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## Creating Political Oxygen to Break the Cycle of Violence 1981-1994: Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process

### *Foreword*

Established in 2012, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute honours the late Senator Edward M. Kennedy for his lifelong commitment to justice, equality, human rights, education for all, and environmental protection, and in particular for his contribution to the Northern Ireland peace process. The Kennedy Institute represents Ireland in the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions.

This paper considers the dynamics of the process used in creating the political conditions to bring about the end of political violence in Northern Ireland in the period from the IRA hunger strike in 1981 to the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires in 1994. It explains some of the key concepts that were forged in the intense political back-channel pre-negotiations that eventually culminated in opening the door to peace talks. It also shows the crucial role that third parties can play in building the capacity for parties to understand each other and create a peace-process architecture.

It is becoming increasingly clear to those in diplomatic circles that conflicts between civil, religious, or ethnic groups, however long or intense, have no real security or military solutions. The use of greater force against one or other group is a mistake often made by policy-makers in the belief that it will quell the violence and restore both order and security to the situation. However, this will only produce further estrangement and sectarianism at the expense of an equal level of effort on the political and diplomatic front. It will therefore postpone the political dialogue essential for producing an agreement.

Even world leaders such as US Secretary of State John Kerry find themselves making statements that accord with this insight when faced with four years of the Syrian quagmire, with its high casualties and millions of displaced people. Resolving conflict is about repairing the broken relationships that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, often involving a power imbalance between a majority and a substantive minority. Yet it is important not to introduce artificial supports into a process that will eventually be withdrawn.

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The parties must reach realistic conclusions about what is achievable in a process and not what someone else may get for them. The overall challenge is to get out of the red zone (see Diagram 1 below) of many years of tit-for-tat violence, to reignite political negotiations to end the conflict, and to bring the protagonists into the blue zone, where they engage in peace talks around the table.

But how do you stop the violence that blocks parties from entering into a talks process? How do political negotiations get started? What are the political conditions that have to be in place before governments can begin to talk to groups engaged in violence? The Northern Ireland peace process shows that at least four factors need to come together to create a “ripe moment”<sup>1</sup> in order to break the cycle of violence:

- acknowledgement on all sides that there is a mutually hurting stalemate between the main protagonists where neither side is going to win;
- the emergence of political leadership that sees the political opportunity of arriving at a ceasefire and/or settlement and is prepared to take risks for peace;
- the forging of a number of key political ideas that are able to pump political oxygen into what is seemingly a hopeless and despairing situation and provide a political way out of the conflict for the party leaders;
- high-level international political initiatives to support efforts to gain a ceasefire and move towards the creation of the talks table.

It took over twelve years for the political conditions to ripen sufficiently in Northern Ireland to allow the leadership of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, to convince the militants on the IRA Army Council to call a ceasefire.

#### *Seeds of the Irish Peace Process*



It began with what Republicans saw as a tragedy involving the deaths of ten Republican hunger strikers at the Maze Prison during 1981, but led to the unintended consequence of the Provisional IRA and its political wing, Sinn Féin, changing their strategy from being a purely military focused organization to becoming a mainstream political party. The basic concept of the hunger strike was self-sacrifice and was rich with historical symbolism. It evoked the revered Fenian and Easter 1916 tradition of turning failure into success: “The cause is more important than your life.” On 9th April 1981, about half-

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1 I. William Zartman, Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond, in Paul C. Stern/ Daniel Druckman (eds), *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, National Research Council, Washington 2000, pp. 225-250, here: pp. 226-232.

way through his hunger strike, Bobby Sands was elected an MP to the British House of Commons, news that quickly went right round the world. The H-

Diagram 1: Sequential Phases of a Peace Process Architecture

1. <i>Conflict Engagement</i>	2. <i>Conflict Resolution</i>	3. <i>Conflict Transformation</i>
<p><i>The Red Zone</i></p> <p>Pre-negotiation phase to end the violence and agree principles to get to the talks table.</p>	<p><i>The Blue Zone</i></p> <p>Talks about the design of the talks table and the negotiation of a political settlement.</p>	<p><i>The Yellow Zone</i></p> <p>Implementation of negotiated settlement and post-conflict transformation.</p>
<p>Community despair, lack of hope; fear and intimidation prevalent as long as dehumanization and violence continue.</p> <p>The task is to engage the protagonists and win their confidence to break out of cycles of tit-for-tat violence on the ground.</p> <p>New political thinking developed in secret back channels can explore the principles on which talks can commence, nudge the parties towards a ceasefire, and build new relationships of trust.</p> <p><i>Ends with ceasefire</i> </p>	<p>In this phase, the negotiation process is paramount to shift on-the-ground realities of the conflict. Involves moving forward on many difficult but interrelated issues simultaneously.</p> <p>Elections may be used to create the talks table.</p> <p>Each side depends on the other to sell the compromise deal to their own people. Trust builds to sustain the settlement.</p> <p><i>Ends with accord</i> </p>	<p>Problems of implementing the settlement are addressed, requiring painful adjustment between the parties in a spirit of reconciliation.</p> <p>Parties have to live up to the commitments made and get compliance on security reform and the decommissioning of weapons.</p> <p>Truth recovery regarding gross human-rights violations, with victims and ex-combatants coming forward to tell their story.</p>

