

28 July  
2005–



4 o'clock–  
and all  
is well

World news and headlines. The IRA war is over. Its statement was recorded on DVD and handed to me in a lunchtime meeting with P O'Neill on Thursday, July 28th 2005. The most significant acts of IRA decommissioning would happen within months.



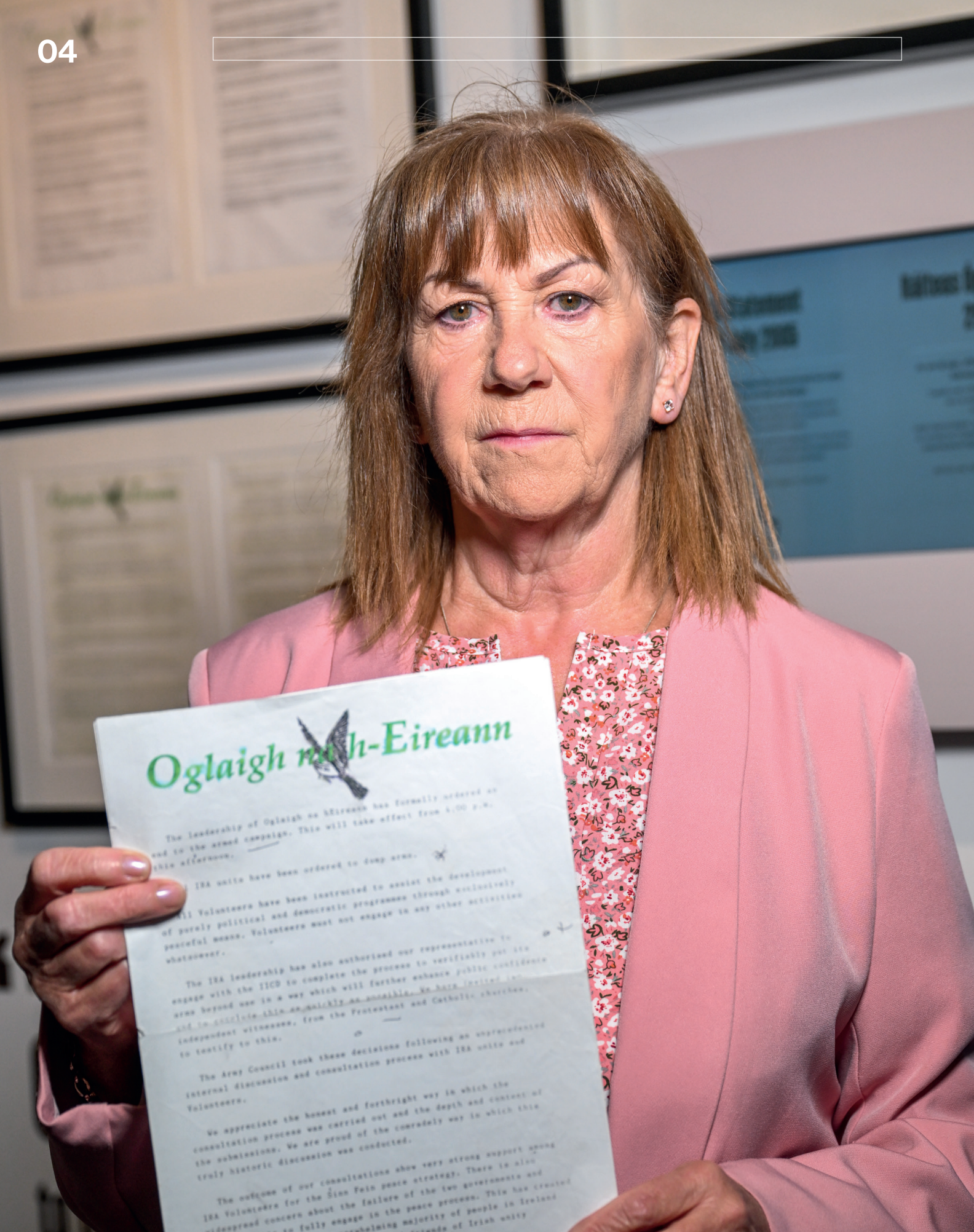
**Belfast republican Séanna Walsh - one of the longest serving IRA prisoners - reads the order that the armed campaign will end at 4pm Thursday, July 28th. All units were instructed to dump arms.**

↑  
Screen grab from the IRA DVD

Séanna Walsh. 1-5-2025.  
Context is all, I suppose, so when I was asked to consider reading an IRA statement to not only comrades and friends, but to the world's media, I had to work my way through it.  
The political and peace process had reached a critical juncture. Making time wasn't, isn't an option. So, initiatives have to continuously be taken to move us forward.  
I grasped the enormity of it immediately. I sat my wife and teenage daughters down - mindful that my actions would impact on their lives too and explained what I was about to do. They were supportive, the girls maybe not realising the importance of it, I stood totally behind it. For the army to leave the stage it had to do so on its own terms, therefore in moving into a new era we had to do so boldly.  
The reading of the statement was a part of all that.

↑  
Twenty years after his moment in history, Séanna Walsh reflects on that day - in moving into a new era we had to do so boldly. The reading of the statement was a part of all that.





First and foremost on this very special occasion, my thoughts are with the relatives of IRA volunteers, and the volunteers themselves, their lost lives in the conflict. I wish to acknowledge their sacrifice and the changes they brought to our society today. I am also thinking of the relatives of everyone who lost their lives as a result of the conflict.

Looking back over the last 20 years, the landscape of our society has changed beyond recognition. There is an air of confidence around, people are no longer limited or confined to their own communities. There is a new generation of people who have no memory of the conflict.

Belfast has become a vibrant city with an ever-growing night-time economy, which wasn't always there. Tourism has exploded, hotels have sprung up everywhere and Belfast is now a popular choice of destination for many. Groups of tourists are a daily sight on our roads and all of this is very positive.

Positivity is also growing in terms of looking towards the future and a new Ireland. Many people, including some from a unionist + Protestant background, are engaged in the conversation around a border poll.

Of course it is still a source of irritation that much of political unionism is still resistant towards any move which promotes Irish language, Irish culture or indeed any issue perceived to be 'nationalist'. Nevertheless, I believe that change is unstoppable and there is a real building momentum towards a new Ireland, one where everyone is treated equally, regardless of background.

Rosie McCorley July 2025



How the IRA statement of July 2005 changed the landscape - former republican prisoner and later Stormont MLA Rosie McCorley shares her thoughts.

Image - Marie Therese Hurson





# A World of War - power, ego and little leadership

This is the latest publication drawn from the thousands of pieces of information that I have logged within my archive; the notes, diaries, tapes, statements and reflections that when read together help us to better understand that fight to escape the wars and the ‘Troubles’ of this place.

The archive follows the steps into the rooms and talks and negotiations in which peace becomes a possibility and then a reality.

As I write, the World headlines are the stories of the Hell of Gaza, and the constant references to war involving Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Iran and the bombs of the US; stories also of ceasefires and broken ceasefires, of power and ego masquerading as leadership.

Within these pages, you will read the words of a Palestinian American Aziz Abu Sarah, someone who has been involved in peacebuilding in a period spanning a quarter of a century and more.

Recently I met him in Belfast, and on the pages of this work, you will read his words about how “we often become trapped in our own perspectives, unable to see a way out of conflict”.

“I come to Ireland to remember that peace is possible,” he writes.

That sentence is a reminder that our peace is often better appreciated from outside of us, and a reminder also of what has been achieved.

This publication builds on our previous works - ‘25 Pieces’ and ‘Impossible Peace’ both of which are included in Ireland’s prestigious ‘100 Archive’.

Our focus now is the period 2005/10, and what happened after the IRA decision to end its armed campaign at 4pm on Thursday, July 28th 2005.

It takes us into the stories of demilitarisation, an earthquake inside the loyalist community, arms decommissioning, remarkable decisions on policing, the achievement of the Paisley-McGuinness government, the dissident republican threat and the stories of leadership and the lack of such in today’s world.

This publication is shaped in the creative thinking of Ciaran Hurson @hallerclarkehurson.com

Photography is by MT Hurson.

And the funding that made it possible came from the Open University and we thank its National Director in Ireland John D’Arcy.

This work is also available on the university’s Open Learn website; there as a contribution to our understanding of some of the key moments in our recent history.

**Brian Rowan -**  
is a former BBC correspondent in Belfast and an author on the peace process.

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Two decades have passed since the momentous events described in this book and its accompanying OpenLearn website. Our collective memories of those times will have been made with press and media reports back then. This new curation, based on Brian Rowan’s personal archive of material and new reflections from people close to the interlocking developments from 2005 to 2010 brings fresh insights to the complexity and dynamics of a pathway to peace.

