
Ripe moments for Exiting Political Violence: an Analysis of the Northern Ireland Case*

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ABSTRACT

William Zartman's concept of 'ripeness' has been strongly criticised on both methodological and substantive grounds, yet it remains central to both academic and policy debates. This paper assesses the usefulness of Zartman's model through an analysis of the three peace agreements which were negotiated during the Northern Ireland conflict—the 1973 power-sharing Sunningdale Agreement, the 1985 inter-governmental Anglo-Irish Agreement and the 1998 Belfast Agreement. It uses a refined version of Zartman's model to argue that the concept of 'ripeness' remains a useful means to analyse the potential for peace and that it can provide an explanation for the relative success of the 1998 Belfast Agreement and for the failure of previous agreements.

INTRODUCTION

William Zartman's work on the conditions under which armed conflict can end has remained popular with policymakers and practitioners. The popularity of this model stems from the framework it is perceived to provide, through which real world problems of building and negotiating peace can be analysed.¹ Zartman refers to the status of a conflict that is open to settlement as a condition of 'ripeness', and suggests that peace agreements are only possible when key parties to the conflict perceive a mutually-hurting stalemate that is potentially damaging to all sides. Richard Haass, President of the US Council on Foreign Relations and former US special envoy to Northern Ireland, argues that Zartman's theory offers a guide to action, for both external and internal

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¹William I. Zartman, *Cowardly lions: missed opportunities to prevent deadly conflict and state collapse* (Boulder, Co., 2005). See also Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary conflict resolution* (Cambridge, 1999), 166, for one of many discussions of Zartman's work.

actors interested in conflict resolution. It is a target to aim for, he argues, and a guide, and is not, as is sometimes suggested by its critics, a justification for inaction while waiting for the elusive moment of ‘ripeness’.² It has, however, been less popular with academics who have criticised it for its perceived tautological nature, centring on the problem that with hindsight it is not possible to distinguish whether or not a successful peace agreement inevitably means that the parties to the conflict experienced mutually-hurting stalemate, and that empirically there is no way to be sure that a stalemate existed until there is evidence of a successful peace process.

Academic criticism of Zartman’s work has therefore been made on both substantive and methodological grounds. It has been argued that ‘ripeness’ is not related to successful outcomes, as too many ‘ripe’ situations do not lead to agreements for the concept to be useful. It is also suggested that ‘ripeness’ is conceptually weak because it is indistinguishable from successful outcomes in peace negotiations—if a peace process is successful, conditions of ‘ripeness’ must have existed and if it is not then the actors were not ‘ripe’. It is also argued that even if ‘ripeness’ can be separated conceptually from a successful peace process, there remains no means of determining whether the key actors perceived that conditions of ‘ripeness’ existed until after an agreement indicates that all parties must have been ready to negotiate.³ The ‘successful’ Northern Ireland peace process that began in the 1990s is an example that has been used to criticise Zartman’s theory,⁴ but so far no academic work has used this case study to develop and expand this model. This article addresses this gap and suggests a refinement of Zartman’s model that allows a more nuanced application of his ideas to the analysis of conflict. It applies this refined model to the three agreements negotiated over the course of the modern Northern Ireland conflict—the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement—and explores whether a rigorous analysis of the Northern Ireland case within this framework can provide a convincing explanation of the relative success of the Good Friday Agreement compared to earlier agreements and, therefore, whether or not the Northern Ireland case suggests that this refined model has explanatory power and can provide a guide for action in other conflict situations.

APPLYING ZARTMAN TO NORTHERN IRELAND

Central to Zartman’s concept of ‘ripeness’ are three key factors that he argues must be present as preconditions for a peace process to exist. First, there must be a ‘mutually-hurting stalemate’ where no significant actor believes that they can secure an outright military victory, and where there are significant costs attached to continuing with the status quo, including the potential for a party’s own position to worsen. The actors must also believe that their political opponents perceive a hurting stalemate. Fundamental to Zartman’s module is the idea that a military victory is always pursued if leaders believe it is possible to achieve, and leaders will only risk negotiations if they believe that the option of military victory is not possible. In this case they also need to believe that their opponents are not confident of securing a military victory and therefore not

²Richard Haass, *Conflicts unending* (New Haven, CT, 1990).

³For a good summary of these criticisms see Marieke Kleiboer, ‘Review: Ripeness of conflict: a fruitful notion?’ *Journal of Peace Research* 31 (1) (1994), 109–16.

⁴Eamonn O’Kane, ‘Learning from Northern Ireland? The uses and abuses of the Irish ‘model’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12 (2) (2010), 239–56; and Eamonn O’Kane, ‘When can conflicts be resolved? A critique of ripeness’, *Civil Wars* 8 (3) (2006), 268–84.

committed to pursuing one. Second, for ‘ripeness’ to exist, the actors in the conflict must recognise the legitimacy of spokespersons on the other side of the conflict to speak for their community or group. Third, actors in the conflict, in the absence of a clear military victory, have to perceive that a negotiated solution is possible.

