pp.67-68, 74). The ‘independence’ of third parties allows them to create fair assessments to resolve controversial areas (Powell, 2011, pp.23-24). McKeown found: ‘international personnel ... are people with integrity ... They ... understood Republicans could not accept ... handing over weapons to the Brits’ (McKeown, interview with author, 9 April 2024). Good agrees that trusted independent ‘honest brokers’ made decommissioning possible (Fuller, 2023, p.434). The British Government should have empowered international observers to create timetables for demilitarisation at an earlier stage alongside decommissioning (Walsh, 2017, pp.69-70, 180-188).

Two, from a security perspective decommissioning is symbolic. McKearney states: ‘decommissioning is a gesture ... Unfortunately, there are too many weapons available in the world ... If either community in Northern Ireland wished to re-arm they could do so’ (McKearney, interview with author, 20 May 2024). Powell agrees (2014, pp.296). Hence:

decommissioning ... is ... normally best at the end [of a peace process] ... when there is agreement on security sector reform ... If you have a complete disparity between the military, who ... stay in place with their weapons, and rebels who, though not defeated, are asked to ... hand in their arms, you are unlikely to have a lasting settlement. (Powell, 2014, p.291)

The IRA saw 'complete disparity' when asked to relinquish weapons 'though not defeated', whilst British Army patrols and security infrastructure remained (Walsh, 2017, p.74).

Third, decommissioning and other reforms should be delivered in parallel. With this conflict persisting over twenty-five years (and arguably centuries), trust between opponents remained low in 1998. For Powell: 'The easiest way to destroy ... trust ... is to break your promises' (Powell, 2014, p.104). He accepts: 'Neither side wanted to go first because they doubted the other side would deliver the reciprocal gesture ... Nor were the government entirely blameless' (Powell, 2008, p.315-316). He adds: 'You cannot have one side waiting for the other to do everything' (Powell, 2014, p.292). Despite the peace agreement stipulating demilitarisation should parallel decommissioning, the British did not initially deliver a demilitarisation timetable (O'Leary, 2019, pp.249-250; Powell, 2014, p.292). As Ó hAdhmaill argues: 'If people are going to give up their weapons ... They have to trust in the new system' (Ó hAdhmaill, interview with author, 9 July 2024). Brown and Hauswiedell accurately argue the British Government and Unionists took a 'partisan approach' to IRA decommissioning that did not 'address' Republican 'security concerns' and 'deepened ... mistrust between the parties' (Brown & Hauswiedell, 2002, pp.55-56). As Mac Ginty and Darby suggest 'a graduated and synchronised programme of decommissioning and demilitarisation could have been agreed' early on (Mac Ginty & Darby, 2002, pp.181-182). Muggah's research on DDR and SSR on the African continent concurs that decommissioning is best at the end of peace processes, when other political and security reforms are outlined via timetables. Otherwise, armed groups are reluctant to decommission. As Muggah concludes, it is vital to ensure 'linkages between DDR, weapons reduction and SSR' (Muggah, 2006, p.194). For Bangura *et al.*, the 'DDR' of paramilitaries 'is intimately linked to SSR' (Bangura, Owusu and Quayle, 2024, pp.10-11).

Fourth, governments need to understand their opponents' worldview if they want decommissioning. Finlay reflects that '[t]here had to be an effort ... [to] see things from' an armed opponents' 'perspective' to find ways to create a political and peaceful way forward (Finlay, 1998, pp.181-182). Republicans never viewed the British as neutral. They viewed them as a colonial power that sided with Unionism (Mac Ginty and Darby, 2002, p.106). Major's approach to decommissioning reinforced this perspective. As did Blair initially by allowing Unionists to insist on guns before government in 1998 and permitting the British Army to delay demilitarisation. Greater

appreciation of Republican psychology would have meant London realising that SSR and political reform were required to unlock decommissioning.

Finally, '[b]oth armed groups and governments have hardliners and moderates ... talking is a way of empowering the moderates' (Powell, 2014, p.349). Frequent splits within Republicanism historically made it understandable that leading Republicans were wary of doing anything that might spark division again (English, 2012, pp.333-335). One way to help to prevent an armed group committed to peace from splitting is to provide reciprocal reforms whilst they decommission.

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