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The Future of Peace in Northern Ireland between the *devil* of Unionism and the *deep blue sea* of IRA.

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'The Irish don't know what they want and won't be happy till they get it.'(1)

British Army officer, 1975.

'Many talk about a solution to Ulster's political problem but few are prepared to say what the problem is. The reason is simple. The problem is that there is no solution – at least no solution recognizable in those more fortunate parts of the Anglo-American world that are governed with consensus.'(2)

R. Rose, 1976.

'Hell just froze over. There's going to be peace in Ireland.'(3)

White House aide, 1998.

For many years it was assumed that the conflict in Northern Ireland was something beyond solution. However hard politicians (and academics) planned, debated, manoeuvred, compromised, rethought and innovated, the problem remained intractable. Northern Ireland had a conflict that was simply too complex to untangle, a struggle that somehow ignored the normal laws of conflict resolution. The Berlin Wall could fall, Nelson Mandela walk to freedom in South Africa and even Israel and Palestine reach peace agreements in 1993 and 1995 (though these have not survived), but Northern Ireland remained 'troubled'. While other regions turned corners, Northern Ireland could only tread the same path. As other politicians talked peace, hers continued to bellow and roar. And as guns fell silent elsewhere, hers continued to kill. Just two months after Israel and Palestine signed the historic Oslo accord in 1993, an IRA bomb

culture a deadly threat to the survival of the 'other's' way of life. In such an environment the world is black and white, gain for one is loss for the other, while concession looks like surrender and moderation like weakness. It is a zero-sum relationship. Arguably these sentiments are a source of strength and unity when the community is under attack. When, however, the task is to search for an accord, they are an obstacle and one not easily surmounted. They operate like a drag-anchor upon their leaders' ability to manoeuvre compromise and bargain: attempts to do this leave those leaders vulnerable to ambitious demagogues outbidding them by playing up tribal fears. For, as political scientist Richard Rose observes, 'to seek friends amongst one's enemies is to risk making enemies of one's friends'. (7) The inevitable result is that leaders in an ethnically divided community find 'it is more rewarding to pursue the conflict than to pursue accommodation' (8) and to fall back on traditional and safe sources of communal backing. Resolving such tensions and pressures is therefore an extremely delicate operation, the long-term success of which will require nothing less than a wholesale 'redesigning and reconciling the parties' relationship with each other', (9) or what another political scientist has called a 'decommissioning of mind-sets'. (10)

Decommissioning mind-sets in Northern Ireland will take more than a political agreement between leaders from both communities to accomplish, though it undoubtedly is a very good start. Part of the difficulty is that the conflict has lasted many centuries and thus has put down deep emotional and cultural roots. Even its most recent manifestation has been running since 1969 and has claimed the lives of 3,633 people, with a further 42,000 injured. Such suffering, over a long period, has created 'vast inventories of historical recrimination' (11) that in turn have deepened resentment, hardened attitudes and widened the communal gulf. Such inventories have meant that despite the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, the causes of the conflict survive. Ingrained tribal loyalties, self-legitimating traditions and myths, tight communal separation and socio-economic exclusion continue to divide the communities and represent significant barriers to normalization. Community reconciliation remains a cherished aspiration rather than measurable development, with traditional anxieties, mistrust and hatreds never far below the surface of life in the province and often erupting into public view, as with the Holy Cross school stand-off during the autumn of 2001. Politically inspired violence may have receded, but that is hardly saying much when paramilitary turf wars, blast-bombs, sectarian rioting, house evacuations, intimidation and punishment beatings

continue as a regular feature of life in the province. It seems one type of violence has been exchanged for another. Though even then political violence still casts a shadow, admittedly a pale one, across the region given the fact that various Republican splinter groups operate outside the Provisional IRA cease-fire of 19 July 1997 and remain committed to violence, a threat scarcely eased by the number and variety of weapons that still lie hidden throughout the region. The Troubles may have gone but Northern Ireland remains a troubled society and the current 'peace' in Northern Ireland can look at times unmistakably like no peace. Although it is now three years after the signing of the GFA, many observers are still not sure whether we have peace or just a lull in the fighting.

If the durability of ethno-National conflict has made solving the problem difficult, then the search for a solution has hardly been aided by disagreement over what the problem actually is! Hardline Republicans argue that it is the British presence in Northern Ireland that lies at the heart of the conflict. If the 'Brits' withdrew, the conflict would end as Unionists would come to perceive their natural home within a united Irish Republic. Unionists, unimpressed with such wishful thinking, focus upon the violence, and particularly that of the IRA, as the main issue at stake. Only by extinguishing this and removing the means to return to violence can the province achieve real peace and reconciliation. Constitutional Nationalists tend to view violence as a symptom of a deeper malaise, the systematic discrimination of Catholics and frustration of their political tradition. Only by addressing these issues will the violence be

removed and peace generated. Alternatively, more extreme Unionists argue it is the very survival of this Nationalist political tradition amongst Catholics in the north, plus mixed signals from the British and unofficial recognition from the Republic, that has generated violence in the north. What is required to end the violence and return the province to peace and stability are tough counter-terrorist measures, alongside a clear endorsement by all that Northern Ireland is permanent and inviolable.

