

Northern Ireland: Still searching for agreement in talks over policing

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Agreement to the transfer of justice and policing responsibilities in Northern Ireland to the power-sharing assembly at Stormont stalled this week due to widespread opposition within the Democratic Unionist Party.

Discussions between the pro-British DUP and the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein, hosted jointly by the British and Irish governments, were expected to conclude successfully Monday. Instead there was the by now regular announcement that an agreement was “close.” In the following days, leaks to the BBC reported how a proposed agreement had been put to an internal DUP meeting, but was rejected by 14 assembly members in a 60/40 split vote in favour, including party chair Maurice Morrow, who also sits in the House of Lords. There were also reports that a number of oppositionists had threatened to resign.

A number of the DUP’s Westminster Members of Parliament were also opposed, led by Gregory Campbell.

The latest political crisis could not only end the career of party leader Peter Robinson, but may provoke an Assembly election where the DUP would almost certainly lose seats and their position as the largest party. It would open the door for Sinn Fein to become the largest party in the Assembly and take the position of first minister.

In the face of this, the DUP went back to demand further concessions from the British and Irish governments and Sinn Fein.

The transfer of policing and justice was a key component of both the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the St. Andrew’s Agreement of 2006, which established the basis for Sinn Fein’s participation in the Assembly. But Unionist resistance to Sinn Fein taking shared responsibility for justice, prisons, probation and related services along with the reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the former Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), led to repeated delays. The overall aim of the move is to create the best conditions for the Unionist and Republican parties to police the working class. To this end an £800 million carrot has been dangled in front of the parties by Britain as a payoff to allow the new institutions to

“bed in.” However, despite such apparent largesse, the agenda being demanded of the strengthened assembly is the imposition of deeply unpopular and socially explosive austerity measures.

Sinn Fein has fulfilled every stated requirement of the British government and the Unionists to prove its commitment to Stormont. The Provisional IRA has been wound up, while Sinn Fein has offered full support to the PSNI in its policing of Catholic areas and campaigns against republican dissidents seeking to continue terrorist activity. The party denounced a recent, near fatal, bombing attack on a prominent Catholic PSNI officer, Peadar Heffron, and has voiced no complaints against suggestions that more units of the British Army’s Special Reconnaissance Regiment be unleashed in the Northern Ireland countryside against the dissidents. Former IRA leader, now Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, has established a working relationship with former first minister, the Reverend Ian Paisley, and his successor, Peter Robinson, both far-right politicians and former allies of loyalist paramilitaries.

Above all, Sinn Fein has collaborated in a savage programme of public spending cuts. Slashing Northern Ireland’s large public sector—providing 30 percent of all jobs—is a key objective. Public spending per head in Northern Ireland is far above the UK average. Shortly before the end of 2009, some £370 million worth of savings were agreed by the power-sharing administration in response to cuts in the £5 billion annual subvention to the executive from the British government. The cuts proposed include some £51.7 million from frontline education spending and £22.6 million from capital investment. Sinn Fein’s Education Minister Catriona Roane warned that cuts on this scale would involve “pain” and would not be possible without job losses. Other agreed cuts include £25.9 million from cultural spending, £28.7 million from employment and learning and £113.5 million from health. Sinn Fein has also prepared proposals by Transport Minister Conor Murphy to introduce competitive tendering for bus and rail services in 2011.

The DUP leadership also has a significant interest in securing an agreement, particularly given the much weakened position of Robinson following the exposure of his wife Iris having solicited cash from property developers to set up her youthful lover in business while pocketing £5,000. A deal with Sinn Fein would be held up as proof that Robinson's strategy of "engagement" has paid off. He has also come to rely on Sinn Fein's political support to avoid the threat of removal, a forced resignation, or even fresh elections. He has been able to continue to conduct negotiations with Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness largely thanks to Sinn Fein. McGuinness took the occasion of Robinson's personal scandals to announce he had shaken Robinson's hand for the first time. Robinson told the *Sunday Times* that, in addition, McGuinness "very kindly sent me text messages, then voice mail messages and spoke to me privately about the issues."

McGuinness in effect offered Robinson political cover in return for a deal on policing.

Despite these political considerations, the DUP leadership must take into account not only hard-line opposition within the party but also the danger from opposition parties exploiting continuing sectarian tensions. Both parties are based on such sectarian divisions, but Sinn Fein must seek to downplay divisions in order to integrate itself into the apparatus of government. In contrast, tensions are being deliberately whipped up by sections of the Protestant bourgeoisie and its representatives in order to prevent too great a diminution of the dominant position they have historically enjoyed in the North.

The sticking points in negotiations have included the form and responsibilities of the Justice Ministry, its relations with the other departments, the person of the first justice minister and the timetable for transfer. But the most heated issue has centred on the DUP's demand for the winding-up of the Parades Commission, which presently governs the ability of the 35,000 members of the Protestant Orange Order to march along contentious routes through Catholic nationalist areas. The commission has the power to ban marches deemed to be provocative. Route, regalia and behavioural restrictions can also be imposed and the Unionists want its replacement with some form of localised determination.

The DUP must be seen to take a hard-line stand because, since coming to power, it has haemorrhaged support. It has lost ground to both the pro-power-sharing Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which it replaced in power, and the anti-power sharing Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV)—which has assumed the oppositionist role once occupied by the DUP before its former leader, the Reverend Ian Paisley, was persuaded to endorse the Assembly. The most recent election put all three parties on a similar level of support—the

DUP with 18 percent, the UUP at 17 percent and the TUV at 14 percent. Were an election to be held tomorrow, the most likely winner would be Sinn Fein, which, as the largest party, would have the right to hold the first minister position.

The Orange Order retains a powerful influence in Unionist circles and includes many members of all three parties. It offered its own support for the transfer of policing only if the Parades Commission was to be abolished and replaced with some form of "local" arrangement.

The DUP has repeatedly stressed that an agreement is close and downplayed divisions. But it has also said that even in the event of an agreement it would "consult" the public and that the transfer of police powers can only happen when there is "community confidence."

The Conservatives have responded to the worsening crisis within the Unionist bourgeoisie with an attempt, led by the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary Owen Paterson, to negotiate a possible merger of the DUP and UUP with the Conservative Party. Secret talks, held at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, on January 16 and 17 while negotiations on policing were ongoing, outlined a three-point set of principles for merger—non-sectarianism, making the Northern Ireland Assembly and the executive work, and upholding power-sharing with nationalists. They were hosted by the Unionist former cabinet minister, the Marquess of Salisbury. Party leader David Cameron denied that the talks took place, but the Unionists contradicted him only days later.

The Labour government, faced with the possible shipwreck of such a key political initiative, is publicly taking a firm position against the DUP. Prime Minister Gordon Brown told UUP leader Sir Reg Empey in a telephone call that, rather than suspension, fresh elections to the Assembly will be called if the executive falls due to a failure to agree a policing and justice transfer. Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward last night warned that negotiations were "on the edge" of success or failure.



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