For The Open University, our partnership with Brian Rowan on this, and previously ‘Impossible Peace’ in 2024, builds on our 2019 ‘Time To Think’ digital archive and other works focussing on the Good Friday Agreement.

Huge thanks to Brian Rowan, Ciaran Hurson, Marie-Therese Hurson and Esther Haller Clarke and to my Open University in Ireland colleagues, Tara Craig, Vic Kostrzewski and Professor Adrienne Scullion and Dr Philip O’Sullivan from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

**John D’Arcy -**  
Director - The Open University in Ireland



# Tea for two

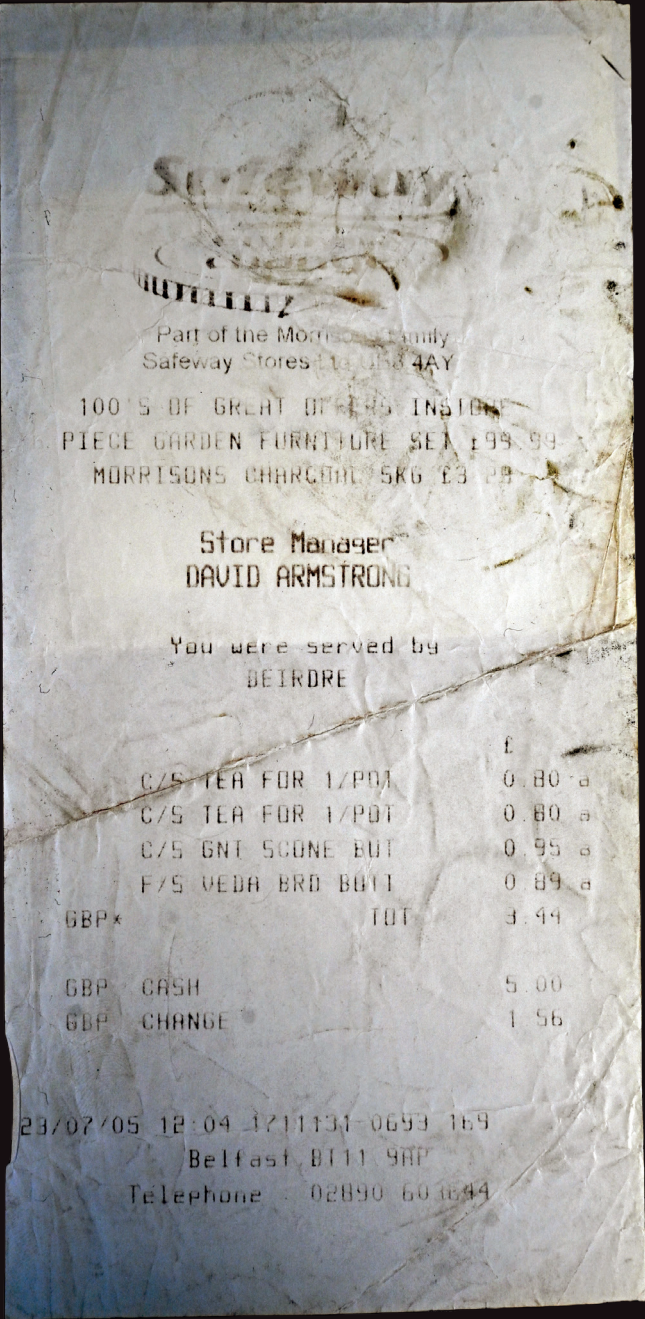
The old receipt is showing its age. Lines and wrinkles through which I struggle to see the detail of two pots of tea at 80 pence each, a scone at 95 pence and a slice of Veda bread at 89 pence. The total cost of the conversation was £3.44. We were served by Deirdre in the cafe at a supermarket in west Belfast, and that crumpled receipt now serves as a reference point - as a kind of aide-memoire. It takes me back twenty years to a Saturday morning - July 23rd 2005. I was in one of those meetings of words and silences; sitting with Richard McAuley a senior aide to then Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams.

The peace process was waiting on the IRA response to a speech that Adams had made some months earlier in April, when he spoke directly to the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann and asked: “Can you take courageous initiatives which will achieve your aims by purely political and democratic activity?” As we waited for that response, the Canadian General John de Chastelain was in Ireland wondering when he would next be needed; waiting for the IRA to move to put more of its arms beyond use.

When I left Richard McAuley on that Saturday in July 2005, I stepped into the car park at the supermarket and scribbled some words onto a post it; words I used in a BBC Radio Ulster news broadcast that lunchtime:

This is what I said:

“My understanding is that crucial discussions are continuing both inside the IRA and between Sinn Féin and the governments. There was speculation that the IRA statement could come before the marching season. It didn’t. Now, there are new suggestions of a significant development within days. Could that mean that we get that statement from the IRA? Yes we could - but there is no certainty at this stage. General de Chastelain has been in Ireland for a number of days now, and it’s my understanding that he will stay for a while longer. So, in summary, there are new expectations in some circles that the IRA will speak soon.”



↑ Brian Rowan's receipt dated 23/07/05

Four days later, Gerry Adams was in Hillsborough Castle with Secretary of State Peter Hain and with the Northern Ireland Office Political Director Jonathan Phillips also present. Sinn Féin was insisting on the release of the IRA prisoner Sean Kelly, whose licence had been suspended in June, and the British wanted to see the detail of the IRA statement. Adams had that statement, and Phillips copied it in his hand writing before sharing it with Downing Street.

Hours later, the solicitor Kevin Winters called me with the news that Kelly was out; that he had been granted temporary release pending an application to the Sentence Review Commission to have his licence restored.

It was the signal that the IRA statement was now imminent. That happened the next day - July 28th 2005, but not in the usual controlled and choreographed way of these things. As I was on my way to meet the IRA spokesman ‘P O'Neill’, the story started to break ahead of its scheduled embargo. I saw ‘Tomas’ (not his real name) hurrying in a street in the Falls area of the city and, minutes later inside a house, he gave me a two-page statement and a DVD on which the Belfast republican Séanna Walsh read the words of the IRA.

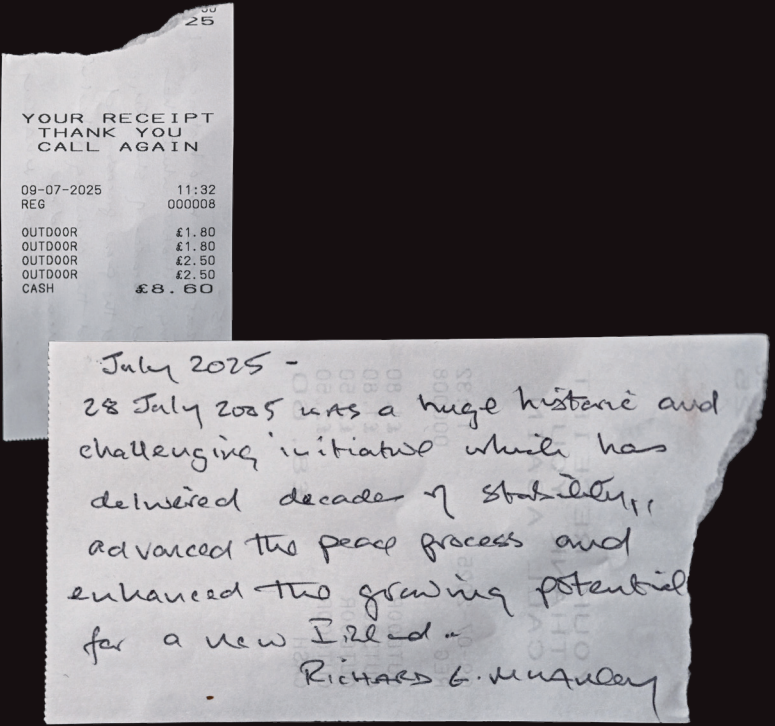
Outside, as I spoke into the BBC news output, a summer rain was falling, landing on my jotter and on the green ink heading of the IRA statement. That organisation turned a page that day, away from the headlines of the Northern Bank robbery and the murder of Robert McCartney to which its members had been linked.

It was not the first time I had been to that house in the Falls. Months earlier, I had collected another statement there - five pages long, in which the IRA had threatened to shoot those who were directly involved in the McCartney killing.

