Re-examining the Northern Ireland Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

The Northern Ireland conflict has its roots in the failure of the British state-building project to consolidate the territorial gains of colonization in Ireland. A decade of intense political activity in the early 20th century, a failed armed rebellion in 1916 and a guerrilla war by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1918–21 led to the establishment of an independent Irish state. The British Government, after a bitter but ultimately failed attempt at counter-insurgency, withdrew its forces from most of Ireland, but the price to be paid was partition. The particular circumstances of the settler plantations from the 17th century onwards had led to well-organized opposition in the north-east to Irish independence, and these supporters of union with Britain were termed ‘unionists’. They had a sufficiently strong alliance with elements of the British political establishment to persuade the British Government to adopt a policy of partition, even after they had failed to defeat the wider challenge of Irish nationalism.

Irish nationalists split on the terms of the treaty offered by the United Kingdom and fought a brief but bitter civil war. After the defeat of radical forces in the civil war the new Irish Government was preoccupied with stability, not with the completion of Irish unity. Unionists for their part accepted a devolved parliament in Northern Ireland as a means of ensuring greater control over their own political destiny. They accepted a smaller geographical area that the traditional northern province of Ulster where their majority was very small and instead drew the partition boundary around an area where they made up approximately 66% of the population.[1] Faced with a nationalist minority and a new southern Irish Government, unionist political culture was grounded in a siege mentality. In this context elites were able to control a political party that ruled in a single-party Government, with no significant internal division, for nearly 50 years. The unionists cemented this position by asserting a nakedly privileged position for their own within the system. It had a strong internal class inequality, but even those at the bottom of the unionist hierarchy still possessed advantages over their nationalist counterparts in employment, cultural rights and security. As Richard Rose (p. 465, in Rose, 1971—see Bibliography) put it, nationalist compliance with the new regime, not consent, was sought.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN CONFLICT

The political divisions between Irish nationalists and unionists continued after partition, but there was little serious armed resistance to British rule until the present conflict erupted in the late 1960s. The international context at the beginnings of the modern conflict was framed by the US civil rights movement, student protests and new social movements. The utter failure of a minor IRA armed campaign in 1956–62 (Coogan, 1980), the inability of moderate conservative nationalism to offer any realistic political strategy, British unwillingness to disturb the status quo and the absence of any significant international support for Irish unity meant that by the late 1960s a traditional nationalist campaign was an unlikely vehicle for the mounting frustration of nationalists and others concerned with the nature of unionist rule.

The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formed in 1967 was based on the US model—adopting its terminology and its tactics of peaceful marches (McCann, 1993; Farrell, 1976). While unionists point out that the present Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams was (as a young and unknown political figure) among its founding members, it was in reality a broad movement, focused on issues of discrimination, not partition. Its demands included: an end to the provision restricting voting rights in local elections to property owners; an end to the manipulation of electoral district boundaries;[2] an end to discrimination in the provision of public housing and jobs; the repeal of emergency laws; and the disbandment of the B Specials (a particularly ill-disciplined element of the security forces). The relationship between the civil rights protests and the subsequent armed conflict remains contested. Unionists predominantly see the civil rights protests as a deliberate effort by republicans to begin civil strife. Nationalists overwhelmingly blame the British Government for its failure to respond adequately, or in time, to what they regarded as reasonable and moderate demands for reform.

Civil rights protests gained momentum throughout 1968 and were banned and eventually violently attacked by both police and unionist protestors. Counter protests by unionists—leading to the emergence of Ian Paisley as a political figure—led to widespread street violence. Thousands of nationalists were forced to leave their homes in mixed areas or at sectarian boundaries. Rising levels of street violence led some within nationalist communities to look to their traditional defenders—the IRA. However the IRA leadership was opposed to an armed campaign at this time, leading to graffiti appearing in Belfast saying, 'IRA—I Ran Away' (p. 83, in Smith, 1995). Almost inevitably the IRA split and it was the new 'Provisional' leadership—the 'Provos' in journalistic shorthand—who were to emerge as the only effective successor to the IRA; it is from this split that the modern Sinn Féin party and IRA emerged (Feeney 2002; English, 2003).

The British Government left political control in the hands of the regional unionist administration, though they did deploy the British army on to the streets in August 1969, when protests had stretched the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC—the local police force) to breaking point. An initial period of calm ended quickly as the British army was deployed to quell nationalist protests and defeat the emerging IRA. As civil rights protests continued and there were signs that the IRA was reorganizing, the unionist Government in Belfast responded in August 1971 by introducing internment—detention without trial. Only nationalists were arrested, many if not most with no IRA connections, despite the fact that unionist paramilitaries[3] had also been involved in killings. The response was a huge escalation of the IRA campaign—more people were killed from August to December 1971 than had been killed between 1967 and July 1971 collectively.[4] The armed conflict had begun.