Given the sides cannot agree on the problem, the search for a solution was always going to be complex and arduous. So arduous, in fact, that many were sceptical a solution existed at all. Writing in 1976, Richard Rose sounded a despondent note when he reminded his readers that 'the existence of a political problem is not proof that there is a solution' [(12)]. This did not deter politicians who, with a legion of schemes and initiatives, from the Darlington conference of 1972, to the Sunningdale experiment of 1973–1974, the Constitutional

Convention of 1975– 1976, the constitutional conference of 1979–1980, rolling devolution 1982–1986, the Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985, the Brooke/Mayhew initiative of 1989–1992 and the IRA cease-fire of 1994–1996, attempted to solve the problem. Yet the fact that the Troubles *still* endured and 30 years of conflict has resulted in no more than a catalogue of fruitless discussions, broken deals and political collapses was surely testament that no solution was possible. Like some Hobbesian nightmare, war and conflict were thought the natural order of things in Northern Ireland. And any survey of the previous 300 years could make a strong case for seeing violence, bloodshed and disharmony as typical, with moments of peace and quiet merely periods of temporary exhaustion, regrouping and re-equipping.

On the other hand it might be argued that the problem in Northern Ireland was less that there was no solution than that there were too many of them. 'The trouble was,' A.T.Q. Stewart has noted, 'that the crisis in Ulster was regarded as a kind of puzzle, which could be solved if the right answer were found. The blunt truth was the opposite. The "solution" was the chief cause of the problem, and was constantly inflaming it.' (13) In his book on the peace process, Tom Hennessey has listed nine possible arrangements for the region, ranging from the full integration of Northern Ireland into the UK, to a United Ireland with a clutch of confederal, federal, joint authority and devolutionary schemes in between. (14) Without a settled future and always awaiting the next Secretary of State for Northern Ireland armed with his latest plan, insecurity and instability became enmeshed into the very fabric of Northern Irish politics and society. And from insecurity sprang violence. Alternatively it might be that the solution existed all the time and the arduous process was actually bringing the leaders of the different groups and parties (or at least some of them) to that realization. The peace process as a journey towards enlightenment rather than a complex mathematical conundrum. The obvious similarities between the Good Friday Agreement and the Sunningdale experiment of 1972 immortalized in the now famous quip from former Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon that the GFA was 'Sunningdale for slow learners', supports this notion of a slowly maturing enlightenment.

Whatever the nature of the problem (and indeed the solution), the complexities of the situation certainly help explain why the road to a political settlement in Northern Ireland has proved to be both long and forbidding. Bringing all sides into a form of dialogue, sometimes through mediators or on a unilateral basis, proved a highly delicate exercise in painstaking diplomacy. Indeed, the exercise gave birth to a new term, 'talk about talks', now common currency in diplomatic

language. Progress was always an extremely fragile creature, vulnerable to disruption on the 'inside' by walkouts, posturing or histrionics, and to 'outside' events be they a bomb, an election, a parade, political crisis at Westminster or just an insensitive speech. At all stages, the journey was characterized as much by delay, suspension, stalemate, fragmentation, obfuscation and reversal as it was marked by measurable advance. Yet even then momentum in the process could be sustained only by 'sleight of hand' and flexible terminology, to enable leaders to elide over what seemed unbridgeable differences while preserving their fixed 'public' stance. And a terminology, we might add, capable of marrying mutually exclusive attitudes, or language able to hide subtle but significant shifts of position while projecting a continuity of approach for supporters.

A good example is the idea of a *fragile cease-fire*. This gave recognition, for those who needed it, that a cease-fire still existed while simultaneously admitting to others that it was regularly breached. And the phrase *peace process* was the essential linguistic tool for camouflaging irreconcilable Unionist and Nationalist objectives. Unionists concentrated on the *peace* aspect of the Peace Process as an end to violence and a settled, water-tight and finalized agreement that by dint of being final has consolidated the Northern Irish state and Partition. 'I have risen from this table,' David Trimble declared on signing the GFA, 'with the

Union stronger than when I sat down.' The SDLP and especially Sinn Fein highlight the *process* part of the Peace Process, a staging post in a still incomplete journey, the final destination being a united Ireland. Thus more about process than about the peace (or process and peace together) because for them, true, lasting peace will come only with unification. Indeed, one suspects that linking the word 'process' to 'peace' was the necessary sleight of hand required to persuade the more militant republicans to lay down (though not to hand in) their weapons. There operated, then, a plasticity of language and terminology that permitted forward motion even when the parties and political actors stood far apart.

