

Bread and butter it wasn't

Sectarian headcount in Irish election sees Paisley triumphant

Sunday 1 April 2007, by [McANULTY John](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2007).

Emergency legislation by the British parliament this week confirmed the power-sharing deal made on Monday by the loyalist and republican leaders, Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams.

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IBELFAST — The 7th March election in the north of Ireland marked the end phase in a long period of Irish history, stretching back to the end of the republican hunger strikes of the 1980s. The decades since have seen the Irish republican movement shift from a strategy of armed struggle to an alliance with native capital (the nationalist family) and seeking a settlement with imperialism.

The settlement, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, promised "equality of the two traditions" - that there would be an equal share of community rights in the Northern colony.

Of course, that promise was illusory. Even ignoring the replacement of civil rights with community rights, the colony could not exist on an equality of sectarianism. There had to be a Unionist top dog.

The period since has been one of instability and political collapse, with the process moving steadily to the right. In October 2006 the Good Friday Agreement was replaced by the St Andrews settlement, with structural adjustments to meet unionist demands. It has now degenerated into an auction to meet the demands of the rabid sectarian Ian Paisley and his ultra-right party, the Democratic Unionist party.

The recent election opened with Sinn Fein, driven by pressure from the DUP, the British and the Dublin government, declaring active support for the police, state and judicial structures in the colony. This retreat was supposed to be matched by a DUP declaration that they would join a coalition government, but this was not forthcoming and further reactionary demands have been made by the unionists since.

The election ended in electoral triumph for Sinn Fein, who saw off a challenge from traditional republicanism and increased their vote yet again. Their triumph was eclipsed by that of the DUP, now firmly established as the majority party of unionism after unionist voters consigned the UUP,

formerly led by David Trimble, to the dustbin of history. Behind the scenes the British government still struggle to establish stability in their colony and set up a local administration, but have the satisfaction of knowing that the anti-imperialist consciousness necessary to fight their rule is at an historic low.

With all 108 seats declared, the DUP have 36 members elected, and Sinn Féin 28. The Ulster Unionists have 18 MLAs, and the SDLP has 16 MLAs. The Alliance Party has 7 MLAs. The loyalist Progressive Unionists held on their East Belfast seat. One Green Party MLA was elected. Independent Dr Kieran Deeny retained his seat in West Tyrone.

This was an election about bread and butter issues, said Tony Blair after the elections. Now its time to get down to business, to implement the bread and butter policies, to co-operate in a new local assembly, he said. It was a view repeated by British secretary of state Hain, by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and ad nauseam by the local media, which had earnest debates, features and phone-ins about education, water charges and rural affairs. Like most of what emerges from the Blair orifice, all of the above is a lie, in utter contradiction to the reality on the ground.

Sectarian

This was an election that had so little to do with bread and butter that the two candidates who stood solely as “bread and butter” candidates - the Socialist Party/don’t pay water charges group - gained only a few hundred votes. In the vast majority of constituencies the outcome could be easily calculated from a sectarian headcount of the population.

Even one of the minor upsets of the campaign - the relatively good showing of the liberal unionist Alliance party, seemed to be a by-blow of overall sectarianism, based on a large section of the Ulster Unionist party conceding that their party was finished but unable to reconcile themselves to voting for Paisley. They then decamped en masse to Alliance.

The election was so sectarian that this extended into the two camps, with gains being made by Sinn Fein, and, to an even greater extent, by Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist party, on the calculation by the electorate that, if you were going to vote on the basis of religious affiliation, it was better to vote for the biggest party and the one most fervently defending “your” slice of the cake.

The outcome was the collapse of the Ulster Unionist Party and the absorption of its right wing into the DUP, making this group of rabid bigots and reactionaries the largest party in the North.

A similar process occurred on the nationalist side, with the difference that the SDLP suffered a more limited decline and Sinn Fein is engaged in a process of damping down nationalist expectations rather than amplifying them - indeed chief negotiator Martin McGuinness, immediately following the count, pleaded with Paisley to take his place as first minister and promised Sinn Fein’s ‘full cooperation’ if he did so.