THE ARMED CONFLICT AND ITS POLITICAL ACTORS[5]

There is a very contested literature on the role of the British state in Northern Ireland. Arthur Aughey (1989), for example, reflects a typically unionist view, arguing that the British state is a less than convinced ally. Former Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald (1991) saw British policy on Northern Ireland as a problem of low priority and inconsistency. Republicans such as Gerry Adams (1995; 2003) see the United Kingdom playing a colonial role. Whatever is thought of the United Kingdom's strategic motivations, over the last 30 years or so there has been a consistency to its public position. The United Kingdom seeks a restoration of stability over all else and believes this will be accomplished by remaining as the sovereign power, trying to defeat the IRA, introducing a power-sharing government between moderate nationalists and unionists, and improving its relationship with the Irish Government.

After some military confusion in the early 1970s the United Kingdom ran an intense counter-insurgency campaign to defeat the IRA, leading to widespread criticisms from human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, 1991). However, British policy showed little strategic thinking on how to deal with the fact that for over 20 years there was little sign of progress either in defeating the IRA or in reaching a political agreement. The British state never adopted a firm view as to the relative balance to be achieved between its relationship with unionism and the Irish Government, where it was often pulled in opposite directions. In the late 1960s and early 1970s it still retained the view that the Irish Government had no business 'interfering' in Northern Ireland. As street violence escalated in late 1969 the British Government refused to meet the Irish Government or even to discuss the crisis (Fanning, 2001; Kennedy, 2001). This view softened somewhat in the 1970s; however, a senior Irish civil servant involved in high-level talks through the 1980s and early 1990s said that, until the lead up to the peace process of the 1990s, there was little real acceptance on the British side that a good relationship required them to take Irish government concerns seriously[6] and so, in general, unionist concerns were generally given priority over those of the Irish Government.

The Irish Government, like the United Kingdom, was conflicted in its strategic goals. It favoured stability over high-risk strategies to achieve Irish unity but faced a public with a strongly nationalist political culture. The Irish Government, for example, banned all Sinn Féin and IRA members from appearing on TV or radio from the early 1970s—15 years before the British did so. In a justification for the measures before parliament, the minister then responsible explicitly referred to the ability of Sinn Féin and the IRA to mobilize public opinion through 'emotive' appeals.[7] After a disastrous 'economic war' with the United Kingdom in the 1930s, an ineffective diplomatic campaign against partition in the 1950s and repeated failed attempts to persuade US governments to intervene with the British, Irish governments had reached the conclusion that for all their frustrations they had no alternative but to seek (slowly) to persuade the UK Government to adopt a position of reform. This also fitted with the relatively conservative instincts of Irish governments over this period, which often led northern nationalists to believe that they had in effect been abandoned.

Sinn Féin and the IRA, sometimes collectively referred to as the Republican Movement, are both organized on an all-Ireland basis, though they have much greater support in the north. Re-emerging as a credible force out of the civil rights period, their political strategy in the 1970s was characterized by a focus on a military campaign. Until 1981 Sinn Féin refused to stand for election, saying it would only lend legitimacy to British rule. However, in the aftermath of a major political crisis around a hunger strike by prisoners (see below) the focus shifted to, first of all, a dual strategy of 'armed struggle' and party political organization and eventually, in the peace process, to a strategy focused exclusively through Sinn Féin (Murray and Tonge, 2005). Sinn Féin denies any organic link with the IRA (which is illegal) and the clandestine nature of the IRA and a very active campaign of attempted infiltration by the British security forces means that in practice the vast majority of Sinn Féin members could not be in the IRA. However, it is commonly assumed by journalists that there is overlap at leadership level. Sinn Féin has a strong focus on community activism and this, along with radical left-wing and militant separatist politics, saw them develop broad support (Doyle, 2006). While the IRA campaign continued, Sinn Féin was unable to overtake the more conservative nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland and remained a small party in the south. After the cease-fire Sinn Féin has become the dominant nationalist party in Northern Ireland (polling 26.2% of the votes, compared to the SDLP's 15.2%, in the 2007 Assembly election) and are a growing but still smaller political force in the south, with approximately 10%–11% in 2006 opinion polls.[8]

