



Why Northern Ireland erupts

By Helen Rate

ONE CATHOLIC taxi driver — seemingly chosen at random — shot in the back of the head by Protestant sectarian gun men; Protestant-Unionist barricades erected all across Northern Ireland, blocking at least 80 main roads; Catholic families driven out of their homes in North Belfast; Catholic schools attacked; large Protestant-Unionist crowds in angry confrontations with the RUC and the British Army — 8 July 1996 was the day in which Northern Ireland showed once more how volatile it is.

Beneath the “peace process” and the “all party talks” communal resentments seethe in the neighbourhoods, housing estates and towns of Northern Ireland. As we go to press it is not possible to judge whether this eruption is a flash of sudden lightening in the days leading up to July 12, when the Orange Order marches, or a sign that serious violence is once again going to set Northern Ireland alight.

What fuels this sudden outbreak? Unionist fears that they will be the losers in the “peace process”. Since the IRA declared a ceasefire in August 1994, Unionist relief at the cessation of violence has been tempered by fear of a looming “sell out” of their cause by the British government.

The “peace process” promoted by the pan-nationalist alliance — all Irish nationalist parties, including Sinn Fein, and Irish America — was, the PIRA believed, the best way to get what they had been fighting for — “war by other

means”. That is what Unionists feared.

While PIRA have shown, by resuming military action, that they no longer believe this, the Unionists still feel themselves to be part of a “process” in which concessions are being offered to the “other side” as “reward” for PIRA violence, and as a result of Irish nationalist, including American, pressure. They do not trust the British government.

They know the contempt and derision in which their “traditions” are held by the British media. They see much more in these traditions than mere communal triumphalism. They fell pushed and crowded. Thus the ban on their march in Portadown became the focus for general anger and issue around which to mount general “resistance”.

On July 8 Portadown sparked the biggest province-wide Orange mobilisation for years.

Last year, despite an initial RUC ban on their Portadown march, they won the right to march. This year the RUC and the army were better prepared.

There is an element in all this, of political leaders flexing muscle to show the others in the “all party talks” that the Unionists will not let themselves be pushed around. The question is whether they can control the forces they now unleash.

David Trimble MP was prominent in the confrontations around Portadown last year, and went on to win the leadership of his party partly as a result of that. Very soon afterwards, he went to Dublin, something Orange leaders do not do casually. Trimble shows every sign of wanting the “peace talks” to register progress. Trimble, now leader of the Official Unionist Party, is prominent in Portadown this year too... But the calculating political demagogues may not be able to control an increasingly volatile situation.

It is worth remembering that it was not the PIRA, but the much weightier forces of Ulster Unionism which destroyed the last great effort to build new political structures in Northern Ireland — by the way of a nine day general strike in 1974.

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