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# The Role of Political Discourse in Conflict Transformation: Evidence from Northern Ireland

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# The Role of Political Discourse in Conflict Transformation: Evidence from Northern Ireland

## **Abstract**

This article introduces this volume by constructing a model for analysing political discourse as an instrument of conflict and peace, drawing on evidence from the Northern Ireland case. It identifies three processes, or stages, in a peace process in which political discourse can play a unique and crucial role: (i) the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place, (ii) the facilitation of agreement between moderate and extreme positions, and (iii) the forging of common ground. The motivating thesis of this research is that discourse analysis is a vital resource for deepening our knowledge of why, how and when violence can erupt and peace can be built.

## **Author Bio(s)**

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# **THE ROLE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: EVIDENCE FROM NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Katy Hayward**

## **Abstract**

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## **Introduction**

If politics is about bargaining, persuasion, communication and cooperation, it is one of the most important uses of discourse in the social world. These discursive features of political activity are particularly fraught in a context of societal division. This is not least because a conflict situation confers even greater political weight on ideology and identity (both discursively constructed). Similarly, political language plays a crucial role in the transition out of conflict, as implied by the maxim attributed to Churchill: “jaw-jaw is always better than war-war”. Language can support and promote war just as it can be used to support and promote peace (Schäffner and Wenden, 1999).

This has long been recognised in the case of Northern Ireland. It was evident during the conflict, as seen in the decision by Irish government in 1971 and the British government in 1988 to impose broadcasting bans on Sinn Féin (amongst other groupings associated in some way with paramilitary activity) until the IRA ceasefire in 1994. And from the early 1990s onwards, in a period of political sensitivity surrounding cautious negotiations, top-level recognition of the power of political discourse was

exemplified in the care taken by the two governments to issue joint statements on Northern Ireland, such as the “Downing Street Declaration” made by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds on 15 December 1993 (HMSO, 1993).

With regard to the specific matter of conflict transformation,<sup>1</sup> the fundamental assumption in most peace processes is that political debate and dialogue needs to replace violence as the expression of dissent and difference. This view is articulated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain (2007), in his assessment of the model of the Northern Ireland peace process. He claims that key actors need, “to prevent violence filling the vacuum left by the absence of political engagement”. Such political engagement, he argues, centres on “inclusive dialogue at every level, wherever there is a negotiable objective”. Conflict transformation, he concludes, therefore requires “the taking of risks to sustain that dialogue and to underpin political progress”. Although Hain is referring here to secret negotiations as much as to public statements, the principle that the communication of political views is an alternative to conflict is integral, he suggests, to the approach taken to the Northern Ireland peace process by the British and Irish governments and top-level third parties.

The purpose of this article (and this special issue as a whole) is to examine the transformative potential of political discourse in contexts of (violent) political division and post-conflict agreement. In doing so, it draws upon the research presented in this special issue. This field work on various dimensions of – and parties to – the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland has been conducted by scholars from a range of disciplines with specific consideration of the role of political discourse. The significance of political discourse in such an arena relates to the fact that it may be used to *legitimise, accompany, disguise or substitute for* change in political activity and policy. These various possibilities point directly to what is simultaneously the greatest strength and the greatest difficulty of discourse as a topic of study: its enigmatic relationship with practice and context. In fact, the three elements of language, practice and context are inseparable (see Fairclough, 2001, below). I contend that analysis of discourse can, therefore, provide some insight into the processes involved in the transition from conflict to peace. In the case of Northern Ireland, this has meant the creation of a socio-political environment through negotiation and political agreement that has enabled the minimisation of direct sectarian violence. As with most of the contributors in this special issue, I am concerned here not so much with the linguistic (de)construction of particular texts but rather broader analysis of the instrumental use of discourse by key political players.

## Political Discourse: Theory and Practice

According to Fairclough (2001), the term “discourse” refers to each of three levels of the social world – language/text, practice/interaction and context – and, importantly, the connections between them (see Figure 1 below, source: Fairclough, 2001, p. 21).