The SDLP was founded amid the political crisis of civil rights, replacing a conservative and ineffective Nationalist Party, with an agenda focused on internal reform. In response to the collapse of a 1973 experiment in power-sharing, the SDLP shifted to a more explicitly nationalist agenda and its strategic focus has oscillated over the years between attempts to secure internal reform with moderate unionists and attempts to mobilize international opinion, especially in the USA, to persuade the United Kingdom to introduce more far-reaching political changes over the heads of unionist opinion (Murray, 1998). It has always opposed the use of political violence and this was the key point of differentiation from Sinn Féin during the conflict, leading to a broad support base. In the aftermath of the IRA ceasefire it has, however, struggled to redefine itself and has seen its support continually shrink, so that it now reflects an older, more conservative voter to an increasing extent (Murray and Tonge, 2005).

Ulster unionism remained a cohesive political force between 1920 and the late 1960s, organized in a single Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Divisions in how they should respond to the civil rights movement saw the emergence of rivals, one of which—the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by Ian Paisley—survived and became the largest unionist party in 2003. Apart from opposing Irish unity, unionism has adopted a relatively exclusionary form of politics. There is no attempt to persuade nationalists to become pro-union with the British, but rather, nationalists are seen as a threat to the state, and this has served as the basis for exclusion not only from the political domain but also in employment, cultural rights and policing (Doyle, 1994). Unionists have been divided in their strategic response to the conflict, uncertain as to whether full integration with the United Kingdom (ending any attempt to restore regional government) or restoration of devolution would best secure their position. While united in opposition to Irish unity, the British Government is often seen as a less than secure ally (pp. 3–4, in Doyle, 2003).

Armed groups also emerged in unionist areas but political parties associated with loyalist paramilitaries have tiny electoral support. This reflects to a large extent the unionist community's support for the official security forces, which are seen as reflecting their concerns. None the less, unionist paramilitaries were sizeable organizations, responsible for the deaths of nearly 1,000 people since the late 1960s. Despite their declared goals of attacking the IRA, most of their victims were nationalist civilians. Steve Bruce (1992) argues that 'pro-state terrorism' rather than 'counter-terrorism' is a more accurate reflection of their position. Indeed their attacks both preceded the re-emergence of the IRA and were as much linked to periods of political reform as they were to IRA activity.

Until the ending of the Cold War the international pressures for a resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict were very minimal (Guelke, 1988). The USA was unwilling to challenge its most important NATO ally and US government policy was firmly within the context of the 'special relationship' with the United Kingdom (O'Grady 1996). Northern Ireland was seen as an internal British affair and Irish governments were politely informed that the US administration would not intervene (Cronin, 1987). Other international interventions were equally low key. The UN Security Council was never likely to get involved as the United Kingdom held a permanent seat and a veto. The European Economic Community (EEC—later the European Community, EC, or European Union, EU) also refrained from involvement (p. 280, in Ruane and Todd, 1996). There were occasional signs of a countervailing view, such as with US President Jimmy Carter's ban on arms sales to the RUC, and there was constant non-governmental organization (NGO) criticism of British policy in Northern Ireland, but the level of international pressure was never enough to have a significant impact.

FROM WAR TO PEACE

In its essentials the conflict endured a period of stalemate between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, with little change in the internal dynamics or the international context. However, three key episodes are discussed below, as they had an enduring impact on the direction of the conflict.

Until 1998 the only agreement to be reached between the parties (and even then excluding Sinn Féin) was the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, which included power sharing between centrist unionists and the SDLP and an advisory cross-border council. The Agreement only survived a few months. The UUP split down the middle and in an early British general election in 1974 every unionist candidate elected was publicly hostile to the Agreement. The Executive limped on, as its mandate came from Northern Ireland regional elections held before Sunningdale. In May 1974 a strike was called by a group including loyalist paramilitaries, anti-agreement unionist parties and workers in the power stations (who were almost exclusively unionist). The British Government refused to use its security forces to keep electricity plants open or to remove roadblocks, and the power-sharing Executive collapsed (Fisk, 1975). The collapse of Sunningdale led to a stronger nationalist position being articulated by the SDLP (Murray, 1998), which was highly critical of the British Government's failure to defend the Agreement. From this point on, the SDLP refused to consider any proposed agreement that did not include an institutionalized role for the Irish Government, believing that an agreement with another state would be harder for the British Government to walk away from.

