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The issue of Northern Ireland has been one of the most important issues of foreign policy for the Irish state since independence, and for many periods was the single most important area of foreign policy activity. Yet there is a surprising absence of analysis of the conflict from this perspective. There are many more texts exploring British government policy, than Irish Government policy (eg. Cunningham 1991).

The importance of partition, British-Irish relations and questions of sovereignty for the Irish state since independence is evidenced historically now only by events but is shown institutionally in the existence of a specific division within the Department of Foreign Affairs devoted to 'Anglo-Irish' relations, in the role of the separate Northern Ireland unit within the Department of An Taoiseach and in the role played by cabinet sub-committees on Northern Ireland over the years. However above all else it has been the impact of the Northern Ireland conflict on Irish society, the human cost of the conflict, the repeated high-level efforts made by Irish governments to resolve the conflict and the ultimate success of the peace process which has elevated this question to the degree of importance it has attained. While political tensions, and occasional acts of violence continue, at an international level it is the comparative success of the 'Northern Ireland case' which attracts attention and those involved in the peace process and academics who specialise in its analysis, such as this author, have been invited to share their experiences in conflict zones such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir and Afghanistan, while Ireland also hosts regular delegations seeking to learn from the Irish case.

The focus of this paper is Irish Government policy and action on the Northern Ireland conflict. Inevitably this will involve some discussion of the wider issues but there is insufficient space to summarise the history of either the conflict or peace process here and it has been well done elsewhere (for example in O'Leary and McGarry, 1996; de Breadún, 2008). There have however been few discussions which focus centrally on the role and policy of the Irish state. In terms of time period this paper focuses primarily on the period of the peace process, after a brief context setting section highlighting some key themes. However to set the scene for this paper a few elements of historical context are worth highlighting

The Historic Context

There was a very limited 'Northern Ireland' strategy by the Irish state, after independence. The focus in the immediate aftermath of the civil war was on internal stability and state-building. While political elites clearly hoped that time might help resolve divisions, there was a prevailing sense of powerlessness on the issue and a sense that any attempt to pressurise Britain on the question would be fruitless and would lead to internal instability. Even when Fianna Fáil came to power on a strongly nationalist platform, their focus was on those aspects of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which they perceived as being within their power to alter - the oath of allegiance to British monarchs, the role of the Governor General, the Treaty Ports and (less successfully) land annuities. In international circles Irish diplomats constantly raised the issue in a vain hope of embarrassing Britain, but beyond that there was no coherent strategy either to achieve Irish unity or to attain a more sustainable situation short of unity. There was clarity however on attitudes to the IRA - Irish Governments acted swiftly against the IRA, with proscription, internment without trial and emergency laws whenever the IRA sought to launch armed actions.

In the immediate aftermath of world war two, there was a very naive attempt to use Ireland's possible membership of NATO as a bargaining chip with the USA, in the hope that the US Administration would be prepared to pressurise Britain on the Northern Ireland question. Given the huge importance of the 'special relationship' between the USA and UK, it inevitably failed, only further weakening Ireland's diplomatic position on the issue. After a period alternating between diplomatic anti-partition rhetoric at all sorts of international conferences, commonly known as the 'sore thumb' policy and quiet inactivity, the early 1960s saw a certain rapprochement between Dublin and Belfast, with the first formal meetings since independence. While little of any substance was achieved, the contacts, for a brief moment before the conflict erupted, seemed to offer hope of better cross-border relations at least.

The absence of a sense of purpose or power to achieve any progress, partly at least, explains the initial confusion around Irish government policy as the conflict erupted in the late 1960s and early 70s. The dominant view was one of seeking to protect the stability of the state, but a minority within Government saw the civil rights movement

and the early conflict in more romantic terms - as a possible opportunity to complete the unfinished business of independence and secure a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The conflict also energised a new attempt to engage Britain diplomatically, seeking to persuade the UK that the Irish state could play a constructive role, not least in informing the British Government of nationalist concerns and in providing some insight into their perspectives.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s however British Governments still retained the view that the Irish Government had no business 'interfering' in Northern Ireland. As street violence escalated in late 1969 the British Government refused to meet the Irish Government or even to discuss the crisis (Kennedy 2001, Dorr 2010). This view softened somewhat in the 1970s; however until at least the mid 1980s, there was little real acceptance on the British side that a good relationship required them to take Irish government concerns seriously and so, in general, unionist concerns were given priority over those of the Irish government, whenever the British government was calculating its own state interests. Irish governments and diplomats therefore faced a challenging situation, not only with the emerging conflict itself but also in seeking to engage a British government, reluctant to listen to their view.

