

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article317>



Ireland

Goodbye to Good Friday

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV346 - December 2002 -

Publication date: Saturday 14 December 2002

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The history books will undoubtedly list the collapse of the current version of the Good Friday agreement as stemming from the British raid on Sinn Fein's Stormont offices on 4th October. The history books will be wrong. The collapse occurred on September 16th with the decision of the Ulster Unionist Party to pull the plug on a number of the institutions of the Good Friday agreement and force Sinn Fein out of office. The raid brings much worse news for Sinn Fein. The pipe dream that the British would reward them and punish unionism for the crisis is just as false as their other illusion that the forces of Irish capital would stand shoulder to shoulder with them in their hour of need. To add insult to injury big brother, in the shape of George Bush, immediately endorsed the call by the British for the IRA to disarm.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/28_adams.jpg]

The Stormont raid has however a significance all of its own. The police raid had all the symbolism of jackboot rule. It was a travesty of democracy, indicating the harsh reality of British rule behind all the pretences of the Stormont assembly. It's only purpose was to pull the plug on the assembly, while making it clear that the republicans will have to concede even more to earn a return of their ministerial seats. Howls about background IRA activity are neither here or there. The disbandment of the IRA was not a condition of the Good Friday agreement - now for the unionists, British, and Sinn Fein's erstwhile friends in Dublin - it is.

This time it's for real. After a whole string of crises which have in fact been a permanent feature of the unstable settlement in Ireland the reactionary offensive by the unionists has guaranteed that the Good Friday agreement, in its present form, will not survive into 2003. In a pattern repeated over and over again during the many attempts by imperialism to settle the Irish question, the trickle of unionist opposition has become a flood, the flood has become a torrent and now the unionist leadership has effectively changed. Following the victory of dissident Geoffrey Donaldson at the Unionist council meeting of the 21st September, supporters of the unionist leader, David Trimble, are being deselected at constituency meetings and it was quite clear that the unionists would pull the plug on major structural elements of the Good Friday agreement in January. At the September meeting the party agreed to withdraw from the Stormont executive if the IRA had not effectively disbanded by January. This may not be enough to save the unionist leadership. Polls indicate that Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party are likely to overtake the Ulster Unionists in 2003 and become the major unionist party.

The standard model

There is a standard explanation for this pattern within unionist politics. That is that unionism is split into reactionaries and progressives. Fear spread by the reactionaries or 'provocation' from nationalists tilts the issue under discussion towards the reactionaries. All the other forces in society, from the British Government in Sinn Fein, must join together to support the progressives.

Sinn Fein holds a left version of this theory. They demand that the Unionists find a leader - a De Klerk - who will represent their true interests and fully support the Good Friday deal. They accuse 'securocrats' in the state forces and civil service of blocking the real interests of Britain - to bring peace to Ireland. The nationalist family and US imperialism must ensure that there is no backsliding by the unionists and British.

The truth is rather more complex. There has never been a moderate wing to unionism in this process. The so-called

moderates were led by David Trimble, formerly a leader of the semi-fascist 'Vanguard' organisation, 'hero' of Drumcree after leading a triumphal march through the Nationalist Geravaghy Rd a few years ago. More recently he was strutting his stuff in East Belfast, standing in front of a besieged Short Strand and accusing the nationalists within of responsibility for the sectarian attacks launched upon them. Trimble's favourite tactic when under attack from the right is to immediately throw himself in front of the reactionaries, adopt their demands and lead them forward.

This tactic has led the Trimble wing, already composed of sectarians and reactionaries, to move steadily to the right and become more strident and absolutist in their demands for an unconditional Republican surrender. However at the same time the opposition has moderated its demands. Trimble's arch-rival, Donaldson, has never demanded the scrapping of the Good Friday agreement and has on occasions stressed his support for it. The DUP, once committed to the smashing of the deal, now want it amended to exclude Sinn Fein.

Goodbye to Sinn Fein

This can all be predicted from the deal. What the Good Friday agreement offered in effect is a sectarian structure in which each group is given equal sectarian rights. Following its publication an academic think tank that advises the British government pointed out that it could not possibly work. There would be no point in equality of sectarian rights. One group would have to be dominant to ensure stability.

