

Frameworks for peace in Northern Ireland; an analysis of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

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Biographical précis

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DECLARATION

This article is the original work of the author, and the research undertaken is in compliance with professional ethical standards. This paper has not been sent to any other journal for publication.

Signed: *Marie Breen Smyth*

The 1998 Belfast Agreement brought to an end over three decades of armed conflict in Northern Ireland. This paper summarises the role of actors within and outside Northern Ireland, together with the processes and mechanics of the Agreement itself. The Agreement is placed in the context of previous

¹ I am grateful to Janine Fullerton and Kenneth Sparks for their detailed comments and assistance with this paper. All errors are, however, my own.

unsuccessful peace initiatives in the region, and elements within the political and economic environment at the time that facilitated agreement are identified. The consociational nature of the Agreement is set alongside concern about continuing sectarian division. It is argued that the Agreement was as much a product of previous failed attempts and the changed economic and political environment as it was a product of the negotiations. The Belfast Agreement is evaluated and tentative lessons for the Arab-Israeli and other peace processes are delineated.

Brief background to the 1998 Belfast Agreement

Since the foundation of the Northern Ireland state by the passing of the Government of Ireland Act (1920), relationships between the Protestant Unionist two-thirds majority and the Catholic Nationalist minority were troubled. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) had succeeded in negotiating treaty with the British, following their insurrection in 1916, which effectively ended British rule in the southern 26 counties of Ireland. Residual Nationalist ambitions for a united Ireland led Northern Unionists - adamant about maintaining the link with Britain - to regard the Nationalist minority in the north with suspicion. Nationalists were barely represented in the police or other organs of the state, and the size of the Unionist majority ensured they were permanently excluded from political power.

By 1969, inspired by a world-wide movement for civil rights, Catholics in Northern Ireland, and a small number of radical Protestants demanded change. The Northern Ireland state resisted reform and met the civil rights movement with violence, leading ultimately to the proroguing of the Stormont parliament, and direct rule from Westminster. Civil disorder led to the deployment of British troops, initially welcomed by the Catholic community, who saw them in the role of protector. However, the IRA reorganized and began a military campaign against the British troops and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Thus began a three-cornered 'war' – between Republican paramilitaries, mainly the IRA and the

British Army and RUC on the one hand and between the Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries on the other. Over 3,700² people lost their lives as a result, the majority civilians, with Republican paramilitaries responsible for 56 per cent of all deaths, Loyalists for about a third and security forces responsible for about a tenth³. Deaths peaked in the 1970s, due to a bombing campaign by the IRA, but subsequently reduced to what Home Secretary at the time for Northern Ireland, Reginald Maudling referred to as 'an acceptable level', although lives continued to be lost and the society was comprehensively militarised⁴. The conflict continued with only brief respites until the cessations of 1994.

In the 1990s it emerged that the British government had maintained secret contact with the IRA from the early 1970s. Similarly, it emerged that the constitutional nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) had been talking secretly to Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, and in 1993 the initiation of the current peace process led to the Loyalist and Republican cease-fires of August 1994⁵. These broke down, due to a lack of progress, partly due to the British Conservative government's dependence on Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) votes in Westminster for their government's survival. After the British Labour victory, the peace process acquired new life, although the traditional stand of the Unionists - not to engage in talks with Sinn Féin because of their link to the IRA - still caused difficulty. Eventually the Ulster Unionists agreed to participate in order to 'confront Sinn Féin'. The United States (US) government supported the process by providing a chairperson, Senator George Mitchell, to chair negotiations. These talks ultimately led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which was overwhelmingly supported in a

² This figure includes deaths due to the Northern Ireland conflict that occurred outside Northern Ireland, such as those in IRA bombs in England. The figure relates to deaths in the period 1969-1994, and includes civilians, security forces and paramilitaries killed.

³ Marie-Therese Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Costs*. London: Pluto. 1999

⁴ Smyth, M. 'The Process of Demilitarisation and the Reversibility of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland.' *Terrorism and Political Violence Special issue on Northern Ireland*, Vol 16, (3) Autumn 2004 pp. 1-23

⁵ See Moloney, E. *A Secret History of the IRA* New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2004.

referendum in the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, it was overwhelmingly supported by Nationalists/ Catholics, but only a slim majority of Unionists/Protestants supported it, due *inter alia* to divisions within unionism about the involvement of Sinn Féin in the process⁶. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) did not participate in talks and opposed the Agreement.