The military stalemate in the late 1970s led some within Sinn Féin and the IRA to question the dominant role of the military campaign in republican strategy (Adams, 1996). The pace of change was increased dramatically in late 1980 by a decision of IRA prisoners to launch a hunger strike to win improved prison conditions (Beresford, 1987; Campbell et al., 1994). Ultimately 10 prisoners died between May and October 1981. The leader of the protests and the first victim, Bobby Sands, was elected to the British Parliament in a by-election and became an iconic figure for republicans. Two other prisoners were elected to the Irish parliament in a general election that June. Further elections of prisoners were only prevented by new British legislation banning prisoners from standing for election. Sinn Féin had previously refused to stand for election on the grounds that it would amount to recognition of British sovereignty, but changed strategy on seeing the huge political impact of Sands's election and quickly established a support base of between 33% and 40% of the nationalist vote.

The electoral rise of Sinn Féin led the Irish Government to launch new political initiatives designed to show that moderate nationalism had a strategy for political progress (p. 462, in FitzGerald, 1991). A cross-party convention was held in Dublin to try and agree a common moderate nationalist position and in November 1985, following more than a year of talks, the two Governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which granted the Irish Government a consultative role in the governance of Northern Ireland. In return, the Irish Government confirmed there would be no change in the 'status' of Northern Ireland without the agreement of a majority there and promised greater security co-operation. Unionists launched a campaign of opposition based on the rejection of any input by a 'foreign' government in the governance of Northern Ireland. In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher (pp. 402–06, in her 1995 publication) said she regretted signing the Agreement as it alienated unionists and as, she claimed, she did not get the security co-operation she desired from the Irish Government. Nationalists were also ultimately disappointed that 'consultation' led to very limited impact on policy, but it was the first institutionalized role for the Irish state and laid some basis for later progress. The unionist campaign,

involving public protests, resignations from Parliament and a major escalation of unionist paramilitary attacks failed to force a British change of policy, unlike the campaign against power-sharing in 1973 (Aughey, 1989). This point was not lost on unionist politicians and it made them very reluctant to boycott talks during the peace process of the 1990s.

The new electoral strength of Sinn Féin altered the political dynamics and pressurized moderate nationalists, but it also gave the SDLP options, other than seeking a deal with unionism. In April 1992 news broke that the leaders of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, Gerry Adams and John Hume, were engaged in a series of secret talks. The Hume-Adams process as it was labelled was hugely popular among nationalists where, despite electoral rivalry and differences on the IRA's campaign, there was a popular desire for a more united nationalist position to exert pressure on the United Kingdom.

THE PEACE PROCESS

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a narrative of the peace process,[9] but the talks between Hume and Adams, involving the Irish Government behind the scenes (Mansergh, 1995), ultimately led to an IRA cease-fire in August 1994. There is no evidence of a secret deal with the British to produce the cease-fire. Rather it reflected a strategic move by the IRA to get itself out of a position of military stalemate and create a new nationalist momentum.

It is possible to see the peace process as an affirmation of William Zartman's (2005) theory of 'ripeness', in particular of the impact of a 'mutually hurting stalemate', in creating positive conditions for peace processes. Sinn Féin knew it could not on its own pressurize the United Kingdom to withdraw; it needed a broader political base and this is confirmed from a leaked document in 1994.[10] Sinn Féin was fearful that a long stalemate would ultimately weaken its movement. It was also clear that the British Government did not believe that it could militarily defeat the IRA (FitzGerald, 1999). While the IRA was relatively contained, incidents like the bombing of London's financial district[11] and of Downing Street itself[12] caused significant financial and psychological damage. The United Kingdom too was open to a new approach. For the United Kingdom and the IRA it is possible to use Zartman's model of ripeness. There was, at least potentially, a mutually hurting stalemate, recognized spokespersons on each side and a possible way forward in the short term (even if long-term objectives differed fundamentally). It is difficult, however, to fit Ulster unionists into this model. They did not accept that the IRA could not be defeated and accused successive British governments of being over concerned with their international image in their security decisions (p. 12, in Doyle, 2003). Unionists favoured the status quo over a high-risk peace process, but they feared being totally sidelined in a bilateral nationalist-British dialogue if they refused to join talks.

There were underlying socio-political factors that also influenced Sinn Féin, in particular demographic changes. From the 1920s to the 1980s nationalist emigration, driven by high levels of unemployment and discrimination was much higher than emigration by unionists. This reversed in the late 1980s, partly as a response to new anti-discrimination legislation. In addition, as the nationalist-unionist balance in the university student population neared parity, increasing numbers of young unionists chose to study in England and Scotland, rather than in the effectively bi-national local universities, and many of them did not return to Northern Ireland. While the nationalist percentage of the population had remained static at one-third for 50 years, by the early 1990s nationalists made up over 40% of the voting population and a majority of the primary-school-going cohort. A nationalist majority is unlikely in the near future, but many nationalists believe a majority will now eventually emerge and

that a growing nationalist population will in the meantime give them added political strength.