By July 2005, it was using different words, but these two decades later, the rains have not yet washed away the detail and the questions from those conflict years; not for the IRA - and not for the many other sides in those long wars.

**I am a supporter of the current peace process. Since my release from prison in 2000 I and other ex-prisoners, civic community and political representatives have worked positively within the North Belfast community particularly around interface areas.**

↑ From Sean Kelly's statement to the Sentence Review Commission - part of a process to have his licence restored.



↑ July 2025: 20 years later, another meeting with Richard McAuley and a new receipt, on which I asked him to share some thoughts. He writes on stability, on how the peace process has been advanced and on the growing potential for a new Ireland.



① The leadership of O'Leigh and Gorman has formally ordered an end to the armed campaign. This will take effect from 4.00 p.m. this afternoon.

All IRA units have been ordered to dump arms. All Volunteers have been instructed to restrict the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means. Volunteers must not engage in any other activities whatsoever.

The IRA leadership has also authorised our representatives to engage with the IICD to complete the process to verifiably put its arms beyond use in a way which will further enhance public confidence and to conclude this as quickly as possible. We have invited two independent witnesses, from the Protestant and Catholic churches, to testify to this.

The Army Council took these decisions following an unprecedented internal discussion and consultation process with IRA units and Volunteers.

② achieve this and to end British rule in our country.

It is the responsibility of all Volunteers to show leadership, determination and courage. We are very mindful of the sacrifices of our patriot dead, those who went to jail, Volunteers, their families and the wider republican base. We reiterate our view that the armed struggle was entirely legitimate.

We are conscious that many people suffered in the conflict. There is a compelling imperative on all sides to build a just and lasting peace.

The issue of the defence of nationalist and republican communities has been raised with us. There is a responsibility on society to ensure that there is no re-occurrence of the pogroms of 1969 and the early 1970s. There is also a universal responsibility to handle sectarianism in all its forms.

The IRA is fully committed to the goals of Irish unity and independence and to building

③ We appreciate the honest and forthright way in which the consultation process was carried out and the depth and content of the submissions. We are proud of the completely contrary way in which this truly historic discussion was conducted.

The outcome of our consultations show very strong support among IRA Volunteers for the Sinn Féin peace strategy. There is a widespread concern about the failure of the two governments and the inability to fully engage in the peace process. This has created real difficulties. The overwhelming majority of people in Ireland fully support this process. They and friends of Irish unity throughout the world want to see the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Notwithstanding these difficulties our decisions have been taken to advance our republican and democratic objectives, including our goal of a united Ireland. We believe there is now an alternative way to

④ the Republic outlined in the 1916 Proclamation.

We call for maximum unity and effort by Irish republicans everywhere. We are confident that by working together Irish republicans can achieve our objectives. Every Volunteer is aware of the impact of the decisions we have taken and all O'Leigh are engaged to fully comply with these orders.

There is now an unprecedented opportunity to utilise the considerable energy and goodwill which there is for the peace process. This constructive series of unprecedented initiatives is our contribution to this end to the continued endeavours to bring about independence and unity for the people of Ireland.

→

On the eve of the IRA statement, Gerry Adams was in negotiations with the British. They wanted to see the text. Adams wouldn't give them the actual statement, and the NIO Political Director Sir Jonathan Phillips had to copy it in his handwriting before sending it on a secure fax to Downing Street to be signed off by the Prime Minister. Sir Jonathan has given us permission to reproduce his note.

I represented the Sean Kelly circa July 2005 when an issue arose in relation to the terms of his release from custody as part of wider political engagement.

I can say I was very much alive to the wider political and other sensitivities underpinning decision making around the Kellys' release terms.

However I was oblivious to the specific details of highly critical last minute meetings between Sinn Féin and the British Government at that time.

I recall that the Kellys were granted temporary release pending a substantive application to be released or licence by the Sentence Review Commission. They then confirmed his licence. In reflection this was very much a seminal moment on the road to the IRA's confirmation that their campaign was over.

Kevin & Winters July 2023.

Solicitor Kevin Winters represented Sean Kelly in his application to the Sentence Review Commission. In a contribution to this archive project, he says he was alive to the political sensitivities of the case, but totally oblivious to the background negotiations involving Gerry Adams and the British Government. On the eve of the IRA statement, Kelly was granted temporary release, pending the Commission's decision.





# Thrown to the political



# wolves

Saturday, July 30th 2005: Within 48 hours of that historic IRA statement I began to better understand the shape of this phase of the process; something that was more about the war than the politics of this place. The IRA words of Thursday would bring a British demilitarisation response and within it a prediction of an 'earthquake' inside the unionist/loyalist community. For now, the focus was not the restoration of functioning and working politics at Stormont, but more a first response to that formal ending of the IRA armed campaign; and "the starting pistol being fired on normalisation". Those words were spoken to me in a face-to-face meeting with Mervyn Wynne Jones on that Saturday, July 30th 2005. At the time, he was the chief press officer at Army Headquarters in Northern Ireland.

As I revisit my notes from that meeting, so I remember him speak his words and the emphasis he placed on the importance of this response. There would be "a significant basket of measures" and a "major issue" was still being addressed: "The intent to disband the Home Service battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment." This announcement was being planned for noon on Monday, August 1st, and he assured me that there was no chance of it breaking before then. He had arranged an interview for me with Colonel Mark Campbell, and the army spokesman accurately predicted an 'earthquake' within the unionist community as the detail of this announcement would become known. That disbandment of the Home Service battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment would fit within a two-year plan to end Operation Banner, the Army's decades-long support role to the police, and would be part of major changes to the security landscape and the making of a peace time garrison. I was told of lots of discussions going on involving the Northern Ireland Office, Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence. At noon on Monday August 1st, I broke that story relating to the Royal Irish Regiment, and then made my way to Thiepval Barracks for that interview with Colonel Mark Campbell.

What became immediately obvious was that the unionists were not in the loop. The DUP deputy leader at the time, Peter Robinson, would later tell me that Ian Paisley got a call from Defence Secretary John Reid "five minutes after you people in the BBC had already announced it on the news". "That's how much notice we were given of that."

Over the weekend, I had filmed Royal Irish Regiment soldiers on duty as part of trying to prevent further attacks in the latest of the loyalist feuds - this one involving the UVF and the LVF. The soldiers had no idea of the real purpose of the filming by cameraman Nigel Rees. Out of their earshot, I recorded a piece to camera for Monday's lunchtime television news, including the words: Within two years there are plans to end Operation Banner - how the Army describes its support role to the police. And, with that, the Royal Irish Regiment will go. Its home based battalions here in Northern Ireland will be disbanded.

In my first question to Colonel Mark Campbell on Monday afternoon, I asked was this the day his soldiers were thrown to the political wolves. He pushed that away: "No, not at all. I wouldn't accept that. This is clearly a security issue... And our assessment is, particularly following the Provisional IRA statement of last week, that we are approaching a point where the Police Service of Northern Ireland will be able to provide the security and law enforcement to the Province without routine military support."

They were the words I would have expected from the Colonel, but writing for the BBC in this period, I used this sentence to contextualise these developments: Republicans will view this as "military Brits out" - that is its real significance. And I added these thoughts: The past few days have given us the stuff of history - words and actions that point towards a better peace than the one we have had so far. But there is another question: Are the loyalist paramilitaries watching and listening? Because in the here and now of Northern Ireland, it is their guns that are loudest.



→  
Mervyn Wynne Jones  
writes on the significance  
of developments,  
describing a seismic  
shift in the landscape of  
Northern Ireland.

This felt big, by any benchmark for political shift in the landscape of Northern Ireland. Seismic, absolutely.

Security normalisation would happen and, with it, an end to Operation Banner, a deployment that had seldom been out of the news for 36 years.

A significant reduction in military profile and infrastructure across Northern Ireland would mean the disbandment of the Home Service battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment. Sensitive handling was paramount.

There was a steadfast and perhaps hopeful logic to it all, but there was a keen awareness too of decades of turmoil, pain and raw emotion across all communities, not least among the courageous men and women, past and present, of the Home Service battalions.

Mervyn Wynne Jones  
June 2025

Chief Press Officer HONI 2001-2007

ROYAL IRISH 13.30
Duration: 0'00"

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The political and security bombshell in these latest announcements on demilitarisation is what's to happen to the Royal Irish Regiment.

More than three thousand soldiers serve in what's called the Home Service battalions - with headquarters here in Holywood, at Omagh and in Armagh.

But in moves towards a planned peacetime garrison these locally based battalions are to be disbanded - a long time republican demand and something which has been announced within days of last Thursday's IRA statement.

