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Report

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➤ Collective Amnesia and the Northern Ireland Model of Conflict Resolution

John Bew

Northern Ireland, as we all know, is often presented as a model for conflict resolution around the world. That it should be is a reflection of the success of the peace process there, the key moment of the success of the peace process which was the Belfast Agreement of 1998. There are numerous exciting stories about Northern Ireland's transition from war to peace which translate well in other conflict zones and have a certain appeal to them and, in some instances, even an element of glamour. The job of the historian is to re-insert some complexity into these stories, and to balance contending narratives about 'what brought peace'. Before we begin to discuss the 'lessons' of Northern Ireland for other trouble-spots around the world, it seems important that we get over that hurdle first.

To say this much is to risk striking a discordant note from what might be called the 'peace process industry'. It also carries with it the danger of going against prevailing political fashion and to be labelled as somehow anti-peace process. This is a symptom of the poor quality of the debate and the collective amnesia which underpins it. My view is that it is admirable that the ending of the conflict in Northern Ireland is examined and it is to be welcomed that thought is given to what lessons it might hold for Israel/Palestine, Iraq, East Timor, Sri Lanka, or other places. Yet for these efforts to be genuinely helpful and intellectually honest, it is important that we also consider the less 'glamorous' sides of the story.

This paper makes the case that much of what has been said about Northern Ireland has been either over-simplified, or, over-conceptualised in a way that fails to acknowledge the ragged edges of real historical experience. The over-simplification is partly the product of the enthusiasm of eager participants in the peace process who wish transfer their experience elsewhere; in some instances, though not all, their efforts are over-laden with preconceptions about other conflicts. The over-conceptualisation is perhaps more the responsibility of academics, who insert post-facto rationalisation and schema to interpret the peace process, in a way which is remote from the reality on the ground at the time.

The Northern Ireland peace process cannot be separated from the conflict that preceded it and, indeed, overlapped with it. That conflict was often dirty, messy, morally dubious, and confusing. But it was also very important in creating the conditions in which the political settlement could be constructed. Equally, the peace process itself was often unexciting, painfully slow, and constructed with great care. But the political architecture needs to be fully understood before we try to recreate it elsewhere. In summary, therefore, this paper stresses two dimensions of the Northern Ireland story, which are often sidelined in the prevailing narratives – the *unpalatable* and the *boring*.

THE ULSTER TALE

There is a common theme among evangelists of the Northern Ireland model; or perhaps, to put it another way, there is a version of the Ulster tale which has so far proved more compelling than others and which goes as follows:

1. In Northern Ireland, the British State faced an organised terrorist threat from the Provisional IRA that demanded a British withdrawal from the province. The British state tried to defeat the IRA through security policy only, but found that it could not do so; both parties became locked in a military 'stalemate'.
2. After three decades of stasis, the British Government changed approach and decided to negotiate with the terrorists.
3. This made possible an 'inclusive peace settlement' that brought in the 'extremes' and ended the violence.

The key lessons derived from this basic narrative – and assumed to be applicable to other conflict zones are as follows:

1. The state should be prepared to talk to terrorists. Lines of communication should be maintained at all times.
2. Talks should not be predicated on rigid pre-conditions, because they discourage terrorists from taking up the process of dialogue.
3. In a conflict, a settlement can only be achieved by the accommodation of the 'extremes', even if this risks undermining 'moderates'.

Rather than discuss the 'lessons', what I am primarily interested in is the 'what happened' side of things. Above all, I want to question the influential and oft-stated idea that the magic solution in Northern Ireland – and the key lesson for the rest of the world – was that 'talking to terrorists', engaging with the extremes, was the key variable in the search for peace: that this is what changed in the 1990s; there was a shift from an unwinnable military war; and both sides put aside their moral scruples for the greater good and gathered around the table.

This is not to dismiss the importance of bringing in the 'extremes'; this was part of the story and part of the success in Northern Ireland. Evidently, with the 'extremes' on board, a peace deal was given another level of durability. However, other aspects have been forgotten and – in some respects – willfully neglected, which also form part of the story.

