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Peacemaking in Northern Ireland: A Model for Conflict Resolution?

8 May 2008 saw the first anniversary of the devolved government in Northern Ireland. Its reestablishment as such was noteworthy per se, but the fact that the two once so acrimonious enemies of the republican Sinn Fein and the pro-British Democratic Unionist Party came together to form a coalition, rightly deserves the term historic. This development has sealed the progress made in the Northern Ireland question since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which was to a significant degree owed to the political priority given to the conflict by Tony Blair's Labour government. With the experience gained during the peace process, Peter Hain, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, explores the key factors and expands on the question, whether the lessons learnt in the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland can be transferred to ongoing conflicts world wide.

Peter Hain*

Introduction

For more than three decades Northern Ireland endured one of the most violent and intractable conflicts to threaten a democratic state in any part of the world. Those long years brought into sharp focus the fundamental issues that have underlain the 'Irish Question' for nearly eight centuries –

the British presence in Ireland, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, the tensions between unionism and nationalism, the search for equality between all sections of the community and, perhaps above all else, the use of terrorist violence to achieve political ends.

This paper explores the key factors that have underpinned the peace process in the past two decades. After the anniversary of devolved government established from 8 May 2007, reflecting an historic agreement between Northern Ireland's most bitter and longstanding enemies, the Democratic

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Unionist Party and Sinn Fein, to share the reins of power, and with the IRA's war having ended now for three years, this is an appropriate moment to reflect on the lessons that have been learned and how, ultimately, the peace was won.

Those of us who had the good fortune to take part in the events of 8 May 2007 in Belfast, when DUP Leader Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein launched their power-sharing Government, will have come away with a series of extraordinary images of history in the making. It was one of those 'it would never, ever happen' days. Like the picture of Ian Paisley and Sinn Fein Leader Gerry Adams meeting together six weeks earlier, they are images which resonated around the world because of the extraordinary level of international interest and goodwill that has been shown throughout the political process in Northern Ireland.

It is also an opportunity to offer some observations on other conflicts around the world – for example, the Basque region of Spain, the Middle East, Kashmir, Colombia, Kosovo, Sri Lanka and many more. In doing so, I draw on my experiences of both campaigning against apartheid and my time as a Foreign Minister from 1999 to 2002.

If one of the longest running conflicts in European history can be resolved, then there is hope for even the most bitter and seemingly intractable disputes across the globe. What we achieved in Northern Ireland should stand as an inspiration – and

perhaps guidance – to others as they go about the business of conflict resolution.

Building blocks for resolving the conflict

Looking back on nearly thirty years of conflict I have identified a number of lessons, each of which would repay further study. On the positive side, there was a relatively consistent underlying Government strategy: countering terrorism, developing political structures unique to Northern Ireland's problems and, most important, social and economic reform and regeneration. There were notable successes in all of these. But in these decades there were also failures and lessons to be learnt.

Rather than revisiting the agonising steps of the past ten years, I want to take a slightly different approach and to set out a number of key building blocks which this Government, and in particular Tony Blair, employed to move the process from agreement in principle to completion.

Resolving the conflict: 1997-2007

Tony Blair knew from his first day in office that Northern Ireland would be a priority. There was a personal attachment to the issue from family connections and school-boy holidays but, more importantly, a clear set of three objectives which have continued to guide his approach for over ten years. They were: the necessity to create a space without violence during which politics could begin to flourish; the identification of individuals with the courage and intention to

lead their communities; and the search for a political framework which could accommodate the needs, aspirations and scope for compromise by all involved.

The necessity to create a space without violence was not in itself new: I have already pointed to the objective of successive direct rule Governments to achieve a stable security environment and to the destructive effect of violence on previous attempts to reach a political solution. But in the years after 1997 the Government very consciously took risks to achieve and maintain the IRA ceasefire, because the absence of conflict was an absolute prerequisite to progress. What is so destructive in terrorism is not just the wrecking of lives but the impact on the psychology of a community. Above all it obscures the natural desire of the majority for peace by entrenching bitterness and creating an entirely understandable hysteria in which voices of moderation can no longer be heard. It is desperately hard for people to focus on politics when they are under attack. This for our Government meant making concessions that went deeply against the grain not only for unionists, but for much mainstream British opinion.

