

SYMPATHISING ORGANISATION TO THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL IN IRELAND

# ***SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY***

DOSSIER

## **THE IRISH "PEACE PROCESS"**

**FROM HUME-ADAMS  
TO THE 1996 ELECTIONS**

## HUME - ADAMS DEAL

"Who are we to criticise other peoples sellouts?" This was the cynical off the record response of a leading republican to questions about their attitude to PLO chair Arafat's deal with Israel. Cynical - yet a great deal more realistic than many republicans supporting the Middle East deal and promoting it as a model for an Irish peace settlement.

The implication that the republican leadership are contemplating a massive retreat of their own was confirmed the following day when a joint statement by Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein and John Hume of the bourgeois Social Democratic and Labour party announced that they were sending a report of proposals for an overall peace to the Dublin Government. The text of the agreement has not been released yet, but the language of the statement and the whole progress of these talks indicates a capitulation to the Irish bourgeoisie by Sinn Fein. Talk about equality of the Republican and Loyalist traditions in the occupied North of Ireland deletes the overall responsibility of British imperialism and tears the heart out of the republican program. This bears out a long series of hints by senior military figures in the IRA that they were willing to compromise on the demand for British withdrawal - not the first time in Irish history that petty-bourgeois militarism has betrayed the programmatic justification for its own existence.

In part this is an episode in a world - wide drama. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes has left radical petty-bourgeois movements seeking some form of accomodation to imperialism. In El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Africa and Palestine various programs of accomodation have emerged. However, as truces in the class struggle are impossible this experience has been largely negative. The mass base of the movements tends to fragment and demobilise while they lose the political defence that a consistant anti-imperialist programme would provide.

It's worth remembering also that whatever sweetners imperialism has on offer have been in exchange for quite substantial material concessions by the oppressed. These movements have held governmental or semi-governmental positions and posed significant threats to their rulers. The Irish republicans represent no such threat and in any case their assimilation by bourgeois nationalism would not resolve the problems faced by British rule in Ireland. It's therefore quite unlikely that "the Irish problem" will meet even with cosmetic surgery in the near future.

In fact in the months preceding the statement the various options that might lead to direct negotiations with the Republicans have all been closed off:

### Unionist Concessions

Much time has been given over the past four years to dragging the Unionists to the conference table, but when they got there it was clear that they had no concessions to offer and no program other than the return of their sectarian parliament and the military repression of the nationalist population. The talks collapsed when they withdrew - making it clear that they had no

intention of returning. In fact polls show a large majority of the Loyalist population offering some support for the Loyalist death squads. These killings have increased and become more random and savage. A senior unionist politician, John Taylor, caused outrage when he appeared to publically condone sectarian killings, while all sections of the bourgeoisie constantly ignore evidence pointing to state collusion in the Loyalist campaign.

#### British lay down the law

The British response has been to suggest that they might impose a deal, but in fact there has been no strategic discussion within the British ruling class about detaching themselves from their mass Loyalist base in Ireland. The possibility that such a discussion might open up has receded after an informal pact which ensures that Unionist MP's will continue to vote support for an unpopular and weak Tory government in Britain.

#### Dublin intervention.

The coalition government in Dublin has hinted that it might go over the heads of the unionists and demand a direct deal with the British. Dick Sping, leader of the Labour wing of the coalition, has been especially active in suggesting this and denouncing Loyalist intransigence. In the event when he had the opportunity to put forward proposals to the British at the last meeting of the Anglo-Irish committee he failed to do so and instead backed a statement reiterating the tired old strategy of wooing the unionists to return to discussions.

#### US intervention

A delegation of U.S. politicians fueled speculation that the Clinton administration might intervene and impose order over the heads of the British. The option of international imperialist intervention is publically supported by the republican leadership despite the recent object lessons of Bosnia and Somalia. In the event the leader of the delegation spelled out what should have been patently obvious - that there was no possibility of intervention without British agreement.

So two quite contradictory mechanisms are now at work. On the one hand we have a sea change in the position of the republican movement in which they seek only some form of words from the British indicating that they do not in principle reject a united Ireland and are willing to give Sinn Fein a place at the conference table. In essence it means an abandonment of their struggle for self-determination and finally closes a chapter opened at the hunger strike.

The hunger strike gave Sinn Fein a layer of mass support and enabled it to build itself as a political party. However it was unable to adjust its programme and link with the working class and radical social layers, especially in the womens movement. This failure fed a spiral of demobilisation and gradually reinforced a petty-bourgeois orientation to the bourgeois parties like Fianna Fail at a time when they were engaged in savage assaults on the working class. It was a strategy which wiped out their electoral base in the South and limited their vote in the North to one-third of the nationalist population. Demoralisation and isolation have fueled an accelerating rightward shift. The professional left in Sinn Fein has melted away in the face of these developments leaving the

opposition confined to those who believe that more ruthless military adventures offer a way forward. There remains in republicanism a genuine layer of opposition to imperialist domination but it is clear now that they will be provided with no strategy or programme by the present leadership. Recomposition will have to come from the independent self-organisation of the working class outside the republican movement.

