

Fissures widen in Northern Ireland Agreement

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The Northern Ireland Agreement has continued to unravel in the weeks since the British government was forced to announce its “parking” until next month. A review is set to begin in September, chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell. But Mitchell is said to have been taken aback by reports that Sinn Fein may not even participate. A tense meeting of Sinn Fein's ruling body is reported to have declined to give the go-ahead to the Sinn Fein negotiators.

On Tuesday August 17, Northern Ireland Secretary Mo Mowlam announced she would suspend until next week a decision on whether Sinn Fein should be excluded from the Northern Ireland Assembly. Calls for Sinn Fein's exclusion were made by unionist politicians and sections of the media following accusations of IRA involvement in the murder of alleged police informer Charles Bennett and other killings, as well as allegations of arms smuggling.

The problems that now beset the Northern Ireland Agreement were inherent within it from its inception. Though it was portrayed as an attempt to secure peace and prosperity for all, the British, Irish and US governments shaped the Agreement solely in the interests of big business. Its purpose was to create better conditions for investment by the major corporations throughout Ireland and cut the vast military and social expenditure associated with the “Troubles”.

The maintenance of divisions between Catholic and Protestant workers has historically played an essential role in preserving bourgeois rule in Ireland. For this reason, far from seeking to encourage a genuine break with the island's sectarian past, the Agreement makes religious and cultural differences the cornerstone of the new constitutional arrangements. In return for ending military hostilities, the Unionists and Republicans were offered a power-sharing agreement within an Assembly that guaranteed them a virtual duopoly over political life within the Province. The Agreement went so far as to stipulate that all parties within the Assembly be officially designated as unionist, nationalist or other. All legislation must receive “cross-community support”, effectively ensuring a joint veto by the two camps so-designated.

By itself, this would have set the scene for constant struggles between the rival parties over control of the lion's share of the rewards of office. The situation was made worse by the machinations of the Blair government to get the Agreement signed. The failure to get the Assembly up and running was brought about by the insistence of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) that the IRA must decommission its weapons before Sinn Fein could take Ministerial seats in the Executive.

When talks first began, Britain told Sinn Fein that decommissioning could wait until after the Executive was established—the position actually contained in the Agreement. At the same time, however, Blair

made a private agreement in a letter to UUP leader David Trimble that IRA decommissioning “should” take place before hand.

A recent op-ed piece by former Southern Irish Premier Garret FitzGerald in the *Irish Times* showed the extraordinary degree to which all the governments involved believed that a few clever manoeuvres were all that were needed to get an agreement in place. He noted, “What appeared in April last year to have been a constructive ambiguity about the relationship between decommissioning and the formation of the Northern Ireland Executive eventually became a trap which caught the two key parties.”

FitzGerald wrote that Blair's letter to Trimble “contained an obvious and potentially dangerous ambiguity”, because “such a side-letter could not alter the terms of the agreement and the use of the ambiguous auxiliary verb ‘should’ was obviously designed to sound as if it meant more than it possibly could in the circumstances.” According to FitzGerald, the dangers of depending on “such a flimsy piece of paper” only later became clear.

Since then, the unionist parties have made demands for prior decommissioning the central plank of their offensive against Sinn Fein, designed to ensure continued unionist domination of political life in the North. The British government has done everything it can to placate their traditional allies.

Last weekend, the Northern Ireland Parades Commission gave the go-ahead for loyalist Apprentice Boys Parades to march through Derry and Belfast. The decision provoked a sit-down protest in the Lower Ormeau Road area of Belfast on Saturday morning, when Republicans attempted to block the route of a parade through this largely Catholic area. Riot police violently attacked the 200 demonstrators, injuring several people. Lower Ormeau Concerned Citizens spokesperson Gerard Rice described the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) offensive as a brutal two-hour attack: “I saw an RUC man deliberately break a bottle on the road, deliberately trail people over that bottle. I saw an RUC man deliberately jump on people to try and break them.” Throughout the rest of the day nationalist youths attacked the RUC and a number of lorries and buildings were set alight.

Prior to the Apprentice Boys march, the RUC issued several inflammatory statements asserting that there was a danger of “Republican violence”. This was used to justify the huge police operation mounted against the counter-demonstration.

The security forces maintain that the IRA are responsible for five murders in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement was signed. These include Andrew Kearney, 33, who was involved in a pub brawl with a north Belfast IRA commander; Eamon Collins, 45, an ex-IRA man turned informer; and two Newry drugs dealers,

Brendan Fagan, 24, and Paul Downey. 33. All those killed were Catholics. The killing of Charles Bennett—the nephew of Bernadette McKevitt-Sands, head of the dissident Republican “32 County Sovereignty Committee”—occurred following the Agreement’s “parking”.

The focus for media debate has thus become whether the IRA could be said to have broken its cease-fire. (Since Bennett’s death, Richard McFerran, who owned a crane hire and haulage business, was shot once in the head as he parked his car in Dundalk, Co Louth. He is understood to have known Downey.)

