



The long Good Friday

Maeve Connaughton

The tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and the first anniversary of the executive it envisaged underlined that the arrangements hammered out in 1998, with subsequent modifications, seem here to stay. Ten years on, socialists could do with clarifying their attitudes to them.

Common perception once maintained that Sinn Féin was emerging the winner throughout the peace process, but a decade on it is clear that those laurels belong to the DUP. Sinn Féin has swapped positions with the SDLP and become the biggest nationalist party in the north. But the DUP have gone further, not just overtaking the official unionists but marginalising them altogether. Post-Good Friday unionism shows a tougher, more extreme face than post-Good Friday nationalism.

Republicanism is in slow retreat, settling for a decreasing fraction of what it spent years trying to achieve. Its army has had to cease fire, give up its entire arsenal for destruction, stand down its soldiers, and before too long will have to dismantle what symbolically remains of its command structure. The army it fought for twenty five years hasn't handed over a bullet and has only withdrawn to barracks, ready to re-engage if and when its political masters need it. The defining characteristic of Sinn Féin in northern politics is not its support for a united Ireland—now a vague long-term aspiration rather than a concrete immediate demand—but its role as an advocate for the nationalist community within the framework of the northern state.

Sinn Féin's entry into the current executive came, not from a position of strength, but from its weakest position in decades. After the Northern Bank robbery and the cover-up of Robert McCartney's murder, the republican movement became a pariah, unceremoniously exiled from all the corridors of power it was proud of having squeezed into. It was precisely at this lowest ebb that Paisley held out the prospect of sharing power, like the spider inviting the fly into his web. Only a few months earlier he had scuppered that prospect, but a humbled Sinn Féin was a party he could do business with on his own terms.

Unionism now occupies a position stronger than at any time since the 1960s. The claim that the north legitimately belongs to Britain was never more widely accepted, and the border is stronger than it ever was. The fact that more political activity now straddles that border only strengthens it the more. If tourism or transport or whatever can be jointly developed by two partitioned states, then why end the partition? As the move of Aer Lingus from Shannon to Belfast shows, partition allows Irish capital to run a race to the bottom of workers' conditions without even going overseas. The Good Friday Agreement makes partition work more efficiently by bringing in an unprecedentedly wide range of political forces to run it.

If anything, unionism is moving rightwards to a more uncompromising position. Paisley has been shoved aside for looking too comfortable with his new partners. He is right to insist that he brought Sinn Féin into the administration of British rule, ending years of republican insurrection. But the endless republican readiness to compromise is not matched on the unionist side. While republican dissidents cannot get beyond a less than miserable level of support, anti-Agreement unionists attract a pretty decent level, and the DUP intransigents are well ensconced at the highest levels of their party and likely to give it an even more stubborn look.

The done-to-death cliché has it that the north is in an era, not just of peace, but of prosperity. If it is, then we can object with Connolly that prosperity such as they speak of is purely capitalist prosperity. The north of Ireland is being touted around the world as an oasis for the world's business speculators, with willing cheap labour and tax breaks galore. Paisley and McGuinness even brought this dream to Wall Street, the symbolic heart of global capitalism. Apparently no one objected to a leader of a party nominally committed to a socialist republic gleefully banging a hammer to open another day's trading in human misery. It is conceivable under certain circumstances that a socialist might enter the New York Stock Exchange with a hammer, but it would be to close the place down rather than open it.

The economic basis of the northern settlement is unequivocally right-wing. The executive is there to implement neo-liberal economic policy, with privatisation, water charges and cutbacks all high on its menu. British subsidies to the public sector are rapidly drying up. Growing signs of world recession reduce the chance of inward investment materialising anyway.

Such an atmosphere is not conducive to cross-community harmony but to intensified sectarian competition for scarcer resources. If there was ever anything to the belief that a forced marriage of unionist and nationalist politicians would bring communities together on the ground, the past decade provides nothing to back it up. The number of 'peace walls' keeping communities apart has even increased at a faster rate since the ceasefires and the Agreement. The wound has been stitched up on the surface, but still festers under the skin.

The Good Friday Agreement has not solved sectarian divisions, for the straightforward reason that it is based on reaffirming, legitimising and perpetuating them. The Agreement's mechanisms aim to balance a unionist bloc against a nationalist bloc. Any political force that can't or won't fit into either of these is handicapped from the start. When the votes are added up at Stormont, x nationalists plus x unionists have to agree, but The Others are set at nought in the equation. This smothers any potential non-sectarian voice, and so the Agreement puts a premium on voting for one of the traditional political camps.

But while cross-community consent is required for almost anything you can imagine, this does not apply to the basic question of who exercises ultimate sovereignty over the north. On this big issue the complicated system of checks and balances is out the window, and naked majoritarianism rules: the north belongs to Britain because the majority want it to, and the rest can go hang. Northern Ireland is still very much part of Her Britannic Majesty's dominions, the southern state having abandoned its symbolic claim over it and all parties agreeing to respect its current status as a British possession. The consensus is not to park the constitutional question but to accept the unionist answer to it.

