Northern Ireland: will talks bring a solution?

THE results of Northern Ireland's 30 May elections are not known as we go to press. Representatives of those elected are to start in the "all party" negotiations due to start on 10 June.

The main nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, will certainly take part, representing the Catholics. However large a vote it wins, Provisional Sinn Fein will not be allowed to take part in the talks unless the Provisional IRA declares a new ceasefire. An indefinite ceasefire does not seem likely, but it is not impossible. On page 10, we print the account by Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein of the issues and the obstacles. Does he present the issues honestly and comprehensively? And what are the prospect s for the talks starting in June?

In theory, the people of Northern Ireland could now proceed to work out a way of living together and begin to create appropriate new institutions and structures. In practice, however, the differences between the extremes of the two communities remain vast and unbridgeable. It is unlikely that the extreme poles of Unionism and nationalism will be so small a part of either community that a middle ground consensus will emerge, uniting enough of the two communities to shape events.

This is not the first such assembly in Northern Ireland's recent history: something like it was set up in the early 1980s, and there was the Constitutional Assembly in 1975 and '76. The gaps proved unbridgeable. We are about to learn whether there has been sufficient movement for something new to emerge now. It is a good point to take stock.

For a generation, the Six Counties has been in a state of latent, and sometimes simmering, civil war, kept at bay only by the British army, which has often behaved with great savagery against the Catholics.

When that army "went in", on 13 August 1969, Northern Ireland had already broken down and fallen apart into the beginnings of outright civil war. The army "froze" the situation. That is what it is still doing.

In August 1969 there was a Home Rule government in Belfast. Run by Protestants and Unionists, it had an armed police force, the RUC, and a large force of armed special constables, the B-Specials, which was in fact an army. The RUC was overwhelmingly Protestant in composition; the B-Specials, entirely and jealously Protestant — a sectarian militia, in fact.

The Catholics, second class citizens for fifty years, were unarmed, except for stones, improvised petrol bombs, and an illegal gun here and there. In Derry and Belfast in August 1969, those Catholics fought the forces of the Protestant state and freelance Protestant sectarian mobs. Only a very feeble and shadowy IRA existed and it had long ago disarmed. It played no important part in the fighting. The present IRA came later, a product of impasse.

In Derry, police, B-Specials and civilian sectarians tried to invade the Bogside — a Catholic ghetto outside the walls of Derry City — where they had, some months earlier, beaten one man, Samuel Devenny, to death during a police riot. The Catholics resisted, built barricades to keep them out, and used stones and petrol bombs — against guns — to deter them.

They beat them. Weeping and hysterical policemen, unused to resistance from the despised "Taigs", retreated from the conflict with the angry Bogsiders.

When the fighting spread to Belfast, where some hundreds of Catholic families were burned out of their homes, and seemed to be on the point of spreading to other towns, the British army was sent in to act like an iron scaffolding, holding things together. ▸

The army presence, ostentatiously welcomed by the Catholics, was seen by the British Labour government as a short-term affair, while emergency reforms were rushed through aimed at satisfying the indisputably just demands of the Catholics.

Reforms were quickly made in the electoral system; the RUC was disarmed, the sectarian special constables disbanded; British civil servants were sent to understudy their sectarian-tinged Northern Irish equivalents and ensure "fair play" for the Catholics. A better Northern Ireland seemed in the making.

But it was all illusion. Less than a year on from August 1969, when Catholics welcomed British soldiers with the much-referred-to cups of tea, the IRA, now split in two and revitalised, fought a gun battle with the British army in West Belfast.

A few months later, in February-March 1971, the newly-formed Provisional IRA launched an all-out military campaign. Two years on, in August 1971, the British and Northern Ireland authorities brought in internment without charge or trial — exclusively for Catholics.

Less than three years on, in March 1972, Britain scrapped the Belfast Home Rule parliament and assumed direct rule.

In May 1974, a General Strike brought down the Catholic-Protestant power-sharing government which had been set up as a short-lived replacement for the Protestant Home Rule government which Britain had been forced to scrap. It has been British direct rule ever since.

What went wrong for the Labour government hopes in 1969 of a new start in Northern Ireland? The Northern Irish sub-state proved unreformable. The convulsions of 1969 were not a passing difficulty, but a terminal breakdown of the Partition settlement imposed in 1920-22.

It has so far proved impossible to put Northern Ireland back together again as it was before August 1969. Britain does not dare let the Protestant Unionists rule themselves in the state set up to give them Home Rule!

