

Ulster Defence Association leader arrested after intra-Loyalist violence in Belfast

Julie Hyland
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Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson has returned Ulster Defence Association leader Johnny “Mad Dog” Adair to prison after an internecine feud between rival Loyalist gangs claimed two lives on Monday. British troops also resumed general patrols on Belfast's streets for the first time in months.

Adair is considered the prime mover in forging a new partnership between the UDA and Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF), who are locked in a power struggle with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UDA leader was released from the Maze prison last year after serving four years of a 16-year sentence for directing terrorism. Under the terms of the “Good Friday” Agreement establishing limited devolved rule in Northern Ireland, an amnesty was declared for all prisoners jailed for terrorist offences, with the proviso that they could be re-imprisoned if they took part in “the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism”. Some 500 prisoners, both Loyalist and Republican, have since been released.

At stake in the Loyalist feud is control of Protestant areas such as the Shankill Road in West Belfast and the lucrative drugs trade and protection rackets through which Loyalist paramilitaries finance their activities. The two men killed by a lone gunman on Monday evening, reportedly in retaliation for previous UDA violence, were UDA leader Jackie Coulter and former UVF member Bobby Mahood.

All the organisations involved have supposedly been on cease-fire since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, brokered by the British, Irish and American governments, which established the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly as a means of ending the civil war and creating more favourable conditions for trade and investment in the North.

The UVF was formerly considered the most violent of the Loyalist terror gangs. Responsible for approximately 550 murders over the last 30 years, the “Shankill Butchers” brutally murdered dozens of Catholics in the 1970s. Subsequently it has become a leading Loyalist proponent of the Good Friday Agreement, with its political wing, the

Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), holding two seats in the Assembly.

The UDA (also known as the Ulster Freedom Fighters—UFF) and the LVF—which split off from the UVF in 1971 and 1996 respectively, have not been so successful. The Ulster Democratic Party, the UDA's political wing, failed to win a seat in the Assembly, whilst the LVF, which does not have a political wing, fell into disarray after its leader Billy Wright was murdered in the Maze prison in December 1997.

Conflict between various Loyalist factions has a long history. In the first two months of this year, the LVF-UVF feud claimed at least three lives. The unity established between the UDA/UFF, the largest of the Loyalist paramilitary organisations, and the LVF is a recent development that has raised the stakes still higher. The first public indications of cooperation between the UDA/UFF and LVF came at July's Drumcree protest, organised by hardline Loyalists protesting the ban on an Orange Order march through Catholic areas.

Adair figured prominently at the Drumcree protest and is thought to be behind last weekend's joint UDA/UFF/LVF military-style parade along the Shankill Road. Several thousand took part, including masked men and women wearing paramilitary-style uniforms. When fighting broke out between the rival gangs outside the Rex Bar, considered UVF territory, the UDA/UFF opened fire—injuring three men and a woman. Later UDA members staged a drive-by shooting on the Rex Bar, injuring three people, also attacking the homes of known UVF members and supporters. Amongst the dozen homes targeted in the north and west of Belfast was that of Gusty Spence, a former convicted UVF leader who brokered his organisation's cease-fire in 1994, and PUP leader Billy Hutchinson. Following Monday night's killings, Adair's office on Shankill Road came under fire, shortly after which UDA/UFF members attacked the offices of the PUP.

The UDA/UFF has been accused of carrying out a form of “intra-Protestant ethnic cleansing”, driving out dozens of

UVF members, their families and sympathisers from their homes on the Lower Shankill estate. It is also being held responsible for a series of sectarian attacks on Catholic homes over the last weeks and the marking out of parts of the Antrim and Crumlin Roads as no-go areas for Catholics.

This led to calls from much of the British and Irish media for Mandelson to revoke the licences of those paroled under the early release system. The violence threatened to overshadow a “ground-breaking” tour of North America by Unionist and Republican members of the Assembly to raise investment, which began Monday. The trip involving Sir Reg Empey, Ulster Unionist Party minister for the economy, and Pat Doherty, Sinn Fein vice-president, is the first of its kind. Empey said “the general message that we’re trying to send out is that Northern Ireland plc is out aggressively seeking investment in the marketplace and everybody—and that means former enemies as well as friends—is pulling together.”

Within less than 24 hours, Mandelson complied by revoking Adair's licence, stating that, “My priority is public safety and I cannot give freedom to an individual intent on abusing it”. Hundreds of armed Royal Ulster Constabulary officers and British troops were involved in Adair's arrest. The UDA leader has been taken to Maghaberry prison.

Mandelson had earlier agreed to the redeployment of British troops in Belfast, including the establishment of street patrols, checkpoints and helicopter surveillance. Although he won applause for his swift response, there is no agreement on how it should be followed up. The British government is thought to be attempting to engineer some form of rapprochement between the rival Loyalist gangs, but UDP leader John White said, “there's no question of mediation, it has gone too far.” On Tuesday, the homes of two local PUP members in North Antrim and Dervock village were attacked.

Whilst the Irish press have expressed concern that events will serve to strengthen anti-Agreement sentiment within the main Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), further undermining the position of UUP leader and Assembly First Minister David Trimble, the Conservative Party used the Loyalist feud to attack the early release agreement. Party chairman Michael Ancram stated, “We have been saying for some time that if you release squalid, murderous gangsters back onto the streets this type of thing was likely to happen.”

The Conservatives' complaints are duplicitous; their opposition to the early release agreement previously focused almost exclusively on Republican prisoners. The Tory Party is historically responsible for nurturing, politically and financially, Loyalist prejudices as a means of retaining British rule in the Six Counties. But now this particular monster is in danger of careering out of control.

More broadly, Ancram's criticisms reflect an unease in ruling circles that the Blair government's rush to get a settlement in Ireland has compromised traditional means of British rule in the North, with no coherent strategy in place should it all go wrong. On the Conservative right wing there are calls for the party to abandon its support for the Agreement. In a pamphlet entitled *The Price of Peace*, Michael Grove from the Conservative Centre for Policy Studies argues that the Agreement has meant the subversion of the rule of law by that of violence. The peace process should be replaced by a strategy of “resolute security action” on the part of Britain, Grove argues.

The Blair government has approached the so-called peace process pragmatically throughout. The Good Friday Agreement did not address any of the underlying historical and social reasons for the crisis in Northern Ireland. Nor did it involve the genuine democratic participation of the Irish people, Catholic and Protestant, in determining the island's future. Dictated solely by the interests of the transnational corporations and banking concerns, the Agreement sought to avoid such issues by stitching up deals with the Republican and Loyalist organisations, establishing a supposedly “balanced” power-sharing Assembly that in effect constitutionally enshrined sectarian divisions. For some time the government turned a blind eye to examples of paramilitary violence, provided it was directed against the terrorists' “own” communities, to some extent viewing such examples of “internal housekeeping” as a useful means of maintaining social control in deprived and volatile working class areas. This has now blown up in the government's face.

By ordering Adair's arrest, the government has sought to show that Britain still retains a “resolute security” policy in Northern Ireland. But in doing so it has again demonstrated the absence of any genuine democratic content to the Good Friday Agreement. The re-arrest of those released under its terms can be ordered solely on the say so of a British minister. There was not even a pretence of consulting with Assembly members by Mandelson.



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