

New Decade, New Approach?

A socialist analysis

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January 2020 saw government institutions in the North of Ireland end their three year hiatus after local parties signed up to the British government's *New Decade, New Approach* agreement, which outlined the basis for the resurrection of power sharing in Stormont. After a prolonged period of no government, which was triggered by the RHI crisis, a time categorised by huge levels of frustration among public sector workers over issues of pay, pensions and the more general running down of services, as well as anger around the denial of civil and individual rights, including Irish language rights, equal marriage and the right to bodily autonomy. The resurrection of the Stormont institutions led to a fleeting sense of positivity across society. But almost as soon as the ink dried upon the pages of the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement, cracks began to appear in the new dispensation, which has all the hallmarks of another weak and unstable marriage of convenience between Sinn Féin, the DUP and other establishment parties.

A thorough analysis of what led to the interregnum of Stormont has already been presented to readers of the Irish Marxist Review. This article instead hones in on the recent deal that was endorsed by the big parties in the North and will likely shape politics going forward, in order to outline some of its key components. Across the 62 pages of the document there are no doubt some positives, alongside many vague or general commitments that very few reasonable people would disagree with. But at its heart it is a deeply flawed deal that kicks a number of cans down the road. It falls short in a number of key areas, including around the petition of concern and Irish language, and strongly hints at a continuation of the neo liberalism and public sector austerity that has defined previous assemblies. A close reading of the agreement also indicates that it will likely exacerbate the underlying issues of communal competition and entrenched sectarianism that has defined the Northern state.

Given the dire state of public services, and the length of time politics has been at an impasse in the North, many

ordinary people understandably welcomed the deal. And there are concessions that will be popular amongst most of the population. It is crucial to understand, however, that where any concessions have been won, on pay or welfare mitigations, or Irish language or any other issues, it is because of movements from below. No one was seriously talking about pay disparity for health workers here, for example, until the recent health strikes, and the clear lesson of this strike is that real progressive change is not handed down by politicians from below, but instead delivered through mass people power and the actions of workers and mass movements. That said, it is also important not to over emphasise these concessions and examine them carefully, which is the intent of this article.

The *New Decade, New Approach* document contains proposals that appear positive, at least superficially, even though many are still only commitments on paper, these include; the extension of welfare mitigations, the creation of 900 new Nursing jobs; banning zero hour contracts; moves to make the Executive a living wage employer; to "settle" the pay dispute in the Health sector and "resolve" pay disputes with teachers; establish a child funeral fund; provide 3 funded cycles of IVF treatment; devolve the power to set a minimum wage to the North; establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency; expand Magee to 10,000 students and a new Graduate Entry Medical School; investment to improve palliative and end of life care and increased support for palliative perinatal care; create an Irish Language commissioner; create parity in financial support for victims of contaminated blood with England; to develop a childcare strategy with resources for limited affordable provision; implementation of a redress scheme for victims and survivors of historical abuse and to publish the mental Health Action Plan within 2 months.

Additionally, there are vaguer commitments to take action on educational underachievement particularly amongst boys from a Protestant working class background; to create a new special educational needs frame-

work; to examine options to remove historical debt from the NI Housing Executive and exclude it from having to pay Corporation Tax; to put civic engagement and public consultation at the heart of policy-making and to create greater support for educating children of different backgrounds together in the classroom.

Many of these proposals are good, but they are not particularly radical. Worse, much of the document is aspirational, with no specific outline of how or when many of these proposals will be enacted. Indeed, there is a complete absence of any financial commitments attached in the deal. There is no single spending figure, nor any sense of where it will come from. The proposed programme for government, for example, has no funding or expenditure figures attached to it. This cloak and dagger approach from a Tory/Fine Gael partnership, which SF and the DUP jumped to endorse, automatically rang alarm bells among most rational readers and continues to define the period that has followed.

People will welcome the commitments to resolve the nurses and other pay disputes. But isn't it the objective of every government to 'settle' or 'resolve' pay disputes? Why is there no mention of acceding to the demands of these workers? The aforementioned health strike in particular emerged as the most impactful industrial action during recent months, as nurses took historic action. The pay offer to health workers, however, exposed the record of local parties here, as funding to settle the strike will primarily come from future and existing Stormont budgets, proving what health workers knew all along – that SF and the DUP had for years denied them fair pay. This point won't be lost on thousands of other public sectors workers and civil servants campaigning for fair pay. We should demand, therefore, that these workers immediately receive fair pay and also insist that this proves that unions should keep up the fight, to ensure that there is no backsliding by the new Executive. We should also point out that the proposal to increase nurse and midwifery jobs by 900 is wholly inadequate, and would only be a sticking plaster, as the trade union movement has made clear.

Mitigating the disastrous impact of welfare reform, which was implemented with the support of both SF and the DUP during the previous Assembly in 2015, was a most crucial issue for the big parties to address, particularly SF, due to the unpopularity of their role in introducing PIP and Universal Credit among their working

class base. On welfare there has been a welcome move to extend mitigations. Although the full timeframe and detail of these mitigations are yet to be revealed and evidence suggests that they will not be extended indefinitely. Worse, there is no talk of taking action for those feeling the effects of welfare reform, nor any discussion of taking power back from the Tories to create a welfare system that is just, humane and fit for purpose.

Alongside the concessions in the deal, however, there is an obvious continued commitment to neoliberalism; with references throughout the document to the need for rationalisation, efficiency reviews, the need for cost cutting etc. The section on health, for example, makes reference to the implementation of the deeply flawed Bengoa report that will effectively greenlight all manner of cuts in the NHS. In addition, there is no reference to increased funding, despite the severe state of school budgets etc. Instead, there is a proposal for an independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs. Without any commitment to greater funding, this review could only lead to one thing – cuts. There are references made to the need to review special needs provisions. But again, the most recent review undertaken resulted in a proposal to close 7 special needs schools. There is nothing in this deal that suggests the trajectory of this agreement is any different. Similarly, the call for further reform of the NI Civil Service and the rationalisation of Arm's Length Bodies, is evidently predicated on the need to cut jobs as previous rationalisations and civil service reforms have. Where the government – no doubt in conjunction with the big parties – have deemed something popular they spell it out. But when they are talking about cuts, they hide it behind the language of rationalisation and efficiency.

The deal makes much of the need to improve housing. But on close inspection, it will do anything but. The deal will continue the decades long process of eroding the Housing Executive, with continuing outsourcing to Housing Associations, no commitments given to increase the Housing Executives housing stock by building new HE homes, and the very strong suggestion in the deal that the Housing Executives future funding will be predicated on increased rents in HE homes was confirmed on 24th February, when the Housing Executive announced that it will be increasing rents by 2.75 percent.

There are some hard fought concessions for the Irish

language in this deal, but given the scale, vibrancy and aspirations of the Irish language movement in recent years, it would be wrong not to be disappointed by what is on offer. This deal falls short of the commitments made in the St Andrews Agreement 14 years ago and are not much more than the much derided leaked draft deal from 2018. There will be an Irish language commissioner, a new central translations hub, and measures to allow for the usage of Irish in the NI assembly and other public bodies and some other concessions. However, there is little specifically about Irish language rights or official recognition, no standalone Irish language act, the proposed commissioner will likely be toothless on questions of big decisions and beholden to the veto of a unionist first minister, and there is little by way of funding to for a rapidly growing community, not least in the education sector with the biggest Irish secondary school now at maximum capacity but with demand still growing. Unionist obstruction towards the language has been rewarded in this deal, with equivalence created throughout for Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition, and no serious moves made by the DUP to shift their opposition.

It is perhaps on the issue of sectarianism that the deal falls furthest short. Despite its much vaunted “new approach”, this deal will further entrench sectarianism into the state, doubles down on the “two traditions” schema whereby communal forces are elevated in politics and bigoted practices are given cover by the law, including a proposal to create a commissioner whose task will include protecting the “Ulster British Tradition”, as if such a thing is an endangered species and not the historic ideology of elites here, as well as swathes of promised funding for all manner of things including a celebration of partition and the creation of the Northern state. There is talk of tackling paramilitarism, but there is nothing in the deal that suggests that the cosy relationship between Stormont and paramilitaries will be in any way reversed. What measures will be taken to ensure that the debacle of the Social Investment Fund, where loyalist paramilitary figures were effectively funded by the state, is not repeated? There aren’t any. There is also a thread running through the deal which presumes that sectarianism is something which takes places outside the Assembly and the structures of the state, with no acknowledgement of the role the state plays both in political practice and its structures of funding in strengthening sectarianism

across society.

The same weaknesses can be found in relation to the ‘reform’ of how Stormont works. The proposals for changes to the Petition of Concern are only superficial and will bring no great change. The deal claims it will improve public participation in decision making through consultations. Yet it also seriously curtails people’s democratic rights and ability to hold politicians to account by significantly extending the length of time an Assembly election must be called after the collapse of an Executive, to 24 weeks. Worse, ministers will be allowed to stay in place for 18 weeks after such an event, encouraging the culture of impunity that allowed ministers to create situations like RHI in the first place. In essence, these proposals are a bridge to the next crisis, and will do nothing to increase accountability or transparency. A Commissioner for Standards is to be created to monitor the conduct of ministers. Absurdly, this post will be appointed by the First and Deputy First ministers themselves and will have no power to enact any sanctions. The deal maintains that whistle-blowers will be protected but provides little detail on how such a thing will be achieved and makes matters worse by insisting that complaints can only be received about Ministers if the complainant provides their name and contact details. Despite the collapse of the Assembly coming as a result of the RHI debacle, no serious changes have resulted. Indeed, the responsibility for any future reform based on the RHI inquiry findings will be left to the same individuals who oversaw the disaster in the first place.

There are other areas of the deal that fall short. The verbiage about climate change is positive. But why are there no concrete demands like a ban on fossil fuel extraction, concrete commitments to invest in green energy, or enshrining eco-friendly measures into future planning developments? Workers’ rights are only window dressing in this deal. There is no effort made to repeal Thatcher’s anti trade union laws that have been devolved here for twenty years, and the proposal to devolve minimum wage powers is not matched by any commitment to actually increase the wage. How will Stormont’s long established practice of selling the North overseas as a low wage economy conflict with such new powers? This is but one of many questions the left must pose. Proposals to end zero hour contracts are positive, but unlike many other proposals contain no timeframe for implementa-

tion. It is also interesting to note that there is very little in the deal about Brexit, despite the extent to which all of the main parties 5 months ago insisted that it was the number one issue.

The most glaring aspect of the deal, however, was the lack of any real financial commitments on behalf of the British (and indeed the Irish) government. The *New Decade, New Approach* document came off the back of the recent Westminster election, which returned an emboldened right-wing Tory party in London. In terms of the North this election was by all standards a bad day for the two big parties, SF and the DUP. Indeed, if the Westminster results were to be repeated at Assembly level both parties faced the possibility of losing seats. In this context, faced with a straight choice between another election and supporting the *New Decade New Approach* deal, the two big parties jumped to sign up to a deal with no financial commitments thereby missing an historic opportunity to tie down the British government to a serious injection of funding. It is in this context that we are witnessing a continuation of the same old austerity politics of the past, as an analysis of recent events in Stormont will show. Indeed, since the establishment of the new Executive, not a week has passed without the leaking of a fresh quote, often from government Ministers, about reactionary ways to raise revenue by forcing the payments of services further onto ordinary people, such water charges, tuition fees, prescription fees or the sell-off of Housing Executive homes. *New Decade, New Approach?* It does not feel that way so far.

As the new executive prepares the early stages of its first Budget Bill, People Before Profit MLA Gerry Carroll addressed these issues inside the Assembly chamber. Highlighting the “irony” of politicians who lament Tory austerity while ignoring their own role in supporting austerity policies, including thousands of public jobs losses and the introduction of benefit cuts, Carroll argued that a progressive future in the North demands steadfastly standing up to the Tories, but also making a break from the neo-liberal and austerity driven policies of previous SF and DUP led governments. Commenting on the Budget Bill, Carroll suggested that instead of a break with the failed policies of the past, all indications pointed to a continuation of the same. His speech is worth quoting at length:

“... the detail of the Bill contains very concerning

elements, such as £24 million in reductions, albeit retrospective, to the budget of DAERA, the Department with responsibility for the environment. At a time when we are addressing climate change — the biggest test of our generation — it is hard not to think, in advance of any new Budget, that the Assembly has already failed the test by approving those figures. Other glaring reductions are to be written into legislation today, many as concerning as the £24 million from DAERA. Most concerning of all, just like the £24 million, there has been little or no scrutiny or oversight [...] I cannot fathom how the Executive, who claim to be championing a new approach for a new decade, are happy to sign off on those figures when they have barely touched the oversight measures demanded by the Assembly. To have financial decisions rubber-stamped by MLAs without a shred of proper scrutiny demonstrates that the Assembly has also failed the test of accountability. People Before Profit has no truck with such antics. We will certainly not be beholden to any austerity Budget. People elected me to take a stand against that kind of behaviour, and that is what I intend to do. We believe that there is a different way forward: one based on taxing the very rich to pay for public services; one based on investing heavily in public services and that enforces proper minimum wages to kick-start our economy, rather than one that drops to its knees, pockets open for whatever multinational corporation is interested; and not an economy that relies on the whim of free-market forces.”

Even in its early stages, then, the new executive seems intent on pursuing the same failed neo-liberalism of the past. A sure sign that what is needed now more than ever is a principled socialist opposition, both in the Assembly chamber but, crucially, on the streets and in our communities. All tall task, certainly, but one that People Before Profit is up for in the months and years ahead.

Notes

1 This article references the following publication throughout: *New Decade, New Approach*, January 2020,

2 <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/housing-executive-raises-rents-in-bid-to-tackle-funds-shortfall-38975405.html>.

3 Stormont Hansard, 25 February 2020, p. 83, <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-25-02-2020.pdf>.