

# Behind the news: 1

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## Cease-fire in Northern Ireland— The Phoney Peace

### Introduction

**A**t the time of writing, the cease-fires in Northern Ireland have lasted over a year. The discipline displayed by the IRA and the loyalist groups has been impressive, despite the slow pace of political progress. The IRA cease-fire, brokered by Sinn Féin, was followed five months later by the Framework Document, drafted by the British and Irish governments with the aim of consolidating the peace with a series of political initiatives. A year later it is becoming increasingly clear that while the cease-fires are still holding, the political promises of the Document to forge a 'new beginning' for the North have become a victim of failed political will on the part of the British government.

The stalemate over the issue of the decommissioning of IRA arms—widely blamed on the intransigence of the British government—and the release of a British paratrooper convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a Belfast teenager, Karen Riley, after two and a half years in prison, are events, among others, which have put the whole process under

severe pressure. At this juncture many are questioning the ability and intention of a weak British administration to avoid a slide into another and probably more violent phase of conflict in Ireland.

There are a number of factors which influence the nature of Anglo-Irish relations and although the precise mixture may vary historically the basic parameters are relatively constant. As with all colonial and imperial relations, shifts in the global balance of power eventually filter back into local situations. These changes influence internal political, economic and social structures often leading to local and national distortions such as the intersection of British post-imperial xenophobia with the movement towards a common currency in Europe. Long term structural changes can be temporarily deflected and modified by internal political conflicts and this is nowhere more true than in the case of British policy in Ireland. The current pressure to disengage from Ireland is balanced by the need of a politically unstable administration to pander to its extreme right wing elements in a desperate effort to cling to power.

### **Winning the War?: the Politics of Military Stalemate 1979-1981.**

The Provisional IRA has come a long way since the mid seventies when the leadership was pronouncing that victory was just around the corner and a British withdrawal imminent. The intertwining of theories of national liberation with an eclectic rag-bag of Marxist ideas formed a backdrop to the republican—and left—interpretation of this phase of the conflict which was largely seen as an anti-imperialist struggle.<sup>1</sup>

On the British side, the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 ushered in a period of intense repression, an approach tacitly supported by a Southern state which had withdrawn from direct interest in the

problem preferring to back its preference for an internal settlement with massive doses of repression. Under the impact of an increasingly effective counter insurgency campaign, the total victory strategy of the IRA was replaced by the rhetoric of a 'long war' and a reorganisation into a cell system which had the effect of making the organisation more efficient while increasing its tendency towards elitism and obsessive secrecy and suspicion of outsiders (Bishop and Mallie 1987). Dissident voices began to be heard from the British establishment on the possibility of defeating the IRA and the (probably) leaked document of Brigadier Glover in 1978 was pessimistic about the prospects for a swift end to the conflict given the reorganisation of the IRA.<sup>2</sup> All sides to the conflict seemed to be locked into a negative stance with the problem seen simply in militaristic terms. Constitutional nationalism (in the form of the Social Democratic and Labour Party—SDLP) had been marginalised by the absence of political initiatives in the wake of the failed Sunningdale Agreement and political dialogue across the sectarian divide was conspicuous by its absence. With the coming to power of the Conservatives in 1989 it seemed that a long war of attrition was in prospect and the beginnings of the prison protest, which culminated in the hunger strikes of 1980–1, appeared to confirm the increasing intransigence of the Thatcher government and the desperation of a section of the nationalist population. (Beresford 1987; Smyth 1987). But already, things were beginning to unravel for the British state. The interrogation, confession and conviction assembly line which had been set up as a result of the establishment of the Diplock Courts<sup>3</sup> was coming under increasing criticism from non-republican groups and organisations as allegations of brutality emerged from the interrogation centres.

In effect, the course of the first decade of the conflict shows the failure of both sides to

evolve a coherent strategy to either win the war or end it. The republican movement, convinced that a military victory resulting in a British withdrawal was possible, gradually distanced itself from politics and came perilously close to becoming a terrorist type organisation in the sense that violence becomes an end in itself. The British state through its policy of 'normalisation' and 'criminalisation', a policy which substituted propaganda for political analysis and dialogue, seemed intent upon driving the IRA into precisely this position. British strategy was crucially dependent upon an absence of political mobilisation and overt opposition to its policies.

