

Northern Ireland: The significance of Paisley's resignation and Adams's regret

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Ian Paisley's decision to resign in May this year from his office as First Minister of Northern Ireland has been greeted with great regret by those he has spent his entire political career denouncing.

Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, described Paisley as a "fascinating, gracious man." Paisley, according to Adams, was motivated by "genuine endeavour to make things better for the people who live here." Adams was looking forward to getting to know Paisley better when he retires to the back benches.

Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, the deputy first minister, was just as effusive: "I think that [Paisley] will be fondly remembered by the people of Ireland—north and south—for the very courageous leadership that he showed."

In contrast, when Paisley steps down next month, his own party, whose leadership he is resigning, will be glad to see the back of him. He will likely be replaced by his longstanding deputy and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) hard man, Peter Robinson.

Paisley has been steadily undermined since he took over the First Minister position. He has faced increasing criticism from Unionists within and outside the DUP, which he founded, for his amiable working relations with McGuinness.

A property scandal involving his son, Ian Paisley junior, who himself resigned as a junior minister, removed his last prop of support within the DUP.

Yet, Paisley has never renounced or expressed the slightest regret for his decades spent in anti-Catholic and anti-Republican incitement.

More so perhaps than any other one individual, he is associated with the sectarian hatred and killing in Northern Ireland that characterised much of the "Troubles." For almost a half century, he functioned as the loudest ideologue and agitator. Many of those recruited into loyalist terror gangs cited Paisley's incendiary demagoguery as central to their political development.

In 1986, at the head of a loyalist demonstration, he famously insisted that Ulster would "never, never, never" surrender.

The kind words from Adams and McGuinness express the degree to which Sinn Fein has been integrated into the apparatus of British rule in Northern Ireland, over which Ulster Unionists have less influence than hitherto. This, in turn, can only be understood as the product of the impact of globalised capitalist production on all political and social relations and which gave rise to the "peace process," the Good Friday Agreement, the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement between Adams and Paisley, and the revival of the Stormont Assembly with Sinn Fein in power alongside the DUP.

When Northern Ireland was partitioned off from the rest of Ireland in 1921 following the Anglo-Irish war, the six-county state dominated by the rich and powerful Protestant bourgeoisie was an important and highly integrated part of British imperialism's industrial and political power. Belfast was a major industrial location, with the vast majority of its considerable production exported to Britain and its imperial holdings. The continual threat from a powerful working class was countered by state-

organised religious sectarianism, Orange mobs, and systematic anti-Catholic discrimination and hysteria.

By the 1960s, however, the industrial importance of the north was in rapid decline. The military spending of World War II had propped up the economy, but this came to a sudden end. Considerable industry remained, but this was no longer cutting edge. Northern Ireland was increasingly dependent on Britain. At the same time, the Catholic minority population's determined demands for civil rights were gaining a hearing amongst Protestant workers.

The response from the Unionist bourgeoisie was brutal repression, enflamed by Paisley's incessant religious ranting. British troops were sent in large numbers in 1969 to stabilise a political situation, which the British government saw as a threat not only to Protestant Ulster but to the stability of capitalist rule across Ireland and in Britain itself.

Over the course of the decades of "the Troubles" and the dirty war against the IRA, British imperialism expanded a vast amount of effort in maintaining its rule over Northern Ireland, which became one of the most militarised areas on the planet. For the Unionist bourgeoisie, the large military and related high levels of social spending, maintained for decades, became a new source of wealth and privilege, while the large military apparatus provided work for significant numbers of Protestants.

This regime of perpetual crisis obscured the underlying loss of competitiveness and increasingly isolation and backwardness of Northern Ireland industry. At the same time, the Irish republic, long an economic backwater, emerged rather suddenly through low tax policies and European funding as one of the most favourable investment locations in the world. American companies poured in, finding cheap labour and access to European markets. By the 1990s, the "Celtic Tiger" economy was among the fastest expanding in the world, while Ireland had one of the highest per capita standards of living, and was eyed enviously from across the border.