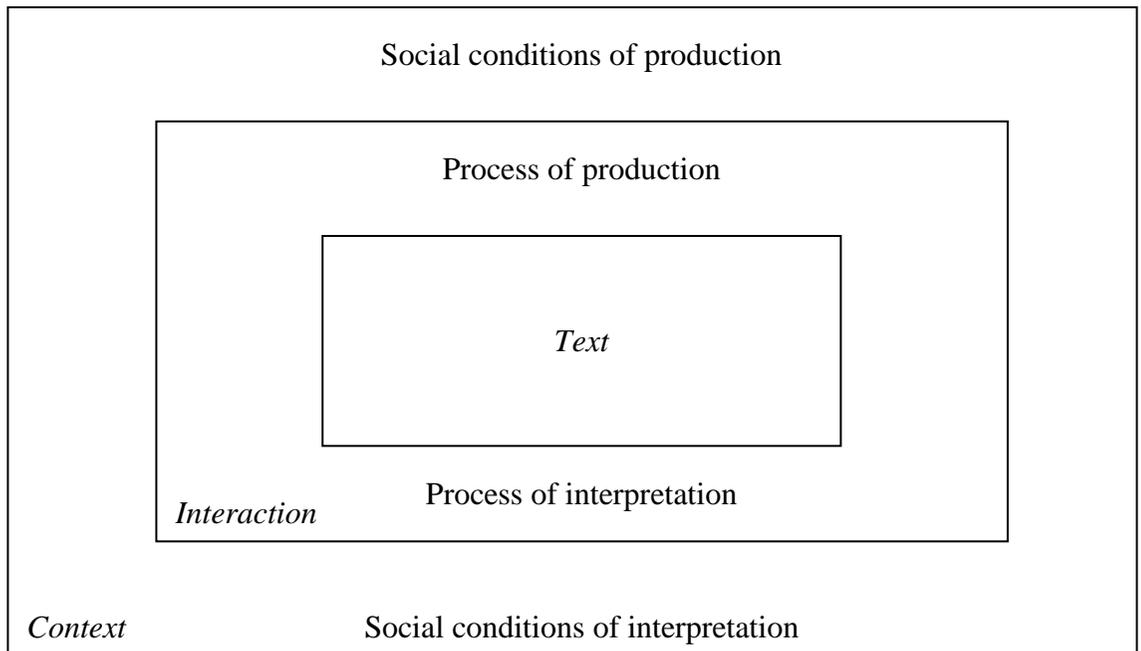


Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context

The two elements in Figure 1 that I wish to elaborate in relation to the subject of this article relate to the role of discourse as *text* and as *interaction*. First, the text of political discourse (be it presented in a speech, interview or newspaper report) embodies processes of production and interpretation of ideas as well as influencing the interaction that shapes these processes. Secondly, what is termed here “interaction” reflects as well as affects wider conditions for the production and interpretation of ideas. When I transfer this model to a “political” arena (as used by the type of party and community actors examined in the research presented in this special issue), it is possible

to identify two crucial dimensions in the role of political discourse that are of relevance to the issue of conflict and its transformation. These discursive dynamics of political and social change may be further elaborated in relation to what I here term “power” and “principle” These core elements can determine the effectiveness and endurance of political discourse in a context of conflict (transformation).

*Power: Politics as Discursive Action*

Politics affects the way people think about, communicate regarding, and act in relation to social conditions and facts. For this reason, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) designated all social systems to be inherently political constructions. More particularly, as Howarth (1998, p. 275) claims, “political practices serve to constitute (and undermine) discourses and the identities they form”. The relationship between the changing political world and the language used to describe and appraise it, or between conception and action, is close and crucial (Skinner, 1989, p. 6). The changing relationships of power that characterise the transition from conflict to peace (or vice versa) are, to a degree, the manifestation of the discourses of political actors. I note in particular that the subject (speaker of the text, in this case usually a politician) seeks to manipulate the potential of the discursive text to *affect* the other two realms of practice and context as much as to reflect them.