Following elections, the Northern Ireland Assembly was eventually established in November 1999, and power for all but security and taxation was devolved from Westminster. The Assembly was headed by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the first to hold the office of first Minister was David Trimble of the UUP. The Deputy First Minister was drawn from the Nationalist side, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party's (SDLP) Seamus Mallon was the first to hold that post. However, the British government suspended the Assembly in February 2000 because of a lack of progress on the decommissioning of IRA weapons. By May, the Assembly was reinstated, following the IRA's engagement with the decommissioning body but was again suspended the Assembly in August 2001, following the resignation of David Trimble, only to be briefly reinstated again before suspension in 2002.

The process remained deadlocked over the issue of decommissioning of weapons and the reliability of the IRA ceasefire. The Assembly was not to meet again until May 2006, and was not reinstated until after further negotiations at St Andrew's in Scotland, which this time included the DUP, who had opposed the Agreement and was by then the largest Unionist Party. Elections to the Assembly in March 2007 led to the reinstatement of the Assembly in May 2007, with the DUP's Ian Paisley as First Minister, and Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness as Deputy First Minister, in spite of Paisley's adamant protestations that he would never sit in government with Sinn Féin.

⁶ For an account of this period, see Mo Mowlam's memoir, *Momentum: The Struggle for Peace, Politics and the People*.

Previous peace initiatives

From early in the conflict, repeatedly unsuccessful attempts were made to broker peace. Indeed, Darby and McGinty (2000) point to seven failed attempts between 1972 and 1993⁷, the main features of which are presented briefly here in tabular form⁸.

⁷ John Darby and Roger McGinty 'Northern Ireland: Long, Cold Peace' in Darby, J. and McGinty, R. *The Management of Peace Processes* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000, p 61.

⁸ The main sources for this section are Sidney Elliot and W.D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory* Belfast, Blackstaff, 1999; and **CAIN Web Service**, Irish Peace Process - List of Source Documents at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/soc.htm> (Last accessed April 14, 2008)

Figure 1: Attempts at Agreement in Northern Ireland						
ATTEMPT	AUTHORS/ NEGOTIATORS	DATES	DEAL	OBSTACLES	RESPONSE	OUTCOME
Sunningdale Agreement	Negotiated by British and Irish governments	Signed Dec. 1973	Power-sharing Elected NI cross community Assembly Cross- border Council of Ireland	Unionist opposition to power-sharing and involvement of Irish government	Unionists formed United Ulster Army Council and called a 2 week national general strike	Chief Executive of Assembly Brian Faulkner, UUP, resigned, Assembly collapsed
Constitutional Convention	78 locally elected representatives, of whom 47 were UUUC, British government	1975-1976	Elected representatives proposed: return to majority rule; no Council of Ireland; new NI parliament with greater powers; double NI seats at Westminster; oath of allegiance to the Queen for all public offices	Rejected by constitutional nationalist SDLP and the Alliance Party	British reconvened Convention for one month but no progress made	British dissolved Convention March 1976.
Northern Ireland Assembly	British Secretary of State's proposal for 'rolling devolution'	October 1982 – June 1986	Weighted majority to prevent Unionist veto; cross community support required for major	SDLP and Irish government saw it as 'unworkable'. Sinn Féin contested	Assembly contained only Unionists so was unworkable	Dissolved June 1986 in protest at the Anglo Irish Agreement.

