Irish deal concluded

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After continuing throughout the night, the so-called peace talks for new political arrangements in Northern Ireland were concluded on Friday, April 10. The final agreement will be signed by the British and Irish governments and all of the unionist and nationalist political parties that have taken part in the present round of negotiations, begun last summer by the British Labour Party government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Only Sinn Fein, the main republican party associated with the IRA, will not sign immediately, though they took part in the talks throughout. Their chairman, Mitchel McLaughlin, said that while Sinn Fein continued to oppose a Northern Ireland Assembly, in the final negotiations "many of the checks, balances and safeguards have now been assured." This means the Sinn Fein leaders will push for acceptance of the agreement at their party conference in two weeks time before formally agreeing to sign.

Former US Senator George Mitchell, the chairman of the talks, had imposed a deadline for midnight Thursday. This was extended as last minute changes in the draft document were pushed through by the two governments, with all parties keen to get an agreement after months of horse trading. An early morning phone call from US President Clinton to John Hume, the leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party of Northern Ireland, set the seal on the final package.

The agreement is made up of three "strands." Strand one is a proposal for a new Northern Ireland Assembly, with members elected by proportional representation. Strand two is for a North-South Council of Ministers to be set up, as well as for cross-border bodies to be established in areas such as trade and tourism. Strand three contains proposals for a so-called Council of the Isles made up of representatives from both Westminster and Dublin, as well as the Scottish and Welsh assemblies.

Both the Irish and British governments will have to make constitutional amendments to accommodate the new arrangements. In Ireland the change to Articles Two and Three of the Constitution, which claim Irish rule for the whole of the island, will go to a referendum. There will also be a referendum in the north on the package as a whole.

Both Sinn Fein and the small loyalist parties taking part in the talks, who are associated with paramilitary groupings, were promised that their activists presently in jail—there are nearly a thousand of them—will be given remission and released in the near future.

Earlier in the week the draft document put forward by Mitchell provoked an outcry from the unionist camp on the grounds that it yielded too much power to the North-South body. The final compromise deal reportedly allows for elections to the Northern Assembly to take place first, after which the executive of this body will negotiate with Dublin on the setting up of the Council of Ministers. Both Council and Assembly are simultaneously to come into operation sometime next year.

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