Yesterday on the BBC there were hints from Martin McGuinness of things to come.

MCGUINNESS: .....TO SUPPORT THAT EFFORT.

(Rowan) To put it mildly, Unionists won't like what they're hearing. They've already had to absorb the release of the Shankill bomber Sean Kelly, and now comes the security choreography linked to the IRA's statement.

ROWAN PTC: Locally based Royal Irish Regiment soldiers are still at work on the streets - including here in Holywood where they are part of a wider security operation aimed at preventing further attacks in the loyalist feud. But within two years there are plans to end Operation Banner - how the Army describes its support role to the police. And with that the Royal Irish Regiment will go - Its home based battalions here in Northern Ireland will be disbanded.

Before all of that, more of the army's watchtowers will be demolished - not just in south Armagh but elsewhere, including here in the west Belfast constituency of the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams.

Work to dismantle the Divis watchtower on the Falls Road will begin shortly.

Just days after the IRA statement, we're seeing a swift and significant military response - this regiment which grew out of the UDR is to be stood down. Republicans will see that their demands have been met - unionists will be furious.

\* The Political and Security Bombshell in these latest announcements on demilitarisation is what's to happen to the Royal Irish Regiment





# ‘The taigs are getting everything’



**Do they really want to start World War 3?**  
Hugh Orde

September 2005: There was a mood and a temper that would soon explode. In the build-up to the rescheduled and rerouted Whiterock Orange Parade, I heard it in numerous conversations; captured in this thought from William ‘Plum’ Smith, who more than a decade earlier had chaired the loyalist ceasefire news conference: “There is an underlying feeling that the taigs (Catholics) are getting everything.” He had the pulse of his community and in the words he chose, he was describing an anger that would not be calmed. There was an inventory of grievances:

Sean Kelly’s release from prison, a man whose name will always be linked to the IRA bomb on the Shankill Road in 1993 and to the slaughter of civilians that Saturday; The decision to disband the Home Service battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment in that phased plan to end Operation Banner; Other demilitarisation steps and, now - The banned Whiterock Parade, meaning no Orange marching steps on the Springfield Road in west Belfast. In another blunt description of the mood, the loyalist politician David Ervine spoke of the potential for “a fucking disaster”.

Both conversations were on the eve of the march; a parade that would not get through the security gates where Workman Avenue meets the Springfield Road. A source inside the Northern Ireland Office told me they had been warned of “cataclysmic consequences”, but was not sure if things would be as “apocalyptic” as they were being told. And, in a late conversation the night before the march, Chief Constable Hugh Orde posed the question: Do they really want to start World War 3?

What followed on September 10th was a day of madness; the manifestation of a sense of losing in the peace; heard firstly in that line “the taigs are getting everything” and then in the sound of gunfire. At a PSNI news conference and briefing on Sunday, September 11th, I watched film of loyalist gunmen and of a pipe bomb being thrown towards police lines. Orde described one of the most dangerous riot situations in the recent history of the United Kingdom and linked the loyalist organisations to the violence. Forty-eight hours later, the government ‘specified’ the UVF and Red Hand Commando, meaning their ceasefires were no longer recognised.

In this phase of the process, the unionists and the loyalists were outside the tent. The key events of this period were matters of negotiation between the UK Government and the republican leadership. On the Springfield Road, on September 10th 2005, and just before the mayhem of that day, I spoke briefly with ‘Tomas’ (the IRA ‘P O’Neill) and in a corner of my diary page that day, I wrote the words - decommissioning by the end of the month. It would be a new page after a day when some in this place momentarily lost the plot and lost the peace.

↑ Loyalist riots spread across the city. Image - Pacemaker  
← Workman Avenue



6  
1  
50  
430  
250  
32  
7

STATS BELOW FROM ORDE

- 6 live rounds fired by police
- 1 live round fired by army
- At least 50 rounds fired at security forces
- 430 plastic bullets fired - 250 by Army, the rest by police
- 32 officers injured - one hospitalised with serious face injury.
- Police Ombudsman has been informed and will investigate events.
- 7 firearms recovered from Highfield estate last night - bomb factory also uncovered. Deployed HQ support unit ie firearms experts because of ballistic threat to police/army trying to keep the peace. Great restraint , behaved heroically.
- Calm restored by 4am to Belfast and Greater Belfast areas



The figures telling the story of the street fight. Live rounds and plastic bullets. Guns seized and a bomb factory discovered. The rage Chief Constable Hugh Orde had feared when he asked - do they really want to start World War 3?



A scene from the Belfast battlefield.  
Image - Crispin Rodwell





# On a wing and a prayer

September 2005: The IRA needed somebody who could handle the poisoned chalice of decommissioning; a leader of such standing to be able to carry the conscience and the orders of its ‘army council’ into this next critical phase of the process. They chose one of the ‘hawks’ of the war - the Belfast republican Brian Keenan; a man the Canadian General John de Chastelain only ever referred to as ‘O’Neill’. Not once did I hear him call him by his name. It was part of the confidentiality of decommissioning - part of not telling its detail, and the IRA, at all times, was pushing back unionist demands for a published inventory and photographic proof. None of this happened. Nor was the DUP’s preferred witness present in that period of decommissioning that stretched from one weekend into another - between Saturday September 17th and Sunday September 25th 2005.

Brian Keenan was there throughout along with other members of the IRA; with the General and his colleagues and two Church witnesses - Fr Alec Reid and the former Methodist President Harold Good. All of them there in the places where the guns, the ammunition and the Semtex explosives were put beyond use. It was something that happened not that many days after the convulsion and the violence that was the fallout from the Whiterock Parade. The IRA could easily have used the events of that day to delay their decision, but chose not to.

On Sunday September 25th, I reported the presence of Harold Good as a church witness alongside Fr Reid. I was given Good’s name by a source within the DUP. And Aaro Suonio of the Independent International Commission for Decommissioning (IICD) advised me of a news conference scheduled for 2pm the next day - Monday September 26th 2005. General de Chastelain and the witnesses would add detail to this decommissioning story.

Before then, I spoke on the phone with Gerry Adams and, separately, with the IRA ‘P O’Neill’ - its leadership spokesman. This is some of what I noted in that conversation with the Sinn Féin President: The job’s done. It can’t be done twice; He expected de Chastelain to say that what was put beyond use matched the “estimates” - meaning the security force estimates of the IRA arsenal; The IRA will say no more than its done; We are all waiting to see how de Chastelain performs, and the church witnesses...Our worry is, and it’s a considerable worry, we engineered this initiative. We have no control of it.

In that final thought, he was thinking back to 2003 and to the last act of decommissioning, when the IRA put arms beyond use as part of a sequence to restore the political institutions at Stormont. But that initiative fell apart when the Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble demanded more detail from de Chastelain on what exactly had been destroyed; detail the Commission could not supply because of the confidentiality clauses of this process.

The call from the IRA, at 12.50 on September 26th 2005, was exactly what Adams suggested it would be. Two sentences were read to me:

“The leadership of Óglaigh na hÉireann announced on July 28th that we had authorised our representative to engage with the IICD to complete the process to verifiably put arms beyond use. The IRA leadership can now confirm that the process of putting our arms beyond use has been completed.” P O’Neill

This information was embargoed to 3pm, until after the Commission and the witnesses had spoken.

Paragraph 3 of the Commission’s report was as Adams had predicted; that matching of the security force estimates with the total weapons that had been put beyond use.

But is there such a thing as ‘total’ decommissioning? That statement was later challenged by intelligence reports that weapons had been held back: “that some individuals and groups within the IRA have retained a range of arms, including handguns”. The DUP leader Ian Paisley had spoken of “a complete failure from General John de Chastelain to deal with the vital numerics of decommissioning.”

“We do not know how many guns, ammunition and explosives were decommissioned, nor do we know how the decommissioning was carried out.”

The IRA did not add to the detail. Yet, in 2007, Ian Paisley entered government with Martin McGuinness, and de Chastelain’s attention turned to the weapons held by the loyalist organisation.



## The Preacher and the Prayer

This is history in a frame. In 2005, the former Methodist President Harold Good was a church witness to IRA decommissioning. They gave him this boiler suit to wear in the fields of rural Ireland, and he gave them a prayer - the timeless words of St Francis of Assisi.