The Sources of Influence on Irish Government Policy

Irish Government policy on Northern Ireland does not of course emerge in a vacuum. There will rarely, even within government be a unanimous view on either long term strategy or the needs of any particular moment. In addition, even if those sitting around a cabinet table, or in senior positions in the Department of Foreign Affairs are all in agreement about what ought to be done, there will be other factors to take into consideration, such as public opinion, pressure from opposition political parties, the likely reaction from the British Government and external international factors. In analysing the factors which influence Irish Government policy on Northern Ireland over the years some key issues need to be explored. To what extent was public opinion a factor in influencing government policy? Did party political competition and changes of the party composition of government influence the policy followed? Did the relative weakness of the Irish state, compared to Britain, impact on the strategic choices made

and finally to what extent was policy adopted influenced by external factors, from the European Union or more globally ?

Public Opinion

Irish public opinion on Northern Ireland and relations with Britain has been difficult to judge and analyse. On the one hand, there seemed at times to be considerable indifference to the conflict, reinforced by limited real understanding of the nuances of the local situation. At other times, in particular after some highly emotive events such as the killing of unarmed protestors by the British Army on 'Bloody Sunday' in 1972, public opinion was highly mobilised, reflecting a nationalist intensity that is usually only seen when Ireland plays England in a sporting competition. Fear of the lingering impact of populist nationalism, led the Irish government to introduce censorship of all Irish radio and television, banning not only the IRA, but all members of Sinn Féin from radio and television on any topic, even when they were not appearing as spokespersons, or even identified as a member (Seanad Éireann, 1975). This provision which lasted until 1994 made it impossible for journalists to adequately cover the conflict, added to a sense of distance from the situation and increased levels of ignorance among the public.

Irish government ministers, of all political parties, often expressed a fear of public opinion and assumed that they would pay a high price in terms of popular support if they were perceived to compromise too much with Britain or to fail to pursue the interests of northern nationalists. Those negotiating what became the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement, decided not to aim for an amendment to Articles 2 and 3, the provisions of the Irish constitution which then described the national territory as being the whole island of Ireland, because they formed the judgement that the necessary referendum to pass the amendment would not pass without a more comprehensive peace agreement and such a deal was not on offer from the British government.

Yet, despite consistent evidence from those involved in Irish government that they believed support for Irish unity and a nationalist analysis of the conflict was relatively strong among the public, political scientists have largely dismissed Northern Ireland as an important issue for Irish voters. This apparent puzzle is worth examining. Northern Ireland rarely features in a list of the top ten issues which voters say are decisive in any

given election, but the conflict and peace process have been important in other ways, all of which then have an influence on government policy-making.

Firstly, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael often used the issue to mobilise their most committed voters and activists, to distinguish themselves from the 'other' party. Party activists, in all countries are more committed on core policy issues than the wider public and if party leaders use an issue such as Northern Ireland to motivate activists they are obliged when in government to give some weight to their views, even if it is not the most important influence. Secondly, and more significantly, there have been occasions when a number of swing voters, motivated by this question, have decided closely fought elections and through that competition for their votes have influenced party and later government policy to some degree at least. The 1981 election was held during a very tense period, when republican prisoners were on IRA hunger strike in prison in Northern Ireland, in a protest over prison conditions, which was in effect a demand to be recognised 'political prisoners'. The protests had led to the death of four prisoners before polling day, including the IRA leader in the prisons Bobby Sands. IRA prisoners stood in eight constituencies, with some supporters standing in others. While securing a relatively small national percentage, the election of two IRA prisoners denied Fianna Fáil an overall majority. The election also led to a decision by Sinn Féin to contest elections for the first time since the beginning of the conflict. All governments which followed sought to engage the British government in a process of reform, partly to reduce the electoral appeal of Sinn Féin and to bolster moderate nationalists in the SDLP.

