

Mandelson on Ulster

The Queen's Speech was delivered to a breathless world on June 20. It opened the proceedings of the fifty-third Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Much has been said in the media about its contents, and the parliamentary debates on it. I concentrate on Peter Mandelson's speech to the Commons.

This strange, potent man started by saying a good government needs a half-decent party to oppose it, which he thought was not in sight. Then he issued the remarkable injunction that "we need to improve broad band roll-out". Who knows what that meant? Recently the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mandelson's observations on the province, delivered from the back benches, are of greater interest.

He complained that the Unionists are irretrievably hooked on their demand for a start to the decommissioning by the republicans of their arms, and that the republicans are using that demand effectively to hold the peace process to ransom, to get their way on everything else that is of concern to them. He said we have finally reached the impasse on arms decommissioning that everyone has seen coming for a very long time.

"Many of us have tried repeatedly to head off this impasse, using different permutations and formulations in relation to arms decommissioning. One of the first things that I did when I went to Northern Ireland was to join Senator Mitchell in his review. We produced a way forward on decommissioning from that; we then produced another permutation to head off the threatened collapse of the new Government and institutions early in 2000; we then came forward with another formulation after the suspension had taken place; and we came back with a further permutation in the talks that gave rise to the Hillsborough agreement in May last year."

Mr Mandelson said he thought we had now run out of ways of postponing the issue of decommissioning, of parking it, of sidetracking it, or of disguising it. It is, he said, sitting there right in the middle of the road, and there is no way of getting round it. "It is going to have to be addressed."

Of course it has for years been addressed, readdressed, and looked at all over and from all angles. Still it is stuck there in the middle of the road. How can this be?

The IRA has huge dumps of lethal illegal weapons dotted about in various places in the Republic of Ireland. I repeat, how can this be? Why are they allowed to remain? Though illegal, indeed criminal, they are officially recognised to exist by the Irish Government. Arrangements are made for them to be gazed at (sorry inspected) by an international group of the great and the good who are supposed to detect any use of the weapons or other disturbance of the dumps.

I say again, how can this be? The dumps belong to the so-called Irish Republican Army. Why does the proper Irish Army, organised by the Irish democratic state, not move in, take them over, and destroy them - as it surely could if its controlling government wished? Obviously its controlling government does not wish, and that has always been the root of the trouble.

The Republic of Ireland prides itself on adhering to the rule of law, prized in democratic countries as the badge of high civilisation. Yet it allows this gross and festering affront to the rule of law to continue unchecked in its midst. How can this be?

Back to Mr Mandelson. "Some people say . . . that we should simply ignore the issue of arms in Northern Ireland. They suggest that we forget about decommissioning and find another road. After all, if the ceasefire is holding, which by and large it is, and if the peace in Northern Ireland is secure, which by and large it is, if arms are not in the main actually being used, why make such a fuss about them? Why not just let them lie there?"

He said that was a tempting thought, but also a profoundly wrong thought. We stand no chance, he said, of stabilising democracy in Northern Ireland while armed paramilitary organisations are running around threatening to second guess the democratically elected politicians so that they can then take over and start calling the shots again. "We simply cannot live and flourish as a democracy and a decent civic society in Northern Ireland in those circumstances."

Opening certain of its arms dumps to international inspection was a major confidence-building measure by the Provisional IRA, continued Mr Mandelson. (Note the word "certain"). "I do not think that it would now be a huge step for it to make those dumps that have been opened to inspection and reinspection by the two international inspectors permanently accessible".

Permanently accessible? How feeble that sounds, and is.

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