Northern Ireland Assembly faces fourth suspension

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Northern Ireland's power-sharing structures are facing suspension yet again amidst allegations of a Republican spy ring at the heart of government and countercharges of a Unionist/British security service smear operation.

British government sources have indicated they intend to suspend the Northern Ireland Executive established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in order to pre-empt a walkout by the main Protestant pro-British Unionist parties. The suspension, timed for Monday October 14, will be the fourth in as many years.

The crisis began on October 4, when the newly formed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) raided the Irish nationalist and republican party Sinn Fein's offices in the Stormont parliament building. Before the full glare of the media, large numbers of officers, including some armed and in paramilitary uniform, stormed the office, locking party workers out whilst they searched the premises. Raids on the homes of leading Sinn Fein officials were carried out at the same time.

One hour later police emerged with two seized computer disks, alleging that they had evidence that for more than one year a spy ring had been operating within Sinn Fein offices, passing on confidential information to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) targeting British security personnel and Unionists.

Three people have been arrested, including Denis Donaldson, Sinn Fein's chief of administration. Donaldson was charged under anti-terror laws introduced in the wake of September 11 with possessing information likely to be of use to terrorists. Former government messenger William Mackessy and Fiona Farrelly, a community worker, have also been arraigned. They have all pleaded not guilty.

Immediately, the Northern Ireland Assembly's First Minister and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble denounced the British government for a "high level of incompetence." For more than one year they had sat on information regarding the alleged mole, compromising security, he said. The revelations were "ten times worse" that anything that had happened in Watergate, Trimble continued—a reference to the 1974 constitutional crisis in the US caused by revelations of President Richard Nixon's blackbag operations against political opponents, that led to his resignation that year.

During talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair earlier this week, Trimble reiterated his demand that Sinn Fein be expelled from the Assembly by Tuesday October 15. If not, his ministers would walk out of the Executive, effectively collapsing the power-sharing arrangements between the main Protestant Unionist and Catholic Republican parties.

Trimble's demands led to a frantic round of horsetrading between the major parties and the British and Irish governments. Following meetings between Blair and Irish premier Bertie Ahern this week, reports indicate that London and Dublin are to take joint responsibility for administering the north over an indeterminate period in the event of a "cooling off" suspension.

Sinn Fein has strongly denied all allegations of spying, and accused anti-Agreement forces within British intelligence and Unionism of engineering the raid to subvert the power-sharing structures.

Sinn Fein Minister Bairbre de Brun accused the police of a direct political attack on her party. "Since March of last year when Mr. Trimble indicated the possibility that he would collapse the institutions and point the finger of blame at republicans there have been a number of very public interventions by the PSNI and other securocrats. All of these had the aim of demonising republicans," she said. This included off the record briefings implicating Sinn Fein in terrorist activities in Colombia and a break-in at the Castlereagh police station in March.

Allegations of such a joint conspiracy have been floated elsewhere. Writing in *The People*, October 6, Greg Harkin alleged that the raid was aimed at covering over British intelligence's own spying operation against Sinn Fein. According to Harkin, Britain's MI5 "fed dud information to Sinn Féin for more than a year and ordered the raid on republican offices and homes last week amid fears that two spies had rumbled the operation."

Harkin claimed that the suspected mole—the recently charged William Mackessy—had been uncovered more than one year ago, when he was allegedly caught photocopying a security document. A disciplinary hearing found there was not enough evidence for his dismissal, and so he was demoted to a less sensitive job.

Security services then begun focusing on Donaldson, Harkin continued, and at least two other "republican spies inside Stormont." A "political decision" was taken, Harkin said, "to continue to allow Mackessy and these 'spies' to pass documents to Sinn Féin—only this time non-sensitive documents are 'mixed' with fake documents." At the same time Donaldson's Assembly office and home was bugged by MI5. It was only when MI5 feared their operation had been rumbled that the police raid on Stormont was staged in order to recover bugging equipment, Harkin wrote.

Writing in the *Guardian*, October 9, Roy Greensale also supported allegations of collusion between security services and Unionists with the aim of discrediting Sinn Fein. "Security forces in Northern Ireland continue to manipulate events to bolster the unionist cause," Greensale wrote. That Unionist politicians had known "within minutes of the raids not only why they had taken place but what was in the confiscated documents" was the outcome of a "well established

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co-operation between the security forces and the unionists." It also supported "those who believe that the security forces, rather than the government, direct what happens. The government is more or less bound by their advice and, most importantly, by their control of operational matters in which they can manufacture 'events' to suit their political aim (i.e. to prevent reunification)," he wrote.

The fact that Mackessy had been demoted more than one year ago has raised questions as to why the PSNI should choose this moment to launch their raid. Some have noted that the search coincided with the opening of a trial in Colombia against three alleged IRA members, accused of working with anti-government guerillas, i.e., that it was timed to cause maximum damage to the republicans.