Authors who have used Zartman to analyse the Irish case, or the Irish case to discuss Zartman, have dismissed the concept of ‘ripeness’ as lacking the capacity to explain why peace processes happen or to predict at what stage in a conflict the conditions for a peace process exist. This perspective is supported by the argument that the conditions for the final successful peace process of the 1990s were not unique and that they had existed prior to the 1990s; as Eamonn O’Kane argues, a military stalemate emerged in the early 1970s and it is from this time that the conditions existed for a peace process to take place.⁵ Jonathan Tonge, Peter Shirlow and James McAuley also support the view that the conditions of stalemate existed before 1998, but significantly, they also believe that the potential political solution, by which they mean the substantive content of the Good Friday Agreement, was also available as the basis for a peace agreement from the early 1970s.⁶ Within this framework of assumptions about the conditions under which actors in the conflict made the decision whether or not to participate in a negotiated settlement, Tonge *et al.* use a set of interviews conducted with former IRA and loyalist paramilitaries as an empirical basis to test the validity of Zartman’s model. They argue that the perception of a ‘stalemate’ does not convincingly explain the decisions on the part of these organisations to enter the peace process, as these interviews did not contain evidence for the key criteria set out by Zartman.⁷ O’Kane takes this a step further and argues that the nature of conflict makes it unlikely that empirical evidence could be found to substantiate the existence of a ‘moment of ripeness’, given the ‘imperfection of the information available and the highly subjective nature of the analyses that surround conflicts’.⁸ From this perspective, the application of Zartman can only be carried out with the benefit of hindsight when the outcome of the conflict is known, and the model cannot be used to evaluate conditions in an ongoing conflict situation. For O’Kane, these methodological weaknesses mean that Zartman’s model is not a framework for action and that in practice there is no alternative ‘to continually seeking “movement” from the parties to the conflict towards a resolution in the hope that a breakthrough will eventually occur’. If a breakthrough does occur it is inaccurate to label it as a condition of ‘ripeness’ that could have been identified and nurtured.⁹

To address the argument that the conditions for the peace process existed from the 1970s onwards and also that it is not empirically possible to assess the degree of ‘ripeness’ of the individual actors without relying on hindsight, the empirical material in this article is based only on information available to the actors in the peace process at any given point in time. This contemporaneous information will be used to determine whether the conditions for ‘ripeness’, based on Zartman’s model, did in fact exist in 1973 and 1985 as well as 1998. On this basis the Northern Ireland case—with three formal agreements—allows

⁵O’Kane, ‘When can conflicts be resolved?’, 280; O’Kane, ‘Learning from Northern Ireland?’, 252.

⁶Jonathan Tonge, Peter Shirlow and James McAuley, ‘So why did the guns fall silent? How interplay, not stalemate, explains the Northern Ireland peace process’, *Irish Political Studies* 26 (1) (2011), 1–18, 17.

⁷Tonge, Shirlow and McAuley, ‘So why did the guns’, 2.

⁸O’Kane, ‘When can conflicts be resolved?’, 280 and 283.

⁹O’Kane, ‘When can conflicts be resolved?’, 280 and 283.

a comparative analysis over 25 years that can assess the effectiveness of the model. A weakness in the analysis by Tonge *et al.* is that they considered just two of the actors to the conflict, leaving out all the Northern Ireland political parties, the British government, the security forces and the Irish government, all of whom were key players in achieving the Good Friday accord.¹⁰ In this they are following Zartman's binary approach to conflict which places actors in two opposing groups, indicating a problem with that approach and raising the issue of which actors should be included in the analysis and how they should be included. To overcome this limitation—given that Northern Ireland is a multi-actor conflict—each actor to the conflict is analysed separately rather than providing an analysis of the joint perceptions of blocks of actors.¹¹ In addition to this, each aspect of 'ripeness' is analysed qualitatively on a sliding scale and not as a yes/no binary concept.

The opening of contacts by an actor with their opponents will be contentious for governments and non-state actors alike, and groups will inevitably experience at least some internal opposition to this development. Therefore an analysis of 'ripeness' must include an assessment of the strength of internal opposition to a leadership shift in strategy, and an analysis of the leadership of each group's perception of the internal balance of power that they face within their organisation.¹² This is difficult, but not impossible, for secretive or closed organisations. The changing public discourse and tactics of an organisation provide evidence of their perceptions of stalemate, of their view of their opponents' perceptions and whether or not they consider that there is a potentially acceptable 'way out' of the conflict. This is an application of the three key components of Zartman's concept of ripeness to the internal domain of the actors to the conflict. An assessment of the perception of actors of the internal power dynamics of other actors is also necessary as this is an essential part of calculating the outcome of any movement in negotiations. At a time of shifting strategic positions these internal debates enter the public domain, even in the most disciplined parties, and can therefore be analysed.

It is also necessary to recognise that it is unlikely that alterations of perception will emerge organically and simultaneously in two or more actors involved in a protracted conflict, and that therefore, in practice, external and internal events can provide a 'shock' or a 'stimulus' for change that is then experienced by a range of actors.¹³ Not all actors will respond in the same way or to the same degree to the occurrence of political 'shocks' that have the potential to produce a shift towards a state of 'ripeness'. Part of this process of change can be the conscious actions of leaders seeking to alter the political dynamic inside their own organisation or between other actors, or it could be that a change in external conditions forces a reassessment of the conflict.

The three peace agreements negotiated during the modern Northern Ireland conflict—the 1973 power-sharing Sunningdale Agreement, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the 1998 Belfast Good Friday Agreement—will be analysed using the following framework, based on Zartman three aspects of 'ripeness' applied to the leadership of each of the organisations that were key actors at each phase of the conflict:

¹⁰Tonge, Shirlow and McAuley, 'So why did the guns', 2.

¹¹Dean Pruitt, 'Readiness theory and the Northern Ireland conflict', *American Behavioral Scientist* 50 (11) (2007), 1520–41.

¹²Juliette R. Shedd, 'When peace agreements create spoilers: the Russo-Chechen agreement of 1996', *Civil Wars* 10 (2) (2008), 93–105.

¹³Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, 'Path dependence in settlement processes: explaining settlement in Northern Ireland', *Political Studies* 55 (2) (2007), 442–58.

1. The *degree* to which the leadership of each significant actor in the conflict:
 - a) Perceives that the group it represents is in a mutually-hurting stalemate. (Essentially this is a judgement on the proportion of the leadership that holds this belief and on the strength of their perception of stalemate.)
 - b) Is willing to recognise all other significant actors.
 - c) Thinks a potential ‘way out’ of the conflict exists.
2. The *degree* to which the leadership of each significant actor believes its opponents hold similar views in each of these key areas.
3. The *degree* to which the leadership of each significant actor perceives it can maintain support among its membership and its support base while engaging in negotiations on a potential settlement.