It is accepted that political constitutions, laws and norms reflect dominant discourses, namely the language/ideology of those in society who hold the reins of structural power (ref. Foucault, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991). The greater the actor’s power, or capacity to change the socio-political and structural environment, the more the actor’s discourse is likely to affect the wider context for public interaction. Put differently, the power of an actor is related to the strength of the effect of a text of his/her words on individual or group behaviour and experience. This is most obvious when considering official discourses (i.e. the language used by actors as representatives of the government or state), as has been done by Catherine O’Donnell and Aaron Edwards in this volume in relation to the Irish and British governments respectively. By having the capacity to shape the rules governing the production and reception of discourse in the public sphere, such actors are able to manage the interpretation (and, in effect, the meaning) of political discourses by a wide range of actors (for analysis of this effect, see Haidar and Rodriguez, 1999). Even if power is not achieved democratically (through persuasion to vote a certain way), it is still achieved through discourse to a degree in that it is used to persuade individuals to act a certain way

(including violently) for a particular end. Analyses of the discourses of political parties, community representatives and former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland contained in this special issue reveal the importance of the concept of power in discourse of a range of groups directly involved in conflict and its transformation.

*Principle: Discourse as Political Action*

Discourse is “socially constitutive” (Wodak *et al.*, 1999, p. 8). It generates and produces social conditions, maintains, legitimates, and reproduces them. On account of this, Ball *et al.* (1989, p. 2) have designated conceptual change to be “a species of political innovation”. Because conceptual change attends any reconstitution of the political world, political change and conceptual change must be understood as one complex and interrelated process (Farr, 1989, p. 30-32). Moreover, a key element of discourse theory is the notion that actors/agents and systems/structures in the social and political realm “undergo constant historical and social change” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 6). Discourse is central to this process of change and, importantly, to the impression of stability through its role in bringing together concepts, interaction and context. There needs to be movement in all three realms for real change to take place. However, again, this depends on the power and influence of the speaker of the text and, crucially, its reporting in the public realm. The role of the media, particularly local printed media, in Northern Ireland is acknowledged throughout this volume.

The closer a text appears to relate to/address individual citizens’ experience of social conditions and their interpretation of them, the more influence it will have. This is because of the congruity (as noted above) between dynamics of interpretation and production. More broadly, there needs to be a certain consistency and logic in the relationship between text, practice and context as put forward by the speaker. This can be “explained” through the ideology maintained by political parties (among other communal/elite actors) on behalf of particular groups. Wenden and Schäffner (1999, p. xx) claim that, “ideologies shape group and individual attitudes which, communicated in discourse and determining other social practices, can either facilitate or hinder the achievement of peace”. In their influential work on *Language and Peace*, Schäffner and Wenden (1999) work with a definition of “peace” as the absence of structural violence. This is necessary

because, they note, other forms of violence can continue through discriminatory practices, institutions and ideologies (Wenden and Schäffner, 1999: xxii). Whilst O'Donnell and I, as co-editors of this volume, also acknowledge that discourse (in its three forms of text, practice and context) can perpetuate structural violence to an even greater extent than direct violence, our evidence-based assessment of the role of discourse in the case study of Northern Ireland would lead us to a necessarily delimited definition of "peace". This is not least because we are as interested in what might be termed the "positive" as well as the "negative" effects of political discourse in the transition from conflict. This is particularly evident regarding the role of discourse as a medium for upholding the ideology or principles of a particular group. Such principles help to affirm the historical integrity of their group, to rationalise the stance taken by group leaders in response to the present situation, and to imagine the ideal position of the group in the future. This is closely related to the effect of political discourse on socio-political change, which is a theme that underlies our analysis on the transition from conflict to peace.

### **Political Discourse in Northern Ireland**

In a situation of conflict or ineffectual democracy the lack of political engagement (as mentioned by former Secretary of State Hain in the above quotation) means that the ability of political discourse to effect change – or even representation – in political interaction and the political landscape is stymied.<sup>2</sup> In Northern Ireland, the lack of real political power held by local politicians together with lack of representation (and potential for holding power) in the UK parliament embedded inequality at the macro level for all in Northern Ireland for much of the duration of the Troubles. The absence of a forum via which political discourse could be directly effectual has implications for its contents ("source domain"), for what it purports to be describing ("target domain") and the connection between the two (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 2).

