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Ireland

# The New Stormont regime in the North of Ireland

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**A local cartoonist, Ian Knox, summed up the May 8th re-opening of the Stormont executive in the North of Ireland as the coronation of the sectarian bigot Ian Paisley, representing Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin as his consort. It was a deadly accurate satire.**

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/PaisleyMcGuin.jpg>]

**Paisley and McGuinness share a joke.**

Tony Blair and [Taoiseach](#) Bertie Ahern led a deputation of B-list politicians from Europe and the US to the coronation, each outdoing the other in the use of cliché. The media played their part too, adopting the reverential terms reserved for royal weddings to describe the marriage of the loyalist [DUP](#) and the former republican movement, and supplying about the same level of analysis. Only the bravest reporters had the nerve to remind us that the same experiment had been tried 9 years before, with a great deal more support and in much more auspicious circumstances.

However it is not the ballyhoo and razamatazz that will determine the future of the new [Stormont](#). It is the political foundations on which the settlement rests. Even at this late stage most people are unaware of the details of this political programme – in fact many details remain unknown, the product of secret diplomacy.

The new Stormont rests on a tripod. The three legs are: The continuation of British rule in Ireland and the denial of democracy. The restructuring of sectarian privilege and the preservation in a modified form of the original basis of the Northern state – ‘a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people’. Finally the new society is to be established by a reactionary social and economic offensive designed to smash the working class.

Any description of the new structures would be incomplete if we did not take into account one other crucial dimension – the frantic and absolute support of the Irish bourgeoisie for the new order, tail-ended by the former republicans of [Sinn Féin](#).

## British rule

Sinn Féin has successfully presented ‘local democracy’ as the alternative to British rule. This is an absolute falsehood. The Stormont parliament, rather than direct rule by British ministers, is the preferred method of British rule, the goal of British policy over more than 3 decades. Britain has been able to, and remains able to, turn off the switch at any time. It has dissolved and re-established the local administration on a whole series of occasions, rejigging rules, procedures, the conditions under which the republicans can enter and the balance of power within the chamber. The budget has been worked out in detail for the next ten years. Any local wriggle room in this comic-opera assembly, with over 100 Members of the Legislative Assembly and a raft of ministers to rule a population no bigger than that of a small city, is negated by the fact that all decisions will be decided beforehand in behind the scenes deals between Sinn Féin and the [Paisleyites](#).

## Sectarian privilege

The programme of the old Stormont parliament, the programme that led to the explosion of the troubles, was for sectarian privilege for Protestants, with heavy discrimination against Catholics and a Protestant militia and a legal

system that negated democratic rights. The British solution, summed up in the [Good Friday agreement](#), was to provide for a sectarian division of rights. There were no democratic rights, instead the groups had supposedly equal communal rights as Catholic and Protestant. It was a solution bound to fail. In a sectarian setup one group has to be clearly top dog. The agreement led to a shift to the right within unionism and a series of accommodations by Britain to meet the bigots demands, leading finally to the collapse of the Good Friday agreement and its replacement by the [St. Andrews](#) schema.

The new assembly rests on total and absolute surrender by the republican movement. Their arms are gone, their movement largely disbanded and they have been forced to give absolute support to the sectarian state and to the judiciary and state forces. The new arrangement shifts dramatically towards Unionist supremacy, with no requirement on unionists to support the joint leadership, with each ministry countered with a scrutinizing committee and the unionist majority able to block all decisions. The republicans are left with a veto over the most extreme sectarian decisions – a very thin one, given their desperation to be in power.

At the same time concessions to the Unionists have inserted sectarian privilege at every level of society. The loyalist armed groups, still armed and still involved in sectarian intimidation, are subsidised by the state and integrated into civic society, being represented on the policing boards and a whole series of unelected committees. The housing authorities offer houses to Protestants in North Belfast at knock-down prices to ‘preserve the Protestant character of the area’ (the site of the intimidation of the children of Holy Cross school). £30 million is reserved in the Health service for Protestant illness.

The Orange order, still openly celebrating sectarian murder at its demonstrations, is free to intimidate while Sinn Féin police the districts it intimidates. In the last area it has been restricted, the Garvaghy road, the chair of the residents committee Breandan MacCionnaith has just resigned from Sinn Féin – a clear indication that the last restriction is to go. The supposedly reformed police openly reject inquiry findings of their involvement in sectarian murder, boycott the Ombudswoman’s office and call for an end to all investigations of their bloody past. A special victims commissioner has been appointed to establish that it was republican aggression that was responsible for the troubles and to shower funds on former members of the police and the local militias.