To carry out this analysis it uses data available at the time of each agreement to identify explicit differences between 1998 and the two earlier periods which would have indicated a greater degree of ‘ripeness’ in 1998.

NORTHERN IRELAND FROM ‘SUNNINGDALE’ TO ‘GOOD FRIDAY’

Based on the above schema the following analysis looks at the public positions of the key political actors who were seen as potential veto players in any possible agreement that would provide a way out of the conflict in Northern Ireland—Sinn Féin, the Irish government, the British government, the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the mainstream unionist parties and the loyalist paramilitaries. It draws only on sources which were available to analysts in the period leading up to each of the relevant agreements in 1973, 1985 and 1998. The analysis also considers the changing external environment in which these three agreements were negotiated and the changing perceptions and comparative status of the main actors in the conflict.

The Sunningdale Agreement, 1973

The Sunningdale Agreement¹⁴ was primarily an initiative of the British government designed as a response to the civil rights movement and the collapse of the Stormont administration. It was not a response to the demands of armed republicans even though the IRA was at that time a growing force and a major security priority for both governments. This was because the crisis precipitated by the nationalist community’s demand for civil rights, and the violent response to the civil rights moment, was considered to have fuelled the revival of the IRA, and therefore Sunningdale was intended to compliment the security policy as part of a programme of political reform to appease nationalists. Sunningdale established a power-sharing government between moderate nationalists in the SDLP and moderate unionists from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Alliance Party. The members of government were drawn from an assembly elected to negotiate the agreement but this did not include Sinn Féin who were at the time a small abstentionist party. The agreement also set up a consultative all-island Council of Ireland and as part of the agreement the Irish government declared that it accepted ‘that there could

¹⁴For full text of the Sunningdale Agreement, see: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/sunningdale/agreement.htm> (accessed 18 September 2015).

be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status'. The British government in return said it 'would remain their policy to support the wishes of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland' and that 'if in the future the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a united Ireland, the British government would support that wish'.¹⁵ There was no attempt to involve Sinn Féin as a representative of the republican community as the two governments believed that Sinn Féin would not support the agreement and strategically the aim of the two governments was to build a solution around moderate nationalism and the majority of the Ulster Unionist Party, in a power-sharing government, that would isolate both militant loyalism and republicanism. It was hoped that the popular support for the initiative would allow the governments to consolidate the nationalist community behind moderate constitutional nationalism and help them to isolate and defeat the IRA.

In the run-up to Sunningdale the Irish government and the SDLP exhibited very high degrees of 'ripeness', with very little significant internal opposition to the leaderships' position of support for the initiative. The Irish government was motivated by a fear of a spillover of violence into the south, while the SDLP opposed the use of armed force and sought a negotiated solution capable of delivering the demands of the civil rights movement, along with some symbolic recognition of Irish nationalist identity. The Irish government and the SDLP were willing to accept the programme outlined in Sunningdale and they recognised spokespersons in the UUP and the British government as actors that they could do a deal with.¹⁶ They strongly believed that the British government was also fully behind the Agreement and willing to uphold it. Sinn Féin was overwhelmingly if not unanimously hostile to the Agreement but it was assumed not to have sufficient organisational strength at this time to be a veto player.¹⁷ This assumption about Sinn Féin's capacity was never tested due to the early and strong unionist opposition that resulted in the collapse of the Agreement within six months of its negotiation.

In late 1973 unionists could be said to have shown some evidence of the key components of 'ripeness' when they entered talks and negotiated with the Irish government and the SDLP for the first time. However from the period of the election in June 1973 that was held prior to talks, through to the Agreement itself in December, there was clear evidence of a substantial body of unionist opinion that opposed power-sharing even with moderate nationalists.¹⁸ Unionist attacks on Sunningdale frequently focused on the fact that many of the unionist politicians supporting the Agreement had in fact said before the June 1973 election that they opposed power-sharing.¹⁹ There was also a widely used rhetoric that this was a 'stepping stone' to a united Ireland—indicating that unionists did not really believe moderate nationalists were ready for a more limited agreement.²⁰ Almost immediately after the Agreement was signed it was clear that the Ulster Unionist Party was split on the issue, with a majority opposed to the Agreement. Within four weeks the governing Ulster Unionist Council rejected the Sunningdale Agreement by 53 per cent to 47 per cent. This

¹⁵Sunningdale Agreement, Para 5.

¹⁶*Irish Times*, 7 and 10 December 1973.

¹⁷*Irish Times*, 7 and 10 December 1973.

¹⁸Jim Kilfedder MP, House of Commons, 14 June 1973, vol. 857, col. 1842; Jim Molyneux MP, House of Commons, 14 June 1973, vol. 857, col. 1847; UUP formal position paper, *Irish Press*, 30 August 1973; *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 September 1973.

¹⁹William Craig, House of Commons, 4 April 1974, vol. 871, col. 1513.

²⁰The Ulster Unionist slogan in the February 1974 election was 'Dublin is just a Sunningdale away'.

led to the resignation of Brian Faulkner as party leader, but he continued to establish and lead the power-sharing executive as he insisted that he still commanded a majority within the NI Assembly parliamentary party. For unrelated reasons, a UK-wide general election was held in February 1974 and anti-agreement unionists won all 11 unionist seats in Northern Ireland, standing on an explicit anti-agreement platform. The agreement collapsed by the end of May 1974 in the face of significant and ongoing unionist protest, culminating in a general strike organised by a coalition of mainstream unionist parties and loyalist paramilitaries. The majority of Ulster Unionists therefore did not perceive there to be a ‘mutually-hurting stalemate’ which required significant concessions; they did not believe that they needed to share power with nationalists in order to defeat the IRA; they did not believe nationalists were interested in a settlement short of Irish unity; they absolutely rejected the right of Sinn Féin to represent their supporters and they believed that the IRA could be defeated with a more ‘robust’ security policy and without the need for power-sharing. At this time the level of unionist opposition was too large to be marginalised and made them key veto players. This was reinforced by the unwillingness of the British government to marginalise Unionism in the context of the UK political structures.