However, it was the impact of the IRA hunger strikes of 1989-90 that was to set in train a series of events which dramatically shifted the parameters of the situation. Initially, the attempt of the British government to abolish the special status enjoyed by both republican and loyalist prisoners met with little resistance from the republican movement outside the prisons despite the fact that it struck at the heart of the republican belief that their members in prison were political prisoners given their participation in what they viewed as a legitimate armed struggle.<sup>4</sup> Within the prisons perceptions were different and the protest against the implementation of a 'normalisation' policy gradually escalated from 1976 onwards. The inactivity of Sinn Féin led to relatives of the prisoners forming themselves into the Relatives Action Committee in 1977. Sinn Féin was motivated by two considerations: that a mobilisation to regain political status for prisoners would fail, and that any such mobilisation would distract from the military campaign. In the event, the extent of the mobilisation of people, both North and South of the border—and indeed internationally—came as a surprise and pointed to an untapped reservoir of disaffection and discontent with the stagnant

situation in the North. The Southern government became convinced—after the election of two hunger strikers to the Dáil (the Irish parliament)—that a situation which had the potential for political instability would have to be dealt with. Sinn Féin was forced to confront the necessity to engage in politics and to move away from a narrow emphasis on the military campaign. It took perhaps longer for some sections of the British establishment to see the writing on the wall. Thatcher's remark that 'Northern Ireland was as British as Finchley', showed a breathtaking ignorance. The refusal of the British government to accept the implications of the hunger strikes is reflected in her reply to a question asking whether there had been a hardening of nationalist attitudes because of her unwillingness to make concessions to the hunger strikers:

I do not believe so. I still do not know of anyone who has asked me to give a political or special category status. They recognise that when I say a crime is a crime is a crime and men of violence are the enemies of society, and of democracy everywhere, they recognise that what I say is true. I think they believe it. (*Irish Times*, 28/5/1981)

The clear message of the hunger strikes and the attendant mass mobilisation was that there was a considerable measure of support for the IRA and Sinn Féin and that this, given the appropriate circumstances, could be transformed into votes thus threatening both the SDLP and the political balance in the South. The Sinn Féin leadership gradually began edging towards participation in the political process. At the Bodenstown Commemoration (commemorating the rising of 1798) in June 1979 the President of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, argued that a political dimension would have to be introduced since the movement's aims could not be achieved by military means alone. In September 1981 a spokesman for the IRA

endorsed the view that SF should contest the Westminster seat of West Belfast in the next election and in November 1981 Danny Morrison made his famous 'Armalite or ballot box' speech to the Árd Feis (the annual conference of SF):

Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand, and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland? (*Sunday Tribune*, 8/11/81)

This somewhat ambiguous hint at the possibility of political involvement was met with a further intensification of the counter insurgency campaign on the part of the British. New tactics were put in place to replace the increasing difficulties (in the wake of the Bennett report on interrogation practices and brutality in police custody) in convincing the Diplock judges to convict on the basis of confessions made after protracted bouts of interrogation. These new tactics—the use of informers—so called 'supergrasses' to stage what amounted to mass show trials and the increasing use of undercover units to execute potentially dangerous republicans soon ran into difficulties. (Amnesty International 1988; Smyth 1988). The supergrass trials were discredited when a number of witnesses were shown to have been offered large sums of money for their information or simply withdrew their evidence (more than half retracted their evidence before the case came to court). The hopes placed by the Chief Constable in the use of informers:

(the) emergence of the supergrass phenomenon was due to a combination of public recognition of the true nature and futility of terrorism and of the growing disillusionment within the ranks of paramilitary organisations. ... Terrorist organisations regard the supergrass

technique as a fundamental threat to their continued existence ... The outcome (of the supergrass process) is crucial to the well being of Northern Ireland (Chief Constable's Report 1983)

proved to be misplaced and although there were some convictions most of these were overturned on appeal.

