



DPI Briefing Note

Political Crisis: Northern Ireland Executive¹

Context:

In the past few weeks, the five-party power sharing coalition of the Northern Ireland executive has been threatened with collapse, following the withdrawal of the two unionist parties in the assembly. This follows from their dispute with the Republican Sinn Féin party over the murder of two former IRA members by republican paramilitaries, with unionists claiming that Sinn Féin had gone against the Good Friday Agreement and failed to decommission paramilitary groups. Sinn Féin for their part claim that they had no association with the events, and that they did not sanction or have knowledge of the killings.

The two murdered IRA members were 'Jock' Davison and Kevin McGuigan, two former PIRA members. 'Jock' Davison was shot dead in the Market area of central Belfast on 5th May 2015, with Kevin McGuigan becoming the primary suspect for the murder. McGuigan was then killed himself in August, supposedly as revenge by PIRA individuals for Davison's killing. A subsequent Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) assessment said that the two murders were the results of a "falling-out" within the republican community. Chief Constable Charles Hamilton drew a link between PIRA members involved in inter-factional rivalry, and those suspected of the murder of McGuigan.² Unionists are angry at the murders as they suggest the continuing activity of nationalist paramilitary groups, which were said to have been decommissioned in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement.

The continuing breakdown of the Northern Ireland executive after the murders coincides with continuing difficulty in the power-sharing coalition over the Stormont House

¹ This paper was completed on 11 September 2015 and captures events preceding and on this date only.

² http://www.psni.police.uk/chief_constable_s_statement_psni_s_assessment_of_the_current_status_of_the_provisional_ira.

Agreement. The Stormont House Agreement was a political agreement between the Northern Ireland executive, and the British and Irish governments. The agreement touched mainly upon issues such as fiscal policy, welfare reform and progress on devolution; welfare reform was a particular point of contestation for the Irish Nationalists, and it underlines the current political crisis.

Effect on Northern Ireland Politics:

The murders of two former IRA members has developed into a political crisis for the Northern Ireland executive, along with the threat of collapse of the power sharing agreement in Stormont House. The threat of withdrawing support for the power-sharing pact by unionist groups follows the assessment made by the Chief Constable of PSNI which stated that former Provisional IRA members, along with a separate group, were involved in the murder of Kevin McGuigan, a former IRA member. A PSNI assessment claimed that McGuigan was targeted because of reportedly murdering 'Jock' Davison, also a former IRA member, a few months earlier.

The murder of McGuigan, according to some unionist groups, shows the continuing existence of the Provisional IRA, despite claims by Sinn Féin to the contrary. Chief Constable Chris Hamilton of the PSNI in his statement on the murder declared that while "some Provisional IRA organisational infrastructure" still exists, the group no longer exists for paramilitary purposes. Unionists however say that one of the components of the power sharing agreement was the demobilisation and decommissioning of groups such as the PIRA, which was deemed to have occurred between 2005 and 2007.³

Within the regional executive this has led to the Ulster Unionist Party, the smaller of the two unionist parties in the current five-party coalition, withdrawing from the coalition in response to the killings. Furthermore, executive meetings between the coalition government have been suspended by First Minister Peter Robinson until the political crisis over the status of the PIRA is resolved. The regional executive cannot function if either of the two largest parties refuse to take part, as these parties are allocated the First Minister and Deputy First Minister positions. This comes amid calls from unionist groups for the

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/08/kevin-mcguigan-family-say-three-members-under-death-threat-in-northern-ireland>

Westminster government to go as far as to suspend devolution in Northern Ireland – a demand which was rejected on 8th September. As of 10th September, Peter Robinson and most other DUP ministers in the coalition have resigned, leaving only the nationalist Sinn Féin and SDLP parties, and non-partisan Alliance remaining in the coalition.⁴

All-party talks are now commencing to resolve the crisis, co-chaired by the Northern Ireland secretary, Theresa Villiers, and the Irish foreign minister, Charles Flanagan. They are expected to last about four weeks. Already the UUP have ‘partially walked-out’ from the talks, after stating they will attend only when the agenda is focused on alleged continuing PIRA activity.

