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The lessons of Northern Ireland: counterterrorism and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland

Report

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➤ Counterterrorism and Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland

Martin Mansergh

The results of the recent election to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the first visit in 100 years by a British monarch to what is now the Republic of Ireland represent a consolidation of what has been achieved by the peace process. The Unionist community emphatically endorsed the leadership of Peter Robinson and the DUP and the political arrangement that they manage, with Robinson extraordinarily invoking the spirit of murdered PSNI constable Ronan Kerr in his victory comments. If Sinn Féin is losing its hold in Republican areas, as dissidents claim, there was little sign of it in election results, with the gain of one seat, including the win of five out of six seats in West Belfast with two-thirds of the vote, despite the departure south to the Dáil by Gerry Adams. As was realized up to 30 years ago, political harmony in Northern Ireland has to be embedded in a strong and positive British-Irish relationship, underlined by last week's visit of British Queen and Prime Minister. Traditional hesitations meant that the visit was not rushed into, but nor, 13 years after the Good Friday Agreement, could it have been indefinitely deferred.

I am delighted to share this platform with Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff, who did an incredible amount of groundwork in relation to Northern Ireland, and who came to the problem without hidebound ideological or inherited attitudes, and who was prepared to venture places where none before him were able or would have chosen to go. I was only one of his opposite numbers on the Irish side, and at an early stage not the most important. Our paths diverged in 2002, when I went for election, in what turned out to be a nine-year membership of the Irish Parliament, first in the Senate, then in the Dáil. We spent a few days together in December 2007, sharing and discussing insights with Greek and Turkish Cypriot negotiators on the peace line in December 2007. Like others who were involved, both of us have been drawn into comparative analysis, relating to conflict in other parts of the world.

Counterterrorism and conflict resolution, while clearly related, are not the same thing. Terrorism was a word used sparingly, if at all, by Irish Governments over the quarter century of conflict between 1969 and 1994. It implied not just a strong rejection of the IRA campaign of violence, but it could also have signalled a narrow view of the solutions, more anti-terrorism laws and security force personnel, and more ruthless tactics up to and beyond the rule of law. Whether or not such measures contained the spread of conflict, they also helped prolong it, by creating new landmark causes, such as Bloody Sunday, the hunger strikes, shoot to kill, collusion, the legacy of all of which has been difficult to clear up even today. In fairness, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, at vast cost and over many years, did finally achieve its objective to the satisfaction of most reasonable people, including the majority of victims' relatives.

The point made by Professor Daniel Wilson in an article on the failed Fenian invasion of Canada in 1866 in the November/December 2008 issue of *History Ireland* about the problem facing Thomas

D'Arcy McGee, former Young Irelander, later Canadian cabinet minister, 'how could they defeat a revolutionary minority inside an ethno-religious group without alienating the moderate majority within that group', and without creating public sympathy for extremists, has a universal contemporary validity. Indeed, the whole purpose of the peace process was to shift from trying to inflict defeat on an isolated section of the population, to trying to find a new and far-reaching accommodation for the many legitimate and powerful conflicting interests and identities in Northern Ireland, while leaving the long-term future open. Nothing less than a substantial replacement of the 1920-1 settlement was needed. The boundary remained in place, but the basis on which it rested was thoroughly overhauled.

There is a separate discussion about how the situation was allowed to fester, then get out of hand, and whether the conflict needed to be so prolonged. The dominant inter-governmental effort for more than 20 years was to try and create a centre ground, rigorously excluding and condemning paramilitary movements, with a view to achieving an agreement that would isolate extremists and legitimize a tough and conclusive security end-game. With the exception of Brian Faulkner, unionists never bought into a strategy which required major concessions from them, without any guarantee of an end to violence.

Both the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements of 1973 and 1985, respectively, were in that mould, the first aspiring much more than the second to provide comprehensive conflict resolution. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was more of a counter-terrorism strategy, and not only from the rather obvious security orientation of Mrs. Thatcher. Dr. FitzGerald had a burning sense of danger that the nationalist community might give majority support to Sinn Féin, while the IRA was still at war, enabling it to claim further legitimization of armed struggle. The Agreement, which created a channel for the constitutional nationalist SDLP, through the Irish Government's representing it at the Intergovernmental Conference and through a permanent secretariat, was actually a far more successful counterterrorist strategy in the political sense than any initiatives, including extradition, on the security front. The check to Sinn Féin's electoral advance in Northern Ireland, and,

south of the border, their minimal showing in the 1987 General Election with 1.2% of the vote, were an important part of the background to the start of the peace process.

People engage in conflict, as they do in politics, to obtain something for themselves and for their supporters, and hence to be able both to deliver and to protect. As long as insurgent movements believe that some of their maximal demands are achievable through force, or, alternatively, that they have something that they need to protect (for example, territories and populations largely under their *de facto* control), their main interest in dialogue will be in seeking confirmation that they are winning. Dialogue has dangers that can reinforce violence. The difficulty is in judging when it might genuinely be the start of a search for a way out and for a credible political alternative.

The question may be asked, from the point of view of the insurgent movement, should the dialogue be with the enemy or enemies, who hold most of the power, should it be with *bona fide* and disinterested third parties; or should it be with other political forces that represent the population or community from which they come. The Northern Irish and indeed other experiences would suggest that all three elements are necessary in constructing a package, which would end or suspend conflict and lead to negotiation.