Analysis of political discourse in such a situation in Northern Ireland here is intended to offer an insight into way in which political actors and core community leaders (in this case those representing loyalism [Orange Order] and republicanism [former IRA prisoners]) managed and legitimated the transition from conflict to peaceful agreement. The "agreement" referred to here is actually two documents, eight years apart: that between the political parties in April 1998 in the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement (which was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP]) and the most significant

amendment to it since, in October 2006, the St Andrews Agreement (which centred on agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP). Within Northern Ireland, the 1998 and 2006 Agreements have been carefully presented so as not imply radical change to the ideologies and goals of the parties concerned.<sup>3</sup> The key to their success has been being able to place moves made as tactical or as pragmatic: always in line with the interests of one's own group. This has been achieved in no small part through political discourse, as examined in detail in the articles contained in this volume.

### *Synopsis of this Special Issue*

The collection begins with Sissel Rosland's analysis of competing political discourses about "legitimacy" in the context of the early 1970s. Her research may be seen to reaffirm Burton's (1978) analysis of the situation in Belfast at the start of the Troubles. Conflicting interpretations of how power is made manifest were, according to Burton, at the heart of the spiralling conflict itself. Rosland elaborates this theme in her article here, by analysing difference between political discourses within Northern Ireland at the time. Unionists, she argues, saw power as being conferred by majority rule and through state sanction. Nationalists, however, related questions of power to "universalist" principles of human rights and equal citizenship, principles which extended far beyond the remit of the Northern Ireland parliament or, indeed, the United Kingdom. Rosland here uses the subject of internment – and the themes of "law", "democracy" and "violence" connected to it – to illustrate conflicting interpretations of power and legitimacy in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Such ideological conflict was exacerbated by a growing emphasis by political actors on ethno-national or religious identity. Such discourses are particularly difficult to address and debate in the traditional forums for democratic dialogue, even if such forums are in place and effective, which they certainly were not in Northern Ireland at this time. Demands were therefore made through the political discourses of various "players" in the conflict, both party and paramilitary, to actors and institutions outside Northern Ireland, while within Northern Ireland the same groups used political discourse to define themselves against each other.

The two most important recipients of these demands were the Irish and British governments. Each was under pressure to act in response to the conflict not only in practical terms but also as a result of its ideological association with the discourses of power and principle at conflict within Northern Ireland. Catherine O'Donnell's article here examines the discourse

of Irish political parties south of the border during the Troubles and the peace process. She shows that as well as sharing a common concern to prevent the spread of republican upheaval into the Irish state, the mainstream political parties in the south came to articulate a common discourse which balanced the ideal of Irish reunification with the pragmatic acceptance of Northern Ireland's inclusion within the United Kingdom. Aaron Edwards also looks at the discourse of mainstream political parties outside Northern Ireland, in this case that of Tony Blair's New Labour party. Edwards shows the way in which the discourse of this party regarding Northern Ireland had to be quite dramatically moderated on its accession to government in 1997. As with O'Donnell (both in this volume and elsewhere [2007]) and Hayward's (2008) analysis of the discourse of Fianna Fáil as the largest Irish political party, Edwards shows that political discourse of the British Labour Party played a crucial role in modifying certain ideological principles in order to facilitate the peace process in Northern Ireland and to garner public and party support for it.

Laura Filardo-Llamas, as the linguistics expert among the contributors to this volume, has performed the difficult task of comparing in detail specific discursive texts put forward by each of the main political parties in Northern Ireland in immediate response to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement of 1998, namely the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin as nationalist/republican parties and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the DUP as unionist/loyalist parties. The latter of these was the only party which refused to participate in the final negotiations of, and Executive arising from, the 1998 Agreement. By analysing texts spoken by the leaders of these four parties (John Hume, Gerry Adams, David Trimble and Ian Paisley respectively), Filardo manages to include a discussion of the importance of personalities in the peace process in Northern Ireland. This is no more evident than in the case of John Hume who, as Peter McLoughlin argues in this volume, was a lynchpin in the peace process. Hume's importance was not because some supporters of his party had to be convinced of the power of the "ballot box" (as was the task for Gerry Adams) or because his was the largest party in Northern Ireland (as was the case for David Trimble) or because his party was capable of amplifying and building on underlying scepticism of the peace process (as Paisley's DUP did between the Agreements of 1998 and 2006). Instead, the importance of Hume's role centred on his use of political discourse to conceptualise a way forward for negotiations between the two governments and political parties across the spectrum in Northern Ireland. As McLoughlin's article elaborates, concepts that proved to be crucial to the 1998 Agreement (without which the

2006 St Andrews Agreement, which this time included the DUP, would not have been possible) originated in the language of the SDLP leader – so-called “Humespeak”.

