



COLLAPSED OR SUSPENDED? YOUR Choice



Introduction

72 days. That's all it lasted. Half the time of Sunningdale, the last power-sharing Executive in 1974-75.

The two worst episodes of violence this decade - Angola in 1993 and Rwanda in 1994 - resulted from the failure to implement peace agreements. Most people in Northern Ireland recognise the seriousness of our situation but are adamant that the violence of the past has no place in the future. There is very little support for dissident paramilitaries. Nonetheless the suspension of the Executive has made all our lives less certain.

The suspension of Devolved Government was not only about decommissioning. It happened because Unionists and Republicans do not know or trust each other. Their leaders began to speak to each other only in recent months, and their wider constituencies have yet to start. If we don't talk to each other we won't understand each other. If we don't understand each other we won't be able to handle our differences. If we can't handle our differences we won't live in peace.

A. Perceptions about the suspension of the Executive

Some Unionist perceptions:

- We tried. We reached out to Sinn Fein. We took them at their word. That's it. There's nothing more we can do.
- You can't be in government and at the same time part of a private army. It's as simple as that.
- Every other party to the Agreement fulfilled their obligations - setting up the Executive, North-South bodies, early release of prisoners, the Patten Report, etc - but still the Republicans refused to start decommissioning.
- They set David Trimble up: Adams said, 'Let's jump together'. Trimble jumped. Adams didn't.

Some Nationalist perceptions:

- David Trimble broke the Agreement by imposing a deadline which is not in it.
- The British Government gave into the Unionist veto just when Sinn Fein had persuaded the IRA to make a significant move on arms. For one side to break an international treaty was illegal.
- Under the Agreement it is General de Chastelain, not the Unionists or the British Government, who judges progress on decommissioning.
- The IRA are an undefeated army. They are not going to jump at the whim of Unionists.
- The Unionist delay in setting up the Executive undermined the trust of Nationalists, and without this decommissioning can never happen. The Unionist argument that decommissioning should precede the Executive was not part of the Agreement.

Some other perceptions (shared by some Unionists and Nationalists):

- The IRA will have to decommission some time. Why don't they do it now? A gesture could have saved the Executive.

- If the war is over why do the IRA want guns?
- If Unionists had waited till 22 May to pull the plug on the Executive they would have had a better case because this deadline is in the Agreement.
- It was a serious error by the two Governments to exclude the smaller parties from recent negotiations.

B. Questions

For Unionists:

- What do you mean by decommissioning? How would it help your security?
- Why do you want decommissioning?
- To show the war is over? or
- To get rid of illegal weapons? or
- As a recognition by Republicans that their violence was illegitimate?
- Are there other ways of knowing that violence is over?
- Do you know why Republicans find decommissioning so difficult? When did you last ask a Republican about this?

For Republicans:

- Can you be in government and be perceived to be linked to a private army?
- The people of Ireland rejected violence in the referenda, so what legitimacy has the IRA? To whom is it accountable?
- The Governments in Dublin, London and Washington will not last for ever. Are Republicans likely to find leaders easier to work with in the future?
- In the real politics of Northern Ireland is it realistic to believe that Sinn Fein can be part of a sustained power-sharing government in the absence of decommissioning?

For All:

- Given the sacrifices made to reach the Agreement was it worth having it suspended over decommissioning?
- In what ways has your community hurt or undermined the trust of others?
- What for you are the advantages and disadvantages of Direct Rule over Devolved Government?
- What are the likely consequences of a long period of Direct Rule?
 - in practical decisions about hospitals, roads, etc?
 - if there is a long political vacuum and we head into another contentious summer?
- How will we get back to the Executive?
- Can you think of a new Agreement acceptable to both Unionists and Nationalists?

D. Options for the future

- What are they?
- Which is your preferred option? How likely is it?
- What is your least preferred option?
- What can YOU do to bring about what you see as a better option?

Conclusion

Now that the Executive has been suspended we can either go into blame mode, which won't help anyone. Or we can try to overcome our differences.

- Most Unionists and Loyalists want devolved government but they cannot have it without Nationalists.
- Most Nationalists and Republicans want devolved government but they cannot have it without Unionists.
- Each side needs the other. Each side can veto the other. The only way either can go forward is together.
- The suspension of the Agreement can be short or long. The last suspension of a devolved government was followed by 25 years of violence.
- Many people felt the Executive was doing a good job. For them it made a difference to have Ministers directly accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. Politicians, however, cannot operate in a vacuum: political society depends on civic society.

So: what do **YOU** want?

Remember: it is up to us to make the future!

WHAT IS COMMUNITY DIALOGUE?

Community Dialogue is made up of community workers from across the divide. As a group we do not take positions on political issues. However, if we want to make peace in Northern Ireland we have to talk. Not just any old talk: rather talk that involves questioning ourselves, listening to others, and trying genuinely to see new angles on things.

We invite you to make your voice heard. Why not discuss the questions in this leaflet with your friends or work colleagues? You could also invite people from backgrounds different from your own to join you in discussion. If you wish, you can send your answers, ideas and other suggestions to us at Community Dialogue and we will send them on to the relevant authorities, or politicians.

Remember: it is up to us to make the future!

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