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ATTEMPT	AUTHORS/ NEGOTIATORS	DATES	DEAL	OBSTACLES	RESPONSE	OUTCOME
			decisions	election for first time, but boycotted Assembly with SDLP		
Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA)	British and Irish governments	Signed November 1985	Designed to undermine Sinn Féin's electoral success. Framework of relationships between British and Irish governments, role for Irish in NI affairs, Strand 1: internal relations in NI; Strand 2: Relations between NI and the Republic of Ireland; Strand 3: relations between Republic of Ireland and British;	Campaign of opposition by Unionists to involvement of Irish government. Irish unwilling to negotiate their territorial claim to NI (Articles 2 & 3 of Irish Constitution).	Supported outside NI, SDLP supported, but vehemently opposed by Unionists; DUP refused to attend talks in Dublin	Established British Irish secretariat and channels of communication. Deadlock on further implementation.
Brooke-	Northern Ireland	1989-1993	Roundtable talks	Agreement not	1993, John	British Downing

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ATTEMPT	AUTHORS/ NEGOTIATORS	DATES	DEAL	OBSTACLES	RESPONSE	OUTCOME
Mayhew Talks	political parties, excluding Sinn Féin		based on Strands 1-3 of AIA	reached, but framework (Strands 1-3) agreed as useful	Hume SDLP revealed their political talks aimed at peaceful resolution	Street Declaration accepted principle of self-determination for the future of NI, based on North-South consensus. Irish constitution amended to remove territorial claim to NI. IRA ceasefire 1994
Good Friday/ Belfast Agreement ⁹	Elected negotiators included all constitutional nationalist and unionist parties and parties representing loyalist and republican armed groups; Irish	Signed 1998	NI Assembly with cross community support required for certain decisions; powersharing (Strand 1); role for Irish government (Strand 2), British Irish intergovernmenta	DUP opposition and refusal to participate in talks; Sinn Féin's refusal to endorse police; armed groups' reluctance to decommission weapons	Agreement ratified by plebiscite in NI (71% in NI - but only 56% of NI unionists voted in favour - and 94% voted in favour in the Republic of Ireland)	Agreement reached an NI Assembly established, but suspended in 2002 over deadlock on several issues, police reform and support for the police, decommissioning

⁹ For text of Agreement see <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm>

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ATTEMPT	AUTHORS/ NEGOTIATORS	DATES	DEAL	OBSTACLES	RESPONSE	OUTCOME
	government; British government; independent chair provided by USA		I conference (Strand 3) Provision for human rights, police and criminal justice reform; decommissioning body to oversee disposal of paramilitary weapons; demilitarisation by British; financial incentives			of weapons etc, and increasing support for radical parties (DUP and Sinn Féin) making agreement more difficult.
St Andrew's Agreement	All those involved in the Good Friday Agreement	October 2006	DUP support for powersharing in return for Sinn Féin endorsement of the police and participation in policing.	Sinn Féin's reluctance to sign up for policing, DUP's reluctance to share power	Agreement, powersharing established	NI Assembly established.

Political and economic environment pertaining at the time

Halliday (2006) points to a new interest on the part of the major world powers in the period after the Cold War to resolve and where feasible to prevent violent conflict, marking a departure from a previous global status quo, where local conflicts were incorporated into Cold War strategic rivalry (Halliday, 2006, p 396-7). However, the Northern Irish conflict largely stood outside the dynamics of the Cold War. The international influences on it, Cox (2006) argues, were of a different order: shifts in international attitudes to national liberation as a legitimate political goal; alterations in relationships between the United States and the British governments; and the influence of the European Union.

The change in the relationship between the United States and the UK government *inter alia* after the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in September, 2001 was perhaps the most dramatic, if not the most significant of these. Whereas previously, the United States' attitude to the conflict in Northern Ireland was regarded as favouring Republicans, by for example, tolerating Republican fund-raising in the US, the declaration of the 'global war on terror' marked a new consolidation of a US global dispensation towards groups regarded as 'terrorist'. This new global revulsion at the carnage caused by terrorism gave Republicans, for whom the US connection was central, pause for thought as to how they might maintain friendly relationships with the US given their reluctance to decommission their weapons. This, combined with pressure exerted locally, meant that on October 23, 2001, the IRA issued a statement confirming that it had begun the process of decommissioning, with two other acts of decommissioning on 8 April 2002 and 21 October 2003 and on Thursday 28 July 2005 the IRA formally ordered an end to its armed campaign and instructed all its active service units to dump arms. By 26 September 2005 the IICD, established to verify the decommissioning of weapons, stated that they were satisfied that the IRA had completed the decommissioning of all of its weaponry.