Block hunger-strike election campaign was run by Jim Gibney and Tom Hartley of Sinn Féin for what many Nationalists saw as a modest demand to regain political status for IRA prisoners.<sup>2</sup> The British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, refused to give in publicly, but privately offered a compromise<sup>3</sup> that Sinn Féin refused to accept. The funerals of the dead hunger strikers had huge emotional resonance within the Nationalist community. There was an enormous outpouring of public support that brought thousands onto the streets to attend the funerals whenever each of the ten Republican prisoners died over a period of several months. It saw the biggest single political shift in the Nationalist community on the narrowest of fulcrums. Suddenly Gerry Adams in Sinn Féin and his “kitchen cabinet” of Jim Gibney and Tom Hartley woke up to the possibility of harnessing this shift and transforming it into a political opportunity. Danny Morrison asked the question at the 1981 *Ard Fheis* (annual conference): “[...] will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand, and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?”<sup>4</sup>

While a dual strategy of guns and votes is chilling to democrats, it proved a crucial turning point for Adams, who began to float ideas about how politics could deliver Republican objectives where violence could not. Loyalist leader Gusty Spence understood the significance: “Without Margaret Thatcher’s ham-handling, we wouldn’t have had the political strength Sinn Féin gained [...] Consequently we wouldn’t have had the peace process”.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately militants will only be convinced if they see the political benefits of winding down violence.

*Lesson 1: Out of the awfulness of a moment can come the political opportunity to initiate a peace process. It is important for governments to recognize how such tragic events can radicalize a whole population and present rebel military leaders with the possibility to switch over to politics if they can see the political gains that might come from it.*

On the back of Nationalist reaction in the wake of the hunger strike, Gerry Adams was elected MP for West Belfast in 1983, defeating in the process the more moderate Gerry Fitt, one of the founders of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Up to that point, Sinn Féin had followed a policy of abstaining from taking seats in any elected chamber, whether Dublin, Westminster, or Belfast, which had been a core value of the Republican tradition going back to 1918. However, it was becoming clear that the IRA could not win an outright victory in their struggle to remove the British from Ireland,

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2 Cf. Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, London 2007; David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The story of the 1981 Hunger Strike*, New York 1987.

3 Cf. Richard O’Rawe, *Afterlives: The Hunger Strike and the Secret Offer that Changed Irish History*, Dublin 2010; Thomas Hennessey, *Hunger Strike: Margaret Thatcher’s Battle with the IRA 1980-1981*, Dublin 2014.

4 Cited in: Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, Oxford 2004, p. 225.

5 Cited in: Roy Garland, *Gusty Spence*, Belfast 2001, p. 243.

nor could they be defeated militarily. This realization began to force the pace of debate about the need for a new strategy that would advance the political aims of the movement and at the same time raise its game to a higher political level. The northern faction, now led by Adams and Martin McGuinness, thought this would be done by votes, while the southern and more ideological traditionalists wanted to continue and, if possible, intensify the military struggle.

Gerry Adams from Belfast and Martin McGuinness from Derry won the “guns versus votes” argument at the Sinn Féin *Ard Fheis* in 1986. However their victory over the traditional military hardliners was not without consequences. A key feature of the Irish Republican movement throughout history was its propensity to split, particularly on issues of political compromise. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh had been a key member of the movement in 1970 when it split between the Official IRA and the newly formed and more violent Provisional IRA. Sixteen years of violence had not changed his mind about the use of force as the sole instrument in removing what he saw as the British presence in Ireland. In response to the new strategy now being advanced by Adams and McGuinness, O’Brádaigh led disaffected members out of the movement to form a more militant Republican Sinn Féin.

