

The participants in the roundtable are: Chris Myant, editor of *7 Days* and reporter on Northern Ireland since 1971; Henry Patterson, co-author of *The British State and the Ulster Crisis* and who works in Belfast; Bob Rowthorn, member of *Marxism Today's* editorial board and author of articles on Northern Ireland; and Clare Short, Labour MP and a member of the Labour party NEC/PLP study group on Northern Ireland. It is chaired by Martin Jacques, editor of *Marxism Today*.

What do you see as the aim of the Hillsborough Accord for the Tory government?

Bob Rowthorn The Hillsborough Accord is a recognition by the British government that it can't smash the IRA on its own. For it is asking the Southern government to intensify the security campaign in the South against the IRA. In return it is offering concessions which allow the Southern government to participate in the running of the North in the hope that within the South such a move will legitimise a much tougher security policy towards the IRA. The government is seeking to undermine the popular basis of support for the IRA in the North, amongst the Catholic population, to the point where the IRA is forced to cease operations or at least become of minor significance.

Chris Myant Bob is right in centring on the security question as the principle reason for the agreement. The governments in both Dublin and London have talked many times about arrangements of an all-Ireland character. During the last period of Prior's secretaryship of state at the Northern Ireland office, Nicholas Scott began publicly talking about the need to offer Dublin some kind of political *quid pro quo* for them to come in and help on security; there was some talk then that this was going to be a dual sovereignty solution. That's not what is entailed here. On the contrary, sovereignty is kept very clearly and specifically in British hands. The only role that Dublin is going to have is the right to be consulted. In one sense it has had this all along since the summit arrangements were first started in 1980 and indeed, even before that, in that the British ambassador would always inform the Dublin government of any policy proposals that London was considering and vice versa. It is clear that sovereignty is held in the hands of the British, that the Irish are given a specific, publicly accepted role in terms of 'consultation' in the North, and all that will happen is that the process of consultation that was taking place between diplomats will now be formalised between ministers at a meeting in Belfast.

Clare Short We must not forget that the SDLP were a major force pushing for the Accord. And they think they are going to get something out of it, that Dublin will work for them and press for major reforms that will make a difference to the life of the nationalist community in terms of the release of prisoners, flags and emblems and so on. I share the doubt about whether that will happen, but that is their motivation. If that doesn't happen, it will be a disaster for them and they will start opposing it and pressurising the Dublin government to pull out.

Clare, you have argued that the Accord, whatever the intent, marks some point of no return. It is the moment when it looks as if the Tories are prepared to take on the Unionists in a new way. And it therefore represents an historic moment, an opportunity.

Clare That was certainly part of the flavour of the two-day

The Hillsborough Accord is the most important initiative on Northern Ireland since Sunningdale in 1973. It is unlikely things will be quite the same again.

The Beginning of the End? The Anglo-Irish Accord A roundtable discussion

debate in the House Of Commons. Unionism sees itself as betrayed, and all the accusations they levelled at Thatcher- and a lot of it was very personalised - caused an enormous rejection of them, quite open and angry, in the Tory party. That is important. We used to have the Conservative and Unionist party and we have seen a fracturing of that. I believe the Unionists will go on with their confrontation and rejection of the treaty, whatever our view



Clare Short

of its limitations, and that Thatcher will take them on and beat them. It will be the first time they have been taken on and thoroughly faced down. And it will weaken the feeling in Britain that you can't take them on. That will create space for subsequent British governments of any complexion to go much further in terms of pushing the Unionists back, and working towards more all-Ireland institutions with a view to getting out, which I think a majority of people would now like if they thought it would be feasible without too much bloodshed.

Henry Patterson I don't share the view that this in any sense represents a historic willingness on the part of the Tory government to take on the Unionists. There have been lots of divisions historically between Tory governments and Irish Unionists.

There has obviously been a very strong element of backbench sympathy and support for Unionism inside the Conservative party, but that 19th century legacy was considered weakened even by the end of the first world war. I don't think in that sense it represents a breakthrough of historic significance. Clearly we agree there is very little of substance in terms of reforms in the North that are likely to come from the Accord. That may ultimately ensure that any Protestant opposition to it is fundamentally divided.

