

Party (UKUP) also joined the talks. Each of the nine parties was obliged to subscribe to what had now become known as *The Mitchell Principles*.

That the talks started at all was a credit to the perseverance and insistence of the governments and to the risk David Trimble took in agreeing to participate in them. But progress was stifled at the outset by disagreement over the agenda. Trimble wanted decommissioning to be discussed first. He had wanted decommissioning to take place before the talks started and it hadn't. He now agreed to participate only on the expectation that decommissioning would take place during the talks, as the International Body had proposed. But John Hume countered that while decommissioning was important and needed to happen, the talks were about politics and if the parties got bogged down over the issue of arms, no progress would be made. As a result none was, although the two governments kept the parties at the table and insisted that notwithstanding disagreements, the talks must succeed. For a year the talks were only about talks.

It was not until Bertie Ahearn and Tony Blair were returned as Prime Ministers in 1997, Blair with a large majority and both of them announcing they would make finding a solution to the Northern Ireland problem their first priority, that progress was made. They finessed the decommissioning issue by forming the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning with a mandate to facilitate arms decommissioning and with the requirement to report on progress to the parties. The IRA declared another ceasefire, Sinn Fein was invited into the talks, the DUP and UKUP left, the agenda was approved with political issues topping the list, and talks began that led to the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement in April of the following year.

When the talks first started Cyril Ramaphosa and Roelf Meyer, the two principal architects of the South African process that ended apartheid, visited Belfast and I spent an hour with Meyer. He listed eight factors he had found were fundamental to the success of their talks, which also started with acrimony and which were fraught throughout with difficulty and disagreement<sup>4</sup>. One factor was the conviction that talks must continue even if parties left the table or violent acts were perpetrated during them, since the purpose of those acts would be to end the talks.

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<sup>4</sup> *Herding Cats. Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World*. Crocker, Hampson and Aall, Editors. United States Institute of Peace. Washington DC 1999. *The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland*, John de Chastelain, p.452.