The continued interest of the Clinton administration in the Irish peace process from the early 1990s onward helped sustain British stamina for the protracted process of reaching agreement. The Irish diaspora within the US, in turn, provided motivation for continued American involvement.

Local civil society organizations also played a role in setting out the issues. Local human rights NGOs¹⁰ highlighted shortcomings in the justice and policing systems, making use of international human rights networks and taking some of these concerns as far as the European court and the UN, thus placing them firmly on the political agenda. Since the early 1970s, within highly segregated local areas, especially on the Catholic side, communities were well organized and deeply engaged in local community development work¹¹. Especially from the 1990s onward, some of this community work was directed at improving relationships across the sectarian divide, and at managing and containing violence¹². Local groups established mechanisms such as a mobile phone network along the interfaces of Belfast, and later elsewhere, as a way of pre-empting sectarian violence in communities¹³.

The influence of the European Union (EU) was also significant in a number of ways. First, the exposure of local politicians such as Paisley and Hume to politics at a European level diminished parochialism and added a dimension, especially to Hume's political repertoire, and which he used to good avail. Second, the success of the economy in the Republic of Ireland following European membership raised questions about how the north of the island might benefit

¹⁰ Locally, the Committee on the Administration of Justice played a key role, and internationally Human Rights Watch, and British Irish Rights Watch were amongst the organisations most active on human rights issues.

¹¹ See Lovett, T. Gillespie, N. and Gunn, D. (1995) *Community Development, Education and Community Relations* Community Research and Development Centre, University of Ulster.

¹² Although Feargal Cochrane (2001) found that groups pursuing peace and reconciliation were as politically divided among themselves as the politicians, and they were not advocates of integration.

¹³ See Fearon, K. (ed) *Power, Politics, Positionings: Women in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, Democratic Dialogue, 1996 for a discussion of the role of women in community and formal politics.

from the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' economy which was the fastest growing economy in Europe.

Europe's direct intervention in economic development benefited both north and south. However, whilst the Irish government managed its own affairs with increasing success, the north's EU assistance was delivered through the UK government, giving rise to questions amongst some Unionists about whether the UK acted entirely in the interests of Northern Ireland. Whilst the economy in Northern Ireland slowly improved, it could not match the rapid growth of its neighbour South of the border¹⁴.

It is perhaps the EU's role in peace-building in Northern Ireland, through its Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation that is most significant. Following the ceasefires of 1994 the EU approved a Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland¹⁵. This programme, worth 691 million Euros in the first phase aimed at underpinning peace building activities by promoting social and economic inclusion. From its commencement in 1995, it concentrated on issues related to the healing of sectarian divisions. More than half of the funds were distributed through civil society organizations, some of whom were specifically set up for that purpose. Twenty six District Partnerships were established, overseen by a 22-member Northern Ireland Partnership Board made up of political parties, trade unions, business and rural communities, and voluntary

¹⁴ See, for example, Breathnach, P. 'Exploring the 'Celtic Tiger' Phenomenon Causes and Consequences of Ireland's Economic Miracle' *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 305-316 (1998)

¹⁵ See Williamson A.; Scott D.; Halfpenny P. 'Rebuilding civil society in Northern Ireland: the community and voluntary sector's contribution to the European Union's Peace and Reconciliation District Partnership Programme' *Policy & Politics*, Volume 28, Number 1, 1 January 2000 , pp. 49-66(18) and Birrell, D and Williamson, A. 'The Voluntary–Community Sector and Political Development in Northern Ireland, Since 1972' *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* Volume 12, Number 3 / September, 2001

organisations. Balance in terms of religion, gender and political affiliation, and cooperation between the various factions was a requirement for the funds to be delivered and managed, thus creating relationships across the political divide. Grassroots projects supported by the funding also worked with victims of the conflict and ex-prisoners, enhanced business and cultural links between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic and offered retraining to individuals previously employed in the security sector.

