

Unionist opposition threatens collapse of Northern Ireland Assembly

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The British government suspended the Northern Ireland Assembly last weekend, the second time it has done so since the formation of the Assembly in January of 2000.

Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid announced the 24-hour suspension in an attempt to save the Good Friday Agreement, drawn up in 1998 by the British, Irish and US governments and agreed by the main Unionist and Republican parties.

The suspension was a manoeuvre to get around the deadline imposed by the resignation of Assembly First Minister and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble on July 1. Trimble claimed he was resigning because the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had failed to decommission its weapons. His resignation meant that unless a deal was reached by August 12 enabling Trimble to resume his post, the Assembly would be "collapsed" and new elections called. By temporarily suspending the Assembly, the British government extended the deadline by another six weeks.

The Good Friday Agreement did not, in fact, make IRA decommissioning a precondition for the Assembly's functioning. Rather it committed all the signatories to "reaffirm" their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. The monitoring of the decommissioning process was made the responsibility of an Independent Commission, directed by General de Chastelain, a Canadian. The hand-over of paramilitary weapons was also linked to reducing the British army presence and changes in the overwhelmingly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

Loyalist terror gangs continue to hold weapons, and have been involved in repeated attacks on Catholics, some fatal, during the cease-fire, whilst changes to the RUC and the dismantling of British army bases have yet to be implemented.

Nonetheless, hard-line Unionists have continuously sought to use the issue of IRA decommissioning to wreck the Agreement. Trimble's resignation was itself an attempt to assuage anti-Agreement forces, which constitute a

significant body of opinion within the UUP and the Assembly itself.

The first minister's precarious position within his own party has become a means of pressurising the IRA, and its political wing, Sinn Fein, to concede to Unionist demands. Trimble's removal as party leader, the argument goes, would leave opponents of the Agreement in charge of the UUP. This, combined with the presence of Ian Paisley's anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) within the Assembly, would effectively wreck power-sharing with Sinn Fein and the Irish nationalist Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP).

In the negotiations following Trimble's resignation, the British and Irish governments sought to find a compromise that would satisfy both sides. At first it appeared that they had succeeded. The "framework proposal" presented by Reid and Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowan on August 8 went into some detail on plans for further reforms of the RUC and the removal of British soldiers from Northern Ireland. As opposed to Unionist claims, the proposal also accepted that the issue of IRA weapons was a matter for General de Chastelain's decommissioning body to resolve independently of any involvement by the political parties.

By appearing to meet Republican concerns, London and Dublin hoped to pressure the IRA to make some concessions to Unionist demands on decommissioning, thus enabling Trimble to resume his post as first minister.

In a separate announcement, General de Chastelain reported that the IRA had presented a "satisfactory" plan for the decommissioning of its weapons. One day later, the IRA released what was described as a "groundbreaking" statement, which said that the IRA had agreed with de Chastelain a method that would put its arms "completely and verifiably beyond use".

The IRA statement was welcomed by US President Bush, and declared to be "historic" by the British and Irish governments as well as Sinn Fein. The statement was "of enormous significance," the *Guardian* newspaper editorialised. "The Irish Republican Army has agreed a

scheme with an outside body which will put its arsenal ‘completely and verifiably beyond use.’ As far as the general is concerned, this is not just talk: the process has already begun,” the *Guardian* wrote.

But the IRA statement was immediately dismissed by the UUP. Trimble insisted that without a timetable or an actual and verifiable start to decommissioning, the IRA statement was worthless. Jeffrey Donaldson, MP, who heads opposition to the Agreement inside the UUP, went even further, suggesting that a delegation of Unionists had to be physically present to witness the destruction of IRA weapons.

Such provocative demands—Donaldson is effectively demanding the IRA surrender to the Unionists—were aimed at burying the proposed blueprint.

Rather than politically challenge the Unionists’ stance, the British government suspended the Assembly. Its decision, apparently taken without consultation with Dublin, represented a significant concession to the anti-Agreement forces. Predictably, the IRA responded angrily to the suspension, denouncing it as “totally unacceptable” and declaring that it was withdrawing its proposal on decommissioning.

The Blair government has presented its concerns for Trimble’s position as being solely driven by the need to keep the Agreement on track. However, the fact that the British government is so dependent on the UUP leader’s fluctuating fortunes points to more fundamental issues.

The Ulster state was set up in 1921, following the partition of Ireland by British imperialism. Based on the Orange Order and Protestant supremacy, Unionism functioned as an essential pillar of British rule in the North. This system continued throughout the period of the “Troubles,” which began in 1969 when the then Labour government sent troops to prop up the Unionist regime against the development of a mass civil rights movement protesting anti-Catholic discrimination.

However, British military occupation has become too costly to maintain. Not only does it involve huge government subsidies, but the sectarian conflict it has fuelled has proven a barrier to obtaining international investment.

For Britain, the power-sharing Agreement represents a means of significantly reducing its financial commitments without reducing its political influence, while also opening up the North for inward investment. In agreeing to accommodate Sinn Fein as a political force in the new arrangements, however, the British government has run up against Unionism’s essential character as a reactionary sectarian and anti-democratic force.

The Good Friday Agreement does not provide the basis for overcoming the legacy of sectarian divisions. Instead, it

preserves existing divisions within the new structures, by enshrining the conception that political life in Northern Ireland consists essentially of two opposing religious camps. In return for ending the armed conflict, and entering into the power-sharing arrangements, the Agreement consolidates the domination of the sectarian parties over Protestant and Catholic workers, by giving Unionist and Republican politicians the power of veto within the Assembly. This has enabled hard-line Unionists to mount their wrecking operation.

These arrangements flow from the class character of the Agreement itself, which is dictated by the interests of the imperialist powers and international capital. Whilst the British, Irish and US governments want an end to armed conflict, they fear the emergence of a united movement of the Irish working class in opposition to the conditions of extreme exploitation being demanded by big business.

Emboldened by Reid’s temporary suspension of the Assembly, the anti-Agreement forces have gone on the offensive. Reports emerged earlier this week that three “alleged Irish terrorists” had been arrested in Colombia, where they were said to be involved in the training of anti-government guerrilla forces. Immediately, Sir Reg Empey, senior UUP negotiator to the de Chastelain commission, called for a reassessment of the involvement of the Republican movement. “The whole basis of the peace process was that the IRA were moving away from violence and were now committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic methods. This shows that they are still wedded to violence and are trying to kill people,” he said.

News of the arrests was passed to the media by Unionist sources. Peter Robinson, the deputy leader of the DUP, said that he had been alerted to the arrests in Colombia by the intelligence agencies. Seamus Mallon, SDLP leader and the Assembly’s deputy first minister, described the ongoing collaboration between the security forces and Unionist politicians as a “sick situation”. “The intelligence services are leaking almost on a weekly basis to members of the Unionist parties,” he said, with the aim of creating a “point of controversy.”

See Also:

IRA offers plan to put its weapons “beyond use”
[8 August 2001]

Northern Ireland’s First Minister Trimble resigns
[5 July 2001]



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