The period leading up to the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement and the setting up of the power-sharing executive in 1974 therefore does not meet the criteria set out by Zartman to define a ‘ripe’ moment. Using the information available at the time it is clear that high levels of ‘ripeness’ only existed in the SDLP, Irish government and British government, and for the British government, this degree of ‘ripeness’ was qualified by their sympathy for the unionist position. It was clear even before the Agreement was signed that a very significant majority of Ulster Unionist politicians opposed the arrangements being discussed and would continue to oppose an agreement if one was signed. Once a new Northern Ireland executive was established this strong unionist opposition was quickly confirmed. Sinn Féin opposed Sunningdale but they were not central to the agreement or its collapse. In this case, given the marginal position of the Irish government to the agreement and the unwillingness of the British government to push the Unionist community too far, the two governments, the SDLP and a minority of unionists together did not represent a sufficient critical mass to constitute a ‘ripe’ moment.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985

In the decade following Sunningdale there was no political progress and the focus of the British state was on the military defeat of the IRA. Between the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 and the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 there was a gradual shift in emphasis within republicanism in the relative importance attached to political and military tactics, driven by the electoral success of Sinn Féin after 1981.²¹ Sinn Féin had become a larger and more politically significant organisation in the aftermath of the 1980 and 1981 hunger strikes by IRA prisoners seeking to secure improved prison conditions, which led to the deaths of ten prisoners between May and October 1981.²² The

²¹Richard English, *Armed struggle: a history of the IRA* (Basingstoke, 2003).

²²Ten republican prisoners died in a hunger strike over prison conditions, sparking a growth in Sinn Féin’s support and their entry into electoral competition. See David Beresford, *Ten men dead: the story of the 1981 Irish hunger strike* (London, 1987) and Brian Campbell, Laurence McKeown and Felim O’Hagan, *Nor meekly serve my time: the H-Block struggle 1976–1981* (Belfast, 1994).

leader of the protests and the first prisoner to die, Bobby Sands, was elected to the British parliament in a by-election and became an iconic figure for republicans. Sinn Féin had, prior to this, refused to stand for election in Northern Ireland, on the grounds that it would require recognition of British sovereignty, but they changed their strategy following the major political impact of Sands' election and in a series of elections in 1982, 1983 and 1984, Sinn Féin established a support base of between 38 per cent and 40 per cent of the Irish nationalist vote within Northern Ireland.²³

The electoral rise of Sinn Féin led the Irish government to launch a new political initiative designed to show that moderate nationalism had a strategy for political progress and on this basis could engage the British government in a new peace process.²⁴ The first element of this strategy was the New Ireland Forum, an attempt to achieve agreement between the moderate nationalist parties in the republic and the SDLP on a formulation for political progress. Initial attempts to engage the unionist parties in the process failed and Sinn Féin were excluded from the beginning, as the main motivation for the initiative was to undermine support for Sinn Féin and the IRA. The report of the New Ireland Forum in 1984 set out three possible options for a new constitutional framework for Ireland, a unitary state, a federal or con-federal state and joint authority over Northern Ireland by the UK and Ireland.²⁵ While then prime minister Margaret Thatcher publicly dismissed these three options at the time, inter-governmental talks lasting more than a year led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985 by the two governments. This agreement granted the Irish government a consultative role in the governance of Northern Ireland. In return, the Irish government confirmed there would be no change in the 'status' of Northern Ireland without the agreement of a majority there and it also promised greater security co-operation.²⁶

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was not an end point in itself as its provisions were relatively weak. The Irish government and the SDLP saw it as a process that could draw the unionists into engagement with moderate nationalism and also undermine support for Sinn Féin by presenting the nationalist community with an alternative constitutional route to political change. It was hoped that the unionist desire to end the inter-governmental aspects of the agreement would lead them to share power with the SDLP to achieve this goal. The UK government also hoped that more robust security measures would be politically possible and militarily successful in the context of wider political progress involving the SDLP, in that security measures would be conducted with a higher degree of support from the Irish government and the SDLP.

As in 1973 the Irish government and the SDLP showed high degrees of 'ripeness' in the run-up to the signing of the 1985 Agreement. They were willing to formalise their acceptance of the constitutional status quo and they both perceived that an intergovernmental political initiative was essential to stop the growth in support for Sinn Féin and the IRA. The British government, in permitting a formal, if purely consultative, role for the Irish government, did so because it believed that it needed to engage with the Irish government on security matters in order to weaken and defeat the IRA. It was also under some

²³Details of the election results are available at: <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/> (18 September 2015)

²⁴Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life: Garret FitzGerald, an autobiography* (Dublin, 1991), 462.

²⁵The complete text of the report is available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/nifr.htm> (18 September 2015).

²⁶Full text of the agreement is available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/aia/aiadoc.htm> (18 September 2015).

minor pressure from then US president Ronald Reagan to find a political solution to the problem of Northern Ireland and to engage with the Irish government. Even so, the wording of the consultative aspect of the Agreement is weak and simply accepts that the Irish government ‘will’ put forward proposals—rather than acknowledging that it has any right to do so:

The United Kingdom Government accept that the Irish Government will put forward views and proposals on matters relating to Northern Ireland within the field of activity of the Conference in so far as those matters are not the responsibility of a devolved administration in Northern Ireland. In the interest of promoting peace and stability, determined efforts shall be made through the Conference to resolve any differences.

