

Sunday Times

31 October 1999

# Forget the weapons and learn to trust Sinn Fein

**F**rom the beginning the peace process has been crippled by the question of decommissioning terrorist weapons. It stopped the process in its tracks under the last Conservative government and still threatens to destroy it.

Yet the issue has never been presented in a balanced way to the British electorate. Among others, the editors of *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*, together with a powerful element on the right wing of the Conservative party, are determined to portray the deadlock on decommissioning as proof that Sinn Fein is cynically insincere about its level of commitment to political action.

This tactic might be described as the picador approach to introducing a terrorist organisation to the attractions of the political arena. No doubt, if sufficient barbs are thrust into its flanks, the animal will eventually, with reluctance, charge. The picadors can then claim the beast was always a ravening monster.

There are lots of guns in Ireland, and in the hands of both communities in the North. The question is not whether an organisation has, or can, obtain weapons. It is whether it will choose violent or political action.

After a 25-year armed campaign, the leadership of Sinn Fein, headed by Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, decided to give politics a chance. It did not do so because of doubts about its ability to continue the campaign or to recruit volunteers to pursue it (the security forces have never doubted it, either).

McGuinness and Adams recognised that the political atmosphere in Ireland and on the British mainland had changed through the development of the European Union, and saw a new way to attract serious attention to their cause. They also realised that the security forces

**Michael Oatley**, a former MI6 officer who held secret talks with the IRA, says decommissioning doesn't matter. Sinn Fein is serious about peace

remained capable of containing their efforts and that relatively modest progress towards the development of all-Irish institutions might better serve their cause than the previous all-or-nothing approach.

The decision was taken with trepidation by intelligent, ideologically committed individuals who had spent their adult lives in pursuit of what they regarded as a just war. They did not abandon their armed campaign because they needed a rest or thought it had become irrelevant. On the contrary, it was clear to them that it had put Irish constitutional issues higher up the political agenda than at any time since 1920.

The suggestion of a ceasefire was furiously opposed within the IRA. Many feared that a move to political action would destroy its strength. Nobody was more conscious of this possibility than McGuinness and Adams, who had seen the damage done to the IRA by the 1975 ceasefire and had inherited the leadership of the movement as a result of it. But they decided to take a risk.

I was a witness to their decision. For many years, circumstances have allowed me an occasionally intimate view of political developments within the republican movement. I became aware of the leadership's broadening attitudes, re-examination of the effectiveness and justification of the armed campaign and willingness to enter into dialogue with people who could offer fresh perspectives. I also know how difficult it was to maintain the confidence and discipline of a scattered and

partly secret membership during lengthy negotiations with three governments.

The prime minister has said that he accepts the sincerity of the two principal spokesmen. From longer experience, I have no doubt at all of their commitment to finding a political way forwards. I should be surprised if most participants in the Mitchell review did not share this view by now.

**T**he republicans believed that they were making a historic gesture by unilaterally declaring a ceasefire, and thought their good faith would be recognised. But it was not. The Major government's response was an example of picadorism at its most provocative. It questioned the sincerity of the ceasefire and insisted on a tougher declaration. This put the pro-politics element of the Sinn Fein leadership under pressure and revived the threat of violence. When this was finally dealt with, the government found a new excuse to avoid the pursuit of peace: decommissioning.

Impasse. And this is now again the issue. "If you are sincere, hand in your weapons. Otherwise we will renege on the Good Friday agreement," the unionists argue.

"We are sincere, but our people do not feel ready to hand in their weapons until they see some change in circumstances," the Sinn Fein leadership ripostes. "They do not altogether trust you, or even us. They need evidence of your sincerity and,

if you are tearing up the agreement, perhaps they are right. Nobody said decommissioning should be a precondition; it was to have been a consequence of the agreement."

There is an explanation for the reluctance of the IRA to commence decommissioning. Weapons and caches are widely dispersed under the control of local cells. Volunteers are not sheep. All joined to pursue an armed campaign for agreed objectives, which have now been modified. Discipline in the face of such changes has been remarkable. Leaders can but lead; confidence in new policies takes time to spread. Members of the republican movement are determined it shall not be destroyed by false promises.