The other process at work is that the mass of the population have had their hopes raised by the republican proposals, only to find the pro-imperialist layers who have cried "Peace!" down the years shrinking away in horror and busily explaining that by peace they mean the total physical extermination of the republican movement. The real perpetrators of the violence, the British and their unionist henchmen stand exposed. Inevitably there will be a hardening of attitudes when the British finally officially reject the republican offer. Turning this into a new political consciousness, new forms of struggle and a new party of the working class is the task for political militants.

J. North

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## **No to Major-Reynolds! No to Hume-Adams! Self-determination and Socialism!**

On 5th October 1968 a peaceful demonstration in Derry was brutally batoned off the streets by the RUC, leaving 96 people in need of hospital treatment. Television pictures showed a bigoted and bitter police force savagely attacking a demonstration demanding no more than civil rights for British citizens. A few months later the RUC murdered two old age pensioners, Samuel Devenny and Francie McCloskey. In August 1969 the North finally exploded as loyalist mobs attacked catholic areas and the British army was sent unto the streets to take over from an exhausted and demoralised RUC. Only two years later in 1971 did the IRA kill its first British soldier. All this seems a long time ago now. The moral rightness of the civil rights campaign and the following struggle against Stormont has been buried in an avalanche of propoganda about "the men of violence" etc. and the overriding need for "peace". However the origin of the present crisis shows that the real problem today is not one of "terrorism" but the existence through partition of a state which can only survive through sectarianism and violence. If the IRA decides to end its campaign it will not be because of the overwhelming desire for "peace", nor even that it has embraced a Socialist programme which subordinates military activity to workers unity and action. It will be because British and Loyalist violence has finally defeated it.

The events of 1968 and 1969 demonstrate that the problem predates the IRA. It showed a sectarian state which divides not only workers in the North along sectarian lines but divides all Irish workers and separates British workers from a unity and sympathy with the workers of Ireland. Catholic workers remain over twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestant ones and continue to have on average a lower standard of living. Torture, internment and murder have all been employed to destroy their resistance to British rule. Protestant workers remain privileged only by comparison with Catholics and for this marginal privilege they have sold themselves to a bitter and bigoted sectarian unity with their exploiters. The whole Irish working class is divided North and South, making it that much easier for both native and foreign capitalism to foist two sectarian and exploiting states on them. Finally British workers are condemned to an alliance with their own ruling class in its denial of self-determination for the Irish people.

One of the biggest lies peddled today is that the British Government 'has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' cited as 'proof of this is the £3 billion subsidisation given every year to Northern Ireland. In fact this proves exactly the opposite. The idea that British imperialism forks out £3 billion every year out of the goodness of its heart is hilarious. While Britain certainly wants to reduce this bill, and hopes a victory against the resistance will achieve this, it is quite prepared to go on paying if it is the price for maintaining

- a minimum political stability.

When Britain sent its troops onto the streets in 1969, it did so not to protect Catholics (this lie has already been nailed by history) but to prop up the northern state which was falling apart. Britain stays in Ireland because Ireland is strategically important and their role in the North is crucial to the stability of the country as a whole. Partition is crucial as the political framework for safeguarding stable conditions for capitalist exploitation in the whole country. The very idea that the island of Ireland next door to Britain and with thousands of citizens living in Britain is of no strategic importance is laughable. At the present time and the foreseeable future Britain sees no other way to preserve these strategic interests than through direct occupation of the North.

If the real issue and the real cause of violence is the sectarian state and British occupation what can we do about it? The utter failure of republicanism has left anti-imperialists paralysed over the alternatives of continuing to support a military campaign which is increasingly isolated and incapable of delivering victory, and an almost unconditional surrender to imperialism. This is the only alternative offered by republicanism. To reject the alternative is to reject republicanism and to reject republicanism itself requires an alternative. The only alternative is revolutionary socialism. What is needed is a socialist analysis of the national question and a socialist programme to reconstruct the resistance to imperialism and build the alliances and movement that will lead to victory.

It is utterly clear that British rule in Ireland is undemocratic. Despite all the hypocritical verbiage about 'consent' being the key to any settlement, partition was imposed by Britain without the consent and against the wishes of the majority of the Irish people. It only continues with the backing of thousands of armed troops and loyalists. The only democratic solution to this oppression is the right of the Irish people to self-determination.

This simple democratic right has been obscured not only by the British and loyalists in their attempt to reinforce partition but also by the SDLP and the Southern government. Now this democratic right is to be emasculated by the loyalist veto which has been dressed up as the consent of the people of Northern Ireland'. They deliberately forget the totally artificial and sectarian nature of the state, created to reinforce the divisions in the Irish working class. Most hypocritical of all is Hume's claim that we live in a 'postnationalist age' (e.g. it doesn't matter who rules Ireland) while he simultaneously seeks to betray the struggle to British nationalism.

Why is self-determination for the Irish people the only democratic solution? It is easy to see that Britain can have no role in determining the future of the Irish people and neither are the Protestants of Ireland part of Britain, 'as British as Finchley'. Even the British have now acknowledged that: 'The British people claim for themselves the unity and independence of their state but deny it to the Irish people. The unity of British and Irish workers which socialists seek can only be achieved when this privilege is rejected by British workers and they too demand that their ruling class withdraws from Ireland.'

