

# Talks on Northern Ireland: Optimism Is Avoided

By STEVEN PROKESCH  
Special to The New York Times

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, April 27 In churches throughout the north and south of Ireland on Sunday, Roman Catholics and Protestants will join in a special prayer that political talks about to start here will bring peace to the land, where 2,872 people have been killed in civil strife since 1969.

The talks here between the Protestant unionists, who want this province where they are the majority to remain British, and the Catholic nationalists, who yearn for a united Ireland in which they would be the majority, begin on Tuesday and are scheduled to last 11 weeks. But judging from all the cautions against over optimism coming from politicians and the pessimism among the people in the British province, the talks will need every single prayer.

"There's no euphoria," said the Rev. Matthew Wallace, a Catholic priest who has been deeply involved in grassroots efforts to bring jobs to West Belfast, a working-class area where unemployment in some Catholic neighborhoods is as much as 80 percent.

This will mark the first time in 15 years that leaders of Ulster's major political parties who do not advocate violence have met to try to settle their differences. Their hope, which is shared by the British and Irish Governments, is that they will be able to come up with a mutually acceptable system of regional government so they can resume the job of governing the province, which has been largely ruled from London since 1972.

## Dublin Might Join Talks

That means a system that guarantees Ulster's 600,000-member Catholic minority a meaningful say in how the province is run and protects them from the kind of discrimination that led to direct rule, yet satisfies all those among the 900,000 Protestants who demand majority rule. And a compromise will not be easy to achieve. Sinn Fein, the political arm of the Irish Republican Army, has been excluded from the talks until it renounces violence.

If the Ulster politicians make significant progress, the Irish Government will join the talks, which are being headed by Peter Brooke, the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It would be the first time that Dublin has negotiated with leaders of all of Ulster's main constitutional parties.

Indeed, these are the most comprehensive negotiations on the future of this island of 5 million since those leading to partition about 70 years ago. They will address the three sets of relationships that have been at the heart of Northern Ireland's divisive problems: those between the Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists of Ulster, between the North and the South, and between Ireland and Britain.

Another major item on the agenda is to devise a system — possibly a pan-Irish institution — that will enable the



Photographs by Jonathan Player for The New York Times

As Northern Ireland prepared for talks to end the sectarian strife that has killed 2,872 people since 1969, children in a Roman Catholic section of Belfast played near a mural promoting the Irish Republican Army.



The New York Times

Talks on the political future of Northern Ireland begin Tuesday.

two parts of Ireland at least to be friends if not to unite one day. To get both those things, Prime Minister Charles Haughey of Ireland is offering unionist leaders, who represent most of the province's 900,000 Protestants, an attractive incentive: the possibility that the Republic might renounce its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland.

## An Island-Wide Vote

London and Dublin have also promised that in return for an agreement acceptable to all, they would give the unionists something else they desperately want: an end to the British-Irish pact of 1985, which gave Dublin a con-

sultative role in running Northern Ireland.

It is highly possible that any kind of broad-reaching agreement will be put to an island-wide vote. But if few people harbor hope that the politicians will be able reach an agreement, it is understandable given all the failures in the last two decades. With the exception of John Alderdice, the 36-year-old head of the Alliance party, a small liberal unionist party, the leaders of the negotiating parties have been associated with those failures.

They include John Hume, the 54-year-old leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party, the nationalist party that represents most of Ulster's Catholics, and leaders of the two main unionist parties that represent most of the province's Protestants: James Molyneux, the 70-year-old head of the Ulster Unionists, and the Rev. Ian Paisley, the 65-year-old leader of the smaller Democratic Unionists. Indeed, it took Mr. Brooke, Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary, more than 14 months to get everyone, including Dublin officials, to agree to talk.

