

As negotiations for new Northern Ireland Assembly break down

Violence erupts again in Drumcree

Richard Tyler
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Mutual recriminations have accompanied the breakdown of the present negotiations to set up the new Northern Ireland Assembly and joint cross-border bodies with the Irish Republic.

At its only meeting so far, the Assembly met on July 1 to appoint Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble as First Minister, with Seamus Mallon from the Social Democratic and Labour Party as his deputy. The Assembly then adjourned for negotiations between the UUP, SDLP and Sinn Fein to discuss the setting up of an executive and to reach agreement on the composition of various cross-border bodies.

However, these talks have proved so difficult that the February deadline for the start of the Assembly is in danger. In an effort to break the impasse, British Prime Minister Tony Blair cancelled all his other engagements last Wednesday and flew to Belfast to hold talks with the party leaders. Following seven hours of late-night discussions the press was reporting that 'significant progress' had been made. But then on Friday, after Blair had returned to England, Trimble claimed the nationalists had made 'unreasonable demands', pointing the finger at the SDLP. 'We thought we had broken the back of it--and then we were to sort out the details--and found fresh obstacles being created,' he said.

For the SDLP, Seamus Mallon said, 'People did not honour their word. That's putting it as mildly as I possibly can.'

He continued, 'Apart from myself, there is a very substantial anger among the other political parties at the way in which the Ulster Unionist Party seems to have walked away from an arrangement it had made.... I can see it even already beginning to erode the credibility that the peace process in the Assembly has had within the community.'

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said: 'There was a deal done this week and it was undone by Unionist bad faith.'

The talks are now on hold as the leaders of the main nationalist and Unionist parties in Northern Ireland flew off to America last Friday to receive various awards. They are en route to Oslo to receive their Nobel Peace Prize. David Trimble and SDLP leader John Hume were nominated for the award for their part in brokering the Northern Ireland Agreement.

Two issues have led to the current crisis in negotiations. According to the *Financial Times*, 'The real crunch was over the SDLP's insistence on including a body for foreign investment promotion, after the UUP had expressly opposed the idea during the multi-party talks.... Trimble argued it would imply a single exchequer, a single fiscal system and one granting body, 'It's a matter of amazement that nationalists want all the economic functions to be extracted from the assembly before it's even started,' he said.'

The Sunday *Observer* claimed that a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Assembly members 'went almost ballistic' following Trimble's report back from the talks with Blair. 'The main sticking point was the SDLP wish for a body to govern inward investment into the whole of Ireland, treating the island as an economic unit.'

The paper wrote, 'Trimble will be ousted by his backbenchers in the Northern Ireland Assembly unless he can scrap plans for a cross-border body on trade. The hard-liners were poised to bring down the Assembly if Sinn Fein is admitted to the executive without the IRA decommissioning weapons.'

This is the second issue. Unionists insist that there can be no place for Sinn Fein on the executive before the IRA begins to hand over its weapons. Pauline

Armitage, a UUP Assembly member for East Londonderry, told the press, 'I want decommissioning and I want a resolution to the Drumcree problem.... I would prefer to see the whole package together, and I would prefer not to have any bodies set up because the pressure should remain on decommissioning.'

This latest impasse once more highlights the deep divisions that exist in the Unionist camp. Trimble's nominally pro-Agreement UUP won 28 seats in the Assembly and the Progressive Unionist Party of David Irvine have 2, making 30 in total. Unionist parties opposed to the Agreement, including Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists, command 28 seats.

In November the anti-Agreement pressure group 'Union First' held their first public meeting in Belfast. In attendance were Martin Smyth and Willie Ross, UUP Members of Parliament. Jeffrey Donaldson, the most vocal UUP MP opposing the Agreement, and former Unionist leader Lord Molyneux sent their apologies. Other opponents of the Agreement in attendance were Ian Paisley and UK Unionist Party leader Bob McCartney.

The loss of just two assemblymen from the pro-Agreement side would jeopardise not only Trimble's position, but the Assembly itself. The establishment of a cross-border body to co-ordinate bids for inward investment with the Republic is at the heart of the new structures planned for the island. The Irish Republic has become a prime investment location for transnational corporations seeking access to the European market. It has done so by offering tax breaks to business and striking wage-restraint deals with the unions at the expense of Irish workers. The Northern Ireland Agreement--drawn up by the British and American governments--is aimed at eliminating all barriers to the exploitation of the whole of Ireland by international capital and ensuring that the North emulates the Republic's 'success'.

In this process, sections of indigenous capital, small businessmen and farmers in the North, who provide the main clientele for Paisley and the Orange Order, will undoubtedly lose out.

Growing tensions within the Unionist organisations were also indicated by the outbreak of violence last Thursday evening over loyalist parades in Drumcree. One thousand people demonstrated in support of Orange marches down the mainly Catholic Garvaghy

Road. Ten police officers and four protesters were injured as the police were attacked with fireworks and other missiles. A loyalist mob attacked a garage and damaged cars, attempting to hijack a lorry. Police responded by firing plastic bullets. Ronnie Flanagan, Royal Ulster Constabulary Chief Officer, said, 'People arrived with fireworks in their back pockets, with iron bars, with cudgels, with staves, with bricks and bottles'.

An Orange Order spokesman said, 'The situation can simply be resolved by the parade being able to get down the Garvaghy Road. If we don't walk it before Christmas we will walk it twice next year.'

Another Orange Order member in Portadown told the press, 'The young men want to fight. The senior people do not want violence and neither does the Orange Order, but we are afraid the young ones may take up arms and it takes a lot of talking to keep them from it.'

The Drumcree protest has been going on for 153 days, since Orangemen were prevented from marching down the Garvaghy Road. At that time, Harold Gracey, leader of the Drumcree protesters, said that they wanted to bring down the Agreement. The organisers are threatening to hold a major demonstration on December 19.

In another incident, shots were fired in Portadown on Saturday morning. Later that day, a senior Loyalist was arrested.

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