There is no democratic validity in the demand for self-determination for

-Northern Ireland. This is a totally artificial state created to ensure Protestant majority - in effect Protestant self-determination. This is totally sectarian, condemning Catholics in a Protestant state to continued second class citizenship. In reality it is only a demand for loyalist privilege and for Britain's continued prevention of Irish unity and independence. Only self-determination for the Irish people simultaneously rejects Britain's interference and offers the idea that both religious communities jointly determine their futures together. The prospect of such a democratic and non sectarian state has been hampered not only by Britain and loyalists but also by the Irish capitalist class which has looked to the reactionary power of the catholic church to bolster its rule.

It has also been obscured by the republican movement failure to remain true to its stated programme. While its military campaign has been directed at imperialism it has not been free of sectarianism - for example when it targets mainly Protestant towns, attacks mainly Protestant workers who service RUC bases or takes risks of civilian casualties that it would not take in Nationalist areas. More importantly it has rejected any confrontation with the 26 county state and the Irish capitalist class. This has been disastrous not just for any appeal it might have had for Protestant workers but also for any alternative it might have hoped to offer to southern workers. By proclaiming that it does not seek to undermine the southern state and actually has the same aims as the capitalist parties in the south it stands condemned for endorsing the failure that exists in the 26 county state. Extending the existing 26 county state to cover all of the island could not possibly succeed in winning southern workers to the anti-imperialist struggle. Achieving this is crucial because the last 25 years have demonstrated conclusively that a struggle against imperialism confined to the North has no possibility of succeeding. At the same time it can't extend to the southern workers if all it offers is a 32 county free state. The republican strategy of seeking to ally with Fianna Fail, the enemy of Irish workers, puts them on the wrong side of the struggle.

Here we come to the limit of any purely democratic programme restricted as it is to the demand for self-determination. Even if the republican movement reject alliances with Ireland's middle and capitalist class it would be totally incapable of mobilising Ireland's workers against imperialism. To do this would require offering an alternative to the inequality and oppression that exists in the 26 counties. Nothing in the republican idea of a 'national democracy' would do this. Only a socialist programme offers such an alternative. Only a struggle that seeks to give revolutionary leadership to the struggles of Ireland's workers offers an adequate alternative for confronting and defeating not just imperialism but Irish capitalism. In other words only in the struggle for socialism can self-determination be achieved. Only by uniting all of Ireland's workers against imperialism and capitalism can partition and the sectarian state be smashed.

The creation of an all Ireland party of the working class with this programme is absolutely necessary to achieve this. It is clear that the republican movement is as near to this as John Hume is to denouncing capitalism. Guided by such a strategy socialists and everyone opposed to imperialism have basic tasks in the current situation.

- 1 Rejection of any alliances with the SDLP and Dublin government.
- 2 Rejection of any compromise with imperialism or loyalism.
- 3 Reaffirmation of the demands for British withdrawal and self-determination for the Irish people as the only road to real peace.
- 4 The call for unity of all Ireland's workers against British rule.

In practical terms this means rejecting not only Hume-Adams and the Downing Street declaration but also reliance on a military campaign which is going nowhere. In the North it would mean a political campaign against attacks on democratic rights by Britain which will continue as the 'stick' half of British strategy to encourage acceptance of the 'carrot'. It means a campaign in defence of workers against sectarian attacks, exposing the SDLP and the trade union leadership who call for reliance on the British state. It means opposition to all deals which will be proposed to seal the 'peace process' with new sectarian structures. Finally it means rejection of sectarianism and an appeal to Protestant workers to reject loyalism on the basis of democratic and class politics.

In the South it would mean construction of a solidarity campaign with the struggle against imperialism in the North which would also target the violation of democratic rights in the 26 county state. It would mean intervening in the struggles of Ireland's workers against the austerity offensive of the Dublin government and for the defence of democratic rights of women against the catholic state and church. The culmination of such a strategy would be the creation of a party which would unite the diverse struggles of Ireland's workers and oppressed giving them the revolutionary leadership required to effect the socialist transformation required to fundamentally change the society that presently exists.

The reconstruction of a mass resistance against imperialism and the building of a revolutionary socialist party in the whole of Ireland will be no easy or sudden task. We can be confident however that neither British imperialism, the Dublin government or Hume-Adams will provide the answers to the problems facing the Irish workers. However, popular a 'peace' settlement may be in the short term it will not bring peace. The British army too was 'popular' when it first arrived onto the streets. Things did not take long to change. They will change again.

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## THE FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

### FOUR PILLARS OF REPRESSION

Faced with rabid outpourings of Unionist bigotry on the days following the publication of the framework document, British ministers repeated the same phrase over and over; "Please read the document **closely.**"

That was good advice. It was of absolutely no use against a Loyalist reaction that rejects everything but the status quo of Stormont as it once was. However a close read of the agreement makes it clear that the positive spin put on it by the republican leadership depends absolutely on no-one reading it closely.

