

Clinton focuses on peace and development in Ireland

by William Jones

Over 1,000 people attended the White House Conference on Trade and Investment in Ireland, in Washington, D.C. on May 24-26. It was indeed an accomplishment to bring such a group together; not the least impressive was the fact that apart from the 350 businessmen from North America and the 250 businessmen from Europe attending, the conference also brought together hundreds of representatives, city councilmen, and municipal officials from both Northern Ireland and Ireland, including the six border counties. Tensions were still visible, with people choosing their tables at dinner with care, some having little desire to share a meal with someone who had for so long been a sworn enemy. But they remained gathered under one roof, and for one purpose—to chart a course of economic development for the isle of Erin.

Understanding the importance of bridging the gulf between Catholic and Protestant, the active cooperation of Irish Primate Cardinal Cahal Daly and Dr. John Dunlop, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, was more than symbolic. Cardinal Daly and Dr. Dunlop have worked together to organize the Churches' Call for Fair Employment and Investment in Northern Ireland, a mobilization involving the four largest churches in Northern Ireland—the Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches. Prior to the opening of the conference, Cardinal Daly and Dr. Dunlop held a press conference on this initiative.

None of this would have happened without the deep personal involvement of President William Clinton. This was recognized by all, and was underlined by many speakers. Nothing less than his bringing to bear the power of the U.S. Presidency, could have brought the reluctant British to the negotiating table and mediated the tense relationship between the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Fein. And not without cost for the President himself, who, by his intervention into the Irish

situation, added grist to the mill of British establishment hacks like Lord William Rees-Mogg and Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, who have been on the warpath against Clinton ever since he took the oath of office.

Ireland has basically been an “untouchable” issue by any U.S. President since John Kennedy, and Clinton stepped on a lot of British toes. President Clinton's appointment of Jean Kennedy Smith as ambassador to Ireland in March 1993, underlined the symbolism of the continuity with the policy of the assassinated Kennedy. The furor in Whitehall and Buckingham Palace when President Clinton granted a visa for the first time to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams in January 1994, and then invited him, along with other Irish leaders, to a reception at the White House on March 17, St. Patrick's Day, still rancours in British oligarchical breasts. Queen Elizabeth II, according to some reports, is refusing to interrupt her vacationing at the Windsor's summer castle at Balmoral in Scotland to meet the President if, as is planned, he stops in Britain on his way to a visit in Ireland.

New opportunities

In December 1993, after much behind-the-scenes arm-twisting, British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds had signed a Joint Declaration on Northern Ireland that set the stage for ending nearly three decades of violence and terrorism. In August and October 1994, respectively, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland declared a cessation of hostilities.

On Nov. 1, 1994, President Clinton announced a package of measures designed “to ensure that peace brings to Ireland new opportunities for job growth and economic prosperity,” one component of which was the White House Conference

and Trade and Investment in Ireland. The President also increased funding for the International Fund for Ireland, to total \$60 million over the next two years, and has recommended an enhanced cooperation program with Ireland in science and technology. At that time, the President appointed former Sen. George Mitchell (D-Me.) as Special Adviser to the President and the Secretary of State for Economic Initiatives in Ireland.

President Clinton reaffirmed his commitment to that process in his speech to the conference on May 25. "Never before have representatives of all the political parties in Northern Ireland, officials from the United Kingdom and Ireland, and so many business leaders joined to help us to build a better tomorrow," he said. "The conference shows anew the historical progress that has been made toward a just and lasting settlement, and toward a peace that respects the rights and traditions of both communities." Although "violence has diminished," he said, "it has not disappeared."

Economic growth to preempt fanaticism

The need now, the President stressed, is to bring about economic development on the island. "There must be a peace in Northern Ireland and the border counties so that everyone is convinced that the future belongs to those who build, not those who destroy," President Clinton told the delegates. "To lock in the accomplishments, we must make hope real. To grasp the opportunity, we must build stronger businesses and communities and families. We must have more and better jobs. We must strengthen the prospects of a better tomorrow. That is the way to preempt fanaticism. . . . More investment in Northern Ireland promises to lift the region out of the cycle of despair that leads to violence. It will reduce the chronic unemployment that runs around 50% in some urban areas and has deadened the dreams of so many."

And indeed, investment was the real subject of the conference. However, the strategy the Clinton administration has adopted, under budgetary constraints imposed by a Republican Congress obsessed with the austerity mania of the Conservative Revolution, seems to be to bring together the business people, provide them a forum and considerable logistical support, and hope that development will get off the ground.

Although Mitchell has been leading the efforts of all U.S. government agencies promoting economic development in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, the real logistical support for the economic initiatives has come from Ron Brown's Commerce Department. Brown led a delegation of U.S. business leaders to the British government-sponsored Belfast Investment Conference and to Dublin in December 1994. Brown will also be going back to Ireland to follow up on the White House conference.

Not accidentally, the Commerce Department has been targeted by congressional Republicans for early extinction. Since its founding in 1903, Commerce remains one of the

last remnants of dirigism in the elaboration of economic policy. The minions of the Conservative Revolution, obsessed with "free market economics," want to eliminate Commerce entirely, thus undermining peace in Ireland as well as burgeoning peace deals in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Although the conference was oriented toward business, it also provided the political backdrop to the long-awaited meeting between Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Sir Patrick Mayhew. This would be the first time since 1972 that a Sinn Fein leader and a British cabinet minister would meet. (In 1972, according to Irish sources, although the story is still adamantly denied by the British, Adams was brought from jail for a similar encounter with a British minister.) The Washington meeting, more symbolic than substantive, lasted 35 minutes. Adams described the meeting as "friendly, positive, frank, and very useful." Mayhew referred to it tersely as "civil," complaining that he failed to get a "positive response" from Adams on the decommissioning of IRA arms, a key issue as the peace negotiations continue. Noting that disarmament is not a one-way street, Adams is insisting that disarmament talks should also include British munitions present in Northern Ireland as well as the release of prisoners.

During a reception for conference delegates at the White House on May 25, Adams also spoke briefly with National Security Adviser Anthony Lake and with Nancy Soderberg, special adviser to the President and the National Security Council point-person on the Irish peace process.

Problems in strategy

The real danger in the administration strategy, however, is its reliance on the "workings of the market" to get development off the ground quickly enough to prevent the peace from unraveling. In response to a question at a press conference on May 24, George Mitchell indicated the administration position. "Ours is a free market economy," Mitchell said. "And we're trying to get private American businesses to invest in Northern Ireland, and we don't have either the intention nor the authority to tell them where to go. We make the facts available to them, we encourage them, we exhort them, but ultimately the decisions are private." Or, as Secretary Brown put it, "It is not the role of the U.S. government to dictate or dominate" the process. But in a world careening toward a major financial blow-out, relying on "market forces" is simply courting disaster.

Furthermore, in spite of the "deference" shown in public by the Major government to the Clinton peace initiatives, underneath the surface, there exists a state of war between Great Britain and the United States. Any delay in creating an economically viable economy in Northern Ireland and the border counties would give what President Clinton so succinctly characterized as "the organized forces of destruction," the opportunity to unravel the threads that have been so carefully woven.