The change in the positioning of the DUP between the 1998 Agreement and the 2006 Agreements is one of the most interesting elements of the long walk to peace in Northern Ireland. The article by Amber Rankin and Gladys Ganiel in this volume shows just quite how extraordinary this change has been by exploring the theme of paramilitary violence in DUP discourses that lambasted the 1998 Agreement and opposing parties (especially the UUP) for their participation in it. Just as Filardo’s article shows that ambiguity – and room for interpretation by the various parties – was crucial to the acceptance of the 1998 Agreement, so Rankin and Ganiel show that the DUP’s predominant role in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement (and the new power-sharing Executive established as a result in May 2007) necessitated that such issues as paramilitary violence be downplayed in contemporary DUP political discourse.

The final two articles in this volume address the role of political discourse outside of the realm of government or political parties in Northern Ireland throughout the peace process. Both articles use large-scale fieldwork using survey and interview data to analyse attitudes and discourses within two influential groupings in loyalism and republicanism (the Orange Order and former IRA prisoners respectively). These two particular groups have proven to be significant in the caution and decisions exercised by political parties in relation to the peace process. James McAuley and Jon Tonge’s article analyses the membership of the Orange Order, which has been an important constituency of support for both mainstream unionist parties. Indeed, much of the DUP discourse analysed by Rankin and Ganiel may be interpreted in the light of that party’s attempt to attract the support of Orange Order members away from the moderate UUP. McAuley and Tonge conclude that the maintenance of the traditional elements of Orange discourses, much of which centre on Protestantism, and clear positions regarding cultural symbols and practices, such as Orange Parades, is seen by members as crucial to the endurance of this community and, thereby, the constitutional link with Great Britain.

Tonge and McAuley also participated, together with Peter Shirlow, in a major project examining discursive and identity change within the republican community since the peace process in Northern Ireland. The article by Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley in this volume considers the question – one close to the heart of many unionist politicians – of the extent to which republican ideology has essentially changed since the 1998 Agreement. Their

analysis of the discourse of former IRA prisoners shows that, similarly to their loyalist counterparts, these actors do not conceive republican ideology to have been compromised or weakened by the peace process. Rather, they assert that the “other side” is the one that has moved to facilitate agreement. Moreover, they consider it vital that republican principles be maintained through in the new political environment of Northern Ireland, from the highest levels of Sinn Féin’s sharing of power in the Executive to the ground level of cross-community interaction.

What this collection of articles on this case study encapsulates, therefore, is the fact that the greatest power of political discourse lies in its ability to be interpreted in very different ways at different levels. Analysts such as ourselves may be able to show critical junctures at which the uses of particular terms altered, or to show different themes in the language used by key players in the course of the conflict and peace process. Certainly, hints of change or compromise in the discourses of parties to a conflict are what third parties, elite facilitators of negotiations and, indeed, opposing parties wish to hear in a peace process. However, what gives these players power and relevance is their ability to convince their wider base of support that they are bringing the exercise of *power* closer to home, that they are remaining true to their *principles* and making progress towards a shared goal. I will now outline three categories for analysing these apparently contradictory dynamics of political discourse as an instrument of conflict and peace.

### *The Role of Political Discourse: A Framework for Analysis*

In order to set a context for the elaboration of these case studies that encapsulates the enduring elements in the connection between political discourse and socio-political change – that is to say, power and principle – this article works from four core propositions:

1. Political discourse offers insight into blend of ideology and practice and into the wider (socio-political) context
2. Change in political discourse goes hand in hand with change in political practice and environment
3. Conflict transformation in a divided society requires change in political discourse *and* its context (the two are inseparable)
4. Discursive difference (and the environment for this) is as important for peace as shared discourse

From these propositions, the hypothesis put forward in this article is that political discourse can perform a unique and crucial role as an

instrument of conflict transformation in relation to three processes: (i) the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place, (ii) the facilitation of agreement between moderate and extreme positions, and (iii) the forging of common ground (for discourse and interaction). Each of these will be considered in turn, looking at the particular role of political discourse with regard to the process, examples from Northern Ireland, and lessons that can be taken for wider analysis of political discourse and conflict transformation.

