

## **Securing the Irish Peace**

**By Jim Dee | October 9, 2006**

By almost any measure, the Irish peace process has been a resounding success in ending decades of violence that claimed over 3,600 lives in Northern Ireland.

Car bombings, political assassinations, and sectarian murders, along with the heartbreaking stream of funerals that followed, are no longer regular occurrences in the Connecticut-sized province of 1.7 million people. Violence perpetuated by the most bigoted hardliners still occurs, but the frequency and severity have also dropped sharply in recent years.

However, more than eight years after the forging of the landmark Good Friday peace agreement, which initiated a raft of comprehensive political and security reforms affecting republicans and nationalists as well as unionists and loyalists, the peace deal is again facing turbulent times. The North's politicians are jetting off this week to St. Andrews, Scotland for another "last-ditch" effort to resurrect the vexed power-sharing government that the agreement created.

It's not the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that's causing the problems. A recent report by a neutral monitoring commission concluded that the IRA had complied with the agreement by disarming, dismantling its infrastructure devoted to weapons procurement, and forswearing future violence. Instead, a single charismatic individual is acting in the role of spoiler: the leader of the North's largest Unionist party, Ian Paisley.

Although the United States under Clinton played a key role in brokering the Good Friday agreement, the Bush administration is not paying very much attention at all to Ireland. Absent pressure on Paisley from outside actors, the latest round of talks in Scotland will not likely produce a breakthrough. Ireland does not risk returning to a time of troubles. But an opportunity to resolve the Northern Ireland dispute once and for all will have slipped through the fingers of the negotiators.

### **Paisley the Spoiler**

A larger-than-life figure with a caustic wit that plays well in the North, the firebrand Free Presbyterian preacher Ian Paisley founded his own religious denomination in 1951 and his own pro-British unionist party—the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—in 1971. He has sat in Britain's Westminster parliament since 1970, thanks to a base of fundamentalist Protestants, hard-line unionists, and pro-British loyalists steeped in generations of animosity toward Irish nationalists and republicans.

Paisley has always denied any link to illegal paramilitarism. He has insisted his past flirtations with vigilante-style outfits such as 1981's "Third Force" and 1986's Ulster Resistance (UR)—which both staged large militarily-style rallies that Paisley presided over—were completely legal and nonviolent. He claims that by the time UR members were caught gunrunning, he'd severed all contact with the group. But even if Paisley has left his paramilitary links behind, he still represents a destructive force in Irish politics.

When the IRA-allied Sinn Fein party joined peace talks in September 1997, six weeks after the IRA declared its final peace process ceasefire, Paisley's DUP quit the talks to protest Sinn Fein's entry. For the next eight months, the DUP sniped from the sidelines as the other parties gradually hammered out the Good Friday agreement. In May 1998, with the referendum votes tallied at Belfast's Kings Hall, an ashen-faced Paisley scurried from the building after the announcement that more than 71% of the North's voters had endorsed the accord. As he left, groups of pro-British loyalists who'd backed the peace accord chanted "Go Home You Dinosaur!"



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Despite opposing the deal, the DUP participated in the elections to the new 108-member assembly and won 20 seats. While they still refused to talk directly to members of Sinn Fein, the DUP politicians did their jobs and helped make the assembly work. However, the DUP also relentlessly exploited dissatisfaction with the unresolved standoff over IRA disarmament, thereby speeding erosion of unionist support for the peace deal.

## IRA Transformed

In July 2005, the IRA—whose *raison d'être* for more than 80 years had been the waging of an armed struggle to force Britain to withdraw from Ireland—announced that henceforth its volunteers would pursue Irish reunification “through exclusively peaceful means.” The guerrillas also announced that, despite having spent years vowing that they would never decommission so much as “a bullet or an ounce” of explosives, they would speedily complete decommissioning their entire clandestine arsenal.

Two months later, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), a three-member panel tasked under the peace accord with disarming all of Northern Ireland’s paramilitaries, certified that the IRA had kept its word. Two specifically chosen clergy—one a Catholic priest, the other a Protestant minister—also confirmed that the guerrillas had destroyed their weapons.

Ian Paisley and the DUP quickly rejected the clergy’s testimony, claiming that they were IRA lapdogs. Instead Paisley embraced the verdict of a different monitoring body—the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC)—which proclaimed in October 2005 that the IRA had in fact held onto weaponry.

Paisley’s respect for the IMC didn’t last long. By 2006, the commission was issuing increasingly positive assessments of the IRA. In September, the IMC stated that the IRA’s command structure was beneficial to the peace because it helped to make sure that former volunteers stayed committed to peace. On October 4, the IMC went even further by declaring that the IRA had radically transformed itself and was now fully committed to peace. The report added that the IRA had dismantled its departments responsible for weapons procurement, engineering bombs,

and recruiting and training new members. The IMC said the IRA had also had made significant moves to halt the illegal activities that had once funded its armed campaign.

The IMC’s conclusions about the IRA stand in stark contrast to the experience of Northern Ireland’s two main loyalist paramilitary groups: the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA). Both groups have refused to decommission any arms during the peace process. Last week, a particularly notorious UDA brigade actually demanded 8 million pounds sterling from the British government to disband.

The British and Irish governments, and nearly all the North’s parties, warmly welcomed the latest IMC report. Tony Blair declared that “the IRA’s campaign is over. The door is now open to a final settlement, which is why the talks in Scotland are going to be so important.” His Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Hain, added that the IMC report showed “there has been a historic, seismic, and irreversible change in the IRA.”