One of the advantages in the Northern Ireland situation is that the British Government, implicitly or explicitly, has always recognized the legitimacy of a united Ireland, provided it is brought about peacefully by agreement and consent, something easier perhaps to concede because of the unlikelihood of its achievement at an early date. This contrasts with the situation in the Basque Country, Sri Lanka and, indeed, Palestine, where the radical solution is out of the question. The issue in the early stages of the peace process was, could enough be built around this recognition of a united Ireland as a legitimate aim to construct an ideological bridge that would allow a cross-over into politics. Two ideas were developed in dialogue, part in the open with the SDLP, part in secret with both Governments separately. The first strand was the British Government explicitly stating,

in the context of the ending of the cold war, that it had no selfish strategic (i.e. defence) interest in holding onto Northern Ireland, unlike perhaps the late 1940s, and then, more obviously, that it had no economic reasons either. A political interest in maintaining the Union is another matter. The second strand was to develop the idea of self-determination, never accepted by Britain at the time of the Anglo-Irish Treaty; this was to be exercised concurrently as would have to be the case in all long-partitioned countries. Ideological positions do matter. One of the comments made recently regarding Al-Qaeda has been the loss of traction regarding the theocratic aim of restoring the Caliphate, especially in the light of the Arab Spring. If ideological conflict can be softened, better still if some accommodation can be reached, then more practical issues for a peace settlement can be addressed.

There were three stages in the Northern Ireland peace process. The first, from 1987 to 1994, was the slow establishment of principles and understandings that would lead to definitive ceasefires. The second, from 1994 to 1998, including a period when the IRA ceasefire broke down, was to negotiate a political peace settlement that would underpin the ceasefires, in which powerful, and relatively neutral, US brokerage was an important element. The third stage, from 1998 to close to the present, has been to flesh out and implement the Good Friday Agreement, one of the best examples being the reform of policing and then the successive buying into by different sections of the nationalist community.

One of the main obstacles to maintaining rapid momentum was the difficulty of obtaining clarity about renunciation of both the threat and the means of renewed violence. The section on weapons decommissioning in the Good Friday Agreement was weak and aspirational, albeit the best that could be obtained at the time, but subsequent events forced the issue and rendered it central to the survival of the overall political strategy. I remember a few years ago being asked on local radio if I trusted the Sinn Féin leadership. My answer was that I trusted the necessities they were under. For all the criticisms that might be made of them, the Sinn Féin leadership in the North have, in the absence of any sort of a military victory, achieved what few other insurgent groups around

the world have succeeded in doing, making a convincing transition into exclusively democratic politics. The political process, and the agreements underpinning it, have overwhelming support throughout the island, even with the initially sceptical DUP having taken over on the unionist side. However, there remains the threat and the reality of limited but persistent terrorist violence, demonstrated 13 years ago by the major casualties of the Omagh bomb, and more recently by three security force murders in the last three years.

Should violent dissident organisations be treated the same or differently? I was intrigued to hear Gerry Adams recently compare the Real IRA and related organisations to the Baader Meinhoff gang and the red brigade, – by implication, on par with marginal groups that could be contained, that would eventually go away, and that did not need to be negotiated with. Many governments have learnt the importance of avoiding counterproductive overreaction that might generate emotive secondary causes. These can be gratefully seized upon as a substituted and more plausible basis for violence. The most effective countermeasure remains the continued, overwhelming rejection of their methods by the community from which they spring, and avoiding situations which allow them to claim that they are gaining popular ground.

Undoubtedly, the fortunes or misfortunes of well-known groups employing similar methods around the world have some impact on morale. Unless there is some point, some potential gain to be made from a campaign it may, under continued security, political and popular pressure, eventually implode. Integral to terror is the making of bombastic claims by small groups about the number of potential targets and victims, often given credibility by the awe with which they are covered in the media and by a carefully nurtured mystique, largely inaccessible to challenge. In an age when at any rate European Governments have outlawed both capital and corporal punishment as incompatible with human rights, such groups arrogate to themselves reactionary powers and methods. Governments change, when the electorate from time to time so decide. Paramilitary groups are impervious to lack of electoral support, and put up pseudo-historicist or -legal arguments

that would not survive searching analysis and that are not often enough challenged. The notion that continued recourse to terrorism, even on a much reduced scale, will eventually wear down the opposition, whether unionist or British, ludicrously underestimates the staying-power of both.

Democratic conflict resolution, underpinned by a firm but not excessive security policy, is by far the most effective way of dealing with a terrorist problem. Ireland today faces other existential challenges. For the moment, Britain and America present friendly faces, compared to some of the demands emanating from France and Germany as the leading European countries.

It is not obvious that a united Ireland, even were it now achievable and however desirable from a longer-term point of view, is immediately relevant to the resolution of our financial and economic problems, or even credible in that context. The peaceful accommodation that has been achieved, and that seems likely to last, can and does contribute, and has the capacity, if unforced, to evolve much further in reducing barriers. Incremental progress will go on, but with the input sought of all involved, and with all significant political forces on board. ■

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