

Row over policing reform in Northern Ireland continues

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Talks are continuing between British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Irish Premier Bertie Ahern, and the Unionist and Republican parties to try and resolve the row over policing reform in Northern Ireland.

The latest dispute centres on the future of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Since Ireland's partition in 1922, the RUC has acted to protect Britain's Unionist state—founded on Protestant patronage—from armed subversion on both sides of the border. There exist mountains of evidence that this overwhelmingly Protestant force (more than 90 percent) has colluded for years with Loyalist gunmen in murdering civil rights campaigners and republicans.

To facilitate the incorporation of Sinn Fein into the new power-sharing structures set out in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, it was agreed to create a police force that would be in “constructive and inclusive partnerships with the community at all levels.” After a consultative period, former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten published his proposals on policing reform in September 1999.

Although ruling out RUC disbandment (the official demand of Sinn Fein for many years), Patten argued that the police force would have to assume a more neutral name and image if it were to be accepted by a majority of Catholics. In particular, he proposed ditching the term “Royal” from the future force's title; a new oath of allegiance emphasising human rights; a recruitment drive aimed at achieving balanced religious composition; that police stations no longer fly the Union Jack and a redesign of the force's badge and logo.

Whilst largely symbolic, the proposals drew immediate opposition from the main Unionist parties in the Assembly—the predominantly pro-Agreement Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) led by First Minister David Trimble, and the smaller anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley.

The Unionist parties have traditionally formed the main political base for British rule in the North. However, high unemployment, growing social inequality and Britain's reluctance to continue current levels of expenditure on social and military provisions in the six counties has eroded the relatively privileged position formerly enjoyed by many Protestant workers, and loosened traditional political ties. Consequently, both the UUP and DUP are locked in a struggle

to maintain influence over northern Protestants.

The DUP denounce the Agreement as a “betrayal” of Unionism, which in the context of an expanding Catholic population will spell the end of Protestant ascendancy. As such it has a vested interest in ensuring sectarian conflict continues. Its strategy is two-fold—to inflame sectarian tensions through provocations such as those over Orange Order marching routes and to attack Trimble in order to exacerbate divisions over the Agreement within the UUP.

The UUP has also seen the writing on the wall for Unionism, but under conditions of severe economic decline, regards efforts to maintain the old set-up as ultimately ruinous to its long-term political influence. For Trimble, the Agreement represents the only means of maintaining Unionist hegemony within the North, especially as it extends a limited measure of self-rule within the framework of the United Kingdom.

Trimble attacked the Patten Commission for ignoring the constitutional provision of the Agreement, which “recognises the legitimacy of British Sovereignty in Northern Ireland”. The Agreement did “not provide for a neutral state” nor “create some bi-national state”, he continued “but recognised the continuing sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament”, meaning that the police would be enforcing UK laws.

Faced with a leadership challenge by hard-liners at a ruling Ulster Unionist Council meeting earlier this year, which forced suspension of the Assembly, Trimble secured the agreement of Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson to ditch some of Patten's proposals—specifically the change in name and badge—in exchange for the his party's return to the power-sharing government.

Consequently, the British government produced a distilled version of Patten's recommendations, which is currently making its way through Parliament and is due to become law by mid-November.

Besides delaying a final decision on a logo and badge until some future unspecified date, the Police Bill (Northern Ireland) proposes to incorporate the title Royal Ulster Constabulary into the new force's name. Mandelson said that “The Police Service of Northern Ireland’ would be the working title of the new force, while a suffix would show that the RUC had not been disbanded. The Bill also includes a provision to establish “The

Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation”, marking the "sacrifices and honouring the achievements of the Royal Ulster Constabulary".

The new Police Bill also emphasises the extent to which the North remains a British province, investing greater powers in the Secretary of State than was even suggested by Patten. The Secretary of State will have the power to modify the force's recruitment ratio; appoint nine of the 19 members of the new Policing Board that will nominally oversee the force; instruct the board to “request” a Chief Constable step down and be able to veto policing plans. Should the Assembly be suspended, the Secretary of State is empowered to appoint all members of the Policing Board.

Whilst Trimble has called on Britain to accede to Unionist demands or face the possible withdrawal of the UUP from the Assembly Executive, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Fein and others have condemned the Police Bill as provocative and insulting. They have warned there can be no compromise on policing, because “Patten was the compromise”.

Sinn Fein claim that, in contrast to the new Police Bill, implementation of Patten's policing proposals would mark the transition from a Unionist militia “to a representative democratically accountable policing service which enjoys the support of the community as a whole”. This is in line with their presentation of the Agreement as a “transitional” framework that will eventually lead to Irish reunification. Sinn Fein is well aware that in signing up to the Agreement it explicitly accepted British rule over Northern Ireland. Mandelson has already demonstrated that Britain has the right to suspend the Assembly whenever it sees fit. The conditions spelt out in the Agreement, which included the Irish Republic renouncing any territorial claim over the six counties, means that the new police force is constitutionally committed to enforcing UK laws.

To concentrate solely on the issue of policing, as the Republican parties do, obscures the thoroughly undemocratic character of the entire Agreement. Shaped solely by the concerns of big business to establish a more stable political and economic framework for international investment, the Agreement was predicated on bringing Sinn Fein into government and that it became an adjunct of the state.

This was considered crucial under conditions in which only a narrow layer of the upper middle class in the North—primarily those administering the new Assembly—will benefit from the Agreement and any international investment it attracts. For the majority of Irish workers it means lower wages, cuts in public spending and greater levels of exploitation.

That is why the essential thrust of policing reform is to develop a force able to control this social divide and police both the Catholic and Protestant populations. At present the RUC is unable to operate effectively in Catholic areas, and the reforms proposed in the new Police Bill will do nothing to change that. Hence Sinn Fein's demand for a more “credible” force that is

better able to stamp its authority across the North.

In the past weeks, the SDLP, Sinn Fein and the Irish government have openly courted the support of the US against Britain. North American corporations are the major investors in the Irish Republic and made up 52 of the 152 overseas companies operating in Northern Ireland in 1997. The US was the main driving force behind the Agreement and stands to be its major beneficiary.

Both the Democrat and Republican parties in the US have called on the British government to ensure full implementation of the Patten Commission. Most striking was the open attack in an article for the *Washington Post* made on the Blair government last week by Senator Edward Kennedy, who was responsible for brokering the Agreement. Citing RUC collusion with Loyalists and key shortfalls in the new Police Bill, Senator Kennedy said the UK had made "unwise concessions to those of the Protestant majority who still view the police as theirs, and to the police themselves, who have always resisted reform."

In response, Mandelson lashed out, saying "Kennedy sees everything in Northern Ireland through the spectacles of one side alone... he's simply out of touch, he's out of date, as I have pointed out in a letter I have written to him". Later Mandelson attacked the SDLP for endangering the Good Friday agreement by insisting on "getting all their own way" on the proposed policing reforms.

Ireland on Sunday said the row was the “latest evidence of the growing rift between the British government and the US political establishment over policing”.

Irrespective of whether a fudge is found on the policing issue, continuing tensions are inevitable. Every attempt at reform immediately exposes the fundamental fault lines at the heart of the Agreement. Politically marginalised from any real say in the island's future, the hopes of many Irish people for peace and economic security continue to be held hostage to the machinations of the various parties and governments.

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