

John Braidwood

The British Government and the Present Face of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

The overwhelming political event of the last year or so in the UK is without doubt the ceasefire in Northern Ireland. Some commentators would argue that the never-ending Eurodebate has been dominating British politics recently. I would argue that the peace process in Northern Ireland is itself part and parcel of the ongoing Eurodebate. Now that we have a ceasefire in place the debate on Northern Ireland has shifted to speculation on the possible shape of the political settlement there and this necessarily deals with the issue of borders and sovereignty. At the heart of the Northern Irish question lies the thorny problem of sovereignty. Similarly, the concept of sovereignty also lies at the heart of the Eurodebate as the very nature of the European Union itself transcends the fundamental concept of internal borders. If Brussels is to be our master — and there has already been a large amount of derogation of sovereignty to Brussels — then the question of British or Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland, Ulster, the 6 counties, the province, the North ... call it what you will, then the problem of borders will have been transcended and it will no longer be an issue, except perhaps in people's sectarian memories.

In order to begin to make sense of what is going on in Northern Ireland today we have to first look at the major political developments of the preceding decade. An understanding of that will allow us to attempt to wrestle with the present political situation. We have two policy documents on which to work — the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the 1993 Joint Declaration also between the British and Irish governments. And not a lot else. When dealing with political science we are of course free to speculate but we must limit ourselves to the realm of concrete facts and avoid being drawn into an ill-informed guessing game of what ifs and maybes.

The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was an example of good domestic policy for both the British and Irish governments, an exercise in highly skilled statecraft which raised the debate on the future of Northern Ireland to a new level, hauling it out of the quagmire of the province's interminable internal politics and pushing it into the international arena. It has been argued that the Anglo-Irish Agreement served only the presentational advantage of the two signatories, but it did in fact set in motion a bold and controversial train of events known as the Intergovernmental Conference, itself a development from Garret FitzGerald's New Ireland Forum. Now, for the first time, the Dublin government did have a say, however small, in the affairs of the British province of Northern Ireland. This represented a solid affirmation of the long-debated "Irish Dimension" now enshrined in an international treaty between Britain and Ireland. The clear intention was to achieve some form of recognition for the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, something which the unionist ascendancy had completely failed to recognise since the partition of Ireland in 1926. Naturally the unionists reacted furiously to what they saw as the British government forcing them down the road towards Dublin — something abhorrent to unionists.

In attempting to make an assessment of current British government policy towards the province of Northern Ireland we have only one still valid policy document on which

to work. This is the pivotal, though much maligned, Joint Declaration¹ of 15 December 1993, and more commonly referred to as the Downing Street Declaration². It was reached by the British Prime Minister John Major and the then Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and all analysts of the Northern Ireland situation agree that the Declaration has to be used as the point of reference for all subsequent political developments there. There simply is no other concrete government policy document to which we can refer.

Paragraph 1 states that *"the most urgent and important issue facing the people of Ireland, North and South, and the British and Irish governments together, is to remove the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted, recognising that the absence of a lasting and satisfactory settlement of relationships between the peoples of both islands has contributed to continuing tragedy and suffering."* As a statement of intent this is excellent, as a statement of policy it would seem to be somewhat insufficient. Unfortunately even this was more than we should rightly have expected bearing in mind the failures of previous governments to achieve anything. What we can tentatively add to the debate about the Downing Street Declaration is that we in fact know very little about what it actually *means*. The Forum for Peace and Reconciliation is up and running, creating an arena for debate rather than killing. The only stumbling block to that at the moment is the continued reluctance of the unionist parties to officially join, although there have been informal contacts between them. Clearly we are now witnessing the direct consequences of that Declaration by virtue of the fact that for almost 5 months the unilateral IRA ceasefire announced on 31 August 1993 and since of course joined by the loyalist ceasefire has held, though it hasn't been without its difficulties. The shooting of postal worker Frank Kerr by an IRA gang in the course of a bungled robbery was the work of a renegade unit reluctant to give up the good life provided by the organised crime activities of the IRA. The stoic refusal of the IRA to be drawn into retaliatory action following the bombing of the Sinn Féin advice centre by Loyalists can only be praised. Never have we known such a benign IRA. What could be behind their new face?

