

A Short History of the Conflict in Northern Ireland

... continued from *Viewfinder Special Lehrerhandreichungen* (München: Langenscheidt-Longman, 1999) ...

[...]

The Peace Process

[...]

1998 (10 April) All-party peace talks lead to the “Good Friday Agreement”

- The agreement recognises the consent principle: that change in the status of Northern Ireland can only come about with the consent of a majority of its people.
- There will be a 108-member assembly elected by proportional representation.
- A North-South Ministerial Council will be established under legislation at Westminster and the Oireachtas, to bring together ministers from the North and the Republic. This Council is to: “develop consultation, co-operation and action within the island of Ireland.”
- A British-Irish Council will be established consisting of representatives of the British and Irish governments, devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. It will hold summit meetings twice a year, and regularly at other times to discuss particular policy sectors.

1998 (May 22) Voters in Ireland and Northern Ireland cast ballots on a referendum on whether to accept the peace deal. Results counted the next day show that more than 71 percent of voters in Northern Ireland approved the deal, but the Protestant community still appears deeply split.

1998 (July 1) The New Northern Irish Assembly (elected on 25 June) meets for the first time – but cannot begin to work properly since Unionists refuse to nominate ministers, which blocks further development because the Irish Republican Army has not begun dismantling its arsenal.

1998 (Dec 10) John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), receive the Nobel Peace Prize at an awards ceremony in the City Hall, Oslo.

1999 (March 18) Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister), Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, and Bill Clinton, President of the United States of America, issue a tripartite statement urging the leaders of political parties in Northern Ireland to meet the deadline set for all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement.

1999 (April 1) Multi-party talks at Hillsborough come to an end with a call for the proposed Executive to be established within three weeks. The Hillsborough Declaration is agreed by Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, and Bertie Ahern, Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister). The Declaration sets out a framework for progress towards establishing the Executive. – The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) insists that there should be decommissioning of arms by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) before Sinn Féin (SF) can sit on an Executive. SF says that it cannot deliver decommissioning before the Executive is formed.

1999 (May 15) Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, announces an “absolute” deadline of 30 June 1999 for the formation of an Executive and the devolution of power to the Assembly. His decision to set a new deadline follows the failure of the Assembly members of the UUP to approve proposals thought to have been agreed by David Trimble, leader of the UUP, with the Irish Government, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin.

1999 (July 4) Drumcree V: For the fifth year in a row attention is focused on the Orange Order parade at Drumcree, Portadown, County Armagh. The Orange Order was refused permission to parade down the mainly Catholic Garvaghy Road. The security forces have erected a steel barricade across the road to halt the march but the subsequent protest passes off relatively quietly compared to previous years.

1999 (Sept 6) Former US senator George Mitchell, former Chairman of the multi-party talks, has come to Castle Buildings to open the review of the Good Friday Agreement. He makes clear that the review will concentrate specifically on breaking the deadlock over decommissioning and the formation of an executive. This is the beginning of 10 weeks of painstaking negotiations between the pro-agreement parties in Northern Ireland.

- 1999 (Dec. 2) First Minister David Trimble opens the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont/Belfast. – The IRA has promised it will appoint a middleman to negotiate the handover or destruction of its weapons soon after the executive has been set up.
- 2000 (Feb 11) When it becomes apparent that the IRA has not yet handed over any weapons, David Trimble refuses to sit on the executive with Sinn Fein, which has links to the IRA, any longer; Britain suspends Northern Ireland's self-rule.
- 2000 (May 29) The Northern Irish executive is reinstated, as the IRA has offered to begin a verifiable process of putting its weapons beyond use.
- 2000 (June 6) Northern Ireland's first and deputy first ministers have decided to take sanctions against the two Democratic Unionist Party ministers because of their attitude to the executive. DUP deputy leader Peter Robinson and assemblyman Nigel Dodds were reinstated as ministers for regional development and social affairs when assembly executive was reformed last week. But they have refused to take their seats in executive meetings because of the presence of Sinn Fein ministers.
- 2000 (June 23) Still a great deal of violence committed by extremists; newspapers quote the RUC press office: The IRA and two loyalist groups, the UDA and the UVF, are responsible for most of the punishment beatings and shoot ings in Northern Ireland. A small number of other attacks are the work of splinter groups. Loyalists have carried out 36 shootings and 35 beatings and republicans 25 beatings and 21 shootings since the start of the year.
- 2000 (July 12) Thousands of Orangemen congregate at Drumcree, just outside Portadown, after July 12 celebrations in their own areas. They mark the victory of William of Orange over Catholic king James II at the battle of the Boyne in 1690. – The day before, the RUC revealed there had been 146 arrests since the dispute began on July 2. They listed 288 petrol bomb incidents, some involving dozens of devices, and said police had recovered 941 petrol bombs. There have been 280 attacks on the security forces, including 13 shooting incidents. A total of 57 RUC officers and five soldiers have been injured. Seventy seven homes, 55 commercial premises and 358 vehicles have been damaged. Protesters have hijacked 88 vehicles.
- 2000 (Oct 26) The IRA announces their arms dumps will be examined by two international inspectors. – The move will be restricted to the dumps already seen by inspectors Cyril Ramaphosa and Martti Ahtisaari last June. But the timing will give a major boost to First Minister David Trimble's prospects of overcoming his internal critics.
- 2000 (Dec 14) In a speech in Belfast, US President Bill Clinton proposes a three-step approach to Northern Ireland's difficulties, involving a political solution and a new three-nation crackdown on dissident paramilitary groups. His three steps are:
- * Implementation of the Patten Commission's recommendations on policing.
 - * Demilitarisation.
 - * Paramilitary decommissioning brought about with all arms being put "fully, finally and forever beyond use."
- 2001 (Feb 21) British Prime Minister Tony Blair meets SDLP and Ulster Unionist leaders at Downing Street amid mounting concern that the deadlock on policing could force the British and Irish governments to put the Belfast Agreement into review. However, there is still hope of salvaging the peace agreement, according to the Taoiseach, speaking in the Dáil on 20 February. He underlined the urgency of the situation, saying there was little more than a week left to reach agreement.