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An Opening for Ulster

Britain's elections have given a lift to the possibility of peace in Northern Ireland. Six months ago the stalemate between the Irish Republican Army, the British government and Northern Ireland's Protestant Unionists seemed overwhelming. Today the IRA may be more inclined to declare another cease-fire. Britain's new prime minister, Tony Blair, ought to reward such a commitment by announcing that if the cease-fire holds, Sinn Fein, the IRA's political wing, will be welcome at the peace talks on a definite date, perhaps in late summer. That would mark the group's first presence in the negotiations.

Britain's former prime minister, John Major, took the peace process far, but he would not give the IRA that assurance. It would have been risky in an election year, and his Conservative Party's parliamentary coalition included the Northern Ireland Unionists, who do not want the Republicans at the negotiating table. Moderate Unionists gained support in last week's elections at the hard-liners' expense. With a large Labor majority in Parliament, Mr. Blair has a freer hand.

The elections also strengthened Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein. Mr. Adams, who ran on a peace platform, easily won a seat in the British Parliament. Many in the IRA do not want a cease-fire and believe that the British will listen only to force. Mr. Adams says he is not one of them, and has given every indication that he favors a renewal of the cease-fire that ended early last year. He will now have more clout to persuade the IRA.

Mr. Blair's Northern Ireland sec-

retary, Marjorie Mowlam, said early this spring that she would bring Sinn Fein to the peace talks if a cease-fire held, but that was before elections. This month she spoke of the need to reform Northern Ireland's police and end job discrimination, two issues crucial to Northern Irish Catholics.

Ms. Mowlam has also said the right thing about parades. Every year, Northern Ireland's peace is jeopardized by Unionist parades through Catholic neighborhoods, which often end in brawls and riots. A commission this January recommended setting up an independent tribunal with authority to decide where the Unionists can march. Mr. Major put off acting on the recommendation. Ms. Mowlam says the new government embraces it fully. That will not help with this summer's marches, though, and Ms. Mowlam must act quickly to ensure that police do not use excessive force.

Even if all-party talks commence, they could quickly be derailed by disarmament issues. Unionists demand that the IRA turn over its weapons before talks proceed. A group headed by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell produced a reasonable solution last year, which is to deal with arms issues as the rest of the talks proceed. Mr. Mitchell, who is now chairman of the talks, has earned the trust of all sides in the conflict. He, and the Clinton administration, should stay involved.

With Mr. Blair in office and Mr. Adams strengthened, Mr. Mitchell may find that the opportunities for peace have improved.

—THE NEW YORK TIMES.