British aims

Not only was the election the most sectarian since the days of the old Stormont [1], it was so by intent. The British government announced that they were calling the election specifically to get a big vote for Sinn Fein and the DUP and confirm them as parties of government and the electorate duly obliged. A process supposed to promote reconciliation and be based on moderate unionism has now become a drive to get the arch-bigot Paisley into power at the head of a mass reaction and with

demands for greater sectarian privilege from Loyalism.

It is worth recalling the purpose of the election. It was called to finally bury the Good Friday agreement and establish some democratic legitimacy for its successor, the St Andrews 'agreement'. In the event the process was bent further to the right and new concessions to Paisley mean that it has already morphed into St. Andrews mark II.

Initially Sinn Féin wanted a referendum, as with the Good Friday agreement, in order to reclaim the invisible all-Ireland dimension that vanished long ago. They then realised, along with the DUP, that it would be dangerous to put the terms directly to the electorate. Those who would vote Sinn Féin would be less likely to vote yes to the RUC/PSNI [2] if asked in a referendum. Those who would vote DUP would be less likely to vote yes to a government including Sinn Féin. The election had the further advantage of rewarding the two parties by allowing them to absorb a larger section of the vote from the former leading nationalist and unionist parties.

So the election is not to elect a government that will then decide policies based on their manifestos, but to put the parties into a position where they can implement policies secretly agreed with the British. For that reason the various media forums about water charges and so on doubly confused the picture; firstly by disguising the fact that the major parties have already agreed to support water charges and water privatisation and secondly by ignoring the process on which the election was actually built - humiliating pledges of loyalty to the police and the state squeezed from Sinn Féin without even the cover of reciprocal pledges from Paisley that they would be rewarded with junior partnership to the DUP in government.

“Battle a day”

The outcome succeeded in producing the sectarian divide that the British designed. It has not yet produced a government. It has produced a new agreement weighted heavily towards the demands of the DUP, but not an agreement that coincides with their programme - the old cry of a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.

Any Sinn Féin presence in government is likely to split the DUP. The internal debate is not whether or not the DUP will accept power-sharing, but if they can accept it on a tactical basis in order to get into government and then seek ways of expelling the Catholics. A section of the party refuses to contemplate a Sinn Féin presence. Those, led by Paisley, who are willing to do a deal so heavily weighted in their favour, stress the temporary nature of a power-sharing government, demand a mechanism for expelling Sinn Féin and promise a “battle a day” with Sinn Féin.

The indications are that Paisley will enter government if he is able to contain the opposition of major layers of the DUP leadership. Given that all his demands have been met except the demand for the old Stormont majority rule government, he is struggling to find grounds on which to refuse. Paisley's strategy will be to frustrate Sinn Féin, ensure DUP control of finances, and search for a way to eventually force Sinn Féin out of government..

The new assembly would resemble the old Stormont parliament that kicked off the Troubles [3] more than the Good Friday assembly with its equal division of ministries.

The DUP will have four positions and Sinn Féin three, leaving three jobs to be divided between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. The positions are shared out on the basis of Assembly seats won and the Ulster Unionists have more seats than the SDLP. The unionist bloc - four DUP ministers and two from the UUP - compares to Sinn Féin's three and the SDLP one, a total of four. A nationalist

minority in a majority unionist assembly filled with hatred and determined to force the nationalist out of government sounds very like a programme of back to the future.

Reaction

The new St. Andrews structure will greatly facilitate the Paisley strategy. Assembly legislation has been changed to avoid the need for the DUP to vote in favour of the deputy first minister. It has also been changed to ensure that all ministerial decisions can be taken to the assembly as a whole - preventing a repeat of past incidents that enraged unionists such as Sinn Féin health minister Bairbre de Brun awarding a new maternity centre to the Royal hospital or education minister Martin McGuinness abolishing the 11+ exam for school children to determine which secondary school they should attend. Even under the existing rules Sinn Fein can be easily frustrated - the last assembly failed to discuss RUC support for a loyalist death squads and involvement in sectarian murder of Catholics because the unionists were able to refuse agreement to a debate.