Northern Ireland, by contrast, was still in a war that, by their own admission, neither side could win. Civil conflict, politically and economically, was increasingly an obstacle to economic development. Who would invest in divided Belfast, trapped behind a militarised border, when Dublin was a safer, more fashionable and lower tax option—one, moreover, with better transport links to the UK and Europe? In the end, British imperialism concluded that the high levels of military and social spending in Northern Ireland could not be sustained and an agreement had to be reached with Sinn Fein and the IRA.

As for Sinn Fein, with its traditional American links, the investment wave drew it closer to the orbit of US imperialism from whence most of the investment originated.

These circumstances formed the underpinning of the IRA ceasefire in 1994 and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Sinn Fein, in return for accepting British rule, was allowed into a power-sharing arrangement with the Unionists. Sectarian division would remain an essential instrument of rule because every level of government, including ministerial positions,

would be allocated based on a “community” designation.

The Irish republic also agreed to remove any constitutional claim on the North.

In return for the removal of the IRA, the British military effort would be drastically scaled down, releasing forces for more pressing foreign wars. Sinn Fein would cease its paramilitary policing of nationalist areas and support, oversee, and encourage Catholics to join a reformed Royal Ulster Constabulary—the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

Cross-border links and institutions would be developed specifically to allow greater collaboration at all levels of government. In this way, Sinn Fein, and the aspiring layer of increasingly wealthy Catholics for whom it speaks, would become integrated into, and responsible for, capitalist rule in the North. Its members would take up comfortable positions in the state apparatus and develop their own business interests alongside their Unionist counterparts.

For the Unionists, the terms meant that Ulster would indefinitely remain part of the UK, while the IRA would be neutralised. Without the war, the investment and tourism opportunities available to the Celtic Tiger would be available to the North. One “strand” of the Good Friday Agreement offered a British-Irish council to deepen Unionist ties to the rest of Britain.

This is to a large extent what has happened, with the initial establishment of the Assembly, with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) led by David Trimble as the major party and Sinn Fein playing second republican fiddle to the then larger Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP).

Prime Minister Tony Blair’s former chief-of-staff Jonathan Powell’s recently published book on the background to the Agreement, *Great Hatred Little Room*, makes clear how important it was for Sinn Fein that any deal was presented in terms that would appear to be a move towards a united Ireland. Adams was desperate to avoid a split within the republican movement, such as gave rise to the Provisional IRA when it split from the Official IRA.

However, in 2003, Adams announced that “The IRA is never going to disband in response to ultimatums from the British government or David Trimble [then leader of the UUP]. But I do believe the logic of the peace process puts us in a different place. So if you ask me do I envisage a future without an IRA? The answer is obvious. The answer is yes.”

These words were in fact penned by Powell himself in his role as adviser and Northern Ireland fixer for the Blair government between 1998 and 2007. [1]

For the more hard-line Unionists, however, it was politically necessary to appear to have conceded nothing at all. Historically, privileges offered exclusively to Protestants generated mass support for Unionism amongst Protestants, and were justified in the rantings of a succession of religious demagogues, epitomised by Paisley himself. Concessions to Dublin, dilution of Protestant hegemony, or undermining its security apparatus were all presented as an attack on the rights and heritage of the “Protestant people.”

At every point over the extended decay of Northern Ireland’s economic influence, hard-line Unionism attempted to mobilise on the streets and politically to block any and all threats to rule from Britain. This accounts for the continual tensions within Ulster Unionism, caught between those attempting to open the way for the expansion of corporate profit in Northern Ireland, and those whose interests lie in maintaining the traditional apparatus and British subsidies.

Trimble, the former deputy-leader of the far-right Vanguard Progressive Unionist Party whose loyalist strike brought down a previous power-sharing agreement in 1973, was elected as leader of the UUP in 1995. He came to public prominence in Portadown during a succession of loyalist protests outside Drumcree Church, when he did a jig in front of TV cameras with Paisley.

