

Whats happening in the six counties?

An Anarchist viewpoint

Workers Solidarity Movement

1995

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“Weaning Northern Ireland off the breast of Britannia could be a painful process, one which cannot be rushed most commentators insist”
(Business and Finance, September 1994)

Last Autumn the speed at which events in Northern Ireland were moving wrong-footed pundits across the political spectrum. British soldiers shouldered arms and swapped hard hats for natty berets, loyalists attacked police stations, Gerry Adams was “Mandelfeid” (to coin a phrase) into a serious statesman with a cute North Belfast brogue. Conor Mc Loughlin examines the possibilities and limitations of the “peace process”

The first thing to say is that the IRA cease-fire is a positive step. The armed campaign was incapable of defeating the British state. Over the last 25 years at least 3500 have been killed and around 40,000 injured and thousands have flowed through the prison system. The armed struggle could not move things any further. It was a failed tactic arising out of a mistaken strategy. Sinn Fein have now switched their tactics (their overall strategy remains nationalist as ever) seeing that may be more to be gained through lobbying and “the pan nationalist alliance.”

In the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985 Britain implied that she had no economic interest in Northern Ireland. In the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 the British government openly declared that it has no economic or strategic interest in remaining in Ireland. Partition was originally set-up to safeguard real economic interests. Britain wanted open trading relationships with the relatively prosperous Northern end of the country. The new Southern government had a very low manufacturing base and initially looked to minimise trade with Britain to protect home based industry.

Over the last seventy years this situation has totally changed. In terms of economic power and military strength Britain is now much weakened Northern Ireland has become a dependent entity. An estimated £3–4 billion is pumped into the economy by Britain per year. An estimated 35–40% of employment is financed by British tax revenues. Employment is concentrated in security (including the 94% Protestant RUC) and local government. Manufacturing employment has halved since 1960.

Britain’s economic interest?

Well before the Anglo-Irish agreement it was clear that there was no economic interest. With the end of the cold war any possible marginal strategic interest has clearly ended. A British ruling class which was acting in pursuit of short-term economic self-interest alone would have abandoned any interest in Ireland .

A major consideration for Britain in Ireland remains loss of face. To lose Northern Ireland would be like losing Wales or Scotland. It would be the last death-knell of the Empire. In the interests of stability and preserving a stable UK that they have paid out the cash, succoured the unionists and attempted to criminalise the IRA.

But no more. The Downing street declaration and the Anglo-Irish agreement seemed to signal that rational self-interest was getting the upper hand. There is now a desire to leave, the question is when and under what conditions?

Not catching the bus home yet

Present indications are that the answer to this question is “not in the near future”. The British response to the IRA cease-fire has been miserly in the extreme; an easing of broadcasting restrictions on Sinn Féin, the slow re-opening of some border roads and a stepping down of army activity in nationalist areas.

None of these are gains as all were ending restrictions imposed as a result of the armed campaign. According to Suzanne Breen in the October Fortnight magazine; “While Albert Reynolds and Bill Clinton may deliver visas Brits out is another matter”.

However the British are moving; though very slowly and with diplomatic skill. The Official Unionists have been in on every stage of this process. Paisley and the DUP (the more hard-line loyalists) are left out in the cold. They have split the loyalists to further prepare the ground.

America’s interest

America has played an important role in the process. Irish-American politicians are addressing a constituency of 43 million votes. There is certainly no harm for them in pontificating about the four green fields. Beyond this American foreign policy has turned from one of “containment” (vis the USSR) to “enlargement” according to Tony Lake, one of Clinton’s foreign policy gurus (Sunday Tribune September 1st 1994). They aim to “widen the family of free market democracies, while isolating and putting pressure on rogue nations.”

Economically America also sees some limited room for investment in a more stable Northern Ireland with its cheap and well trained workforce. The American fraction of employment in overseas owned industry is 23% in Northern Ireland as compared with 53% in the South. This could certainly be expanded.

The EC has also promised money for the peace process also with its own long-term benefits in mind. Like the EC civil servants most Irish-American politicians couldn’t really care whether Northern Ireland were a part of Britain, Ireland or a small moon of Jupiter. Despite any fantasy expectations that nationalists might have of their devotion to “the cause” they are merely furthering their own economic and strategic interests.

It’s not just in Ireland

The peace process follows deals struck in El Salvador, South Africa and Palestine. Already the people of these regions are learning to their cost what these deals with the imperialists will not make any major changes to their lives.

The process represents some rethink on the part of the Brits combined with a change in tactics by Sinn Féin. They have spent the last year or so ditching any sort of left or progressive spin they may have adopted and are eagerly courting the SDLP, Reynolds and the Irish American Lobby. They now call for a Nixon, a De Klerk or a De Gaulle to step forth and lead the loyalists to compromise.

This comes as no surprise to us. It springs from the bedrock of their nationalism. It was not a sell-out of any thing they stood for. It was the obvious path to follow at this time. If the armed struggle was running out of steam then try and stitch up a deal.

An eventual withdrawal?

What happens next? As materialists our crystal ball gazing skills are limited. The process may lead to some form of local government like the “power sharing executive” of 1974 propped up by British, American and EC cash. It may even eventually lead to British withdrawal and a united 32 county capitalist Ireland.

In the next while the cease-fire offers opportunities for left-wing activists. The chances could be good for those with the will, the resources and the politics to take them. Many Sinn Féin supporters are confused and may soon become disillusioned with their high flying leadership. Already In the Bawnmore estate in North Belfast the graffiti reads reads “25 years for what?” (Fortnight Oct 1994).

Those who thought they were in a socialist or anti-imperialist organisation may now begin to look for one. Since the Loyalist cease-fire it is now easier than it has been for a long time to approach Protestant workers with anarchist politics. The challenge facing anarchists North and South is to use this chance to build a real alternative based on socialism and anti-imperialism.

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