

Northern Ireland's "peace" built on state repression and paramilitary violence

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Last Thursday's meeting between David Trimble, Northern Ireland's first minister, and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams was the first such between a republican and loyalist leader since 1922. The meeting followed multiparty talks on Monday, involving most of the political parties in Northern Ireland. Both meetings were a prelude to the reconvening of the Northern Ireland Assembly next week.

The main issue yet to be resolved is the appointment of a Ministerial Executive for the Assembly that will be responsible for implementing the Northern Ireland Agreement. The executive will comprise members from all parties, dependent on their political strength in the Assembly. Of the 10 posts open, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic Labour Party are entitled to three each and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein two each. For weeks the Unionists have insisted that the IRA must at least begin to decommission weapons before Sinn Fein can take its seats. Representatives from the DUP and UK Unionists (UKU) refused to attend the multiparty talks because of Sinn Fein's presence in the meeting.

Trimble's meeting with Adams was presented as a significant step towards breaking this logjam. In the event, it was little more than a choreographed media stunt. Everything had already been decided beforehand. Following their discussion, Trimble said that he was 'quite satisfied' that 'Mr Adams recognises the need for progress to happen on all fronts.' For his part, echoing Margaret Thatcher's description of then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Adams described Trimble as 'a man I can do business with, a man I have to do business with, a man I will do business with'.

No agreement on decommissioning was reached, but then none was really expected. Under the Agreement, it is not a precondition for ministerial seats. Moreover,

leading police officers and political commentators have commented that the country is awash with arms and that it is unrealistic to expect that the IRA could simply gather them in.

To the extent that the 'decommissioning' red herring has any purpose, it is to push Sinn Fein further down the road of compliance with the dictates of the British and Irish governments.

In the last weeks Sinn Fein has made a series of 'historic' announcements. Following the Omagh bombing--which claimed its twenty-ninth victim earlier this week--Adams 'unequivocally' condemned the bombers. This was followed by his demands for the Real IRA--the organisation responsible for Omagh--to implement an immediate cease-fire. Last week, on the eve of President Clinton's visit to Northern Ireland, Adams declared that the war with Britain was 'now a thing of the past, over, done with and gone.' The next day Sinn Fein named Adams' right-hand man Martin McGuinness as the party's representative on the International Commission on Decommissioning.

Trimble's agreement to face-to-face talks with Adams was the first instalment of Sinn Fein's payment for services rendered. The talks were intended to symbolise the party's new found political legitimacy and to signal that its incorporation into the Executive is on the cards. As a further reward to Adams, the British government announced that all British army patrols would be removed from Belfast at the weekend, due to the 'reduced threat of terrorism'.

The DUP and UKU withdrawal from talks also owed more to playing to the gallery than any issue of substance. The DUP has made clear it will take up its ministerial posts and sit in the assembly and on committees with Sinn Fein, although they insist 'not in government'(?).

The real attitude taken by the powers that be towards paramilitary decommissioning was indicated in events surrounding the RIRA's cease-fire declaration on September 7.

Earlier in the week, in a military-style operation lasting just 90 minutes, representatives of the IRA's Army Council 'visited' the homes of several key members of the RIRA. The dissidents were informed that the IRA's Army Council had declared the RIRA had no right to exist and demanded the organisation's disbanding. The RIRA members were accused of 'treachery' by violating the Northern Ireland Agreement and misappropriating weapons, and were told that 'action will be taken' if they did not make amends. Some were told plainly that they would be shot. Later that evening the RIRA declared a 'complete cessation' of military activities from midnight.

Blair and Ahern said the RIRA announcement vindicated the rushed passage of undemocratic 'anti-terror' legislation through the British and Irish parliaments the previous week. Just days later, on September 9, the Irish police used the new legislation for the first time; arresting a Dublin man under the Offences against the State Act. His 48-hour detention was extended for a further 24 hours, as provided for by the act. Sinn Fein, however, was eager to claim credit for the RIRA cease-fire, stating that 'pressure' from nationalist and republican groups had been the decisive factor rather than the new legislation. For its part, the British media glowingly reported the IRA's 'home visits'. According to their scenario, paramilitary violence and intimidation is permissible--and even welcome--when it is put to the service of the Agreement.

See Also:

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[27 August 1998]

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