It is no longer polite to point out that this majority was deliberately crafted with the forcible creation of a state just the right size to guarantee such a majority. The old democratic argument that the partition of Ireland was one of the great injustices of the twentieth century leaves you open to an accusation of antediluvian sectarianism. The most undemocratic act of modern Irish history has been retrospectively rubber-stamped, officially rewritten as a necessary and just recognition of the rights of the northern Protestant community.

Given this, what is likely to happen should that community eventually find itself a minority in those six counties? If northern Protestants require a state of their own for self-protection, the clamour would surely arise to do it all over again, to create another place that unionists could call home. The reorganisation of local government in the north even provides a potential blueprint for repartition, with green super-councils running things west of the Bann and orange super-councils to the east. If an uneconomic six-county state was worth artificially shoring up all these years, why not an uneconomic three- or four-county state? No carving out of territory for a unionist statelet could fail to condemn Catholic

workers to an even worse position. The only question is whether repartition would be merely tragic or truly horrific.

The nettle has to be grasped. Increasingly, the left is falling in with the conventional wisdom that it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. But the longer this particular dog is left unchallenged, the more ferocious its teeth are likely to be when bared. Either partition is a good thing, in which case socialists should argue for it to continue indefinitely, or it is a bad thing, in which case we should argue for it to be ended as soon as possible. Sitting on the increasingly overcrowded fence is not an option. Of course, arguing for socialism on an all-Ireland basis will rarely be popular with workers raised within a unionist mindset, but they will be equally suspicious of socialists who have nothing to say on the biggest issue dividing workers in the north. Differences within the working class can only be overcome by confronting them, not by acting as if they didn't exist.

Socialists looking for a united workers' republic clearly have to stress at every opportunity that this is not the same as the traditional Catholic nationalist conception of a united Ireland. But this doesn't mean, as the amended southern constitution has it, respecting people's right to a British identity. Unionist or loyalist identity isn't actually British at all. No one in Britain recognises unionists as having anything in common with themselves or being anything other than Irish. Northern Protestants slot easily enough into contemporary British popular culture, but no more easily than anyone else in Ireland. Northern loyalism doesn't celebrate the great cultural achievements of our neighbouring island, but a perception of itself as being apart from and better than the other inhabitants of Ireland. It doesn't commemorate the Battle of the Boyne for what it was, the victory of one useless king in alliance with the Pope against another useless king, but for its mythical status as a zenith of Protestant supremacy. This is an identity no socialist can find anything to cherish in, and one that offers nothing to northern Protestant workers but the deadest of dead ends.

The unity of the working class means that we are prepared not just to stand on a picket line together but to live together without privileges or borders. A worker afraid of being over-run by Catholics, immigrants or gays will be in no position to advance his own class interests. If he joins in with the ruling class in building up barriers against them living alongside him in equality, then he is actively undermining his own class interests.

And opposition to sectarianism cuts both ways. The growing feeling in the northern nationalist community that 'we' are advancing and getting one over on 'them' is pathetic and pernicious. At the same time, socialists who want a united Ireland seem unclear why they want it. Often it comes down to a nostalgic nationalism that Ireland is one country and should be united, not that far from the simplistic ideology that backs up the worthless military efforts of dissident republican groups. Ten years after the Good Friday Agreement, the left needs to formulate a renewed argument for the relevance of Irish unity.

Left-wing opposition to British rule was once partly based on the discrimination that it imposed on the Catholic working class, and such discrimination is now assumed to reside only in black-and-white archive documentaries. But the form of discrimination has changed more than the substance. At a fundamental bread-and-butter level, to be a Catholic in the north still means a far greater likelihood of unemployment. The 'equality agenda' is still subject to a unionist veto, with the DUP constantly boasting of how they are frustrating it. For all the reforms over four decades, the most basic discrimination of all remains in place: northern nationalists are still second-class citizens in a state they never consented to live under.

For socialists the prime relevance of the demand to remove the border is the need for working-class unity. Far from being a barrier to class politics, raising the question of the border is a prerequisite for it. The united action that northern workers can and do display in individual strikes and campaigns can only strengthen and extend itself if it attempts to

provide an answer to the big question of northern politics. Otherwise it is forever condemned to go so far and no further, to repeatedly refuse the big hurdle and return to the starting blocks, never exercising the gravitational pull needed to break workers free of communal politics.

A socialism that dodges awkward questions will get no more than it deserves. The division of the working class between north and south, and within the north, is an obstacle that socialism in Ireland will have to tackle. As against the perpetuation of sectarianism that the long Good Friday represents, we need to hold out the notion of an Ireland united in the hands of its workers. At the rich and rare highpoints of northern class struggle—1907, 1919, 1932—socialists who made no secret of their support for Irish independence gave a lead. When James Connolly argued that socialists in Belfast should adopt such an approach, they asked him if he thought it would make their work any easier. “I answered that I did not, that on the contrary it would arouse passions immensely more bitter than had even been met here by the Socialist movement in the past, but that it would make our propaganda more fruitful and our organisation more enduring.”

Red Banner 32
June 2008