

Unionists and Tories raise the stakes in British-Irish Agreement

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Just four weeks before the Northern Ireland Assembly becomes operational on March 10, the Unionists, backed by the Conservative Party, have stepped up their efforts to secure political dominance within the new structures.

Assembly members are due back in Stormont on February 15 to endorse the creation of 10 Ministerial departments and numerous cross-border bodies between the North and South of Ireland. But David Trimble, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader and the Assembly's First Minister, has threatened to stonewall the proceedings unless Sinn Fein persuade the IRA to begin decommissioning their weapons.

The Unionists have raised this demand repeatedly since the British-Irish Agreement was signed last year. Its purpose is twofold: to extract further concessions from the British and Irish governments, and to subordinate Sinn Fein/IRA to their dictates.

The Conservative Party backed the Unionist threats. Speaking in Westminster last week, party leader William Hague demanded that the Labour government halt the prisoner release programme, under which Republican and Loyalist prisoners are made eligible for early parole. Hague claimed that figures released by Families Against Intimidation and Terror (FAIT), showed that punishment beatings in January--supposedly directed against "anti-social" elements--were double the rate of the previous two years. He said this proved that Sinn Fein/IRA had not broken with violence.

Hague's statement broke the bipartisan support for the Agreement that had existed since John Major's leadership of the Conservative Party. The Tory press took up Hague's cause enthusiastically, claiming that the Agreement was on the brink of collapse and warning of renewed bombings in Britain.

Trimble and Hague's stance has created major problems. The most significant aspect of the British-Irish Agreement was Sinn Fein/IRA's incorporation into the structures of government, in return for their acceptance of continued British sovereignty over the North and an end to hostilities. From the standpoint of the British, Irish and American governments, this would reduce the huge costs of policing and social provisions, while ensuring a politically stable framework for opening up the entire island to the transnational corporations and developing cross-border investment.

Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam complained that Hague was being "difficult". Alongside Irish Premier Bertie Ahern, she announced a joint Dublin-London offensive to get the peace process back on track. US President Bill Clinton also made clear that he would use his personal authority to ensure the Agreement went through. British Prime Minister Tony Blair made clear that decommissioning is not a precondition for the executive's formation,

whilst seeking to ease Sinn Fein in that direction.

There is undoubtedly an element of brinkmanship in Trimble and Hague's utterances. But the instability this creates exposes the fundamental weaknesses at the heart of the Agreement. For all the talk of overcoming sectarianism, the accord does nothing to resolve the fundamental antagonisms responsible for decades of conflict.

Attempting to defend the government's record, Blair declared that an "imperfect peace" is better than none at all. This is another way of saying that sectarian divisions will remain. Assembly voting procedures are already predicated on this. The new Agreement accepts that Ireland is divided into two opposed religious "communities". Assembly members must register their "designation of identity"--nationalist, unionist or other. Legislation can be passed only with majority support from both nationalist and unionist parties, essentially marginalising any organisation that rejects the sectarian framework. In this way the British government hopes to continue its policy of dividing the working class by manipulating religious differences. All the major parties--both those for and against the Agreement--base themselves on the same premise.

Hague's decision to break the bipartisan set-up is partially motivated by his need to end the schisms that the Agreement--amongst other issues--has created within his own party. In the last months, Hague has sought to enforce a single party line to settle such disputes, which include the bitter split over Britain's entry to the euro. The Tories have been struggling to demarcate themselves from an increasingly right-wing Labour government. This has meant making a sharp shift to the right, which includes readopting their former partisan stance on Ireland. The Tories are the traditional party of Unionism. Sections of the party have long complained that the new arrangements represent an unpardonable concession to Britain's rivals and will ultimately weaken Britain's dominance in Ireland.

Trimble's threat to withdraw from the Assembly is a major shift by one of the Agreement's main architects. It is rooted in the deep split within Unionism, which has witnessed the more hard-line elements opposed to any power-sharing with the nationalists steadily gaining ground.

Assembly voting procedures mean that Trimble can only be defeated if 40 percent of the 58 Unionist Assembly members vote against him. He is currently safe but is coming close to losing his 50 percent margin. In his own party, Peter Weit, a member of the Ulster Unionist Party group in the Northern Ireland Assembly, has had the whip withdrawn for defying the leadership, whilst another two members--Pauline Armitage and Roy Beggs Jnr--are on the verge of quitting. This would take the pro-Agreement Unionist block to 27 and the anti-Agreement block to 31. If Trimble can be defeated, his

Unionist opponents could effectively bring the Assembly down, hence the demand for further concessions to pacify his critics.

The narrow majority amongst Protestant voters for the Agreement in last year's referendum was won with promises that it would not only bring peace, but prosperity too. Neither has so far materialised.