Since 1969 Britain, using very savage repression against the Catholics where necessary, has held together the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. If Britain were to go without a political settlement, Northern Ireland would dissolve into sectarian civil war and the Six Counties would be redivided between Catholics and Protestants. It is not at all clear that Britain is within sight now of a political settlement, even with the active involvement of the USA.

Ireland's basic problem, coming out of centuries of terrible oppression by Britain, was that its natural majority and minority, Catholic/Gaelic majority and Protestant/"British", did not reach a modus vivendi, but had their relations warped by a British "solution" which imposed a brutally unjust and unviable partition.

That is the root of the present situation in Northern Ireland. The Six-Counties entity is a blatant piece of nonsense. Northern Ireland long ago broke down. It has been kept in being — and murderous sectarian civil war staved off — only by the power and the inertia of the British state, at a tremendous cost to Northern Ireland's people, Catholic and Protestant.

Since 1972 Britain have accepted a Catholic veto on Northern Ireland majority rule because they know from experience that majority rule will be, or quickly become, sectarian rule. The Protestants have again and again rejected British attempts to set up a constitutionally guaranteed system of Catholic-Protestant power-sharing. We will soon know if enough of them have changed their minds about that.

What makes the Northern Ireland entity untenable is the sheer size of the Catholic-Nationalist-Republican minority it contains. Never less than 33%, it is now 45% and growing fast, while the Protestant-Unionist population is shrinking.

Yet to pretend that the issues in Northern Ireland, for either community, can be reduced to the question of a majority and a minority, to undifferentiated head-counting, is to ignore what is important there. The Tories do not believe it — so their rejection of Northern Ireland majority rule tells us, despite what they say.

Northern Ireland's Catholics have always rejected such an approach, in pursuit of something they consider greater and more important — their national identity.

So, in the past, when Ireland was part of a common state with Great Britain, did the people of Catholic Ireland behave towards the "UK majority" when it denied them their national rights.

So, in the future, would the Six-Counties Protestants behave if they found themselves a locked-in and coerced minority in an all-Ireland state, or (and it is not fantastic) if they one day find themselves a minority in the Six Counties.

For a quarter of a century, Northern Ireland has not worked according to the majority/minority model of states where the citizens share a common national identity. In fact, it never worked according to that pattern. For 50 years it was a one-party sectarian dictatorship. Then it broke down. Without the British Army, intra-Irish civil war would have bloodily redrawn the political map of Ireland and torn Northern Ireland into its component parts.

Despite the official Tory-Unionist rhetoric which is still occasionally mouthed, the British state long ago declared, in solemn official documents like the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, and the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, that it would not stand against Irish unity if the Irish wanted it.

Gerry Adams's studied reasonableness is, in contrast, a fake. The Provisional IRA has in fact been altogether more dogmatic and inflexible than the British government. They have demanded a unitary Irish state with no provision for the Protestant-Unionists as a distinct people. All the "reasonableness" is strictly within that framework.

This position has expressed not a proper Irish Republican viewpoint, but a narrower communal viewpoint of the Six-Counties Catholics — who would still be a minority in any autonomous Protestant area and can only hope to escape that if the Protestants are locked as a minority into an all-Ireland state without self-rule on any level.

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Twenty-five years ago, the Provisional IRA launched a military campaign whose basic premise was the threadbare traditional right-wing Catholic "Republican" dogma, that Northern Ireland is nothing other than "British-occupied Ireland". Even from themselves, they hide the reality that one million people in Ireland oppose Irish unity behind indignation against Britain and Britain's towering blame in Irish history. They made war not fundamentally on Britain, but on the Northern Ireland Protestant-Unionists and only incidentally on Britain.

After a 17 month ceasefire (August 1994-February 1996) they have returned to the gun. During the ceasefire, they had demanded "all-party talks", meaning in practice that the British should proceed without the representatives of the Six Counties majority, who would have boycotted those talks. Now Sinn Fein is to be excluded. They should not be.

We think that the Provisional IRA should call off its futile and counterproductive military campaign. But unless radical changes are made in the state structures in Ireland — in practical terms that means, unless the new Assembly can work out a broadly acceptable way of living together for Northern Irish people, Catholic and Protestant — any peace will be illusory. And at present Northern Ireland lacks even so much as a labour party striving to unite workers with a programme that includes consistent democracy for both communities.

The basic solution is socialism. Immediately the solution is simply stated, but, while Ireland's workers are divided along sectarian lines, far from simple to achieve: a federal united Ireland, with self-rule for the Protestant majority areas, coupled with closer, perhaps confederal, links between the UK and independent Ireland to reassure the Irish minority. If the present conflict ends with less than that, then it will probably prove to be just a lull in the long, long war.