

Peace?

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The suspension came after the provisionals were accused by Northern Irish police of being linked to two recent killings — a condition of the talks is to desist from violence. But Sinn Fein's president, Gerry Adams, denied Sinn Fein or the IRA's involvement in any ceasefire violations.

"The IRA have not, in my firmest belief, breached their cessation," Adams said in a Feb. 12 statement. "Sinn Fein completely disavows all killings."

Adams added that the police body investigating the murders, the mostly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary, has long been known to be an unobjective observer of the IRA. The suspension also earned the ire of many nationalists, since loyalist paramilitaries had killed more than a dozen Catholics in recent months. Loyalist political parties linked to some killings last year of Catholics were also briefly suspended from the talks.

Adams, who met with Blair March 12, was slated to outline his party's position on the current peace talks during a speech at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., on St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

Sinn Fein's Washington, D.C., office provided the *Catholic Courier* with Adams' prepared text. Titled "A Bridge Into the Future," the text emphasizes that Sinn Fein — despite its recent suspension from the peace talks — is still fully committed to seeing an end to Northern Ireland's conflict.

"Nationalists, despite their reservations about the talks ... wish to see their representatives concentrating their efforts to bring about a just and lasting settlement," Adams wrote.

Sinn Fein has not given up its dream of a united Ireland, Adams emphasized. Among the starting points to such a political entity, Adams envisioned several steps, including the creation of a new police force in Northern Ireland that is 40 percent Catholic, withdrawal of the British Army to its barracks, and the release of all political prisoners.

A start to healing?

Depending on whom you talk to, these negotiations have been a mere pause in a soon-to-be resumed war or the first step down a long road to real and lasting peace.

Both the British and Irish governments want a settlement to emerge by Easter. The settlement terms would be subject to referendums in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland sometime before the end of May, possibly by May 22, both governments have said.

Ray O'Hanlon, senior editor of the New York City-based *Irish Echo*, a prominent Irish-American weekly newspaper, told the *Courier* in a phone interview that any settlement produced would only begin the real work needed to end generations of conflict in Northern Ireland. He added that it is unlikely that either side will get everything it wants.

Unionists will no longer be linked to Britain in the same way as in the past, O'Hanlon speculated. For that matter, he said, nationalists may not get the united Ireland they want for at least another generation. It will take several years of no violence from both sides for each community to learn to trust the other, he said. But once they do, a united Ireland may appear to be an enticing prospect, he opined.

"I think the far ends of both extremes in Northern Ireland have run their course," said O'Hanlon, author of the forthcoming book *The New Irish Americans*. "The burden falls on all sides to create something completely new."

A Unionist view

But if a new dream is to be created in Northern Ireland, many old dreams will have to be given up. And that seems a slim possibility when you examine statements from representatives of both sides.

In particular, unionists see the Republic of Ireland as a foreign country, and don't want its government to have any substantial power over them, according to Anne Smith, U.S. bureau coordinator for the Ulster Unionist Party, Northern Ireland's largest political party. Smith outlined her party's views in a phone interview with the *Courier* from her Washington, D.C., office.

One possible aspect of a settlement would be the creation of a North-South ministerial council with authority over such areas as economic development and transportation. While her party would welcome cooperation between the Republic and Northern Ireland on certain issues, like health care and tourism, Smith said the UUP doesn't want the council to have any executive authority whatsoever.

"We don't want that because that's just sort of inviting the government of the republic to come in and make executive decisions for Northern Ireland, to come in and make decisions that we don't think they should be able to make," she said.

Adams, in his "Bridge to the Future" speech, however, made it clear that nationalists want "powerful, all-Ireland bodies ... immune from the veto of any (Northern Ireland) institutions."

Smith added that the unionists want the Irish republic to give up its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland, a position na-

tionalists oppose. Adrian McDaid, press officer for the New York City Irish consulate, told the *Courier* the Irish government is willing to modify its claim to Northern Ireland, but will not give it up completely.

Smith's party — as well as other unionist parties — has been criticized by many Irish nationalists for obstructing the talks. To date, David Trimble, the UUP president, hasn't even conversed face-to-face with any Sinn Fein representatives at the talks, a fact that Smith acknowledged.

