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Ireland

Stability proves illusive in the North of Ireland

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The elections to the Stormont Assembly in the North of Ireland on May 5 passed in silence, with the main issue persuading people to vote. The reason for the apathy was that voting makes very little difference. There is only one possible administration and the programme for government had been agreed in advance and accepted by both the political parties and civic society. Not only were the main elements of the administration's programme not discussed, they were rarely referred to. This was a cause of great satisfaction for British secretary of state Theresa Villiers, who claimed that the acceptance of the mixture of austerity and sectarianism contained in the Fresh Start accord meant a new era of stability in the statelet.

But in words ascribed to former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan setting out the inherent uncertainty of political life: "Events, my dear boy, events." No sooner was the last vote cast than local politics began to spiral out of control yet again.

The central item on the agenda was the continuation of a grim and unmoving sectarian division. As in every election, the Democratic Unionist Party had played the Orange card with the slogan "Keep Arlene as first minister". Only Unionist unity around the DUP can prevent the Catholic Martin McGuinness becoming first minister. To bring this message home DUP leader Arlene Foster appears nowhere without a British crown in her lapel.

The second big issue of the campaign was the economic programme within the "Fresh Start" agreement. This outlines eye-watering austerity and includes sharp cuts in welfare payment, 20,000 job losses in the private sector, privatisation and a mass transfer of public funds to transnationals through a reduction in corporation tax.

Neither sectarianism nor austerity were discussed in the election. As a result it was mind-numbingly boring and generated waves of apathy.

Misrepresentation

Sectarianism is ignored because the reality is constantly misrepresented by the media and liberal commentators. Foster and the DUP are presented as ill-mannered, gauche and out of tune with modern times. Their boorishness is unimportant because the offices of 1st minister and deputy 1st minister are equal. It doesn't matter who has the title.

This flies in the face of reality. A Sinn Fein 1st minister would throw the political system into deep crisis. The whole facade hangs on the primacy of unionism and, to placate their right, they demonstrate this regularly. Unionists oppose the settlement and dream of the day they can expel Sinn Fein. Bribery and patronage keep them in line, but any serious restriction of sectarian privilege would lead to moves to collapse the executive. The main concern of the British is to keep the Assembly afloat, so they resolve disputes in favour of Unionism.

In contrast Sinn Fein are heart and soul behind the settlement. They believe that constant conciliation will win over the unionists. The collapse of the executive would see the collapse of their political strategy and all their claims to have won gains from the settlement. They would quickly find themselves targets of the wrath of Dublin, London and Washington.

This basic inequality explains why the Stormont executive doesn't work. It is not an instrument of shared government, but a mechanism for sharing sectarian spoils, with the major party consistently questioning the need to give the nationalists anything. It also explains the slow gavotte of local politics, with the unionists moving right and Sinn Fein dragged behind. A recent example on the eve of the election was the DUP, with the acceptance of Sinn Fein, blocking funding for coroner's courts to look into historical killings. The DUP will not accept criticism of state forces and these issues will not be resolved.

So the explanation of sectarianism as a meaningless holdover from the past is an ideology designed to prevent protest and reflects the satisfaction of the Catholic middle class with the gains they have made. The circumstances of the working class have hardly changed, but this causes no concern.

Anti-austerity?

A similar mechanism explains the silence around the Fresh Start agreement. Sinn Fein tried to preserve an "anti-austerity" stance by protesting the welfare element of an economic programme designed to slash public sector services and jobs and cut corporation tax. When the British threatened to close down Stormont they endorsed the package, telling their supporters that they were "British cuts" and that they had won a hardship fund to protect them.

Fresh Start was initially opposed by Trade union leaders. However the occasional strikes and demonstrations are only decoration on a fixed mechanism for lobbying the Stormont administration. For them also the threat of suspension was enough to bring them to heel. In addition the bureaucracy are frantic supporters of the political settlement. In their statement of capitulation the union leadership argued that Stormont was so important that the workers had to sacrifice themselves to preserve it.

As is standard, the remaining republican organizations proved unable to mount any serious challenge, either politically or militarily, to the northern state despite the advantage of the 1916 centenary. For its part the state demonstrated its determination to suppress that tradition by the mass arrest of an IRA funeral colour party on the day of the vote.

Change source

There was one potential source of change. The election saw the arrival of a spectrum of mostly youthful left candidates - a mixture of long established groups standing young candidates and new youthful formations. All are anti-sectarian, which is a cause for hope. However all these are children of the peace process and their horizons constrained by the colonial and sectarian environment they live in. Sectarianism is seen as individual bigotry rather than inherent in the state structures. The candidates failed to make an impression with the exception of a substantial vote and two seats for the SWP/People before Profit front.

More to be said about PBP vote in separate article, the main element of the election was not their vote alone, but that vote within a sharp fall in the electoral support of the nationalist parties. This change is not a rejection of the political settlement. Disgruntled older Sinn Fein and SDLP voters enthusiastically supported the settlement and young voters have known nothing else. Failure to achieve the goals of peace is seen mostly as incompetence and corruption on the part of Sinn Fein. Alongside nationalist discontent is a growing recognition by the smaller unionist and nationalist parties that, in the way of all coalitions, it is they who suffer when public discontent grows. As a result they have jumped ship and left the all-enclosing coalition that constituted the administration to form an opposition.

Phony war

What nationalists are protesting is the failure of the system, and specifically of the nationalist politicians, to produce any change. Their anger is deepened by rampant corruption. The change is potentially of major significance. Sinn Fein have had their chance to demonstrate the success of a reformed Stormont. They have failed. Now a fall in the vote is transforming into a willingness to vote against them.

However there are many weaknesses. There is a wide acceptance of the democratic credentials of the Stormont executive and a belief that protests and lobbying can obtain liberal and economic reform. The fact that policy is decided by sectarian deals and that the DUP have an absolute veto is never discussed.

In the same way the sectarian nature of the state is never confronted. It is seen to be enough to assert individual opposition to bigotry. The need to tear down the material basis of sectarianism and the state structures that sponsor and enforce it, is not recognized.

The anti austerity campaign is seen as being carried on by common action with the trade union bureaucracy, even though they have accepted the constraints of the Fresh Start agreement.

Stormont can easily accommodate what is already being labeled a "naughty corner" for its opponents. What it cannot do is grant their demands or see them grow to a size that would see a major collapse of Sinn Fein's political base and disrupt the sectarian carve up of the state. At the same time the opposition would need to confront the nature of the state to pose a more serious threat.

However we are in the phony war phase of the struggle against austerity. The fact that Sinn Fein has received such a slap in the face gives hope for the future when they physically enforce the coming offensive on the working class.