
been left ambiguous and Mitchell predicted that while it had been difficult to get the Agreement in place, it would be harder still to get it implemented. He was right.

The Agreement laid the foundation for a new Assembly for Northern Ireland, with parties from both traditions represented based on their electorate and with the positions of First Minister and Deputy First minister shared between the two. Some critics claimed the system institutionalized sectarian difference, but it guaranteed that the Assembly would no longer be heavily weighted in favour of only one tradition, as was the case previously. Six north-south ministerial committees were established to meet regularly and deal with areas of common interest, and a British-Irish Council was set up with the First Ministers of Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man included. The Agreement called for a review of policing, the early release of prisoners, the devolution of justice, and for the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms. It was on the decommissioning issue that progress was held up once again.

When the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (the IICD) was set up in September 1997 I was asked to chair it with Commissioners being provided by each of the United States and Finland. The State Department assigned Ambassador Donald Johnston to the Commission – he was subsequently replaced by retired State Department senior official, Andrew Sens – and Finland assigned retired Brigadier Tauno Nieminen. That composition remains today. Our remit was to facilitate the decommissioning of paramilitary arms by rendering them permanently inaccessible or permanently unusable, and it was foreseen that this task should be completed within two years of the referendums on the Agreement. That meant we were expected to be finished by May 2000. While the Agreement stipulated when we should be finished, it did not say when we should start.⁵

From the outset we made it clear that we needed a representative named by each paramilitary group, who could meet with us to work out the mechanics of what we had to do – our version of jaw jaw. The UVF named one immediately but the IRA and the UDA declined to do so. No progress was made on decommissioning and the unionists once again

⁵ *The Agreement*, 10 April 1998, Blair and Ahern. *Decommissioning*, Part 7, para 3. CAIN Web Service. [http://cain.ulst/ac/uk](http://cain.ulst.ac/uk).