The document maps out a strategic orientation for the London and Dublin governments. There are four planks to the strategy. None of them will act as a "stepping - stone" or a "transitional phase" to a united Ireland. In fact each of them is designed as a barrier to any real democratic settlement.

Constitutional issues [paragraphs 14 -23]

The first plank reeks of the decay of Irish nationalism. Just as the clause 4 debate in the British labour party shows that that leadership can no longer stomach even a hollow aspiration to socialism which they would never have enacted, so the eagerness with which all the parties of the Dail unite to rip out articles 2 and 3 show there is no longer room for the fake "republicanism" so long used by Irish capitalism to win support. In fact the demand for the right of self-determination which the articles were designed to placate are now condemned as irredentist and immoral. If this is what they are now they must always have been so and the whole history of the Irish national struggle is being repudiated. In practice this "green" framework document has at its core a repudiation of Irish self-determination and a willingness by all the recognised political parties in the South to apologise for ever having seemed to demand a democratic settlement to the Irish question.

"...the Irish government will introduce and support proposals for change in the Irish constitution to implement the commitments in the joint declaration. These changes... will full reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland and demonstrably be such that no territorial claim of right to jurisdiction over N.I. contrary to the will of its people is asserted." [para 21]

So the "bastard state", the "artificial statelet", the "failed political entity" is to gain formal recognition from Dublin. In any future protest

- by Northern nationalists Britain will be able to point out that the matter is purely internal.

This massive betrayal of national rights is to be "balanced" by British amendments to article 73 of the Government of Ireland act;

"...the supreme authority of the Parliament shall remain  
....undiminished over all matters and things in Northern Ireland"

Yet this is simply pious fraud. Dr. Trimble, Unionist legal expert, pointed out that this had been superseded by the Northern Ireland constitution act of 1973. Section one says;

"...Northern Ireland or any part of it cease to be part of her majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority of the people in Northern Ireland voting in a poll held for the purposes of this section."

Given that it is British guns and British money which maintain the North and that as long as they are able to maintain privileges there is no reason why the unionists should vote to give up the guns, money and privilege this section simply become a cynical manoeuvre which has allowed Britain for 20 years to claim it is defending democracy in Ireland when it is in fact thwarting that democracy.

The claims of balance thinly disguise a massive suppression of national rights by the framework document.

North - South bodies [Para 24-28]

The nationalist apologists for the framework document dismiss criticism of the constitutional deal as airy-fairy theorising. What matters, they say, is the practical and the concrete. The North - South bodies will have a real presence and will in practice be an eventual stepping-stone to a united Ireland.

A theoretic underpinning of this view is given by Sinn Fein and left groups like the SWM and Militant Labour who either privately or openly take seriously the British declaration - stated in the Downing Street declaration and reiterated in paragraph 20 of the framework document - that they "have no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland". From this point of view Britain can be trusted to disengage from Ireland without a further fight and the North-South bodies are the way to create an exit door.

Again understanding is to take a back seat. No-one explains when Britain stopped being an imperialist power, why it alone of all the powers has no interest in a neighbouring country which it dominates, when British firms and capital withdrew from Ireland, who now owns the capital infrastructure in the North and why the good Samaritan - unable to meet its aid commitment to the third world - pours billions into the North each year. Still less are they able to explain why the "independent" southern state was forced to devalue in line with the

British pound while Irish capitalist strategy was committed to maintaining parity with the rest of Europe.

The new realists push all this aside. The pragmatic reality of North - South institutions proves their case. But even this reality is unable to face any serious examination. If Britain were moving to withdrawal and the cross-border institutions were the mechanism then there should be some strategy to protect the bodies from the inevitable unionist resistance. In fact the evidence is all the other way.

"It would be for the Assembly and the Irish parliament both to operate the body and decide whether its functions should be extended"  
{John Major. Framework prologue}

It's clear the North/ South body is to be subordinate to a Unionist majority assembly stridently opposed to any formal obligation to the Dail. Even though it would have been easy to give them only nominal powers of veto, the British chose not to do this.

In fact the proposals in the framework document flow naturally from British policy since the Hunger strike. Reestablishing a six-county assembly has been a consistent policy all along. Unionism is too fragmented, weak and bigoted to serve as the sole base. The Dublin government have shown themselves willing to be co-opted and they need the cover provided by the cross-border bodies. Alongside Dublin the SDLP and the Catholic middle class they represent stand ready to aid the British. For them this is the perfect deal - no separation from British capital that ensures their comfortable life-style and some measure of exclusion from the worst excesses of the sectarian regime.

### A Six county Assembly

The great defeat for Britain in the past 25 years of struggle was the destruction of the Stormont assembly. Essentially this allowed Britain to determine the direction of Irish politics without the instability that direct involvement brings. The violence associated with partition can be controlled by native forces and presented as a conflict between the Irish. The assembly itself become a shield, deflecting attention away from the British.

The main strategic aim of the British has been and is to re-establish that shield. It's significant that this proposal is not part of the framework document - that carries only 2 pages of waffle on "structures in Northern Ireland". Attached are 9 pages of British proposals in enough detail to be transformed quickly into an act of parliament and then into actual structures. In terms of detail a modified Stormont is the only concrete proposal - and Britain will hope to win it even if the rest of the pack of cards come tumbling down.

