

Where now for the Northern Ireland Peace Process?

Until 1992 efforts to bring a permanent peace to Northern Ireland focused on negotiating a political settlement involving the more moderate elements on both sides of the divide. This assumed that such an achievement would marginalize the extremists on both sides, and lead to a permanent end to a violence.

From early 1993 however, a new strategy was proposed by the then Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds, and SDLP Leader John Hume. This new strategy proposed instead to achieve an end of violence first, making all-inclusive negotiation of a settlement much easier. To provide a basis for this approach a set of fundamental principles was negotiated between the British and Irish Governments, and published as a Joint Declaration at Downing Street in December 1993. Central to the Declaration was the principle that the deciding factor in the constitutional future of Northern Ireland would be the views not of London, nor of Dublin, but of the people of Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein and the IRA refused to accept this but were persuaded to call a cease-fire on the basis that they might be able to persuade others to come around to their way of thinking in negotiations.

In fact over succeeding months the momentum continued to move away from the IRA position. At the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation called by the Dublin Government, many months of negotiations produced a report on the political way forward. The clear position of that report, to which every other nationalist party in Ireland signed up, reflected the principle of consent as outlined in the Downing Street Declaration. Sinn Fein opted out of the nationalist consensus and rejected the report when it was brought back to the plenary of the Forum on Friday 2 February, just a week before the fateful London bombing.

Just a couple of weeks before, Senator George Mitchell's International Commission had produced a Report on the decommissioning of weapons. It said that the decommissioning should take place during the All-Party Talks, which might well result from an election, but would be open only to those who accepted the six principles of democracy laid down by Senator Mitchell and his team. This report, presented only a couple of weeks ago, was also acceptable to everyone, except Sinn Fein. So, both on democratic consent, and the de-commissioning of weapons Sinn Fein had failed to win the argument by democratic means.

The Sinn Fein leadership however seemed genuinely shocked when news of the London bombing came through. It seems that despite the fact that the decision to return to terrorism was a major strategic shift, it had not been discussed with the political leadership. The small unelected Army Council of the IRA had simply decided to go back to the terrorist campaign. They did not like the way things were going, so they simply set aside the elected representatives of Sinn Fein and restarted the violence. More worrying still, the political leadership of Sinn Fein seems powerless to stop it, or

even voice reservations about the decision.

The implications for the Peace Process are stark. If Sinn Fein is unable to abide by the discipline of democracy, and to challenge the IRA in its use of terrorism, then there may be little option for the British and Irish Governments but to return to their pre-1993 strategy where they work together to create a settlement which has the support of the broad mass of people on both sides of the divide. Extremists like Sinn Fein then become like Hamas in the Middle East, or the hard-liners in South Africa, unable to accept the fair and reasonable compromise, and setting themselves back outside of the democratic pale.

For the ordinary people of Northern Ireland however, such larger considerations of political strategy are not the current subject of conversation. Fear and despair again stalks the city, which until Friday night at six o'clock was becoming an increasingly prosperous, and fun place to be. One suspects however that it will not be long before we see through the gloom, the resilience and determination which sustained the population through a quarter of a century of terrorism and which will ensure that the search for a lasting peace will not be blocked for long, even by those who are determined to have their way through the bomb.