The unionists agree and have mounted a vicious and violent campaign, on and off the streets, to ensure that the agreement is modified to recognise their dominant sectarian privilege.

Holy Cross

Perhaps the key event in that offensive was the raw intimidation of Catholic schoolchildren by loyalist paramilitaries at the Holy Cross primary school in Ardoyne. Rather than meeting with the condemnation of 'moderate' unionism the unionist political organizations were quick to justify the attacks and advance the sectarian demands for apartheid - with Catholic families to be locked in ghettos and refused homes in 'Protestant' areas. A loyalist commission was set up involving the sectarian gangsters and leading advisors to the Unionist leader Trimble. Although the loyalist campaign involved a constant barrage of armed attacks and a number of brutal sectarian killings the politicians felt no need to keep their distance. One of its more striking statements from the commission was a 'no first strike' statement - this meant that the random sectarian killing of Catholics could be justified as long as the killers could point to some imagined provocation that preceded it.

In fact the unionist politicians now openly bid to outdo each other in their open support for raw sectarianism. David Trimble issued a statement in September accusing the nationalist victims of the loyalist violence of responsibility for the violence. He was quickly outdone by Peter Robinson, a government minister representing the Paisleyite Democratic unionist party. Robinson was interviewed by police after stopping traffic on the main road into East Belfast while the loyalist sectarians gathered for a street party to celebrate the imprisoning of the nationalist population behind a series of 'peace' walls. Needless to say, the walls were built by the British.

â€˜Progressive' unionism

The sectarian unionist offensive knocks away one major element of the peace process - the assumption that there was within unionism a 'progressive' wing anxious to build a new society in the North of Ireland. In reality the unionists have behaved as any sober analysis would have suggested - pocketing the massive gains for them built into the Good Friday agreement and pushing constantly to move it to the right and make it more sectarian. The difference between Trimble and his critics has been that he has been anxious to retain all the structures of the agreement while forcing the British to amend it, while his opponents are happy to collapse the executive in the expectation that what will emerge will be more to their liking.

It is Trimble's opponents who had it right. Again it was the Holy Cross attacks that clarified British policy. Initial horror at the Loyalist bombing of schoolchildren was instantly replaced by a definition of the situation as 'community conflict'. The role of the 'reformed' RUC/PSNI was to force the parents and children to run a gauntlet of sectarian hate and demand that the parents negotiate with their tormentors. The eventual outcome of this policy of managing 'community conflict' is that the unionist demands for apartheid were met and Holy Cross school faces closure, under siege and without any genuine protection from state forces.

Appeasement

The desire to appease loyalism was far from local. In a major speech following Holy Cross British secretary of state Reid announced that the Good Friday Agreement had made the North of Ireland 'a cold house for Unionists'. The intent was clear. The agreement had to be bent further to the right and the republicans had to make further concessions. British Prime minister Blair issued a statement blaming Sinn Fein for the violence.

Reid's speech was followed by a wave of sectarian attack and killings from the loyalist gangs. Wave after wave of sectarians openly attacked Catholic areas while the RUC/PSNI looked on. The new Chief constable, Hugh Orde, announced blandly that the police were unable to act without the full support of the community - in other words, if Sinn Fein wanted protection they would have to sign up to the new police boards. Days later the Chief constable announced that the level of violence was such that he would have to retain the almost exclusively Protestant RUC reserve that was slated for disbandment under the Patten proposals on the police. At the same time the British intensified a long-standing policy of encouraging moderates within the loyalist sectarian gangs. Unfortunately the gangs had moved so far to the right that the moderates were now 'Mad Dog' Johnny Adair and his henchmen. Not only did they keep up sectarian killings while talking to the British, they followed up with a full-scale loyalist feud.

Torrent of reaction

By this stage the wave of reaction had become a torrent. Preparations were made by the Sinn Fein leadership to sign up to the new police boards, with a statement from leading figure Mitchell McLoughlin that the British had accepted many of their demands for reform but, given the level of police involvement in the sectarian attacks, this was leading to fist-fights at local Sinn Fein meetings. The leadership split the difference yet again - announcing that the main problem with the policing boards was that many of their members were unable to join because of convictions they had gained during their period of struggle against the British.