Successes and failures of Belfast Agreement

Ten years after the Belfast Agreement, levels of political violence in Northern Ireland are negligible, unemployment has fallen by 7 per cent, house prices have risen by 400 per cent, and the new Assembly, headed by First Minister Paisley and Deputy First Minister McGuinness is widely celebrated as a success story. This may seem like a 'happy ending' to the sorry tale of death and destruction that came before. Certainly, the reduction in violence, IRA decommissioning, and more or less credible and enduring ceasefires on the part of the main protagonists is a major step forward. The reform of the police and criminal justice system, new provisions for human rights and equality and mechanisms for improved accountability and governance has created a sense that there are new institutions for a new dispensation. Politicians have been attracted back into the job of government, with the seemingly miraculous *volte face* by Dr Paisley and the DUP going into government with Sinn Féin, and Paisley's subsequent canonisation by the media as a man of peace, after all.

Nonetheless, the Agreement has its successes and failures. Although initially supported by a slim majority of Unionists at the time of the referendum, Unionist support for the Agreement waned thereafter. Following the Agreement, the electoral collapse of middle ground Unionism, accompanied by a similar collapse of the SDLP on the nationalist side, left the most radical elements on both sides

as the biggest parties. The challenge of bringing the anti-Agreement DUP into government with its historic enemy, Sinn Féin seemed overwhelming. It was not until further negotiations at St Andrew's in Scotland in 2006 that the DUP was successfully engaged and Paisley's entry into government with Sinn Féin has caused further dismay amongst radical Unionist, some of whom regard him as a traitor for this move.

Other violent divisions within Loyalism following the 1998 Agreement gave rise to other concerns. Loyalist paramilitaries did not substantially engage in the decommissioning process, and violent feuding took place in Belfast's Shankill Road Gallaher and Shirlow (2006) describe the substantive issues involved in the feuding as between:

...those who wish to transform Loyalists out of conflict and criminality, and those who wish to perpetuate criminal greed and sectarian and racist actions.... a divide between those who wish to reposition Loyalism and those who have been unable to shift into a non-violent non-criminal mode. (Gallaher and Shirlow, 2006, p 150)

The UVF and its political wing the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) have negotiated the transformation more successfully, winning a seat in the Assembly, held initially by the late David Ervine, now by Dawn Purvis. The UDA were less successful, their political party the Ulster Democratic Party was disbanded and controversially, in 2007, the government gave them a grant of £1.2m to assist with their transformation into a non-violent organisation. Following the announcement of the funding, the police alleged that they were still involved in criminal activity¹⁶. The Minister for Social Development threatened to withdraw the money unless they began to decommission their weapons¹⁷. However, the

¹⁶Irish Times, 'NIO places conditions on UDA grant' Fri 03 Mar 2007

¹⁷ BBC News 'UDA is in 'last chance saloon'' Friday, 10 August 2007 Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6939636.stm. Last accessed 19th July, 2008.

Ulster Political Research Group, the *nom de paix* of the UDA, instituted legal action which effectively prevented this.

Loyalist and Unionist disaffection with the new political dispensation remains a concern¹⁸. Part of this disaffection is to do with the new dispensation itself, the establishment of a Human Rights Commission, the reform of the police and justice system, the introduction of a Bill of Rights, all of which is seen to be capitulation to Nationalist demands. The equality and anti-discrimination agenda is perceived by many Unionists to have reversed the fortunes of the two communities, to the extent that Protestants are now discriminated against. Most seriously, although the protection of rights was a central part of the Agreement, and arguably essential in a divided society in order to protect against discrimination, the human rights and equality agenda has been construed as antithetical to reconciliation, crystallising the competition between the two communities.

The continued operations of groups such as the UDA and the dissident Republican groups, the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA have implications for the policing of communities. However, with the participation of Sinn Féin in local policing committees, and as the reform of police recruitment begins to increase Catholic representation in the police, these issues are largely perceived as criminal matters, rather than affecting the stability of the political settlement. This is in the context of a reduction in recorded crime of 10.5% for 2007/8¹⁹.

Similarly, the arrangements within the Assembly for designation of identity of members and for cross community voting are increasingly seen by some as the

¹⁸ For more on this, see McAuley, J.W. 'Whither New Loyalism? Changing Loyalist Politics after the Belfast Agreement' [*Irish Political Studies*](#) Volume 20, Issue 3 September 2005 , pages 323 - 340 and McAuley, J. W. 'Fantasy Politics? Restructuring Unionism after the Good Friday Agreement' *Eire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 39, 2004.