The Northern Ireland economy has proved especially vulnerable to the world recession. This month two major engineering firms, whose work forces are predominantly Protestant, announced large redundancies. The diesel generator manufacturer FG Wilson is to lay off 400 and Mackie International, which employs 300, has gone into receivership. The latter's failure is particularly significant: the plant was held up by Clinton three years ago as a "symbol of Northern Ireland's rebirth". The announcement led to crisis meetings across the engineering sector. If the company goes bankrupt millions of pounds of public finance, which had been poured into the firm in an attempt to keep it afloat, have been lost.

Sectarian conflicts have not been overcome but have, if anything, escalated. Whilst the brutal murder of IRA defector Eammon Collins was widely reported, what has been less well publicised, for political reasons, is the role played by the Unionist organisations in the continuing violence. Reports of punishment beatings have concentrated on those attributed to the Republicans, but the biggest increase has been by Loyalist groups, who already account for almost half the total.

Trimble's Unionist opponents have stepped up their campaign against the Agreement. Protests against the banning of the Loyalists' Drumcree march last year continue around the predominantly Catholic Garvaghy Road. Some 70 RUC officers have been injured, and one killed, since the protest began, whilst 11 Catholic families have been forced out of their homes in the area. Loyalist thugs have also begun a campaign of terror against Catholics. A group calling itself the Red Hand Defenders has mounted petrol and other bomb attacks on half a dozen Catholic homes in the past fortnight. On Monday evening it was responsible for a failed grenade attack on a Catholic-owned bar on the main Belfast to Londonderry road. Billy Hutchinson, Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) leader, has threatened that without IRA decommissioning Loyalists would be "dragged back into" violence, "irrespective of whether there is republican violence or not".

Sinn Fein face serious difficulties in this situation, having long portrayed themselves as the sole force capable of defending Catholic workers from Unionist violence. Their refusal to agree to immediate decommissioning is not due to any lack of commitment to the Agreement, but fear that they will lose political credibility and possibly provoke splits in their own ranks more serious than the breakaway of the tiny "Real IRA" and 32 Counties Sovereignty Commission.

In entering into the Agreement, Sinn Fein effectively renounced its agenda of a united Ireland. They are equally willing to accept decommissioning. The party's chief negotiator Martin McGuinness gave a major interview in last week's *Guardian* newspaper. Echoing Yassir Arafat's complaint that he was being asked to do a "strip tease" on the White House lawn, McGuinness pleaded, "Do I have to lie down in the middle of the road and allow them to walk on top of me?" McGuinness condemned punishment beatings and, when pressed on decommissioning, said, "Have you noticed how I have not used the word 'never' in this answer?" He could not deliver decommissioning "at this time", he said, because he would be chased "out of the room".

McGuinness made a direct appeal for Trimble to understand his dilemma, pointing out all the occasions when Sinn Fein had made

significant concessions to the Unionist agenda in order to make "life easier for him". He pledged that he would "do anything to contribute to his survival as the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party".

Labour has also sought to quieten Unionist anxiety. Replying to Trimble's concern that Assembly voting mechanisms made it virtually impossible to expel an officeholder, Blair promised that Westminster would "support changes to these provisions" if they remained ineffective after six months. Unionists utilised the exchange to prove that Britain will retain ultimate sovereignty over the North, irrespective of the Assembly's deliberations. Northern Ireland Victims Minister Adam Ingram also declared that the two Scots Guards who shot 17-year-old Catholic Peter McBride in the back, killing him outright, were "loyal" soldiers who will be able to remain in the British Army.

Despite its desire to placate the Unionists, the government cannot be indifferent to Sinn Fein's dilemma because it relies on them to "police the peace". Following the Omagh bombing last year Mo Mowlam publicly demanded that the IRA deal with their dissidents whilst repressive security legislation was rushed through both the Irish and British parliaments. Last week, the 32 County Sovereignty Committee accused the IRA of mounting a "highly public wave of threats and political abductions" against dissidents. Paddy Fox, a former leading IRA man, was kidnapped and beaten for his opposition to the Agreement. At the height of the media outcry against punishment beatings, the IRA announced that dissidents had stolen weapons during their split from the organisation last year. This was already widely known, so the high-profile declaration has been interpreted as a public death threat. Under IRA rules, those found to have seized weapons are guilty of treason and can be assassinated.

The Agreement's open reliance on paramilitary thugs cannot continue indefinitely. In his interview McGuinness called on the British government to speed up its review of policing in Northern Ireland. "I want to be able to say to young men and women from areas like Ballymena, Coleraine, Ballymoney and the Bogside that there is a policing service that I think you should join. I think when that day comes we will have cracked this particular problem," he said. Nevertheless, official uniforms cannot disguise the fact that the Assembly is dependent on the enforced division of Catholic and Protestant workers by sectarian parties and their armed thugs.



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