

Northern Ireland elections: deepening polarisation and the collapse of the Ulster Unionist Party

Steve James
10 May 2005

Britain's May 5 general election included polls for 18 Westminster seats in British-ruled Northern Ireland. The results exposed deepening sectarian polarisation between nationalist and unionist voters. They also confirmed the virtual collapse of the traditional party of the Northern Irish bourgeoisie, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), and triggered the resignation of the UUP's leader, David Trimble.

The election was prefaced by a media and government campaign waged against Sinn Fein, focussing on the IRA's alleged role in both the Northern Bank robbery in Belfast late last year and the murder of the Catholic nationalist Robert McCartney by Sinn Fein members earlier this year. With negotiations between Sinn Fein and the DUP to revive the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont stalled, the Irish, British and United States governments launched a concerted effort to force Sinn Fein to accept that the IRA must be disbanded, not merely disarmed.

Pressure on Sinn Fein reached a high point with US President George Bush's decision to meet with members of the McCartney family in the White House on St. Patrick's Day. The US special envoy to Northern Ireland, Mitchell Reiss, announced that it was time for the IRA to "go out of business."

On April 6, Adams pledged himself to such an eventuality in an open appeal to the leadership of the IRA to permanently abandon the strategy of armed struggle and to "fully embrace and accept" parliamentary means.

"For over 30 years, the IRA showed that the British government could not rule Ireland on its own terms," Adams declared. "You asserted the legitimacy of the right of the people of this island to freedom and independence.

"Many of your comrades made the ultimate sacrifice. Your determination, selflessness and courage have brought that freedom struggle forward towards its attainment.

"That struggle can now be taken forward by other means. I say this with the authority of my office as president of Sinn Fein."

In the past, Adams continued, he had defended the right of the IRA to engage in armed struggle.

"I did so because there was no alternative for those who

would not bend the knee or turn a blind eye to oppression or for those who wanted a national republic.

"Now there is an alternative. I have clearly set out my view of what that alternative is. The way forward is by building political support for republican and democratic objectives across Ireland and by winning support for these goals internationally."

In the aftermath of Adams' statement, media interest in the McCartney family largely evaporated. Both the murder and the Belfast bank raid were seen only as leverage to force Sinn Fein to comply with the demands placed on it. Adams and his ally Martin McGuinness are still viewed as favoured instruments for ensuring Republican acceptance of the devolved executive at Stormont based on "power-sharing" with the pro-British Unionist parties.

The campaign against Sinn Fein in fact served to strengthen its political authority amongst Catholics. May 5 confirmed the ongoing decline in support for the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and its eclipse as the main nationalist party by Sinn Fein. The SDLP had expected to benefit from Sinn Fein's difficulties, with members of the McCartney family suggesting that they might stand as SDLP candidates to take advantage of disgust at the IRA's brutal role in Catholic communities. Instead the campaign strengthened the belief that Sinn Fein is the force capable of acting as a defender of Catholics against the Unionist forces and of negotiating political concessions in Westminster and Stormont, when it reconvenes.

A parallel development has taken place within Unionism. The media campaign over the robbery and murder served to further undermine the Ulster Unionist Party, and strengthen the hardline Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley. The DUP still adopts a position of opposing power-sharing with Sinn Fein, which it denounces as a front for the IRA and hence a criminal organisation. In reality, this posture of opposing the terms of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is used as a device through which to extract further political concessions from London. Paisley is involved in ongoing negotiations aimed at re-establishing the Stormont Assembly.

The election campaign was dominated by jousting between the Republican and Unionist parties aimed at consolidating their sectarian grip over their respective “communities”.

The DUP fought the election by accusing the UUP and its leader David Trimble of having “betrayed” Ulster by signing the Good Friday Agreement and bringing the “terrorists and criminals” of Sinn Fein and the IRA into the state apparatus. The UUP’s response was entirely defensive, arguing that it had first forced Sinn Fein onto a constitutional path and then forced it out of power sharing. Both parties draped themselves in the Union Jack and trumpeted their efforts on behalf of Ulster’s farming, tourist and quarrying industries.

Amongst nationalists, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) proposed essentially identical perspectives to push forward the political and economic integration of Northern Ireland with the Irish republic. By drawing together health, energy, infrastructure decision making and planning on both sides of the border, both parties hope to gradually erase Ireland’s partition while defending capitalist rule. Both demand the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Both support the adoption of the euro, which is the currency in the South.

But the SDLP is seen by many Catholic workers as a politically compromised force due to its long record of working loyally within Northern Ireland’s political structures. And Sinn Fein continues to benefit from its association with a militant struggle against British rule, Unionist violence and anti-Catholic discrimination.

The main winner in the election was the DUP, which increased its tally from 5 to 9 seats. All DUP gains were taken from the UUP, which also lost a seat to the SDLP because of a split in the unionist vote.

Emblematic of the UUP’s decline was the fate of party leader and former First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, David Trimble. Trimble lost his previously safe Upper Bann seat to David Simpson of the DUP by a margin of over 5,000.

Simpson is typical of the DUP hierarchy, a businessman, member of the Orange Order and the Northern Ireland Assembly and a gospel singer. Amongst his political achievements to date has been the negotiation of local tax relief for Orange halls.

Another leading UUP figure to lose his seat was former British Airways executive David Burnside. Such is the extent of the UUP’s decay that Burnside welcomed his own party’s defeat as proof that a more hardline stance was needed. “I am pleased with the message that has been sent out in Ulster,” he declared. Burnside was replaced by another gospel-singing Orange Order member, the Reverend William McCrea, a minister in DUP-leader Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church.

Trimble promptly resigned as UUP leader. In the 10 years since he was elected to the UUP leadership as a unionist hardliner, the party has lost nine of the Westminster seats it held in 1995. The UUP, the party of Ulster’s founder Edward

Carson and the dominant unionist party since the partition of Ireland in 1921/2, now retains only one seat.

Over the same period, the Protestant bourgeoisie has been forced to acknowledge that its British patrons are no longer willing to subsidise their unchallenged rule over the Northern Irish state and that it must seek a *modus vivendi* with Sinn Fein. Underlying the UUP’s loss of political influence is the drastic undermining of the north’s economy.

The Good Friday Agreement was an attempt to end the substantial costs associated with maintaining a British military presence in the north, to bring the political stability necessary to encourage international investment and thereby both emulate the successes of the Irish Republic in the south and encourage cross-border economic cooperation.

For all the DUP’s success and its rejection of power-sharing with Sinn Fein, it faces exactly the same problems as the UUP and the same demands from London and Washington that it must do what is necessary to make the north economically and politically viable. Paisley and his cohorts will thus have to make their way to Dublin and seek new relations with Sinn Fein, while seeking the best terms for the Protestant business interests they represent by whipping up religious tensions backed up with anti-IRA rhetoric.

In nationalist-dominated seats, Sinn Fein advanced at the expense of the SDLP, winning the Newry and Armagh seat with an 11 percent swing. SDLP leader Mark Durkan was able to hold off a challenge from Sinn Fein’s Mitchel McGlaughlin in the Foyle seat in Derry, likely as a result of tactical voting by unionists. In the end, Sinn Fein won five seats against the SDLP’s three.

In the coming months, new negotiations between Sinn Fein, the DUP, and the other signatories to the Good Friday Agreement will be sought. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has appointed Peter Hain as Northern Ireland Secretary to oversee the process.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact