

Shenanigans at Stormont

By **John Quinn MSc IT**, Published on November 3rd, 2009

The unrelenting Northern Ireland quarrel between Nationalist and Unionist continues. The latest spat over the devolution of policing and justice powers from Westminster to Stormont might seem petty to the outsider but to the politicians involved, it is a deadly serious issue that threatens to destabilize the entire power sharing government in Northern Ireland. Quite why this local squabble qualifies as an international event with the recent visit of US secretary of state Clinton is difficult to fathom.

Why having reached agreement in major areas such as constitutional issues and decommissioning, would the devolution of policing and justice powers prove to be such a sticking point? Is there more to this than a personal animosity between the Unionist and Nationalist leaders Peter Robinson of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin who simply don't get on?

The DUP is the largest Unionist party in Northern Ireland and remains implacably opposed to any advance of nationalism. Sinn Féin has displaced the SDLP as the largest nationalist party whose ultimate goal is a 32 county Irish republic. Sinn Féin's enthusiastic working and selling of a Belfast agreement that institutionalizes majority Unionist control seems contradictory in the context of their 32 county Holy Grail.

According to Jim Allister, leader of the hard-line Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) party, *"devolving policing and justice is about more than money. It is about the much deeper issue of gifting such vital and sensitive issues to an Executive and Assembly where IRA/Sinn Féin – the party which still justifies their IRA's murder of policemen and judges – holds the power of veto"*.

For Sinn Féin, gaining local control of justice matters is the only way to secure widespread nationalist support for law and order. They argue that without this long-sought move, it will prove impossible to isolate dissident republican groups, who are still trying to kill police officers and soldiers.

They believe that this would be a vote winner amongst the nationalist community and cement their position as the largest nationalist party. Perhaps for Sinn Féin too, any perceived victory over the traditional Unionist enemy is some consolation for their daily encounter with the enduring symbol of Unionist rule, Lord Carson as they drive past him daily to and from work in the hitherto detested Stormont castle.

The DUP leader Peter Robinson has wisely in the context of Unionist politics dispensed with the chuckle brothers routine of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness in favour of a more sober and remote relationship with Sinn Féin. This plays well in the Unionist heartland of Mid-Ulster and helps prevent voter support leaking to the rival TUV.

The extraordinary American interest in Northern Ireland affairs as personified by the Clintons continues. The appointment of economic envoy Declan Kelly is further evidence of this commitment. It seems unlikely that this level of commitment will continue indefinitely unless the parties can at least agree to the devolution of policing and justice from Westminster. The Northern Ireland parties should reflect on this and avoid stretching the patience of a powerful friend to its limits. Hilary Clinton in her recent address to the Northern Ireland assembly didn't say as much but it is fair to surmise that this is what she really meant. To what extent the Belfast agreement could be used as model for addressing other conflicts around the world is a moot point.

Is this latest spat really a case of *Shenanigans at Stormont* or are we witnessing the devolution end game with the transfer of the only remaining key powers retained by Westminster? This is an important achievement for Nationalists but it must be galling for Unionists having to confront the political reality of Sinn Féin having control over police and judges who not so very long ago were considered legitimate assassination targets. Perhaps the Unionists in the eyes of their supporters have engineered a victory of sorts by managing to negotiate a financial package with Gordon Brown that will underpin this agreement. There are other battles between Nationalists and Unionists ahead including the Irish Language Act but maybe the parties can do business locally without the recent international fanfare we witnessed at Stormont. They may well have to function without the indulgence of the British and US Governments who have much more important issues of their own to tackle. Breezing in and out of Downing Street and enjoying such high level access to the Washington State Department must be a real drug for the local politicians; how soon will they have to content themselves with this less glamorous task of knuckling down without the photo opportunity outside Downing Street or the phone call to the US State Department? Only time will tell but it is difficult to fault them for enjoying their extended fifteen minutes of fame.