A new assembly only makes sense if it restores unionist power. This new assembly will do so, the main concern being to limit that power sufficiently so that their bigotry does not provoke another nationalist

- uprising. Overall much less is on offer to the nationalist population - but then there is no mass movement to be placated.

Some of the control mechanisms are familiar - rolling devolution - if the unionists behave themselves they will gain new powers. New mechanisms depend on a "last chance veto by one nationalist politician on a panel of two unionists and a nationalist and on weighting of certain votes. The whole package is meant to win middle-class catholic participation, but within a context of unionist power. It offers absolutely nothing to nationalist workers and will leave unchanged the fault lines in the working class.

Significantly the token reform touted most assiduously over the past 25 years - a bill of rights - is nowhere mentioned. In fact a reference to compatibility with British structures would tend to rule it out." Instead there is to be a "Charter or Covenant" - pious wishes with no legal standing.

In line with earlier British dismissal of a Sinn Fein "clarification" question on repression there is not commitment to the repeal of repressive legislation.

#### East-West structures

The framework document contains significant new proposals strengthening and deepening the structures of the Hillsborough agreement of 1985.

Again the carrot and stick are present. Powers will move to the assembly if they behave. It is however clear that this will not amount to a withering away of intergovernmental structures - not surprising when we consider that it is the one element of British strategy which has actually worked and enabled the British to turn the tide.

Conceived after the hunger strike, the agreement enabled the British to co-opt Southern capital and greatly expand the military pressure on the IRA on both sides of the border, survive unionist protest, halt the Sinn Fein electoral threat to the SDLP and exploited Sinn Fein's confused attitude to constitutional nationalism - leading directly to the present "peace process".

Garrett Fitzgerald explains in the Irish Times [25/2/95]:

"...after the 1985 agreement the Sinn Fein share of the minority community vote was down by no fewer than 10%. Thus one of the key objectives was achieved; the danger of Sinn Fein overtaking the SDLP in popular support had been averted.....It became clear that neither the conference nor the initially controversial Maryfield secretariat posed any threat to the unionist community - though it is doubtful if that community ever realised the extent to which these new structures had a positive impact upon North-South security co-operation."

So the most successful pillar of the framework document is a system designed to militarily crush the IRA, politically isolate Sinn Fein and co-opt Dublin as a junior support for partition [Paragraph 46 re-states the relationship - Dublin can consult but Britain rules]. And Sinn Fein and a large section of the left see this as a stepping stone to a united Ireland!

The four pillars of the framework hang together. Do they constitute a solution to the Irish question? Are they the basis of a short-term settlement? The Irish Committee for a Marxist programme is certain that this in no way represents a solution. Even as a temporary solution it is extremely fragile. Amendment to articles 2 and 3 depends absolutely on them being presented as part of an overall settlement. Cross border institutions in no way represent a stepping-stone to a united Ireland and even to fulfil the limited role outlined will require a unionist support which will not be forthcoming. The new six-county assembly will face pressure from a section of the republican community and will also be a focus for the unionist far right demanding a full-blooded return to sectarian rule. Even SDLP supporters will expect substantial reform. There will be very little of that from a majority unionist assembly. In any case the end of military action will release strong pressures from within the British economy for a major "peace dividend for Britain itself. Anyone who imagines that a capitalist society that can find billions for war can find the same money to secure a peace is in for a rude shock. Both the SDLP and the Unionists will find themselves presiding over massive public service cuts.

Not only is the framework document not a solution, it is a very weak settlement that gains most of its immediate strength from the collapse of the republican programme and the present strategy and tactics of the republican leadership.

The immediate battle is a battle for ideas - an unremitting opposition to any imperialist settlement without looking back to a failed militarist strategy and outlining the only real alternative of independence and workers power. We need a party of the working class and we need it now - not when the working class as a whole realise they've been conned and begin to swing into action. Join the ICMP and help us build that party!

## Ireland - not Peace, but an imperialist offensive

Any impartial assessment of the 18-month IRA ceasefire in Ireland would conclude not with surprise that it had ended, but with wonderment that it lasted so long. Initial concessions - withdrawal of the troops from the urban areas, the opening of border roads, withdrawal of the ban on radio and TV interviews with Sinn Fein leaders - were followed by consistent demands that IRA weapons be "decommissioned". This demand had little military significance. The IRA could easily have lied about the extent of its weaponry and replaced "decommissioned" weapons with new supplies. The recent Canary Wharf bomb which ended the ceasefire was made from easily obtainable fertiliser. The decommissioning demand was essentially political - for the unconditional surrender of the republican forces.

This demand for surrender was accompanied by a whole series of provocations. The only step taken towards the release of prisoners was the restoration of remission rates that the British had earlier removed. Only a few republican prisoners were returned from England and for those that remained conditions were made harsher and more punitive. Private Lee Clegg of the Parachute regiment, convicted of the murder of a Belfast teenager, was released in circumstances which essentially endorsed the right of members of the state forces to kill with impunity. Sectarian Orange marches were forced through Catholic areas by state forces while republicans were batoned off the streets. Even the much heralded economic "peace dividend" faded away in a welter of "investment conferences" while major cuts were made in funding for community projects.