¹⁹ Chief Constable, *Chief Constable's Annual Report 2007/8* Belfast: Police Service of Northern Ireland.

institutionalisation of sectarian division. Indeed, Tonge and Evans (2002), who conducted a survey of the intermediate tier of political party members, and found that in contemporary debates, the requirement for parallel consent across bloc designations in the Assembly may not be necessary, and could operate as an obstacle to achieving change in matters of educational policy. Tonge and Evans (2002) found divisions within the political parties rather than between parties on issues not related to sectarian conflict.

This is compounded by the unassailable power positions of the DUP and Sinn Féin in their respective constituencies, whereby they can 'do deals' with each other to which there can be no effective opposition. This had led to the accusation that many decisions are made on the basis of a sectarian carve-up between the two main parties, rather than on the merits of the issue at hand.

Ten years after the Agreement, there is a lack of progress on issues of segregation, sectarian violence and the deep divisions between the two communities. A report by Hughes, Donnelly, Robinson and Dowds in 2000 found that sectarian divisions had gotten worse, yet the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey in 2007 found that 65% of respondents thought that relationships between Catholics and Protestants were better than before, and 30% thought they were about the same, although most respondents thought that sectarian violence was still a problem in Northern Ireland. Since there appears to be little will on the part of the main parties to address these divisions, the settlement will remain vulnerable to collapse should sectarian divisions again manifest themselves in more widespread violence.

Lessons for other peace processes

The cautions about the 'success' of the Agreement notwithstanding, certain features of the Agreement and the long process that led up to it may help shed light on similar processes elsewhere.

1. Duration of the process

The first lesson from the Irish experience, in common with the Arab Israeli experience, is the duration of the process. Whilst some may see the Agreement as Blair's legacy, or the Assembly as Paisley's last *grand geste*, it is clear from an examination of the history of the process that the underpinnings of agreement and the establishment of the Assembly were laid down early in the conflict. Previous successive 'failed' attempts at agreement and devolved government were crucial in identifying a set of issues and possible solutions, which, over time, focused the sense of intractability onto two or three key issues, and helped identify the key actors.

Any attempt, whether successful or not, at achieving peace has the potential in the short-term to create a new imagined hopeful future in the context of a violent present, and in the long run to contribute to a successful outcome, which is cumulatively achieved over decades. Negotiations take place in, and are shaped by, histories of previous encounters and previous attempts, which have constructed the agenda, created the dynamics and located the antagonisms. The antecedents of negotiations must be taken account of: indeed, some have described the Belfast Agreement as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. Where the level of intractability is high, it is likely that progress is likely to be slow, punctuated by apparent failure, and cumulative over long periods of time.

2. 'Talking to terrorists'

What distinguishes the Belfast Agreement and the processes leading up to it from previous such attempts is the participation of the armed organisations in negotiations²⁰. This inclusivity distinguishes the Belfast Agreement from its

²⁰ See Jonathan Tonge 'From Sunningdale to the good Friday agreement: Creating devolved government in Northern Ireland' [Contemporary British History](#), Vol 14, Issue 3 Autumn 2000, pages 39 - 60

predecessors, according to Tonge (2000). Without 'talking to terrorists', there would have been no cessations, and subsequently no agreement. The idea of 'talking to terrorists' is often unpalatable to governments, since to negotiate with those who wield terror is to imply that they have legitimate grievances and demands. Nonetheless, the British government held secret negotiations with the IRA sporadically, almost from the beginning of the conflict, whilst simultaneously denying that such negotiations were taking place. The existence of such back-channels provided a communication infrastructure which supported the ultimate establishment of multi-party talks including the armed groups and ultimately led to the agreement.