In response, the IRA issued a statement insisting its cease-fire was still in place. It said, “The Army Council has not sanctioned any arms importation operation. There has also been speculation about the killing of Charles Bennett. Let us emphasise there have been no breaches of the IRA cessation, which remains intact.”

Martin McGuinness, Sinn Fein’s chief negotiator, said: “When the IRA called their cease-fire, they said they were calling a complete cessation of *military operations* to enhance the peace process. In my view, the cease-fire is intact. That’s all we need to say about it” (emphasis added).

The issue of whether the IRA cease-fire had been breached ended up doing more damage to the British government than to Sinn Fein, because it threw additional light on the actual character of the Agreement. When pressed on the matter, everyone from the RUC, to the UUP and the Northern Ireland Office declared that, strictly speaking, the IRA statement was correct.

Vincent McKenna of the independent Northern Ireland Human Rights Bureau (NIHRB)—which campaigns against punishment beatings and shootings—rang the Northern Ireland Office seeking clarification last Friday. He said he wanted to know if this meant that murdering working class people was not a breach of the IRA cease-fire. An NIO spokesperson is said to have replied: “Off the record, Vincent, the Secretary of State [Mo Mowlam] has to decide whether an incident is an internal housekeeping matter to the terrorist organisations or an attack on the entire community, i.e., the Omagh bomb, before making a determination of their cease-fire.”

McKenna said that the government’s response, which he taped but is being denied by the NIO, suggested that if the IRA just killed Catholics, or the loyalist terrorists murdered Protestants, they were not breaching the cease-fire. This interpretation was subsequently confirmed by the remarks of the head of the RUC, Sir Ronnie Flannagan. He stated that the IRA’s own definition of a “cessation of military operations” covered bombings and attacks on the RUC and Army, but not the murders of alleged informers, or of drugs dealers. UUP spokesman Ken Maginnis also acknowledged, “The cease-fire was about not shooting soldiers and policemen, but it wasn’t about not shooting members of the Catholic community.”

This week the NIHRB issued a list of reported terrorist activity since the Agreement was signed in April last year. As well as naming the five people allegedly murdered by the IRA (that have been repeatedly cited in the British press), the list notes 61 punishment shootings and 152 punishment beatings by the organisation over the same period. What has received less attention are the figures pertaining to loyalist violence. Three people have been killed, 71 shot and 171 beaten by unionist thugs. “The type of paramilitary activity covered by our list has increased some 400 percent since the first IRA cease-fire in 1994. The reason is that without a full-scale conflict, the various groups want to keep a social grip on their respective communities,” McKenna commented.

Despite attempts to make political capital out of the IRA’s activities, both the British government and the UUP have made clear that this should not—at least at this stage—provoke a breakdown of the Good Friday Agreement. This points to a key aspect of the new relationship that the Agreement sought to establish between the British government and both the Republican and loyalist terrorists.

Though decommissioning has featured heavily in discussions surrounding the Agreement, it is common knowledge that Ireland is awash with arms on both sides of the sectarian divide. A recent article in the *Irish News* noted that RUC statistics document 139,588 licensed weapons in the hands of the unionist community: one gun for every seven unionists. This figure includes 12,090 handguns of a type banned everywhere else in the UK. Licensed weapons held by unionists increased by 861 between 1997 and 1998.

The proclamation of “peace” referred solely to a truce between the paramilitaries and the RUC and British Army. In return, the rival sectarian groups were given de facto control over their respective communities. On this score, the IRA has no serious challenger, but there has been a brutal turf war between rival loyalist groups since the Agreement was signed. The leader of the pro-Agreement Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), David Ervine, recently told the press that he had received six death threats in the last six months, five from loyalist sources. The PUP is the political wing of the Ulster Volunteer Force, which has been battling with the Loyalist Volunteer Force, Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Freedom Fighters for control of Belfast’s Protestant estates. Sharp disagreements exist between the UUP and Ian Paisley’s anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party, over the UUP’s support for Sinn Fein remaining in the Assembly during the Mitchell review.

Though the British government may now insist that some of the worst excesses have been curtailed, the activities of the paramilitaries do not run contrary to the spirit of the Agreement. The higher profile activities of the sectarian groups, such as murder, has so far been related to internal disputes or drugs. But punishment beatings are the method favoured by the paramilitary groups for policing social breakdown in areas of high unemployment, poor housing and deprivation, and are particularly directed against young men. This is especially the case on predominantly Catholic estates, which are virtual “no-go” areas for the RUC; so this type of “rough justice” is given tacit support by the government and the security forces.

The attempt to incorporate the paramilitary organisations into a new framework of rule points to the undemocratic character of the Northern Ireland Agreement—just as the reliance on double bookkeeping and deceit regarding decommissioning epitomises the entire “peace process”. Despite the convening of referenda on both sides of the border to endorse the Agreement, there has been no genuine reference to the concerns of working people. Power and decision making remain the exclusive province of the representatives of corporate interests and sectarian formations. Against this self-appointed cabal, only a united, independent movement of working people based on the struggle for democratic and social equality provides a way forward.



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