Bob The SDLP has a lot of mileage at the moment because it enjoys a privileged position as a political party in Northern Ireland; it is consulted as the non-violent representative of the Nationalist population. As a consequence, it has been shaping quite a lot of the politics. In a sense it benefits from the presence of the Sinn Fein and the IRA because it can present itself as a non-violent face of the Catholics. But to be viable in the eyes of the Catholic population, it has to get a lot of reforms. The real difficulty here is there is no genuine political space for the SDLP to operate in, it is if you like a clientelist party, its claim is that it speaks on behalf of the Catholic community to the British and Irish governments and will get reforms. In the long term that is a completely unviable position.

Chris I don't think the Accord represents a historic break. If there is a historic break anywhere in all of this, it came in 1972 when direct rule was imposed. That is when the Unionists lost their close friends in the Tory party and where the two came into confrontation rather than coalition. Since then British governments have been exploring different ways of trying to restore some sort of stability. The IRA stops there being some stability, but it is not just the IRA. The Unionists themselves prevent the restoration of stability because the only thing they are prepared to tolerate is the restoration of their absolute power. And no one else is prepared to let them have that. Having said it is not a historic break, I do think something quite significant must have happened this year which brought this government to do this at this time. Earlier this year, the government seemed to be set on a very different trajectory, with Hurd, then Northern Ireland Secretary, putting the issue of security policy right at the front. A few months later we find the government taking what appears to be a very different line and saying politics must come to the fore as well.

Henry I agree with what Chris says about the importance of direct rule. Direct rule represents a real historical confrontation

between the British state and the Unionists. It deprived the Unionist party of control over the state apparatus. It created the basis for the political fracturing of Unionism between the Democratic Unionist party and the Official Unionist party. In that sense it is of much greater historical significance than this agreement is likely to be. Now one of the important elements of continuity in Tory party policy that you can see over the 15 or so years from direct rule to the present is the quite cynical willingness to make what they see as largely symbolic gestures to nationalist identity and to the Southern government instead of doing things which cost money, which brings them into conflict with important power groups in the security forces, the UDR and RUC in Northern Ireland. So I don't think there is any incompatibility between a strong security policy and this sort of thing, in fact I think in one sense they fundamentally go together.

Bob I don't really agree it is not a historic moment or turning point. I agree with Henry that direct rule was a historic turning point because it really set the end of Unionist rule in the North, that the British would rule. I think *this* is a historic turning point because it is a public recognition for British people of the fact that the British state can't solve the problem by itself. The importance is not what Britain is doing in Northern Ireland, but its implications within Britain. If stability is not achieved, then the fact that it has been clearly stated that this is really an Irish and not just a British problem will have a profound impact on the development of British public opinion. There will be much more willingness to say 'well look, we tried, we brought in the Southern government, now we should just dump the problem.'

Labour has gone along with the Accord. Only a small number of Labour MPs voted against it. Clare, how do you assess Labour policy at the moment?

Clare We've had a policy since 1981, when there was a feeble break with bi-partisanship and a commitment to the long-term aim of re-unification with the consent of the majority in the North. It was obviously a fudge, given that consent isn't there, but still the aspiration of re-unification became part of policy. Clive Soley then interpreted it to mean Labour working to build all sorts of united institutions between North and South, merging social security, agricultural and economic policy and so on - till you reach the point where you have actually re-unified the country without anyone noticing. And people liked it because in the Labour party, like everywhere else in Britain, there is not much concern with Ireland and little interest in the details.

Given that the Irish government and the SDLP were backing the Accord, there was never any doubt that the Labour party would vote for. What was conceded, because we were no longer bi-partisan, was that everyone who spoke for the policy would say 'but Labour would go further because we would work positively for re-unification'. So that's where Labour is. But it is a weakly thought-out policy, without much detail and not a lot of understanding and commitment by the major leading forces in the parliamentary party that could be blown off course very easily.

What do you think it should be?

Clare We have to commit ourselves to a policy of re-unification and withdrawal and drop consent and explain why historically. But you still have to accomplish it in the real world and that is very difficult. My optimistic scenario now is that this deal, and its subsequent failure, will make it easier, in the sense that Bob

talked about earlier of a shift in the climate of British public opinion, including parliamentary opinion. You know, 'we tried and that failed and the Unionists are so intransigent and it really is time that we moved further more rapidly and extricated ourselves.' So if you got a Labour government committed to a new form of words that dropped formal consent by a majority in the



North plus that kind of general climate of opinion in Britain, you could start to move quite rapidly.