The inclusion of representatives of the armed groups in negotiations affords the opportunity to deal directly with the issue of violence and responsibility for it. Schulze (2001) argues for the inclusion of militants based on both the Northern Ireland and Lebanese examples, a position supported by other analysts such as Mc Garry and O'Leary, but opposed by Horowitz (2001), who sees the inclusion of militants, especially Sinn Féin, as destabilising. The effectiveness of cessations in the Northern Ireland case was monitored, and the use of the Mitchell Principles allowed for the temporary exclusion of those whose armed wings committed violent acts. Participation in negotiations became a 'carrot' for armed organisations and exclusion from talks became the 'stick'. Thus, the armed organisations represented in negotiations were less dangerous to the process and less likely to be spoilers than those smaller armed organisations who were not present.

3. Consultation with constituencies

During negotiations, some parties expressed frustration at delays in the process incurred, particularly by Sinn Féin who seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to respond to certain questions and proposals. However, Sinn Féin engaged

in extensive consultation within its constituency, from grass roots level upwards, ensuring that the party had a robust mandate from its constituency. 'Leading from the front', without engaging in such extensive internal consultation, leaves leaders vulnerable to mutiny and splits within their own ranks. Subsequently, as the terms of the Agreement became clearer, support waned amongst unionists in particular. Frustrating as it might be during negotiations, parties need time and support to bring their constituents with them, and this ultimately is crucial to the success of any outcome.

In the post Agreement period, the role of politicians and civil society in championing an agreement is critical, since a written agreement cannot be an end in itself. Maintaining the confidence of the electorate post agreement, whilst democratic institutions are being established is a key political task, yet politicians, preoccupied with shaping such institutions, may neglect this task, as in the Northern Ireland case.

4. Independence of government

Under John Major's premiership, the British government were dependent on Unionist votes at Westminster to maintain his balance of power. This stymied any initiative he might have wished to take in Northern Ireland that would evoke the displeasure of Unionists. In spite of this, Major managed to begin the process, and established the basis for negotiations. Labour's landslide victory afforded Tony Blair the free hand that Major had lacked. Blair was able to engage with Unionists on an independent basis, and this proved essential to achieving further progress. McGarry argues:

Agreement was reached in 1998 on a consociational government and North South institutions in part because London made it clear to unionists that the default settlement was no longer unalloyed direct rule from Westminster, but instead, deepening Anglo-Irish cooperation in the governance of Northern Ireland. (McGarry, 2001, p 16)

McGarry goes on to point out that the IRA ceasefire and the rescinding of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, which claimed territorial rights over Northern Ireland, were important incentives for Unionist agreement. We will return to the issue of the consociational nature of the Agreement later.

Throughout the negotiations, various incentives were offered to the local parties in order to increase their motivation for compromise and agreement. These included financial packages, various reforms, assurances and guarantees, constitutional amendments by the Irish state and political concessions of various kinds. Parties had to earn these incentives by signing up to various deals, abandoning previous positions and desisting from previous behaviours. Incentives were deployed alongside sanctions, such as exclusion from talks, or threats of undesirable consequences. The balancing of sanctions and incentives composed the choreography of the peace process itself. The role of the British government as a 'second' for Unionists and the Irish government as a 'second' for Nationalists added a moderating dimension to the application of incentives and sanctions. This built the confidence of both sides, in that they were not in the process alone, yet when their 'second' refused to champion them in the face of sanctions, the pressure on them to change intensified.

5. Inclusion of civil society in addressing division

Ten years after the Agreement, sectarian division in Northern Ireland is as deep as ever, with continuing sectarian violence between communities punctuating daily life. The Agreement, although negotiated by mandated representatives of the electorate, was nonetheless a product of an elite process, from which local communities were largely excluded. It is one of the failures of the Agreement, and the political institutions that followed, that these deep divisions and patterns of segregation have been largely ignored and as a result sectarian division has proliferated. Effective mechanisms for the inclusion of civil society more directly in addressing community division, and sufficient investment in reconstruction of

communities at grass-roots level are lacking in the Northern Ireland process. It must be acknowledged that the depth of these divisions poses a considerable challenge and demands imaginative and courageous intervention on the part of governments, politicians and civil society. To date such imagination and courage has largely not been manifest.