### **Framing Negotiations**

Political discourse can affect the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place in three main ways. First, political discourse on *power* can be used to justify a new course of action by the party concerned that is considered necessary preparation for the negotiations to follow. In this sense, justification by political actors for the use of the power and responsibility that their supporters have given them is tested frequently and over a long period of time to ascertain the trustworthiness of the leaders at the negotiating table. For similar reasons, when political actors step into the realm of preparing for negotiations with the “other”, discourses of *principle* are needed to reassure their supporters of their integrity. This integrity would mean that they uphold principles founded on the essential nature and shared ideology of the group in question. Related to this, political discourse on what the actors see as opportunities for progress must make consistency with both past achievements and future ideals apparent.

#### *Experience in Northern Ireland*

In Northern Ireland, given the role of the grandest questions of national identity and state legitimacy in exacerbating the conflict, the conceptual framework for negotiations involved the discourses on *power* that centred on the reconfiguration of arrangements for constitutional and territorial representation in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. As O’Donnell describes in this volume, by the early 1990s, there was broad cross-party consensus among southern Irish parties regarding the necessity of co-operation with the British government, recognition of the legitimacy of British governance over Northern Ireland, and support for inclusive multi-party negotiations. She also shows that consensus existed among Irish

political parties regarding discourses of *principle*, namely that the goal of Irish reunification was unimpeachable as a political ideal but almost inconceivable as a political goal. This contrasted with the rather fluid interpretations in British politics regarding principles for addressing the “Northern Ireland question”. As Edwards depicts in relation to the New Labour party alone, there was little intra-party let alone inter-party consensus on the principles for negotiating the future of Northern Ireland. One thing that both British and Irish mainstream parties do have in common (as noted by McLoughlin) is that they were heavily influenced by the principles for negotiation espoused by John Hume as SDLP leader. Whilst the articles here by O’Donnell and Edwards illustrate the role of official or governmental discourse in influencing the ideological – and strategic – positioning of parties prior to negotiations, McLoughlin’s article serves as a reminder that this process of discursive influence is not merely a top-down one. Moreover, the common approach to the Northern Ireland peace process that was evident among the British and Irish governments, EU Commission and US administration was due in no small part to the influence of the SDLP discursive principles. Such principles facilitated a shared approach at the highest levels to Northern Ireland, approaches that were concerned to uphold “unity by consent”, a “three stranded approach”, and “agreed Ireland”, amongst other things.

The key to the success of these principles in the peace process in Northern Ireland is that they were ambiguous enough to allow those who subscribed to them to appear to be maintaining the integrity of their long-held principles and to be drawing a line of continuity between past and future. In the case of nationalist/republican parties (south as well as north of the border), these terms were used in effect as synonyms for well-established ideals of a united Ireland, etc. In the case of unionist and British parties, these terms represented a flexibility of ideology within Irish nationalism and an acceptance of an integral “British” dimension to the future of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP’s engagement with external actors and the imprint of its ideology on the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 gave it an authority and influence in relation to framing the peace process. Nonetheless, as McLoughlin and Filardo’s articles reiterate, this did not automatically translate into electoral success or political power. The focus on bicomunal or ethno-national identity in political activity and institutions established after the 1998 Agreement meant that the SDLP in effect drew itself out of the circle within which political bargaining would take place. The SDLP’s discourses for post-Agreement Northern Ireland did not correspond with the

resulting political construct. This indicates that progress after the framework for negotiations has been set does not necessarily correspond with a group's contribution to that framework.

### **Facilitating Agreement**

Once the groundwork for negotiations has been laid, political discourse can play a vital role in enabling agreement to be reached between moderate parties, moderates and hardliners, or between extreme ideological positions. Political discourse on *power* at such a time is of particular interest, because real power is at stake according to the discursive line followed by participants in the negotiations. The priority of political actors as negotiators, is to balance the requirements of power with the possibility of holding it. Discourses of *principle* are also under particular pressure when it comes to facilitating agreement; “agreement” by definition means agreed terms, but does it also mean agreed meanings? Certainly, the room that is necessary for bargaining in order for those “at the table” to make progress must be enabled by the discourses they espouse.

