Northern Ireland election: An attempt to rescue the Good Friday Agreement

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Today's second election for the Northern Ireland Assembly is another desperate effort to resuscitate the constitutional arrangements established under the power-sharing Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (Agreement).

Voters are being asked to choose representatives for a devolved Assembly and a governing executive whose every action has been characterised by bitter divisions. Northern Ireland is currently ruled directly from London, the Assembly having been suspended four times in its short history and put on ice for over a year by the British government following a manufactured spying scandal involving Sinn Fein. It remains to be seen whether these elections will lead to any agreement on the terms for its revival.

Such instability is the direct result of the Agreement, which was predicated on ensuring the interests of big business at the direct expense of the democratic rights of working people.

The Good Friday Agreement was patched together by the United States, Britain and Ireland as a means of creating a more stable economic environment for corporate investment in the North. Irish workers were excluded from any real say so over the future course of events.

The US in particular, which is the largest and most influential investor in the island, was concerned to replicate the success of the Southern Irish Republic which had been transformed over the preceding decades into a boom area for corporations seeking an avenue into European markets. But plans to extend the cheap labour economy north of the border depended upon establishing a stable political and economic framework for investment by ending sectarian-armed conflict, and enabling greater collaboration between London and Dublin.

For their part the British government had long concluded that the enormous cost of maintaining thousands of troops in a state of readiness along the border, coupled with a vast and complex apparatus of surveillance and repression, far outweighed the financial gains accruing from its military domination of the province.

The Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher had signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement with Dublin in November 1985, establishing an Intergovernmental Conference providing for cooperation on political matters, security, legal matters and the promotion of cross-border economic cooperation.

The South recognised that the Northern six counties belonged to Britain and that any change would demand a majority vote that the Protestant Unionist majority could veto, but the agreement met opposition on all sides.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams condemned it for having "copper-fastened partition and Dublin's recognition of the Northern Ireland state", while the Unionists held mass protests culminating in a "day of action" on March 3 that closed down much of Northern Ireland's economy. The North's Stormont Assembly was dissolved in June 1986.

The two governments concluded that it was essential to secure the agreement of the Unionists and bring Sinn Fein on board if success was to be achieved—a perspective that was given added impetus following the election of the Labour government of Tony Blair in 1997.

During the protracted negotiations that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, the British and US governments sought to convince the Protestant bourgeoisie represented by the Ulster Unionist Party that cooperation was the only means of securing its economic future. The elite that had dominated political life in the North following the forced partition of Ireland in 1921-22 had seen its engineering and textile manufacturing operations decline and the transformation of the province into an economic backwater whose small, globally uncompetitive industries were dwarfed by the new outfits operating in the South. Unionism entered the Agreement seeking to attract investment while defending as much of the apparatus guaranteeing Protestant rule as possible.

But the plans of big business were dependent upon incorporating Sinn Fein and its military wing, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), into the proposed structures of British rule over the North. Sinn Fein depends on US backing for its survival. Under the urging of Washington, the IRA agreed to a ceasefire in 1995 and Sinn Fein made clear that it was seeking a political accommodation with London that would elevate them into government. As the representatives of an aspiring layer of the Catholic middle class, Sinn Fein allied itself to US corporate interests in the hope of emulating the economic success of its contemporaries in the booming South.

The coming together of imperialist interests with those of the sectarian formations was sold to the people of Northern Ireland as an equitable means to halt the civil war, end anti-Catholic discrimination, overcome the religious divisions which have plagued Northern Ireland for centuries and inaugurate a new era of peace and prosperity for all.

The referenda on the Agreement won the support of an overwhelming majority in the South and of Catholics in the North,

and a narrow but significant majority of Protestants.

But the constitutional arrangements never offered a genuine prospect of meeting up to the grandiose claims made for the Agreement, i.e., that it would end sectarian hostilities. This prospect was not in the interests of the bourgeois powers that drew up its provisions. None of them were prepared to abandon a strategy of divide and rule that had been employed so successfully to prevent the emergence of coherent and unified political opposition to big business from the working class.

