

Northern Ireland power sharing agreement threatened after First Minister resigns

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Britain's Conservative government is seeking to set up talks between unionist and republican parties in Northern Ireland to avert the growing threat of the collapse of power-sharing at Stormont.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers held separate discussions with the leaders of the main political parties in Belfast Wednesday.

A day earlier she delivered a statement to the House of Commons indicating her support for the creation of a new monitoring mechanism for paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

Describing the situation in Northern Ireland as "very grave," Villiers stated, "Serious consideration needs to be given to whether the time is right to re-establish a body along the lines of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC)."

The IMC completed its work in 2011, having overseen the decommissioning of Irish Republican Army (IRA) weapons in 2005 and the winding up of the organisation's military structures. It was led by international security experts, including former CIA operatives.

Villiers' proposal was welcomed by Republic of Ireland Foreign Minister Charlie Flanagan, who has been heavily involved in bilateral talks with the Northern Irish parties. He stated that convening roundtable talks involving all parties was the "only manner in which we are going to find a resolution to the current impasse."

The current crisis erupted last month in the wake of an assessment by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) that current members of the IRA were involved in the murders of two alleged former IRA gunmen, Jock Davison and Kevin McGuigan. Davison was shot May 5 in Belfast. McGuigan was killed, supposedly in retaliation, on August 12.

The PSNI said there was no evidence to suggest that the killing was ordered by the IRA, but the unionist parties seized on the revelation to attack Sinn Fein for denying

the continued existence of the IRA paramilitary organisation and to pose as defenders of peace and democracy. McGuigan's killing in particular was cited as proof that the IRA continues to exist and hold weapons.

Last week, the crisis intensified when Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader and First Minister Peter Robinson announced he was standing aside from his governmental post. Another three DUP ministers walked out of the Northern Ireland executive, leaving DUP Finance Minister Arlene Foster to serve as acting First Minister.

Robinson's decision was triggered by the as yet unexplained arrest of senior Sinn Fein figure Bobby Storey on September 9. Storey was detained for 24 hours by the PSNI along with two other republicans before being released without charge. He later alleged that no evidence or intelligence accusing him of a crime was presented during his detention.

Even Peter Hain, Northern Ireland secretary in the former British Labour government of Tony Blair, criticised the provocative character of the PSNI's arrest of Storey. "Arresting a chairman of Sinn Fein, as opposed to somebody involved in criminal activity, is very serious and was bound to cause the repercussions that it did amongst the unionist community," Hain told the BBC Tuesday.

Robinson subsequently announced that the DUP ministers would be renominated to their positions each week, after which they will promptly resign, to avoid the vacant posts being assumed by representatives of Sinn Fein or the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

Prior to stepping aside, Robinson sought to get agreement with the Stormont assembly to suspend normal business while talks took place between the parties, but this failed to secure the necessary backing.

The efforts by the unionist parties to paint Sinn Fein as untrustworthy and opponents of power sharing are absurd,

not least because they themselves have close ties with loyalist paramilitary groups who collaborated with the British state in its counter-insurgency operations during the Troubles. These outfits, no less than the remnants of the IRA and other republican groups, have their own organised crime activities and seek to poison political life with sectarianism.

Moreover, Sinn Fein has made its peace with British imperialism, symbolised most recently by its deputy leader Martin McGuinness toasting the queen and dining at a royal banquet in London last year.

While both unionists and republicans have sought to exploit the crisis to whip up sectarian divisions, political leaders are keen to reach a deal enabling them to press ahead with their combined attacks on working people and moves to open up Northern Ireland to global investment.

Above all, they are determined to uphold the reactionary power-sharing institutions, established on the basis of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which have overseen the deepening of sectarian divisions in working class communities across Northern Ireland.

At a press conference on Sunday to discuss his arrest, Storey attacked the unionist parties for endangering the institutions of power-sharing by their “disgraceful” behaviour, while Sinn Fein Deputy President Martin McGuinness declared his determination to reach a deal with the DUP to put the Stormont executive back to work.

Although he avoided pinning the blame on anyone in particular, McGuinness raised the possibility that the murders of Davison and McGuigan were carried out by Sinn Fein’s opponents. “It certainly wasn’t our agenda, it wasn’t Sinn Fein’s agenda, it wasn’t the Sinn Fein peace strategy agenda, and in my opinion it wasn’t Peter Robinson’s agenda,” McGuinness stated. “So I think serious questions have to be asked about whose agenda was served by those murders, particularly as we all know that the prospect that agents were involved, people who are hostile to the peace process, who are hostile to Sinn Fein’s involvement in the political institutions.”

McGuinness called for the convening of talks without any preconditions. Otherwise, he said that the next step would be the calling of fresh elections to the Stormont assembly, which he could provoke by stepping down from his position as deputy first minister.

Villiers told parliament that it was necessary for politicians from all parties to come together and find a solution that included full adoption of the Stormont House agreement. The deal included an agreement on the implementation of the British government’s attacks on

social welfare in Northern Ireland, as well as a commitment by London to extend corporation tax powers to Stormont for the beginning of the 2017-18 fiscal year.

“Without welfare reform and steps to tackle in-year budget pressures, there is a real danger that executive departments could start running out of money,” Villiers warned.

Both republican and unionist parties see the slashing of corporate tax rates as essential to their joint strategy of transforming Northern Ireland into a cheap labour platform capable of competing with the Republic of Ireland to the south. In the Republic, business tax rates are set at 12.5 percent and average wages have been cut by 14 percent since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008.

Although all parties initially signed up to the deal, Sinn Fein later withdrew its backing in order to boost its credentials ahead of May’s UK General Election. Sinn Fein cited its opposition to austerity and claimed that the financial figures presented to it during the talks were inaccurate. This was despite the fact that Sinn Fein has loyally imposed the austerity measures of successive British governments in its position in the Northern Ireland executive. The result has been deepening poverty and increased unemployment for working people.

The Conservative government in London and the unionist parties doubtless see the current furore as an ideal opportunity to compel Sinn Fein to drop its pose of opposition to the latest round of welfare cuts. The DUP are also likely to be seeking to take advantage of the Conservative’s narrow majority to offer support for measures on which the Cameron government is viewed as likely to face defeat.



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