So we see that since 1985 the British and Irish governments have been actively discussing the situation in Northern Ireland at the highest of levels. Who are the key actors in what has become known as the peace process?

For the British government there is the Prime Minister **John Major**, a man who is in the difficult position of purporting to be a unionist while being prepared to sacrifice British sovereignty for the sake of peace in Northern Ireland. More on his current political dilemma later.

For the Irish government there is Labour Party leader and coalition government foreign minister **Dick Spring**. Mr Spring has been a much more important player than his media conscious prime ministers Garret FitzGerald and Albert Reynolds.

The tireless mediator in the whole affair has always been **John Hume** MP leader of the Northern Irish SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party), a pacifist nationalist party close to the small cross-community Alliance Party. He has liased with both the British and Irish governments and he is credited with being the first politician to bite the bullet, embrace Sinn Féin and to get the political ball rolling.

There is Sinn Féin itself, the small but vocal nationalist or republican party with their highly talented media players **Martin McGuinness** and, more prominently, **Gerry Adams**. The party is the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) the well-

1. Command Paper 2442, London: HMSO, January 1994.

2. It acquired this name due to the fact that negotiations took place in Downing Street from where the two premiers made their joint announcement. For posterity it perhaps gives too much credit to the British when it is the Irish who are making most of the running with their offer to consider constitutional change in order to bring about a political solution to The Troubles.

known and highly efficient terrorist organisation.

The United States has, perhaps surprisingly, been very much involved in the peace process. There is a powerful Irish American lobby in the US congress, some 40 million Americans claim Irish ancestry (which is quite impressive when you consider that the total population of Ireland is a mere 5 million). The Americans went out of their way to bypass the Special Relationship with Britain (a relationship which largely exists only in the minds of the British Conservative Party) in order to grant visas to a number of prominent nationalists and unionists. America provided a forum for these people when they had been denied one by the British government. Until the end of last year members of what the British government termed terror organisations or their spokespersons were denied access to the media. This had also been the case in the Republic of Ireland.

And there is **Gusty Spence**. He is a convicted loyalist terrorist turned peacemaker who has been called the godfather of the loyalists. It was Gusty Spence who appeared at the press conference to announce in the name of the Combined Loyalist Military Command the ceasefire of the loyalist terror organisations in October 1994. Yet again this was a reaction to an IRA move. It has been argued by some political commentators that loyalist violence has largely been reactive to IRA violence.

You may have noticed that the more mainstream unionist politicians are missing from this list of key actors in the peace process. Since 1985 they have been largely bypassed as a result of their famous intransigence and refusal to discuss the future of Northern Ireland with Sinn Féin. Therefore I do not discuss at this point the more prominent unionist politicians of the old school: Ian Paisley, James Molyneux, Peter Robinson. These are politicians who are actually on the margins of the peace process, not because they oppose peace but because of their stubborn commitment to the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland — a commitment which is far from reciprocated by the British. To the activists of the loyalist movement these are politicians who are seen as representatives of the "soft middle classes" and no longer earning the unconditional support of the working classes who make up the bulk of the unionist movement.

The present situation in Northern Ireland is not all it seems to be. There is definitely a reassessment of priorities and a jockeying for position going on which is directly connected to power politics within Northern Ireland and at Westminster. I won't be discussing here the possible future shapes that Northern Ireland could take. At this moment the door is open to a solution of the ancient troubles of Ireland. The Downing Street Declaration in effect states the obvious, but states it once and for all. This is zero option time for the terrorists in Northern Ireland. If there is a majority decision in Northern Ireland for a united Ireland, then so be it. If there is a majority decision that Northern Ireland remains within the UK, then so be it. The British government is not washing its hands of Northern Ireland, although it gladly would if it could, it is simply stating the bald facts: they don't mind how it is done but a peaceful settlement *will* be reached. Guarantees are provided to both communities — the nationalists and the unionists — that their traditions will be honoured. In effect this is a negative guarantee as it precludes any progress for either community towards their stated aspirations: for the nationalists a united Ireland, for the unionists a renewed sense of union with Britain.