What especially breeds cynicism is the fact that Mr. Molyneux and Mr. Paisley were deeply involved in the protests by Protestant loyalists that brought down the last serious attempt at regional government: the coalition executive of moderate Ulster Unionists, the Alliance Party and the S.D.L.P. that was set up under the so-called Sunningdale agreement of 1973. Mr. Paisley and Mr. Molyneux objected strenuously to guarantees that the

Catholic nationalists would enjoy seats on the executive irrespective of their electoral support.

## Acceptance of Compromises

The widespread disillusionment with politicians and mass yearning for an end to the strife that has killed 2,872 people in the province since 1969 were the main reasons that politicians agreed to talk. Nobody wanted to be seen as the one who refused. Mr. Molyneux has made it clear that he thinks it is overly dangerous to hold talks dealing with the conflicting aspirations of Ulster's two communities.

But many caution that just because they wanted political talks does not mean that the two communities are ready to accept the compromises any settlement will entail.

Adding to concerns about whether there will be sufficient public acceptance of any settlement is the fact that Sinn Fein has been excluded. Those saying a way must be found to include Sinn Fein are not just the one-third of Ulster's Catholics, most of them working class, who support it but also moderate Catholics and liberal Protestants.

Mr. Hume and other politicians argue that a referendum on the settlement will insure that Sinn Fein supporters don't feel disenfranchised. But virtually everyone still expects any agreement to set off a surge in violence by paramilitary groups from both communities intent on undermining it.

Following are views expressed by some prominent members of the Northern Irish community

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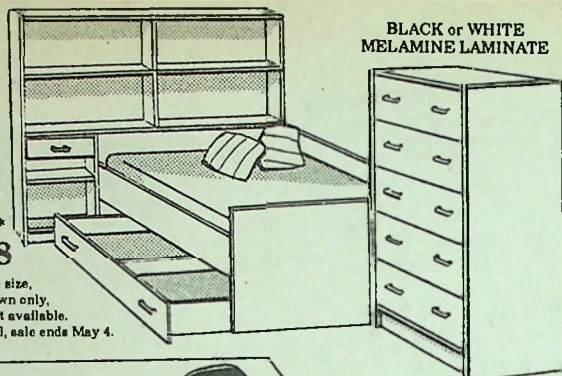
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North's Fate: Concerns and Warnings From the Adversaries

The Rev. Martin Smyth

Member of Parliament and senior vice president of the Ulster Unionist Party, a mostly Protestant party, the largest in Northern Ireland and a champion of continued union with Britain. It is being represented at a new round of talks on Northern Ireland's future, beginning Tuesday.

Jim Molyneaux, leader of my party, has always taken the position that constructive politics in which parties work together on bread-and-butter issues is much better than high-wire negotiations. I share that view.

It would be wrong to say that anyone going into these talks could be over optimistic because we recognize that the real issue despite all the attempts to cloud it is one of national identity, which I don't think can be resolved in the talks to the mutual satisfaction of everyone.

My big concern is that the Social Democratic and Labor Party, like in the past, will maintain its intransigent demand that it be guaranteed a place in a Northern Ireland executive government no matter what happens in elections. So why bother having elections?

I can't imagine that the London and Dublin Governments, having invested so much effort, will allow the talks to be a complete failure. But

John Alderdice

Leader of the Alliance Party, a small, liberal unionist party of Protestants and Catholics. The Alliance will be joining the talks.

The protection of minority rights is absolutely crucial. A democracy isn't a democracy because there is majority rule. Majoritarianism just may be populism and that can be fascist. Democracy is about how you treat your minorities. All the four parties in these talks are minority parties.

We want a regional government

John Hume

Member of Parliament and leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party, the largest Irish nationalist party in Northern Ireland. It seeks the unification of Ireland through peaceful means and will be represented at the talks. Most of its members are Catholics.

I am more hopeful than optimistic about the talks. We face very major difficulties in reaching an agreement. But if we do and it is endorsed by the people North and South, then it will make a major contribution to ending violence because the Irish people as a whole will have spoken for the first time.