Having already replaced Ó Brádaigh as president of Sinn Féin three years earlier in 1983, Gerry Adams and his Belfast “kitchen cabinet”, now took complete control of the organization from the southern leadership and, together with McGuinness, embarked on an unprecedented political partnership that went on to contest local and Westminster elections successfully. All of this political shift amounted to an “internal ripening”<sup>6</sup> that put in place the first building block of the peace process.

*Lesson 2: In almost all national liberation organizations dedicated to political objectives, there are those who bomb and those who think. The challenge for governments and peacemakers is to identify those who think beyond the violence and help them to develop political strategies.*

#### *Increased Security Co-operation*

Following the 1981 hunger strike, the British government embarked on a new effort to establish a minimal level of political functioning under a system they described as rolling devolution within Northern Ireland. In the election to a new Northern Ireland Assembly in October 1982, the Unionists successfully fought back to hold off the increased turnout by Nationalists and Republicans at the polls. However, the moderate Nationalist SDLP and Sinn Féin, the

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6 Jannie Lilja, Ripening Within? Strategies Used by Rebel Negotiators to End Ethnic War, in: *Negotiation Journal* 3/2011: pp. 311-342.

political representatives of the Provisional IRA, refused to take their seats, and the British initiative consequently stumbled.

The incoming Irish government in 1983 led by Taoiseach/Prime Minister Garret FitzGerald was alarmed by the electoral success of Sinn Féin, whose vote exceeded that of the SDLP by a margin of three to one in the Lower Falls by-election in Belfast. If that trend were to continue, it could undermine the moderate nationalism of John Hume's SDLP party within Northern Ireland, which was committed to a united Ireland agreed through dialogue. If repeated in the South, that momentum could even destabilize the Republic. FitzGerald was very worried: "Unless a political solution was found that would enable the [Nationalist] minority to identify with the system of government in Northern Ireland, it would be impossible to solve the security problem."<sup>7</sup> He had great difficulty in explaining to Mrs Thatcher that these two issues of nationalist political alienation and non-identification with the security forces and structures of justice were inter-twined.

Equally alarmed at the continued electoral success of Sinn Féin, this time in the British general election of 1983, the British government held a different view. Mrs Thatcher saw the discussions opening up with Garret FitzGerald as an opportunity to bring the Irish government to a realization that only through improved security co-operation between the two governments and tougher security measures against the Provisional IRA could they be defeated. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the British Army, and the Special Air Service (SAS) were now deployed with increasing effectiveness against the Provisional IRA, who had intensified their campaign of violence and taken it to cities in the UK. Then came October 1984, when there was an audacious attempt by the IRA to kill Mrs Thatcher along with other British cabinet ministers. IRA activist Patrick Magee planted a long-delay time bomb behind a bath panel on the fourth floor of the Grand Hotel in Brighton some weeks before the Conservative Party's annual conference. It was primed to go off at 3am. Mrs Thatcher survived, but five people were killed and 31 injured, including the wife of Norman Tebbit MP, a close ally of the prime minister.

Following the Brighton attack, a concerted high-level political effort was made between Garret FitzGerald and Margaret Thatcher that involved summit meetings, diplomacy and back channels. When they met at Chequers in November 1984, FitzGerald went over the issues again of why a Nationalist minority needed special treatment in terms of policing/security and political momentum. Amazingly, out of the clash of polar opposite views between these two heavyweights, Mrs Thatcher suddenly felt that "we're now tackling the problem in detail for the first time",<sup>8</sup> showing that she loved intense political argument. Ideas about a joint border zone and a joint security commission were discussed, but the Irish side were unwilling to go in this direction

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7 Garret FitzGerald, *Just Garret, Tales From the Political Front Line*, Dublin 2010, p. 363.

8 Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life*, Dublin 1991, p. 521.

because they would be taking on responsibilities without power. The Irish would have to be politically involved in any security instrument. At this stage, Mrs Thatcher was opposed to any Irish involvement.

Despite disastrous press conferences following the summit, when Mrs Thatcher turned down the three political options put forward in the New Ireland Forum report in her famous “out, out, out” riposte, there followed a year-long round of negotiations that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985. Most of the progress was made at the level of senior officials. The key negotiators were Sir Robert Armstrong (cabinet secretary), Sir Robin Butler, and Sir David Goodall on the British side, and Dermot Lally (government secretary), Noel Dorr, and Michael Lillis on the Irish side. US President Ronald Reagan applied some pressure on Mrs Thatcher to sign the Agreement even though she strongly opposed the newly created intergovernmental entity becoming a joint authority, thereby undermining British sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> From their once differing perspectives, the two governments created an intergovernmental conference for improving political relations and a co-operation mechanism to be based in Belfast to work on security matters. For the first time since partition, both governments gave Unionists a strong guarantee on the principle of consent – that no change in the status of Northern Ireland would come about without the consent of a majority of the people living there.<sup>10</sup>