The use of undercover units proved equally difficult to justify. Considerable numbers of innocent civilians were shot and killed by police and SAS units and many of the republicans shot were unarmed at the time. The shooting of fourteen civilians between November 1982 and November 1983, of which eight were killed in a small geographic area in Lurgan/Armagh, led to the establishment of an inquiry led by the then Assistant Chief Constable of Manchester, John Stalker, and his refusal to engage in a cover up and his subsequent sacking terminally discredited this particular tactic although its use was to continue for a number of years. (Stalker 1988; Smyth and Ellison 1995).

### Reluctantly towards the Political

Meanwhile, in the wake of the hunger strikes, there were some hesitant movements on the political front. The mobilisation and mass political action surrounding the hunger strikes may have faded away, but the political impetus was felt in the Assembly elections of 1982 when Sinn Féin received 10.1% of the first preference votes as compared to 9.3% for the middle-of-the-road Alliance Party. (Guelke and Smyth 1992). This came as a profound shock to mainstream opinion and was instrumental in Garrett Fitzgerald—then Taoiseach in the Republic—acceding to John Hume's attempt to set up a 'Council for a New Ireland'. Eventually called the New Ireland Forum, the new body first met in Dublin Castle in May 1983. Because of its

refusal to renounce violence, Sinn Féin was not invited to join all the other nationalist parties on the island. It was clear from the start that the implications of the 'Armalite and ballot box' strategy were beginning to strike home. Fitzgerald, in his opening speech, unambiguously supported constitutional nationalism, and by implication the SDLP:

Let the men of violence take note of this unambiguous message from the nationalist people of Ireland: the future of this island will be built by the ballot box and the ballot box alone. (*Irish Times*, 31/5/83)

But it was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Peter Barry, who clearly laid out the rationale for the Forum in March of the same year:

We must also recognise that the political situation in Northern Ireland itself is in a number of important respects worse than it was five or ten years ago. Dialogue between unionists and nationalists is virtually non-existent. Nor is there any significant dialogue between the SDLP and the British government. On the nationalist side, while the SDLP have, against all the odds, held their ground, there has been an increase in the support for the IRA. One out of three nationalists who voted at the NI Assembly elections last October supported IRA candidates (*Irish Times*, 16/3/83)

The final report of the proceedings was published in May 1984 and proved to be a bit of a damp squib. Three models were proposed and all three involved constitutional change to the status of the North. Initial British reaction was muted and reserved for the Anglo-Irish summit to be held in November but by October the British position was being clearly flagged. Thatcher persisted in her 'as British as Finchley line' as in the course of a Channel Four interview as quoted in the *Irish News* (16/10/84):

Mrs. Thatcher said that Northern Ireland was a democratic society and that everyone had the right to vote in Westminster and local elections. 'It is not a question of having to resort to the bullet because there isn't a ballot box. There is'.

This comment was made in the wake of the IRA bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton and was reinforced by the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, on the same day during a visit to the North:

He (Hurd) believed that the IRA could be beaten by a combination of a firm security policy, trying to bring the political leaders in the North towards a greater understanding, and economic policy. (*Irish Times*, 16/10/84)

In the event, Thatcher's rejection of any constitutional change was brutal and direct and her 'out, out, out' comments on the proposals of the Forum seemed to put an end to that initiative. However, the political process which began in the wake of the hunger strikes and the politicisation of Sinn Féin had not lost its impetus. As we now have learned, already in 1984 Sinn Féin and the IRA were putting out peace feelers to the Southern Government and the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985 was to grant the Irish government the right to 'put forward views and proposals on matters relating to Northern Ireland within the field of activity of the (intergovernmental) conference'.

This, of course, enraged Unionist opinion (which at no time had been consulted) and a period of protest and demonstrations followed during which the homes of some 300 RUC members were attacked and damaged. Crucially, the police which had been transformed from being the tool of a sectarian local state to a highly paid and socially isolated arm of the British state, clearly understood on which side its bread was buttered and showed itself willing and capable of breaking Loyalist heads.

