

EUROPE

The Political Crisis in Northern Ireland

SEPT. 11, 2015

Q&A

By DOUGLAS DALBY

DUBLIN — Northern Ireland was thrown into turmoil this week when the province's pro-British first minister resigned from the executive branch, taking his party's ministers with him and leaving the government unable to function. Here are answers to some questions about the developments:

Q. *What is the status of the government?*

A. The government, in which pro-British unionists and Irish republicans share power by official mandate, cannot conduct any business without the participation of either of the two largest parties, so it is hanging by a thread. It has not officially collapsed, however. When Peter Robinson, the first minister and leader of the majority Democratic Unionist Party, resigned, he appointed one of his colleagues as acting first minister to stay behind and retain a toehold in the government.

Q. *What happens next?*

A. Mr. Robinson said Friday that he would renominate his ministerial team next Friday, and then immediately have all but one resign again — thus prolonging the limbo.

Q. *What is behind the current political crisis?*

A. On Aug. 12, a former Irish Republican Army activist, Kevin McGuigan, was murdered in Belfast, and the police blamed I.R.A. members. The official assertion

that the organization was still in existence upset the unionists because their main republican partner in the Northern Ireland government is the Sinn Fein party, the former political wing of the I.R.A. Sinn Fein has long insisted that the I.R.A. is defunct; many of the Sinn Fein lawmakers are themselves former I.R.A. members.

In remarks on BBC radio on Aug. 27, Jeffrey Donaldson, a Democratic Unionist member of the British Parliament, threatened unilateral action by his party if the assembly did not support the expulsion of Sinn Fein from the government. “If that means that we have a period in Northern Ireland where we don’t have a government until we resolve and sort out these issues,” he said, “then so be it.”

This week, tensions hit a boiling point when Bobby Storey, a prominent leader of Sinn Fein and a former I.R.A. commander, was arrested. Although not a lawmaker, Mr. Storey was a familiar sight to the unionists in the halls of the provincial legislature, the Northern Ireland Assembly. He was released a day later without charges. But to the unionists, the arrest was all the proof they needed that their partner in the power-sharing government could not be trusted.

Q. *Pro-British unionists have historically regarded the I.R.A. as their mortal enemy, so why should they care about what appears to be an internecine feud?*

A. It is true that few unionists would have shed tears over the murder of an I.R.A. operative. But the police assertion that I.R.A. structures were still in existence a decade after the group had ostensibly disbanded and given up arms infuriated the unionists.

Q. *Is there a danger of the situation escalating and leading to a resumption of sectarian strife?*

A. There is little doubt that sectarianism remains across Northern Ireland. There are now more so-called peace walls — barriers that separate nationalist and unionist neighborhoods — across Belfast than there were at the height of the 30-year conflict known as the Troubles. A government collapse could create a political vacuum, and there are organizations on the margins of the two sides that would be eager to fill it. They are unlikely to have the ability in the short term to wreak the kind of havoc that characterized the conflict, but the British government does not want to test such a possibility.

Q. *What role are Britain and Ireland playing in trying to find a solution?*

A. The British and Irish governments are co-guarantors of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which effectively ended the conflict in Northern Ireland. As such, they have a responsibility to try to break the impasse. In the past few years they have both been criticized for a hands-off approach to Northern Ireland affairs, and they must now try to convince the Democratic Unionist Party that continuing to participate in the government is in its best interests.

Q. *How credible are the reports that the I.R.A. is still active?*

A. There is little doubt that the I.R.A. or remnants of that organization remain active. Police intelligence, both in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic, suggests ongoing involvement in protection rackets and smuggling. There are also allegations of involvement in several murders.

However, there is also general agreement that the guerrilla units that made the I.R.A. such a deadly force are no longer in place, and that it is not a direct threat to the ongoing peace process.

Q. *Are surviving elements of Protestant paramilitary groups also active in the province?*

A. There is abundant evidence that these groups not only are still active, but have also been recruiting new members over the past few years. Various groups have been heavily involved in racketeering and drug dealing.

A version of this article appears in print on September 12, 2015, on page A9 of the New York edition with the headline: The Political Crisis in Northern Ireland.