So what made the IRA declare a total cessation of violence? At this point it is incredibly difficult to specify exact reasons. There seems to have been a fundamental shift in IRA/Sinn Féin thinking. Gerry Adams himself says this started at around the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. We are seeing a slow acknowledgement by the IRA that the goalposts have moved and that the rules of the game are now different. The spectre of British imperialism no longer haunts Ireland and the activities of the IRA were actually making the situation worse for the nationalist community in Northern Ireland by causing the British army to intensify its patrols and searches. (Less than two weeks ago the army ended all daylight patrols in Northern Ireland, they have already switched from steel helmets to berets, the RUC has abandoned flak jackets and officers now only carry side arms during the day. These are massive confidence building gestures

to the people of Northern Ireland that a sea change has taken place within Northern Ireland). The IRA ceasefire was very difficult for a lot of people to swallow. Some nationalists were outraged, many unionists deeply suspicious. Why now? The IRA had clearly not been defeated by the British.

It was the acknowledgement of the actual parameters of the situation in Northern Ireland by the IRA that persuaded them that the armed struggle was now over, exactly as the British government had claimed they had said in a secret exchange of messages. At present we have no clear confirmation of this, only that the two sides disagree on what may or may not have been said. It had finally dawned on the IRA and Sinn Féin that the British and their army had absolutely no desire to be in Northern Ireland and that their own campaign of terror was in fact making the British military role more permanent. The building last year of new watchtowers and fortifications by the British army in the "bandit country" of southern Ulster around Crossmaglen can now be seen as a tactical move to show the terrorists that the army was going nowhere until major concessions had been given by the terrorists. At the time this construction work was considered insensitive and counter productive.

Inherent in this change in the thinking of the IRA is the acknowledgement that it is not altogether clear that the majority of Catholics in the North really want unity with the South. The South has meanwhile indicated that it would be happy to have a referendum on the issue in the South. According to Irish political analysts the response would be a resounding "NO THANKS!" from the people of the South if asked if they want union with the North. The IRA and Sinn Féin are now coming to terms with the concept of "consent to change" as being the way forward in Northern Ireland. The two proposed referenda (one in the South and one in the North) are seen as crucial to the whole process of self determination for the people of Ireland. Not that these referenda would actually achieve any new political settlement — but they may provide the stability required to allow Northern Ireland to progress not as a part of a united Ireland, not as a part of the United Kingdom, but as part of a united Europe. They would also serve to turn the ceasefire into peace.

While it might seem to your average British news watcher that the key to the peace process is Sinn Féin this is now only partly true. It is true to say that Sinn Féin and IRA do hold a wild card that they can play or threaten to play at whatever time they deem fit: they can stop, slow down or derail the peace process by reactivating the campaign of violence, terror and intimidation. The IRA is, after all, still armed to the teeth. Let's just believe that they really have abandoned the armalite for the ballot box, but let's not forget either that — without their weapons — they represent a minority in Northern Ireland politics and a very tiny minority in the politics of the whole island of Ireland. Oddly the key actors in the future of Northern Ireland have become the very people largely left out of the negotiations: the unionist politicians. Of course they are crucial to any future referendum (the outcome of which is hardly in doubt anyway) but they have recently become crucial to the survival of the Conservative government in Westminster. Last week there was a vote on European Union fishing policy in the House of Commons which would have seen the government defeated had it not been for the support of, strangely, the Ulster Unionist Party. This parliamentary grouping of only 9 MPs holds the trump card in any Commons votes now. So who should keep whom sweetest? The UUP could actually bring down the government, but if it did so it could well allow the Labour Party to come to power — and the Labour Party has a very much greener agenda than the Conservatives. The end result may be that the long-awaited framework document — much feared by the Ulster unionists — may be somewhat longer coming than originally thought.