For the IRA and Sinn Féin, matters were reaching a head. They tended to share the gloss Mrs Thatcher had put upon the 1984 Anglo Irish Agreement, that ‘To sum up: we entered into the agreement to defeat the men of violence and to bring peace and stability.’ (*Irish Times*, 16/11/84). Gerry Adams, writing in his book *The Politics of Irish Freedom* made the following comment about the Agreement:

It is an attempt to isolate and draw popular support away from the republican struggle, while putting a diplomatic veneer on British rule, injecting a credibility into establishment nationalism so that British rule and the interests it represents can be stabilised in the long term, and insulating the British from international criticism of their involvement in Irish affairs.(105).

Indeed, in the wake of the Agreement, electoral support for Sinn Féin began to contract and gains were registered by the SDLP. The decline of the electoral fortunes of Sinn Féin culminated in Adam’s losing his Westminster seat in West Belfast at the last general election but the rot had set in long before that. Their share of the vote fell to 11.3% in the 1987 general election, with Adams just hanging onto his seat. In the local elections of 1989 Sinn Féin lost 16 seats although its first preference votes held up. It was clear at this stage that the Anglo-Irish strategy of isolating Sinn Féin as the unacceptable face of nationalism was having some success since the lower preference votes—the more volatile section of the electorate—were moving towards the SDLP. In the European elections in June 1989 the Sinn Féin share of the vote fell to an eight year low at 9.1%. The strategy of increasing political credibility and gaining seats in the South—endorsed with the abandonment of abstentionism in 1986—came badly unstuck in the general election of 1989 when Sinn Féin managed to get a mere

1.9% of the vote (Guelke and Smyth 1992).

In retrospect, it is clear that by the end of the eighties the policy of both the British and Irish governments to isolate Sinn Féin and, if not defeat, then neutralise the IRA and the Armalite and ballot box strategy of Sinn Féin were having limited success. Equally, the specific aim of the Irish government to establish the SDLP as the hegemonic nationalist party had foundered in the face of the failure of the British state to deliver on reforms of the police, the justice system and other areas. Although shifts in policy and perceptions were desperately slow in emerging there were a number of straws in the wind. The loyalist response to the Anglo-Irish Agreement was violent but short lived. The initial threats to make the North ungovernable were not carried through. The RUC had not cracked under Loyalist pressure although this may well have been because the pressure was never very great. As early as 1985 there was a meeting between John Hume and the IRA leadership and this was followed by an exchange of documents and a series of meetings in 1988. In July 1989 Peter Brooke was appointed Secretary of State and he soon began to redefine the parameters of debate. In November he admitted that the IRA could not be defeated militarily, thus giving political sanction to that section of the military establishment which had held this view for more than a decade. He also stated that he would not rule out talks with Sinn Féin if violence ended. Almost exactly a year later he went on to say that Britain had no selfish or strategic interest in the North and that unification by consent would be accepted.

In retrospect, it is clear that by 1990 the groundwork had been completed for the negotiation of the IRA cease-fire and the publication of the Framework Document which appeared five months after the cease-fire announcement in September 1994.<sup>5</sup>

## The Logic of the Framework Document

The Framework Document, which took two years to draft, is an exercise in studied ambiguity. It consists of two levels of discussion, one which seeks to reassure nationalists that there will be no return to the old Stormont regime and a further, more complex level which seeks to reassure Unionists that change will not take place without their consent.

Both the codification within the document of the position that the status of the North cannot be altered without consent—and the corollary that it theoretically could vote itself into a united Ireland—and the proposed establishment of cross-border institutions to ‘discharge or oversee delegated executive, harmonising or consultative functions...’ (*Framework Document*: 29) are provisions which demonstrate that the Union is not sacrosanct. The fact that this is balanced by a commitment on the part of Dublin to support a change in the constitution to abandon the territorial claim to the North should be seen in the broader context of the dissolution of the remit of nation states. This is emphasised in Paragraph 20 of the Document: ‘...they (the British government) reiterate that they have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland’.