On other occasions the impact on party policy and later government policy was more direct. For example, in the aftermath of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, most voters viewed the development positively and Fianna Fáil's opposition to it, voiced very vocally by party leader Charles Haughey, left that party open to challenge. An MRBI poll conducted for *The Irish Times* in the week after the Agreement was signed saw 59% approval for the Agreement but perhaps more importantly 43% of Fianna Fáil voters approved while only 52% supported the Haughey position (MRBI, 1987). As the campaign developed and Fine Gael were losing ground in the polls, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Progressive Democrats simultaneously made an issue both of Fianna Fáil's alleged ambiguity in relation to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and of potential problems for Anglo-Irish relations that could be created if Haughey was elected

Taoiseach. 15% of the voters in a close run election saw policy on the Anglo-Irish Agreement as 'very important' to them according to an MRBI/*Irish Times* poll and the failure of Fianna Fáil to secure an overall majority may well have rested on their position on the Agreement. In the aftermath of the election Fianna Fáil abandoned its previous policy and supported the Agreement in government (Doyle and Connolly, 2002).

In an MRBI poll taken just after Albert Reynolds became Taoiseach in 1992, when the peace process did not have the public profile it would later receive, 80% of respondents identified Northern Ireland as a priority for his Government, compared, for example to 99% for unemployment and 70% for the EU (Marsh and Sinnott, 1993: 99). In the following 1997 election, held during the breakdown in the IRA ceasefire, between 10% and 11% of all voters thought Northern Ireland would be the main issue in the election and there were considerable differences between the parties on their proposed approach to the peace process - in particular on the issue of Sinn Féin's inclusion in talks and also on whether the government's role was to advocate on behalf of northern nationalists or pursue their own interests regardless of northern nationalist opinion. (MRBI, 1997). The outgoing Taoiseach John Bruton, had as Fine Gael leader consistently argued that the role of the Irish Government was to be equidistant between northern nationalists and unionists rather than part of the nationalist consensus at the heart of the peace process and he declared that a vote for Sinn Féin in advance of an IRA cease-fire would be a vote for violence. However, his government colleague, Labour leader and Tánaiste Dick Spring, was reported as saying that a Sinn Féin vote in the election was a vote for peace. Fianna Fáil leader Bertie Ahern attacked Bruton for his failure to give leadership to nationalist Ireland, while Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin accused the Taoiseach of mismanaging the peace process (Murphy 1998: 130). In an analysis of opinion polls, Marsh and Sinnott (1999: 174) found that 'if a voter spontaneously mentioned Northern Ireland as a factor influencing his or her vote, he or she was substantially more likely to vote for Fianna Fáil in preference to any other party save Sinn Féin'. The negative impact on the government parties (Fine Gael, Labour Democratic Left) was, they say, 'quite substantial'. Just as Fine Gael benefited from focusing on the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1987, it seems that Fianna Fáil had successfully convinced the electorate that they rather than Fine Gael could best manage the peace process in 1997 and in both cases the result seems to have impacted on the subsequent policies of both political parties.

In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement Fianna Fáil clearly sought to promote their involvement in the peace process to maximum effect with their pre-election billboard advertising focused on the economy and the Good Friday Agreement in roughly equal proportions. In addition to competing with Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil now saw Sinn Féin as a much more significant electoral threat than they had been previously. A high profile on Northern Ireland and a strong commitment to North-South links was designed to hold (and attract) more nationalist minded voters. However in this election, unlike 1997, Fine Gael managed to prevent Northern Ireland becoming a topic of debate in the campaign. Michael Noonan in his campaign for the Fine Gael leadership had promised to bring Fine Gael back to the nationalist centre and move away from what many within Fine Gael perceived to be the unpopular stance taken by John Bruton. Michael Noonan saw that a debate on Northern Ireland would serve to benefit Fianna Fáil and sought to prevent Fianna Fáil making it a point of policy difference between the parties. In that election's party leader's debate, the mere four minutes out of seventy which were dedicated to Northern Ireland were remarkable for their consensual tone (RTE, 14 May 2002). It was the one exchange of the evening where Noonan made no attempt to counter Ahern or to critique Fianna Fáil policy (Doyle and Connolly, 2002). The key point of this analysis is that the election competition between the parties and the balance of public opinion, not only made the difference between winning and losing elections, it also led in 1987 and in 1997 to policy shifts and in 2002 saw Fine Gael shifting their position to close off this issue as a factor in the election.