A leadership change in the governing party in the Republic of Ireland saw a new Taoiseach,[13] Albert Reynolds, effectively reverse key elements of Irish government policy (p. 352, in Coogan, 1995). Previous conflict resolution strategies had been based on trying to isolate Sinn Féin and build a centrist agreement around the SDLP and the UUP, with the hope that this would erode support for the IRA and eventually bring peace. Reynolds opened a dialogue with Sinn Féin with the aim of getting a cease-fire before political negotiations and based on including Sinn Féin in government, not excluding them. He also played a large role in persuading US President Bill Clinton to join the process. US visas for Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and IRA leader Joe Cahill were crucial confidence-building measures in the run-up to the cease-fire. This new approach survived a change of government in early 1995, as a senior advisor in the new Irish Government argued that any agreement that excluded Sinn Féin was 'not worth a penny candle'.[14]

The Conservative British Government was clearly not convinced of this new approach of the Irish Government and sought to prioritize restarting talks, excluding Sinn Féin, with a focus on internal reform and a strategy to contain the IRA campaign. British reluctance to engage with the process led to delays in opening talks with Sinn Féin after the 1994 IRA cease-fire and this ultimately precipitated the ending of the cease-fire in February 1996. However, following the election of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom in 1997 and the return of the more nationalist Fianna Fáil to power in the Republic of Ireland later that year, a new IRA cease-fire was declared and talks, including Sinn Féin, began in September.

THE IMPACT OF A CHANGING INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The ending of the Cold War opened up greater possibilities for international involvement in the conflict. It weakened the importance of the US relationship with the United Kingdom—a crucial factor, as the USA was the only international actor likely to be able to exert influence on the United Kingdom. While Northern Ireland was a low-risk intervention for the USA, it did involve President Clinton in a breach with an ally—to the extent that British Prime Minister John Major refused to take his phone calls—and was taken against the advice of almost the entire foreign policy, defence and intelligence establishment (p. 373, Coogan, 1995).

While the new world order permitted President Clinton's intervention, it did not prompt it. For motivations, it is necessary to look at the domestic pressure on Clinton (O'Cleary, 1996). His party needed to win back Irish Americans, who had become part of the Reagan-Democrat bloc. Clinton himself needed the Irish vote to win the Democratic primary and it was before the crucial New York primary, with its large and well organized Irish American vote, that he made his public commitments on the 'Irish' issue. He was also under pressure from a much more professional and influential Irish American lobby, itself partly a response to the changing strategy of Sinn Féin in Ireland, where better working relationships with other nationalists were being sought. The fact that President Clinton was personally involved increased the pressure on political actors to reach agreement and, as nationalists had least interest in accepting the status quo, this intervention inevitably favoured nationalists (as they wanted change), even if the process of intervention was even-handed, which it was.

Other international factors were also significant for the peace process. 'Struggles' that the Sinn Féin leadership had drawn inspiration from or sought to compare themselves with in South Africa, Palestine and Central America were moving towards peace negotiations (Cox, pp. 676–82 in 1997, and pp. 75–77 in 1998). Though the

IRA did not face significant financial or military material losses they were affected by the political climate that these developments created and were part of. At an ideological level and, in the case of South Africa, at the level of extensive personal contacts[15] the emergence of international peace processes had a significant impact on republican thinking, a process of influence that Sinn Féin then played in the Basque conflict.

Prior to the end of the Cold War, unionists by virtue of their siege mentality had made limited use of international contacts. Such parallels as were drawn tended to be with what were perceived as similar communities under siege, such as Israel, Turkish Cypriots, apartheid South Africa or other 'abandoned' British settlers, such as the white community in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (pp. 40–46, in Clayton, 1996).[16] Such comparisons were clearly damaging by the 1990s and unionists could not credibly argue that the conflict was a purely internal 'British' matter once the British Government accepted US and Irish government involvement (p. 289, in Ruane and Todd, 1996). However unionists were undoubtedly pleased with the election of George W. Bush as US President and the lower level of engagement it promised, but their general distrust of any international involvement was seen after '9/11' when they made no serious attempt in the USA to try and use the new environment to damage Sinn Féin.