The Anglo-Irish Agreement became the second building block of the peace process. It paved the way for improved political relations between the two governments, enabling them to make a joint political analysis of events on the ground, and gave the Irish a consultative role in security and other limited matters relating to Northern Ireland. Even though Mrs Thatcher remained unconvinced by the Anglo-Irish process (she arranged no other summit), it laid the basis for the two governments to work together against IRA violence and become twin political anchors for an emerging peace process. Add to this the fact that British and Irish prime ministers and their foreign ministers were now meeting each other regularly on the margins of EU summits, it all contributed to consolidating an equal partnership.

*Lesson 3: A major challenge is to attempt to create structures between parties in the conflict that will foster trust on issues where suspicion may be pre-existing. Such structures can be intergovernmental, security, political or other. What makes it important is the fact that the relationship is worked on and improved.*

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9 Cf. Eammon Mallie/David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, London 2001. This book provided the background for the script of the three part BBC/RTE television co-production of the same name. It is now available on YouTube.

10 Cf. Brendan O’Leary/John McGarry, *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland*, second edition, London 1996.

### *The Unionist Backlash*

In retrospect, the failure to involve the Ulster Unionists or representatives of Loyalist paramilitaries in the process was a missed opportunity, resulting in the Anglo-Irish Agreement being completed without them. It raises a central question: When do you include parties in consultations and in what circumstance do you exclude them? As 1986 began, the Unionist parties came together in ferocious opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, holding a massive rally outside Belfast City Hall led by Reverend Ian Paisley (Democratic Unionist Party, DUP) and James Molyneaux (Ulster Unionist Party, UUP). They felt betrayed by Mrs Thatcher, even though the principle of consent was now enshrined in an internationally recognized agreement. As a result of their public anger and negative stance towards the Agreement, no new thinking came from the Unionist heartland community. In many ways, this encouraged a situation in which mainstream Unionism could continue to say what it was against and not what it would settle for or ask of others in terms of a comprehensive political process.

Against the background of Unionist exclusion and increased intergovernmental co-operation, former Loyalist prisoners such as Gusty Spence and Davy Ervine of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) as well as John McMichael of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) began to rethink the future of the union and their own identity through self-education and intense political discussions on how the conflict could be brought to an end. The Long Kesh prison regime allowed political prisoners access to books and Open University courses, as well as the ability to meet, debate, and deeply reflect on what the violence had achieved, regardless of whether offensive or defensive. They slowly came to a similar realization that the use of violence or armed struggle is counter-productive and more could be gained for their community from a different political strategy.

Despite all the political progress between the governments and within Republicanism, the shrill sound of Republican rhetoric around the removal of the British presence in Ireland served only to make Unionists and Loyalists more suspicious of Republican motives. The Unionist community were now asking themselves whether they were in danger of being driven out of Ireland. In their view, they were the British presence in Ireland, and no amount of violence or historical revisionism would change that fact.

With the ongoing improvement in relations between the British and Irish governments, the question was where the substantial shift in Unionism would come from? Were there leaders who could go beyond negative identity politics and come up with a new vision of what Unionism could be in the



changing political landscape?<sup>11</sup> In Diagram 2 below, we describe this as the fourth building block, together with the absent building block 5.

*Lesson 4: Governments need to identify emerging political leaders who have symbolism and substance in equal measure. Such leaders should be able to symbolize the aspirations of their communities yet have the substance to negotiate the difficult terms of a future settlement.*

#### *A Mutually Hurting Stalemate*

Despite the best efforts of British security forces to manage the security threat, the low intensity war of bombs and shootings perpetrated by paramilitaries continued unabated. The IRA still had the capacity to do a lot of damage as a result of their acquisition of Semtex and heavy arms shipments sent by Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. An IRA bomb killed eleven civilians and injured another 63 in Enniskillen in 1987 at the Remembrance Day ceremony to honour the dead of previous wars. The images were horrific and the public was shocked. The next year saw further deaths on each side. In Gibraltar, three unarmed IRA activists were killed by the SAS in a controversial "shoot to kill" incident. Their bodies were brought back to Milltown Cemetery in Belfast, where three mourners were killed by loyalist Michael Stone. Two days later, two British Army corporals were killed when their car encountered another IRA funeral. Eight British soldiers were killed and 28 injured at Ballygawley. Three IRA men were shot dead by the SAS in Tyrone.