International Influences

Apart from public opinion and the private considered views of the politicians and senior diplomats other factors which need to be considered in analysing Irish foreign policy in this area are the relative strength of the Irish and British states and the role (or in most cases absence of interest) of the wider international system. Ireland's small size and relative poverty meant that any attempt to try and force a change of policy from the British government was unlikely to succeed. The original Treaty had reflected this power imbalance and the attempt to force British concessions on land annuities in the 1930s led to retaliatory sanctions from Britain, which caused huge economic costs on Ireland and forced the de Valera-led government to reverse policy. It also highlighted for all future

governments the potential costs of a combative approach to Britain. As the conflict erupted and escalated a small minority briefly considered using the emerging IRA as leverage against Britain, but ultimately a fear that the conflict might spread South and that Sinn Féin would seek to challenge them politically meant that even those willing to overlook the moral issues involved never pursued this possibility after 1970. This not only altered the tactics utilised by Ireland it also fed into the state's understanding of the substantive question. If there was little possibility of either pressurising or persuading any British government to pursue a policy of supporting a united Ireland against their own wishes and unionist objections, then pursuing such a policy was at best a waste of energy, but was in fact likely to be more negative and to prevent Ireland making progress on other diplomatic issues where a good relationship with Britain would be important.

If challenging Britain directly was not a real foreign policy option, another possibility was to seek to mobilise international opinion or international organisations to pursue diplomatic objectives as non-state Irish-American organisations had attempted over the years or as others such as the South African anti-apartheid movement had successfully done. This policy was attempted at various times, but repeated attempts to embarrass Britain at diplomatic events failed to have any impact. The attempt to use potential NATO membership as leverage with the USA in the late 1940s simply ignored the realities of post war politics. Britain's permanent seat and veto at the UN security council ensured that body would never intervene, even if other powers wished to (which they did not). Even during the Cold War there was no serious attempt to utilise the Northern Ireland question for strategic purposes. Guelke (1989) refers to a general mood in the international system which favoured the Irish Government over the UK, but this rarely led to any concrete action, not least because there was little which most states could do. The only states seeking to utilise the conflict to attack British interests were states which were already marginalised such as post-Revolution Iran or Libya. No Irish government welcomed their interest and even guerrilla movements, who had sympathy for Sinn Féin such as the PLO or ANC kept the contacts at a low and discreet level as their own cause would have been damaged by any serious public links with the IRA.

Irish governments did however make significant efforts, from the mid 1970s onwards to mobilise members of the US Congress who had Irish roots or were sympathetic to the Irish government's position. During the Cold war it was difficult to make progress, as

the importance of the US-UK special relationship in international affairs placed significant limits on what was possible. There were occasional signs of progress, such as with US President Jimmy Carter's St Patrick's Day statement in 1978, the first such statement by an American President, and his ban on arms sales to the RUC. President Reagan also raised Northern Ireland directly and in private with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, expressing a hope that talks then beginning with the Irish Government would be successful. There were also constant non-governmental organization (NGO) criticisms of British policy in Northern Ireland, but the level of international pressure was never enough to have a significant impact (Guelke, 1989). As outlined in more detail in the discussion on the Good Friday Agreement, the greater flexibility in the US position in the 1990s, created an opportunity whereby the hard work in the 1980s saw greater results, with the very high profile intervention of US President Bill Clinton.

The European Union also refrained from any involvement in the conflict (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 280). There was and remains a limited legal basis in the Treaties for direct intervention and Britain was very hostile to any involvement whatsoever until the late 1980s at least. After the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, there were more consistent interventions as Britain could not prevent discussion of the issue, given the more open procedures of the Parliament. In 1980 the strongly nationalist independent MEP Neil Blaney unsuccessfully called for an investigation by the Legal Affairs Committee of the parliament into human rights issues in Northern Ireland. Some Irish MEPs from the government parties supported another attempt in 1981 to raise the hunger strikes, but it is not clear if the Irish government exerted any diplomatic effort on the issue. The amended resolution reinforced the limited powers of the then EC with the phrase 'recognizing that the European Community has no competence to make proposals for changes in the Constitution of NI' (Ruane and Todd, 1996; Guelke, 1989). There were individual motions on human rights issues over the following years, passed with Irish government support and in the face of British government opposition, though often supported by individual left wing British MEPs. The most significant diplomatic initiative was in February 1983 when the parliament decided that its political affairs committee should conduct an investigation into the political and economic affairs of Northern Ireland (Guelke 1989; Ruane and Todd, 1996). The British Government made what even they in hindsight recognised as a diplomatic blunder by condemning the