Henry What Clare says about the general attitude of disinterest in the PLP and Labour frontbench is obviously true. The record of the Labour government in the 70s was abysmal. What I doubt is that even if things turn out the way she hopes they will, that a Labour government would actually begin the process of withdrawal. Because the one thing they did learn, probably for all the wrong reasons, is the massive problem withdrawal would entail. They can't really withdraw and get rid of the problem. There has been an incapacity of proponents of withdrawal to demonstrate how you could get, for instance, a clear successor power to take over and establish some form of stability in Ireland as a whole. That is the problem for the British ruling class as a whole and it would face a Labour government.

Bob The basic problem of Labour governments is they are utterly weak, without any kind of strategic perspective. If you look for example at Wilson's handling of Rhodesia, it would have been inconceivable that UDI in Rhodesia would have been dealt with in the same spineless way by Thatcher. The reality is that future Labour governments will be exactly the same. The truth is if Britain is to withdraw from Ireland it will almost certainly be a Tory government that does it. Or possibly an SDP one under Owen. I cannot conceive of a Labour government having the decisive strategic perspective to do this. Whether one's in favour of it or not, the fact is that on these kind of questions the Labour record is one of vacillation. The unity by consent formula they have is clear evidence of this vacillation, an unwillingness to face unpleasant problems and just hope they will go away.

Chris There was something of a historic break in the period after the Callaghan government fell when you had forces within the Labour party fighting very hard for a decisive shift in Labour's policies away from a do-nothing to a more active approach where the Labour party would actually have a policy

and a strategy. The 1981 conference did adopt a new set of long and short-term aims. Since then, the Labour frontbench has moved away bit by bit from that stance and I see the way in which the frontbench has approached this agreement as being, if you like, a culmination of that. This agreement would enable them to look to the Dublin government as being the main force for putting pressure on London to secure some kinds of reforms in Northern Ireland, rather than campaigning here. I am very worried by the approach of the current Labour frontbench. I see it as a step back and a shuffling off of responsibility to fight around these issues.

Bob The endless criticism of Labour governments for not introducing democratic measures in the North I think is partly misplaced. There is a war going on in the North and the repressive measures are a product of the fact that the British state is facing a very determined enemy. If they introduced all these democratic measures in the North, it might well mean that they won quite a lot of Catholic support for it. The trouble is they wouldn't win enough Catholic support to make the IRA give up. The lack of normal democratic legal methods in the North comes from the extraordinary nature of the situation. The Labour party would make all kinds of noises about democracy in opposition and then if they got into power would realise they need most of this repressive legislation if they are going to maintain the power for the British state. Democracy within the North rests upon the consent of the people who at present are fighting a war there. A political settlement in which Sinn Fein and the IRA were involved, would be one thing, but to say we are going to get rid of all this repressive legislation whilst they don't accept the terms of the solution is to live in a fantasy world.

Henry In an absolute sense what you say is obviously true in that insofar as the Provisionals are certainly not going to be damaged by this agreement, they are going to continue their activities into the foreseeable future and that would face a Labour government if it came to power. The evidence is that Catholic support for the Provos does vary incredibly depending on the broader political context in which Provisional violence takes place. It is a recipe of despair to say that nothing a prospective Labour government can do is going to affect the attitudes of the Catholic masses to the Provos. One of the basic sources of massive support for Republicanism is the material conditions of the Catholic working class. The Catholic unemployment rate is two and a half times that of the Protestant.

Clare A plausible line for a Labour government would be to declare the intention to withdraw and re-unify, starting the process of doing so, while lightening the repression and releasing people from jail, and thereby reducing IRA activity. I agree that you can't make Northern Ireland work without doing something about the border, you have to move on both fronts.

Chris But here we have the intractability of the problem. A declaration of intent to withdraw by a Labour government would stir up the Unionist hornet's nest far more than anything this current Anglo-Irish agreement has done. I disagree fundamentally with Bob about his estimation of the role of what he terms democratic reforms within the context of the Northern Ireland state. I don't see that as the be all and end all of policy. But the fact is there will never be a united Ireland unless there is a degree of consent given to that process by some who are presently Unionists. And Unionists are not going to agree to do that simply because Britain says it is getting out. What we have to find are

some ways of eating into the ability of Unionism to mobilise behind it such vast forces as it commands at the moment. It is here that democratic reforms can play a certain role as part and parcel of a much wider and bigger strategy that must also include much more extensive public spending in Northern Ireland to answer the problems of the Catholic sections of the working class.

