# Suspension of Northern Ireland Assembly reveals undemocratic nature of "peace process"

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Westminster's decision to suspend the nine-week-old Northern Ireland Assembly and reinstate direct rule from Britain has thrown a question mark over the future of the so-called “peace process”.

The move was ostensibly prompted by the Irish Republican Army's failure to begin decommissioning its weapons. But a key concern of the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, was to save Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader and First Minister David Trimble from being ousted by those in his party who oppose the Good Friday Agreement that established the Assembly.

The same day Mandelson announced his decision, a hurriedly issued report from General John de Chastelain's international disarmament commission revealed that the IRA had said it was prepared to begin arms decommissioning, in the context of "the full implementation of the Good Friday agreement and ... the removal of the causes of conflict." London, Dublin and Washington welcomed the IRA statement, but Mandelson said the IRA had still not answered the critical questions of whether it intended to disarm, and how and when it proposed to do so. In response to the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the IRA announced Tuesday it was withdrawing from participation in the de Chastelain commission.

The “collapsing” of the Assembly had the desired effect, strengthening Trimble's position inside the UUP. At the previous meeting of the party's 860-member ruling council in December last year, Trimble had provided post-dated letters of resignation for himself and other UUP ministers, in order to secure the deeply divided council's support for Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, taking up ministerial seats on the Assembly Executive in advance of IRA decommissioning.

At last Saturday's re-convened UUP council meeting, Trimble told the press the resignation letters were now "invaluable historical documents". Trimble's resignation as first minister in the Assembly would have spelt the end of the new body, since anti-Agreement Unionists could prevent him being re-appointed. The resignation threat was held over Sinn Fein and the IRA in an attempt to produce a definitive move towards decommissioning.

To all appearances, the brinkmanship of the British government seems to have paid off, for the moment. Sinn Fein has not walked away from talks on re-establishing the Assembly, despite their humbling at Trimble's behest. But major problems concerning the new political arrangements still exist. Opponents of power-sharing within the UUP and Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) feel strengthened by recent events and could yet move against Trimble.

For his part, Sinn Fein head Gerry Adams faces opposition from Republican hard-liners who, though small in number, still have the ability to conduct terrorist actions. This is particularly the case, given that Adam's place in the negotiations is predicated on his ability to bring the IRA on board and end bombings in Belfast and Britain. Adams warned that the decision to suspend the Assembly "has shaken confidence among nationalists and republicans" in the British government.

Recent events once again underscore the essentially undemocratic character of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the impossibility of overcoming the social and democratic problems of Ireland through the political mechanisms it established. That the new Assembly, its Executive and the North-South bodies established by the Agreement can be cast aside at the behest of a British cabinet minister, without consulting the thousands of ordinary working people on both sides of the present border who voted to bring them into being, is testament to this fact.

The Northern Ireland Assembly was finally set up last December, after extensive secret talks between representatives of the Republican and Unionist parties, together with the British and Irish governments, presided over by former US Senator George Mitchell. The negotiations never extended beyond these parties and their own narrow concerns.

Both before and since the signing of the Agreement there has been a complete lack of involvement by the mass of working people. In the referendums held north and south of the border, Irish workers were asked to vote for the Agreement as the only alternative to a continuation of sectarian conflict, and did so overwhelmingly. Since then, they have been excluded from a process characterised by unprincipled manoeuvres between the major imperialist powers and the various sectarian parties.

The “peace process” was not only presented as a means of ending sectarian violence, but of addressing the wider problems of economic deprivation confronting working people. However, it has been shaped by the needs of big business alone.

The old political mechanisms through which the British government exercised its rule over the six northern counties were proving increasingly ineffective. In order to maintain its rule through the Unionist bourgeoisie, Britain had to expend enormous amounts of public finance and maintain a costly police and army presence.

Northern Ireland had become a growing economic burden, as traditional industries such as shipbuilding and engineering went into decline. Since 1981, the north has had a continuous trade deficit with the Irish Republic, rising to £284 million in 1997. From 1973

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unemployment in the province rose steadily from 4.5 percent to a peak of 16.8 percent in 1986 and 12.6 percent in 1994, when the then-Tory government set the peace process in motion.

Without the problem of armed conflict on the streets, the Irish Republic has succeeded in becoming a prime European location for transnational corporations. If this success was to be emulated in the North, the "Troubles" had to be dealt with. Dublin would also benefit from a rapprochement with Britain by gaining easier access to European markets, either through Belfast or an expanded rail and road network linking Dublin with Britain, and was prepared to give up its historic claim to the six counties in order to do so.

