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The lessons of Northern Ireland: bad students learning the wrong lessons?

Report

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➤ Bad students learning the wrong lessons?

Roger MacGinty

PREMATURE HISTORY?

Sitting at the LSE IDEAS ‘Lessons of Northern Ireland’ event, it was fanciful to think of ‘who was bugging who’ during the peace process. Around the table at the seminar we had Jonathan Powell (Tony Blair’s chief of staff for the Northern Ireland talks), Martin Mansergh (the Irish Taoiseach’s special representative on the Northern Ireland talks), Tim Dalton (from the Irish Ministry of Justice who collated Irish government intelligence files), David Trimble (the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and a leading player in the peace process), and Barbara de Bruin (a member of Sinn Féin’s negotiating team). Is it beyond the bounds of possibility that Jonathan Powell, or Tim Dalton, were privy to the transcripts of telephone calls and other surreptitiously recorded conversations of the people with whom they now shared a seminar room? My educated guess would be that Jonathan, Tim and many others know a lot more than they are prepared, or allowed, to tell us.

This gets to the heart of the matter of the lessons to be learned from a peace process: what information is available to allow us to draw lessons? Some information is in the public domain, and other information is not. But even the information that is in the public domain may not be as helpful as we imagine. There is a difference between having access to information and identifying those parts of that information that might be useful to others.

There has been no shortage of politicians, policymakers and academics (myself included) travelling the world to explain the ‘lessons’ from the Northern Ireland peace process. But it is worth asking if we are in a position to identify ‘lessons’ from the Northern Ireland peace process? A number of barriers mean that politicians, policymakers, journalists, and academics may not be able to learn from Northern Ireland’s peace process in any meaningful way. Instead, there is a danger that many of the lessons that are shared are superficial and glib.

Perhaps the most prominent of these barriers relates to the instant history that accompanied the Northern Ireland peace process. There has been no shortage of memoirs, insider accounts, television documentaries, and learned wisdom from telegenic historians. This is not a criticism of the politicians, policymakers, journalists, and academics who have given us insights to the Northern Ireland peace process. Many of the insider accounts make gripping reading and are invaluable sources of information. The problem is that a largely accepted version of the peace process was laid down very early, more or less in real time. This narrative has become hegemonic. Indeed, key players in the peace process (individuals and institutions) invest considerable energy in maintaining this accepted narrative, and their crucial role in it. Thus, those who made the peace process, have become gatekeepers to a particular narrative of the peace process.

But is this dominant narrative faithful to events as they truly occurred? It is too early to say. Historians in fifty or one hundred years will revise the dominant version of the peace process and provide a different account or accounts. They will be able to place the peace process in its global and socio-cultural context, and in the long-trends of history. They will be able to disaggregate the truly significant events and processes from the welter of events and 'historic moments' that characterised the peace process. They will also have access to some of the documents (particularly the intelligence documents) that are not yet in the public domain. The implication of this instant – or perhaps premature – history of the peace process is that may be at risk of drawing lessons from an inaccurate account of the peace process.

Certainly, the accepted script is probably too much focused on the elite processes, the crucial hours in Castle Buildings, the set-piece meetings and key documents. As in much history, the social, the economic, the female, and the non-elite risks will, with historical distance, be recognised as under-reported and under-valued. These multiple histories of everyday stories and perceptions formed a vital part of the peace process,

particularly in terms of providing an environment of resistance and enablement. The dominant narrative has an emphasis on the making of peace through elites rather than the more general reception, consumption, and subversion of that peace. Although we talk about a peace 'process', the accepted version of the peace seems to characterise the peace process as a series of episodes and key events rather than as a long-term process or series of processes. There is a danger that we are equipped with inaccurate textbooks and we may not be in the best position to learn lessons.

A VERY DIFFERENT CONTEXT

We should be in no doubt that Northern Ireland presents a very different case than most other contemporary civil wars. As a result, we must be cautious about proffering lessons or encouraging mimicry. The Northern Ireland state did not collapse in terms of economic or social provision. The collapse of such public health and sanitation systems has been the big killer in the civil wars such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia in the past two decades. Northern Ireland has been blessed by first-rate healthcare and infrastructure. Moreover, there were no massive

DEBUNKING THE PEACE PROCESS

Richard English

1

PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND DID NOT COME AS A RESULT OF RECONCILIATION.

Northern Ireland remains deeply divided and sectarian, and the reason for peace is more that terrorism was contained by the state, the terrorists were practical and wanted momentum, and terrorist-related politicians therefore sought a Plan B of peace-process politics when the Plan A of violence did not produce the desired results.

2

CONTRARY TO MUCH ASSUMPTION, NORTHERN IRELAND IS NOT A PLACE WHERE TOO MUCH IS REMEMBERED.

In fact, most victims and the circumstances of their deaths are forgotten. Remembering the atrocity of such conflicts (and not euphemizing them) is a vital aspect of responding to terrorism, failing to do so runs the risk of encouraging more terrorism in the future.

numbers of displaced persons. The casualty rate was low in comparison to other civil wars, and all sides used some measure of restraint. Northern Ireland occupies a very rich part of the world and is a member of the European Union. It is the only conflict that I know of where Marks & Spencer stayed open throughout.

Not only does Northern Ireland present a very different context than many other conflict contexts, it was also treated very differently by the key power-holders. We can see this by contrasting British government policies towards Afghanistan and Iraq with those towards Northern Ireland. Courtesy of its extended peace process, Northern Ireland has experienced 'liberal peace-lite' or a generous and largely consensual form of peacemaking based on negotiation, electoral endorsement and a good dose of Keynesianism. Money and attention were lavished on Northern Ireland and its peace process. The process was not without coercion, but this coercion – even the worst of the British government's outrages – pales in comparison with British government activities in Afghanistan and Iraq. Here the version of 'peacemaking' took the form of regime change by force, military occupation, the imposition of a government (later endorsed by elections), and a major international project to

re-orient the society, polity, and economy. The ferocity of this 'peacemaking' project is evidenced by the fact that British troops fired just under four million bullets in a year in the 2006-2007 in Afghanistan's Helmand Province.

