

By Lee Bruce

In the past year the rising tide of violence in Northern Ireland has lead commentators to suggest that the peace process is in terminal danger. Defence analysts question how an entrenched and complicated political puzzle like Northern Ireland can be 'solved' – as if to assume that all conflicts can be ended provided that sage politicians are prepared to engage in rational and constructive debate. Both of these interpretations should be questioned. Firstly, an increase in sporadic acts of sabotage and assassination from dissidents who are marginalised from power (political conflict bloodless or otherwise is all about getting your hands on the levers of power) does not mean that there will be a return to the ferocious insurgency of the 1970s and 1980s. And secondly, there needs to be a clear definition of how victory is to be understood. Resolution in Northern Ireland (or any other counter-insurgency for that matter) is not an end to all violence of any kind as this is impossible in the Hobbesian world – sink estates in England, Wales and Scotland attest to the type of racketeering, drug running and gangsterism that afflicts Belfast, South Armagh and Londonderry. Success should instead be defined as finding 'an acceptable level of violence'. And this has been achieved by British intervention in Ulster.

When the administration of Edward Heath suspended devolved government in Northern Ireland three strategic decisions were taken. Any devolved government at Stormont should include representatives from both the Unionist and Republican communities, Northern Ireland was to remain within the United Kingdom providing a majority of its citizens wanted this to be the case and the Republic of Ireland was to be induced into dropping her territorial claim to the North. Two of these criteria were met in an agreement signed at Sunningdale in 1973 (the Republic did not drop the territorial claim but recognised the Unionist right to veto reunification)[i]. Sadly, the first multi-party Executive folded in a tide of Unionist hostility manifesting itself in industrial action. Despite this setback the formula developed in the dark days of 1972 remained and became the basis of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.[ii] Britain was nothing if not remarkably consistent throughout the 'Troubles'.

Today the political framework conceived in the 1970s is more resistant and enduring than is commonly appreciated. An Executive filled with many of the protagonists from the 'Troubles' has governed Northern Ireland without collapsing in ignominy. Whilst there have been periods of disagreement, most infamously with the transfer of policing and justice,[iii] none of the political parties are advocating ending the Stormont regime. With nearly all the political parties holding at least one ministerial portfolio there is a vested self interest in prolonging the Executive in order that the trappings of power – a good case of Bushmills whiskey at Hillsborough Castle and a ministerial limousine– are enjoyed by the locals and denied to outsiders from London.

This analysis of political stability in the province might be accused of optimism. But if so, the alarmist needs to find a coherent group of activists who are prepared to collapse Stormont. They may look to the Republicans, the Unionist or the Republic of Ireland to manufacture

instability. The Republican Sinn Fein, a party previously devoted to the destruction of the British state in Ireland, are perhaps the obvious candidates. It is also within the Republican community that overt hostility to the peace process – often in the form of a defiant Tricolour or Real IRA graffiti – can be found. Doctrinally pure Republicans consider it treasonous for their leadership to be serving in an Executive that passes laws carrying the stamp of the British monarchy and question what the British have surrendered now that wasn't on the table in 1973.

However, even though there is residual hostility to Stormont and the sporadic flexing of the muscles by dissident paramilitaries, there is as yet little evidence that opponents of the peace process have substantive support or benefactors to bankroll a full-scale insurgency. The most talented Republican politicians are supportive of the Executive and need to sustain its existence if they are to continue to ascend the 'greasy pole'. Moreover, should Stormont fold, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams would endure an uncomfortable bout of questioning about what precisely their political strategy has achieved. As this would be a less than desirable state of affairs it is safe to assume – and past experience as detailed by Ed Maloney^[iv] bears out the cunning of McGuinness and Adams – that both men are able and prepared to deal in the black arts to shore up the Executive and protect their privileges. Supporters of the peace process will note with relief that there is no young Turk ready to usurp the Republican crown and in so doing bring down Stormont.

