

One year on
Evaluating the Ceasefire

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Contents

Some things were meant to be	3
Military stalemate	3
All together now?	4
Pan-nationalist alliance	4
All has changed, or has it?	5
Telling lies	5

The IRA CEASEFIRE is approaching its first anniversary. That year has been striking for two things, on the one hand the success of the ‘peace process’ in turning Sinn Féin from demonised pariahs to lauded peace makers. On the other hand, the failure of the process to produce any substantial gains for the nationalist community.

Although many British soldiers have been returned to barracks, only about 800 have left Ireland. The RUC may have exchanged their machine guns for pistols but they have also moved into areas they previously feared to patrol. Harassment of nationalists has continued. Sinn Féin’s paper, An Phoblacht/Republican News, now carries a Peace Monitor instead of a War News column.

Every week it reports on beatings, threats & intimidation directed at nationalists by various sections of the British war machine. Although prisoners have been released early in the Republic, no such releases have occurred in the six counties and, indeed, the number of prisoners allowed compassionate temporary release has been reduced.

In this situation it’s not surprising that a minority are questioning the validity of the ceasefire strategy. Some left republicans see the ceasefire as a sell-out of a previous commitment to socialism and anti-imperialism. There are other republicans who see the ceasefire as a cunning strategy forced on the British government. They seem to expect the Sinn Féin leadership to pull a united Ireland out of the hat at a future stage despite obvious hints to the contrary by the same leadership. This view fails to realise that the peace process is a change in strategy rather than a victory.

Some things were meant to be

When looked at in the context of the last twenty five years the ceasefire not only makes sense but is inevitable. All other strategies had been exhausted. Britain was not militarily defeated in the ‘years of victory’ declared by the IRA in early 1970s. Likewise, the economic bombing campaign in Britain and the six counties failed to bring victory.

The post Hunger-Strike turn to electoral and community politics represented by Danny Morrison’s ‘ballot box and armalite’ strategy ground to a halt in the mid-80’s. Although Sinn Féin had a lot of support in the nationalist ghetto’s it was unable to break out of these and attract significant votes from Catholic working class voters elsewhere or the Catholic middle class. In the south, outside of a few council seats it never had any success.

Once this was realised it became not so much a question of if, but when an IRA ceasefire would be declared. Talk of fighting the British army to a standstill is all very well but when translated into a yearly toll of harassment, deaths and prisoners the need to move beyond the war of attrition became dominant.

Military stalemate

This has been recognised by Danny Morrison (seen by many as a hard-liner within the current republican leadership). On his recent release from prison he told AP/RN “It was obvious that something was going on, and it might appear controversial, but it was tacitly understood by many people that there was a military stalemate developing ... the IRA had in 1992 exploded a bomb in the City of London followed by the Bishopsgate bomb in 1993 and the Heathrow mortar

attacks early last year. Despite these prestigious attacks there was a stalemate on the military front.

So I think people were mature enough to understand developments even though the announcement of the cessation came as a severe shock and ran contrary to all our instincts.”

The ceasefire was also inevitable in a broader setting. Wars of ‘national liberation’ don’t end with outright victory and independence for the nationalist side. They involve a negotiated settlement. In the Irish context this means one acceptable to the British state. This has been the pattern of the settlements in South Africa, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Palestine in recent years.

All together now?

Sinn Féin’s has long held a strategy of uniting the nationalist family against Britain. In this context the ‘peace process’ has delivered more than any other strategy. One year ago Sinn Féin were pariahs with virtually no political allies nationally or internationally of any stature. Today the man once known as John Unionist (Bruton) is giving out about the British government stalling in releasing prisoners. The much dreamed of pan-nationalist alliance of Sinn Féin, SDLP, Fianna Fáil and the Catholic Church not only exists but seems to include Fine Gael, Labour and even a somewhat hesitant Democratic Left! Eamonn Dunphy has argued in the ‘Sunday Independent’ that it is dangerous to continue to demonise Sinn Féin! A world turned upside down, unimaginable twelve months ago.

