

# Northern Ireland: Discussions aimed at rescuing Good Friday Agreement

Steve James, Chris Marsden  
20 February 2004

Discussions have begun between all the major political parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments on a review of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The review will centre on the extent to which the far-right pro-British loyalist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley can carry out its stated policy of excluding Sinn Fein from power in a revived Northern Ireland Assembly.

The review follows elections to the Assembly in November 2003, in which the DUP, for the first time in its history, pushed the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) of Northern Ireland's first minister David Trimble into second place amongst Protestant unionist voters. The DUP won 33 seats against the UUP's 24.

Following decades of bloody civil conflict, the 1998 Agreement set out terms for the establishment of devolved government by a Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont. One of its central goals was to co-opt the republican nationalists of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, into the structures of government as a means of bringing economically damaging sectarian conflict under control while preserving British rule over the six counties. At the same time, it continued to foster religious divisions in the working class that have been essential in sustaining capitalist rule in Ireland by preventing any unified political movement against big business concerns.

With every member of the Assembly designated according to his or her nationalist or unionist orientation, the Executive consisted of the leading figures of the main parties. Trimble became first minister, the Social Democratic and Labour Party's (SDLP's) Seamas Mallon his deputy, Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness education minister, and the DUP's Peter Robinson minister for regional development. What united them was a shared desire to defend the large subvention handed over from Britain to Northern Ireland, while attracting overseas investment to fund infrastructure and privatisation projects.

From the start, the DUP saw the Agreement as a long-term threat to the domination of the north by the Protestant unionist bourgeoisie. The viewed the concessions made first of all to Sinn Fein and secondly to the Southern Irish government—without which no agreement would have been possible—as the beginning of the end for the Protestant ascendancy in the north.

As the hoped-for “peace and prosperity for all” failed to materialise, the DUP benefited from growing disillusionment amongst many Protestant working people. Every aspect of the Assembly's operations—from schools to infrastructure to cross-

border projects to human rights—became arenas for bitter sectarian disputes, while the DUP sought to focus all attention on the IRA's failure to fully disarm. The Assembly was suspended four times, primarily to save Trimble from a challenge by the DUP and other anti-Agreement unionists within his own party.

Following its electoral rout last November, the UUP has begun to disintegrate, with core elements defecting to the DUP. Jeffrey Donaldson, the Westminster MP for Lagan Valley and a longstanding critic of the Agreement, joined the DUP after having failed to oust Trimble, and the UUP's youth wing, the Young Ulster Unionist Council, wound itself up, generating more defections to the DUP. The leadership of the Orange Order, with 100,000 members and traditionally associated with the UUP, has opened discussions with the DUP. Peter Robinson, deputy leader of the DUP, summed up the situation: “Unionism is under new management.”

The SDLP is facing a comparable collapse to the UUP. Sinn Fein won 24 seats to the SDLP's 18 in the elections, and subsequently the SDLP leadership of Mark Durkan has been under fierce internal criticism. The SDLP has been superseded as a “constitutional” nationalist party by Sinn Fein's adoption of the same policies, while Sinn Fein's historical association with the struggle against the British Army and its more aggressive defence of Catholic interests give it a base of support that the SDLP cannot hope to emulate.

Sinn Fein has also benefited electorally from the collapse in support for Bertie Ahern's corruption-riddled Fianna Fail in the south.

Faced with a DUP election victory its Ireland policy was based on avoiding, the Blair government has met with the DUP and the Ulster Political Research Group (UPRG)—the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association's (UDA's) political wing—in order to keep them within the framework of the Agreement. Blair himself has been involved in talks with the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), the political wing of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force. PUP leader David Ervine described Blair as being in “listening mode.”

Britain has also hosted an unprecedented meeting between the Irish government and the DUP at the Irish Embassy in London. According to Irish *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern, the meeting was “a good start,” with the Irish government listening “carefully and respectfully” to the party of Protestant bigotry. Ahern also met with the UPRG. The UDA's representatives warned Ahern that any proposal for joint British and Irish

authority over Northern Ireland would be “a disaster for the peace process.” Ahern reassured the organisation, which has murdered hundreds of Northern Catholics, that “too often loyalist people feel their voices are not heard.” A UDA spokesman commented, “Dublin has shown at least they are prepared to listen to the loyalist case.”

Following the flurry of meetings, the DUP released its “Devolution Now” document, which makes any restoration of the “power-sharing” Executive dependent on the IRA having fully disbanded.

