

Elections to All-Party Peace Talks the Next Step?

The terrorist campaigns in Northern Ireland have been on hold now since late 1994, and still All-Party Peace talks have not started. Nationalists say that the Talks should start immediately, without the de-commissioning of the arsenals of the paramilitaries. The Irish Government supports this position. Unionists representing more than half the people of Northern Ireland, refuse to participate in Talks with them, until the de-commissioning of weapons has at least begun. The British Government has taken the same position. It was this stand-off that led the British and Irish Prime Ministers to ask former Senator George Mitchell to lead a task force which would try to make progress on the issue of the weapons.

In his report published last week, Senator Mitchell and his colleagues outlined a sophisticated package of measures involving the acceptance of six principles of democracy, a compromise on progressive decommissioning of weapons, and a series of confidence-building measures. One of the proposed confidence-building measures involved the possibility of elections to All-Party Talks, but when British Prime Minister, John Major, in a speech accepting the Mitchell Report, singled out this suggestion for particular attention, and proposed a move to early elections, nationalist protests were loud and vehement. Has the Mitchell Commission failed? Is the Irish Peace Process about to collapse?

As one of the very few politicians who has actually been in talks consistently over the past year with **all** the parties to the conflict, I have come to the conclusion that the **only** practical way to get all parties to the table in the near future is an election. Unionist politicians are not under serious pressure from their supporters to talk to Sinn Fein, and in the run-up to a Westminster election the Ulster Unionist Party, is certainly not going to give the more extreme Democratic Unionist Party a stick with which to beat them. Unionists have always said that they would not talk to Sinn Fein without de-commissioning of weapons, and they cannot change that position without an electoral mandate from their people. Nationalists meanwhile are worried that an election is simply a device to delay talks, and destroy the current basis for negotiations which involves the Irish Government, an involvement which they see as essential in strengthening their position.

There is another dimension too. While the political elites are playing for advantage, the ordinary people have made it very clear that they are not prepared to contemplate a return to the terrorist campaigns. No-one actually wants the process to fail. There is a strong argument which says that the people, in the new post-cease-fire climate, deserve a chance to decide who they want to negotiate on their behalf. The absence of violence has created a much less frightening context for life here. People feel more free to think and talk about a new stable, peaceful way of life. Why should they not have the normal democratic input provided by an election, in which they can give the politicians a mandate to talk? In recent opinion polls some 70% say that they would welcome an election to All-Party Talks, and significant support seems to be forthcoming from all sections of grass roots opinion.

If there is to be an election however, the fears of nationalists must be addressed. The North-South relationship, and the involvement of the Irish Government should continue as before. The elections should only be for the purpose of talks, not for any legislative or administrative purpose. The whole exercise should be time-limited, so that abuse of the process is kept to a minimum, and any outcome should require a weighted majority to ensure that the concerns of the minority are an essential component. Finally the whole settlement must address all the sets of relationships, not only within Northern Ireland, but also between North and South, and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Is all of this possible? I believe that it is, and indeed it is not impossible that the mechanisms could even be coming into place by the end-of-February target date which the British and Irish Governments set themselves on the eve of President Clinton's momentous visit to Northern Ireland.

The race is now on to ensure that by the time the President welcomes the Irish from North and South to celebrate St Patrick's Day 1996 at the White House, the Peace Process to which he has devoted so much interest has taken another step forward. The most likely way that can happen is through elections to All-Party Talks.

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