At the Agreement's heart was a Stormont Assembly that institutionalised the sectarian divide. By defining every member of the Assembly as belonging to either a Unionist and Protestant community, or a Republican and Catholic community, the Agreement guaranteed that every area of political and economic life became an arena for turf wars between the sectarian factions.

Moreover, while a majority of ordinary Protestants supported the Agreement, a sizeable minority led by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and sections of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) opposed the Agreement as a sell out of Ulster's interests. They found support in particular from within the province's vast paramilitary and state security apparatus.

In its short life, therefore, every decision taken by the Assembly on investments, schools, hospitals, language rights and so on has been denounced by one or other camp as either a concession to "terrorism" or a capitulation to the British and Unionist hierarchy.

All the suspensions have their roots in factional feuding usually initiated by sections of Unionism opposed to the Agreement. Under the barest of pretexts relating to this or that aspect of the IRA's disarmament, the anti-Agreement Unionists have succeeded in getting the British government to stall the Assembly in order to save the political skin of pro-Agreement First Minister and UUP leader David Trimble.

As a consequence the Agreement has been accompanied by the growth of ever-deeper sectarian divisions. While Northern Ireland is a safer place for business and the level of conflict between the paramilitary groups has been considerably reduced, there are daily reports of pipe bombings, punishment beatings and families forced out of their houses by paramilitary gangs. The initial reversal of the trend towards polarised housing in many working and middle class areas has been thrown back. So-called "peace walls" continue to be erected at "sectarian interfaces". North Belfast now has 15 of them. Opinion polls suggest that the current election will see a historically low level of cross community voting—where nationalists vote for unionist parties, and vice versa.

At the same time the prosperity which the Agreement was supposed to bring has proved illusory. While a narrow minority are doing rather well, the experience of ordinary Catholics and Protestants has been one of continuing pressure on schools and social services. The recent "Bare Necessities" report produced by a pro-Agreement thinktank, conceded that 502,000 people, including many Protestants, were living at or close to a poverty line of around £156 a week.

Jobs have continued to disappear. In the last two months, 160 jobs were lost at Carpets International in County Down, 55 from hosiery firm Adria in Strabane and Derry, 80 from a Glen Dimplex electronics plant in County Down, 300 from clothing manufacturer Desmonds & Sons in Derry and 189 at Saintfield Yarn in County Down. This follows large-scale layoffs from the Shorts aircraft plant in Belfast and the end of shipbuilding at the Harland and Wolf shipyard.

The continuing growth of social inequality, in an atmosphere of existing sectarian divisions, is forcing working people into the arms of those parties perceived to be most aggressive in standing up for the interests of "their" community—Sinn Fein on the one side and the DUP on the other. Much commentary around the election has speculated on the likelihood of Sinn Fein and the DUP emerging as the largest parties in the new Assembly, a scenario that guarantees further tensions and instability.

The elections will resolve nothing. Despite the numerous parties standing in the elections, only two perspectives are on offer. Voters are being asked to either endorse a continuation of an Agreement that has only deepened divisions and done nothing to ameliorate the social difficulties facing working people, or support reactionary Unionist calls for a return to the past through a renegotiation of the Agreement aimed at marginalising Sinn Fein.

For all the worldwide parading of the Agreement, the "peace process" and its participants, as a global example of how conflict could be overcome to the benefit of all, none of the contending parties are capable of addressing the real concerns of the vast majority of the Northern Irish population. As a consequence, despite this only being the second election to the Assembly, predictions are for a low turnout, perhaps below 50 percent.

A new party for working people in the North and South of Ireland needs to be built based on the understanding that sectarian divisions and social inequality can only be reversed by offering high living standards, good education and the fullest expansion of democratic rights for all, regardless of their religion or community.

Improved housing, healthcare and full participation in political life for one section of working people cannot come at the expense of another. Rather it can only emerge through laying claim to the immense private and corporate wealth owned by a narrow elite in the North and South and reorganising all areas of economic life to meet the basic social needs of the masses instead of the selfish requirements of big business. The inevitable and bitter opposition such a perspective would meet from the Ulster, Irish and British bourgeoisie can only be overcome by a unified political movement of working people throughout Ireland and in Britain on the basis of such a socialist strategy.