The Document also has unstated and deeply embedded implications for the nature of the UK itself. In the last century, Ireland was often used as an laboratory for experiments with institutional measures to deal with social change. The establishment of a national school system, the organisation of a centralised police force and the poorhouse system are all cases in point. If the Framework Document were to lead to some form of final British disengagement from Ireland and the establishment of all-Ireland institutions it might well set down a marker for the break up of the UK as a unitary state, with Scotland, and eventually Wales,

successfully demanding similar arrangements. The more progressive sector of multinational capitalism might well see distinct advantages in dealing with smaller—and weaker—regions within a more powerful EU. Regions would compete even more fiercely than at present (the competition between the Republic and Scotland for multinational plant location is a case in point) for investment and labour organisations would be in a far weaker position to influence local states. England itself, divested of loss making regions, might well be a better position internationally as well as politically. Of course, such a scenario would have to consider the political and ideological consequences of such far reaching changes to the structure and nature of the UK. But it does seem that the Framework Document, at one level, along with the withdrawal from Hong Kong, is a final farewell to Empire and the fact that the Ulster Unionists appear to be friendless in Westminster is another straw in the wind.

The second level of the Document is, however, an exercise in *realpolitik*. The actual process of political change is laid out in great detail and hedged around with numerous caveats and checking mechanisms. The route to any agreement involves three strands. The first is concerned with the establishment of an elected assembly which will emerge from talks between the political parties. The second strand is about relationships between North and South and the final strand deals with Anglo-Irish inter-governmental arrangements. No time scale is put upon this process and the lack of progress in even reaching the first stage—talks between the political parties—does not auger well for the future. The process is further complicated by a series of ‘safeguards’ involving a ‘triple lock’ of agreement between the parties, a proposed referendum on any agreed proposals, and the consent of the British parliament. The nature and extent of any changes is further limited by the ‘reserved powers’ retained by London,

even in the event of an agreed settlement. As with the Government of Ireland Act which formed the legal basis of partition, foreign affairs, defence and taxation will all remain in the hands of London. One significant difference is that control of the RUC would not be ceded to any local administration but this is balanced by clear signals that the police are not in need of fundamental reform.

What is extraordinary about the Document is the success of its profound ambiguity. In the March 1995 edition of *Parliamentary Brief* the spectrum of comment ranged from outright rejection by one commentator because the IRA had won to another because the IRA had lost with a clutch in between counselling various graduations of acceptance or rejection. This was probably the main objective of the Document. It offers enough to ensure that the cease-fire will continue into the foreseeable future while setting down implicit parameters for a future restructuring of the North. It capitalises on both the weakness of Unionism and the war weariness on Nationalists in the hope of creating a new coalition created from the disintegration of the traditional bi-polar fronts. It also sets a potential agenda for the restructuring of the UK as a whole, if such a restructuring is viable and politically possible. But above all, it has placed the initiative firmly in the hands of London and ensured, at least for the time being, that the Irish question can be firmly subordinated to the needs of internal British politics.

### The Political Economy of Change

Recent political developments in Ireland cannot be seen in isolation from the process of socio-economic change which has transformed the social and economic structure of the island over the last two decades.

The year 1973 is by now enshrined as the *annus horribilus* of post war capitalism, the turning point in the collapse of the Fordist economy and the emergence of a long process of economic restructuring. In the North it was the year of the setting up of the power sharing executive and the proposal to establish a Council of Ireland. The following year saw the Ulster Workers Council strike and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement. Not for the first time, the loyalist working class had entered into an alliance with middle class Unionism to destroy attempts at reforming the local state. The strike worked for a number of interlocking reasons: the sheer power and ability of the Protestant working class to bring the region to a standstill, the ambivalent attitude of sections of the British political, administrative and military establishment, the cohesive nature of the Unionist class alliance, and the ham-fisted way in which the proposed reforms were planned and executed. But there was an underlying inexorable logic, driven by changes in the global as well as the national economy already at work reshaping the contours of the future shape of the economy and social structure. Unionism had traditionally depended for its political power on a cohesive, if occasionally acrimonious, all-class alliance. The industrial working class monopolised skilled industrial work, the civil service and local administration was Protestant dominated as was business, the service sector and the majority of the professions. The collapse of heavy industry and the dispersal of assembly type production to low wage areas had a disproportionate effect in the North given the narrow base of industry there. In Belfast alone the numbers employed in manufacturing declined from 63,257 in 1971 to 41,871 in 1981 and slipped further to a little over 22,000 in 1991. Between 1961 and 1991 the percentage employed in manufacturing declined from 43% to 15%. Employment in