Is it possible that the Unionists could collapse power-sharing? In an article in the Belfast Telegraph^[v] the former DUP leader Lord Bannside (Rev Ian Paisley) suggested that he would 'accept' a Sinn Fein First minister if the Republicans became the largest majority party. Both the DUP and UUP are supportive of power-sharing. But these concessions mask an unease at the direction of travel. In the same article Lord Bannside pointed out that Sinn Fein did not become the largest party 'on my watch' – a clear warning to the current DUP leader and First minister Peter Robinson that letting Sinn Fein in would end his career. Moreover, a Unionist splinter group that rejects power-sharing, the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), are gaining some traction amongst the grass roots and a cursory reading of the battle between the DUP and the UUP for Unionist supremacy warns those in power to guard against complacency. Any significant gains by the TUV at the forthcoming Assembly elections in 2011 could force the DUP and UUP into demonstrating their Unionist credentials – something that may sit uneasily with Sinn Fein and the SDLP.

There are big political battles to be fought for the right to govern Ulster and a splintering of the Unionist vote could have serious ramifications for the future political composition of the province. But the leading Unionists have too much political capital invested in Stormont to let the institution die or to hand Sinn Fein the office of First minister. They hold the most seats in the Assembly, control the plum ministerial portfolios and are able to reflect on a political settlement that kicks the reunification of the island of Ireland into the long grass. Given these notable victories, the prospect of Unionists collapsing what is a favourable political structure remains negligible. The future is bright if you are of an orange persuasion.

The final point of the triangle is the Republic. Throughout the 'Troubles' the actions and territorial claims of the government in Dublin inflamed Unionist opinion and encouraged Republicans to believe that they would be supported in their quest to end British rule. In the end

the Republic was rendered impotent: politicians in the Dail may have wished to govern the North but the Irish army was so bad they had no means of asserting their claim. Unionist intransigence and the brutal reality of the Provisional IRA insurrection finally convinced Dublin that it was best to give up the claim to the North of Ireland.

So the question needs to be asked: is the Republic likely to perform a dramatic shift in policy and reassert her claim to the North? The obvious answer is no. In the 2007 elections to the Dail, Sinn Fein polled abysmally proving that they are still distrusted, not perceived as credible and unable to manufacture significant support for their vision of a re-unified socialist Ireland.[vi] Moreover, there is little evidence that the Irish army would be any more capable of holding areas in the North than they were during the 'Troubles' and the dramatic downturn in the Irish economy means this is an unprofitable moment to be indulging in Republican gestures. The Republic remains impotent on the question of Northern Ireland and behind closed doors all the other political operators recognise this.

The upsurge in violence and intractable nature of the Irish question does raise concerns that the political settlement in Northern Ireland may collapse. But before descending into alarmism two key points should be borne in mind: counter-insurgencies rarely ends in the total abandonment of violence by all sides; instead an acceptable level of violence is achieved. And alarmism risks underplaying the interest all of the politicians have in tending to, and strengthening, the political institutions of Northern Ireland. Each participant needs Stormont to succeed because without it their careers as politicians who matter are at an end. Of course the Republicans, Unionists and security chieftains will all use the rhetoric of 'crisis'. The threat of political violence is indeed a useful tool both in pushing for political concessions and as a means of funnelling money from the Exchequer – with Northern Ireland so dependent on the public sector and the bounty of EU peace funding running dry the temptation to demand special dispensation must be enormous. But the sober analyst must not be seduced into believing this fiction; for the time being the strategic decisions taken in 1972 by the Heath government continue to tie all the factions in Northern Ireland to the peace process.

Lee Bruce studied at the University of Leeds and has published a book on Northern Ireland politics: *Perfidious Albion: The Application of British Policy and Strategy in Northern Ireland, 1970-74*[vii]

[i] For a copy of the Sunningdale agreement see the CAIN website at:
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/sunningdale/agreement.htm>

[ii] For a copy of the Good Friday agreement see the CAIN website at:
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm>

[iii] Belfast Telegraph, 14 December 2009 at:
<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/northern-ireland-leaders-peter-robinson-and-mar-tin-mcguinness-in-public-clash-14597456.html>

[iv] Ed Maloney, *A secret history of the IRA* (2003)
<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Secret-History-IRA-Ed-Moloney/dp/014101041X>

[v] Belfast Telegraph, 27 July 2010, at:

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/ian-paisley-irsquod-accept-sinn-fein--in-to-p-stormont-job-14890246.html>

[vi] See the Dail election results here:

<http://electionsireland.org/results/general/30thdail/resultssummary.cfm>

[vii] Lee Bruce, *Perfidious Albion: The Application of British Policy and Strategy in Northern Ireland, 1970-74* (2009) at:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Perfidious-Albion-Application-Strategy-Northern/dp/3639109902/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1282511362&sr=1-1