move, calling it interference in their internal affairs and refusing to cooperate. The ultimate report, with Niels Haagerup MEP as rapporteur, was rather bland and simply called for the establishment of joint British-Irish responsibilities in a number of specified fields, 'politically, legally and otherwise'. However it established a precedent of involvement and created some international pressure on the British Government to cooperate more fully with the Irish government. It is this informal pressure which was the EU's main contribution rather than any formal role. It was the first international institution where the UK was required to engage with Ireland on a fully equal basis and where they often needed an Irish vote on the Council of Ministers and it also created opportunities for quiet side-meetings away from the glare of publicity. The limited role of the EU however meant that Irish diplomacy primarily looked to the USA for international support and that was also reflected in the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. While the EU had a very limited role in the politics and diplomacy of the peace process they did provide substantial financial resources in the aftermath of the 1998 agreement, aimed at building support for the process by showing an immediate socio-economic dividend.

The Content of Irish Government Policy

The above discussion on the key influences on Irish Government policy highlights how difficult it was to develop a Northern Ireland policy which recognised the international environment, satisfied competing interests and which made some progress. The result was often that the state was conflicted in its strategic goals. From 1923 onwards all governments, naturally prioritised the stability of the state and opposition to the IRA when that organisation was active. There was no obvious policy, which offered a strategy to achieve Irish unity. Until the 1990s an improved relationship with unionists might well have been seen as postponing the possibility of Irish unity and not as a strategy to achieve it. Yet governments faced a public with a nationalist political culture, which if relatively subdued for most of the time, could in response to events in Northern Ireland come to the surface and pressurise governments to act and even influence election outcomes. In the absence of an obvious strategy, doing nothing apart from expressing a dutiful wish for Irish unity was often the response. One impact of this inactivity was that even very moderate northern nationalists felt they had in effect been

abandoned by successive Irish governments and this meant that Irish government influence within the nationalist community was much weakened by the late 1960s when the civil rights protests and ultimately a new IRA campaign emerged.

The period of the initial hesitancy in 1968-70 was reflected most strongly in what is known as the Arms Crisis. Two government ministers, Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey, were dismissed by the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, who accused them of involvement in a botched arms deal with the IRA. The charges against Blaney were dropped and Haughey was acquitted, and the question of whether the Taoiseach and other senior members of the cabinet had known or approved what was being done remains contested to this day. As the conflict escalated within Northern Ireland a relatively consistent Irish Government policy emerged, which was pursued regardless of which party was in power over the following 15 to 20 years. This was clearly articulated for the first time in the 1973 'Sunningdale Agreement', but it survived the collapse of that effort.

The Irish Government's Northern Ireland Policy from 1972 to 1992 was based on the following key elements:

- Full and public opposition to the IRA campaign.
- Asserting a role for the Irish Government in seeking a solution to the conflict
- Support for a power-sharing system of government within Northern Ireland between moderate nationalists and moderate unionists, which would be linked in a loose and consensual way with the Irish state.
- An acceptance that constitutional change would only occur with the consent of a majority within Northern Ireland.
- A belief that a power-sharing government would erode support for the IRA among the nationalist community – as potential IRA supporters would see another way to make progress and a belief that such a broad-based government would have a much greater legitimacy to take hard-line security measures against any remaining IRA campaign.
- A strategic view that such an outcome could only be achieved by working with the British Government and not by attacking it internationally, though efforts were always made to engage US policy-makers to act as persuaders with the British government.

- (Particularly in the negotiation of the 1985 Agreement) seeking to persuade the British Government, that in the absence of power-sharing within Northern Ireland, the Irish Government should have a formal role in representing the interests of northern nationalists.

