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If peace comes to Northern Ireland this week, don't go overboard at once

By Brendan O'Leary

Tuesday April 7, 1998

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If the miracle of a settlement happens in Ireland, celebrations should be restrained: not just in memory of the dead and wounded of the long war, and not just because some will try to destroy the British-Irish agreement through further violence. Restraint will be required because there will be stress points in the new political architecture that will need painstaking management by the two governments and the Northern Irish parties. Sustaining and implementing the miracle will be at least as difficult as making it.

Let us remind ourselves what is being postponed for subsequent resolution. First, there are the paramilitaries, their weapons and their prisoners, and then there are those who have policed the paramilitaries. The rapid release on licence of the imprisoned paramilitaries who have sustained the cease-fires, is an essential precondition of a sustained peace. The disbanding of the mainstream paramilitaries' organisations is essential in the medium term, but it cannot be expected before there is rapid movement on the release of prisoners. A voluntary and controlled disbanding is also necessary to limit the resources and personnel that might otherwise accrue to the ultras who oppose the settlement - the LVF, the INLA and the Continuity IRA.

The withdrawal of the British Army to its barracks and its return to Great Britain will have been accomplished quickly even though there will be accompanying risks. But the

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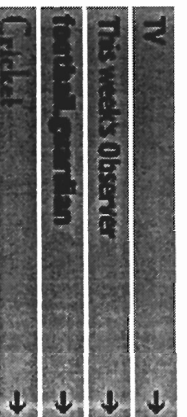
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security sticking point will be the RUC rather than the Army. Policing issues are expected to be handed to an international commission. Unless this commission recommends means to ensure that Catholics and Protestants are proportionally represented in local policing services, and unless a British government delivers unequivocally on its recommendations, then Northern Ireland will never be at peace. Northern Nationalists have bitter experiences of commissions attached to treaties - the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 was accompanied by promises of a boundary commission.

The principles contained in the prospective agreement are welcome: let me give praise where it is due. The new British-Irish agreement, for that is what it will be, will be built around the identities, ideas and interests of both ethno-national communities. It links Northern Ireland to both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland - through the council of the isles and the north-south body. Both will be able to grow in importance, subject to local consent. The agreement corresponds to what is required - a model for the management of differences rather than their elimination.

Nevertheless there will be difficulties. There will be a downsizing of Britain's financial support over time, so the region will have to pull together and look south as well as east if it is not to suffer peripheralisation. Unionists will have some difficulties living with Sinn Fein should its members choose to take their assembly seats. The executive will be vulnerable to the withdrawal of support in the assembly - if many parties join Ian Paisley's DUP in refusing the settlement. The executive and the assembly may deadlock on the development of the north-south council.

As nationalist support in the assembly grows through demographic change, hard-line unionists will become a minority in the assembly - and that will require them to learn a new politics. Much responsibility will accrue to the Alliance Party and the Northern



accrue to the Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland women's coalition in bridging a shrinking majority and a rising minority. The establishment and management of the north-south ministerial council will have to be meaningful to bind most republicans to the settlement, and both jurisdictions will have to live with the likelihood that Sinn Fein will become the fastest growing party in both locations, with concomitant ambitions at least to federalise Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, or her successor, will still have a plentiful in-tray in promoting equality and protecting human rights, and Irish governments present and future will have to prepare for the possibility of a federal Ireland in which there will be a very significant British minority.

So if a miracle happens let us celebrate, but let us remember that implementation is often more important than design.

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