Aside from such an eventuality, its proposals essentially constitute a return to Stormont rule by the unionist majority.

The DUP proposes government by a “Voluntary Coalition,” which would establish rule by a unionist block and possibly entice the electorally pressured SDLP into a unionist-dominated coalition government. The Assembly would still pass legislation on the basis of a majority of declared delegates from both “communities,” but an absolute majority of 70 percent could pass legislation even if the majority of one “community” opposed it.

The DUP’s second suggestion is for a “Corporate Assembly” to be introduced in which the Stormont Assembly would function without an Executive. Executive functions would be taken over by committees formed from the Assembly members, with the allocation of powers to the Assembly committees decided by vote—another way of assuring a unionist majority.

It is a measure of the desperate situation now facing the British government’s efforts to resolve the decades-long crisis in Northern Ireland that the DUP’s suggestions met a favourable response. Northern Ireland secretary Paul Murphy described proposals that would bring to an end a political compromise established only after years of intense negotiations and arm-twisting by London, Washington and Dublin as “constructive”; and he ventured that they “could mean that devolution could be restored.”

Several media commentators also praised the DUP for its grudging admission that under certain circumstances Sinn Fein could re-enter government. This is a case of desperate men clutching at straws.

The DUP could not do other than accept that Sinn Fein could join an Executive if they wind up the IRA without openly rejecting the right of a legal and constitutional party to participate in government. But Sinn Fein is unlikely to ever satisfy the DUP that the IRA is no longer a threat. Even after a 10-year ceasefire, the destruction of large quantities of weaponry, and the IRA’s acceptance of British rule for the foreseeable future, the DUP continues to rail against any appeasement of “terrorism.” It aims to maintain its grip over Protestant voters while seeking to exclude the majority of Catholics from any say in the political affairs of Northern Ireland.

The DUP’s proposals were denounced by Sinn Fein, but the latter’s spokesmen stressed that it was still anxious to find a way to work with the DUP. Gerry Adams spoke of his confidence that “unionism, even of the Paisleyite kind, will have to face in time the same reality that led the UUP to agree to the Good Friday Agreement.”

Even if Sinn Fein genuinely wants to establish some form of

working arrangement with the DUP, the basis for any compromise has been severely undermined. Sinn Fein does not want to go head to head with the DUP for fear of antagonising the British and Irish governments and thereby hastening the demise of the Agreement. For its part, the DUP does not want to appear as wreckers and thereby push London and Washington into closer alliance with the pro-Agreement unionists and with Sinn Fein.

But a mutual desire to benefit from any increased investment resulting from the so-called peace dividend is not enough to secure a common approach by the parties.

Sinn Fein has been the main beneficiary of the Agreement, which provided for the social and political advancement of a petty-bourgeois layer of Catholics who have long been denied the same access to the corridors of power as their Protestant counterparts. In contrast, the DUP fears that a weakening of the link with Britain, the continued growth in the size and political influence of the Catholic population, and an extension of trade and political links with the south will in the end prove disastrous to the unionist bourgeoisie.

Sinn Fein has, therefore, responded to the DUP’s proposals with countermeasures designed to strengthen the power-sharing arrangements by creating three new departments, of which one would give the Assembly control of policing and justice as opposed to London. Party chairman Mitchel McLaughlin insisted that “power sharing government is the only way forward.”

In contrast, the DUP’s Nigel Dodds denounced the measures as a “republican wish list.... The days of David Trimble’s pushover unionism ended on the 26th November last year.”

The rise of the extreme right forces now grouped around the DUP cannot be combated by lending any support to Sinn Fein or with any strategy based on shoring up the provisions embodied in the Good Friday Agreement. Bitter experience has refuted the notion that politics based on power-sharing between parties supposedly representing the religio-political “communities” of republicans and unionists can resolve sectarian conflict and guarantee peace and prosperity. The opposite development has occurred.

A new political axis is required that seeks to unite the working class across the religious divide. All of the parties that are presently represented in the suspended Assembly are vying for the support of big business and are whipping up sectarian tensions in order to strengthen their own bargaining positions. None advance social and economic policies that challenge the profit system and offer the basis for providing decent living standards to all. As a result, armed struggle may have been set aside, but political and social conflict over jobs, housing and every aspect of life has become more acute, not less. And things will only worsen as the economy of the north and south goes into yet steeper decline and savage cuts are made by Britain in employment, wages and public service provision.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**