However, Smith noted that her party's representatives are walking a mighty thin tightrope stretched between unionists' fears of Sinn Fein and unionists' hopes for peace. Just getting to a table where Sinn Fein also sits took a lot of effort on the part of her party's representatives, she said.

"Certainly there is a lot of bitterness on both sides ...," she said. "(But) everyone really realizes that they have to do something. They just can't go on procrastinating."

At day's end

Irish-Americans are watching the current events across the sea with keen interest. Those who talked to the *Courier* expressed both pessimism and optimism when it came to the prospects for peace.

Edward McGowan, a retired professor of history and sociology at Dominican College in Rockland County, spoke on Northern Ireland at Immaculate Conception Church in Ithaca on March 15.

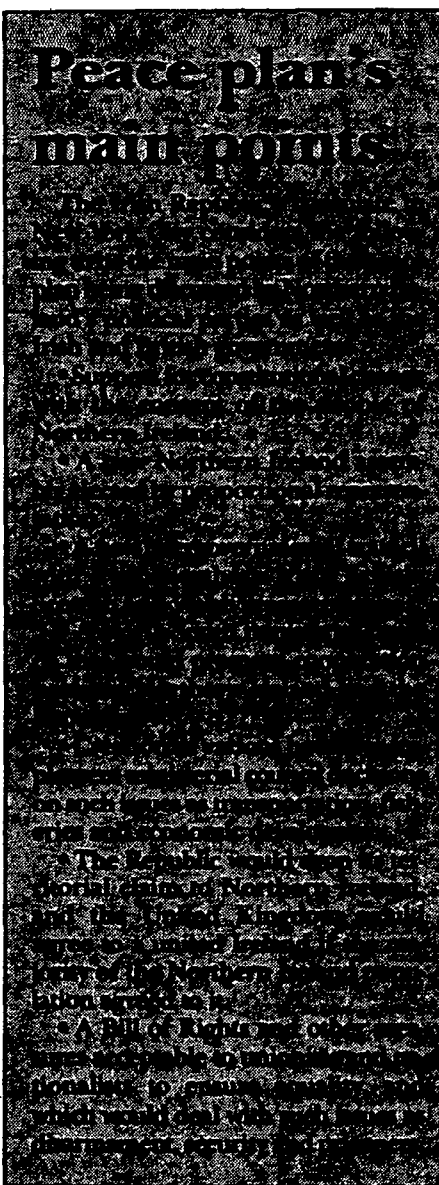
Prior to his speech, he spoke to the *Courier* in a phone interview and expressed his belief — one shared by many nationalists — that the onus in the talks is on the British government to pressure the unionists to give up some of their power.

However, given the history of unionist domination in the region — a domination marked by officially and unofficially sanctioned violence against Catholics — he said he was skeptical that any real peace would emerge from the talks.

"I think most people fail to gauge the seriousness of the unionists, about how intransigent and violent the unionists can be," he said. He noted that it would only take a handful of violent loyalists opposed to a settlement to disrupt not just Northern Ireland, but Ireland as a whole.

Prime Minister Blair must let unionists know that Great Britain will not forever accommodate their whims, said Frank Durkan, chairman of Americans for a New Irish Agenda, based in New York City. The ANIA, a group of prominent Irish-Americans, played a role in arranging the IRA cease-fire in the fall of 1994.

"If (Blair) really means to solve the problem, he's going to have to bring (unionists)



to heel," Durkan said. "I have hopes he will, but I wouldn't want to bet my fortune on it."

But that's not the view of Daniel McGrath, president of Division 2 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Monroe County, a well-known Irish-American fraternal organization. A parishioner at St. Felix Church in Clifton Springs, McGrath said, "I think we're as close as we've ever been to a settlement."

McGrath noted that peace is too enticing a prospect for Northern Ireland's citizens to ignore. The Irish republic is experiencing tremendous economic growth, he said, and peace throughout the island will mean new investment in the North. He stressed that he shared the views of Northern Ireland's Alliance Party, made up of Catholics and Protestants.

"There has to be some way that the rule of law is established in a lawless society," he said.



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