For the Irish government, the British government and the SDLP, the perception of stalemate, of a possible ‘way out’ and recognition of each other was similar to the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973. There was some limited internal opposition to the Irish government’s position from the leader of the opposition Fianna Fáil party, but as the Agreement had widespread public support this caused no political difficulties.²⁷ Neither the SDLP nor the British government faced any significant internal opposition. For the British government, the weak wording of the agreement meant that little had been conceded to the Irish government. None of these key actors believed that the IRA or Sinn Féin perceived a stalemate; indeed the whole initiative was based on the need to curb the growing support for Sinn Féin. For the Irish government and the SDLP in particular, as in 1973, their position was based on an assumption that Sinn Féin was not a veto player and an agreement without them could undermine support for the IRA and also for Sinn Féin.

While Sinn Féin opposed the Agreement, the focus of public debate was the widespread unionist opposition.²⁸ Ulster Unionists were initially more uniformly hostile to the 1985 Agreement than they had been to a potential agreement in 1973. The elections prior to Sunningdale gave unionists a local parliament and they were formally involved, while the negotiations in 1985 only included the two governments as neither government believed that UUP-SDLP talks had any prospect of success, given the failure of months of talks in the early 1980s. The only mild pro-union support came from the small, centrist Alliance Party.²⁹ The unionist campaign of opposition involved co-operation across the entire unionist spectrum from the mainstream UUP to the illegal loyalist paramilitary groups—using massive public protests, resignations from parliament to force by-elections and a major escalation of loyalist paramilitary attacks. In this case it failed to force a formal British change of policy, unlike the campaign against power-sharing in 1973, reflecting that the Anglo Irish Agreement had little impact on the institutional governance of Northern Ireland and that even though the British government did not rescind the agreement, without unionist support it could not be used to make further political progress.

The growth in support for Sinn Féin, between 1981 and ’85, did represent a break in path dependency for the Irish and British governments, pushing them

²⁷John Doyle and Eileen Connolly, ‘Foreign policy and domestic politics: a study of the 2002 election in the Republic of Ireland’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 13 (2002), 151–66: 154.

²⁸Arthur Aughey, *Under siege: Ulster Unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (London, 1989).

²⁹For UUP and DUP position see, for example, *Newsletter*, 22 May 1987; for Alliance Party, see party leader, John Cushnahan, ‘Conference Speech’, *Alliance News*, May 1986.

towards an agreement from different perspectives. The British government still prioritised the limited policy goal of security containment, whereas the Irish government believed that a 'security only' response was doomed to failure.³⁰ As Ulster Unionists did not engage, Sinn Féin were excluded and the aims of the British government were minimalist, there is no basis for considering 1985 as a 'ripe' moment, as defined by Zartman.

THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE 1998 AGREEMENT

Following the Anglo Irish Agreement, while there was a widespread sense of military stalemate in the late 1980s, no political initiative succeeded in breaking a path dependency towards violence,³¹ and no significant progress towards an agreement was made. However, beginning in the early 1990s there were observable shifts of position from a number of the key actors, which moved their individual positions along a spectrum towards a stronger sense of 'ripeness' as defined by Zartman.

Sinn Féin

In November 1989 Sinn Féin re-launched an earlier 1987 policy document, *Scenario for peace*, which followed the traditional republican position of seeing the Irish government as having no significant role in either bringing about a united Ireland or building its new government.³² The Irish government was treated as a Vichy-like regime lacking legitimacy and actively frustrating Sinn Féin's attempts to secure Irish unity. By 1992 this very traditional republican position was reversed with the launch of a new policy document, *Towards a lasting peace*, in which Sinn Féin took a new strategic direction recognising the legitimacy of the Irish government and placing it at the heart of any possible peace process.³³

A number of factors brought the leaderships of Sinn Féin and the IRA to this position. The military stalemate began to be perceived as a hurting stalemate when the post-hunger strike electoral progress of Sinn Féin was halted in the mid 1980s.³⁴ This perception was translated into strategic action following the consolidation of Gerry Adams' leadership in 1986, when the party voted to end abstentionism in the south of Ireland and to take their seats in Dáil Éireann. This decision led to the resignation of a section of Sinn Féin including former party leader Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, who strongly advocated maintaining a traditional republican ideology and strategy.³⁵ Following this, in the late 1980s, a series of 'botched' IRA operations with high civilian casualties produced unprecedented public statements from Sinn Féin acknowledging not only that such actions were mistaken but that they also seriously damaged public support for Sinn Féin.³⁶ At this time Sinn Féin also began to acknowledge the importance of other actors, beginning a round of public discussions with the SDLP in 1988. In these discussions Sinn Féin sought agreement with the SDLP on limited political objectives while at the same time

³⁰Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street years* (London, 1995); FitzGerald, *All in a life*.

³¹English, *Armed struggle*.

³²The full text of Sinn Féin, *Scenario for peace* is available at: <http://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15210> (18 September 2015).

³³The full text of Sinn Féin, *Towards a lasting peace* is available at: <http://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15212> (18 September 2015).

³⁴English, *Armed struggle*, 260.

³⁵Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry, *The politics of antagonism* (London, 1993).