THE 1998 AGREEMENT

The Agreement[17] reached by the two Governments and the main Northern Ireland parties (excluding the DUP) in April 1998 included a power-sharing consociational-style government, a new Northern Ireland regional assembly and a structured set of cross-border institutions. Sinn Féin was to be included in the power-sharing government, the cease-fire was to be reinforced, prisoner releases provided for and a programme of reform for police, criminal justice, cultural rights and economic equality set in place.

The Agreement provided for a new Assembly to be elected by proportional representation, which would have 'full legislative and executive authority' in respect of matters devolved from London. Elected members, on taking their seats, have to designate themselves as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. Key decisions are made with either 50% support from each community or a 60% overall majority, including at least 40% support from each bloc. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister are elected by the process of parallel consent, designed to ensure that one will be a unionist and one a nationalist. They effectively operate as a single institution. Other ministerial posts are allocated to parties on the basis of the number of Assembly seats held, and ministers have a good deal of autonomy in running their departments. To ensure that the North-South Council actually operates and is not frustrated by unionist opposition to such cross-border institutions, the Assembly and the North-South Council are declared to be 'mutually interdependent ... one cannot successfully function without the other'. Participation in the Council is declared to be 'one of the essential responsibilities' attaching to a ministerial post. Also, the British and Irish Governments agreed to redraw their constitutional expressions of sovereignty on Northern Ireland, stating:

it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

Most of the UUP leadership, including party leader David Trimble, had been active in the unionist opposition to the more modest Sunningdale Agreement, which only involved power sharing with the SDLP and a purely consultative cross-border Council of Ireland. The 1998 Agreement did commit the two Governments to maintaining the Union with Britain, even if qualified by saying that it was only for as long as that was the wish of a majority. The Agreement also meant the return of a government and parliament to Northern Ireland, with David Trimble as the most likely First Minister. Also, the Irish Government agreed to hold a referendum seeking to amend the Irish Constitution to reframe the Republic's position on unity from a territorial claim to a 'firm will'. Unionists, however, also had to face a number of previously unthinkable propositions. They would be forced to share power not only with the SDLP but also with Sinn Féin and they had to agree to a cross-border body with a strong structural position, police reform, equality measures and prisoner releases.

Unionism was, however, faced with an Irish nationalist position that had formed an effective alliance with a US administration and a reasonable working relationship with a British Labour Government that was likely to be in power for another eight or nine years. Northern nationalists now made up over 40% of the voting population and moderate unionism, as represented by Alliance, combined with loyalist paramilitaries who supported the deal for different reasons might mobilize another 8%. Mainstream unionism, for the first time since partition did not have a secure majority. Nationalists were still a long way from securing a majority for a united Ireland, but with minimal other support they could secure a majority in a referendum for far-reaching political change. The UUP leadership was quite explicit about this threat during the negotiations. Senior UUP negotiator Anthony Alcock argued that if the UUP walked out it was likely that a section of mainstream unionists would vote in a referendum to accept a peace deal that had been negotiated in their absence.[18] The bottom line for the UUP leadership was that however unhappy they were with key elements of the deal, any likely alternative was going to be much worse from a unionist perspective, as a British Government keen to secure the IRA cease-fire was going to agree to some sort of deal with or without the unionists.

The rejection of the deal by the DUP—and almost half of all UUP supporters—was not surprising as they had been on the record over many years as opposing compromises and reform well short of what was in the Agreement. Unionist parties have traditionally insisted that there is little point having a veto on the 'final hand-over' of sovereignty if they cannot prevent political decisions which change the character of the state and/or which move them towards a united Ireland (Doyle, 2003). This strong linkage of equality issues and constitutional issues means that reform is seen as undermining the state and paving the way for further change. This position was articulated by all the major unionist parties, including those which ultimately supported the Agreement, as recently as 1997.[19]

For Sinn Féin, the Agreement fell short of achieving a united Ireland, but it saw this as an agreement in transition, not its end point. While there are specific gains in the deal such as the North-South Council and internal reform, the detail is less important than a clear commitment by the two Governments to move away from the status quo. Sinn Féin leaders recognized early on that a united Ireland was not going to be available at these talks, as they did not have the political support to achieve it. However, they could achieve—in alliance with other nationalists, the Irish Government and the USA—a much strengthened equality agenda and institutional links between north and south and they could create a dynamic for further progressive change. Given the stalemate that the IRA campaign had reached, Sinn Féin was willing to accept the Agreement on this basis.