It was far too late. Trimble's policy of squeezing them until they bled inside the agreement was replaced at the September meeting of the Unionist council with a decision to collapse elements of the Good Friday structure and force them out.

Analysis

Sinn Fein's analysis of the October 4th raid at Stormont is quite accurate. The arrival of an army of RUC members at their Stormont offices and the arrest of chief administrator Denis Donaldson was not an investigation into allegations that they spied on the British administration - something that the unionists have done routinely throughout the troubles - it was a stunt to establish that it was they, Sinn Fein, who are to blame for the British suspension of elements of the local government and it is they who will have to make further concessions in the next round of discussions.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/29_derry_mural.jpg]

One of Derry's Bogside murals supporting the IRA

The problem for Sinn Fein is that it is not possible to blame this on low-level servants of the British state acting against the British interest. This is the state itself declaring its interest in the preservation of the sectarian unionist organisations as the basis for its rule in Ireland. The nationalist family, in Sinn Fein's eyes the bulwark against any backsliding by the British, stood alongside the British and the US in effectively demanding the disbandment of the IRA and the local representatives of Irish capital, the SDLP, supported the proposals to abandon the Patten reforms of the RUC. The fact that Dublin widely publicised the charge that a group, arrested in Bray and claimed to be planning a robbery were IRA members is a strong indication of the pressure the republicans are under and the total failure of their analysis.

The next period will be grim. Tony Blair set the tone in a major speech in which he demanded the absolute surrender of the IRA. What was even more interesting than the threats to the republicans was the carrot he held out to their leadership. Capitulation would ensure a stable Northern Ireland - precisely what the Provisional IRA was set up to prevent! The British and the Unionists are now able to bank all the gains that they have made from the Good Friday agreement. Some of the sectarian structures set up will be preserved. The current hysteria by Dublin and the SDLP is an acknowledgement that only the immediate disbandment of the IRA would be enough to prevent the complete collapse of the existing agreement. This is an impossible demand for the Sinn Fein leadership to meet, at least on any short time-scale. The upshot will be a re-negotiation of the agreement either explicitly or implicitly around the core demands of unionism. These have nothing to do with the IRA. The main demand is for superior sectarian rights - a demand that can be achieved either by the exclusion of Sinn Fein and the retention of an SDLP rump within the existing structures or by changing the structures to retain an inner core of government for Unionism alone. In either case the RUC must remain their private army and any pretence that at some time in the future it will be made up of equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants must be brought quickly to an end.

The response of the Sinn Fein leadership has been pathetic. They can describe what is happening easily enough - they are simply unable to acknowledge who is doing it. They call upon the unionists to be the unionists of their imagination rather than the unionists of reality. They call on the British to protect the agreement as the British tear it up in front of their eyes. Mitchell McLoughlin announces that the way forward is nationalist unity - as nationalist Ireland turns as one to demand the disbandment of the IRA. RUC chief Hugh Orde and Secretary of state Reid explain that the nature of the Stormont raid was a terrible mistake - and Gerry Adams thanks them for their gracious response! He responds to demands for IRA disbandment by saying that he supports the call! In statement after statement the Republican leadership made it clear that nothing will break them from the Good Friday agreement - plan B is to do plan A all over again even while plan A is in tatters!

The republican response indicates the extent to which the British remain in command of the situation. However in the long run this is a major setback. The Good Friday agreement involved the complete capitulation of the republican resistance. The British and their allies had massive popular support. They failed to capitalise on this and an attempt to put together a more reactionary version of the current settlement will have a weaker base and be even less stable. Even now there is a sharp taste of dissatisfaction in the republicans working-class base in the North of Ireland. It will take some time for the working class supporters of Sinn Fein to walk away. It will take longer for them to leave behind

Goodbye to Good Friday

the republican opposition who simply want to roll back the film to the situation that led to republican defeat. However long it takes there is nowhere else to go. There is nothing in the Good Friday agreement - Mark I or Mark II - for the working class but imprisonment in a sectarian hell. However unpalatable the vision that faces the workers, it is at least a vision of the real world - not a republican pipe dream where Irish capitalism and British and US imperialism combine to bring justice and peace to Ireland!