³⁶For example, *Irish Times*, 2 February 1990.

supporting the IRA campaign. It is not possible to determine at what point Sinn Féin perceived that the British government were open to talks, as these interactions were secret at this time, but Sinn Féin's new strategic direction was premised on this possibility. The collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 reordered the international system, leading to peace processes in South Africa and Israel/Palestine and the resulting internal and external pressure on the IRA to end the conflict and seek a negotiated settlement was widely discussed at the time.³⁷ Sinn Féin engaged in an internal debate that was, unusually for such a disciplined party, conducted in public. Key party members argued that republicans could not, on their own, successfully pressurise the British government to withdraw and that Sinn Féin needed to be part of a broader political movement for change. This change of position is observable in Gerry Adams' public comments³⁸ and was confirmed in an internal document leaked in 1994.³⁹ From the early 1990s the Sinn Féin leadership perceived that they were in a hurting stalemate and began to develop a political strategy based on this perception. This included building relationships with other actors in the conflict and preparing its support base for political compromise.

One visible expression of this new direction in the 1990s was a change in the editorial style of *An Phoblacht* (the republican weekly newspaper).⁴⁰ The pejorative term 'Free State' was no longer used to describe the republic and its government, and was replaced by more neutral terms such as 'the South' or the '26 Counties' and the 'Dublin administration', before finally using the term 'Irish government'. This reflected a shift in Sinn Féin's attitude to constitutional nationalism, the SDLP and the Irish political parties, especially the ruling Fianna Fáil party and to a lesser extent the Irish Labour Party. They were now seen as potential political allies on some issues rather than as collaborators with British rule. The goal of a nationalist consensus became central to Sinn Féin's political strategy. It was not until the document *Towards a lasting peace* was adopted in 1992 that Sinn Féin officially recognised the validity of other potential negotiators in a peace process and while it was willing to enter talks with the British government, their official line was that this would only be about the details of withdrawal. This shift in position can be seen from 1989 onwards with the first round of SDLP-Sinn Féin talks, and even though those talks failed that failure did not change the new direction of Sinn Féin strategy which was formalised in 1992 with the publication of *Towards a lasting peace*.⁴¹ From this time, Sinn Féin also recognised the Ulster Unionists as independent political actors separate from the British government. It also indicated its willingness to support and promote a ceasefire as a transitional measure towards a political settlement even if that settlement fell short of a united Ireland. Based on this analysis Sinn Féin did not meet the criteria for 'ripeness' until at least 1990, and not with any strength until 1992.

³⁷Michael Cox, 'Northern Ireland: the war that came in from the cold', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 9 (1998), 73–84.

³⁸In, for example, *Irish Times*, 28 June 1988.

³⁹The leaked document is now available at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/tuas94.htm> (18 September 2015).

⁴⁰See, for example: <http://www.anphoblacht.com/archive> (18 September 2015).

⁴¹For documents released after talks see: <http://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15215> (18 September).

Moderate Irish nationalism within Northern Ireland

The change in Sinn Féin policy would not be sufficient to enable a peace process; there also had to be recognition of their political status and their legitimacy as representatives of their community from other actors. The first organisation to recognise Sinn Féin's legitimacy was the SDLP leadership. This was a major step as the previous strategy of all other parties had been united in ostracising Sinn Féin. The decision by SDLP leader John Hume to engage in a process of talks with Sinn Féin in 1988 was central to the origins of the peace process and encouraged Sinn Féin towards engagement with other actors and a moderation of their demands. While those initial talks were not successful, secret talks between the party leaders were again held in the early 1990s and formed the basis of the process that led to the Good Friday Agreement.⁴² The SDLP leadership met the conditions for 'ripeness' from 1973 onwards, but alone they did not have the political leverage to lead change. However, they played a major role in privately persuading the Irish government to change its long-standing policy of isolating Sinn Féin and laying the groundwork for including Sinn Féin in negotiations.

The Irish government

In the period 1989–94 the 'behind the scenes' involvement of the Irish government in talks with Sinn Féin marked a significant change of government policy. This new direction was strengthened by the election of Albert Reynolds as leader of Fianna Fáil and taoiseach in 1992.⁴³ The new Irish government in the changed conditions of the early 1990s came to the conclusion that the policy of isolating Sinn Féin was not producing political progress in Northern Ireland, weakening Sinn Féin or defeating the IRA. The Irish government also believed that Sinn Féin perceived itself as being in a stalemate situation, and was, therefore, at this time open to a new political approach that would provide a feasible way out of the conflict, even if the details remained to be worked out. It is clear from media coverage at the time that the political elites of the Irish state were deeply divided on this shift in approach. SDLP leader John Hume and Albert Reynolds were attacked for breaking with a long-held consensus on the isolation of Sinn Féin—reflected in violent criticism in newspaper editorials.⁴⁴ Despite these divisions, the Irish government maintained its position, with one senior advisor arguing that any agreement that excluded Sinn Féin was 'not worth a penny candle'.⁴⁵ The Irish government's recognition of the validity of Sinn Féin's representation of a section of the population of Northern Ireland (though full recognition as a political actor was subject to an IRA ceasefire) marked a crucial shift in the degree of 'ripeness' exhibited by the Irish government.

⁴²Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *The fight for peace: the secret story behind the Irish peace process* (London, 1996).

⁴³Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles* (London, 1995), 352; Martin Mansergh, 'Albert Reynolds: delivering the impossible', in Philip Hannon and Jackie Gallagher (eds), *Taking the long view: 70 years of Fianna Fáil* (Dublin, 1996), 116–134.

⁴⁴David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making sense of the Troubles: the story of the conflict in Northern Ireland* (London, 2012), 285; also *Irish Times*, 27 April 1993, 4 May 1993 and 2 October 1993.

⁴⁵Fergus Finlay, adviser to then Irish foreign minister Dick Spring, *Irish Times*, 26 April 1996.

The British government

There is no public evidence that the British government believed that the IRA had internalised a sense of stalemate or was willing to endorse a solution that the British government was willing to support. As was clear from many statements, during the SDLP talks with Sinn Féin the British government did not want to include Sinn Féin in negotiations. However, even though the IRA was considered by the security forces to be ‘contained’ in that it was unlikely that they could escalate the level of conflict, individual high-profile attacks such as the bombing of London’s financial district⁴⁶ and of Downing Street itself⁴⁷ were for the British government an unacceptable level of violence.

