

Northern Ireland: talks resume following suspension of Assembly

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Talks convened on November 21 between the British government and parties represented in the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, including Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionists (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is opposed to powersharing with Sinn Fein, is holding discussions separately with the Northern Ireland Secretary, Paul Murphy.

Despite the factional loathing, all the parties are seeking to reconstitute the assembly with their own interests best served. Attracting global investment, from which all the parties hope to benefit, is focusing their minds in the search for the necessary stable political environment.

British prime minister Tony Blair suspended the assembly for the fourth time on October 14 to give the Northern Ireland first minister David Trimble, leader of the main pro-British Protestant party, the UUP, room to manoeuvre in the face of a challenge to his authority from anti-Agreement unionists in his own party and the DUP. Suspension and the restoration of direct rule from London was finally triggered by a raid on Sinn Fein's office in the Stormont home of the Assembly. Sinn Fein members were arrested and accused of spying against the British Northern Ireland Office.

Material seized during Operation Hezz was used by police to claim that Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had used sources within the state, to follow events in the Northern Ireland Office and to gather around 2,000 names and addresses of prison and police officers, leading loyalists, and other state and military personnel.

Deputy leader of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the successor to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), Alan McQuillan, told the press on November 11 that the operation had been underway for months prior to the raid. He connected the Stormont raid to police investigations into a break-in at PSNI Special Branch HQ at Castlereagh in March this year, in which the names of Special Branch informants were seized. McQuillan said the Castlereagh investigation had led "into the very heart of the IRA". In addition to the four people arrested on October 4, two civil servants, including a former under secretary to Trimble, were subsequently arrested in connection with Operation Hezz.

Unionists seized on the revelations as evidence of the

unreconstructed character of Sinn Fein and the IRA, and the latter's determination to continue a covert civil war. The DUP and the UUP called for Sinn Fein to be excluded from the powersharing executive, which currently incorporates the UUP, the DUP, Sinn Fein and the SDLP.

The unionists' claims are patently false. The IRA was engaged in an armed campaign against Britain for decades, during which intelligence gathering and subversion was the norm. Lined up against the IRA and Sinn Fein were the combined resources of the British military intelligence, the Special Branch, hundreds of informants, state infiltrated loyalist assassination squads, not to mention the thousands of troops deployed on the streets of Northern Ireland. For its part the UUP dominated Northern Ireland politically through its alliance with the British state.

Only the most politically naive would believe that the establishment of the Assembly has led to this huge British security apparatus to be dismantled, or that information on Sinn Fein is not regularly passed to loyalist sources either by Britain or the largely Protestant police service. Indeed numerous allegations of British forces bugging Sinn Fein discussions continue. It is hardly surprising therefore, that Sinn Fein still keeps its own surveillance network in place.

There have even been suggestions that police initiated the raid without reference to the British government. The then Northern Ireland secretary John Reid reportedly swore on hearing news of it. The new head of the PSNI, Hugh Orde, was out of the country at the time and later apologised to Sinn Fein for the manner in which the raid was carried out.

Politically, the raid gave Trimble a much-needed pretext to force the Assembly's suspension. The UUP has been hemorrhaging votes to the DUP led by Rev. Ian Paisley. Since the Assembly's founding in 1999, the DUP, while part of the Executive, has accused Trimble and the British government of being soft on IRA terrorism and complained that the Agreement has benefited Catholics at the expense of Protestants. Through these means the DUP has sought to present itself as the most vociferous defender of unionist privilege.

With elections to the assembly due next year, Trimble hoped to steal his opponents' thunder by being seen to take a hardline against the IRA, while applying maximum pressure on Sinn

Fein to finally disband the organization.

Irish Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern, Blair, and John Reid all made the same demand. Blair insisted, “the crunch is the crunch ... the fork in the road has finally come.”