Image - Marie Therese Hurson

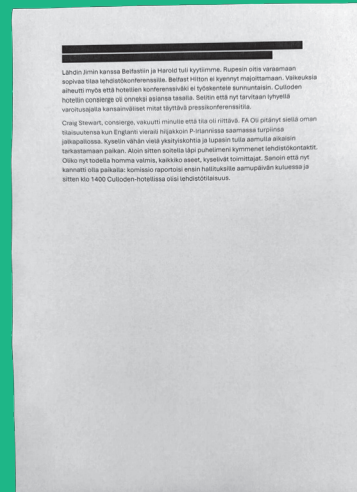




While it is now almost 20 years ago, it is a rare week when a complete stranger does not reach out a friendly hand and say "Thank you"! While like most of us I am always flattered by any expression of appreciation, I soon realise that what they are really expressing is profound gratitude for the event, of which I was just a part, which brought to an end the dark and fear-filled days & nights of terror which blighted our beloved land for almost four decades. But standing back from my own part in that decisive week, I share that sense of gratitude and am humbled by the trust of those who invited me to share that journey and of those who accepted my witness to the certainty of that event.

Harold Good

July 2025



Helsinki 7 July 2025

The day the IRA's decommissioning was confirmed brought a quiet but profound sense of relief. It had been a long and difficult journey and now, finally, the weapons were verifiably gone. Still, even amidst that relief I could not shake a lingering concern: how would we convince the sceptics - particularly in the Unionist camp - that this was real? No photos, just trust and testimony. That very evening my focus was on arranging the international press conference at short notice, ensuring the message would reach the world. But my thoughts also turned to the Loyalist groups. They hadn't believed this day would come. Now the burden of reconciliation was theirs ..

Aaro Suonio

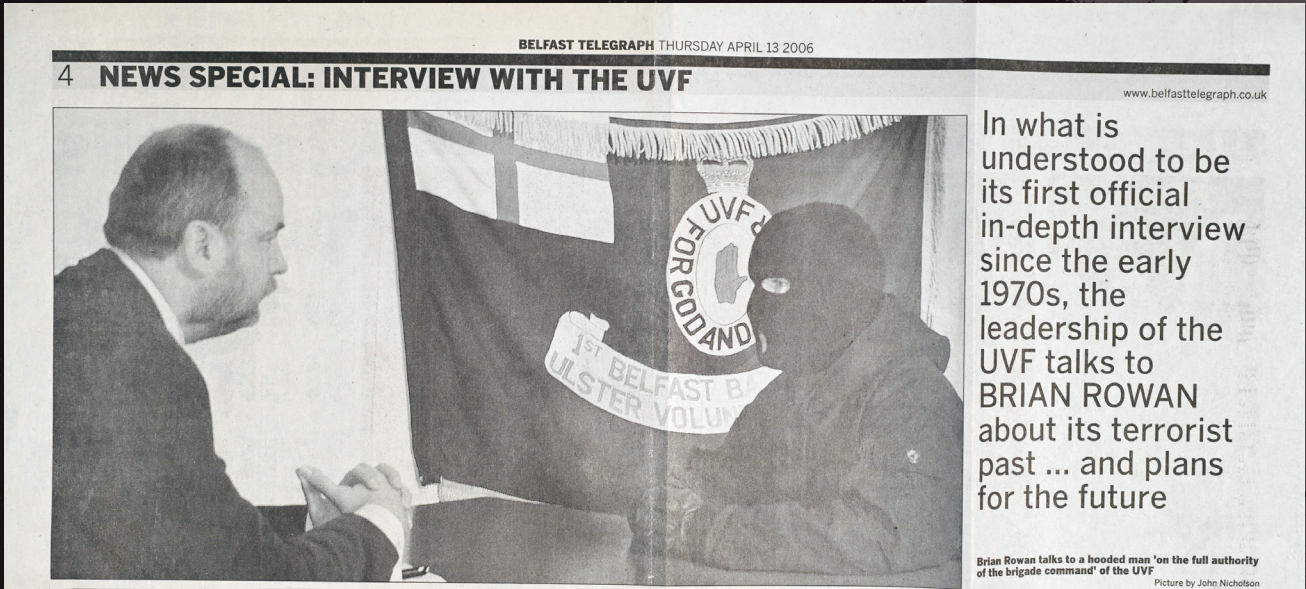
AARO SUONIO  
FORMER CHIEF DE CABINET  
I.I.C.D





“Quite frankly decommissioning is not a word that we use in our vocabulary.”

UVF leadership interview April 2006



↑ April 2006 - Rowan interview with UVF leadership. From behind the mask , decommissioning is dismissed as not a word we use in our vocabulary. In 2009, their contacts with the IICD would lead to arms being put beyond use.

NEWS FEATURE INTERVIEW QUOTES

ON IRA DECOMMISSIONING:

UVF: “We accept the significance of that... but we do not believe that the IRA are an unarmed organisation at this stage.

ROWAN: They have certainly put away more weapons than the UVF have put away.

UVF: Well that’s correct.

ROWAN: And any other loyalist organisation.

UVF: That’s correct.

ROWAN: They are well ahead of loyalists in terms of decommissioning.

UVF: Well decommissioning has never been something that we felt should be given the weight that it has been given. It has never been an issue with us. Quite frankly decommissioning is not a word that we use in our vocabulary. Decommissioning is something that the Ulster Volunteer Force have neither promised nor discussed nor are likely to become engaged in. It is not on our agenda. However, the issue of military material is something that the Ulster Volunteer Force are very actively discussing. We recognise that society is changing. We, engaged in the (consultation) process that we are, wish to be responsible about military materials. We do not want to see a Northern Ireland awash with weapons and plagued by the misuse of those weapons and we are looking at that issue responsibly.

↑ A part transcript of Rowan's interview with the UVF April 2006 - included in his news copy to the Belfast Telegraph.



# The bunker in the peace

MI5  
HQ

October 2006, Brendan Duddy - once a secret link in a backchannel between the IRA and the British Government - ridicules the new MI5 Headquarters: It's like building an air raid shelter after the war.

September 19th 2006: A few lines scribbled on a couple of my diary pages speak to the nervousness of this period, and to a giant step soon to be taken. At 2pm, in a Sinn Féin office on the Falls Road, I recorded an interview on policing with Gerry Kelly and, afterwards, logged a conversation with press officer Mark McLernon. He told me that Kelly would call me at home at 06.30 the following morning before I sent my news copy to the Belfast Telegraph. Policing was an issue on which Sinn Féin had to measure its words - choose them carefully, and I wanted to be certain - as I am sure he did - that I had correctly understood the context in which he had set his comments. A historic decision by Sinn Féin to participate in policing could come within weeks of a time frame being agreed for the transfer of policing and justice powers from London to local politicians. And, in this context, Sinn Féin's participation would be "full-bodied" - not "half-hearted". Kelly told me the interview would "cause a little ruction".

On September 20th it was front page news and, inside, his words were given plenty of space in which to breathe. The headline on the newspaper's editorial on the 21st captured the significance of what had been said: Sinn Féin prepares for seismic shift.

In the way that the IRA needed the influence of Brian Keenan to carry the weights of decommissioning, this issue of policing would demand similar attention - with not just Keenan but other significant IRA figures involved. I have another diary note from October 9th 2006, in which a source described the Belfast republican Bobby Storey as the "political voice of the Army" - meaning of the IRA - doing meetings in areas where there are problems. Twenty-four hours later, on the eve of significant political negotiations, I watched one of those republican set pieces; Gerry Adams conducting the orchestra inside the Europa Hotel on a night when I watched the body language and listened for the mood music. The headline on my news report the next day - October 11th 2006 - read: In hotel regularly blitzed by IRA, republicans prepare to do a deal.

I quoted a senior police source, who predicted that if the DUP did the deal on power sharing, then the 'Shinners' would do the deal on policing. By now, the path to a Paisley-McGuinness partnership in government was becoming more obvious. The IRA would meet in a 'Convention' before the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis vote in late January 2007. And inside the British intelligence community, that vote for policing is described as the "landmark event" - the "pivotal moment" in the new approach of the Provisional Movement; a confirmation that the war was over.

There were, and still are, complicated, divisive issues to be resolved:

The presence and role of MI5 in 'national security', housed in a headquarters at Palace Barracks in Holywood. Those offices have been developed over a period of near 20 years, likened to the building of a air raid shelter after the war is over. And there are questions relating to an unanswered Past and that conflict graveyard. How do you build new policing on that battlefield?

Paisley and McGuinness entered government in May 2007, but like everything in this process, the time frame for that transfer of policing and justice powers was stretched like elastic - to an almost breaking point in Stormont politics. The DUP slowed things; made a number of demands and not just those relating to republican support for the PSNI and participation on the Policing Board and in District Partnerships. They wanted the issue of contested parades resolved (on their terms) - plus a public statement standing down the IRA army council. This was the next impossible demand; a stalling tactic - deliberately designed as such, something that took us into 2010.