First, the idea that talking to terrorists was an innovation of the 1990s is probably the most misleading of all the commonplaces. Talks between the British government and the IRA – both direct and indirect – occurred on a number of occasions through the 1970s and 1980s. When it was part of part of a wider and clearly defined strategy, as it was in the 1990s, talking to the IRA became an important fabric of the eventual deal. Strategically, this made sense in 1993 and, arguably, earlier than that. However, in the first fifteen years of the conflict, the act of talking to terrorists was too often a symptom of policy drift, a sign of exhaustion, or part of a simple desire on the part of the British government extrication from the Northern Ireland problem. On these occasions, such as 1972 and 1975, it risked strengthening the IRA's perception that it was their

violent campaign that had delivered results. In addition to providing a boost to the IRA, some of these early communications encouraged loyalists to mobilise and ratchet up their campaign in the 1970s. More importantly, they also risked undermining more reliable partners for peace, including mainstream nationalists or Unionists, whose support levels fluctuated at various times. It is sometimes forgotten that the Irish government was very much opposed to direct British negotiations with the IRA for most of the 1970s and much of the 1980s, particularly when they were left out of the loop. Prominent figures such as the late Garret FitzGerald believed that they undercut legitimate voices and contributed to instability.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PEACE PROCESS

There are also a number of misleading commonplaces about the origins of the peace process. Some view it through the prism of the DUP-Sinn Féin, which characterised the final stages of the process. Others see it as the outcome of a lengthy bi-lateral dialogue between the British state and the IRA that went back to the late 1980s. Yet bringing in the terrorists was not the absolute priority at the outset of the Northern Irish peace process. Sinn Féin involvement was preferable but it was not the be-all and end-all of any projected deal. The settlement train, to adapt a phrase from Tony Blair, had a momentum of its own. Crucially, there were a number of important 'preconditions' placed on Sinn Féin involvement in the peace process. Article 9 of the Downing Street Declaration – a joint initiative announced by the British and Irish governments on 15 December 1993 – established that the conditions for peace negotiations were as follows:

The British and Irish governments reiterate that the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to the use of, or support for, paramilitary violence. They confirm that, in these circumstances, democratically mandated parties which establish a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods and which have shown that they abide by the democratic process, are free to participate fully in democratic politics and to join in dialogue in due course between the governments and the political parties on the way ahead.

While there was to be some ambiguity as to how this commitment to "exclusively peaceful methods" was to be demonstrated, it did serve to establish some ground rules for conduct before the IRA ceasefire of 31 August 1994.

BORING REALITIES: PRE-CONDITIONS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS

Conventional wisdom now holds that pre-conditions slowed up the peace process, were manipulated by obstructionists, and stored up problems to be dealt with later on. On the contrary, there is compelling evidence that the pre-conditions were crucial to the eventual deal because, without them, there may not have been a sustainable peace process in the first instance. Once again, it is worth reiterating that 'constructive ambiguity' was no bad thing; flexibility about the precise meaning of certain pre-conditions was a useful device for government to have. But without any pre-conditions at all, it is hard to imagine how the foundations of the peace process could have been constructed.

This brings me to the boring point I adverted to in the introduction – which is that a key component in Northern Ireland was that normal politics (by which is meant democratic and peaceful politics) was preserved and protected by the process.

One might, in fact, say that there were two peace processes running side-by-side in the early 1990s, but that we are in danger of forgetting one of them. On the one hand, as we are all aware, the British had some stuttering and stop-start contacts with the IRA, which were to become increasingly more important. At the same time, there had also been multi-party talks going on with all the main constitutional parties from the early 1990s, and these were also to become increasingly important.

Crucially, when the situation came to a head, the government prioritised the latter talks – those with non-violent parties – time and time again over the 1990s, even if it did want to abandon the other contacts. In other words the process was painstakingly constructed, with great care and patience, and a sense

of balance. In this respect, advocates of the Northern Ireland model might be better placed to revisit the importance of the Downing Street Declaration, the 'principle of consent', the notion of 'sufficient consensus', the Heads of Agreement in January 1998, and the very negotiation of the Belfast Agreement itself. The real achievement was not only the fact that Sinn Féin got on board the train as it was leaving the station, but it was the fact that the government kept the train on the rails at all, when bringing in Sinn Féin risked derailing it.

