

Northern Ireland

Back into the bearpit?



RUC clash with mourners at the funeral of reputed INLA chief, Gino Gallagher

THE CRISIS provoked by Britain's plan for elections for a new assembly in Northern Ireland is the most serious since the Provisionals announced their ceasefire on 31 August 1994. It may destroy the ceasefire and lead to the resumption of the IRA war.

The Provisionals called their ceasefire because they were finally forced to face the fact that they could not win the war — essentially a war against the Protestant majority of Northern Ireland's people — and the strategy of the "pan-nationalist alliance", worked out by John Hume of the SDLP, seemed to offer them an alternative. They hoped that the influence of Dublin and of the USA, levered into action by the Irish diaspora, a powerful force in US politics, could be used to force Britain to "sort out" the Protestants and to force the NI Protestants into some variant of an all-Ireland framework.

The "pan-nationalist bloc" — Provisional IRA-Sinn Féin/the constitutional nationalist SDLP/the parties in the 26 counties — does have some weight, but most of its components do not want to, and in fact almost certainly could not, push Britain into trying to force the Protestants into a united Ireland.

It would require full-scale repression.

The strategy of Britain and the Irish Republic is essentially to build on the model of the European Community (gradually weaving links while leaving formal borders untouched) and the framework of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which on the political level gives Dublin a voice on what happens in Northern Ireland.

This is not what the Provisionals want, and there is probably a hard core willing to take up arms again to fight against it.

On the other side, the British government wants and needs to bring the Protestants along with it, and has thus gone along with Unionist "spoiling" demands for the Provisionals to give up their weapons before talks can start.

There is much political manoeuvring, with Britain striking stances to keep the Unionists on board and Dublin doing the same for the Provisionals, but there is a real gulf under the manoeuvres.

The Mitchell Commission proposals were designed to smooth over the issue of IRA weapons, but Britain cannot go along with Mitchell and start "all-party talks" without losing the Unionists.

And now, to try to draw in the Unionists, Britain has acted unilaterally, proposing elections for a new Northern Ireland assembly — flouting Dublin's legal right to be consulted, and throwing the political process back out of the Anglo-Irish framework into the Northern Ireland framework which has again and again proved unviable.

This tack has been proved unworkable before. The Provos called a ceasefire in 1975. Britain set up a Constitutional Convention in Northern Ireland to design a new framework. They hoped for some power-sharing deal. But the Unionists would not cooperate. When William Craig, a former Unionist hard-line leader, came out for power-sharing, he was instantly and devastatingly repudiated. The Convention achieved nothing, and Britain eventually prorogued it. The ceasefire collapsed.

John Hume has denounced the British government's initiative, and Dublin too has responded angrily, probably in part to help Gerry Adams keep the Provos in line. But a major split in the Provisionals, and the breakdown of the whole framework developed since the ceasefire, is now a real and tragic possibility.