How much violence has there to be before parties say "enough is enough"? How much hurting has there to be before people shout stop? William Zartman defines the mutually hurting stalemate as that point when the parties perceive the costs and prospects of continuing the conflict to be more burdensome than the costs and prospects of settlement.<sup>12</sup> This opens a ripe moment when it becomes possible for political leaders to seize the opportunity to get out of the grip of the tit-for-tat spiral and open up a discussion around future solutions.

Looking back, it is possible to see that this ripe moment came in two waves – one in the late 1980s and one in the early 1990s after yet more atrocities. The British military strategists realized they could not beat the IRA militarily, but they could certainly contain them. In fact, the IRA's operational capacity was being heavily undermined by informers and the success of British intelligence gathering through more effective electronic devices.

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11 For further elaboration cf. Benedetta Berti/Ariel Heifetz Knobel/Gary Mason, The Role of Intra-Group Consensus-Building in Disarming Militant Groups in Northern Ireland, in: *Journal of Mediation & Applied Conflict Analysis* 1/2015.

12 Cf. Zartman, cited above (Note 1), pp. 228-229.

As BBC journalist Peter Taylor reported, “The Brits simply knew too much”.<sup>13</sup> On the other side, prominent IRA leaders began to accept that they could not win, that the British military regime could not be defeated, and there had to be negotiations. IRA ex-prisoner Brendan Hughes told Taylor: “Otherwise the only alternative was [to carry on] a futile war which I didn’t think the leadership was prepared to do.”<sup>14</sup> They could keep the terrorism going but would they be any nearer their objective of British withdrawal and a united Ireland?

*Lesson 5: A peace process builds momentum when each side recognizes that a military victory over the other side is unattainable. However, leaders must prepare the ground for negotiations and to see whether dialogue is possible. Making contact with their enemy through private back channels becomes the first safe step.*

#### *Back-Channel Private Dialogue*

In 1987, Father Alex Reid, a Redemptorist Priest in the Clonard Monastery in West Belfast, accelerated his efforts to get a clear set of principles and objectives from Republicans that could bring them into an exchange of ideas with other Nationalist parties such as the SDLP and the Irish government headed by Taoiseach Charles Haughey. He approached each of them with a set of six principles and twelve stepping stones that had been developed in a secret and unofficial channel of communication between Gerry Adams and Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, the Catholic Primate of All Ireland. In January 1988, John Hume took the risk of meeting Gerry Adams for preliminary talks at Clonard Monastery.<sup>15</sup> Hume was committed to dialogue and had been a leading contributor to the New Ireland Forum, at which four nationalist parties in Dublin 1983-4 had met to reach a nationalist consensus.

This triggered a number of inter-party dialogue sessions between four Sinn Féin and four SDLP thinkers, including the party leaders. These began on 23 March 1988 and ended in September at St Gerard’s Retreat House in North Belfast. Reid did not facilitate the sessions but left the parties on their own, as did Terje Rød-Larsen in the Oslo talks on the Middle East peace process in 1992. These intense and sometimes heated talks were based on papers prepared by each party to discuss a common strategy for bringing about Irish unity. For Sinn Féin, unity meant a united political territory whereas for the SDLP it meant a united people including both the green and the orange traditions.

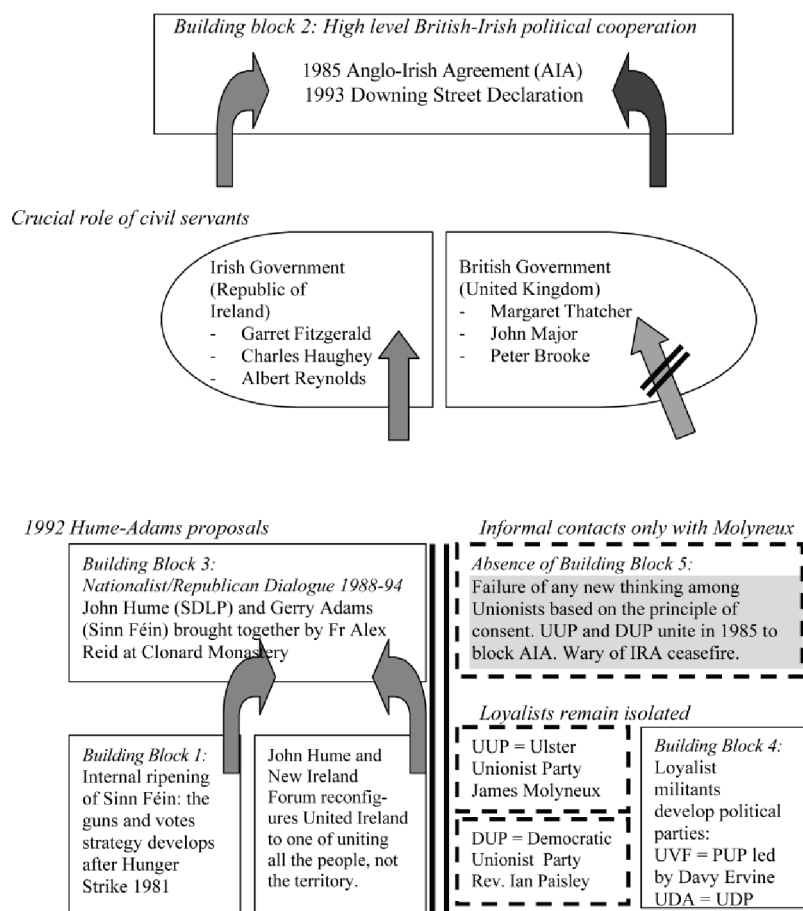
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13 Peter Taylor, *Brits: The War against the IRA*, London 2001, p. 308.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Cf. Moloney, cited above (Note 2).

