

Northern Ireland Assembly elections delayed

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Elections to the currently suspended Northern Ireland Assembly have been put back four weeks by the British government. The Assembly was established as part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which set up a measure of devolved government for Britain's oldest colony and established power sharing between the pro-British and Protestant Unionist parties and the Irish nationalist and Catholic parties, including Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA.

The delay follows the failure of all party talks at Hillsborough Castle, County Down, in Northern Ireland, on March 4 and 5, to resolve disputes between Sinn Fein and the main loyalist formation, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Planned for May 1, the elections are now likely to be held on May 29. Legislation will be hurried through the British parliament at Westminster to authorise the delayed vote—the second to the new assembly—in the hope that the IRA can be pressured into final disarmament in the intervening period.

The Assembly was suspended in October last year, following a concocted spy scandal designed to give UUP leader and Northern Ireland First Minister David Trimble an excuse to walkout of the Assembly, force its suspension, and trigger the re-imposition of direct rule from Westminster.

Police raids on Sinn Fein offices allegedly found evidence of information gathering on various state officials and staff. The revelations, hardly surprising after 30 years of civil war, were then held up by the unionists as “proof” of continued IRA military activity. Unionists also pointed to IRA activity in Columbia, where three IRA members are currently on trial for working with the FARC guerrilla movement.

Underlying the hysteria generated by Trimble and the UUP were their own divisions into factions for and against the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the desirability of power-sharing with Sinn Fein that was

integral to the new constitutional arrangements. Faced with opposition from the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley, and from a majority within his own party, Trimble's has been forced to oscillate between support for the Agreement and popular denunciations of Sinn Fein.

Trimble's leadership of the UUP is seen by Britain as key to the survival of the Agreement. But the splits within the UUP have been deepened by the continual erosion of its support and the advances made by the DUP. In recent elections, the party has made substantial gains at the expense of Trimble's UUP by taking advantage of the lack of any improvement in social conditions for ordinary Protestants emerging from the agreement and blaming this on the advances—real and imagined—made by Catholics as a result of the Agreement. The DUP now looks set to emerge as the largest unionist party.

In the intervening months, press speculation and political pressure has focussed on pushing forward the disbandment of the IRA's few hundred active members and its military structure, along with the destruction of around 200 tons of guns and two tons of high explosives.

In return, the British government has indicated that they would offer a reduced level of British military activity in the North, the removal of thousands of British troops and the destruction of watch towers on the North-South border and allow for increased Catholic representation in the renamed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), formerly the almost exclusively Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

This trade off, which would allow the UUP to claim victory over the IRA and Sinn Fein to claim a partial victory over the British, is intended to allow the UUP to regain the initiative against the DUP while reintegrating Sinn Fein into government. For their part the British

army are known to be anxious to free up army units stationed in Northern Ireland for global operations.

In order to lock Sinn Fein and the IRA into a timetable for disbandment and the destruction of arms, prominence has been given in recent weeks to the threat of sanctions, overseen by an international monitoring commission, which would be triggered by any IRA breaches of prior disarmament agreements. Floated by the UUP, the demand was quickly taken up by the British and Irish governments and by the United States envoy to Ireland, Richard Haass.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Irish counterpart, Bertie Ahern, were both present at the Hillsborough talks, as were Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionists and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The talks were hailed in advance as the likely venue for a new and historic breakthrough, with an exhausted and politically besieged Tony Blair desperate for some political success to offset the disintegration of his political standing due to his support for the upcoming US war against Iraq. In the end, however, the parties merely moved incrementally closer with discussion on policing and “community relations” and an agreement to meet again in four weeks time.

Sanctions were reported as the major area of disagreement. Although sanctions have been publicly rejected by Sinn Fein, indications are that they may agree to them in return for some form of political amnesty for IRA members still wanted by the security services. Around 100 IRA members from Northern Ireland are currently exiled in the Irish Republic or the US.

Allegedly directed against all breaches of disarmament timetables, sanctions would in reality be aimed solely at the Sinn Fein and the IRA. No suggestion has ever been made that the UUP, the DUP, or the British government should suffer any political constraints on their armed strength—whether the British Army or RUC units. The British Army still retains around 9,000 heavily armed troops in the north.

In the years since the Good Friday Agreement, the vast majority of bombings and shootings in Northern Ireland have been carried out by loyalist gangs motivated by drug turf wars and sectarian loathing of Catholics. While the paramilitary killers of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) recently agreed to stop

painting sectarian murals over north Belfast and handed in a tiny number of pipe bombs to the police, another group, the Orange Volunteers, announced its intention to continue recruiting in rural areas. It appealed to the Protestant Orange Order to support it, called for a unified loyalist front, and insisted that it would never hand over such weaponry as it owned.

In contrast, IRA violence has generally been directed towards its own one time comrades in arms—either in order to regulate their openly criminal activity or to suppress opposition to Sinn Fein’s parliamentary trajectory and support for the terrorist methods of the past—or against socially troublesome elements within the broader Catholic community.

In the last two months, the IRA is reported to have carried out at least 13 punishment shootings in Belfast and South Armagh—often involving youth being kneecapped for joyriding, petty theft, drug taking and other offences.

As a consequence of the continued promotion of sectarian division amongst the working population by all Northern Ireland’s parties, and the failure of the new structures to address any of the pressing social problems in the Six Counties, a recent University of Ulster report suggested that divisions between the unionist and nationalist communities have deepened since the Good Friday Agreement.

Their survey found that Protestants preference for living in mixed areas has dropped from 81 percent to 59 percent in the past five years. Amongst Catholics the figure fell from 85 percent to 72 percent. Support for mixed religion workplaces fell by 25 percent amongst Protestants and 15 percent amongst Catholics.



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