

Northern Ireland Assembly gripped by crisis

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The future of the Northern Ireland Assembly has been thrown into question, the result of allegations relating to the financial affairs of Iris Robinson, the wife of Northern Ireland's first minister and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Peter Robinson.

On January 5 the BBC *Spotlight* current affairs programme broadcast an episode revealing that between June and August 2008 Iris Robinson obtained £50,000 from two property developers and used this to help her lover, 19-year-old Kirk McCambley, set up a business. It is alleged that after giving the £50,000 to McCambley, Robinson then asked him to give her £5,000 back.

Iris Robinson, a former councillor was elected as DUP Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom (MP) for Strangford in the 2001 general election and re-elected in 2005. She caused a public outcry in June 2008 when she described homosexuality as an "abomination" and that with help, gay people could be "turned around." She made her remarks during a week in which a gay man had been badly beaten in a homophobic attack.

In the same month, Peter Robinson became Northern Ireland's first minister and DUP leader, taking over from the 82-year-old Reverend Ian Paisley.

The affair has revealed the extremely thin layer that has been able to enrich itself as a result of the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Robinsons, dubbed the "Swish family Robinson" due to their lavish lifestyle, are representative of this layer. Both had the closest of relationships with the businessmen named in the scandal. One of the developers is the now deceased Fred Fraser, a multi-millionaire and Northern Ireland's biggest property developer. There is growing speculation that Fraser may have also donated money to the DUP prior to the scandal.

According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, the Robinsons jointly received more than half a million pounds a year in salaries and expenses, with a further £150,000 in wages paid to four of their relatives for constituency and other work.

The BBC questioned why Peter Robinson, as the leader of the DUP and first minister did not tell the relevant authorities, at Stormont or Westminster, that his wife had not registered the £50,000. *Spotlight* alleged that a number of

rules had been broken by the alleged conduct of the Robinsons, including that she had failed to declare an interest in the business she had assisted McCambley set up.

Faced with the possible end of his political career, Peter Robinson announced that he was standing down from his first minister duties for up to six weeks to be temporarily replaced by former Minister of the Environment Arlene Foster. Robinson has authorised an inquiry into the allegations and is seeking legal advice. Iris Robinson has since left her elected posts and has been expelled from the DUP.

The allegations against the Robinsons serve to highlight the deeply undemocratic "power sharing" structures established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Such are the narrow, sectarian interests that are represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly that if Robinson is forced to resign it could threaten the very existence of the institution.

The model of government established by the agreement enshrined sectarian divisions as the basis of government in Northern Ireland. Members elected to the assembly are required to designate themselves as "nationalist," "unionist" or "other." Under the rules of the assembly, major decisions must receive majority support within both the unionist and nationalist camps, effectively rendering redundant the opinions and votes of the "others," i.e., the formally non-sectarian parties.

As a result of the agreement, the posts of first minister and deputy first minister (currently held by Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness) in the Northern Ireland Executive are shared between the largest unionist and republican parties. Both first minister and deputy first minister posts hold the same powers, while the joint nature of the offices of the first and deputy ministers, which were integral to the agreement, means that McGuinness would automatically be removed from his post if Peter Robinson were to resign.

Commenting on this state of affairs, the *Times* commented, "In any other corner of the democratic West, the fall of a single leader would signal trouble for the governing party and opportunity for the opposition. But in Northern Ireland, the whole political settlement is now under question, because here we don't have an opposition."

In the assembly's original incarnation, the first minister was elected by the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) on a joint ticket with the deputy first minister. It was necessary for the joint nomination to obtain an overall majority in the assembly and also be supported by the majority of designated "nationalist" MLAs and "unionist" MLAs. Under the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement, this process was altered to allow the leader of the largest party to nominate the first minister, and the leader of the next largest party that is in the opposite "designation" to nominate the deputy first minister.

The Robinson allegations follow a December scandal. It was then revealed that police wanted to question Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams's brother Liam regarding allegations of sexual abuse against his daughter.

Such minor personal scandals come at a time of deepening political crisis in Northern Ireland. The most vexing questions have been the attempt by the DUP to delay the completion of the devolution of policing and justice in Northern Ireland and with it the establishment of a new Department of Justice. Sinn Fein has demanded for months that the DUP engage in negotiations to collaborate in the establishment of a justice ministry, even threatening to bring down the current Northern Ireland Executive over the issue.

The Robinson affair has prompted widespread commentary that if the first and deputy first ministers were to fall, this scenario would necessitate new elections under conditions in which Sinn Fein could emerge as the largest party in Northern Ireland. In the wake of the Robinson scandal, Gerry Adams and the Sinn Fein leadership have sought to maintain the fiction that the Good Friday Agreement was based on implementing genuine democracy. Sinn Fein has quickly moved to prop up the DUP and ensure that the affair does not threaten the future of the assembly and the sectarian divide inherent in the Good Friday Agreement.

Sinn Fein has effectively agreed a quid pro quo, in which it has accepted that Robinson can temporarily stand down in exchange for the DUP engaging in discussions regarding the implementation of a devolved justice ministry and policing. The affair has triggered the resumption of new behind-the-scenes talks on these issues between the DUP, still led by Peter Robinson, and Sinn Fein.

The Alliance party leader David Ford, who has been favoured to take the job of the new justice minister, said on Friday, "[T]alks are at an extremely important stage, and I believe that the coming days will define politics in Northern Ireland for years to come." He added, "It looks as if the DUP and Sinn Fein are finally engaging seriously on some of the crucial issues that have divided them and blocked progress."

The negotiations between the DUP and Sinn Fein followed talks between Republic of Ireland Taoiseach Brian Cowen and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on the issue. The British government is pushing for the creation of a department of justice and is prepared to invest heavily to this end. In October the Brown government published a proposed budget to finance it, which would cost an estimated £800 million.

In an article published January 8, the *London Times* recognised the fragility of the political set-up in Northern Ireland and the extent to which British imperialism carefully groomed both Robinson and Adams in order to achieve a settlement to the "Troubles" in the interests of British imperialism.

"Gerry Adams was for decades the hidden ace card of Whitehall mandarins seeking a solution to the Troubles. Identified very early in his career—he was part of a Provisional IRA delegation secretly flown to London for talks in the 1970s—Mr. Adams would eventually deliver the ceasefires and eventual disbandment of Western Europe's most ruthlessly efficient terrorist group," said the comment.

"When Peter Robinson, the long-term deputy to the Rev. Ian Paisley, the seemingly implacable hard line Democratic unionist founder/leader, who would never give an inch to republicans, finally emerged on top, the government was confident it had its man."

"They have both also developed a highly autocratic style of leadership which brooks no dissent, even from their closest allies," the *Times* said. And "as a consequence the foundations upon which the Northern Ireland peace process has been built are fragile."

The *Economist* wrote in similar tones, lamenting that the "effect of the current scandal has been to turn an existing stand-off on power sharing into a full-blown crisis," adding "though Mr. Robinson is not, perhaps, Belfast's most popular politician, he is beyond doubt the ablest exponent of the Protestant and unionist cause. His departure from the political scene would be a real blow to the Belfast Assembly."



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