The details of how this policy was pursued of course varied at the level of detail and different possible arrangements were discussed and attempted over the years. However none of those attempts managed to restore or replace the power-sharing ‘Sunningdale agreement’ government which collapsed in 1974. The lead up to the Good Friday Agreement saw some continuity with this period, but also a significant change of strategic direction and a more detailed examination of that period shows the importance of that change for the success of the peace process.

Strategic Change - the Road to the Good Friday Agreement

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a narrative of the peace process, but talks between Hume and Adams, and various contacts, including contacts involving the Irish Government, behind the scenes, ultimately bore fruit when the IRA announced a cease-fire in August 1994. There is no evidence of a secret deal with the British to produce the cease-fire, rather it reflected a strategic move by the IRA to get itself out of a position of military stalemate and create a new nationalist momentum, combined with a shift in Irish Government policy to encourage and strengthen this change within the IRA. Sinn Féin knew it could not on its own pressurise the United Kingdom to withdraw; it needed a broader political base and this is confirmed from a leaked document in 1994 (Cox et al., 2006: appendices).

There had been talks between Sinn Féin and the SDLP in 1988, which failed to make any progress towards an agreed position or an IRA ceasefire. These were followed by a set of talks chaired by the British Government and involving Irish Ministers, the SDLP and the unionist parties, (but, because of the continuing violence, not including Sinn Féin or Loyalist representatives). , The aim was to explore the options for a new agreement but the absence of any progress over more than a year of talks with unionists and the

continuing development of strategic thinking in Sinn Féin, which he was following, convinced John Hume, the undisputed leader of moderate nationalism, that an opportunity was opening for a dramatic change of strategy. This coincided with a leadership change in Fianna Fáil and a new Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, who had no prior public profile on Northern Ireland. Reynolds was briefed on exploratory secret contacts between representatives of the Irish Government and Sinn Féin, which had been authorised by his predecessor Charles Haughey who had taken some risk in doing so. Reynolds, unlike his predecessor, had no residual 'baggage' deriving from the 'arms crisis' of 1970 discussed above and, with a leadership style focused on finding solutions, he effectively reversed key elements of previous Irish government policy (Coogan, 1995: 352). Previous policy as outlined above had been based on trying to isolate Sinn Féin and build a centrist agreement between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party, with the hope that this would erode support for the IRA and eventually bring peace. Reynolds opened a more intensive dialogue with Sinn Féin with the aim of getting a cease-fire first - before political negotiations - and based on including Sinn Féin in government and not excluding them, on condition that the IRA agreed to end their armed campaign. He also encouraged John Hume in his dialogue with Sinn Féin, despite unprecedented attacks on Hume in the media when the existence of those talks leaked. The opposition parties were initially very hesitant about this new approach, but opinion polls suggested a high level of support for the Hume-Adams dialogue as it was called (because the Irish Government involvement was still secret). This new approach, though initially associated with Reynolds personally, survived an unrelated change of government in early 1995, as a senior advisor in the new Irish Government argued that any agreement that excluded Sinn Féin was 'not worth a penny candle' (*The Irish Times*, 26 April 1996).

The British government was very wary of this change of approach by the Irish government, and dubious about the dialogue between the Irish Government and Sinn Féin, before ultimately being persuaded that this was a process that they should support. While the IRA was relatively contained, incidents in the early 1990s such as the bombing of London's financial district and of Downing Street itself imposed significant financial and political costs and made a more permanent solution than containment attractive. It was clear that the British Government did not believe that it could militarily defeat the IRA and it was extremely worried that a prolonged public engagement with Sinn Féin, if it was followed by the collapse of the IRA ceasefire, would actually lead to a newly

energised and stronger IRA campaign. Irish Government diplomacy needed to persuade the British Government that this initiative could meet their number one objective, which was an enduring IRA ceasefire, at a political cost which they were willing to pay in terms of the content of a political agreement. There was extensive dialogue between Irish and British officials from 1992 onwards, and work on drafting of texts continued to be informed by exploratory contacts through intermediaries with the aim of securing a commitment from both Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries to cease their armed campaigns as a condition for the eventual involvement of their respective political affiliates in possible future comprehensive negotiations. This work ultimately led to an important joint statement by the two Prime Ministers – the Downing Street Declaration – in December 1993. The language was considerably softened over the course of negotiations. In early drafts the Irish Government had unsuccessfully sought to get the British government to commit to becoming a 'persuader' for Irish unity. However, after a few delays, the process was sufficient to set up an IRA ceasefire. The British Government remained a somewhat reluctant partner and their position in the House of Commons where they relied on unionist support on key parliamentary votes made their position difficult. Ultimately the election of a new and highly energetic Labour Government led by Tony Blair in 1997 saw a much more committed British engagement and a better relationship with the Irish Government in the run up to the 1998 agreement.