But it was under Trimble that the UUP was finally cajoled into the Good

Friday Agreement by the British and US governments. Paisley’s DUP and some hardliners within the UUP opposed signing the agreement and furiously denounced the disbandment of the Protestant-dominated Ulster Defence Regiment, and the reform of the RUC.

After 1998, the DUP denounced every move towards implementing the Agreement as a concession to terrorism and insisted that IRA disarmament and weapons decommissioning was speeded up and independently confirmed.

The Northern Ireland assembly was repeatedly suspended to prevent First Minister Trimble from losing support to the DUP. Nevertheless, the polarisation of political opinion was expressed by Sinn Fein becoming the largest Republican Party and the DUP finally replacing the UUP in 2005 as the largest Unionist party.

Once he came to office, however, “Dr. No” also ended up agreeing to power sharing with Sinn Fein.

He was assisted in this by the effective disbandment of the IRA. US support for the IRA all but dissipated since the September 11, 2001, attack on the Twin Towers. Under intense pressure from Washington and London, and after a complicated process of arms destruction, monitoring and international verification, the IRA agreed to end its military campaign and Sinn Fein have joined the PSNI policing boards and accepted MI5 being in charge of national security.

Underpinning the final agreement between Sinn Fein and the DUP, and the revival of Stormont in 2007, was also a growing unease that the protracted delays in reviving the Assembly were impacting on economic prospects.

In the end, the DUP and Paisley were presented with a “Plan B,” under which more influence over affairs in the North would be transferred to Dublin with the weakened Unionists further excluded. Faced with this, and a healthy short-term subsidy from Britain, the DUP signed up to power sharing.

Sharing office with the arch-Unionist villain Paisley was in many ways a political coup for Sinn Fein. His acquiescence was proof that the fruits of office were now secure. However, while the DUP leadership around Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds are every bit as concerned as Sinn Fein to draw in new investment and prepare the way for privatisations, the longstanding conflicts remain and have increasingly focused on the 81-year-old Paisley.

Paisley and McGuinness became known disparagingly in hard-line Unionist circles as the “Chuckle brothers.” Shortly after taking office in 2007, Paisley was removed from his position at the head of the Free Presbyterian Church he formed in 1951 for consorting with the “monstrous and ungodly” Sinn Fein. Free Presbyterians took out adverts protesting “power-sharing with murderers.”

The DUP has also seen a string of resignations. In March 2007, Jim Allister, who replaced Paisley as the DUP’s member of the European Parliament (MEP), resigned. Allister, a former lawyer, established a new group, Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), which opposes the Good Friday and St. Andrew’s Agreements, calls for direct rule in a simple majority Assembly, which would be controlled by Unionists, and describes Sinn Fein as “unrepentant terrorists.” TUV equates Paisley with Trimble and describes his attitude to the IRA as “hopelessly naïve.”

A TUV candidate in a recent council by-election at Dromore, a commuter village near Belfast, polled 739 first preference votes, against 1069 for the DUP and 912 for the UUP. The Protestant-dominated seat was finally won by the UUP through second preference allocations.

Paisley’s fate was sealed following the revelation that Ian Paisley junior had utilised the St. Andrew’s negotiations, at which he served as the closest adviser to his father, to extract concessions for a tourist project at the Giant’s Causeway, in which a DUP supporter and personal ally of Paisley junior had interests.

Deprived of his closest ally, Paisley quietly retired. This leaves the Sinn

Fein leadership facing an increasingly fractious and disunited DUP, prompting Adams to state, “My only concern...is that those within the DUP who are against power-sharing, and there are some, would use any instability in the leadership or any question around the leadership to set back the progress we have made thus far.”

Notes:

1. Jonathan Powell. *Great Hatred Little Room, Making Peace in Northern Ireland*. Bodley Head, 2008 (p. 213).



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