THE PROSPECTS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In some respects the Northern Ireland conflict is regarded as 'resolved' in a comparative context. There are almost no conflict-related deaths. The IRA has destroyed all of its weapons in a process witnessed by a Canadian, Gen. John de Chastelain, and an international commission.[20] British and Irish security sources agree with Gen. de Chastelain's analysis that IRA disarming was complete. The IRA also issued a public statement calling an end to its armed conflict.[21]

The underlying political conflict remains however. The power-sharing executive set up under the 1998 Agreement was suspended in 2001 and was not restored until May 2007. The UUP refused to remain in the Executive until the IRA fully disarmed. The IRA in turn would not disarm until the Agreement was fully implemented. Without a champion to argue the case for the Agreement within the unionist community, support for it fell dramatically and the consistently anti-agreement DUP emerged as the largest unionist party in 2003, and consolidated their position, polling 30% to the UUPs 15% in 2007. However, disarming by the IRA in 2005 did not see unionists rejoin the government at that time. The DUP now demanded IRA disbandment and Sinn Féin support for the police among other issues before they would agree to share power.[22] Nationalists were sceptical that they had any intention of ever doing so, as they believe unionists prefer direct rule from London to sharing power regionally with Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin for its part refused to support the police until further reforms were implemented—as proposed in a review chaired by the former British politician and (perhaps symbolically) last Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patton. In particular it sought the transfer of political control from London to the power-sharing Executive.[23]

Opponents of the Sinn Féin leadership from the perspective of IRA dissidents (McIntyre, 2001; Moloney, 2003), pro-agreement unionists (Bew, 1998) and academic analysts (such as Murray and Tonge, 2005) have characterized the Sinn Féin leaders' acceptance of the 1998 Agreement as an abandonment of their republican objectives, as there is little evidence of an imminent united Ireland. Jennifer Todd (1999) disagrees, arguing that Sinn Féin has rather redirected its energies towards a radical egalitarianism. While Sinn Féin has embraced the language of equality as the core theme of its recent publicity, it also pursues the objective of a united Ireland (Doyle, 2006). It sees the 1998 Agreement as part of a process, not a settlement. It always uses that language.[24] Sinn Féin remains committed to the peace process as it believes it has a greater possibility of achieving its objectives than an 'armed struggle' that had been contained. In addition, its commitment to a process that does not self-evidently deliver a united Ireland is based on three assumptions. First, the Sinn Féin leadership assumes that demographic trends will continue to reduce the unionist percentage of the population in Northern Ireland. Secondly, Sinn Féin argues that increased functional co-operation through cross-border institutions will create a political dynamic towards unity—a point also feared by unionists.[25] Finally, Sinn Féin believes that unionism at its most fundamental rests on a position of privilege over nationalists—reflected in unemployment figures, policing, cultural rights, etc. Sinn Féin does not have the political power to achieve Irish unity at present, but it does believe that it has the power to create much greater equality between nationalists and unionists and that such reform will strengthen nationalism and weaken unionism, boosting the political dynamic towards unity.

Some unionists who still support the 1998 Agreement assume that if nationalists have a role in government, greater equality and some institutional links with the Republic of Ireland then this will effectively end the militant nationalist challenge to British rule. The dominant voices in unionist politics, however, do not believe that

nationalists will alter their underlying perspective and see the reform process as strengthening nationalist claims by undermining the security forces and the 'British' ethos of Northern Ireland. There is therefore little internal dynamic in unionism to reach any form of agreement. However, unionists traditionally rejected power sharing with the SDLP and refused to have any talks with the Irish Government, both of which they now accept. If the unionist parties could resist power sharing or further reform by simply accepting continuing rule from London they would gladly do so. However, the real prospect of political change being agreed by the two Governments without them, forced unionists to make a decision.

The confidence in the IRA's commitment to the peace process was partly responsible for the stalemate in the political process. As the British Government became convinced that the IRA is unlikely to resume its armed campaign, it felt under less pressure to respond to nationalists' political demands for reform of policing, troop withdrawals and more proactive equality measures, or to pressurize unionists to rejoin the power-sharing Executive. This was a high risk strategy. While there is no evidence of any intention by the current IRA leadership to relaunch an armed campaign, a long term stalemate could have lead to disillusionment among members and a crisis event of some sort could see street violence re-emerge in the future. Certainly throughout 2006 former IRA members opposed to the peace process were attempting to reorganize.[26] Ultimately those dissident who challenged Sinn Fein in the 2007 election received a tiny vote, consolidating the party's leadership in the nationalist community.

