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Irish

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Weapons and words

In mid-February, however, Peter Mandelson, the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland, unilaterally suspended the power-sharing assembly set up under the Good Friday Agreement. That government had existed for little more than two months. As the primary reason for his move, Mandelson cited the fact that David Trimble, leader of the province's primarily Protestant Ulster Unionist Party, was threatening to resign from the government because the IRA had yet to hand over any of its weapons.

"It was a painful decision, and one which I recognize was unpopular amongst many republicans and nationalists," Mandelson wrote in an article published in the Feb. 21 issue of Newsweek magazine. "But the sad fact is that the decision was inevitable. Because just as both traditions have suffered during the long years of violence in Northern Ireland, so too must both traditions have confidence in the future."

In a phone interview from her Virginia office, Anne Smith, North American representative of the Ulster Unionist Party, the largest pro-British party in Northern Ireland, said unionists do appreciate the five-year IRA cease-fire. However, unionists feel they have compromised enough with Irish republicans on such issues as the release of imprisoned paramilitaries, and they now want to see real evidence of the IRA's intent to disarm — namely, a disposal of weapons.

She added that her party also supports the disarmament of paramilitary factions that support union with Britain.

"As far as we're concerned, a terrorist is

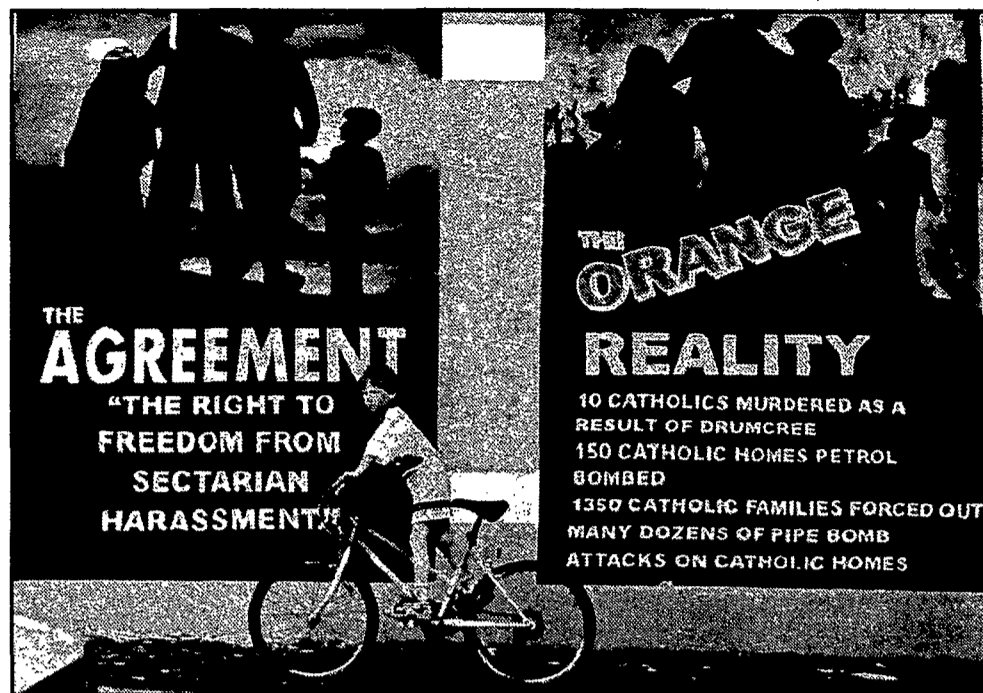
a terrorist," she said. "And they've got to give up their weapons in a democracy."

But leaders of Sinn Fein, the primarily Catholic nationalist political party tied to the IRA, cry foul when unionists like Smith call for IRA disarmament. Such leaders note that the Good Friday Agreement did not impose any obligation to disarm before a government could be established. Indeed, although the IRA has participated in negotiations regarding the decommissioning of weapons, it never actually said it would disarm. However, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams also said that the IRA was on the verge of a significant move regarding disarmament just before the suspension, but that Britain's action rattled republicans' belief in unionist and British good will.

In particular, Sinn Fein believes that the unionist call for decommissioning of its arms is merely a ploy to forestall any kind of power-sharing in Northern Ireland, according to Rita O'Hare, Sinn Fein's representative to the United States. In a phone interview from New York City, O'Hare sharply criticized the unionists for their stance on weapons decommissioning. The IRA is an undefeated army, she said, and involuntary disarmament is tantamount to humiliation and surrender.

"(Decommissioning) is the perfect weapon to stall off democracy and to stall off change," she said, adding that unionists don't give enough credit to the IRA for its five-year cease-fire. "(The unionists) don't want to share power. They don't want to give up what they see as their domination of the six counties."