Chief Constables Sir Ronnie Flanagan and Sir Hugh Orde were important leaders in the long period of change. Flanagan delivered the RUC into the new beginning, and Orde's task was implementing the many reforms of the 1999 Patten Report. At one point, mischievously, I guess, he had offered to address the Sinn Féin Special Ard Fheis on policing. It was too soon for that and, at times, new policing, like the new politics and the new peace still struggles. So, there is an argument, I believe, for a rebeginning or a reimagining of policing; a need to revisit this issue and to look at what has been achieved and what needs more work. This is something on which a number of contributors to this archive project have shared some thoughts.

■ ■ ■ And there are questions relating to an unanswered Past and that conflict graveyard. How do you build new policing on that battlefield?

Brian Rowan



Policing reform was one of the most intricate and consequential projects of the peace process. However, in the present day, the rule of law is facing challenges due to inadequate policing resources, failure to properly address the legacy of the past, and by the continued existence and tolerance of paramilitaries - the 'blind-eye' turned and the impact that has had in communities and politics.

26 years on from the Patten Report is the right moment for a clear eye on what is working, what is not, and how we sustain the promise and progress of the new beginning to policing.

Claire Hanna MP July 2025



Long before Sinn Féin, the SDLP took steps inside the Policing Board - there from November 2001 at the outset of the 'new beginning'. But what is today's snapshot assessment of the project and process - a question I put to party leader Claire Hanna MP.



## New beginning or a false dawn?

When you listen in on the policing conversation, you hear the frustration; the talk of a political class who look to the police to referee the most contentious of issues. How the failure to address legacy is still a barrier to full political support, and how lack of funding has slowed the physical transition to demilitarise police buildings and vehicles.

In 2025, police officers feel burnt out, disillusioned and undervalued. If you listen, there is a reminder that in his report on reforms, more than 25 years ago, Chris Patten pointed out that policing means more than just the police. It is about how you depoliticise policing in a place where politics can't help itself. A place that still fights with its past and about other issues including parades. Representativeness is still framed by religion.

A senior officer shared this thought: "If a society wishes to rely on policing to referee their disputes, absorb financial cut after financial cut, deal with a past bigger than us all, and manage all the new threats that every society faces, then they will end up with a tired, overstretched service full of people trying to do their best in impossible circumstances."

It is within this thought that the new beginning has perhaps started to look like a false dawn, and it is why I argue for a rebeginning.



Brian Rowan

The Patten Report has been held up as one of the success stories of the Good Friday Agreement - a blueprint for the reform of policing.

I certainly saw and felt the change and accountability as a former Vice-Chair of the Policing Board.

But 26 years on, did Patten envisage an under resourced, overstretched police service unsure of itself and poisoned by the past? The failure to address issues of legacy has continued to politicise and poison current day policing.

We need to waken up and not allow the gains to be losses. We need to continue to take risks for peace!

D. Watters

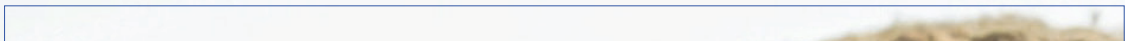
July 25.



Debbie Watters, a former vice chair of the Policing Board, speaking at one of our archive events in 2023.







2007 endgame statements and the making of a long path to decommissioning.

May 3rd 2007 at 12 midnight the UVF and Red Hand Commando will assume a non military, civilianised role.

November 11th 2007 the Ulster Defence Association believes that the war is over.

Bullets in their socks

In the bunker there was a shout of ‘fire in the hole’, an explosion followed and, then, a lighting up of the sky likened by someone present to a fireworks display. It was January 2010. The setting was the Ballykinkler army base in County Down, and the story told to me was the painting of the picture of loyalist decommissioning - the part of it involving the UDA.

In a handwritten note dated June 2025, the paramilitary ‘brigadier’ Jackie McDonald shares some more detail, including how the Canadian General John de Chastelain had invited him to use the electric saw to cut up a few machine guns. He writes that he did so with mixed feelings, and then offers the standout line: “But the time was right for them to be destroyed.”

Back in 2010, I had reported that on a cold winter’s day, the bullets had been delivered in socks, and that the vehicle used to transport the weapons had got stuck in the snow and needed loyalist muscle to move it.

These many years later, I know that after the breaking of the guns, there was no breaking of bread. McDonald sensed the General was disappointed at what had been brought to him to be put beyond use. de Chastelain asked the question: are these all of the UDA/UFF weapons? And McDonald replied they were all of the weapons they had access to.

Part of the learning of decommissioning, and this relates to all of the sides to the conflict, is that you cannot put beyond use the hell, and the fears and the hurts of those years of war. There will always be guns. Just in case. Believing in Peace is a very long process.

Months earlier in June 2009, I had broken the story of UVF/Red Hand Commando decommissioning before the organisations were ready for it to be told. In pages of notes from that period, logging numerous conversations with sources, I see the pieces of the jigsaw and I am reminded of my doubts.

The story was told to me by loyalists, one of whom spoke of “a bit more running about this week - more than normal. People about who aren’t normally about.” I have another conversation logged with the Red Hand Commando leader, Winston Churchill Rea: “I can’t comment one way or the other. I’m telling you to leave it alone.” Then, from another source, I heard this description of the detail of UVF/Red Hand decommissioning - “a good bit and a big bit”.

On June 17th 2009, I called a senior police officer who commented: “You have some interesting sources. Go with your instincts.” And just before my reports were due to run in the Belfast Telegraph I spoke with an official at the Northern Ireland Office and asked: Could I end up with egg on my face? His breakfast-time response was another confirmation: “If you have, we are both in the same omelette.”

Reporting a conflict and its transition to peace is this making of a jigsaw; putting the pieces together, talking with the widest range of sources - to those on the inside of the many sides. My reports ran on June 18th 2009 and I built in more detail over the days that followed. The UVF and Red Hand confirmed that detail at a news conference on June 27th. I was advised in advance that I would not be welcome, but was told the story of that day by those inside the room, including how plans to decommission were put on hold in March 2009. I deal with this in detail on page 34.

■ ■ And just before my reports were due to run in the Belfast Telegraph I spoke with an official at the Northern Ireland Office and asked: Could I end up with egg on my face? His breakfast-time response was another confirmation: “If you have, we are both in the same omelette.”

NIO source speaking to Rowan



Jackie McDonald UDA Brigadier recalls the day he played his part in loyalist decommissioning.

→

A FEW OF US ARRIVED IN A TRUCK WITH THE WEAPONS, AMMUNITION AND EXPLOSIVES AT BALLYKINLER ARMY CAMP ON A COLD SNOWY MORNING. GENERAL JOHN AND HIS COLLEAGUES WERE EAGERLY WAITING TO DESTROY THE WEAPONS, BUNT THE AMMUNITION, BEFORE DETONATING THE EXPLOSIVES. THE GENERAL INVITED ME TO HELP USE THE ELECTRIC SAW TO CUT UP A FEW MACHINE GUNS WHICH I DID WITH MIXED FEELINGS, BUT THE TIME WAS RIGHT FOR THEM TO BE DESTROYED. GENERAL JOHN ASKED ME IF THESE WERE ALL OF THE UDA/UFF WEAPONS AND I TOLD HIM THEY WERE ALL OF THE WEAPONS AND EXPLOSIVES THAT WE HAD ACCESS TO. ALL WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION LOGGED AND RECORDED WE RETIRED TO THE 'BUNKER' TO WATCH AND LISTEN TO THE DETONATING OF THE EXPLOSIVES.

20-6-25

Jackie McDonald



The headline makes a big statement - that all weapons have been decommissioned. But it's an over-telling of the story. You read in Jackie McDonald's words the doubting tone when General de Chastelain asks: are these all the weapons held by the UDA/UFF? No organisation decommissioned its entire arsenal. There are still guns - just in case.

→

# THE LOYALIST

Vol. 10 No. 6

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## U.D.A. 'has decommissioned all weapons'





Shoot back - or hold back?

Ulster Volunteer Force & Red Hand Commando  
Command Staff  
Belfast, Saturday 27th June 2009...

“In March 2009, all preparations were suspended following the attacks on UK citizens at Massereene Barracks and Craigavon. Assurances were sought from the Government, and from the Irish Government, that those responsible, in whatever jurisdiction, would be vigorously pursued and the failures of 1969 would not be revisited upon our community. Only when forthright assurances were given, and it became clear that they would be honoured, did our process resume.”