A similar plasticity or ill-defined quality can be seen with the settlement itself. To a large extent this was unavoidable and even perhaps necessary, given Northern Ireland's zero-sum politics. In these circumstances it was essential that the Good Friday Agreement pointed both ways, offering security for the Union while advancing the cause and possibility of a united Ireland. Unless both communities saw in it a victory, it would not acquire a broad consensus of support. However, the reality was that the GFA was a compromise, a complex

network of trade-offs involving Northern Ireland, Britain and the Irish Republic, in a society where the very idea of a compromise and trade-off meant defeat and surrender. To compensate for this the different parties placed upon the settlement their own conflicting inflections; indeed, they even referred to it differently. For Nationalists it was the Good Friday Agreement, stressing the powerful motifs of Easter and resurrection. Unionists, on the other hand, called it the Belfast Agreement, the locus of Unionist power and home of Stormont, a neo-classical reminder of a once dominant Unionist polity. Within the terms of the agreement, Unionists focused upon the guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK as long as its people desired it, the creation of a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly and executive and the removal of the Republic's constitutional claim to the north in articles 2 and 3 of their Constitution. Nationalists stressed the recognition of their Irish identity and tradition in article 2 of the GFA, the sharing of power in the executive, the North-South Ministerial Council and various implementation bodies dealing with all-island matters and the reformed British–Irish Inter-Governmental Conference. Refracted through the lens of their own political objectives, the agreement appeared to mean all things to all men/women. Elsewhere in the settlement, contentious or unbridgeable issues were suspended or 'farmed out' to various independent commissions, as with police reform and decommissioning. Even then particularly sticky areas were left blurred and vague, perhaps hoping for a softening of views or an altered political context in the future. The thorny question of weapons decommissioning is a good example. For some, the relevant passages in the GFA *obliged* all political parties to the actual demolition of terrorist arms, weapon by weapon. For others it reads more like a general *commitment*, necessarily gradual and without time limits, and connected to the simultaneous removal of all weapons within Northern Ireland – taking the gun out of Irish politics, whoever owned or wielded it. [15]

Unfortunately this inherent ambiguity in the agreement, though vital for providing each side with 'its' victory, has stored up difficulties for the future, difficulties that some three years after the GFA are only now being confronted with predictably destabilizing consequences. The subsequent 'stop-start-stop' record of the new Northern Ireland executive, the boil of decommissioning that *still* awaits lancing and the knotty questions of police reform, British de-militarization and the Saville inquiry into Bloody Sunday all loom like ice-bergs on the horizon and testify to the limitations of the 1998 Agreement. It also furnished those elements that stood outside it with an easy, soft target. Such flexible and multiple readings of the GFA enabled the DUP (and

a growing number of Ulster Unionists) to claim it was not really an agreement at all. For them it was a sham, a mere tactical realignment by Republicans looking to continue their struggle by other means, and gullibly supported by naïve British and Unionist politicians. Sections of the IRA would probably view 'the peace' in a similar way as an option to run with and, when exhausted, discard if nothing concrete materializes. In other words, the very nature of the peace agreement appeared indefinite, contested and ambiguous. It was a malleable, even moveable, agreement rather than a fixed and finite one. Though, arguably, it was these very qualities that allowed a settlement to be agreed in the first place. And a flawed peace is surely better than no peace.

NOTES

(1) – J. M. Cohen, *Dictionary of Modern Quotations* (Penguin, 1971) p 16.
(2) – R. Rose, *Northern Ireland: A Time for Choice*, (Macmillan, 1976) p 139.
(3) – White House aide on hearing news about the Good Friday Agreement in C. O'Clery, *Ireland in Quotes* (O'Brien Press, 1999) p 253.
(4) – A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground* (Faber, 1977) p 3.
(5) – M. Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging* (Vintage, 1994) p 2.
(6) – Ibid, p 2.
(7) – R. Rose, op. cit., p 16.
(8) – D. Horowitz, 'Conflict and the incentives to political accommodation' in D. Keogh and M. Haltzel (eds) *Northern Ireland and the Politics of Reconciliation* (CUP, 1993) p 176.
(9) – D. Bloomfield, *Peacemaking Strategies in Northern Ireland: building complementarity in conflict management theory* (Macmillan, 1997) p 69.
(10) – D. Whittaker, *Conflict and Reconciliation in the Contemporary World* (Routledge, 1999) p 90.
(11) – 'But a resolution of the decommissioning issue – or any other issue – will not be found if the parties resort to their vast inventories of historical recrimination', in *Report on the International Body of Arms Decommissioning*, by G. Mitchell, J. de Chasterlain, H. Holkeri, 22 January 1996.
(12) – R. Rose, op. cit., p 6.
(13) – Stewart, op. cit., p 7.
(14) – T. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Gill & Macmillan, 2000) pp 185–7; pp 7–9.
(15) – Ibid, pp 185–7.