The sense of military stalemate was expressed by the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke MP, in a major public statement in November 1989. He said that the IRA could not be defeated militarily and he held out the inducement that talks with Sinn Féin would be possible after an IRA ceasefire.⁴⁸ In spite of this public statement the Conservative British government did not approve of the Irish government’s approach of gradually ending the political isolation of Sinn Féin. Prior to the announcement of the first IRA ceasefire in August 1994 the British had continued to prioritise restarting talks between what it considered to be constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, and excluding Sinn Féin. They feared that bringing Sinn Féin into the process would negate years of effort at isolating them which could not then easily be reversed. This changed with the election of a new British Labour government in May 1997, and while this administration retained some reservations about the Irish government’s approach, it also actively engaged in the process and became a driving force in achieving the final agreement.⁴⁹ While the British government perceived a military stalemate at least by the late 1980s, the wider concept of ‘ripeness’ can not be appropriately applied to them until the mid-1990s when they came to accept, for the first time, that a political solution that excluded Sinn Féin was not possible, and also that the Irish government needed to play a central role in any negotiations.

Ulster Unionists and loyalists

There is very little evidence that Ulster Unionists perceived any significant level of ‘ripeness’ before the IRA ceasefire. They never accepted that the IRA could not be militarily defeated and accused successive British governments of being overly concerned with their international image and lacking the political will to take harsh security decisions.⁵⁰ Ulster Unionists, as represented by their mainstream political parties, were worried about their marginalisation from talks yet showed no sign of any significant degree of ‘ripeness’. Overwhelmingly their leadership wanted a more robust security response; they did not accept Sinn Féin’s legitimacy to represent their voters and there is no evidence that

⁴⁶In particular two unusually large devices caused hundreds of millions of pounds in damage in 1992/3 in London’s financial district, at the Baltic Exchange in April 1992 and a year later in the Bishopsgate area.

⁴⁷Mortars landed in the rear garden of 10 Downing Street during a cabinet meeting on 7 February 1991.

⁴⁸See *Irish Times*, 4 November 1989.

⁴⁹Deaglán De Bréadún, *The far side of revenge: making peace in Northern Ireland* (Cork, 2001).

⁵⁰See for example, James Molyneaux, House of Commons, 5 December 1974, vol. 882, col. 1975; Peter Robinson in NI Assembly, 13 February 1985, vol. 13, p. 391; Ian Paisley *Irish News*, 21 March 1989; Iris Robinson, NI Forum, 6 September 1996, vol. 8, p. 54.

they believed a better ‘way out’ than the status quo could be negotiated through talks.⁵¹ The only significant elements within the unionist political leadership that showed signs of ‘ripeness’ were the moderate pro-union Alliance Party—representing about 6 per cent of the public—and the political parties associated with the loyalist paramilitaries, representing about 3 per cent.

The loyalist parties—the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), aligned with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), aligned with the Ulster Defence Association (UDA)—showed a limited level of ‘ripeness’ stemming from their self-image as a group of counter-terrorist or pro-state terrorist organisations.⁵² This position would be more difficult to justify in the context of an IRA ceasefire, while at the same time joining in talks could be justified to their own support base as an opportunity to exert political influence as loyalists had been frustrated at their inability to create a political party with as high a level of popular support as Sinn Féin, and they saw the opportunity to develop a political support base in the context of a peace process. This low level of ‘ripeness’ amongst the loyalist paramilitaries was conditional on the IRA’s decisions. Their support for the emerging peace process was cautious and functional, but it was re-enforced by the increased profile of the PUP and UDP, as they acted as conduits to the loyalist paramilitaries. The British government tactically used the loyalist parties to balance and justify to the unionist community its contacts with Sinn Féin. A meeting with the much smaller UDP and PUP preceded the first public contact by British officials with Sinn Féin, and the first ministerial meeting followed a similar pattern. These contacts gave the loyalist parties a credibility and profile they had lacked before the peace process and encouraged them to continue with their participation.

With a very low level of ‘ripeness’, the participation of the main unionist party in talks requires explanation. Understanding the UUP’s willingness to support the agreement requires an analysis of the strategic choices available to mainstream unionism. Unionism was faced with a growing Irish nationalist consensus which included the engagement of influential groups in America. Irish nationalism, including northern nationalists, had formed an effective alliance with the US administration and a reasonable working relationship with the newly elected British Labour government which, with its large parliamentary majority was likely to be in power for the following eight years. Northern nationalists now made up over 40 per cent of the voting population (a significant increase from just 29 per cent in the early 1980s), moderate unionism as represented by Alliance could mobilise at least 6 or 7 per cent support; the centrist Northern Ireland Women’s’ Coalition (NIWC) 1.5 per cent and the loyalist paramilitaries 3 per cent. Mainstream unionism, for the first time since 1920, was faced with the possibility that it could become a minority of the Northern Ireland electorate. Nationalists were still a long way from securing a majority for a united Ireland, but if nationalists were united they could clearly secure majority support in Northern Ireland in a referendum for far-reaching political change. The UUP leadership were quite explicit about this threat during the negotiations. Unionists favoured the status quo over what they considered to be a high-risk peace process, but they also feared that their views

⁵¹William Ross MP (UUP), *Ulster Review* 23 (Autumn 1997); David Brewster (UUP), NI Forum, 27 February 1998, vol. 63, pp 21–22; Peter King (UUP), NI Forum, 4 October 1996, vol. 12, p. 60.