An example was the controversial and painful republican and loyalist prisoner releases at the time of the Good Friday Agreement. It was essential to show paramilitary groups that a commitment to peace brought gains which could not be achieved by violence. Thereafter, continuously moving forward with small steps was to some extent an end in itself because time was critical: the

longer the cessation of violence the stronger the desire for peace could grow and the more difficult the return to conflict. To 'keep the bicycle upright and moving' was a key objective and required constant intervention and even more constant attention of a forensic nature.

Personalities matter

Keeping the process in motion depended ultimately on the leaders involved. One of Tony Blair's core beliefs is that people and personalities matter in politics, and that building relationships of trust, even where deep differences remain, is vital. This may seem obvious, but is surprisingly often relegated to a place well below 'issues' in resolving conflict.

The key challenge for the Government was to identify the positive elements within the opposing communities and to encourage and sustain them. That meant establishing a relationship of trust with the individual leaders and understanding the pressures on them from within their own movement or party and from outside. Ultimately this meant making judgements about the extent to which those pressures were real or tactical. In short, were they sincere in their attempts to resolve the conflict?

Identifying key leaders is critical to success. The leading personalities of republicanism and nationalism had remained remarkably consistent through the Troubles even if their thinking had evolved quite radically. By contrast, unionism, permanently divided, had not produced leadership that appeared capable of proposing or even grudgingly

accepting a new vision for Northern Ireland post conflict. That fact makes the emergence of David Trimble in 1995 as a unionist leader of courage all the more remarkable and significant.

In making these judgements about the good faith and courage of individuals, Ministers had a number of tools available. 'Political intelligence' was gathered at a community level over many years by able Northern Ireland Office civil servants and gave a real sense of what the various sections of the community and their political leaders were feeling. Routine engagement with the media and opinion polling provided a further resource separate from the views of the parties themselves. In the case of parties allied to paramilitary groups, sophisticated counter-terrorist intelligence assessments were a significant factor. But the judgements ultimately have to be political and personal, based on instinct, and at crucial junctures, the product of private conversations between the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and individual leaders.

Aligning international influence

Judgements about key leaders within Northern Ireland were complemented by the alignment of international interest. A British Prime Minister, like Tony Blair, prepared to devote unprecedented time and energy to solving the problem as a real priority, came into power to find a strong, confident Irish Government, led by Bertie Ahern, and a US President in Bill Clinton who was influenced by the large and politically significant Irish American community and open to positive

and open to positive intervention or support. All three were prepared to work to a shared strategy. As other parts of the world have discovered, these alignments of leadership and circumstances do not come along often: failure to seize the opportunity can mean condemning another generation to conflict. It is one thing to feel that a dispute - whether in Northern Ireland or the Middle East - will eventually be resolved, but another to grip it in such a way that resolution does not wait for generations, with all the intervening violence and turmoil.

Political framework

With space and momentum created by the absence of violence and the regular energetic intervention of the Prime Minister, the challenge was to find a political framework which could allow opposing political leaders to govern together without compromising the basic principles of their constitutional identities.

In practice, this requires a good deal of creative thinking by politicians and their officials. It was not difficult to see that a 'consociational' model of government was the most likely to fit Northern Ireland's unique dispute, although there are plenty of other forms of power-sharing. These detailed structures are secondary to a basic political will to agree, but they can, if handled wrongly, prevent such a political will from becoming a political agreement.