The Irish Government also played a large role in drawing US President Bill Clinton into active and supportive involvement in the process. US visas for Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and IRA leader Joe Cahill were crucial confidence-building measures in the run-up to the IRA cease-fire. Partly this was the outcome of a long process of engagement, by Irish Governments, in particular with Irish Americans in the US Congress, seeking to build support for a more active US involvement on the issue. The ending of the Cold War opened up greater possibilities for international involvement in the conflict. It weakened the importance of the US relationship with the United Kingdom—a crucial factor, as the USA was the only international actor likely to be able to exert influence on the United Kingdom (Cox, 1998). Northern Ireland was a low-risk intervention for the USA, but it did involve President Clinton in serious tension with an ally—to the extent that British Prime Minister John Major refused to take his phone calls—and the visa decision was taken against the advice of almost the entire foreign policy, defence and intelligence establishment (Coogan, 1995: 373). While the new world order permitted

President Clinton's intervention, it did not prompt it. For motivations, it is necessary to look at the domestic pressure on Clinton (O'Cleary, 1996). The fact that the President of the US had chosen to become personally involved in the later talks, at a level beyond anything required by his electoral needs, increased the pressure on political actors to reach agreement and, as nationalists had least interest in accepting the status quo, this intervention favoured nationalists (as they wanted change), even if the process of intervention was even-handed, which it was. This quiet pressure on Britain to make greater efforts to come to a joint approach with the Irish Government was crucial in strengthening Irish diplomacy and in building a dynamic towards agreement.

If the Reynolds government led a major change in strategy, the actual content of the agreement sought by the Irish government drew heavily on the long-term policy of previous governments, but with some key changes, without which the agreement would not have been reached. These changes to the solution sought most obviously involved the inclusion of Sinn Féin and release of IRA prisoners but also a more formalised institutionalisation of North South links with a relatively open-ended agenda and far reaching transformation of policing (Doyle 2010).

The Agreement reached by the two Governments and the main Northern Ireland parties (excluding the DUP) in April 1998 included a power-sharing consociational-style government (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004), a new Northern Ireland regional assembly and a structured set of cross-border institutions. Sinn Féin was to be included in the power-sharing government, the cease-fire was to be reinforced, prisoner releases were provided for and a programme of reform for police, criminal justice, cultural rights and economic equality was set in place. The Agreement provided for a new Assembly elected by proportional representation, to have 'full legislative and executive authority' in respect of matters devolved from London. Elected members, on taking their seats, have to designate themselves as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. Key decisions are made with either 50% support from each community or a 60% overall majority, including at least 40% support from each bloc. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister are elected by the process of parallel consent, designed to ensure that one will be a unionist and one a nationalist. They effectively operate as a single institution. Other ministerial posts are allocated to parties on the basis of the number of Assembly seats held (Doyle 1998; DFA, 1998).

To ensure that the North-South Council actually operated and was not frustrated by unionist opposition to such cross-border institutions, the Assembly and the North-South Council are declared to be ‘mutually interdependent ... one cannot successfully function without the other’. Participation in the Council is declared to be ‘one of the essential responsibilities’ attaching to a ministerial post. This was a key demand of nationalists. The SDLP believed that the British government might have been more willing to defend the 1974 power sharing experiment if there had been a formal institutionalised international dimension with another state, rather than the looser Council of Ireland envisaged in 1974. Whether that analysis is accurate or not, it created a political reality that neither of the two parties representing northern nationalists would support a deal without strongly institutionalised North-South cooperation. This was also crucial to Sinn Féin in persuading their support base that they had another strategy to replace reliance on the IRA campaign to deliver change.

The British and Irish Governments agreed to redraw their constitutional expressions of sovereignty on Northern Ireland, stating:

it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively and without external impediment, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish, accepting that this right must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland (DFA, 1998).