And as things stand at the moment, the IS Unionist MPs are due to resign at the beginning of the year and Unionism is committed to a strategy of passive resistance. What do you think is likely to happen?

Henry They will resign, and in the by-elections the Unionist vote will go up, perhaps considerably. They will go back to Westminster and say to Mrs Thatcher, 'we've had our referendum'. She will say, 'so what?' Then they can go on to various forms of civil disobedience which would create certain problems for day-to-day administration and a lot of problems for sections of the Protestant working class and unemployed people. But where do they go after that? It will be containable. Once it becomes clear that the deal will stick, that Thatcher will stand by it whatever happens electorally, then the Protestants are likely to divide. The evidence of the failure of the 1977 strike is that substantial sections of the Protestant middle class and working class, when faced with confronting the British state, which subsidises and maintains much of the economic and social structure in the North, will draw back from that confrontation. So the unity you have got now is the maximum sort of unity that is possible. The more we get into next year, the more divisions will become apparent.

Chris The particular problem that the Unionist leadership faces is that they have spent 15 years now trying to dictate the pace of events in Northern Ireland and they haven't been able to do that. This agreement says to them on a very crucial aspect that you are not going to dictate the pace of events along certain lines. Now, when the first glimmerings of such an agreement came out, when the summits first got under way, Paisley tried a mass mobilisation in Northern Ireland. And the response was poor. Moreover, we shouldn't overestimate the paramilitaries. Paramilitaries are nowhere at all compared to where they were in 1972-4. I don't think they are capable of it any longer because the people at the lower levels within the Unionist movement don't see it as giving them anything in return.

Henry Another factor is that the nature of the Provisional campaign has changed quite a lot.

Chris That's right, it doesn't impact in a mass way on the Unionist population. You can walk around much of Belfast and it is not like it was ten years ago. The nightly bombing and shooting have gone. The Unionist population is not prepared to go in for the kind of thing that led to the 1974 situation, that led to the mass demonstrations by the UDA and UVF, with possibly 10,000 or more people in uniform mobilised in paramilitary formations. Moreover, they'll not be able to pull off civil disobedience on any great scale. They are going to have to be telling people to give up their livelihoods. If there is one thing they are not going to do it is give up safe civil service or post office jobs.

Clare If the Unionists threaten and bluster and then don't come up with anything - though I am not as confident as you that there won't be a big growth of Unionist paramilitary activity - then it would make it much easier to deliver reforms on the security situation for the Nationalist community.

Henry I do think there is certainly the potentiality for a resurgence of Protestant paramilitary violence. Whether that occurs or not will depend on how the mass of Protestants perceive what is going on in the next three to four months. If nothing very much happens, then paramilitary violence will not develop on a serious scale.



Bob Rowthorn

The Provisionals condemned the Accord, which is hardly surprising given one of its objectives is to bolster the SDLP against Sinn Fein.

Clare Early on, I think there was a real fear in Sinn Fein that it might work, that it might seem to give enough to the SDLP such that its own support would be weakened. But the shared analysis here suggests nothing seriously will change, certainly not on the economy, and therefore it's likely that the whole process will benefit them, and in the sense that it will weaken Britain's commitment to staying in Ireland, I agree with them. They can only gain.

Chris They wrote the agreement off a long time ago. They condemned the whole concept of the summit arrangements between Haughey and Thatcher and Fitzgerald and Thatcher. They see this as part of an attempt to draw Southern Ireland rather closer into the British network. We've got to move away from talking about the Provisionals and the IRA in terms of short term aims. They had a view in the early 70s that victory was just around the corner. It has taken them many years to get away from that. They now talk very determinedly in terms of a long-term approach. They are thinking in terms of a decade or more in which military and political struggle go together. I don't think they see this agreement as being of great significance from their point of view, it doesn't require them to change their approach.