There will be a reactionary social agenda. A leading DUP figure spent the election denouncing integrated schooling of Catholics and Protestants as evil. The organisation is famous for its homophobia. It's sectarianism remains rabid. In a breathtakingly cynical move the British government gave control of the reform of the 11+ to the assembly. Leading DUP figure Sammy Wilson boasts that all the DUP has to do is to block a decision. The result will be each grammar school organising its own admissions and the de facto retention of selection.

For its part, Sinn Fein has agreed a system of seven local councils that will feed in a Sinn Fein majority in each council west of the Bann and a corresponding Loyalist majority in eastern councils..

There is a reactionary economic agenda. All of the parties have signed up to water privatisation and to a massive increase in rates used to finance public borrowing. The Review of public administration will do away with local councils and involve job cuts. The DUP is making much of calls for a subvention from the treasury, but this will be used to ameliorate the worst effects of a privatisation agenda, especially among its own supporters rather than to prevent deregulation and privatisation.

Sinn Fein and the DUP are united in support of a Thatcherite economic vision that sees corporation tax on multinationals slashed and a corresponding cut in the number of public service workers and the wage rates and conditions that have been associated with public service.

There will be further side-deals to conciliate loyalism. During the election, secretary of state Hain met the Orange Order [4] and accepted a shopping list of demands from them, with the central one being that they retain their traditional right to intimidate Catholics with their annual parades through Catholic areas. More money will follow the millions pumped into Loyalist paramilitary groups.

The arrest of Gerry McGeough, a dissident republican candidate, at the polling station and the subsequent charges against him are a signal of just how little toleration there will be for any form of republicanism in the new order. Even more shocking is the announcement that there is to be an enquiry into police collaboration with republicanism.

This follows a damning enquiry into the police use of a UVF death squad and connivance in sectarian killings. Nothing came of the report, but it emerged that senior police officials had refused to collaborate with the police ombudsman and a number have issued defiant statements since, with the full support of the entire unionist political establishment. The unionist line is not that collaboration did not take place, but that it was entirely justified.

The British enquiry, seeking to draw an equals sign between running IRA agents and the use of the death squads, means that the whole history of the troubles is consigned to oblivion and it will remain open to the state to use the same methods if it is threatened again.

Absence of the opposition

With such a disastrous prospect why did Sinn Féin's vote increase at the polls? Why did the left and the traditional republican current have a limited impact? Why did more people not abstain?

The failure of the left and the republicans was predictable. One group didn't think the question of Sinn Féin capitulation worth answering. The other didn't have an answer.

The only vote of any size on the left was for the SWP in the guise of two different fronts. [5] As a spokesperson seemed to believe that sectarianism and colonialism had been "sorted" and their views on the endorsement of the colonial police force were "police won't solve poverty" it's difficult to know what the vote represented. Troops out (of Iraq, not Ireland) seems the best answer.

The traditional republicans, a mixture of people just leaving Sinn Féin, traditional physical force republicans and those politically opposed to the continuing partition of Ireland have been unable to build a political alternative in the past ten years, have often spent their time lobbying the Sinn Féin to change direction or alternatively denouncing the capitulation as contrary to republican principle. The unstated background has been the assumption that there was nothing wrong with the physical force tradition and that one more offensive would have sapped the British will. This view is so deeply unpopular that it actually reinforces Sinn Féin's support. The republicans have a role to play in establishing that the Sinn Féin is no longer republican. They are big enough to constitute a small opposition, but the vote shows that the electorate don't care about the nature of the Sinn Féin - they now believe that constitutional nationalism can achieve equality in the North.

So why no abstention?

The predictions of a fall in the Sinn Féin vote (made by this correspondent among others) seemed sound given the massive political retreat from the Good Friday Agreement to St Andrews. Why didn't it happen?

In part this was because nationalist workers simply haven't noticed. The GFA itself was never the subject of discussion. Most activists gave a vote of confidence to the Sinn Féin and welcomed the end of horrendous bloodletting and decades of repression, with a miniboom in employment and a promise of equality.

The institutions have collapsed and workers have simply waited for them to be restored. In this depoliticised atmosphere of complacency and a benign sectarianism that accepts the division of the working class as a given, they have accepted Sinn Féin assurances that forcing Paisley to become first minister will in some way force him to concede equality.