services rose during the same period from 48% to 80% and the numbers employed in public administration and defence more than doubled between 1871 and 1991. (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988; Cebulla and Smyth 1995) This amounted to the emergence of a post-industrial class structure, but one that was still riven by ethnic division and discrimination. Yet during the two decades after 1973 the combination of economic change and state policy began to have irreversible effects. Direct rule coincided with Local government reforms in the UK and led to the replacement of a unionist dominated local state with a considerably expanded cross community recruited bureaucracy. The ideological cohesion of the state sector was diluted, not only through the recruitment of Catholics and the introduction of Fair Employment legislation but because the option of loyalty to the central state was introduced by direct rule. Gradually, a buffer class, with at best divided loyalties began to emerge. In the non-state sector, the predominance of service occupations and the spatial dispersal of traditional working class communities further eroded the basis of traditional politics and allegiances. The profound nature of this shift was disguised by the apparent immobility of voting patterns but this must be set against the rapid decline of Protestant mass participation in political action.

### **The Isolation of Militant Nationalism**

The political attempts to isolate Sinn Féin and the IRA could not have taken place, or enjoyed any measure of success, had the processes of economic change briefly outlined above not been in train. The combination of the collapse of the local economy and the effects of internal war led to a restructuring of traditionally nationalist areas such as West Belfast. Inward migration during the seventies was mostly made up of

the unemployed or working class fleeing to safer areas. But outward migration was principally middle and skilled working class. The retreat of Protestants to suburbia opened up areas of the housing market within the city previously closed to Catholics such as South Belfast which saw a rapid influx of the 'new' catholic middle class during the eighties. It has been calculated that one in three migrants from within the city moving to South Belfast over the last decade came from the West of the city. (Smyth and Cebulla 1995) The consistent rise in the SDLP vote in this area attests to the political allegiances of those moving there from traditional ghetto areas. The transformation of central Belfast from a centre of collective industrial production to a post-industrial arena of individualised consumption has consolidated the influence of a new service class with a high disposable income dependant upon the largess of the British state. The spatial and class shifts within the minority population are attested to by the fact that catholic households in the South of the city have an income well above the average for Belfast while those left behind in the West have one of the highest levels of deprivation for any area within the EC.

These factors form a background to the reversal in the electoral fortunes of Sinn Féin and the ghettoisation of their support. Attempts in the late eighties to form a pan-nationalist front met with little success and the published discussions and exchange of papers between SF and the SDLP exposed the central weaknesses of the republican position. A central tenet of republicanism is the claim that Britain has a clear economic, strategic and economic interest in Ireland. The comments of Peter Brooke in 1989 were fleshed out by John Hume in his dialogue with Gerry Adams:

The unionists, historically, also had a veto on British policy towards Ireland, a veto to which they had no right whatsoever. That

veto was exercised in that British policy denied Irish unity. Up until now successive British governments have been pro-union. Now, however, they are neutral in that they are saying, without taking up a position themselves, that Irish unity is a matter for those who want it persuading those who do not. ... Britain is now saying that she has no interest of her own in being here and that her only interest is to see agreement among the people who share the island of Ireland. (SF/SDLP Talks 1989: 19)

The beauty of this argument is that its very radicalism contains a conservative core of great seduction. The argument is radical in that it cuts the ground from under the basic tenet of physical force republicanism, that Britain has some sort of a transcendental need to occupy Ireland and that the loyalists are their hired stooges. It is conservative in that it closes the debate where the question should be posed: how will international capitalism maintain stability in Ireland? By closing off this debate on the position of Ireland, united or otherwise, within the international economy the discussion returns to the realm of internal politics. It also offers Sinn Féin a way out of the central dilemma which has restricted them since the beginning of the present conflict. For some time now, the SF leadership has been attempting to resolve the contradiction between its adherence to a physical force tradition which rejects constitutional solutions and the logic of *realpolitik* which points towards participation in democratic politics. Rather than having a dialectic, which some militant republicans have assumed, this stance deposits them between a rock and a hard place since political action must ultimately play second fiddle to the military campaign.

