

Power sharing in Northern Ireland threatened with collapse

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Northern Ireland's First Minister Peter Robinson met with British Prime Minister David Cameron on Tuesday in a bid to avert the collapse of power sharing at Stormont.

His request for a meeting came after a motion by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was rejected by the other parties in the Stormont executive. Following his meeting with Cameron, Robinson expressed the hope that emergency talks between the parties in Northern Ireland would begin early next week.

The immediate trigger for the crisis was the statement by the head of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), George Hamilton, that members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) were involved in the murder two weeks ago of Brian McGuigan in Belfast. McGuigan was a one-time IRA member who had fallen out with former IRA leader Jock Davidson, who was murdered three months ago. Some have accused McGuigan of involvement in the killing of Davidson.

The PSNI statement did not allege that the IRA had ordered the killing. The chief has denied having any evidence that the IRA has committed terrorist acts. Officially, the IRA abandoned the armed struggle following the decommissioning of its weapons in 2005 and the acceptance by Sinn Féin of a power-sharing agreement with the hard-line unionist DUP in 2007.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) seized on PSNI chief Hamilton's claim to announce the withdrawal of its one minister from the Stormont executive, the five-party coalition that governs the territory.

DUP leader Robinson declared that when the assembly met again on September 7, it could not be "business as usual." He told the *Irish Times*, "If the prime minister refuses to suspend the Assembly we will take unilateral action."

Demands have been raised from within the DUP for the reestablishment of the Independent Monitoring Commission, a body created to oversee the activities of paramilitary organisations immediately after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. It ceased work in 2010.

The British government led talks to negotiate the Stormont House Agreement last year, which it hoped would enable the Stormont administration to press ahead with an assault on the public sector. It agreed to the extension of corporation tax varying powers in 2017 as a mechanism to increase competition for investment. The Cameron government is thus keen to avert a collapse of power sharing.

"The prime minister recognised the gravity of the current situation and the need to rebuild trust and confidence in the political process in Northern Ireland," Downing Street said in a written statement.

Speaking on Tuesday, Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny suggested that the Irish government would support suspending the activities of the Northern Ireland executive temporarily to facilitate talks, stating, "the executive will not sit in September."

Robinson sharply criticised the UUP's decision to leave the executive, attacking leader Mike Nesbitt for putting party political considerations ahead of representing Northern Ireland. In a *Belfast Telegraph* piece, he rebuked the party for taking a decision based on "political expediency." Robinson wrote, "Punishing your own community for the wrongs of others and rendering yourself irrelevant is hardly a brave, bold or sound strategy. Having fled dramatically, the Ulster Unionist Party has taken the pressure off republicans."

Playing to his hard-line unionist supporters, Robinson stoked sectarian divisions, continuing, "Whatever we do we must not allow republicans who precipitated the crisis to end up benefiting from it. It should be

republicans and not unionists who pay the price for the misbehaviour of the IRA.”

Robinson’s attempt to posture as a democrat and defender of the rule of law is absurd, given the close ties between the DUP and loyalist paramilitary groups that collaborated closely with Britain during the “Troubles.”

The latest crisis proves once again the rottenness of the structures put in place by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Far from overcoming sectarian divisions, it established a governmental system that enshrined these in law, with every party compelled to designate itself as unionist (Protestant) or nationalist (Catholic).

This reactionary separation has been enforced throughout society under conditions of declining budgets for critical public services and welfare. Both the Republican and Unionist parties consider the encouragement and manipulation of these divisions essential in facilitating the intensification of their assault on workers and opening up Northern Ireland to global investors.

Even before Hamilton’s statement, Stormont was in a deepening crisis due to the failure of the parties to implement the House Agreement.

Although Sinn Fein and the other nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, initially accepted the deal, they reversed their position in March on the portion on welfare reform. In the lead-up to May’s general election, Sinn Fein was determined to strike an anti-austerity pose, even though it has implemented several rounds of spending cuts in alliance with the DUP over recent years. It asserted that insufficient resources were being made available to help those affected by welfare cuts.

The furore over the McGuigan murder provides an ideal opportunity for the DUP to intensify its pressure on Sinn Fein to get back on board with Stormont House. High-level talks have been on-going over the summer, with DUP officials warning of a £600 million black hole in Stormont’s budget if a deal is not reached.

Sinn Fein has rejected the claim of IRA involvement in the McGuigan murder, with President Gerry Adams insisting that the organisation “left the stage” in 2005. A similar message was delivered by Sinn Fein’s Gerry Kelly, who defended the divisive power sharing

arrangement, stating, “This is an attempt to punish a section of a community for the actions of a few criminals. Let me be clear the days of exclusion and discrimination are over and they aren’t coming back.”

The possibility remains that power sharing could collapse, resulting in direct rule from London for the fifth time since 1999. Robinson not only is at odds with the UUP over remaining within the Stormont executive, but also confronts elements within his own party that favour breaking from the Sinn Fein coalition. Ahead of local elections next year, these forces may push for a break to boost their credentials among hard-line voters.

Sinn Fein deputy leader Martin McGuinness issued a warning of further escalation, declaring that a DUP decision to leave the executive would create a leadership “vacuum” and the “very real prospect of an increase in violence on our streets.”

The persistence of the most reactionary forms of sectarian politics in Northern Ireland, nearly two decades after the conclusion of a so-called “peace” agreement, points to the urgent need for a united offensive by the working class based on a socialist and internationalist programme to sweep away the artificial divisions fostered by the existing political institutions.



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