Such a view was supported by the election itself. It was totally absent from everyday debate - silence followed by a sudden rush to the polls. To a certain extent, in the absence of genuine debate, voters sleepwalked in a sectarian fog to vote for 'their' party. Workers in general, and nationalist workers in particular, are in for something of a shock. If the British succeed in levering Paisley into the assembly a provincial government will emerge with a unionist majority, led by a bigot forced by internal party divisions to prove himself the hammer of the Catholic opposition and with the rules

changed to reduce the power of nationalist to effect change. Sinn Féin claims of equality will be reduced to claims of a veto - a veto much reduced by British and unionist pressure. The difficulty then will be to shake off the paralysis of the sectarian mindset and build a new socialist organisation and policy that pushes aside the decayed ruins of republicanism.

The political parties in the North of Ireland

The Nationalist Parties are Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). The SDLP is the traditional party of the Catholic church and the Catholic middle class, campaigning for a share of political power within the Northern colony, while in practice accepting partition and British rule.

Sinn Féin (translating as Ourselves Alone) is the traditional party of revolutionary nationalism and the physical force tradition, giving political expression to the views of the armed wing, the IRA.

During the peace process Sinn Féin has moved closer to the Dublin government and right-wing politicians in the US. Its policies are now very similar to those of the SDLP and it has eclipsed the SDLP at the polls.

The unionist parties were once united in one hegemonic bloc in perpetual government in the Northern colony. The Nationalist revolt of the late 1960s and early 1970s fragmented into a small, relatively nonsectarian Alliance party, a bourgeois Ulster Unionist Party and a petty-bourgeois and extremely sectarian, violent and vicious Democratic Unionist party led by Ian Paisley.

Unionists opposed the Good Friday agreement because it appeared to offer an equal share of sectarian privilege to Catholics, undermining the rationale of Protestant privilege on which the colony rested. The UUP and DUP were locked in vicious rivalry because the UUP leader, David Trimble, the UUP leader, joined a power-sharing government, arguing that it was necessary to undermine the agreement from inside, otherwise Britain would punish Unionism. Paisley argued that the best way to bring the agreement down was to refuse agreement.

In the event the British, by constantly bowing to Unionist pressure and moving the deal to the right, proved Paisley right and Trimble wrong. The UUP were reduced to the minority party of unionism at the last election and the collapse of their vote continued in this one.

NOTES

[1] The Northern colony was established by the British to limit Irish Independence following the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and maintain a base for occupation. The local parliament, set up at Stormont, just outside Belfast, had a permanent unionist majority, a local police force that it controlled (the Royal Ulster Constabulary or RUC) and paramilitary death squads (the B specials). It ruled the colony until a nationalist revolt and calls for civil rights led to its suspension in 1972 and the establishment of direct rule by Westminster.

[2] RUC/PSNI Royal Ulster Constabulary/Police Service of Northern Ireland. Traditionally the republican nationalist movement refused to recognise the police service in the North. The Sinn Féin conference on policing in January 2007, which recognised the legitimacy of the police force, was one of the concessions demanded by the DUP to enable power sharing with Sinn Féin.

[3] The Troubles began in the 1960s as a mobilisation for civil rights which was violently suppressed

by anti-Catholic armed pogroms, the deployment of the British army and the introduction of special laws and internment. The initial struggle then became a demand for troops out and Irish unity, and armed republicanism came to the fore. This came to an end with the collapse of the IRA campaign and Sinn Féin's endorsement of a peace process in the 1990s.

[4] The Orange Order is a sectarian protestant organisation that unites members of that community over and above their political parties. It organises the notorious July and August marches that are frequently a cause of tension between the communities as they insist on marching through Catholic areas.

[5] The Socialist Workers Party ran two candidates in the election using two different fronts. One candidate stood in Derry as a Socialist Environmental Alliance (SEA) candidate and another in Belfast as a People before Profit candidate. The difference was in name only. The main political point they had to make about one of the major issues in the election - the Sinn Féin decision to support the police and state forces - was "Poverty is the issue - not policing" managing to dismiss the Sinn Féin collusion and the sectarian nature of the local police in one slogan.

P.S.

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