Diagram 2: Building Blocks of the Northern Ireland Pre-Negotiation Phase



*Lesson 6: Ethnic conflict has traditionally focused on issues such as territory, power, and resources. In fact, it is about people. In Ireland, the violence was perpetrated with the goal of uniting territory. However, it was the people who were divided in their minds. Sometimes overcoming ethnic conflict is about creating a unity of hearts and minds to enable people to act in common purpose and make each other secure in their differing identities.*

John Hume and Gerry Adams continued to meet in secret for another four years to tease out key concepts<sup>16</sup> around:

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gerry Adams, *A Farther Shore: Ireland's Long Road to Peace*, New York 2003, pp. 76-84.

- national self-determination and whether Irish people support violence;
- the role of the British government and what is meant by British withdrawal;
- the Unionist veto over change and the principle of consent;
- alternatives to armed struggle that would involve maximum consensus among Irish Nationalists.

New understandings emerged between them on how to reframe “the British presence in Ireland in a manner which leaves behind a stable and peaceful situation”.<sup>17</sup> They shaped the Hume-Adams proposals, a set of principles that ultimately became part of the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993 following top level negotiations between the two governments. This third building block offered a way out of the conflict.

### *A New British-Irish Political Landscape*

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, the international context changed, creating a more favourable environment within which a peace process could be born. Political changes in London saw the departure of Mrs Thatcher and the appointment of John Major as prime minister in November 1990. He put Northern Ireland on the front burner. Peter Brooke became his secretary of state for Northern Ireland. Brooke was a shrewd political operator with a good understanding of Ireland, its history and politics thanks to his Irish roots. He reopened the secret channel with the IRA senior leaders that went through Brendan Duddy, a Derry businessman,<sup>18</sup> and received in return the dramatic message that the IRA wanted to end the conflict. John Major pondered whether it was genuine and believable: “Were the Provisionals really ready to end violence? Or was it just a ploy? Did they wish to suck the government into negotiations in which they would demand unjustifiable concessions in return for an end to their killing of the innocent? If that failed, would they then blame us for the renewal of violence?”<sup>19</sup> Jonathon Powell, chief of staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair, had similar thoughts some years later: “It is very difficult for governments in democracies to be seen to be talking to terrorists who are killing their people unjustifiably. But it is precisely your enemies, rather than your friends, you should talk to if you want to resolve a conflict.”<sup>20</sup>

Brooke was keenly aware of how sensitive the Republicans were to language and wanted to indicate a British willingness to help bring the conflict to an end. In November 1990, he made an astonishing public statement,

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17 Ibid. p. 78.

18 Cf. Moloney, cited above (Note 2), p. 406.

19 John Major, *The Autobiography*, London 1999, p. 431.

20 Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, London 2008, p. 312.

which had been approved by John Major, that echoed back what he knew was of strategic importance for the Reid/Hume/Adams back channel. He said the British government had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland [...] Britain’s purpose is not to occupy, oppress or to exploit.”<sup>21</sup> What this meant was that if a clear majority of the people in Northern Ireland wished to leave the UK, Britain would not force them to remain. “It is not the aspiration to a sovereign, united Ireland against which we set our face, but its violent expression.”<sup>22</sup> It was hard for the unionists to hear this message, deeply unsettling them, because they had come to rely on the Thatcher dictum that Northern Ireland was, as she put it, “as British as Finchley [her constituency in England]”.

