

COMMENT & ANALYSIS: Give Northern Ireland's voters a chance

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By Brendan O'Leary
Published: Oct 14, 2002

John Reid, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, is today expected to suspend the assembly and power-sharing executive. That is meant to pre-empt the withdrawal of David Trimble's Ulster Unionist party. However, suspension would be unconstitutional and might prove to be a serious political misjudgment.

The suspension power, introduced by Peter Mandelson, Dr Reid's predecessor, breaches the 1999 British-Irish agreement. It has been used in a partisan manner in the interests of Mr Trimble, although he is, ironically, opposed to its use in the present circumstances. The suspension power, for which he has lobbied, has itself become a prime source of instability. Unless a date is set for early elections it will appear that London is suspending the assembly until it is happy with how the Northern Irish will vote.

The agreement is not dead, and can be fully revived. The current difficulties have arisen because of the failure to implement several of its elements. First, the British government has not fully implemented police reform. That, together with loyalist paramilitary violence, has made demands for the IRA to disband unacceptable to many nationalists who do not trust the police.

Second, the UUP, the most divided party in the executive, has responded to the threat of electoral defeat by Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist party by rejecting the necessity of police reform; illegally refusing to nominate ministers to the north-south ministerial council; and by demanding suspension, at regular intervals, to bring republicans to heel.

Third, Sinn Féin, more heterogeneous than is usually acknowledged, has delivered a start to IRA decommissioning, but has not been able to go further, as it is obliged to do under any plain reading of the agreement. Now the IRA stands accused of espionage and involvement with paramilitaries in Colombia.

This cycle of crisis must be broken. The British government has to keep its promises and implement, through fresh primary legislation, all the reforms proposed in the 1999 Patten report. That would win Sinn Féin acceptance of the new policing regime. Then the reformed police would have both the resources and the political support to control the loyalist paramilitaries who are presently engaged in violence. In that world, the disbanding of the IRA, the main objective, would become feasible.

The cycle of crisis can also be broken by elections. Assume that London's worst fears are correct and that after elections the DUP becomes the majority party on the unionist side, and Sinn Féin replaces the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour party as the majority party among nationalists. This need not be a disaster. The DUP is pro-devolution. Judging by its campaign for last year's Westminster elections, it will espouse orderly renegotiation of the agreement rather than its chaotic dissolution.

Heretical though it may sound, Northern Irish nationalists, and Dublin and London, may find it easier to negotiate with a victorious DUP than a fragmented UUP, especially a UUP with more rejectionists in its ranks after the elections. It would be better, perhaps, to deal with the DUP's pragmatists than the UUP's hardliners.

Sinn Féin's platform is pro-agreement. To maximise its vote it will remain committed, as it says it is, to the path of peace. Police reform and the incentive of further success at the ballot box would make the dismantling of the IRA more likely. As the largest party in the nationalist bloc,

Sinn Féin would then have much more to lose from exclusion from the executive if it was found to be in overt and organised breach of its obligations to cease all paramilitarism.

True, the prospect of the DUP and Sinn Féin agreeing jointly to nominate their respective candidates to the positions of first and deputy first ministers looks improbable. But stranger things have happened in this peace process. It would not be inconceivable were the IRA to disband.

Of course, things may work out this way. The DUP may refuse to work with the assembly and demand full renegotiation of the agreement. An official review of the agreement could then be held. If that failed, further elections could be called, or, as specified in the agreement, Northern Ireland would revert to direct rule with the British-Irish intergovernmental conference.

But instead of giving the DUP and Sinn Féin the chance to make the institutions work, the British government appears intent on conducting a review now and staving off elections as long as possible. That postpones the day when Sinn Féin and the DUP must accept the realities of power-sharing.

The failure of devolution will require the return of British direct rule, albeit with an Irish hand on the rudder. This may be unavoidable. But it is surely better to follow the right constitutional route and first give the voters of Northern Ireland their say.

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