↑  
The words above are from paragraph three of a UVF/Red Hand Commando statement in June 2009 - confirming their decommissioning, but explaining how that process was almost derailed by dissident republican killings. There was a choice to be made - to shoot back or to put their arms beyond use.

The murders at Massereene

March 2009: It was one of those writing moments when I thought carefully about every word; about whether I would be understood or misunderstood. The Belfast Telegraph used my photograph alongside a short blurb: How - after Saturday - do you begin to explain to people that the dissidents are not an IRA?

That Saturday was March 7th 2009; when another murder scene was painted onto the canvas of an imperfect, troubled, tortuous peace. Two soldiers were dead, and among the wounded, were two pizza delivery drivers. One of the many front page headlines described an evil that had returned. And, as I typed, I was trying to find the words that recognised the horror of what had happened, but that also made the point that the dissidents are not an IRA:

This is some of what I wrote: After the shooting, killing and wounding at Massereene Barracks you could argue, it is not the point. But it is the point in terms of political and security responses and the future of Northern Ireland, or the north as others prefer to call it. At the weekend, the dissidents painted a murder scene and a reminder of the dark old days - but they cannot recreate the 'war' and all the daily routine and happenings in that decades-long conflict... Massereene, to quote one republican source, is "their best so far". It sounds so cold and callous, but it is not meant that way. He means "best so far" in terms of how they want and would like to portray themselves - as an army fighting an army.

When you write on conflict, speak on it, offer context, there are some who read and hear that as excusing or dismissing actions. This is not what I was doing. Those difficult words I wrote then, and have repeated many times since, were inviting people to look not just into that frame of the shootings at Massereene, but to see the wider intention and motivation.

The dissidents were targeting Adams and McGuinness - their strategy: trying to bring the IRA back in, trying to wreck the peace. They were hoping for knee-jerk security and political and loyalist responses that would rewind into the past and create a sense of crisis. My words were about trying to explain all of this; words I spoke into RTE, BBC, Channel 4 and other news coverage that day. Then, the news broke that a police officer, Stephen Carroll, had been shot dead in Craigavon by another of the dissident organisations. And I found myself writing more words, built this time on a conversation with Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde.

He asked the question: "What are these idiots trying to do? Getting the British Army back onto the streets to spend the next 30 years getting them back off the streets." Orde had "no intention of bringing the military back into the routine of policing". No intention of giving the dissidents the "victory" they wanted. I used his words on March 10th, and hours later, Martin McGuinness - standing with Orde and First Minister Peter Robinson - labelled the dissidents as "traitors". Loyalists also avoided the dissident trap. Yes, they thought about returning fire, put their decommissioning plans on hold but, as in 1996, after IRA bombs in London and at Thiepval Barracks in Lisburn, they were held back.

On my diary page March 10th 2009, I find the name of the former Stormont MLA Dawn Purvis; find it alongside the names of Robinson, Dodds, McGuinness, Adams, Empey, Durkan and Ford - the political leadership of this place at that time. Beside the names, I wrote the words, private meeting. And, just months later, the Progressive Unionist Party leader spoke at that loyalist news conference on decommissioning; when there was confirmation of just how close things came to falling apart not that many months earlier.

What are these idiots trying to do?  
Getting the British Army back onto the streets to spend the next 30 years getting them back off the streets.

Sir Hugh Orde



→

Trying to find the right words. Reporting conflict is a walk on eggshells. Two soldiers and a police officer are dead, but this threat from dissidents is not a re-run of the IRA campaign or in any way comparable to the levels of violence in the 1970s, 80s or 90s.

# Getting tough now will only play into the hands of killers

Dissident republicans want a heavy security response to the Massereene and Craigavon murders. Sir Hugh Orde is not likely to give it to them, says **Brian Rowan**

Sir Hugh Orde knows what the dissidents are looking for out of that murder mission at the weekend — and, now, last night's shooting of a PSNI officer in Craigavon. He knows they are waiting for and hoping for a security response — something that demonstrates that they are succeeding and that policing and politics and peace are failing.

What are these idiots trying to do?" he asked, "Getting the British Army back onto the streets to spend the next 30 years getting them back off the streets."

The Chief Constable will not walk into that trap. He has made that perfectly clear.

"Categorically" he states that he has "no intention of bringing the military back into the routine of policing."

Sir Hugh was speaking before one of his officers was murdered last night.

But he knows that to paint troops back into the picture would be to "give the victory" the dissidents want.

All of that said, these recent attacks will change things.

Security arrangements at bases will change, and there will be changes to the routine that soldiers have allowed to develop as the peace has been built and as they have relaxed into those changing circumstances.

But juggling resources — reviewing operations — is part and parcel of what goes on here, part of the security task and job.

"That's what we do all the time," the Chief Constable said. "That's what I'm paid to do."

Right now, all of that will happen on a daily — indeed hourly — basis.

It was happening before the Craigavon shooting.

The dissidents have now killed a police officer and two soldiers.

That has happened within the space of a few days — killings that came after a series of failed attacks.

The Real IRA will have known that there is a routine, a pattern that develops around soldiers in the towns in which they are based.

It is something that is easily seen and Saturday's attack was possible because the dissidents put the jigsaw together.

Unarmed soldiers — waiting for food — walked into their gunfire and there was no escape, no place to take cover.

It is likely that the gunmen were experienced in this type of attack.

As one source said, he would be "staggered" if this was "their first hit".

And this is one of the things the police will be looking at — who operating in that dissident republican world is capable of this?

Yesterday, hours before the attack in Craigavon, Sir Hugh Orde discussed the security picture with the Prime Minister.

**For all the watching and listening of the intelligence world, the IRA still managed to launch mortar bombs at Downing Street and still managed to smuggle in weapons**

If he feels he needs something more, then he will ask for it, but he stresses that "you have to be realistic about this."

There is no such thing as perfect security or a complete intelligence picture — never has been.

For all the watching and listening of the intelligence world, the IRA still managed to launch mortar bombs at Downing Street and still managed to smuggle in Libyan-supplied weapons.

In that surveillance world you don't see and hear everything.

The latest dissident attacks are not just about targeting the security forces.

These are attacks on the peace process and on the Sinn Féin strategy. The dissidents consider Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness to be traitors.

It is also about targeting police officers and soldiers to tell young nationalists and republicans that it is not safe to join the PSNI — that if they take that step then they are risking their lives.

Three killings in such a short space of time is a confirmation of that — those murders are about adding to the fears.

So, there is a lot to think about — both what to do and what not to do.

What happened at the weekend and last night needs a thought-through response.

That is what is happening.

In the worlds of politics and policing they know what the dissidents want. They are not going to give it to them.

He knows that to paint troops back into the picture would be to "give the victory" the dissidents want.

Dawn Purvis is a former Stormont MLA and leader of the Progressive Unionist Party

Looking back at that weekend of 7<sup>th</sup> March 2009, you could be forgiven for thinking that the peace process was in trouble. The dissident IRAs killed two soldiers and a PSNI officer within days of each other. People were worried. Did this mean full-scale violence on our streets again with the army deployed to back up the police? The killings had the opposite effect. People and politicians were united in their opposition to violence. The latter demonstrating the leadership required to take this place into the future and far away from what it once was.

Dawn Purvis  
July 2025



↑

Dawn Purvis thinking back to 2009 and the headlines of murder. Would this mean full-scale violence on our streets again? The answer was no.



The missing legacy voices

Every time I read into my files, I am reminded of those no longer with us and I think about them in the different phases of the conflict and in the peace of this place. Some of them shouldered the heavy weights of change, while others made things difficult and, at times, impossible.

We often talk about the different sides in conflict. There are also different sides in peace. And there are those whose voices will no longer be heard in the conversations on legacy and in the telling of the battles of the Past and the making of agreements.

Who speaks now for those missing voices in politics, in military, in policing, in intelligence - in the loyalist and IRA leaderships? For those who have taken their memory and experiences and truths with them. There is a long, long list that stretches into the churches through to those who offered international help and advice - to the big community voices and into the media, to colleagues of mine who reported on that long journey from then to now.

For several decades, this place lost itself in the trenches and in the traps of war, before discovering the importance of words and dialogue and the challenges of compromise. Here I list just 40 of those missing voices. There are many, many more.