The strength of the Good Friday Agreement and other negotiations culminating in last year's St Andrews Agreement, was its attempt to be holistic. It did not simply

address the constitutional framework, but looked at the broader political hurdles: policing, human rights, victims, equality, etc. Dealing with those issues has been at least as difficult as the constitutional model. Policing has always had the potential to destroy any agreement, partly because law and order goes to the heart of legitimacy of the state, and partly because the police were in the frontline in the conflict with paramilitary groups and suffered greatly: reforming policing opened the rawest wounds of the Troubles. It was these emotive issues – policing, prisoner releases, decommissioning of weapons – which touched the lives of so many individuals, rather than the constitutional framework itself which threatened the process on so many occasions. Monitoring and influencing public opinion has been a key part of this process at every point. No Government expected unionism to embrace a consociational approach with enthusiasm, still less one with a North-South dimension. But acquiescence by the majority of unionists who wanted peace and wanted a settlement was the key. Once again, time itself was an objective - keeping the process on track for as long as it took for the physical force tradition in republicanism to be ended, and for as long as it took unionism to get comfortable with the fundamentals of a new political framework.

Dialogue

At the heart of this process – and arguably its ultimate objective – has been the development of dialogue at every level. It is worth reflecting on this for a moment, be-

cause I know that the risks and compromises involved in establishing dialogue often dominate and frequently destroy the chance of progress almost before it begins. That much is certainly a feature of the Middle East peace process, where, from time to time, both sides have imposed pre-conditions which effectively have blocked any dialogue from beginning. Pre-conditions can strangle the process at birth.

It is true that entering into dialogue – even secret dialogue – with paramilitary groups carries risks. The real risk may not be so much one of political embarrassment, but rather the danger of encouraging an armed group in the belief that its campaign is working. Yet if one of the keys to resolving conflict is identifying positive elements and encouraging those leaders who are prepared to contemplate an end to violence, then dialogue is a key way of making that judgement. And my view is that, in order to achieve results, it is worth erring on the side of being exposed for trying to talk – even to those seen as ‘the enemy’ and maybe still engaged in paramilitary or illegal activity and therefore ‘dissidents’. Of course there need to be clear objectives and clear messages: it needs to be understood that an end to violence is the pre-requisite to progress. And there has to be some discernible political programme, some negotiable objectives, for dialogue to make progress. But trying is almost always worthwhile. A fruitless encounter can sow the seeds of later success. Contact at low level can pay off years later and handling small issues with integrity – for example the release of a

prisoner to take part in talks – builds trust and confidence over time. Dialogue brings in those elements of the ‘extremes’ in a conflict or process which are capable of delivering the most obdurate constituencies. Indeed, as we saw recently in Northern Ireland (and more than a decade ago in South Africa) bringing the most polarised parties to the point of agreement can be absolutely critical to ensuring that any deal sticks. I am confident that the agreement in Northern Ireland will stick precisely because it was brokered between the two most polarised positions held by Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party and Gerry Adams’ Sinn Fein. That cannot be achieved without dialogue, even dialogue through a third party – in the case of Northern Ireland with the Government acting as a conduit between DUP and Sinn Fein. Democratic Governments should have the self-confidence in their own values to be able to take risks for peace where it is much more difficult for those locked in ethnic or communal struggle to engage with each other. Furthermore, identifying side issues which enable negotiators to demonstrate progress to their sceptical followers is important.

Drawing the threads together

I have set out some of the lessons we have learnt in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland in the hope that they will be helpful in spreading this optimism and underpinning the inspirational images of May 2007. There are other important areas such as the role of victims and the handling of the past which, as we have learnt in South

Africa, deserve separate treatment and to which we must return before too long.

But I want to conclude by drawing together some of the threads which I hope are already visible. I have argued that over the past ten years a number of key principles have guided the Government’s handling of Northern Ireland: the need to create space and time, free from violence, in which political capacity can develop; the need to identify key individuals and constructive forces; the importance of inclusive dialogue at every level, wherever there is a negotiable objective; the taking of risks to sustain that dialogue and to underpin political progress; the alignment of national and international forces; the need to avoid or resolve pre-conditions to dialogue; perhaps above all the need to grip and micro-manage a conflict at a high political level, refusing to accept the inevitability of it. And to do so, not intermittently, but continuously whatever breakdown, crises and anger get in the way.

I have so far resisted the temptation to apply these principles to other conflicts. But even a quick glance at this checklist of key principles throws up some obvious points.

In the Middle East there is a strong sense that the conflict has not been gripped at a sufficiently high level over a sufficiently sustained period - efforts and initiatives have come and gone and violence has returned to fill the vacuum. International forces have not been aligned and dialogue has been stunted. Periodic engagement has led to false starts and dashed hopes.