There is, in fact, a tendency to undersell the achievement. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was a triumph for moderation and a triumph of normal politics. What makes it unique in the history of all previous attempts to bring peace to Northern Ireland was *not* that the extremes were engaged with for the first time but the fact that it was ratified by a majority of people north and south of the Irish border.

THE UNPALATABLE: WAS IT A STALEMATE?

Talks between the British Government and the IRA became part of the success story in 1998. That is undeniable. However, this needs to be seen in context. The terms of the dialogue between the British government and the IRA were set by the war that preceded it. By the early 1990s, it had become increasingly clear that the IRA had been heavily infiltrated by informers and was subject to a strategy of containment by the British security services.

To say that the IRA was beaten or that hard power won the day is a vast exaggeration and a misleading one. Hard power came with great costs and its ineffective and misbegotten application in the early phase of the conflict exacerbated the violence considerably. There are also many things which the British state did which were dubious both in moral and strategic terms. But when we are asking ourselves the question, 'what brought peace to Ulster?', to write hard power out of the equation is simply to ignore reality.

Hard power has been written out of many accounts of the peace process presented round the world. This is particularly the case in the accounts by key government officials involved, such as Jonathan

Powell, or in the narrative of leading members of the Republican movement. But it is also replicated in many academic accounts of the peace process and in large swathes of the political establishment. The truth is that the importance of hard power is blurred because of a lack of official documentation about it in the public domain. Moreover, those who refer to the importance of hard power are often charged with preferring hard power to negotiation. But if Northern Ireland is to be taken seriously as a model for conflict resolution, a dose of reality is needed about the more unpalatable events which also formed part of the story. In fact, one could go so far as to say that there is a collective amnesia about the murkier elements that went into the conflict and which were deployed to bring it to an end. It suits the British state to forget many of the dubious things it did as part of the dirty war. And it suits the Republican movement – at the other end of the spectrum – to play down the extent to which they were in a stranglehold by the efforts of the security services (above all, by infiltration of their ranks with informers).

Further, it is understandable – and highly politic, indeed – that elements of the British government have allowed the IRA to maintain the notion that the military conflict ended in a stalemate. But the whole idea of a stalemate is in itself something of a misnomer. While the IRA was far from beaten, there is incontrovertible evidence that counterterrorism operations were taking a heavy toll on the organisation. In military terms, it was a movement that was squeezed and weakened, and which had lost momentum. In political terms, it was a movement that had the potential for electoral expansion but which was being held back by its military actions. Thus, Sinn Féin preferred to be part of a political process that did have momentum, even at the risk of not being able to control that momentum themselves. It was not an ameliorative process of dialogue and trust-building which brought them to the table. It was a calculation based on realpolitik. And, to a great extent, their sense of realpolitik was shaped by their declining military fortunes and the increasing success of the security services. There were numerous failures and embarrassments in the British state's counterterrorism efforts against the IRA. Yet there were also many successes about which we have heard a lot less.

CONCLUSION

When discussing the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process, it is simplistic and misleading to say that the key to success was the bringing in of extremes. Despite the obvious temptation to bring them in, during the crucial phase from 1993 to 1998, the needs of the moderates were prioritised at crucial junctures, thus creating the conditions for a sustainable deal. Though it is now unfashionable to say so, preconditions were very important to that process – albeit preconditions with a useful element of constructive ambiguity. Meanwhile, the British state’s counterterrorism strategy evolved significantly over the course of the Troubles, with covert (and controversial) methods used to increasing effect. This took a significant toll on the IRA, through fair means and foul.

It is very hard to argue against the sentiment that it is good to talk or that it represents the best way forward to end violent conflict. This is certainly part of the story in Northern Ireland. However, the act of ‘talking to terrorists’ has been given a disproportionate weight in explaining how violence was brought to an end. The main problem with the Northern Ireland model – as exported around the world – is that it presents the talking process as a self-contained and ameliorative activity on its own terms – removed from the less palatable ingredients of the conflict and the precarious political balancing act which helped bring it to an end. ■