Although the rhetoric of the 'cutting edge' of the military campaign remained official doctrine right up to the cease-fire even the most intransigent republican must have realised that the republican movement

was in a no-win situation. It was nonetheless surprising to listen to a prominent Árd Chomhairle member reverse the order of priority in favour of political struggle:

For almost 25 years the principle dynamic which drove the freedom struggle was the IRA's campaign. Republican activists, understandably, became dependent on the IRA as the cutting edge of the struggle. For them this phrase wasn't just propaganda; it was intrinsic to how republicans including many Sinn Féin activists thought about the struggle and their place in it. As a consequence of this outlook republicans continually undervalued the role of popular struggle to effect political change. They viewed masses on the street as less powerful or in support of the IRA's armed struggle. This thinking was wrong or more importantly in this climate it is wrong and needs rectified. (Gibney 1994)

## Conclusions

The initial cautious optimism which greeted the cease-fires has, a year later, all but dissipated. The Sinn Féin leadership is becoming increasingly desperate in the face of British demands for the decommissioning of weapons to precede all party political talks and rising discontent among working class nationalists over the absence of any tangible benefits from the cessation of the war. It has become increasingly obvious that, unlike Michael Collins in 1921, Gerry Adams did not leave the negotiating table with a signed piece of paper or any concrete promises from the British. The Sinn Féin leadership can also take little comfort from the election of David Trimble as leader of the Unionist Party. Trimble's election was an index of the continued intransigence of the rank and file but he is more than a simple knee jerk reactionary. Unlike previous leaders, he is capable of putting a reasonable and modern

face on Unionism (as his visit to Dublin in October demonstrated) while not deviating from basic positions. The tactical abilities of Trimble and his deputy, John Taylor, may prove more than a match for Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness of SF.

It could well be argued that, having achieved the prime objective of ending the IRA campaign—particularly the treat to the City of London—the British government is in no hurry to reach a settlement. Given a slender majority in the House of Commons, there is every reason not to antagonise the Ulster Unionists who might still form a critical voting bloc during the long march to the next election. The government can afford to go up to the wire, as has been recently aptly demonstrated, as they still have an almost infinite number of options with

which to placate nationalist opinion—the release of prisoners, reform of the police, legal reform, to name but a few. On the other hand, Sinn Féin and the IRA face a stark alternative: to play the game by British rules or risk the consequences of a renewed military campaign.

There may well be a section of the British establishment who would welcome a renewed IRA campaign, as in their view, the pressure to introduce draconian measures on both sides of the border would be irresistible thus making the defeat of the IRA inevitable.

But the British have always underestimated the power and tenacity of the militant tradition of Irish nationalism and it is clear that, if the war were to resume, it would entail a significantly higher level of violence and repression.

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## Notes

1. For a balanced discussion of IRA strategy see M.L.R Smith, *Fighting for Ireland* (1995)
2. It is not clear how this document fell into the hands of the IRA. Entitled *Northern Ireland: future terrorist trends*, it is reprinted as an appendix to Sean Cronin's book, *Irish Nationalism*.
3. These courts were named after Lord Diplock, who reported in 1972 on how the legal system could be modified to deal with the IRA and other groups. The report was entitled *Report of the Commission to consider legal procedures to deal with terrorist activities in Northern Ireland*, Cmnd 5186, HMSO, London 1972. A central recommendation was the setting up of non-jury courts presided over by a single judge.
4. The republican leadership outside the prisons was opposed to the hunger strike. They feared that it would not gain any significant support and that it would deflect the membership away from military activity. David Beresford's book, *Ten Men Dead*, is a gripping account of the hunger strikes and the campaign outside.
5. The official title of the document is *Frameworks for the Future* and it is made up of two parts, *A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland* and *A New Framework for Agreement*. The first section deals with internal political structures in the North and the second with relationships with the Republic.

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