6. Role of external actors

The role of external actors was important in establishing appropriate standards of fairness and equity. The international community, external governments and the European Union all played important roles in bring fresh and relatively disinterested perspectives to the peace process. Local politicians became accustomed to being received in the White House and invited to address various international political arenas. This international interest helped galvanise their motivation for progress, and required them to give an account of themselves in various forums. This wider airing of the nature of the dispute and potential solutions ultimately helped to counteract the parochial and inward-looking tendencies of the local parties, who were invited to learn from other societies and compare their situation to that of others elsewhere.

Some critics of the Agreement have focussed on its consociational nature. Consociational theory, first applied by Lijphart (1969) to the Northern Ireland case was first evident in the Sunningdale Agreement. According to the consociational approach, social and ethnic divisions do not inevitably entail political instability, and Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Austria at various stages in their history are cited as examples of consociational regimes. Lijphart (1996) argues that the essential conditions for the establishment of a consociational regime are the presence of a strong elite willing to accommodate one another and marshal their followers to do likewise.²¹ According to Lijphart

²¹ Lijphart (1996) was pessimistic about the prospects for a consociational settlement because of the absence of support among Unionists, and because the Unionist majority was married to the Westminster majoritarian tradition, and aspired to the exercise of hegemonic power, rejecting power-sharing.

(1969) they have four basic features, not all of which was present in the Northern Ireland case: a grand coalition in the executive which includes all the main sub-cultures; proportional representation of those sub-cultures in the legislature, administration and public institutions; group autonomy, facilitating self-government by each sub-culture (not present); and minority vetoes on decisions made about crucial issues.

Consociationalism has its critics. O'Leary and McGarry (1996) argue that consociationalism emphasises endogenous factors in political conflict, whereas they argue Northern Ireland was influenced by both endogenous and exogenous factors. Anderson and Goodman (1998) see the consociational model as seriously defective, with its assumption of the permanency of ethnic division, and its failure to take account of other divisions such as gender and class. In the same vein Wilford (1992) accused consociationalism of consolidating ethnic division. Similar criticisms have been voiced by Taylor (1994) and Dixon (1996), the former advocates economic growth and the eradication of discrimination, and the latter argues that integration and mass participation provide more effective alternative approaches to ethnic division. All of these criticisms focus, in one way or another, on the inability of the consociational model to overcome divisions, its tendency to institutionalise them, and its failure to foster cross-cutting identities.

Conclusion

One can see the Agreement as merely the potential beginning of the solution, not the solution itself. The Agreement was as much a product of previous failed attempts at peacemaking and the changed economic and political environment as it was a product of the negotiations at the time. Zartman (2000) argues that peace processes must wait for 'ripe moments', which are necessary but not sufficient for the success of such processes. 'Ripeness', in the case of Northern Ireland was not passively awaited, but constructed through the intervention over several decades of various actors, all of whom deliberately contributed to peace building. Those contributions at the time they were made may have seemed

unsuccessful or futile, yet they each contributed another piece of the jigsaw puzzle that ultimately came together on that Friday before Easter in 1998. Horowitz (2002) however, counsels that the conditions under which the Agreement was produced are unlikely to be replicable in many other contexts. He also points out that the fact that the institutions were agreed does not mean that they will deliver positive and functioning democracy in the long run, nor that they will positively address the divisions in Northern Ireland society that they are expected by some to heal.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, the Assembly now faces the challenges of operationalising politics within the new structures. Following the departure of Ian Paisley as First Minister, and his replacement by Peter Robinson, the honeymoon, such as it was, between the DUP and Sinn Féin is clearly over. At the time of writing, the Assembly has not met for over a month. There are claims that Sinn Féin's attempts to secure the transfer of policing and justice powers to Stormont by autumn 2008, and to obtain the introduction of an Irish Language Act was derailing other business²². It remains to be seen whether the Assembly will survive in the long run. In the 2007 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, just over half the respondents thought that Northern Ireland should continue to have devolved government (NILT, 2007). It remains to be seen whether and for how long they get their wish. Some, such as Reynolds (2000), have suggested that the Good Friday Agreement and the Assembly may be transitional stages on the route to a united Ireland, arguably rendered inevitable by demographic shifts. Only time will tell.

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²² Purdy, M. 'Is Stormont heading for stalemate?' BBC News Thursday, 10 July 2008 Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/northern_ireland_politics/7500762.stm. Last accessed 19th July, 2008.

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