

Northern Ireland's First Minister Trimble resigns

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A series of intensive meetings between the major political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish and British governments are underway, following the resignation of Northern Ireland First Minister and leader of the pro-British Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) David Trimble on Sunday over the Irish Republican Army's failure to decommission its weapons.

His resignation automatically led to the fall of deputy first minister Seamus Mallon of the constitutional Irish nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP). However, Mallon will continue in his position until the election of new first and deputy first ministers that must be held by August 11. In the meantime, the UUP nominated economy minister Sir Reg Empey as interim first minister. An agreement on decommissioning that allows Trimble to return to his position is essential if the possible collapse of the 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement establishing a devolved Assembly and power-sharing executive encompassing the loyalist and republican parties is to be prevented. The British and Irish governments are said to be anxious to secure a deal before July 12, when the traditional unionist Orange Order marches reach their climax.

To enable Sinn Féin/IRA to take their position within the new constitutional arrangements, the 1998 Agreement had not set a specific date for arms decommissioning. Moreover, the general agreement to decommission was applicable to all paramilitary organisations and was framed as part of a series of measures intended to reduce the role of British and overtly unionist institutions such as the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) within the north. But the issue has been central to behind the scenes horsetrading between the main Assembly parties and the British, Irish and American governments ever since.

Reflecting the Agreement's primary concern to establish a more stable business environment in order to attract international investment capital, the strategic issues surrounding Ireland's partition, and its tragic consequences for the Irish people, were brushed to one side. Within the new Assembly, the main Unionist and Republican parties

took their seats as the representatives of big business. Their influence over northern Irish politics and the sectarian divisions on which this is based was shored up by the system of "cross-community voting" necessitating a majority vote on all legislation amongst those parties designated as representing the catholic-nationalist-republican community and those representing the protestant-British loyalist community. This arrangement has guaranteed that at every stage, the democratic aspirations of Irish workers for a peaceful and progressive solution to the Troubles has been subordinated to petty and selfish manoeuvres between the Agreement's signatories.

In return for Unionist participation in the Assembly structures, Trimble is said to have received personal assurances from both Prime Minister Tony Blair and former US President Bill Clinton on IRA decommissioning. His resignation threat had been on the table for several weeks, and was aimed at shoring up his leadership against fierce opposition from Unionist opponents of the Agreement. Following a similar threat to resign last year, the IRA agreed to put its arms "beyond use" by June 1, 2001.

Trimble had initially made his latest threat in the run up to the British General Election in May, which was widely regarded in the north as a referendum on the Agreement. It was intended to help stave off another leadership challenge from critics within the UUP, and cut across the electoral challenge presented by the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Instead the DUP made great play of the fact that Trimble's deadline had passed without movement on the part of the IRA, enabling them to pick up votes and seats at the UUP's expense. With the arms commission due to report that little progress had been made on decommissioning—despite the IRA ceasefire and international inspections of its arms dumps—Trimble had little choice but to honour his pledge if he is to retain any credibility within his organisation.

The UUP leader has made clear that he hopes to return as first minister if an agreement can be reached. Against the backdrop of growing political and religious tensions—which

have led to a series of riots and sectarian clashes in Belfast over the last month—Trimble hopes his resignation will be used by the British and Irish governments to maximise the pressure on the IRA/Sinn Fein.

The Blair government in Britain immediately leapt to the UUP leader's defence. Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid, who is hosting talks with Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen this week, insisted that "there is no solution" to implementing the Agreement outside of IRA decommissioning.

Sinn Fein has no intention of allowing the assembly to collapse, but it has thus far rejected Trimble's demands as a Unionist ultimatum. IRA decommissioning is Sinn Fein's main bargaining chip in attempting to resolve a series of contentious issues outstanding from the agreement, including RUC reform and the demilitarisation of the British state.

Now, however, its stance has brought strong condemnation from other nationalist parties, for whom the sharp polarisation expressed in May's election is also cause for concern. Sinn Fein increased its vote in the election, overtaking the SDLP as the largest republican party in northern Ireland. Its vote went up particularly amongst young people, who identify it as the strongest advocate of the interests of Catholics within the Assembly.

In unprecedented remarks, Mallon indicated his support for the British government's threat to exclude Sinn Fein from the Assembly unless the IRA began decommissioning. Under the Agreement, Mallon said, the British Secretary of State has the power to exclude a political party or individual ministers from the Assembly on a series of grounds, including failure to cooperate fully with the International Commission on Decommissioning. Writing in the *Irish Times*, July 3, Mallon followed up his remarks by insisting that whilst a range of issues are outstanding within the Agreement, the onus is on the IRA to decommission.

The Irish government has also insisted that Sinn Fein/IRA must begin decommissioning if there is to be any further progress. Whilst welcoming "positive aspects" of the arms decommissioning body's report, Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern said he wanted to arrive at an IRA agreement "as quickly as possible".

There is some speculation that the Irish government's shift from avoiding attributing blame to placing responsibility on Sinn Fein/IRA is dictated by the political difficulties it faces in the south. Ahern must call a general election within the next year, and there is every indication that Sinn Fein could pick up a number of parliamentary seats within the Republic—possibly enough to hold a balance of power and raising the possibility of them forming a coalition government with Ahern's Fianna Fail.

Despite the present standoff, there seems to be some confidence in ruling circles that a deal can be arrived at. None of the main parties to the Agreement want it to collapse, with all its implications for business. According to a survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), such an eventuality would lead to 90 percent of overseas companies based in Northern Ireland slashing proposed new investment. PwC report that big business has high expectations of the devolved government's ability to increase the rate of return on investments. Indeed, the UUP's decision to install their Economy Minister as assembly caretaker was aimed at reassuring the business community of their commitment to the Agreement.

That is why Mallon's proposal received a lukewarm response in London. The *Financial Times* reported that more amenable solutions were being sought—one scenario being that the IRA make some limited concessions on decommissioning in return for "further concessions on policing and demilitarisation. Mr Blair, then, will be asked to swallow his referendum pledge of 'no local policing' in favour of the highly controversial Patten recommendation of private local agencies. The republican leadership would then sell its own move to its foot soldiers as a minimal concession while insisting that everyone else treat Sinn Fein as a party of the purest democratic integrity".

Whilst such a deal would break the present impasse, it would in no way resolve the more fundamental faultlines at the heart of the Agreement that have once again been exposed by Trimble's resignation.



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