⁵²Steve Bruce, *The Red Hand: Protestant paramilitaries in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1992).

would be unrepresented in what would be a bilateral Irish nationalist-British government dialogue if they refused to join talks.⁵³ Senior UUP negotiator Anthony Alcock argued that if the UUP walked out it was likely that a section of mainstream unionists would vote in a referendum to accept a peace deal that had been negotiated in their absence.⁵⁴

Unionists had the power to veto a local parliament and executive by refusing to take part. However it was unionists who most wanted a devolved administration. Sinn Féin at that time (though they altered their view after being in government) opposed any local parliament and wanted governance via cross-border bodies, combined with a series of far-reaching reforms imposed by Dublin and London jointly. Unionists could not veto such arrangements and neither could they veto prisoner releases, police reform or equality measures, as the British government could implement these reforms without their agreement. The government led by Tony Blair was open to negotiating political reform with Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the Irish government if no wider agreement was possible with unionists.⁵⁵ Faced with this dilemma, unionism split, almost 50/50, but with a slim majority favouring engagement. This indicates that the main unionist parties did not have high levels of ‘ripeness’ but that their power of veto was too limited to avoid progressing towards an agreement when all the other key actors met the criteria of ‘ripeness’ supported by a high level of co-operation between nationalist parties, the Irish government and a modernising British government and when the pro-agreement dynamic was also reinforced by the external involvement of the USA.

CONCLUSION

The peace process would not have occurred, or survived, without a high level of ‘ripeness’ being exhibited by the two governments and by Sinn Féin as these three sets of actors were veto players in the conditions in which the agreement emerged. Once the Irish government and British Labour government were persuaded that a lasting IRA ceasefire was possible this altered their calculations and therefore the strategy of these key agenda setters. Unionists from 1993 onwards believed that they no longer possessed a veto over British government policy on Northern Ireland. The limits of their power of veto had been demonstrated by their incapacity to reverse the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement once the British government decided that its own interests were best served by its continuation. As the British government’s commitment to the peace process grew from 1993 onwards and especially after the 1994 ceasefires, unionists’ power of veto over future aspects of an agreement, with the exception of a local parliament, was further reduced. However, the low levels of ‘ripeness’ exhibited by unionist parties meant they were reluctant participants.

The IRA’s decision to call and to maintain a ceasefire and to ultimately disarm as a demonstration of their support for a new non-violent political strategy cannot be understood through an analysis focused exclusively on their position as a paramilitary organisation. The self-perception of the IRA was influenced by, and in turn influenced, the views of the other key actors. Their dynamic towards ‘ripeness’ was an interaction between internal actions, bi-lateral initiatives by the two governments and the intervention of then US president Bill Clinton. It is clear, and crucially it was clear at the time, that the

⁵³See *Irish Times*, 24 April 1995.

⁵⁴Northern Ireland Forum, 3 October 1997, vol. 45, p. 10.

⁵⁵See *Irish Times*, 17 February 1998.

IRA had come to the conclusion that while they could maintain their campaign without defeat, they could not attain their political goals. The majority of the IRA leadership saw their position as not only in stalemate, but also one in which the position of militant republicanism could weaken over time. Sinn Féin, in changing their long-standing policy of non-recognition of the legitimacy of the Irish government, met Zartman's criteria of recognition of spokespersons. This allowed the Irish government in turn to offer to recognise Sinn Féin's electoral mandate, in return for an IRA ceasefire, and these shifts helped to persuade each that the other was serious about a realistic 'way out'. The British government tentatively engaged, under then prime minister John Major, from late 1993 onwards, and did so more committedly after the British Labour Party came to power in 1997.

Ulster Unionists do not meet Zartman's criteria for ripeness, and as their power of veto was limited to the internal political structures of Northern Ireland they could not veto wider British government strategic engagement with the Irish government or with Sinn Féin. Nor could they veto decisions by the British government, to which they were strongly opposed, on prisoner releases and on police reform. The majority of Unionists reluctantly supported the process, focusing on the offer of a limited form of self-government, once it was clear to them that there was no alternative.

The analysis of the Northern Ireland case shows that the emergence of the peace process in the 1990s is consistent with a refined model of ripeness that analyses individual organisations rather than two binary oppositional groups as actors. Moments of ripeness, as defined in this article, did not exist earlier in the conflict. Information in the public domain in 1973 and in 1985 allows for an accurate judgement to be made on the level of 'ripeness' demonstrated by the relevant actors. In this way the Northern Ireland case can be used to further clarify the concept of 'ripeness' and in particular to set out a model which can be used in the context of other conflicts. First, it confirms the core elements of Zartman's work. An analysis of the trajectory towards peace in Northern Ireland shows a significant shift in the key factors identified as essential in Zartman's writing. Sinn Féin came to see their position as one of a hurting stalemate and to achieve political progress they adopted a new strategy focused on building a broad nationalist alliance, redefined their characterisation of the Irish government from collaborator to potential ally and moved towards an acceptance that such a strategy required an IRA ceasefire. The British government also, though to a lesser extent, saw itself in a hurting stalemate. There was for all actors, except within Ulster unionism, a gradual shift towards mutual recognition of spokespersons and a public exploration of the parameters of a potential agreement that would provide a 'way out' of the conflict.

This analysis of Northern Ireland demonstrates that for 'ripeness' to be a usable concept it needs to recognise that conflicts are not binary but multi-actor and that 'ripeness' is not a unitary concept but a graduated one. In none of the three agreements in Northern Ireland did a consensus exist. In each case judgement calls were made, explicitly or implicitly, by political actors about their own power of veto and about who else had a power of veto over issues of importance to them. 'Ripeness' needs to be conceptualised as a goal that is achieved when a critical mass within key political actors share perceptions around stalemate, recognition of spokespersons and the political will to engage in compromise. 'Ripeness', defined in this way, offers a lens through which to analyse conflict dynamics and to conceptualise the direction of movement which is required to break the path dependency of conflict and create the conditions for peace.