Although Smith maintained the IRA has more weapons than any other paramilitary group in Northern Ireland, O'Hare argued that most of the legally owned private weapons in the province (estimated at about 140,000) are in Protes-



Reuters/CNS

A mural in a nationalist area of Belfast July 5, 1999 indicates ongoing hurdles in the implementation of the peace plan for Northern Ireland.

tant hands, and that Catholics have greater difficulty getting gun licenses.

U.S. Rep. Jim Walsh, a Syracuse Republican, co-chaired a Congressional delegation that accompanied President Bill Clinton to Northern Ireland in 1995. At a recent forum on the Irish peace process held at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, Walsh said the IRA would never hand its weapons over to the British Army or the Northern Irish police. However, he said the IRA has stated it would "put them out of use."

Smith noted that her unionist party would be willing to accept the IRA giving up its weapons to a neutral observer who could verify the process.

Niall O'Dowd, founding publisher of both Irish America magazine and the New York City weekly Irish Voice also spoke at the Geneva forum Feb. 28.

"I do think the war in Northern Ireland is over," O'Dowd said. He added that while he's sure the IRA will never hand over its weapons, Sinn Fein has come too far politically to ever resort to violence again.

"What they have found out is that politics works better than violence," he said.

Hope springs eternal

One factor that weighs on the minds of peace-process observers is the end of President Clinton's term next January. Although Vice President Al Gore has publicly expressed his support of the president's efforts for Irish peace, no candidate, Republican or Democrat, seems as enthusiastic about Northern Ireland as Clinton has been, noted Dr. Eoin McKiernan, a former professor at the State University of New York at Geneseo and founder of the Irish American Cultural Institute. McKiernan said that the peace process would be nowhere without the involvement of the U.S. government.

That's a point seconded by most other observers, including Eamonn McKee, press officer for the Irish consulate in New York City.

McKee was more optimistic than McKiernan, stating his belief that the U.S. government would remain involved in Northern Ireland no matter who occupies the White House next year. He added that the current logjam in the Irish peace process comes down to two vastly different views of what's needed for the process to work.

"I think the real tragedy in all this is everybody has a sincerely held position," he said in a phone interview.

Sinn Fein's leaders note that the IRA isn't interested in surrendering its weapons so long as British troops patrol the region, McKee said, and will not disarm while there are no governmental institutions to guarantee the civil rights of Catholics. Meanwhile, many unionists don't want to form a new government with their nationalist counterparts while the IRA remains armed, he said. On the surface, at least, it appears to be a Catch-22 situation, McKee said, but he noted

that he held out hope for creative negotiation.

"I don't believe in conundrums," he told the Catholic Courier. "I believe where there's a will, there's a way. I think what one wants to see is people moving off their defense of static positions and moving into engagement."

On St. Patrick's Day, March 17, representatives of Northern Ireland's various political parties along with Irish and British leaders will meet with President Clinton at the White House as the United States tries once again to break a logjam in Northern Irish politics. Although the obstacles presented by the decommissioning issue seem insurmountable, Smith said that meeting on neutral territory gives Northern Ireland's contentious parties some breathing space to work out their differences. Meanwhile, McKee said he is ever-hopeful that the peace process will get back on track.

"The Good Friday agreement was supported by the vast majority of the people," he said. "It was an act of self-determination by the island, and I don't think anybody has a right to walk away from it."

One woman who won't walk away from the implications of the agreement is Judy Sochia, a Spencerport resident who heads up the Irish Children's Program of Rochester. The program brings Catholic and Protestant children from the Northern Ireland capital of Belfast to live with Rochester-area families each summer. Sochia said that the non-political, ecumenical program is designed to sow the seeds of peaceful coexistence among Irish children whose communities have mistrusted each other for centuries.

Even though sectarian violence has declined dramatically in Northern Ireland in the last five years, she said her contacts in Northern Ireland want the children's program to continue because peace is so new to their homeland.

"(The northern Irish) feel that the children over there really need to be taught to work out their differences without violence," she said. "We hope that, one child at a time, we're affecting the way they think."

For that matter, there's no question Irish people in general want the Good Friday Agreement to work, according to Father David Reid, CSSR, former pastor of St. Peter and Paul Church in Rochester. Currently serving as a pastor of a Massachusetts parish, Father Reid was slated to lead a parish mission at St. Pius the Tenth Church, Chili, from March 11-16.

"All the arguments belong to the past, not to the future," the Irish priest said in a phone interview, noting that southern Ireland's economy is booming and that young Irish people, north and south, want to integrate with the rest of Europe. There's no nostalgia for old conflicts in Ireland today, he added.

"Who wants to be stuck back there in the mud?" he asked.

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