There is every reason to assume that Sinn Fein and the IRA are willing to comply in the longer term, but this is not an easy demand to honour. The IRA and Sinn Fein took the fork in the road when they accepted the legitimacy of the six county state and pledged to work as a constitutional opposition. The essence of the Good Friday Agreement was that Sinn Fein and the IRA would be integrated into the apparatus of the Northern Ireland state they had once fought to destroy. This was intended to create a stable political base with which to attract the investment that had turned the neighbouring Irish Republic into the “Celtic Tiger”, while the North stagnated behind its fortified border. Sinn Fein’s aim was to secure a share of the spoils from the exploitation of the Irish workforce, Catholic and Protestant alike, confident that demographics would eventually ensure their domination of the six counties and eventual unification with the south.

Following recent events, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams quickly insisted that his party remained committed to the Agreement, and went out of his way to praise the British government’s handling of the situation. Sinn Fein’s education minister Martin McGuinness told the BBC that he had joined the IRA at the age of 19, but now, “my war is over.... My job is to continue to ensure a political set of circumstances which will never again see British soldiers or members of the IRA lose their lives as a result of political conflict.”

Although the IRA retains arms and an apparatus, this is now primarily a bargaining chip to be exchanged for political influence within the state institutions, including the PSNI. So as not to overly weaken their negotiating position, in face of mounting calls for disbandment, the IRA broke contact with the international commission supervising IRA arms decommissioning led by General John de Chastelain.

The stakes are high. Immediately prior to the Assembly’s suspension, Trimble announced a new Draft Programme for Government, subtitled “Reinvestment and Reform”, in which he set out the Northern Ireland Executive’s intentions up until 2005. The 169-page document, agreed upon by all four major parties, complained that Northern Ireland’s manufacturing base was too reliant on “traditional industries” and that more modern industry had to be attracted. Other problem areas of the economy were agriculture and the textile and clothing industries, both dependent on European Union assistance and low global wage costs.

Acknowledging the primitive state of infrastructure, the draft programme called for the rail network to be upgraded, particularly to the Irish border at Newry, better public transport in Belfast, and the ancient sewage system to be brought up to standard. Some £14 billion of spending was needed to develop the infrastructure, including £6 billion of private capital, it

stated. Such levels of spending can only be raised through the slashing of existing levels of social spending. The draft warns that the large public sector in Northern Ireland is a “barrier to increased economic growth”. A review must be aimed at achieving “value for money” in public administration and services.

The draft programme reiterated the need for greater cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic to develop infrastructure, cross-border trade and tourism. European Union funds were needed to this end, it stated. Meanwhile Northern Ireland should be promoted worldwide, and efforts made to overcome the province’s global image problem.

The Executive has already stated its intention to open offices in Brussels and Washington. Britain is using the assembly’s suspension, which has enabled it take direct control of Northern Ireland affairs once again, to push through 22 pieces of legislation aimed at forwarding this agenda.

What the draft unintentionally describes is a new arena for vicious factional warfare between the traditional unionist business interests that have long dominated the north, and the aspiring Catholic middle class layers represented by Sinn Fein whose social advance was blocked by the Protestant ascendancy on which British rule was based.

Even following the Agreement, every road scheme, every cross-border investment decision, every lucrative contract and comfortably salaried position becomes part of the turf wars between the sectarian parties. Moreover, in conditions of deepening world economic crisis, the investment bonanza of which the Good Friday Agreement sought to win a share has begun to dry up. This can only stoke up tensions between the rival groups in the Assembly as they fight for dwindling resources and encourage them to pit Protestant against Catholic with even greater vigor.

There remains a powerful desire amongst working people to rise above the decades of anti-Catholic discrimination and sectarian bitterness and to provide for democratic rights and decent living standards for all. But the Good Friday Agreement in no sense laid the basis for realising such a progressive agenda. These aspirations can only be taken forward through the construction of a political movement uniting workers both sides of the border in a common struggle for genuine social and political equality against the British, Irish and American governments and their political representatives in the Assembly.



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