In Iraq, the failures of covert intelligence were compounded by the absence of political intelligence: a comprehensive lack of understanding of the sectarian forces and fault lines present across the country. The problem was compounded of course by post-invasion policy failures.

The security situation has remained complicated and there are still serious concerns over levels of sectarian violence in parts of the country. This is particularly the case in Baghdad and the surrounding provinces, where Multi-National Forces are working in partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces to reduce the levels of violence and give key Iraqi figures from across the political spectrum, the chance to make real progress towards national reconciliation.

The question is: 'does Northern Ireland provide us with any pointers that could assist the efforts of the coalition in Iraq on the way forward?' The answer is, 'possibly.' For example, like in Northern Ireland, we and the Government of Iraq have been keen to harness the influence of neighbouring powers, each of whom has an interest in the future stability of Iraq. This will need dialogue, including with Sunni and Shia representatives. It also requires a strategy to tackle the rise of Islamist extremism in Iraq.

Similarly, the terrorist threat from Al Qaeda is fundamentally different from the terrorist threat that existed in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. It is not rooted in political objectives capable of negotiation, but rather in a reactionary totalitarian ideology that is completely opposed to democracy, freedom

and human rights. Negotiation with Al Qaeda and its foreign Jihadists in Iraq is therefore politically and morally out of the question. However, there is one important lesson from Northern Ireland that we can use in Iraq: just as legitimate grievances in Northern Ireland fuelled republican sympathies, grievances in Iraq provide fertile territory for Iraqi militants. Addressing people's grievances, as we did in Northern Ireland, can undercut the extremists who seek to inflame and exploit them, so creating more fertile ground for a political process to complement engagement by the elected government of Iraq.

In Sri Lanka where I became involved and I visited as Foreign Office Minister, one of my predecessors as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, engaged in attempts by the Sri Lankan, British and Norwegian Governments to help broker a new way forward. There is much work to be done, not least in accepting that there cannot be a military solution for either side, that the absence there of sustained bi-partisanship between the two main parties is an obstacle, and in developing viable forms of devolution to suit the particular history of Sri Lanka, reconciling bitterly competing Sinhalese and Tamil interests.

I hope also that resolving the conflict in the Basque region of Spain will make progress in the coming months because the lessons certainly apply there too. Once again those on all sides in Northern Ireland have played and continue to play a useful role. And

there are other unresolved conflicts around the world, from Kashmir to Western Sahara, which could benefit from our experience.

The global threat from international terrorism and the turmoil in the Middle East present the world with an opportunity to address long-running conflicts, to address their root causes and to drive forward their solutions. The potential for a new Democrat President in the United States offers the possibility of framing new ways of resolving conflict, balancing commitment to security solutions and military intervention against the political will necessary to address underlying causes. Both are essential but we urgently need to redress the balance: to match our commitment to global security with our commitment to global justice and human rights, to global development and global conflict resolution. The Northern Ireland experience, bitter as it was, gives the United Kingdom a strong voice in advocating this re-balancing of Western foreign policy.

Conclusion

What happened on the 8 May 2007 was a decisive moment in which the people,

through their politicians, decided to break free from history, to shape a new history.

A year on, the settlement has been remarkably stable despite minority Unionist dissent and isolated terrorist threats and attacks from small 'dissident' IRA break-away groups. But no-one is under any illusion that the process will be completed quickly. The faultlines in Northern Ireland's society, created centuries ago and deepened by violent conflict, will take generations to close over, just as the joy of a non-racial democracy in South Africa has not abolished the awful legacy of apartheid. But beginning the process on the basis of politics alone is what really matters - that is the real triumph of the past few years and I hope the inspiration to those parts of the world that cannot yet even see as far as the starting point.

This is an abridged version of the original pamphlet "Peacemaking in Northern Ireland: A Model For Conflict Resolution?" by Peter Hain. Available for download: <http://www.peterhain.org/default.asp?pageid=62&mpageid=61&groupid=2>.

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