For all this, the Paisleyites last demand, that they be given a red button to eventually expel the republicans and end what they consider to be a temporary arrangement, was not granted. They were however given more seats on the Privy Council, giving them automatic right to scrutinise continuing British intelligence reports on the republicans.

## Social and economic offensive

The attempt to make the North work politically is to be accompanied by attempts to make it work economically. The current setup rests heavily on public investment and employment by the British state. The plan is to rationalise and privatise in the hope of attracting significant transnational investment. In part the new dispensation is the outcome of a detailed strategic plan designed by the British treasury, the ‘Review of Public Administration’ (RPA). In part it comes from the DUP and Sinn Féin, who have very similar economic policies and who are hammering out a reactionary ‘Programme for government’ behind the scenes in committee rooms.

This combined offensive has both a social and economic element. The RPA was originally designed as a programme of rationalisation, to reduce the number of councils and unify education and library services. It was then modified to support and legitimise further sectarian division. So there are to be seven councils, three, West of the Bann, will have built in sectarian majorities for Sinn Féin. Three, East of the Bann have built-in loyalist majorities. In the background the DUP are lobbying furiously for new gerrymandered ward changes to give them control of the final council in

Belfast.

Similarly the proposal to set up a single education authority has been modified, with controlling bodies from the Catholic church and the Grammar schools bolted on. A report on rationalisation of the schools estate – the building and land in the education sector – instead of proposing comprehensive and integrated schools – proposed that the sectarian and social divisions remain and that different schools cooperate within an area – it is even proposed that schools would share the same site without the sects uniting! In the process genuine integrated schools stand to loose out, with an increasing number of starts refused funding. As already mentioned, the Health service finds itself forced to hand out Â£30 million to Protestant patients only.

As part of the RPA, the number of workers employed in the ancillary staff associated with schools and libraries will be cut sharply. Those retained will face a sharp speedup in workrate and worse working conditions. Classroom assistants and facilities for special needs will be specially affected. The decision of the new executive to delay water charges simply highlights the fact that the privatisation of the water service is well under way with 500 highly skilled jobs within the service slashed as the executive formed.

A large swathe of the Northern civil service is to be transferred to the public service, meaning that after a few years protection wages and pensions will be cut. The overall plan is to slash at least 30% off the public sector workforce and produce a low wage, business friendly environment that will attract inward investment.

By far the most enthusiastic proponents of this view are Sinn Féin. They have led the way in proposing a 12% corporation tax. The North will prosper, they argue, if the workers pay the taxes and the bosses don't. One early casualty of the southern general election was their attempt to rebadge themselves as Social Democrats, with proposals for a 5% increase in corporation tax, a tax increase for 'middle income earners' earning over 100,000 Euro and increased levels of public service. They dropped these proposals at the start of the election and now stand as a party of the right on economic issues, completely in support of the Thatcherite programme of Fianna Fail in the South and urging the extension of this rapacity to workers in the North.

The British have one final strategy for making sure that the new system beds in – using the conflict resolution principle that 'no-one should be left out.' They have poured money into community organisations run by Sinn Féin and the Loyalists. Very little reaches the communities. A 'Civic Forum' of Trade unionists, Loyalists, NGOs and the religious has been set up to advise the government as partners in the process.

## Reality

There is no doubt that the reality of the new society will come as a shock to workers. Catholic workers will find that they remain second-class citizens. Protestant workers will find that the authorities have handed over control of their areas to Loyalist 'community representatives' whom they have consistently rejected throughout the troubles. All will find themselves facing major economic cutbacks and the destruction of public services.

Support for the new order will come under strain quite quickly. The danger is that the collapse in support will be to the right and that those who loose faith in the Sinn Féin pipedream will turn to sectarian rivalry, competing with the other community, and increasingly with migrants also for increasing scarce resources.

Those who fight for a socialist alternative will have to begin now, keeping in mind a number of key principles:

## The New Stormont regime in the North of Ireland

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\* Target the British – the main purpose of Stormont is to make British rule invisible – we consistently aim demands at the real rulers and begin to reactivate a solidarity movement in Britain.

\* Oppose sectarianism – The British are building sectarianism into every nook and cranny of the six counties, with the collaboration of the majority of forces in civic society. Our aim should never be so poor as to target the bigots alone – we must expose all, North and South, who are complicit.

\* Build rank and file opposition to the economic offensive – the trade union leaderships are in partnership North and South of the border and collaborate both in the economic and political offensive.

\* Build a 32 county movement. The Irish capitalists are the most enthusiastic supporters of partition and the neoliberal offensive. The only alternative to sectarian division is our common identity as members of the Irish working class.