Henry Prior to the agreement, some sections of the Provo leadership were worried about it. First of all, it appears to be difficult for them to get past the degree of electoral support they got in the 1982 assembly and the 1983 Westminster elections. That showed in the 1984 local and European elections. They are not cutting into the SDLP vote in the way Adams and Morrison thought they would in the euphoria after the assembly elections. At that time they felt they were going to displace the SDLP and become the main Nationalist party. Second, they feared some cosmetic concessions which would consolidate and bolster the position of the SDLP. And that is in some degree what has



Chris Myant

happened. The Accord has improved the morale of the SDLP. There is no doubt about that. The Provisionals have a real problem of expanding their area of support. I think it is practically impossible for them to displace the SDLP. Catholic politics of a clientelist, constitutional nationalist character can exist without delivering the goods. The SDLP is far from on the ropes and in that sense the Provisionals are in for a long and fruitless war.

Bob The Provisionals are against it because it is an agreement aimed basically at them. The Accord is likely to strengthen the military forces within the Provisionals because it undermines the possibility in the short run of making electoral gains. In fact, in the short run they are almost certainly going to lose out electorally. From their point of view, they have absolutely no alternative but to continue the military campaign.

Chris It proves the bankruptcy of the position that the military campaign has got them into. It cannot exercise pressure to militarily defeat the British authorities or the local security forces within Northern Ireland itself, but it can maintain Northern Ireland in a state of tension and confrontation, which is not conducive to the development of political forces which might lay the basis for some sort of change or breakthrough. As long as the Provisionals' campaign continues, there are going to be deep difficulties for anybody who wants to try and ease away some of those currently committed to Unionism and so create the possibilities for some sort of fundamental change. If the Provisionals follow the kind of line that Bob is talking about, then the future for Ireland and for Northern Ireland is very gloomy indeed.

Clare What is being said now seems to contradict our earlier discussion. I believe it's very likely that in the election caused by the Unionist MPs' resignations the SDLP vote will improve. But then nothing will happen and people will become very cynical about the treaty. In that situation, Sinn Fein's present strategy can continue with some prospect of picking up more support as the SDLP seems to fail.

Henry The other thing is there is a sizeable section of the Catholic population who just don't support the Provos because of violence, and that is one of the fundamental factors which will ensure the long-term strength of the SDLP. If the SDLP vote does not collapse, and I don't think there is any evidence that it is going to, then the Provisionals have a problem.

Bob One has to be realistic about the role of violence in politics. The fact is that this agreement is clearly a product of violence. If the IRA had called a ceasefire five years ago, this agreement wouldn't have happened. The SDLP are the beneficiaries of IRA violence. It's also clear that the Unionists will not in any conceivable process you can think of voluntarily agree to a United Ireland, if their arms are not twisted by the British. So those who believe in a United Ireland ultimately face the situation that either Britain unilaterally forces the Unionists into a united Ireland, or the Nationalists fight the military struggle to bring this about and ultimately twist Britain's arm to do this. That is the reality of the situation and constitutional Nationalism is ultimately a sham, because it relies for its credibility upon the violence of violent Nationalists.

Clare Henry says there is a whole chunk of the Nationalist community that will never support Sinn Fein because they don't agree with violence. But it's a complex disapproval, isn't it, because it approves of violence in 1916.

Now, let's bring in the other actor in the Accord, the Irish government. Why is Fitzgerald so keen on this whole business?

Henry It's quite simple. His government is incredibly weak in terms of popular support and it faces massive economic problems. On a whole range of domestic policy in the Republic, the government is manifestly seen to have failed. Now elections in the Republic certainly since the second world war are fought and lost on the economy, not the North. But for Fitzgerald, the Accord does represent, given the official political culture and ideology of the Southern state, one avenue of possible statesmanlike success. That is why he is being driven to it.

Chris For the Irish Republic, the issue of the North has been deeply damaging, and they want to find a solution probably more urgently than the British government does. For Britain is a big country, and Ireland is only a tiny little place, and the impact of the crisis in the North on the South has been quite considerable. They want to see an end to it and they are prepared to do a number of things to secure that end. For them to have the right to be consulted about the internal affairs of Northern Ireland is a very considerable step forward in terms of how they see themselves as a government vis-a-vis the government in London.

Bob The political reality is that the Fitzgerald government will downplay its role in the North. In other words it will make a public fuss about it, but will demand absolutely minimal concessions. Fianna Fael would behave very differently, if only because they will have put forward a lot of specific demands in opposition. Over the next year there are obviously going to be a lot of arguments in the South about exactly what the Southern government demands of this agreement and Fianna Fael is bound to come out with a pretty hard position. If in government I don't think they would renounce the agreement unless it actually collapses, but they certainly will up the terms.