

Ireland: Fianna Fail and SDLP float unity pact

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Fianna Fail, the main establishment party in the Irish republic, is considering standing candidates in Northern Ireland's upcoming general election. First suggested at the party's annual conference last year, Prime Minister Bertie Ahern used a recent interview in the *Sunday Business Post* to give the proposal more impetus.

At the same time, Mark Durkan, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), which operates solely in the North but supports a united Ireland, spoke of his party's "affinity" with Fianna Fail. His remarks have raised the possibility of either a pact between the two parties, or a merger to create a new all-Ireland bourgeois party. Currently the only all-Ireland party is Gerry Adams's republican Sinn Fein.

The move has been precipitated by concerns that a general election could be held in a matter of months. The power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly, comprising all the main republican and pro-British unionist parties, was suspended on October 14, 2002 amidst a spy scandal.

The suspension was a blow to the Good Friday Agreement, drawn up by the British, Irish and American governments in 1998 with the aim of establishing more stable conditions for international investment across the island.

In the interval, the British and Irish governments have worked hard to pressure republican Sinn Fein and the IRA to make the significant display of weapons decommissioning demanded by the unionist parties.

Reports indicate that the closed door talks have had some success. Although full details are not yet available, it appears that Sinn Fein will agree to some form of decommissioning that will enable the Assembly to be restarted. In return, Britain has apparently agreed to fresh elections being held in May.

Sinn Fein have also demanded a significant reduction in British military forces stationed in the North and the demilitarisation of the border. In the last weeks, feuding loyalist paramilitary groups have come under increased pressure from the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland, while the head of the notorious Royal Ulster

Constabulary Special Branch, Bill Lowry, was forced to resign.

British moves to accommodate Sinn Fein have been given added impetus by an international situation in which fully one quarter of the British Army has been committed to war against Iraq. Currently 14,500 British soldiers are based in Northern Ireland, down from 25,700 at the height of "the Troubles". The army leadership are reported to be particularly anxious for part of the Parachute Regiment which still patrols the border to be dispatched to Iraq where it would likely be involved in murderous street warfare for control of Baghdad.

Sinn Fein hope that fresh elections will enable it consolidate the electoral gains it has made in previous elections. Having been accepted into the establishment through the Agreement, Sinn Fein have been able to contest elections in the south where it has significantly increased its support, threatening the position of the traditional republican parties both sides of the border.

Fianna Fail, which has been mired in a series of corruption scandals, is especially anxious at the prospect. The party's own origins lie in that faction of the republican movement that opposed the 1921 agreement between the British government and Sinn Fein leader Michael Collins, which partitioned the island. Militarily defeated, Eamonn de Valera's faction formed Fianna Fail (Soldiers of Destiny), as a political party to stand in the Irish parliament. Fianna Fail first came to power in 1932, where it stayed for most of the twentieth century. De Valera became prime minister, later president, of the Republic.

In power, Fianna Fail has sought to cover its class character as a party of the southern Irish bourgeoisie by presenting itself as the representative of the whole "Irish nation". As Richard Dunphy explains in his work *The Making of Fianna Fail Power in Ireland 1923-1948*, throughout this early period Fianna Fail combined de Valera's nationalist rhetoric with a programme of economic autarky in the South designed at strengthening the position of the farming and business interests.

Resting on traditions of loyalty and party discipline inherited from the long struggle against British rule, Fianna Fail established a network of patronage which stretched from farmers to trade unions, small and big business. Very restricted social concessions were made to workers and small farmers. Faced with huge class divisions and appalling conditions facing the urban and rural working class, the party ruled alongside the Catholic Church, and combined anticommunist and anti-British rhetoric.

Fianna Fail also combined verbal opposition to the Protestant-ruled Northern state with a cynical indifference to the fate of the latter's Catholic population. Moreover, the party's ties with the Catholic church provided ideological ammunition to the efforts of successive pro-British bigots to maintain divisions between Protestant and Catholic workers.

By the 1960s, however, Fianna Fail was forced to abandon its policy of economic autarky, in favour of opening up the South to multinational corporations keen to exploit Irish cheap labour. The eruption of the civil rights movement in the North in the late 1960s threatened to destabilise the entire island, exposing Fianna Fail's indifference to the fate of the Northern population. When the British government sent in thousands of troops in 1969, Fianna Fail set about ensuring that the struggle against British rule was restricted to a purely military campaign led by the small groups of fighters in what became the Provisional IRA.

Throughout "the Troubles", Fianna Fail and the Irish government trod a line intended to defend the stability required by Southern business and its new investment orientation. This is period in which what has subsequently become known as the boom economy of the "Celtic Tiger" was built. Throughout the 1980s and '90s many of Fianna Fail's business backers benefited from a US-led investment bonanza, much of which was organised by corrupt means. In 1992, Charles Haughey, then Irish premier, was forced from office over corruption allegations, inaugurating numerous police investigations into leading Fianna Fail officials that are still ongoing.

The party has been on the decline ever since, relying on the support of the Progressive Democrats to remain in office. The coalition managed to hold on to power in last year's elections, but the worsening economic situation, deepening social tensions, combined with an endless stream of corruption revelations has further undermined the government. Only last month the government announced the biggest spending cuts in more than a decade that will decimate the public services on which thousands rely.

The SDLP, Fianna Fail's prospective partner in the North, has not fared much better. Formed in the aftermath of the civil rights movement in 1970 it had set itself up as the defender of the North's Catholic minority. Like Fianna Fail,

however, it also has close links to the Catholic Church and has always envisaged its goal of a united Ireland being achieved in cooperation with the major powers.

Its former leader, John Hume, was one of the major architects of the protracted manoeuvres between Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionists and the British and Irish governments that led to the Agreement.

The SDLP has no progressive solution to the declining living standards faced by the workers in the North, Catholic and Protestant alike. Its support for the Agreement, whilst benefiting big business, has only been to the detriment of the working class. Support for the SDLP has fallen amongst Catholic workers in the North, with Sinn Fein now holding 18 seats in the assembly compared to the SDLP's 24. Increasingly alienated from its traditional base, the SDLP fears being eclipsed entirely by Sinn Fein and effectively wiped out of national politics.

SDLP executive member Tom Kelly explained in remarkably frank terms the deal his party could offer Fianna Fail: "The Irish body politic has taken a significant blow in terms of public confidence across the political spectrum. Many regard it as being without integrity and others condemn it as being without principle."

Kelly nevertheless went on to praise Fianna Fail as the "natural party of government with the instincts and ability to deliver the services and structures that will form the basis of a truly united Ireland."

Such an alliance is a measure of the political crisis faced by the traditional establishment parties. Whilst the two parties no doubt hope their cynical manoeuvrings will provide them with a much needed boost, their decline, which is rooted fundamentally in the growing social polarisation, is terminal.



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