The picadors are having an effect. Most British voters are quite uninformed on the subject. Decommissioning is projected as the central issue in the peace process. It is not. The true issue is politics or violence.

A majority of people in Northern Ireland voted in favour of the Good Friday agreement. Many in the Ulster Unionist party now seek to withdraw from it and are setting new conditions for their co-operation, while blaming Sinn Fein. Under the Conservatives, this small political party was able to exercise a veto on government action. Any attempt to do so now should be seen for what it is and the political cost should be fully understood by those on the mainland who will be asked to underwrite it. The damage it does to unionism's future prospects is evident. *Michael Oatley is a former MI6 controller for the Middle East and counter-terrorism, and for Europe. He established a secret dialogue with the IRA leadership that led to the 1975 ceasefire and, 16 years later, produced the first moves in the peace process.*



# Ex-MI6 chief defends Adams on IRA guns

THE MI6 officer responsible for bringing the IRA to the negotiating table has accused senior politicians in London and Belfast of trying to destroy the peace process, writes David Leppard and Paul Uki.

In an article in today's Sunday Times, Michael Oatley, who acted as a secret conduit between the IRA and succes-

sive British governments for more than 20 years, says the issue of decommissioning weapons is being used deliberately as a mechanism to stall peace talks and to antagonise the IRA.

In an unprecedented public statement, the former director of counter-terrorism says unionist and Tory demands that the IRA should give up

its arms should be dropped. "The question is not whether an organisation has, or can, obtain weapons. It is whether it will choose violent or political action," he writes.

The decision by Oatley to break his silence comes at a critical juncture in the peace process. US Senator George Mitchell returned to Stor-

## MI6 expert's IRA plea

*Continued from page 1*

mont this weekend in a final attempt to unlock the decommissioning impasse. The talks broke up last night without agreement but contacts between the parties will resume today.

Oatley suggests that the IRA's desire to retain its weapons is inevitable. "There remains a massive imbalance in weaponry available to the loyalist population as compared to what [the IRA] have", he says. "All-out sectarian conflict is not unimaginable to them."

This weekend he also denounced the unionist community, accusing protestant

"mobs" inflamed by Ian Paisley of carrying out "ethnic cleansing" of Catholics in 1969.

Conservative politicians and commentators in London are guilty of "provoking" and "insulting" the IRA, he says — and this has made renewed violence more likely.

Oatley is uniquely qualified to comment on the thinking within the republican movement. He established secret contacts with the IRA leadership that led to the organisation's first ceasefire in 1975. He was also involved in negotiations that resulted in the ending of the IRA hunger strike in 1981

after the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine other republicans.

Friends say he has become frustrated by the unionist stance and thinks it could lead to a return to violence. Challenged yesterday on whether he had gone soft on the IRA, he replied: "My 32-year career as an intelligence officer required me to do two things: to understand motivation and to report objectively. I do not condone IRA atrocities. But I have had the opportunity to understand how perfectly worthwhile people can become involved in them."

*Trust Sinn Fein  
News Review, page 5*



## Ex-MI6 chief backs IRA on keeping arms

By Neil Tweedle

THE former MI6 officer who brought the IRA to the negotiating table has accused Unionist and Conservative politicians of inflating the importance of decommissioning so as to frustrate the search for peace.

Michael Oatley, once controller of counter-terrorism in the Secret Intelligence Service, said decommissioning had been used to stall negotiations over the Good Friday Agreement.

He accused Unionists, Right-wing Conservatives and elements in the press, including *The Daily Telegraph*, of portraying the deadlock on decommissioning as proof that Sinn Féin was insincere. They had treated it like an injured bull in the ring.

"No doubt if sufficient barbs are thrust into its flanks, the animal will eventually, with reluctance, charge. The picadors can then claim the beast was always a ravening monster."

Writing in *The Sunday Times*, Mr Oatley said: "Weapons and caches are widely dispersed under the control of local cells. Volunteers are not sheep.

"All joined to pursue an armed campaign for agreed objectives, which have now been modified... Leaders can but lead; confidence in new policies takes time."