#### *Experience in Northern Ireland*

Engagement in negotiations towards an agreement has always required in Northern Ireland the discursive acceptance of the norms of participation. Political discourses on power within parties that have held a seat at the negotiating table have centred on the assumption of their essential equality with the other players. This has been more difficult for some parties to accept than others. The articles by Rankin and Ganiel and Filardo-Llamas in this volume indicate that unionist parties have struggled to articulate discourses during the process of making peace agreements that allow them to accept the equal bargaining position of Sinn Féin in particular. Regarding the actual substance of these negotiations, as noted above, it is difficult to find accommodation – or democratic peace – between parties distinguished primarily by ethno-national principles. It is for such reasons that, as Tonge (2007) has argued, *principles* are “downgraded to tactics” for hardline parties. McIntyre (2001) contends that such principles in republican discourse (namely those on Irish identity and unity) had pretty much always been tactical, from the start of the Troubles, and were used to cover for reactionary violence, rather than to inspire it. Bean (2007) puts a more

modest interpretation forward, suggesting that, in the case of Sinn Féin, it was the particular context of the peace process that led the party to accept the norms of other parties in order to find agreement with them. Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley's article recounts the effects of this tactical change in republican party discourse among hardline supporters of republican principles; what is notable is that their support of Sinn Féin has been conditional on being able to identify an ideological continuity between party tactics and political principles. Discourses of all parties in relation to an agreement intended to formalise a peace process must be seen to enable (internal and contextual) change to occur. Yet, in the case of Northern Ireland, the most successful parties in electoral terms have been the slowest to change but have ultimately come the furthest in both discourse and practice.

### **Forging Common Ground**

The stability of any common ground revealed through a peace agreement may be determined to a large degree by the discourses of those sharing power. The very fact that new actors are holding *power* has huge significance. If political discourse has "consequence", is a co-operative or a competitive discourse more likely? Aside from the particularities of the context, the nature of political discourse chosen by parties at this stage depends in part on their assessment of whether progress towards their goals is best achieved through co-operation or competition with one's political opponents. This is not least because, judging by what has been outlined above, the common ground that has been forged is less likely to have been constructed from shared *principles* than through the acceptance of (the existence of) different principles. The construction of some shared political space as a result of an agreement can mean that political competition is more direct and, according to the particular terms of the political agreement, this competition could either be directed most severely at opponents within each community or at those representing the "other" community. Either way, parties from a "hardline" tradition may be the ones most comfortable with using the type of political language and (media-aware) tactics necessary in a forum of direct political competition.

#### *Experience in Northern Ireland*

The outstanding question in Northern Ireland is whether those now sharing power (the DUP and Sinn Féin) be forced to confront the legacy of

their historical polarising discourses, or are they the ones best placed to redress it? As several articles in this volume show (Rankin and Ganiel, Shirlow *et al.*, McAuley and Tonge), the moral discourses of parties (including that used in the past) makes forging of common ground not only difficult but controversial. Taken together, articles in this volume provide evidence from Northern Ireland that some (particularly hardline) actors have the ability to blend conciliatory public discourses with oppositional private discourses in order to make political progress. Sinn Féin, for example, had already become adept at the use of emotionally-driven cultural factors in political activity prior to the 1998 Agreement (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998). Such skills have proven useful in the party’s competitiveness for support from within nationalism and against unionism in new forums for political engagement in Northern Ireland. Moderate parties, such as the UUP, are not as practised or as comfortable with discourses of otherness and defence that the new forum of direct political competition (including within own communal group) appears to have required (Hogan, 2007). Two of the parties that have benefited the least in electoral terms since the successive suspension (between 2000 and 2007) of the institutions established by the 1998 Agreement are the SDLP and the centre-ground Alliance Party; it is perhaps no coincidence that these have been the main parties to engage directly and meaningfully in discourses of a “shared identity” in Northern Ireland.