Others have suggested that the government kept quiet on the allegations against Mackessy in order to maximise pressure on Sinn Fein behind the scenes, and that the police raid was intended to act as a "spoiler" on such rapprochement.

Although British ministers were said to be fully aware of the police investigation into Sinn Fein, it is still not clear if they were informed of the raid beforehand. Reports speak of the search as being an "operational" rather than "political" decision, i.e. a matter for the police alone. That some days later political pressure forced PSNI chief, Hugh Orde, to express "regret" for the manner of the raid whilst justifying its purpose, tends to indicate ministers were not wholly aware of what was being planned. If so, the fact that police and security chiefs could take it upon themselves to raid a parliament building and the offices of an elected party in order to subvert the political process has sinister implications.

Whether or not the government knew of the raid, the fact that it took place at all again demonstrates how the arrangements set in place by the Good Friday Agreement have not seriously challenged the patently undemocratic and sectarian character of politics in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement was predicated on the systematic exclusion of working people from any democratic control over, much less say in, the power-sharing process. Motivated solely by the interests of the British, American and Irish governments in establishing a more stable economic climate conducive to the interests of big business, Unionist and republican parties were invited to share in the spoils of government in return for agreeing a ceasefire.

The result has been to place enormous power in the hands of sectarian parties, each striving to improve their own lot at the expense of others. For the Assembly to work at all demanded not only the ascendancy of pro-Agreement factions within the Unionist and republican camps, but their agreement that Sinn Fein was co-opted into government.

Trimble's position as First Minister was made possible through convincing the majority of the Unionist establishment that it was possible to achieve a working relationship with Sinn Fein providing that its military wings were clipped by Adams. For his part the Sinn Fein leader could marginalise his own more extreme nationalist opponents providing that he could point to real advances on such key issues as reform of the overwhelmingly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

None of the historically rooted antagonisms that gave rise to The Troubles were resolved. Instead the Assembly became the arena for a turf war between a Unionist bourgeoisie that felt its old political and economic ascendancy was under threat and an aspiring petty bourgeois layer around Adams anxious to use their support amongst oppressed Catholics to become a real power within the institutions of government.

Far from abating, this conflict has worsened since the Agreement. The Assembly was living on borrowed time even before the Stormont search took place. The pro-Agreement UUP is losing support to the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Rev. Ian Paisley. In last year's general elections, the DUP captured former UUP strongholds, increasing its seats in parliament to five compared to the UUP's six. Trimble only scraped to victory in his own Upper Bann constituency against a strong DUP challenge.

Recent council elections confirmed the trend, with the DUP picking up 21 percent of the vote to the UUP's 23 percent. Elections due in Spring 2003 could well see the UUP finally eclipsed by the DUP.

To make matters worse, Trimble has been marginalised within his own party by the recent ascendancy of its own anti-Agreement forces. To offset another potentially lethal challenge to his leadership, only last month Trimble was forced to agree to a demand by his party's ruling council that unless IRA weapons decommissioning and complete disbanding was forthcoming, the UUP would withdraw from the Assembly.

This would represent a blow not only to Trimble, but also to the British government. Historically, British domination of the north has been secured through the Unionists and the government is reluctant to take on the UUP lest it weaken its own position. To this end the government has constantly sought to safeguard Trimble's leadership through one concession after another.

This places the political emphasis squarely on Adams to rescue the Assembly from collapse. It is all but impossible for him to agree to the UUP's demand to disband the IRA within such a restricted time-frame, but that does not signal a lack of willingness to deepen Sinn Fein's collaboration with the British government. Whatever its tactical conflicts with Britain's ruling elite, Sinn Fein's aim is to secure the right of an aspirant Catholic bourgeoisie to share the fruits of the exploitation of the working class, north and south of the border. Adams sees Sinn Fein's newfound respectability in the north as the key to fulfilling much broader political ambitions—to establish Sinn Fein as a major all-Ireland political presence and himself as a possible future premier.

Nor does the Blair government want the expulsion of Sinn Fein from the Executive, as without its participation there can be no Assembly. It is using the current crisis to demand Sinn Fein prove once and for all its subservience to the powers that be and announce the disbanding of the IRA. During talks with Adams on Thursday, Blair pressed for agreement on the issue. The spy-ring controversy had shown that Sinn Fein's attempt to combine paramilitary and political activity—the ballot box and the armalite—was now "not merely the perception but the reality," and would have to end, he said.

Whilst Sinn Fein has protested at the governments plans for suspension, they have indicated they will acquiesce. Adams has sought to emphasise Sinn Fein's support for the Agreement, saying "republicans are deeply wedded to this peace process." He appealed for the unionists with whom he shared "the objectives of getting rid of armed groups" not to "in any way put in peril the agreement."

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