The Irish Government is always under pressure to achieve progress. It faces an increased electoral challenge from Sinn Féin; the largest and currently (2006) governing party, Fianna Fáil, has sought to protect the traditionally nationalist element of its support base by projecting a more strongly nationalist position and, in this context, it needs to assert itself against the United Kingdom. The British Government could resist such pressure given its more powerful position, but it also wants good relations with the Irish Government. This led the two Governments (under Irish pressure) effectively to threaten the imposition of a 'plan B' over the heads of local parties if unionists did not rejoin the power-sharing Executive. The agreed phrase 'joint stewardship of the process' was designed to hint at the possibility of something close to de facto joint governance by the two Governments if unionists refused to share power with Sinn Féin, although without being explicit enough to cause a unionist revolt. While still leaving the United Kingdom as the sovereign state and most powerful actor, such an arrangement would have been likely to lead to further reform measures in policing, cultural rights, etc., and to the renewal of cross-border institutions, with London appointing the 'northern' representatives. This would be an acceptable fall-back position for Sinn Féin—not as advantageous as being in government but better than stalemate and probably enough to sustain the IRA cease-fire.

For unionists the possibility of an inter-governmental 'plan B' was seen as a threat that the status quo is an unlikely future scenario and that they were faced with a choice between sharing power with Sinn Féin or seeing the Irish and British Governments share (some) power over their heads. The DUP chose power-sharing over allowing the Irish Government a greater institutionalised role in Northern Ireland, in cooperation with a British Government they really did not trust. Party leader Ian Paisley made it clear on a number of occasions that agreeing to share power with Sinn Féin was only acceptable because the alternative was worse. Unionists used the opportunity to extract some concessions from Sinn Fein but once they made the decision to join in government with Sinn Fein they worked (up to time of writing) the institutions in good faith and with good grace, perhaps confirming a consociational

principle that you do not need to like or agree with those with whom you share government

1. Space does not permit a more detailed analysis of the historic roots of the conflict. For a good overview see O'Leary and McGarry (1993).

2. In the most famous case in Derry City, a unionist population of approximately 33% of the city's voters returned a majority of councillors on the city corporation.

3. 'Paramilitaries' is the term widely used to describe illegal armed groups in Northern Ireland and not 'paramilitary police' as is common elsewhere. 'Loyalist' is usually used to describe a militant unionist; for clarity, in this article it is only used to describe those with links to illegal unionist paramilitaries.

4. See website with statistical analysis (http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/stats.htm).

5. Two excellent introductions to the academic literature on Northern Ireland are McGarry and O'Leary (1995) and Ruane and Todd (1996). The best international and comparative studies are McGarry (2002) and Cox, Guelke and Stephen (2006).

6. From a confidential conversation with the author.

7. Contribution by the Irish Minister responsible for Broadcasting in the Seanad Éireann, the Irish upper house of parliament, on 12 March 1975.

8. E.g. *Sunday Business Post* of 25 March 2006 gave Sinn Féin 11%.

9. There are many books that do so; the two best journalistic accounts are Mallie and McKittrick (1996) and De Bréadún (2001). Mansergh (1995) and Adams (2003) provide insider's accounts.

10. Reproduced in full in the appendices of Cox et al. (2006).

11. In particular two unusually large devices caused hundreds of millions of pounds in damage in 1992–93 in London's financial district, at the Baltic Exchange in April 1992 and a year later in the Bishopsgate area.

12. Mortars landed in the rear garden of 10 Downing Street during a cabinet meeting on 7 February 1991.

13. The Irish term for Prime Minister.

14. Fergus Finlay, adviser to then Irish Foreign Minister Dick Spring, in *The Irish Times* of 26 April 1996.

15. *The Irish Times* of 20 April and 30 April 1998.

16. See also: *Combat*, August 1974 and September 1974; Jim Kilfedder in the House of Commons on 6 March 1978; and David Trimble in the House of Commons on 30 October 1996.

17. Full text available at foreignaffairs.gov.ie/angloirish/goodfriday/. For commentary, see Doyle (1998).

18. Northern Ireland Forum of 3 October 1997 (Vol. 45, p. 10).

19. For example, the UUP response to the framework documents on the internet at www.uup.org and Alcock in the Northern Ireland Forum of 7 February 1997 (Vol. 27, p. 21).

20. On 26 September 2005.

21. On 28 July 2005.

22. See www.dup.org.uk for latest positions from the party.

23. See www.sinnfein.ie/ for up-to-date policing statements.

24. At www.sinnfein.ie/ are copies of all recent manifestos and policy documents.

25. E.g. Robert McCartney in the Assembly on 22 November. 1982.

26. E.g. *Sunday Tribune* of 27 August 2006.