The US was the central driving force behind the Good Friday Agreement and stood to be its major beneficiary. North American corporations are the major investors in the Irish Republic and also made up 52 of the 152 overseas companies operating in Northern Ireland in 1997. This compared with 47 from Britain, 14 from the rest of Europe, 13 from the Irish Republic and 10 each from the Asia/Pacific and Germany. In order to safeguard and extend these commercial interests the Clinton administration pushed for a settlement to be reached with Sinn Fein.

In their efforts to secure the backing of Sinn Fein for the Agreement, the three governments were kicking at an open door. The Republican movement had arrived at a dead end. Three decades of fruitless sectarian conflict had widely disillusioned Catholic workers in the IRA's promise that the armed struggle would bring a united Ireland. There was even greater disbelief that it could bring decent jobs, housing and democratic rights. Ordinary Catholics and Protestants alike were sick and tired of the constant threats of sectarian violence, of life surrounded by barbed wire, constant army and security checks, and the urban decay and social problems produced by economic decline, compounded by civil unrest.

No concessions were necessary regarding Sinn Fein's nominal goal of a united Ireland. They were fully prepared to accept a role in government in the North alongside their traditional Unionist rivals, within an Assembly explicitly based on the recognition of partition and the preservation of the Unionist veto.

As for the Unionists, unlike the last attempt at power-sharing in the 1970s, they were now incapable of rejecting out of hand the demand for new arrangements. The Unionist grip on the Protestant working class was historically based on the ability of the northern bourgeoisie to utilise patronage and nepotism in the allocation of jobs and housing, while spreading the fear that Protestants would become a persecuted minority within a unified (Catholic) state.

Beginning with the Thatcher/Major Conservative Party administrations, the British government made clear that it was no longer prepared to continue subsidising Northern Ireland, and that the survival of the northern bourgeoisie depended on creating conditions for an influx of international investment and establishing the necessary relations with their southern counterparts. Once the Republic's government made clear its willingness to renounce its claim on the northern six counties, the UUP agreed in principle to power-sharing with Sinn Fein, leaving only the DUP and some smaller parties to oppose the Agreement.

Sinn Fein and the UUP were given a constitutional guarantee that would provide the basis for an effective duopoly of power within the six counties. Parties in the new Assembly would be designated as Unionist, Republican or “Other.” Those designated as representing the two officially recognised “communities” in the North—Protestant/Unionist or Catholic/Republican—would be allotted a joint veto on all contentious legislation. This provision would give them a joint share in the exploitation of the working class by the major corporations which Britain promised would locate in the North, once peace was established.

Given the circumstances of its birth, it is little wonder that the 22 months since the Agreement was signed have been dominated by a continued struggle between Unionist and Republican politicians for power and influence. Conflict between the UUP/DUP on one side, and Sinn Fein on the other, has never been over questions of economic policy, education, housing, democratic rights or any of the things that would be regarded as pressing concerns by people in the North. Rather, neither side has been content with the guarantees of political influence enshrined in the Assembly's provisions. Both know that their standing amongst their traditional supporters is at best precarious. The essential issue has been the preservation of the ability to resort to armed terror, while limiting their opponents' capacity to respond in kind.

For the Unionists, IRA decommissioning and the preservation of the Royal Ulster Constabulary as a bastion of Protestant ascendancy is the ground on which the Agreement must either stand or fall. For their part, Sinn Fein have been prepared to abandon everything but the IRA's weapons caches. This is not only to counter the danger posed by an RUC monopoly of arms and the loyalist thugs with whom the RUC collude. The IRA's own control of working class Catholic neighbourhoods relies to a far greater degree on their possession of weapons than to any political standing they may possess. Relinquishing these weapons might not only allow a free development of oppositional political currents amongst Catholic workers, it could well bring reprisals for the countless IRA punishment beatings and other acts of intimidation carried out over the years.

The central political lesson to be drawn from the past two years is that the prerequisite for resolving the democratic and social problems of Ireland, north and south, is the active and unified political mobilisation of broad masses of working people. The future of the Irish people cannot be left to the representatives of British, Irish and US capital, and the selfish concerns of the Unionist and Republican parties. An independent movement of the working class requires a rejection of the divisive politics of Republicanism and Unionism, and the advancing of a socialist programme that meets the requirements of Catholic and Protestant working people alike.

The abolition of discrimination against Catholics in the North—the issue that first provoked three decades of conflict—cannot be achieved by counterposing the interests of Catholics and Protestants, as is the case within the Northern Ireland Assembly. This premise enforces the artificial division of the working class and, as is the case with the explicitly Roman Catholic constitution of the Irish Republic, plays into the hands of the sectarian Orange bigots.

The securing of democratic rights is indissolubly bound up with the struggle for social equality and an end to all forms of exploitation and poverty.

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