Martin McGuinness  
Brian Keenan  
Ted Howell  
Bobby Storey  
Kevin McKenna  
Rita O'Hare  
Brendan McFarlane  
Joe Cahill  
Gusty Spence  
David Ervine  
William 'Plum' Smith  
Billy Mitchell  
Jim McDonald  
Hugh Smyth  
Winston Churchill Rea  
Andy Tyrie  
Mo Mowlam  
May Blood  
Pat Hume  
Rev Roy Magee

Fr Alec Reid  
Fr Des Wilson  
Dr Jack Weir  
Bishop Edward Daly  
Brendan Duddy  
John Hume  
David Trimble  
Ian Paisley  
Albert Reynolds  
Charles Haughey  
Robin Masefield  
Sir John Wilsey  
Sir Patrick Mayhew  
Margaret Thatcher  
Sir John Hermon  
Nelson Mandela  
Martti Ahtisaari  
Seamus Kelters  
Stephen Grimason  
Ken Reid





↑  
The funeral of Belfast republican Brendan McFarlane

## The living and the dead

February 25th 2025: I thought about those carrying the coffin of Brendan McFarlane – the IRA jail leader during the 1981 hunger strike. And I thought about so much more. Thought about how the Past is being buried and lost, and thought about the living and the dead. Inside Milltown Cemetery, the coffin was carried by Padraic Wilson, Martin Lynch, Gerry Adams, Sean Hughes, Sean Murray and Martin Ferris, and the oration was given by Gerry Kelly.

Speaking at a legacy conference eight days later, I described the men in my picture frames as the corporate memory of the republican leadership – able to speak to the Past if ever we find a process in which to make this possible. At that conference on March 5th 2025, there were questions about naming names – about those behind the orders and the actions. We are fooling ourselves if we believe this type of ‘truth’ is possible.

I expect something like the formulaic, pre-learned responses that David Park described in his 2008 novel *‘The Truth Commissioner’*. And this is why I argue for an international report on the conflict years; written with pens free of emotional ink. We are not capable of doing this ourselves and, as far back as 2008, we should have realised this when four victims commissioners had to be appointed instead of one.

We also need to record the stories of leadership that brought the conflict here to an end. And there should be some proper place of remembrance and for storytelling; something imagined and shaped from outside of politics. All of this would allow for a generational shift within this process that is future looking. Is there the leadership now and the will to find a way through?



David Ervine, Ian Paisley, Martin McGuinness, ‘Plum’ Smith and Gusty Spence all had parts in this remarkable journey.

Images - Marie Therese Hurson





Whenever David Trimble's name is mentioned, two particular observations come immediately to mind; a two-word sentence by Tony Blair and a Biblical reference by my late father.

"Leaders matter," wrote Blair when reflecting upon the making of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Without Trimble's courageous and inspirational leadership, we would not have had the Agreement in 1998.

Yet, in 2005, he lost his Westminster seat and resigned as Leader of the UUP.

I remember asking my father, "Why?" With the wisdom of his 90 years, he replied, "Trimble was like the prophets of old... not without honour, except in his home country."

Sylvia Hermon



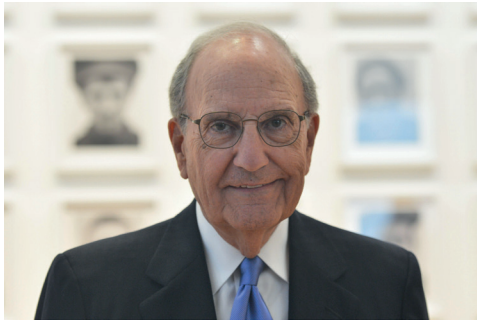
Leaders matter: the former MP Sylvia Hermon remembering David Trimble and how he made the Good Friday Agreement possible.

Image - Marie Therese Hurson





Where have all the leaders gone?



For all its flaws, we have a peace to die for - something I have always thought is better appreciated from outside of us. It is a peace that depended on international help; on the urging and coaxing of Clinton and Mandela and others, including the Canadian General John de Chastelain who ignored the writing on the wall of 'not a bullet - not an ounce', and who with colleagues made significant progress in taking many guns out of Irish politics.

George Mitchell, Nancy Soderberg, Martha Pope and the arms inspectors Martti Ahtisaari and Cyril Ramaphosa are others who come to mind. We learned from South Africa and the Basque Country and they learned from us. Peacemaking happens in a two-way street. It needs facilitators and believers, and people who know the difference between leadership and power and ego.

The Trump White House confuses these things; confuses facilitation as it plays on one side. This time a year ago, at a festival event in Derry, I argued that unless Netanyahu was stopped, nothing would stop. And a year later, I would say the same thing. Erasing a land and its people is not a proportionate response to what happened on October 7th 2023 in the horror and the hell of the Hamas attacks. And nor was that date a starting point in a conflict with much deeper roots.

When I speak to them, I tell people from the Middle East that we can't help them. And what I mean is that their conflict is way above our pay grade. Yes, we can tell them what worked here; ceasefires, quiet dialogues, negotiations and, eventually, agreements. The statements that ended the armed campaigns were a part of this, as were the Commissions on police reform, on prisoner releases and decommissioning.

Our land is still poisoned by the Past, and we have come to understand that peacebuilding is a 50-year or two generations project, which means we are only half way there. But we are much further along the road than many others. Is there anyone out there to speak above the noise of Trump and the noise of the bombs? Where have all the leaders gone?



Senator George Mitchell  
President Bill Clinton  
Nancy Soderberg  
Nelson Mandela

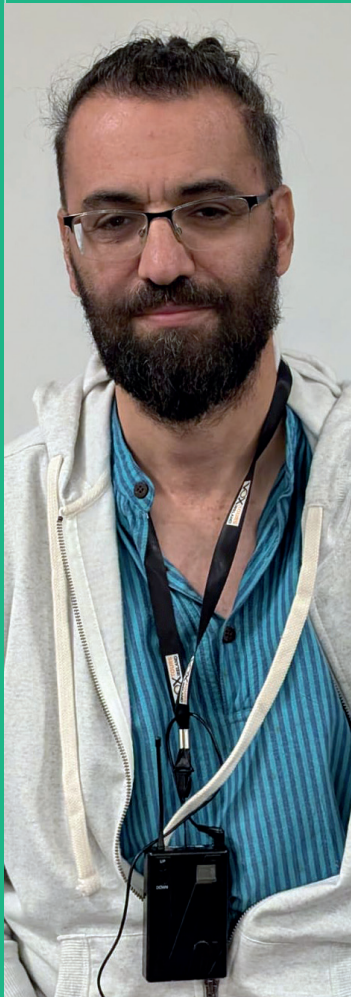
I began working in peacebuilding 27 years ago and soon realized the power of travel as an act of peacemaking. We often become trapped in our own perspectives, unable to see a way out of conflict. I came to Ireland to remember that peace is possible. As a Palestinian American, I deeply connect with the Northern Irish experience. Each visit gives me hope. Not naive optimism, but a practical belief in a peace grounded in restorative justice, not surrender.

Aziz Abu Sarah,  
June 20th, 2025  
CEO - Mejditoors



Aziz Abu Sarah - June 2025

Aziz Abu Sarah is a peacemaker who uses travel as a tool for peacebuilding through his social enterprises Mejditoors.





## An everyday kind of miracle

Declan Lawn—  
Screenwriter/Director  
Blue Lights



**Conflict journalists counted the bodies; I would spend my career counting the cost.**

Declan Lawn



I joined BBC Northern Ireland in 2002, and so became a reporter of the aftermath. Conflict journalists counted the bodies; I would spend my career counting the cost. In those early years after the agreement there were times when it seemed as if the accumulated weight of history might prove too heavy for the gossamer threads of peace.

Sometimes, when covering yet another interface riot, or charting the rise of dissident republican organisations, or interminable political stand-offs, I would often be reminded of F Scott Fitzgerald’s famous phrase in *The Great Gatsby*; “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

In the end, though, we came through. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the last three decades wasn’t the idealism of the Good Friday Agreement, but the mundane and often frustrating pragmatism of the years that followed.

Blue Lights, the TV drama that I write these days has that dichotomy at its heart. The show is in some sense a testimony to those countless quotidian decisions, mostly made far away from the halls of power; to take the higher path.

To do the right thing.

Perhaps we all wish we might have travelled farther in those decades; but the fact that we remain on the path, for all its bumps and obstacles, is an everyday kind of miracle.



Want to learn more? Search ‘OpenLearn Impossible Peace’ to discover more from Brian Rowan as he explores the thoughts of some of those who made the ceasefires and the political agreement in Northern Ireland possible in his book ‘Impossible Peace’.



28 July  
2005–



4 o'clock–  
and all  
is well

Supported by