What they were now hearing from Peter Brooke – and a new prime minister – was that the status quo of rigid positions and ancient feuds was unacceptable and things had to change. Unionists heard this statement with some trepidation and sought to downplay its significance as an “off the cuff” remark. They did not want even the slightest opening of a position that might be interpreted by their own hinterland as weakness in the face of IRA violence against members of their community.

Building on John Hume’s thinking, Brooke initiated a process that sought to address the three sets of broken relationships – within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland. These became known as the interlocking “three strands” with the key proviso that nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed. They would later be incorporated into the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

John Major had struck up a friendship with Albert Reynolds when they met each other at the EU Council of Finance Ministers. By coincidence, in 1992 they were now prime ministers and both approached the matter with less ideological baggage and no historical scores to settle. They saw the need for a safe deal in the knowledge that neither would sell the other short. Their relationship was not without its hiccups, and there were some tempestuous meetings between them, particularly the summit in Dublin; but Reynolds was determined to create the conditions for a ceasefire deal based on the Nationalist consensus for peace that he had forged with the SDLP and Sinn Féin. It sought to bring all strands of opinion to a position where, if the IRA were to call a ceasefire, then doors would open and chairs at tables would be made available for the Republican movement. As part of the choreography in advance of a ceasefire announcement, the British and Irish governments unveiled the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993. Crucially, this included input from the Loyalist paramilitaries, who were aware of what was being produced.

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21 Cited in: Major, cited above (Note 19), p. 435.

22 Ibid.

*Lesson 7: Governments and others can give political oxygen to a process that has been breathing in nothing but the stale air of violent or oppositional rhetoric, thereby perpetuating a stalemate. This oxygen can come in the form of political signals, statements, and political actions that signal to those engaged in violence that a new strategic political avenue may be opening up. While the statements can indicate a willingness to be civil, the bona fides of those involved in violence remains subject to examination.*

### *Risking Political Credibility to End Violence*

Bill Clinton realized there was a sizable Irish-American vote to be won when he ran as a presidential candidate, and promised that if elected he would make Ireland a priority during his administration by appointing a special envoy. As part of the ongoing sequence of confidence-building steps that were now underway following the announcement of the Downing Street Declaration, focus shifted towards pushing and pulling the Republican movement into a ceasefire. In January 1994, the Irish government, John Hume, and Sinn Féin lobbied President Clinton to allow Adams speak to a conference on Northern Ireland. The US State Department and the British embassy in Ireland vigorously opposed it, and ultimately it came down to the personal signature of the president. Pressure came on Clinton and his deputy national security advisor, Nancy Soderberg, to grant a 48-hour visa as a signal that the US was true to its word on backing the Nationalist consensus for peace. The problem for the United States was that this decision was needed to keep Sinn Féin and the IRA on course for a ceasefire but was intrinsically repugnant to every nerve ending in the US system, not because it was Adams, but because the British were America's closest international ally. The stakes could not have been higher and presented a major dilemma for the US administration.

In a smart political calculation, Soderberg and Clinton realized that granting the visa would commit Adams to deliver the IRA ceasefire and enable the peace process to go forward. If he did not deliver, then Clinton would walk away from any further support.<sup>23</sup> However, this would give Adams' opponents in the Republican community the excuse to say: "They only want one thing: our capitulation and the destruction of the IRA." In a last minute decision, the visa was granted, and it turned out to be a public relations triumph for Adams, who met members of Congress and appeared on television talk shows. Adams scrupulously honoured the terms of the Clinton visa and only talked peace. When he returned home, Adams used the fact that the Irish government had played a key role in securing his visa to strengthen his position within Sinn Féin and the IRA. The fact that the US went with the

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23 Cf. Mallie/McKittrick, cited above (Note 9).

Irish position was proof that the peace process was advancing the political objectives of the Republican movement. This changed the balance of power within the movement. If violence of any kind or even the threat of violence was to be continued, then all the progress on the consensus between Dublin, Washington, and the SDLP would melt away and they would be further back than ever.