All this was necessary because the peace process was founded on one gigantic illusion - the illusion that Britain was leaving Ireland. In the run-up to the ceasefire British ministers repeatedly said that they had no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Ireland. The ICMP, Irish section of the Fourth International, stood almost alone in arguing that the British were lying and that Britain remained an imperial power with major economic and strategic interests in her oldest colony.

The formulation of British disinterest was supposed to be contained in the Downing Street declaration, jointly signed by London and Dublin just before the ceasefire. In the declaration, for the first time ever, Britain used the term self-determination in relation to Ireland. Again we were almost alone in pointing out that the term was immediately negated by enshrining a veto for the Unionist minority in the occupied area to continue the partition of the country.

Following the ceasefire London and Dublin negotiated the "Framework document" as the concrete expression of the Downing Street declaration. This made it clear that partition would remain, but by advocating a few cross-border talking shops it allowed the illusion that the proposals were a

stepping-stone to a united Ireland. Tellingly the British accompanied the publication of these woolly proposals in the occupied North with very detailed and specific proposals on the creation of a new local assembly. Just how seriously the British took the framework document, essentially the maximum programme for bourgeois nationalism, was shown when, a week after publication, political development minister Michael Ancram announced that the British would welcome fresh ideas to solve the crisis!

An insight into British strategy was given by a throwaway remark by foreign secretary Douglas Hurd after the signing of the Downing Street declaration. Asked if he thought that the republicans would buy the ceasefire he replied;

"I hardly think it matters".

The reality for the British was that their "peace process" was in fact a major imperialist offensive designed to forge a new capitalist stability and roll back all the gains of the anti-imperialist struggle. They had won from Dublin agreement in principle to support the establishment of a reinvigorated partition and in addition to rescind the historic aspiration of the majority of the Irish working class for unity by removing all claims to a united national territory from the constitution.

In addition they had greatly constrained the effects of the republican armed campaign. The difficulty in attacking state forces had led to the militarist strategy broadening the number of "soft targets" considered legitimate and a new concentration on military adventurism in England - the main effect was to demoralise republican supporters.

Further the British had built up the Loyalist death squads and these were able to strike at will in nationalist areas, carrying out a number of sectarian atrocities. The IRA had no credible defensive strategy and when they attempted to carry the fight into loyalist areas the result was civilian casualties which further weakened their support.

The British were willing to make minor concessions that would help the republican leadership in from the cold - but the price would be republican surrender as the only measure that would allow the imperialist offensive to roll on.

As the peace process ground to a halt the Clinton administration stepped in. A visit by the President helped reinforce the British line and served as a platform for the "Mitchell commission". Its report in February was linked to a "target date" for all-party talks.

In the event the commission's report was overshadowed by the British decision to sideline the report, scrap the target date, and propose elections which would have the effect of fixing in stone the outcome of the process - the return of a modified local assembly with a built-in sectarian majority.

In fact its proposals simply moved the date for an IRA surrender from before the talks to during the talks. The proposals, if put into effect, would have

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forced the disbandment of the IRA. It dismissed utterly any attempt to bring state weaponry into the equation, despite the many atrocities by these forces and their associations with the right-wing death squads. Above all the report ignores all the issues of an all-Ireland dimension. It too makes clear that a revamped partition is what is on offer.

So the ceasefire ended with two proposals on the table - one from the Mitchell commission and one from the British government. Both demanded the surrender of the IRA and both signposted a return to a modified Stormont - the old regime that ruled a web of sectarian discrimination and privilege.

The whole sorry process was helped by a sharp move to the right by the Republican leadership. They wanted out of the cul-de-sac of the militarist strategy, but their new political strategy rested on a whole series of illusions.

The first illusion was in British imperialism itself. It's quite clear that the republicans believed that Britain was preparing to withdraw from Ireland. After all, the British themselves said that they had no "selfish or strategic" interest in Ireland! Yet Sinn Fein found itself unable to sign up to to any of the proposals on which the "peace process" was based.

Alongside the illusions in British imperialism ran more general illusions in the U.S. and the E.C. In internal documents it was consistently argued that these forces would support a democratic solution in Ireland and force Britain to toe the line. In order to believe this the republican leadership had to close its eyes to the role of the U.S. as the main force for the suppression of democratic rights on a world stage, its constant invasion and manipulation of small countries and the key role that Britain has always played as American imperialism's most dependable ally.

An even more worrying indication of the republican leadership's political evolution has been their tendency to praise and look to as a model the "Peace Process" in the middle East and the role of Yasser Arafat. This praise was being repeated by Martin McGuinness only days before the ceasefire broke down.