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THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

# The Daily Telegraph

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## Spooked by the IRA

**D**ID you ever wonder why the British state failed to defeat republican terrorism over the past 30 years, notwithstanding its vastly superior resources? If so, take a look at Michael Oatley's article in yesterday's *Sunday Times* — which affords a fabulous insight into the degenerate, post-imperial mindset of some of our secret servants. Mr Oatley was a senior figure in MI6 who "liaised" with the Provisionals during the Troubles. He now thinks that the Unionists, the press and the "Right wing" of the Tory party should stop insisting on the decommissioning of IRA weapons and acknowledge the sincerity of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Afford these honourable gentlemen the flexibility they need — he suggests — and they will thereby be able to show their own supporters that politics works and that the gun is redundant.

Mr Oatley is clearly suffering from a spook's variant of the "Stockholm syndrome" — whereby captives start to view the world from the standpoint of the kidnappers. Certainly, he is hostage to just about every republican myth about the "peace process". Why did the first IRA ceasefire end? According to Mr Oatley, because John Major's government unfairly injected the precondition of decommissioning after the republicans had "unilaterally" called a halt to violence in 1994. (Nothing could be further from the truth. Decommissioning was insisted on by London and Dublin at the time of the 1993 Downing Street Declaration as one of the criteria for establishing whether the ceasefire was permanent.)

These are not just points of scholarly interest: republicans take them seriously because they desperately require validation for their violent actions in the eyes of nationalist Ireland. By accepting them at their own estimation, Mr Oatley has underwritten the notion that the republicans were cheated of their just deserts by Perfidious Albion. And if they don't get what they want now, they will no doubt cite his view as yet another justification for a return to violence. At a minimum, he will have made it very much harder to persuade republicans of the idea even of token decommissioning.

In Unionist eyes, Mr Oatley's remarks will validate the idea that talks on Ulster's new political structures are mere window dressing to conceal the fact that the province's future is really being carved up in secret between unaccountable secret servants and the Provisionals. It will certainly do little to strengthen David Trimble's hand. So whose agenda is Mr Oatley serving and for whom does he speak as an ex-officer of SIS? He has, after all, recently visited the north-west of the province and has maintained his contacts there. The Conservatives should ask written questions in the Commons to ascertain whether he had any contact with a minister or an official on this subject before publication. If not, Peter Mandelson should immediately repudiate him, for giving a misleading impression of British state thinking. If the answer is yes, the implications are even more shocking — of MI6 colluding in a campaign to urge British citizens to submit to blackmail.



# Why the IRA wants peace

*Sunday Telegraph 3 Nov 1994*

**F**UN for the Editor, whose allegiances are no secret, to call me a post-imperialist degenerate because of views I expressed in the *Sunday Times*. (I began my career in colonial Africa, so why "post"?). But the serious attention he gave them was limited.

And the last part of his note, constructing Le Carré-esque scenarios, whereby Old Spook plays a role in some extraordinary agency conspiracy, was well over the top! Old Spooks, I can tell him from the heart, are a bore and a liability to successors and, when they speak publicly, which they should of course never do, we cover our ears. I have not spoken to anyone in government about Irish matters since retiring from SIS in 1991.

I believe that decommissioning is not an issue on which the Belfast Agreement should be allowed to founder; that the majority in both communities in Ulster do not wish it to be; that mainland voters have been misled as to its significance; that pressing republicans on the matter is counter-productive; that there are understandable reasons for this; and that identification of decommissioning as a yardstick of republican sincerity damages prospects for peaceful settlement. I believe that it has done so since the republican leadership first signalled interest in pursuing a non-violent strategy in 1991.

I believe that a disservice is done to the democratic process in the United Kingdom by presenting only one side of this coin. And that this also damages Unionism: Unionists will gain no credit with the mainland electorate by getting hung up on decommissioning while claiming a right to conduct arcane ceremonies around other people's backyards.

There are more complex and interesting reasons than the mind-

set of such as me for the Government's inability to defeat republican terrorism. If there is only a little water, fish can swim. For two decades, military commanders and Northern Ireland secretaries of state have accepted that the activity can be contained, but not eradicated. It may wither, but people die in the meantime.