### Conclusions

Evidence from Northern Ireland would suggest that it is important to consider political discourse as a crucial factor when seeking to understand the processes involved in the escalation of conflict or the transition to relative peace. We are not at a stage in Northern Ireland where we can confidently assess the “success” of the peace process; nor is our theoretical framework comprehensive enough to draw anything more than tentative lessons regarding the potential of political discourse in conflict transformation. Figure 2 (below) summarises the key themes regarding the “power” and “principle” dimensions of political discourse in stages of conflict and conflict transformation.

| <b>Role of Discourse</b>    | <b>Power</b>  | <b>Principle</b>      |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Frame negotiations</b>   | Justification | Integrity             |
| <b>Facilitate agreement</b> | Balance       | Tactics               |
| <b>Forge common ground</b>  | Competition   | (Accepted) difference |

Figure 2. The role of discourses on power and principles in conflict transformation

First, in relation to *power*: analysis of the connection between discourse and political activity/change indicates the necessity of providing a forum in which political discourse has the possibility of effecting real change. Within Northern Ireland, the polarising influence of different discourses was further exacerbated by the suspension of Stormont and its replacement with “direct rule” from Westminster in 1972. This in effect removed the shared (albeit highly flawed and integrally unequal) forum for political debate and activity within Northern Ireland. At the very least, by having political responsibility, key actors should choose their words more carefully before addressing a public audience. Ideally, the conditions of local democratic representation will provide a forum for the peaceful articulation of ideological principles and, crucially, the practical application of political responsibility. What we have seen in Northern Ireland is that active (and conceptual) input into the architecture of a peace agreement is ultimately not as important as being seen to be ready to lead in the post-agreement context. Both qualities depend on the use of political discourse and the marriage of “power” and “principle” therein.

On the issue of *principle*, Northern Ireland witnessed rapid polarisation between parties when the touchpaper of identity was lit by key political actors in order to prove (to their own community) the seriousness of their demands. Such demands centred on policy issues that brought together the most sensitive points of principle with the need for pragmatic accommodation (such as policing or decommissioning). These issues were only agreed upon at the negotiating table through what might be termed a “fudging” of specifics and grew in significance in the post-agreement context. It is with such controversies – and ambiguities – in mind that Aughey (2002) has termed the 1998 Agreement a “paradoxical reality”. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind (as reflected in my use of the term “conflict transformation” rather than that of “resolution”) that it is possible, even desirable, to have conflictual discourses in a post-agreement political arena. Whether these have the capacity to stymie all progress depends in part on the discursive strategies adopted by core political actors in relation to their assessment of the attitude of their own communities as well as their opponents (plus, of course, the potential critics within their own party). The analyses of the contributors to this volume reveal why some political discourses have been more enduring and influential than others at

different stages along the path from conflict to relative peace in Northern Ireland.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Whilst I acknowledge that the term “conflict transformation” is often conscientiously applied to processes outside the realm of (party) political activity, it is my intention to highlight the relevance of the insights provided by Lederach (1995), Francis (2002), Miall (2004) and other theorists of conflict transformation to this “political” sphere. I do this not least because I believe the importance of discourse as a medium and driver of contextual change derives from the fact that it supersedes societal divisions (such as “community” and “elite”) and is often used to connect them.

<sup>2</sup> O’Neill’s (2003, after Habermas) argument for a forum for the free use of communicative reason in order to confer legitimacy on a post-conflict political arrangement relates to this awareness.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the electoral fortunes of political parties changed quite dramatically in the ten years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998; this may be characterised in summary by the growing dominance of the “hardline” parties of the DUP and Sinn Féin and the weakening position of the “moderate” parties of the UUP and SDLP. In the election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 1998, the SDLP won just under 22 per cent of first preference votes (24 seats in the Assembly), the UUP won just over 21 per cent (28 seats), the DUP won 18 per cent (20 seats) and Sinn Féin won over 17 per cent (18 seats). In the March 2007 Assembly elections, the DUP won 30 per cent of first preference votes (36 Assembly seats), Sinn Féin won 26 per cent (28 seats), the SDLP won just over (16 seats) and the UUP (18 seats) won just under 15 per cent each. Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive (ARK) < <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections> > (August 2008).

<sup>4</sup> For a fascinating application of notions of membership categorisation in political discourse, see Leudar *et al.* (2004).

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