What is remarkable is that the same British government, and often the same ministers and policymakers, were involved in the disbursement of such wildly schizophrenic variants of 'peacemaking'. The successive British administrations seemed unable, or unwilling, to draw lessons from the Northern Ireland experience and apply them to Iraq or Afghanistan. The exceptionalism of Northern Ireland – as a context and in terms of its treatment – means that it is prudent to be cautious when drawing comparison.

HAS THE WORLD MOVED ON FROM PEACE PROCESSES?

In 2009 only one peace agreement was reached in a civil war situation, the Ihussi Accord in Congo. It may be that we live in a post-peace process era, or in an era in which there is little room for inclusive and patient peace processes. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program

3

NORTHERN IRELAND DID NOT DEMONSTRATE THE VICTORY OF EXTREMISM.

In fact, during most of the conflict neither community had a majority in it which supported terrorism. It was only after the IRA effectively ended their war against the British state that their party, Sinn Fein, became the dominant voice of Northern Irish nationalism. Before that, repeatedly and emphatically, the non-violent SDLP easily outpolled Sinn Fein year after year.

4

NO TERRORIST GROUP IN NORTHERN IRELAND ENDED THE CONFLICT GETTING WHAT THEY WANTED.

Terrorists did accomplish certain second-order gains (greater influence for their political party; greater personal influence and even wealth) but in terms of the achievement of central, strategic goals, terrorism did not work very well in Northern Ireland. ■

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records an average of nine peace accords annually in the period since 1989, but that figure seems to have sharply declined. Whether this is a blip or part of a wider trend is hard to tell at this stage.

The argument advanced in this brief article is that the Northern Ireland peace process was something of an outlier, or an atypical peace process, in that it was more inclusive and more embedded in the rights agenda than many other peace processes. Of course, the Northern Ireland peace process was not completely inclusive, and sometimes patience was in short supply. However, overall, the peace process was based on the notion of including those who had the capacity to wreck peace from without. Tony Blair famously told Sinn Féin that 'the settlement train' would leave without them. It didn't. Blair and the others waited for Sinn Féin. There were countless other attempts to make the peace process inclusive, and seemingly endless waiting for various constituencies to be consulted. The result was a big tent peace process. It wasn't exactly 'touchy feely', and the shadow of violence was often nearby, but it was a peace process in which consent and inclusion played very significant roles.

Northern Ireland's 'big tent' peace process can be contrasted with contexts that were much more hostile to peace initiatives. The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed many cases where one party in a conflict has sought to secure unilateral victory by violence or authoritarian suppression: Sri Lanka, southern Thailand, Burma, Darfur, Afghanistan, North-West Pakistan, various parts of India, Chechnya, Israel/Palestine, Yemen, and the list goes on. In some of these cases, such as Sri Lanka or Israel/Palestine, there was a nod to a peace process or some sort of negotiated settlement. But often this was subterfuge, or a cover for military action.

There are two interesting contextual factors that have made suppression an easier option than negotiation and may suggest that Northern Ireland is an outlier

with limited comparative value. The first is the global War on Terror, which is still being waged although the term is no longer common currency. This gave cover to many authoritarian regimes to label their opponents as 'terrorists' and use violent rather than negotiated means to attempt to 'solve' their conflict. British and US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan meant that regimes can laugh off lectures on human rights abuses. The War on Terror meant a lessening emphasis on the Clintonian doctrine of democratisation, and instead placed a greater emphasis on the stabilisation of states (as a bulwark against 'terrorism') and the securitisation of humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding.

The second reason that might make suppression more attractive than negotiation is that investment from China – and other locations including Saudi Arabia – means that a number of developing countries can re-orient themselves eastwards towards the boom economies, rather than west towards gloomy lectures on human rights and aid that is tied to a multitude of conditions. As Mark Duffield has observed, the Sudanese government has been able to frustrate western attempts to intervene over Darfur in part because it has been cushioned by Chinese investment.

Sri Lanka was able to afford to win its war against the Tamil Tigers via cheap money from China and the international markets that enabled it to rearm. It was able to insulate itself against complaints on human rights from western INGOs and governments because they had lost their financial leverage over it. In May 2011, just as the LSE IDEAS event was looking at lessons learned from the Northern Ireland peace process, the Sri Lankan army was hosting its own lessons learned conference. Forty-two countries signed up to hear how to win an insurgency. It is worth stressing that Sri Lanka 'won' its war in 2009 through the suppression of human rights and a sustained military offensive. A combination of the international and domestic contexts made this option more palatable to the Sri Lankan regime than another round of negotiations.

ARE THERE ANY LESSONS?

So far the tenor of this article has been sceptical in relation to lessons from the Northern Ireland peace process. Yet there is one lesson that does deserve to be aired, and that is that a peace process is possible, even if the circumstances seem unpropitious. The Northern Ireland of the late 1980s was characterised by a palpable despair. The conflict was described as 'frozen', 'cyclical' and 'pointless'. Few people, if any, could see a way out of the stalemate. Yet within half a decade a feasible peace process was up and running.

A conflict that was seen as 'intractable' seemed to offer the possibility of movement. This movement was not inevitable and was rarely achieved without controversy. But the very idea that a peace process was possible, and that it could have a tangible impact on the ground, was important and is likely the most important lesson that Northern Ireland has to offer. ■

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