The fact that the republicans held on as long as they did is a tribute to the greatest illusion of all - the illusion of the "nationalist family". Both publicly and in internal documents the Adams leadership put forward an alliance with bourgeois nationalism as representing an alternative weapon to the traditional militarist strategy. Unfortunately republican illusions in the Irish bourgeoisie are just as traditional and just as incorrect as their faith in militarism, with the disadvantage that this alliance immediately puts them on the same side of the barricades as the direct oppressors of the majority of the Irish working class. In fact the whole peace process was a process of watching the "nationalist family" crumble to dust. As the ceasefire drew to an end the bourgeois parties were all entering negotiations with the British proposal for a unionist assembly at the top of the agenda. The formal expression of the family - a forum meeting in Dublin over the past 18

months - produced a final report which trashed the demand for self-determination and left Sinn Fein out in the cold, unable to sign up.

Even now the leadership cling to the Irish bourgeoisie. Their latest analysis indicates that the family would have survived if it had continued to be led by the populist Fianna Fail party rather than the slightly more openly pro-imperialist Fine Gael party!

The end of the ceasefire in no way resolves the problems for republicans or ends the confusion and illusions. The bombing campaign is itself based on the assumption that Britain is willing to leave Ireland. If it is in Britain's interest as an imperial power to stay then lost trade and tourism and bills of £150 million for bomb damage will make no difference.

At the same time the Sinn Fein leadership peddle the foolish idea that the difficulties they face are due to a British tory government with a tiny majority being dependent on unionist support. They don't explain why the labour party and the British establishment as a whole would support such irresponsible behaviour or why the unionist party would vote against the government in a crucial vote. In fact leading establishment figures warned Prime minister Major not to play party politics with the Irish question. They have remained silent since, indicating that the government's stance is essentially based on the interests of British imperialism. Sinn Fein continue to make their main call for all-party talks. Again, if Britain is leaving then Sinn Fein can fight their corner within all-party talks as a minor party. If they are not then the talks will achieve nothing.

Even more worrying is the question mark over the military campaign itself. As Rory O'Bradaigh of the breakaway Republican Sinn Fein has indicated, the statement ending the ceasefire makes no mention of the traditional troops out demand and instead calls for negotiations.

All the recent remarks by the republican leadership indicate that the link between military and political action is the demand for talks. Now London and Dublin have provided a fixed date for all-party talks on June 10th - in the context of a partitionist election, with the "nationalist family" lined up with the British and Unionists in ruling out any democratic solution and with the Mitchell proposals at hand to turn the screw on the republicans at every turn.

In a familiar tactic Gerry Adams has welcomed the talks date while looking for "clarity". For many militants the outcome of the "peace process" has become all too clear. So also is the symbolism of the leader of Sinn Fein sitting with John Hume, the northern representative of bourgeois nationalism, across the table from the IRA and calling for a ceasefire.

Veteran campaigner Bernadette McAliskey has called for a Republican congress to map a new way forward. This would be an important step forward but could only be supported by the present republican leadership if they withdrew from alliances with bourgeois nationalism. Without such a U-turn Sinn Fein's position will continue to weaken - applying two

contradictory and failed strategies in the face of the most determined offensive by imperialism since the outbreak of the present troubles.

There is yet much to play for. There have been massive peace demonstrations but many have lacked the harsh pro-imperialist edge of the past. Opinion polls indicate that a majority of the population in both Ireland and Britain blame the British government for the breakdown of the ceasefire. Opposition to the return of a Stormont regime or direct Dublin support for partition is not confined to the ranks of Sinn Fein. Even to secure the reactionary settlement they propose now the British would need to force the Unionists to make some concessions to the Catholic middle class. At the moment the unionists are essentially demanding the return of "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people" and there is little sign of any real British pressure to amend this.

Marxists should continue to stand as irreconcilable opponents to the imperialist offensive, while calling for the self-organisation of the working class as the one immutable barrier to that offensive.

J McAnulty  
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February 1996

MAY 1996

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## ELECTORAL CHECK TO BRITISH PLANS

The recent elections to the new Northern Ireland assembly represent a tactical problem for the British and a triumph for the Adams leadership of Sinn Fein. However in the longer term the British have won important strategic advantages. Now the short - term setbacks and the more general problems of the conservative administration in Britain mean that we face a period of neither peace nor war.

The British began by proposing that new initiatives must have broad support. They then adopted an election strategy that only unionists supported - declaring that these would solve all problems and act as a "gateway" to all-party talks. Of course they were nothing of the sort. Even with almost half the nationalist vote and 15% of the overall vote Sinn Fein are to be excluded unless there is a new IRA ceasefire. Behind this condition lie others like the decommissioning of weapons - essentially calling for the surrender of the republican forces.

A major British aim was the creation of a new assembly. This is a mere talking shop, but it establishes the shape of the outcome the British plan - an improved partition that will be able to garner some support from the Dublin government and sections of the Catholic middle class. The new body also represents a trump card - an embryo solution that the British will be able to threaten to implement unilaterally if the Irish capitalists prove hesitant in falling into step.

Another aim was to cement the Loyalist death squads into the process as a counterweight to Sinn Fein. This was a difficult problem given their lack of support within the unionist population. The need to achieve this, to avoid anything too close to the old Stormont assembly and to restrict the political challenge they faced led to a Byzantine election system.