In Ireland’s case this led to an amendment to articles 2 and 3 on the constitution through a referendum, removing the description of the nation in territorial terms (as the entire island and its seas) and replacing it with a definition of the nation defined in terms of people and asserting the ‘firm will’ of the Irish nation for unity. The key elements of the new articles 2 and 3 then read as follows

‘It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation...’ (Art. 2.)

It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island... (Art. 3)

The ceasefire and the constitutional changes were key elements for the British government, persuading them to move further than they ever had before on institutionalising North-South cooperation and on internal reform within Northern Ireland in areas such as policing and equality laws. It also created a new relationship between the two governments. Differences of opinion of course remained, but there was now a much greater commitment from the British side to try and present a joint approach with the Irish government on all key issues.

Signing an agreement is of course only a beginning, not a 'settlement'. The agreement encountered many difficulties in its implementation and it was a decade later before the power-sharing executive was operating in a consistent manner. High levels of inter-governmental negotiations and all-party talks and repeated US interventions by President Clinton and his envoy US Senator George Mitchell were required on many occasions to secure the ongoing implementation. On one occasion the Irish and British governments only reached agreement on how to proceed at a late night Downing Street summit, held when President Clinton was already en route to London in Air Force One.

Conclusion

The case of the Good Friday Agreement is an interesting one, not just because of the outcome but because it is an example of high level diplomacy and an internationally significant successful peace process. It includes some important elements which are relevant for the analysis of Irish foreign policy more generally. It involved a fundamental change of strategy in response to changed circumstances. While in hindsight this can be seen to have worked, at the time it was seen as high risk and controversial, with no guarantee of success. The factors which lead a government to undertake such major changes in direction are very important in the study of foreign policy in general. In this example there was a long period of failure to make progress, but unfortunately international examples suggest that on its own that is not enough to produce change. However the concept of ripeness in conflict resolution theory suggests that a stalemate such as existed, where neither side believes a military solution is possible, can often be an opportune time for successful mediation (Zartman, 1997). There was also a change of

leadership in the Irish Government in 1992 at the start of the process and in both governments in 1997, before the actual formal negotiations, which in this case at least assisted in the creation of a dynamic for change.

Public opinion was also important. This was not simply an agreement by elites. If the agreement was to involve changes to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution relating to the definition of the national territory, then a referendum had to be passed. Irish Government negotiators needed to be confident that the agreement was sufficiently far reaching to secure support for such an important change. In practice they wanted a result which was overwhelmingly in favour, so they could use that support to deny legitimacy to any break-away groups from the IRA who sought to oppose the agreement. The British government could have constitutionally delivered on the agreement by normal legislation at Westminster but it supported the holding of simultaneous referenda North and South, not only to challenge IRA dissidents, but also to firm up support in the unionist community and to defend its own position against conservative critics in London. Public opinion therefore played two roles. It acted as a constraint on what elite negotiators could agree as they needed to be able to sell it. Afterwards, public opinion also played a legitimising role for the Good Friday Agreement and allowed its supporters to deny such legitimacy to opponents of the deal.

The success of Irish strategy also rested on external events. Some of these, such as the end of the Cold War were totally beyond the control of Irish foreign policymakers but they certainly left open many different choices in how to respond. The ability, for the first time to persuade a US president to become personally involved to a significant degree was a significant success for Irish diplomacy. Given Britain's powerful position in international affairs, there was no other country in the world which could have exerted such quiet diplomacy over a British Government. A more 'neutral' mediator, such as a retired Scandinavian diplomat for example, would have been easier to exclude entirely if Britain wished to and, even if allowed to play a role, would have been easier to ignore. The US never sought to blame the British government publicly. That was not their role and even a US President might have been rebuked by Britain, if they had tried. However there is little doubt that they played a major role in persuading Britain to move their position the little bit extra that was required to reach agreement, first of all with the Irish government and then with the political parties in Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement and the question of Northern Ireland policy show that foreign policy making is complex. It involves a multi-layered approach, balancing the views of government ministers and opposition politicians, the strength of public opinion, which can be difficult to gauge and a changing international environment. Successful diplomacy needs to both deal with the demands of stakeholders and chart a strategy which is well informed and realistic in its goals.

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