One effect on the Good Friday Agreement that has been raised is the effectiveness of the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) process in Northern Ireland, as the use of a semi-automatic rifle in the murder of Kevin McGuigan suggests that the IRA retained some of its arms after the peace process. Some experts suggest that the use of high-powered rifles in the murder show that the IRA held back weapons from the international decommissioning body during the DDR period.⁵ Unionists have used this to argue for the return of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), which they claim would deter further paramilitary attacks that further destabilise the already fraught peace process.

As of 11th September, it remains to be seen whether David Cameron will go above the authority of Northern Ireland Secretary Theresa Villiers and suspend the assembly, whether Peter Robinson allow elections to be triggered by refusing to nominate new ministers in the seven-day window he has to do so, or whether the Northern Ireland executive will be left governed by almost entirely nationalist parties.

Timeline:

5th May 2015:

- Gerard ‘Jock’ Davison, a former senior IRA figure is shot dead in the early morning in Belfast city centre.

12th August 2015:

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/10/northern-ireland-government-on-brink-of-collapse>

⁵ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/provisional-ira-may-have-left-stage-but-not-theatre-1.2324978>

- Former IRA Assassin Kevin McGuigan, chief suspect into the murder investigation of 'Jock' Davison, is shot dead outside his home in East Belfast.

20th August 2015:

- PSNI state that members of the Provisional IRA, under the cover name of Action Against Drugs (AAD), were behind the murder of Kevin McGuigan.
- Unionists claim that Sinn Féin risk exclusion from the Northern Ireland assembly if they are found to have established links between them and the PIRA.

22nd August 2015:

- PSNI chief constable Charles Hamilton confirms that individual PIRA members were involved in killing McGuigan, but that the act was not sanctioned by PIRA leadership.

26th August 2015:

- UUP leader Mike Nesbitt says that his party will pull out of the five-party coalition at Stormont in response to the report that the PIRA is still active.

27th August 2015:

- The Democratic Ulster Party (DUP), the largest unionist political party in the NI Executive, faces internal pressure to either exclude Sinn Féin from government or to resign from the administration.

29th August 2015:

- Up to 90 members of the executive of the UUP unanimously vote to leave the NI Executive.

30th August 2015:

- Northern Ireland's former first minister, Lord Trimble has suggested the revival of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) to help restore unionist confidence in the political process.

1st September 2015:

- First Minister Peter Robinson suggests suspending the Stormont assembly for four weeks in Northern Ireland, bringing back non-devolved direct rule from Westminster. The DUP want this in order to hold urgent talks in order to solve the political crisis facing the future of the power-sharing agreement and the peace process.
- Deputy First Minister and Sinn Féin politician Martin McGuinness urges British Prime Minister David Cameron not to suspend the assembly.
- UK and Ireland ministers indicate support for the revival of the Independent Monitoring Commission.

3rd September 2015:

- Prime Minister David Cameron and Taoiseach Enda Kenny announce emergency talks aimed at preventing the collapse of power-sharing in Northern Ireland. All five parties in the regional government will be asked to attend, including the UUP.

9th September 2015:

- Three senior republicans, including former head of intelligence for the IRA Bobby Storey are arrested and questioned in connection to the murder of Kevin McGuigan.

10th September 2015:

- First minister Peter Robinson resigns from the executive, alongside almost all other DUP ministers. Only the Finance Minister, Arlene Foster, remains. Talks are stalled as a result
- Arlene Foster is appointed by Robinson as Acting First Minister to keep the regional government alive while emergency talks recommence.
- Bobby Storey is unconditionally released from arrest and questioning by detectives.

11th September 2015:

- Theresa Villiers outlines that the two issues of still active paramilitary groups and the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement will be on the agenda when talks continue on Monday 14th September.