The IRA first signalled interest in adopting a political strategy in 1991. Two years later, the government included decommissioning in the Downing Street Declaration. Decommissioning was recognisably unattainable, its inclusion certain to damage political moves in the IRA. But these survived, and in

obtained John Major's recognition that decommissioning would impede agreement.

In March 1995, Sir Patrick Mayhew produced requirements for phased decommissioning before Sinn Féin could be admitted to talks. Sinn Féin rejected them. Sir Hugh again: "When the stalemate about decommissioning became more rigid, I think it became progressively more difficult for the leadership of Provisional IRA to hold in check those who wanted to go back to violence." Which is my point. (Is Sir Hugh also suffering from Stockholm syndrome?)

George Mitchell produced a more realistic formula, but no sooner were

## Michael Oatley, a former secret negotiator, replies to this newspaper's criticisms of his views on Northern Ireland

October 1994 a ceasefire was announced. The government declined to accept the sincerity of the statement, demanded a reformulation, and again pressed for decommissioning.

Sir Hugh Annesley, the former RUC chief constable, later explained how unhelpful this was: "It was clear from all intelligence assessments that the Provisionals were not going to hand in their arms ... I believe that, whilst decommissioning was important politically, it was not as important operationally as some people have attempted to make out." Albert Reynolds, a former Irish prime minister, believed he had

peaceful negotiations once more in sight than the government announced elections for a Northern Ireland Forum. Sinn Féin was unprepared for elections. It saw a trap. The result was the Docklands bomb.

This pattern of government response to an opportunity to pursue peaceful solutions is what I call picador politics. The history of these events and the prominence in them of the issue of decommissioning is indeed "of more than scholarly interest". It shows how to construct a cul-de-sac. I do not think the majority on the British mainland or in Ulster wish to go down it.

Is it gullible of me to join the Prime

Minister in accepting the sincerity of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness? I should be surprised if most participants in the Mitchell review did not accept it by now. I have had unusual opportunities over the years to observe broadening attitudes in the republican leadership, willingness to engage in dialogue with people offering fresh perspectives, re-examination of the justification and effectiveness of their campaign, leading finally to its abandonment.

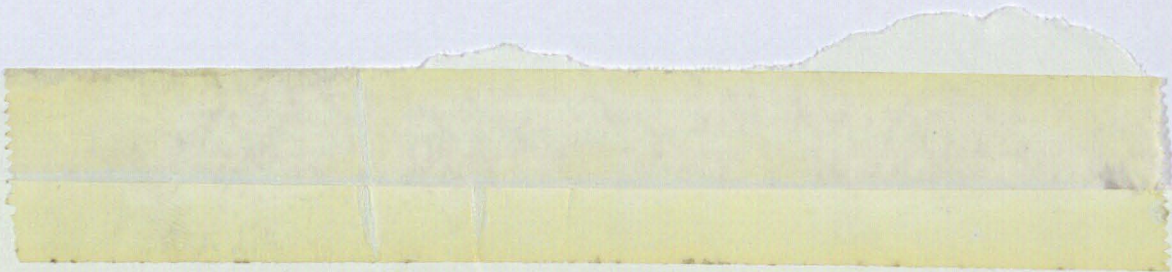
Formerly a professional student of terrorist organisations, I can appreciate the difficulties of the small leadership group in keeping its supporters with it in a radically modified strategy. It must be hard, mustn't it? With a membership originally committed to violence? Compare the problems of our own party leaders in developing policy consensus and party discipline.

Republicans are determined that their movement will not be destroyed by false promises. For some, politics is on trial. This is no reason to question the sincerity of those trying to show that the course is worth pursuing. Pressure for decommissioning touches old wounds. All-out sectarian conflict is still imaginable. The IRA in its modern form emerged from such conflict. It was a response, like the introduction of British troops and the imposition of direct rule, to the apocalyptic experience of thousands of Catholics fleeing in terror as their homes burnt, our very own example of ethnic cleansing. The issue, for the paramilitaries on both sides and for the rest of us, is not whether guns are held or can be obtained. It is whether they are to be used.

*The author was MI6's Controller for Middle East and Counter Terrorism 1984-88, and Europe 1988-94*

*Quotations from Provos, by Peter Taylor*





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