

Unionist domination of Northern Ireland Assembly confirmed

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Tuesday's vote by Republican and Unionist parties in favour of establishing a new Executive for the Northern Ireland Assembly came after more than a fortnight of intense political pressure directed at Sinn Fein.

Despite continued antagonisms over the issue of IRA decommissioning, Northern Ireland Assembly members endorsed proposals for a new system of devolved government by a vote of 77 to 29, with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley voting against. With the Unionist vote split exactly in half, David Trimble, First Minister and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader, reiterated his threat that without IRA decommissioning the March 10 transfer of certain powers from the UK to the Assembly could not take place.

Peter Weir was the only UUP member to vote against the proposals. A revolt by two other dissident UUP members was averted by Trimble's assurances--described by one source as a "kind of post-dated cheque"--that the Executive would not begin without the IRA's commitment to disarm. A statement after the vote by one of the anticipated dissenters, Roy Beggs Junior, said that he had been "strongly influenced" by a meeting of the UUP executive the previous weekend which had unanimously voted to block the appointment of Sinn Fein ministers in advance of IRA decommissioning.

In the days prior to the vote, the British and Irish governments stepped up their pressure on Sinn Fein and the IRA to make further accommodations to Unionist demands. A key role was played by the Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern. Just two days before the vote, he signalled his support for Sinn Fein's exclusion from the executive if they did not begin decommissioning. In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, Ahern stated that the Republicans' refusal to begin a weapons hand-over was "not compatible with being a part" of the Executive.

Ahern's remarks were, as he later admitted, aimed at "stepping up" the pressure on the IRA. With the leader of

Fianna Fail--the largest Republican party on the island --throwing its weight behind Unionist demands, Sinn Fein was left completely isolated. In advance of the Assembly vote the *Times*, calling on Unionists to rally behind the Agreement, stated, "The IRA are being pushed into a corner. Unionists should ... press home their advantage today without hesitation. They must not falter now."

Subsequently, Sinn Fein and the IRA made additional efforts to accommodate London's and Dublin's demands without further undermining their credibility in nationalist areas. Trimble welcomed an RUC statement that the IRA had not engaged in any "punishment" attacks for two weeks. During Tuesday's debate Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said, "Irish Republicans and Ulster Unionists have to get it into our heads that we are on the one side." In an effort to explain the difficulties that the IRA faces over the issue, Sinn Fein's number two man Martin McGuinness held up part of a hand grenade he said came from an illegal arms shipment to loyalist paramilitaries, brought in with the aid of British intelligence. The grenade had been used in an attack on a Catholic home in Belfast earlier in the week. Decommissioning could not be seriously raised whilst this was going on, he said.

Later that evening, however, pictures of an alleged IRA arms cache were shown on Irish television. Commentators described the find--one automatic rifle, several pipe and coffee-jar bombs and bullets--as a signal by the IRA that its weapons were going out of circulation. The following day, Sinn Fein held an unprecedented meeting with the UUP, the first time full delegations from each party had sat down for talks. McGuinness said that the 90-minute meeting was "good and useful", but Trimble would only say that each side has restated its position. Sinn Fein requested further talks.

On Thursday, Northern Ireland Minister Mo Mowlam announced she would introduce draft legislation next week allowing the Executive to be formed, but deferring

the allocation of ministerial posts until the decommissioning issue was resolved. One senior political figure said that all that was now required was some careful "choreography" on arms, which could be played out over the month. The main suggestion is that if Arms Decommissioning Chairman General John de Chastelain produced an agreeable form of words that he is satisfied with the decommissioning process, this would enable the Executive to meet. It is expected that the final deal could be unveiled when all the political parties travel to Washington to celebrate St. Patrick's day on March 17.

Speculation has already begun over how the parties will divide up the 10 ministerial departments. Of these, the UUP, which has first choice, is expected to take control of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) would take the Treasury, with Sinn Fein and the DUP taking Education/Leisure and Agriculture respectively.

Details of the role to be played by the First Minister's office were released, which make clear the enormous powers that Trimble will wield. Outside of security and taxation matters--which will remain under London's control--virtually every department comes under the Unionist leader's office.

Largely missing from reporting of the deliberations over portfolios was any discussion of the cost of Northern Ireland's new government. Estimates range between £10 million and £90 million. Assembly members agreed to expand a number of government departments and approved measures to raise funding for the Assembly by cutting other areas of public expenditure. The report tabled by Trimble and Seamus Mallon, his Social Democratic Labour Party deputy, was overwhelmingly carried. It noted that "increasing the number of departments inevitably involves some dislocation and diseconomies. We share the firm view expressed during our consultations with parties that the additional costs should be offset by rationalising the remainder of public administration in Northern Ireland".

James Lyons, the US president's special adviser for economic initiatives in Ireland, also emphasised the necessity for corporations based in the North to be competitive. He warned Northern Ireland business leaders not to rely on American handouts. Accompanying the US ambassadors to London and Dublin on a two-day tour of the province, Lyons said that he regarded his role as one of encouraging *entrepreneurship*. "Full implementation" of the British-Irish Agreement was necessary to unlock Northern Ireland's economic potential, he said, but

"frankly my own personal view is that to count on substantial inward investment to solve the economic problems ... is the wrong way to do it.... At the end of the day it's your own capital, your own wits and your own risk that are going to spell the difference between success and failure."

His remarks were backed up by Phillip Lader, US ambassador to London, who pointed out that many of America's "new jobs" of the last six years were in small, private sector companies which were largely "indigenously financed, and entrepreneurially driven."

These warnings have major implications. The crisis facing the Northern Ireland economy was a major factor shaping the British-Irish Agreement. Decades of military conflict and partition prevented Northern Ireland from emulating the success of its southern neighbour in transforming itself into a cheap labour platform for international investment. The Agreement was a response to the demands of global finance capital and Ireland's major investors that stable political conditions be created to enable the more effective exploitation of the working class across the island. The Unionist and Republican leaders signed up to the Agreement in return for establishing their economic and political niche within this process. Now they are being told not to expect a free ride and to get on with the job of slashing vital public services and rationalising industry at the expense of the working class.



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