

# N. Ireland MPs hold peace process hostage

by Mary Jane Freeman

Talks between Ireland and Britain on the next phase of the Northern Ireland peace process were abruptly cancelled on Jan. 18. No official reason for the postponement was given, and Irish Embassy sources in Washington expected the high-level meeting to occur on Jan. 26. But the clue as to why, may be found by looking behind the threats made by Northern Ireland Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) officials who declared, on the same day the talks were cancelled, that they were prepared to "topple the British government."

This is no idle threat. British Prime Minister John Major, having expelled some Conservative Party ministers from his party, now has a minority government, which over the last two to three months has held onto power only with the votes of the Northern Ireland Unionist MPs. Their beef is that Major may dilute the province's British status by giving the Dublin government a say over its governing.

The talks were to be the first official government-to-government meeting between Ireland's Foreign Minister Dick Spring and Britain's Northern Ireland Secretary Patrick Mayhew since the new Irish "rainbow" coalition government of Prime Minister John Bruton came to power. The agenda was to finalize the so-called framework document, which lays the basis for all-party talks to cement a negotiated peace in Northern Ireland. Two of the most controversial issues, from the Unionists' view, expected to be addressed in the framework document are 1) the creation of cross-border bodies with executive British-Irish powers to coordinate trade, investment, and tourism, and 2) rewriting of rival British and Irish constitutional claims to Northern Ireland.

Both issues are seen by the Unionists as fraught with potential for a reunification of Ireland and, thus, a loss of their British status. Neither of these issues, however, is new. In fact, the initiating Anglo-Irish Downing Street Declaration signed in December 1993, which launched the possibility for peace negotiations, included language that Britain would not object to Northern Ireland merging with Ireland if a majority in the six counties wanted it. It has always been the case, as Mayhew reiterated in January, that the two governments are "simply going to make proposals" in the framework document. Those proposals in turn will be offered to the parties in the province. "They can accept, reject, or amend them but we hope that they will at least discuss them together," Mayhew said.

But Major, who has been taking a "go-slow" approach to

the historic peace process and who is holding onto political power by a thin margin, appears to be caving in to Unionist pressure. James Molyneaux, head of the UUP, raised the tenor of the Unionist threat in an interview with British Broadcasting Corp. radio on Jan. 21. He declared that he would renege on a long-standing pledge to support the Major government on issues where its survival is at stake. Molyneaux wanted a *quid pro quo*: Unionists will support the government if Northern Ireland Unionists can have a "vetting" role over any proposals concerning Northern Ireland. In holding the peace process hostage, he issued a veiled threat to Major, saying, "Parliament itself would be very much aware of the pitfalls in what was being proposed [in the framework document, and] that's why I think that the ministers . . . would be very unlikely to accept [it]."

## More British obstacles

Two days later, on Jan. 23, Major replied, "When the proposals are published, you will find no provision for the British and Irish governments to exercise joint authority over the affairs of Northern Ireland. That has never been our intention." Just before Major spoke, he had concluded a two-hour meeting with Molyneaux. Major's aides were quick to clarify that the prime minister's comments do not preclude cross-border bodies being set up, but just that "there is no question of sovereignty being pooled between Dublin and London nor of anything being imposed." Was Major's comment just for public consumption of unhappy Unionists? Is all this talk yet another ploy by the British to slow the peace process?

The British have thrown up other obstacles. For instance, both Major and Mayhew have floated the proposal that all weapons held by the Irish Republican Army and Loyalists must be decommissioned *before* they will agree to commence all-party talks. The British government has also refused to release IRA members or Loyalists held political prisoner in British jails.

What is clear, however, is that each day of delay makes possible the potential for derailing the peace process. The all-party talks must begin and development projects to transform the war-torn lives of the Irish people have to commence. As seen in the Middle East, every day that goes by where the digging is not begun on infrastructure projects, is a day in which British-controlled terrorist assets can blow up the prospects for peace. Unemployment in Northern Ireland is 12.7%. President Clinton, who is sponsoring a conference on trade and investment in Northern Ireland in May, has stated that the best peace dividend we can give people is jobs. But as Kieran McGowan, chief executive of Industrial Development Agency Ireland, said on Jan. 18 in Ballybofey County, Donegal, peace alone will not bring a surge in jobs: "If funds were being directed to border counties from the government, the European Union, or the International Fund for Ireland, money had to be spent on infrastructure," otherwise companies will go elsewhere.