



*Ireland Eye*  
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## Unity would give Irish republicans more strength

The controversial Civil Service (Special Advisors) Bill, which passed its consideration stage at Stormont, would place severe restrictions on the recruitment of ministerial special advisors, ensuring that ex-terrorist prisoners could not hold these coveted positions.

Unionists are supporting the bill to put one over on Sinn Fein, which has traditionally promoted former IRA prisoners into its higher ranks. Finding significant roles for these one-time inmates is vital in ensuring that that Sinn Fein retains electoral advantage in its working class heartlands, especially with the terrorist threat from various dissident factions.

To block bill will be blocked, Sinn Fein needs the help of the SDLP. This has rekindled debate on the need for a single nationalist party.

Sinn Fein has what the SDLP needs: an all-island identity. Speculation of a merger between the SDLP and parties such as Fine Gael in the Irish Republic has come to nothing.

The SDLP has what Sinn Fein seeks: the support of the Roman Catholic middle class. A recent House of Commons by-election saw Sinn Fein's vote collapse by more than 5,000 votes, although it still held on to the seat.

With increasing talk of Unionist co-operation, nationalist seats could be lost if Unionists start uniting behind candidates. However, no one should underestimate how politically astute the nationalist electorate is. At the 2010 Westminster general election, in spite of a Unionist unity candidate and a split nationalist vote, Sinn Fein held Fermanagh South Tyrone. Catholic voters deserted the high profile SDLP candidate in thousands.

If there is to be closer co-operation between Sinn Fein and the SDLP, the latter will have become more overtly republican. Sinn Fein may have to look again at its policy of not taking its seats in the House of Commons and ditch its policy of pushing former Provisional IRA prisoners onto ballot papers.

Since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Fein has cultivated a new generation of well-educated young

republicans who have never served their traditional apprenticeships in the IRA. Throughout the Troubles, the republican leadership pushed the Armalite and ballot box strategy – “A ballot paper in one hand, a rifle in the other”. The motto of new generation of republican politicians could be: “A ballot paper in one hand, an honours degree in the other”.

With dissident republicans still launching terrorist attacks against the security forces, it may be only a matter of time before the dissidents have sufficient strength to enter the political arena. Although the dissidents could not mount a significant electoral challenge to Sinn Fein, there is the danger the party could suffer from the general political malaise and voter apathy.

For the SDLP, given the slippage in its vote, the expected 2016 Stormont election could see the party reduced to a handful of Northern Ireland Assembly members – a mirror image of what is happening with the equally election-battered Ulster Unionists.

One nationalist thinker, Declan O’Loan, the former North Antrim SDLP MLA, got his knuckles rapped when he suggested a single nationalist party. However, rather than suspending him, perhaps the current SDLP leadership should have seen the wisdom of his vision.

Sinn Fein and the SDLP ought at least to consider which of them is best placed to hold or take various seats at forthcoming elections.

The next big test will be the European elections next year. Sinn Fein is again expected to top the poll. And with so much Unionist discord, there is the possibility two of Northern Ireland three MEPs could be republicans.

With opinion polls suggesting a united Ireland is currently off the agenda because of the collapse of the Irish Republic’s economy, the only way that aspiration can be progressed at present might appear to be through a single republican party.

But is the level of compromise that Sinn Fein and the SDLP would have to make too high a price for them to pay?

## Chagos Islanders

# Justice is a very long time in coming

A fair settlement for some dispossessed people may just be on the horizon, writes David Snoxell

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the last boat load of Chagossians to be deported from their homeland. The last voyage (*MV Nordvaer*) to leave Chagos ailed from Peros Banhos on May 26 1973 with eight men, nine women and 47 children on board.

During the House of Lords’ foreign affairs, defence and development debate on May 15 four peers raised the future of the Chagos Islanders – an issue that straddles all three aspects of the debate. Baroness Whitaker’s (Labour) speech drew attention to the Foreign Secretary’s commitment before the general election “to work to ensure a fair settlement of this long-standing dispute”. She commended William Hague’s positive attitude towards righting the wrongs and his promise last December to review the policy on resettlement, enquiring when Parliament would be consulted about the review. She also argued for a marine protected area (MPA) that everyone could support wholeheartedly.

Hague promised a similar review of policy in June 2010, but it fizzled out. Five months after its announcement where has this review, since extended to cover all aspects of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), got to? It seems it has still to get of the ground. No information about who is to lead the review, its timescale and how the interested parties are to be consulted has filtered out. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office may think they can do an in-house job with its limited resources, but there is no indication that any staff has yet been allocated to the task. The Chagos Islands (BIOT) All-Party Parliamentary Group has long argued that what is needed a cross-cutting department dedicated to bringing about an overall settlement of the various issues. So will this review be up and running in time to bring about the coalition’s pre-election promise of a fair and just settlement before 2015 election?

There is a significant sign of progress. After four years of pressure from the APPG. FCO Minister Mark Simmonds has abandoned the official mantra that arguments against resettlement are “clear and compelling” and that “it’s not possible to put the clock



The Chagos Islands: a diplomatic solution still being sought

back” and agreed to an independent study. This should revisit the flawed science and assumptions of the 2002 feasibility study, on which the FCO largely based its opposition to resettlement, an argument also intrinsic to its cases before the Law Lords in 2008 and Strasbourg in 2012. The study should be above board. In 2002, the Chagossians were not consulted. This time, it is vital that they and Parliament are involved. The timescale, terms of reference and the choice of consultants should be agreed with them.

2015 will be a crucial year for Chagos – not only is it the end of the coalition’s term of office, but December 2014 is the deadline by which the 1966 agreement between Britain and the United States on the use of the BIOT can be renegotiated. And, in 2015, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) takes place in Mauritius. Since the signing, in March, by the Queen and Commonwealth countries of the Commonwealth Charter, which sets out universal values and standards of human rights that all members must abide by, there is bound to be a sharp focus on how the United Kingdom is meeting its obligations to restoring the fundamental human rights of the Chagossian people. As many live in Mauritius, and as the Mauritian Government is committed to facilitating their return, when the sovereignty issue is resolved, this will clearly be a lively issue at CHOGM.

Before then, there is the MPA to be addressed. In April, the High Court spent seven days listening to the arguments for and against the legitimacy of the MPA, as declared by the Foreign Secretary David Miliband shortly before the 2010 election. The Chagossian case was based, in part, on WikiLeaks evidence which demonstrated an

improper motive in the creation of the MPA – in other words, that FCO officials had told the US Embassy that an MPA would provide a definitive obstacle to resettlement. Last year a High Court judge decided that the WikiLeaks documents constituted admissible evidence and that FCO officials must be cross-examined. This decision was questioned by the FCO at the start of the judicial review. First, FCO officials argued that they were bound by the Official Secrets Act and must remain silent. They then tried the policy of “neither confirm nor deny”. Having failed to convince the judges, Government lawyers produced a rabbit out of the hat – arguing that the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations protects communications originating in diplomatic missions. In a controversial spoken ruling, the judges decided in FCO’s favour, denying the Chagossians their key pleading. A judgment on the case is awaited. The Mauritian case at a United Nations arbitral tribunal against the MPA will be heard next year.

Whichever way these cases go, they do not exonerate the FCO from negotiating a diplomatic solution to a laudable but misconceived project. While resettlement becomes ever more urgent, nothing could be simpler than to design an MPA which reconciles the interests of conservation with the rights of the indigenous people who have traditionally fished there. In practice, this means amending the MPA to make provision for local fishing by allowing the Chagossians to return and taking account of Mauritian interests. These issues could have been resolved years ago without resort to the courts.

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