

Mitchell review of Northern Ireland Agreement proposes new formula to begin devolution

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Former US Senator George Mitchell left Northern Ireland last week following the conclusion of his 11-week-long review of the Good Friday Agreement. His review was an attempt to break the deadlock since this summer, created by the Unionist parties' insistence that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) decommission weapons prior to Sinn Fein taking up ministerial seats in the newly created Assembly.

The Unionists "no guns—no government" formula contravened the conditions specified in the original Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which simply called for the parties to work towards decommissioning by May 2000. But Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble was able to cite personal assurances by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to back up his stance.

For 11 weeks, Mitchell met in secret with small groups of politicians from the various parties to cobble together a deal. Of necessity, talks between the Unionists and Sinn Fein focused on achieving a formula on decommissioning acceptable to both parties. But Mitchell's review was essentially an attempt to strengthen the hand of Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble against anti-Agreement forces within his own party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley.

In order to bring the UUP firmly on board, the British government replaced Mo Mowlam as Northern Ireland Secretary with Blair's right-hand man Peter Mandelson. With the assistance of the Clinton government in the US, maximum pressure was then placed on Sinn Fein and the IRA to give the necessary assurances to the Unionists that they had definitively abandoned the armed struggle and accepted continued British rule over

the six counties of Northern Ireland. At the same time, Mandelson gave repeated assurances that the proposed reform of the Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and other measures, would not significantly undermine the dominant political position of the Unionist bourgeoisie in the North.

The secret talks provided everything possible for Trimble to secure the backing of his own party and its leading body, the Ulster Unionist Council. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams issued a statement that his party was "totally opposed to any use of force or threat of force by others for any political purpose".



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