A single nontransferable vote for a party rather than a candidate led to election quotas for five seats per constituency. In addition a fast track gave two seats each to the top ten parties - guaranteeing the Loyalists seats. In addition the British licensed parties and independent candidates - excluding Republican Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Socialist party. So we had a democratic election confined to the area of British rule and with the administration having final say about which parties would stand.

The outcome was very revealing: A voting figure of 65% despite boycott calls showed massive illusions in the "peace process" on the part especially of nationalist workers. Yet within this vote was a major turn to Sinn Fein - their best

ever result in Northern elections. Nationalists are very angry with British obfuscation and foot-dragging. They blame them for the breakdown of the ceasefire. Rather than feeling defeated and demoralised and ready to accept whatever the British had out they have enormous expectations about a settlement that Britain will be unable to meet.

The overall message of the election is that the Irish question is far from being resolved. Britain has won major advantages but has a long way to go if it is to inflict a decisive defeat on the nationalist population.

The implied threat will be felt most sharply by bourgeois nationalism.

This was most clearly shown in West Belfast, where Sinn Fein took four of the five seats after Joe Hendron, the sitting SDLP MP, called them a sectarian and fascist organisation.

This is a major upset. Much of the dynamic of London - Dublin collaboration since the Hillsborough agreement has involved the need to suppress the Sinn Fein electoral threat to the SDLP following the hunger strikes. Now they obtain their highest vote ever.

Implicit in the vote is a serious challenge to the hegemony of the SDLP. Also it poses a threat to the Dublin government. They can only sell an agreement if they are not seen as openly selling out the Northern nationalists. Yet the framework document involves such a sell-out and goes on to deny the democratic rights of the Irish people as a whole. The role of capitalist Irish - America, represented by the involvement of US senator George Mitchell and his team, cuts much less ice than was supposed.

Unfortunately this development is innocent of any conscious revolutionary dynamic. The Sinn Fein leadership entered the election as the "peace party" explicitly to preserve the unity of the "nationalist family". Statements from leading figures in the IRA, demanding that Sinn Fein be admitted to talks, made it perfectly clear that they understood that a united Ireland would not emerge from such negotiations. Gerry Adams marked a major shift to the right when he said that Sinn Fein would accept the Mitchell principles, established by an international body sponsored by the U.S. to deal with the demand for the surrender of IRA arms, if everyone else did so also. Within Sinn Fein this is seen as tactical manoeuvring, but politically it cuts the ground from under the republican position.

The Mitchell commission swept aside the republican submissions on British death squads and refused to consider the arms held by state forces. It made a series of recommendations that not only demand the surrender of arms by the IRA but also effectively call for its disbandment.

This sort of manoeuvring, while helping to boost Sinn Fein votes, has led to internal stresses. The success of the doorstep tally was matched by difficulties in mobilising Sinn Fein members to stand as candidates or be active in the poll. The result was a purely electoralist campaign which also had presidential overtones - Gerry Adams mawkishly overprinted on an Irish flag as the main election poster.

The British have problems in other directions too. Part of their strategy has been to bring along the main bourgeois unionist party, the Ulster Unionist party [UUP] while being much less concerned about Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist party [DUP]. The election demonstrated just how reactionary a political force unionism is, while showing also how fragmented and volatile it has become. The UUP, with the demand for an IRA surrender, came top of the poll, but the DUP, with its demand for essentially the military defeat of the IRA and a return to unionist ascendancy, came a close second. The smaller fragments, like the UK unionists and the loyalist paramilitary groupings, had even more extreme positions. Only the Alliance party, with its dream of a non-sectarian unionism and some adjustments to partition did badly.

So the immediate political future is quite clear. Unionist positions are hardening and they will not agree even to reform of the existing system without substantial pressure from the British. There is no possibility of such pressure being mounted at any level by a British administration which needs unionist support in the Westminster parliament.

All this began to play itself out in the jostling for position before the all-party talks that the election gateway was supposed to open. Like the hall of mirrors the door to the talks keeps receding. It is now made clear - as if it were not clear all along - that only formal opening positions will be taken and the talks kicked into touch for September. However the talks are not waiting for the collapse of IRA determination not to surrender arms. The presence of the US means that a settlement to restabilise partition will be attempted. It will be thoroughly reactionary and will remain so whether republicans participate or not. The demand for surrender is a confession in advance that the settlement cannot be squared with the programme of republicanism or with the democratic rights of the Irish working class as a whole.

The republicans see much of this and have now adopted a longer - term strategy. They will wait for a new government in England, not dependent on unionist votes and a return of a Fianna Fail government in the 26 counties. In the meantime Sinn Fein will create more space between itself and the IRA in the hope that its electoral mandate will force the British to eventually admit them to talks.

They hold to the illusions of British disinterest and of bourgeois nationalist support for a united Ireland, that US and European imperialism can play a progressive role, to the idea that they can go back to a militarist strategy that failed and maintain a strategy of secret diplomacy that has sharply eroded their activist base.

The situation in Ireland is familiar to socialists in many areas of the world. The political offensive by imperialism far outstrips its physical impact. There is a weak and limited regroupment by the class within traditional structures but no real independent self-organisation or leadership. Given the difficulties of imperialism and the lack of any real reform on offer there will be further opportunities to regroup and rebuild.