This national success has been matched internationally. Gerry Adams has not only been allowed a visit to the US, but with John Hume has sung a duet of “The town I knew so well” for Bill Clinton. What’s more both Bill Clinton and the icon of sacrifice of the 1980’s, Nelson Mandela, have publicly given out to the British Government for dragging its heels. All that’s missing is a Noble peace prize for Adams (and he’s actually been awarded a lesser peace prize by Swiss industrialists).

Pan-nationalist alliance

Unionism has become more fragmented and isolated. No significant section of the Tories opposes the peace process and no major loyalist mobilisations against the process have been organised in the six counties. The British state has not yet fulfilled Sinn Féin wishes, by becoming “persuading” unionists to accept the inevitability of a united Ireland, but they have pretty much said that as far as the peace process goes the unionist veto is dead.

So the peace process has achieved what the armed struggle failed to. The pan-nationalist alliance exists, with Gerry Adams at the head of it. Britain is internationally isolated and seen to be dragging its heels. Unionism is isolated to the point where small sections are willing to consider direct talks with Sinn Féin. But even in the most optimistic forecast of its dividends there are many republicans who are wondering, is this it, is this all? The answer from the Sinn Féin leadership would seem to be ‘yes’. To quote Morrison’s interview again “one thing is certain we are not going to end up with a pre-1969 Stormont solution. It is going to be much more radical than that.”

A mystic vision of a united Ireland is not what drives most republican activists. They became activists because circumstances which included constant harassment, high unemployment and

poor housing compel them to fight the sectarian system that created these conditions. They are activists because when at the end of the 60's they and others took part in peaceful attempts to reform this system they were first batoned and then shot off the streets.

All has changed, or has it?

But even if the peace process resulted in British withdrawal tomorrow, few of these conditions would change. Decent housing and decent jobs are no more likely in a 32 county Ireland with Gerry Adams as Taoiseach. The 'success' story of South Africa illustrates this point. The most ambitious scheme of the post-apartheid government is to provide fresh water to a sizeable percentage of squatter towns by the year 2000. The reason cited for the lack of ambition is lack of money.

Yet in both South Africa and Ireland enough wealth exists to make a massive difference to the way most of us live. But it needs to be taken out of the hands of the wealthy and put into the hands of the workers. Gerry Adams may scoff at the Irish left but it is only a united working class that can drive the British state out, and usher in a better life for all. The all-singing, all dancing 'peace process', sponsored by Donald Trump and Bill Clinton may look good but at the end of the day what can it deliver?

Even the basic demand of British withdrawal cannot be met by the peace process or any other nationalist based strategy. This can only be won in one of two circumstances. Firstly if the British state decides it no longer has any interest in staying and is satisfied that it can withdraw and leave stability behind. It is unlikely to do this in the short term, as most northern Protestants want it to stay, and it is wary of the destabilisation they could cause in the event of withdrawal.

Telling lies

It is also wary of withdrawal undermining its credibility in Britain. In the course of its 25 year war it lied to the British working class about what was going on. Republicans were portrayed as psycho-gangsters, terrorising even their own communities. To admit that it lied about Ireland means that it will be less able to convince its own population that sections of British society that dare to fight back are common criminals.

During the 1984 miners strikes Thatcher referred to the striking miners as "the enemy within", and they received the sort of media coverage familiar to Irish republicans. They also received the attention of the SAS, often dressed in police uniforms, although in this case they were content with kicking the shit out of miners rather than killing them. The anti-Poll Tax rioters were also portrayed as criminals by the media. The rule of the British state in Britain as well as Ireland is dependant on most of the population of Britain trusting it. Admittance of the true facts of its Irish war threaten this.

The only other way the British state will leave Ireland is when it is forced out. The IRA could not achieve this, it was incapable of defeating the British army. Withdrawal will only happen in the face of a united working class in Ireland, supported by vast sections of the British working class. Creating this unity requires an entirely different strategy than anything Sinn Féin could pursue, it requires a break with nationalist politics.

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