*Lesson 8: Take political risks for peace. Political leaders almost need to be personally obsessed about winning peace to take the risk to get peace. However, the greater the credibility of the leader taking the risk, the greater is the possibility of reward. When a world leader goes to all the trouble to open doors and to get those excluded from the mainstream into the process, then this in turn creates a commitment to keep them inside the process.*

### *Endgame*

The next step was for Sinn Féin to deliver the ceasefire. A group of Irish-American businessmen assembled by Niall O'Dowd, New York-based publisher of the newspaper *Irish Voice*,<sup>24</sup> played an important role in edging Sinn Féin and the IRA along this road. As 1994 broke into spring, the internal debate sharpened inside Republicanism about what was being sold out and for what in return. The hardliners argued that IRA ceasefires had historically always weakened the organization and damaged the armed struggle, pushing the line that the British and Irish governments wanted to destroy Republicanism. They believed any peace process involving the IRA would end the struggle to remove the British from Ireland and inevitably result in a compromise. So it was vitally important for Adams, having gone this far, to now bring the whole movement with him and limit the size of any splinter group. The internal management of the Republican movement to avoid a possible split was now becoming increasingly crucial. This is why Gerry Adams felt compelled to walk with IRA volunteers carrying the coffin of a dead IRA man who was killed while planting a bomb on the Protestant Shankill Road in October 1993. That bomb killed nine people. He also needed to demonstrate his affiliation publicly because he knew he had a big ask to make of the Republican movement in the months ahead.

*Lesson 9: Prepare the political mainstream for the entry of former paramilitaries into the political process and manage the expectations of people on all sides. Violent organizations are united in what they oppose but they rarely stay together in agreeing what they will settle for in terms of a compromise.*

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24 Cf. Niall O'Dowd, *An Irish Voice*, Dublin 2010.

Following many secret meetings and the holding of an IRA General Army Convention in the summer of 1994, the IRA was ready to take a decision. However one more hurdle remained to be cleared. A visa was now required for veteran Republican Joe Cahill to travel to the USA and reassure those who had supplied money for guns that the movement was entering a new phase of the struggle, a phase characterized by political action and not military struggle. The key message was that the movement was united in its decision and that Adams and McGuinness had the support of the vast majority of the Republican family. When Taoiseach/Prime Minister Albert Reynolds again pressed Clinton to secure his approval for Cahill's entry into the US, Clinton remarked: "Have you seen this guy's CV?" To which Reynolds is reputed to have replied "I didn't expect you to read that he was a member of the Legion of Mary [conservative Catholic group]". Once again, Reynolds argued for a visa, the British opposed it, and Clinton was told by his State Department that his political credibility was on the line. In the end, the visa was granted. However, all governments were weary of demands and tests. It was now time for Adams and Co. to call a ceasefire. Cahill went to the USA, and forty eight hours later, on 31st August 1994, following 25 years of violence, the Provisional IRA called a complete cessation of military hostilities. For the first time in a quarter century, the guns and bombs of one of the most dangerous, disciplined, and violent organizations fell silent. This was followed by the Loyalist ceasefire in October. The doors were eventually opened for Sinn Féin/the IRA and the Loyalist parties to take their seats at the negotiation table.

*Lesson 10: A diaspora can potentially play a crucial role in funding and supporting an armed struggle. It therefore follows that the same diaspora can play an equally important role in supporting elements of an organization who wish to pursue peace. In an emerging peace process, it is important to ensure that those who supported the armed struggle do not continue to give support to militants wishing to continue violence.*

These thirteen years of peacemaking show that the de-escalation of protracted conflict between religious and ethnic parties is a slow process involving a journey of incremental relationship-building and conflict analysis where the language gets fine-tuned. Some ten years later, Taoiseach Brian Cowen remarked: "Peacemaking is a journey. Don't frontload the destination in the first few steps. Start the journey and let the destination take care of itself."

When protagonists of opposed causes engage with each other, they build confidence, trust, and credibility, giving reassurances of their desire to get to the negotiating table. While the early stages of this work are best done secretly via back-channel third parties shuttling between the parties, the power of direct face-to-face dialogue is huge in dissolving negative stereotypes. It enables parties to hear and understand how past collective events



have affected their community, to unravel the political trauma of what happened, and to tease out the political issues that have to be addressed to get to a settlement. Here is where the pumping of political oxygen by the governments into the intense discussions enabled the Nationalist parties to re-imagine the fractured relationships and to create new political frameworks. Yet the missed opportunity was not being able to engage the Unionist parties in a similar de-escalation process [as shown on the right-hand side of Diagram 2]. They were unable to win the confidence of their own Protestant community and forge growing relationships between Britain and Ireland, the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, as well as within Northern Ireland.

And now for the final lesson we really learned: that while we are all profoundly different in nature as human beings, yet united by destiny, we are here on these islands as British, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, as well as a host of other identities. We can choose to make the future different from the past. As David Ervine, the Loyalist PUP leader, kept telling us: We may all be a victim of the hate that was handed down to us through “a taught process” about the past, it will skew our vision of the future if we are not able to be part of “a thought process” that rethinks our relations with others who are in conflict with us.