

Northern Ireland: New efforts to revive power sharing at Stormont

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The British and Irish governments are trying to revive the suspended Northern Ireland Assembly, now in the third year of its fourth period of suspension since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998.

Northern Ireland is currently ruled by a British Labour-appointed proconsul, Paul Murphy, whose efforts to reopen Stormont revolve around seeking further concessions from Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to appease the right-wing Protestant Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Ian Paisley and the loyalist paramilitaries of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

A series of proposals were submitted to the leading unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland last week. Responses are expected before the latest deadline, set by Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, for November 26—one year since the last elections. The proposals themselves emerged after two months of protracted manoeuvring and horse trading.

The IRA has been in a ceasefire for a decade, while Sinn Féin is in the process of transforming itself into a potential governing party.

In return, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 set the framework for the province to be run on sectarian lines, replacing London rule and outright unionist hegemony with an assembly in which every decision had to be approved by political leaders of both unionist and nationalist “communities,” and with a unionist and nationalist First and Deputy First Minister, respectively.

The Agreement was intended to stabilise political life in line with the requirements of the British, Irish and US bourgeoisie, maintaining divisions in the working class while curtailing the low-level but protracted, expensive and exceedingly bitter conflict. But this framework has necessarily led to the growth of the nationalist and unionist parties with a vested interest in portraying themselves as the most determined defenders of “their” community—Sinn Féin and the DUP.

The Assembly was finally suspended in 2002 as part of a last-ditch attempt to prop up the traditional unionist ruling

party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and its beleaguered leader, David Trimble. A minor IRA spying operation in Stormont was used as the pretext by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Trimble to stall the Assembly pending some means of accommodating or neutralising the anti-Agreement DUP—the UUP’s most vocal critic within the unionist camp.

The DUP has won support by exploiting the inability of the Agreement to generally improve living standards and complaining that only Catholics were getting jobs and projects under the new arrangements.

Blair’s move to avert a DUP challenge to the UUP was a complete failure. In the intervening two years, the DUP has replaced the UUP as the major Protestant Unionist party, while Sinn Féin has eclipsed the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as the dominant nationalist party.

The UUP is in a state of collapse. One of its leading figures described its current condition as a “living nightmare,” devoid of policies or coherence. Only 250 people attended its recent party conference. Had the elections of 2003 been choosing members of a functioning Assembly, the DUP’s Ian Paisley would now be the First Minister, with a Sinn Féin leader as his deputy.

Paisley has long been the loudest and most bigoted voice in Northern Irish politics. His career is one of evangelist anti-Catholic ravings and provocations designed to enflame unionist sentiment against any compromise with the Southern republic, or with Sinn Féin and the IRA.

Paisley has taken some time to accept dealings with Sinn Féin. But come round he has. Under pressure from a younger and more pragmatic layer in the DUP, the reverend doctor has visited Dublin, politely discussed political matters with Bertie Ahern, and generally made it clear that, public outbursts aside, the DUP is willing to consider some sort of working arrangement with Sinn Féin.

The deal reportedly being offered is that, should the IRA visibly disarm, Sinn Féin will, in return, be offered a role in the policing and justice ministries of a revived Stormont Assembly.

Another carrot being dangled by the Fianna Fail

government in Dublin is the possibility of Sinn Fein joining a coalition government in the South. Fianna Fail is in electoral disarray and urgently needs a coalition partner able to broaden the party's disintegrating support in the working class.

Sinn Fein is therefore being simultaneously offered a ticket to the top tables in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic provided IRA disarmament can be delivered.

Haggling over verification of disarmament appears to have resolved itself into proposals that one Catholic and one Protestant religious leader would be allowed to photograph the physical destruction of most of the IRA's weaponry—mostly 1,000 or so assault rifles and some explosives.

Sinn Fein has strongly indicated that the IRA will accept this arrangement, although there is likely to be opposition from local paramilitary groups—many of whom use their armed status in crime and in policing working class areas.

The DUP is being encouraged to accept changes to the functioning of the Assembly, primarily the means through which the First and Deputy First Ministers are elected. This is intended to allow the DUP to work with Sinn Fein without appearing to compromise its unionist "principles."

The British-Irish Council will also be elevated to appear of comparable weight to the cross-border North-South Ministerial Council, established as part of the Agreement. Whether the DUP will accept either of these proposals is not clear. The party campaign in the 2003 election called for a renegotiation of the Agreement to exclude Sinn Fein entirely, until such time as the IRA had completely disappeared from the scene. The DUP's response hinges on whether the party believes it can extract still more concessions by further delay.

Sinn Fein has repeatedly called for the British and US governments to pressure the DUP into accepting some form of the current proposals. There appears to be a degree of optimism in London and Dublin that this will ultimately be successful.

Another component of a new settlement involves the loyalist paramilitary groups—currently more active than their nationalist opponents and with fingers in most areas of criminal activity. Sinn Fein has consistently pointed to the threat the UDA poses to working class Catholic areas as one reason for its reluctance to disarm the IRA.

The British government has removed its ban on by far the largest loyalist armed group, the UDA, and is investigating means through which the organisation can transform its primarily criminal activities into more legitimate security firms. Other loyalist groups, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and its political wing the Progressive Unionist Party, are being marginalised.

Over the course of "the Troubles," the UDA's assassination wing, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, was responsible for more than 400 killings, and the organisation was, and presumably still is, riddled with police and intelligence agents.

The UDA has asked Paul Murphy for £3 million in assistance with its new lines of business. The response must have been favourable to some degree, since, on Murphy's cue, the UDA claimed to be willing to "enter a process which will see the eradication of all paramilitary activity."

Both Sinn Fein and the DUP represent aspiring layers of the petty bourgeoisie hoping to land a share in the exploitation of the working class. With the collapse of the UUP and SDLP, both feel their time has come. Both hope to see Stormont revived from the standpoint of securing corporate investment and developing tourism in Northern Ireland. Part of this necessarily involves a continual deepening of relations with the South—a point of which the DUP are as aware as Sinn Fein.

Should a new agreement be reached between Sinn Fein and the DUP, therefore, it will no more hail a new era of "peace and prosperity" than the original 1998 deal, for which a majority of both unionists and nationalists voted. Rather, it will represent a further drawing together of Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist political forces to best manipulate sectarian divisions for the purposes of extracting wealth from all sections of working people in Northern Ireland.



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