Since he couldn’t easily reject the IMC’s much-praised report, Paisley instead argued that it proved that his party’s hard-line stance against the IRA was working and that more pressure was needed. He reiterated his demand that all parts of the IRA—including the command structure that the IMC pegged as helpful to the peace—must be dismantled completely before his party would join a Sinn Fein government. This effort to move the goalposts suggests that Paisley simply won’t countenance working with Sinn Fein and will risk destroying the power-sharing government to maintain his uncompromising position.

## Pivotal Police

Paisley and the DUP might be coaxed into a power-sharing government with Sinn Fein if republicans finally endorse changes to the North’s police force mandated by the peace accord. For much of Northern Ireland’s 86-year existence, the mostly Catholic nationalists and republicans have viewed the 90%-plus Protestant police force as bigoted and sectarian. Some cops colluded with loyalist paramilitaries to assassinate IRA suspects and their supporters during the conflict.

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Sinn Fein is the only major party that hasn't endorsed recent reforms to make the police more representative of the North's 53-44% Protestant-Catholic divide (based on 2001 census figures). Sinn Fein wants to shift more police oversight authority from Westminster to a Belfast administration. It also supports stricter limits on the "national security" interventions that Britain's Northern Ireland secretary or the Northern Ireland chief constable can make to prevent inquiries into police misconduct.

If Paisley and Sinn Fein can't agree on a deal, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain says that he'll pull the plug on the Northern Ireland assembly and instead devote more time to expanding links between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Such increased cooperation will only render more irrelevant a border that is steadily fading in economic terms within the context of broader European Union integration trends.

## Washington's Non-Role

Watching all this from across the Atlantic, in theory at least, is the White House. George W. Bush's current Northern Ireland envoy, Mitchell Reiss, will attend this week's talks in Scotland. Reiss, a former State Department official, replaced the State Department's Richard Haass in 2003 when the latter became head of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Given Bush's disputed razor-thin victory over Al Gore in 2000, and his similar close shave in edging out John Kerry in 2004, Republican Party strategists are keenly aware of the potential electoral importance of pleasing the large numbers of Irish-Americans who care about the peace process.

Still, the post-9/11 "war on terror" and the subsequent quagmires of Iraq and Afghanistan have preoccupied the Bush administration. Neither Haass nor Reiss ever had a chance to attain the White House clout enjoyed by Bill Clinton's special Northern Ireland envoy, George Mitchell, who helped chair the peace talks that produced the 1998 Good Friday agreement.

Ever the political animal, Clinton's initial interest in Northern Ireland sprang from a desire to secure Irish-American votes during his 1992 presidential run.

According to some close colleagues, Clinton began reading up on the conflict as soon as he took office. Eventually he yielded to lobbying from Irish-American members of Congress who wanted him to back an infant peace process advanced by the leaders of two Irish nationalist parties in the North—Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams and John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labor Party.

Despite vehement opposition from Britain's Conservative Prime Minister John Major, Clinton granted Adams his first-ever visa to the United States in early 1994, allowing the Sinn Fein leader to make a brief visit to New York. Clinton's move was later widely seen as a key factor in getting the IRA to call its first peace process ceasefire six months later.

In an interview for this article, Clinton's National Security Adviser Anthony Lake said that in the period after Adams was granted his first visa to the United States, "I probably talked to the leaders of the various parties by phone, as well as the people I was working with in the British and Irish governments, at least once every few weeks. And that was because I cared about it, but more importantly, President Clinton really was invested in it."

President Bush, on the other hand, has invested little time in Ireland. To date, his most notable peace-process-related policy initiative has been last year's imposing of a fundraising ban in the United States on Gerry Adams. The ban outraged Sinn Fein backers for it took place after the IRA had stood down all its units and completely disarmed.

The Bush administration instituted the fundraising prohibition to pressure Sinn Fein into supporting policing reforms. So far, the Bush administration has shown no inclination to place any similar pressure on Ian Paisley or the DUP.

In an interview for this article, Bruce Morrison, a former Democratic congressman from Connecticut who was instrumental in getting Bill Clinton interested in Ireland, said the White House has no leverage with unionists. "It has nothing to give them, or take from them," said Morrison. "This is not a priority for the Bush administration. And all the rest of this Kremlinology is a waste of energy. It is not a priority. Their priority is Iraq."

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One Washington insider with many years of involvement in Irish affairs was even more blunt about the state of play: “Who’s worried about Ireland? It doesn’t matter. Nothing bad is happening in Ireland. They can play silly deckchairs-on-the-Titanic games, but there is nothing there. There’s no iceberg. So who cares?”

At the end of this week, the St. Andrews talks may or may not produce a breakthrough deal. The stakes, however, are no longer what they were. There is no widespread fear of impending doom anymore when the North’s politicians fail to find common ground. In fact, the plain truth is that most people in Northern Ireland became bored with the seemingly endless political bickering several years ago, and most go about their daily business largely ignoring the political posturing that accompanies the latest version of “make-or-break” talks.

At the same time, having endured decades of bloody strife, most people in the North would surely welcome any deal that would replace political confrontation with a new spirit of real cooperation. Many concrete issues need tackling—such as the abysmal housing conditions in places like south Belfast’s Village area, an overwhelmingly

Protestant section of the city, and the unemployment rate of Catholics, which is twice that of Protestants.

Beyond the obvious local impact, the final bedding down of the Irish peace process could cause international ripples as well. The sight of once intractable enemies finally leaving behind entrenched animosities in order to tackle meaty issues of governance and societal transformation may well inspire others locked in similar conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to do the same.

And, although highly unlikely at present, a St. Andrews success might even eventually give White House hawks pause to consider whether the time and money spent pursuing an elusive military solution to Iraq might be better spent. As the experience of Northern Ireland suggests, fostering new channels of dialogue and flexibility have a better chance of producing a truly lasting peace than force of arms and a refusal to negotiate.

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