Tom Hartley

Chairman of Sinn Fein, the second-largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland and the political arm of the Irish Republican Army, the mostly Catholic guerrilla group fighting for union with the Irish Republic. Sinn Fein was not invited to the talks.

Sinn Fein represents 35 percent of the nationalist community in the six counties. The politics of that base should be reflected certainly in any attempt to try and solve the problems of the six counties.

Although the British Government has something like 30,000 armed personnel in Ireland, Republicans don't say, "We won't talk to you." We don't try to create the preconditions about the British talking to us. What we are saying is there is a very serious problem in Ireland that stems from British interference in Irish affairs. As a means of addressing that problem

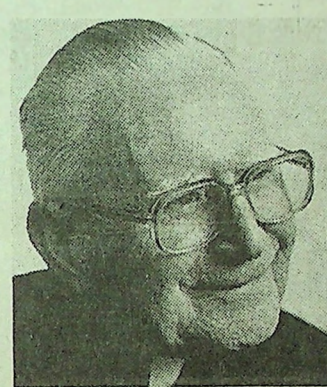
they might give us some other form of monstrosity to replace the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985, which has given British and Irish civil servants a larger say in Northern Ireland's affairs than its elected Members of Parliament.

It's quite conceivable that there will be an escalation in terrorism in reaction to whatever comes out of the talks.

with legislative and executive responsibilities, with the executive being made up on a proportionate basis of representatives of the parties. We want that and other institutionalized protection for minorities.

I don't like to think too much about what the prospects are if we don't succeed in reaching agreement. It will be very very damaging. Every time a political initiative has failed in the last 20 years, it has led to a great falling away in morale, some talented people leaving politics and a boost to the terrorists who can say, "There you have it, democratic politics can't deliver."

I would hope that in these talks we would apply the lessons of Europe. In Europe, they agreed to build institutions which respected the differences and diversity but allowed people to work their common ground together. I would hope we in Ireland would agree on institutions of government, North and South, which respect our differences but which allow us to work our common ground, which is considerable and which will grow, particularly in the economic field. If we work together in building that common ground, we'll spill our sweat together and not our blood. We'll break down the barriers between our people and we will grow together at our own speed toward a new unity which respects our diversity.



Cahal Daly

Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the religious leader of Northern Ireland's Roman Catholic minority. The Church was not invited to the talks.

Northern Ireland cannot be regarded unifically and exclusively British. Nor on the other hand can it be regarded as unifically and exclusively Irish. Both dimensions are intrinsic to Northern Ireland and must be part of the internal solution to the Northern Ireland problem.

One of the greatest obstacles to achieving an agreed settlement is precisely what the Irish Republican Army and its political arm, Sinn Fein, call the armed struggle.

It seems clear from the things that they have been saying that Sinn Fein is somewhat envious of those that are involved in the talks and resent their exclusion. Hopefully progress in the talks will bring increased pressure on Sinn Fein to take the only step that would make it possible for them to become involved in the evolving political process: to renounce violence.



Peter Robinson

Member of Parliament and deputy leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, the second-largest unionist party. It is sending a delegation to the talks.

I'm happy that the process has begun. The distinction between talks held in the 1970's and today is that the people who will be at the table this time have the ability to sell an agreement to the electorate. Before, the majority of the unionist community was outside the door.

My hopes are that we can agree to new structures for Northern Ireland that will be democratically based and which will recognize that there has to be and is a role for all constitutional minorities so they can feel they can make their contribution in a valuable and meaningful way. But the term power sharing is not part of my vocabulary. Although power sharing can mean a number of types of government administration, what it has become attached to is the type of rigged and enforced coalition executive of unionists and Irish nationalists that was brought down in 1974. The one thing we don't want is to attempt to build new structures on the rubble of the past.

The fact that the Republic of Ireland's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland is on the table is an encouragement to us. What I'm hoping for is that we can live apart together. In that contradiction there is a recognition that we are on one island, that we are two separate states, but there is absolutely no reason why there shouldn't be a good relationship between the two.

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