

New Irish government backs peace process

by Mary Jane Freeman

In mid-December, after a month of negotiations, a “rainbow” coalition government was formed in Ireland, and it has made significant efforts to put the Northern Ireland peace process back on track. During November, the leadership vacuum in Dublin following the collapse of the government under Albert Reynolds had slowed the rapid pace of the historic peace process that he had initiated. But a parliamentary vote on Dec. 15 elected John Bruton, head of the Fine Gael party, the second largest party in parliament, as Ireland’s new prime minister. Fine Gael, a “conservative-right” party, is joined by coalition partners Labour and Democratic Left parties—thus a “rainbow” coalition spanning right, left, and center. Within days of taking office, Bruton took three steps to reinvigorate the peace process.

Bruton’s election was hailed as “good news” for the John Major government in Britain. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s mouthpiece, columnist Conor Cruise O’Brien, wrote, “As far as Anglo-Irish relations are concerned, John Major will certainly not find the new government any harder to deal with than its predecessors. Even a bit easier.” Indeed, up until mid-November, when the Reynolds government fell, the peace process (despite stonewalling by the Major government) had progressed to where the British had no more excuses to “go slow.” In September and October, both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the paramilitary Loyalists announced cease-fires; on Nov. 1, President Clinton announced a major trade and investment package for Northern Ireland; and on Nov. 4, the first meeting of the Irish Forum for Peace and Reconciliation was held. It is likely, in the wake of the Irish government collapse, had it not been for renewed pressure by the Clinton administration on the Major government to meet with representatives of the Sinn Fein and the Unionists parties, the peace process would have been derailed.

Bruton extends the hand of peace

The day after being sworn in, Bruton made a point of extending a hand-shake to Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein, the party most closely associated with the IRA. Four days later, on Dec. 20, Bruton flew to London to meet with Major to work out a schedule for completing the so-called framework document which is to provide the guidelines for the next phase of negotiations. Prime Minister Major used the occasion to yet again demand that the IRA must “decom-

mission” all its weapons before any talks can proceed. The next day, Bruton met with Adams for 30 minutes, reassuring him that negotiations must be “inclusive” and “involving all democratic parties.” By Dec. 23, Bruton’s justice minister, Nora Owen, announced the early permanent release of nine IRA prisoners, which Sinn Fein has repeatedly requested of both governments.

The fact that Bruton moved so quickly to restart these discussions, and especially that he met with Adams, has upset pundits such as O’Brien. They believed that because, when Bruton was leading the opposition parties, he had criticized Reynolds for his “hasty embrace” of Sinn Fein after the IRA cease-fire, he could be expected to go along with the British agenda. Even more disconcerting to the British, however, must be the new Irish prime minister’s rejection of Major’s demand vis-à-vis the decommissioning of arms. Warning against a “one item agenda” approach to the peace talks, Bruton, after his meeting with Major, declared: “It wouldn’t be sensible to say that there is a one-item agenda, and that until we pass item one we can’t even talk or discuss items two, three, and four. These items must all be dealt with, [to] build a situation of confidence.” Reinforcing this position, Adams, in response to reporters’ questions on the weapons issue, said, “Surely the whole purpose behind the peace process is to remove the guns for good. . . . Surely that has to be a part of the objective.” Similarly, Tony Blair, the British Labour Party shadow prime minister, agreed with Bruton that the peace process cannot be dominated by the arms issue.

The economy is the test

The measure of the new government’s commitment to peace, however, will be revealed when Finance Minister Ruairi Quinn issues the 1995 budget on Feb. 8. The weakness of the new coalition government is its adherence to “free trade.” It has adopted a policy of curbing “public expenditures,” which, according to the *Irish Times*, have been “capped at 6% [for] next year and at 2% above inflation thereafter.” One Fine Gael proposal suggests shifting the “traditional approach” of “supporting industrial development” toward making “indigenous firms” and “services” a stronger part of the economy.

But the way to secure peace is through development. Ireland must “think big” and not fall into the London financial money-manager’s trap of being a service economy. One hundred years ago Belfast shipbuilding was the most advanced in the world. If all of Ireland, North and South, is to be at peace, the new government must spend the necessary monies to put its people back to work in productive jobs. Both the Clinton administration and the European Union have adopted multimillion-dollar investment packages for targeted cross-border development projects in Northern Ireland. Ireland must complement the EU’s Delors plan of great infrastructure projects by rebuilding its ports, rails, and canals.