

Can peace last? Backlog of mistrust in Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland

by [Ronald A. Wells](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

What new thing has happened in Northern Ireland? The peace agreement reached on Good Friday 1998 has begun to be implemented. A power-sharing Assembly has been established in which, for the first time, representatives of all political persuasions have agreed to participate. The two main governments did their parts. Britain passed legislation, duly signed by the queen, transferring power from the parliament in Westminster (where it had resided since the crisis of 1971-72) to the Assembly in Stormont, outside Belfast. The government of Ireland passed legislation amending its constitution to renounce its traditional territorial claim to Northern Ireland.

These moves by Britain and Ireland appear to give in to the main Unionist demands. Britain, Ireland and the two major nationalist parties in Ulster now agree with a Unionist construction of the constitutional question: that, at least for now, Ulster is a legitimate part of the United Kingdom, and that its constitutional status can be altered only by the express wish of the people of Northern Ireland themselves. But the Unionists are badly divided. Only 57 percent of the larger Unionist party—David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party—agreed to participate. Ian Paisley's slightly smaller Democratic Unionist Party is opposed to the agreement and the Assembly but is going along for the moment, though it says its members will not actually sit in the same room with Sinn Féin. If the UUP falters in its ability to work with the main Catholic party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, and SF, the DUP could possibly supplant it as the party of Protestant Ulster.

There are many reasons why it took 18 months to move from the Good Friday Agreement to the Assembly. The great backlog of mistrust between the parties requires that even the smallest matters must be dealt with slowly and carefully. But the main stumbling block has been the Irish Republican Army's refusal to turn in its weapons, and the Unionists' refusal sit down with SF until it does. The headlines have proclaimed the Unionist view: "no government until no guns." Both positions are plausible, though for different reasons. The Unionist position seems unassailable: there can be no extra-parliamentary forces in a democratic society. SF's leaders, especially its able spokesman, Martin McGuinness, accept the Unionist viewpoint in theory, but they worry about the Royal Ulster Constabulary's historic hostility to the Republican movement and about what will happen if it acquires a monopoly of force.

Further, as SF points out, the Good Friday Agreement did not mandate that guns must be surrendered before a government is formed. SF says a decommissioning of weapons should be voluntary; all the other parties insist that decommissioning is a moral obligation under the agreement, if not specifically mandated by it. Until recently the UUP said (and the DUP shouted) that it wouldn't trust SF's pledges that once the government was launched and something like normal society reestablished it could persuade the IRA to surrender its weapons.

The political miracle of late November was accomplished, in large part, by a new player, Peter Mandelson, who replaced Mo Mowlam as Britain's secretary of state for Northern Ireland. Mandelson persuaded the UUP at least to try the policy of trust. The UUP party conference voted 58-42 to go ahead, to "jump first." But Trimble's first public words showed how little trust there actually was, since he immediately challenged Adams and SF also to jump—and soon. The world will now indeed be watching Gerry Adams and his SF colleagues to see if they can get their former comrades in the IRA to cooperate.

The question of trust will surround the Assembly's work, and it will be on everyone's mind until and unless the IRA weaponry begins to be surrendered in verifiable ways. It is worrisome that Trimble could not make a policy of unconditional trust acceptable to his party. The only way he could persuade it was to promise that the Assembly, under his leadership, would return to the question of weapons in late winter to see whether the IRA was beginning to comply. McGuinness replied that Trimble's view represents another form of ultimatum.

The British and Irish governments have been saying that everyone expects SF to deliver the IRA's weapons in a timely fashion, and that the time for excuses is over. If the IRA won't turn in its weapons when its friends have become ministers of state, when will it? Here is where George Mitchell—a man trusted by all—could be of immeasurable help. He has offered to broker the question of trust about weapons. That—perhaps with Bill Clinton's personal intervention—could go a long way toward establishing trust. There is, however, one further problem that a senior official in London mentioned off the record: the difficulty of assessing the IRA decommissioning, since there are no reliable intelligence estimates of what is in IRA armories.

Clearly, establishing trust is going to be long and difficult—something made all the more difficult by the discovery on December 8 of a high-powered bugging device in the car that Adams had been using to meet IRA commanders (he termed it "a hugely serious breach of faith"). But on the success or failure of establishing trust turns the entire peace process. All the parties must prove themselves in the new government, but a special burden does rest on SF. Adams and McGuinness are to be applauded for having realized, some years ago, that armed struggle had to be given up, and for bringing SF and the IRA with them. But they have no proven experience in government, and they refuse to pledge allegiance to the queen, as all officeholders in the United Kingdom must do. The burden is on them to demonstrate that they can be responsible politicians. It is essential to the peace process that all its participants acknowledge that the Assembly in Stormont is part of the government and society of the United Kingdom.

The views of religious people and their participation in the peace process also present a mixed story. Many conservative evangelicals in Northern Ireland remain unreconciled both to Catholicism and to nationalism. The religiopolitical movement led by Paisley attracts a wide following and can be a significantly destabilizing element. But religious folk with a more ecumenical and inclusivist vision have been, and are, at work behind the scenes to promote peace and reconciliation. In the context they provide, there is hope that the political process will succeed. This opportunity for peace will probably not return soon. With Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, the ecumenical people of Ulster believe it is right to hope:

History says don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed-for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.