

The Guardian

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It's proving a lengthy Good Friday

Mediation in Ireland seems to be best done by avoiding deadlines

Once again our attention is on the clock. But in Northern Ireland, is it a matter of counting down or counting on? General John de Chastelain, chairman of the international commission on decommissioning, is still trying to mediate a timetable for disarmament. He has already indicated that he was prepared to set out a timetable to put pressure on the paramilitary organisations to dismantle their armouries.

As a mediator, he should pause at this moment in the process and reflect on the recent strategies employed by his two predecessors, Tony Blair and former US Senator George Mitchell.

Since the ceasefire was implemented by paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide in 1996, the peace talks agenda had been narrowed down to two main issues: setting up a representative government and ensuring that violence never again threatens the democratic process.

The first attempt at trying to implement the 1998 Good Friday agreement failed last July because Blair, in the role of "honest broker", tried to impose time deadlines and force a decision. When he realised that neither party had a "Plan B" for peace, he fudged the stalemate by asking the parties back to the table in a "review" two months later. This time, the process concluded with an agreement. But only after it was extended long past its original schedule of 10 days by the tenacity of the mediator, George Mitchell, who was willing to withstand despair as long as the parties did not desert the process.

The hallmark of mediation is that the parties own the solution, it cannot be imposed on them. As Mitchell noted, "decommissioning has to be a voluntary act". The parties have to want to cooperate before they can conclude on a verifiable solution.

Few who have been seriously following the peace process over the past 18 months would question the resolve of either Sinn Féin or the Ulster Unionists to finally take the gun out of politics. No one really walked away from the negotiation table as long as the armed struggle was in abeyance. Since both sides had already conceded that a military solution was not possible by either of their paramilitary forces, continuing the dialogue, however long it took, was the only way to find a solution everyone can live with. It was not so much a question of finding a "Plan B" as of reworking "Plan A", adding a footnote here and there so that neither side had to decide between the humiliation of defeat and escalation to violence.

Mitchell's control of the agenda as a "neutral facilitator" became apparent in the fi-

nal weeks of the talks through the "stage-managed" public comments of the negotiators on the possible outcome, made before he released the findings of his review. In short, he did not appear to be forcing the issue.

By threatening to resign from the power-sharing government by next month if there is no start to IRA decommissioning, David Trimble and the Ulster Unionists have unmistakably anchored their opening bargaining position. That was expected of them. But if he gives in to this brinkmanship, or sets a deadline of his own, de Chastelain will compromise his neutrality — and force an outcome that no one is really prepared for.

There is still much creative room for the IRA to demonstrate their ability to lay down their arms. The general's job is to help suggest a way out that all sides can live with. He needs to create the recognition that the solution is not a matter of what can be proven, it is a matter of what can be believed. Perception is reality in this situation because the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland want to be-

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lieve that the violence has ended. For them, there is no turning back.

The threat of violence is only real when there is willingness to use it. It can be exercised by anyone at any time, by one bomb or a thousand bombs. The final number of weapons each side holds is no longer important. The US and Russia still hold vast quantities of nuclear weapons, but the threat of their use has all but disappeared. The cold war ended after nearly 50 years without a shot being fired directly at the other side, or one side having to surrender to the other.

President John F Kennedy once noted that "civility is not a sign of weakness, but sincerity is always subject to proof". In the mediation process, that proof is reserved for the parties, who alone determine when they walk away. When mediators impose time deadlines on negotiations they are in effect making their own positional statement which, even when done with the best of intentions, implies that their priority in the process is their own ability to engineer a successful outcome.

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