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What's the Craic? Humour and negotiations during the Northern Ireland peace process

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ABSTRACT

Sarcastic remarks and hilarious gestures were evident throughout the Northern Ireland peace process. However, was there anything behind this? Why were these humourous remarks being made? What role did humour have in communicating throughout the Northern Ireland peace process? This article argues that humour played a role in the Northern Ireland peace process in four primary ways, in (i) initiating contacts and meetings, (ii) developing relationships and confidence building, (iii) demonstrating solidarity and defusing situations, and (iv) expressing frustrations and objections. Furthermore, in the post-conflict context humour has been utilised when reflecting on the Northern Ireland peace process.

KEYWORDS Northern Ireland; peace process; humour; terrorism; communication

Introduction

The Northern Ireland peace process is naturally and rightly associated with its importance, seriousness, and magnitude. Indeed, the peace process was a grave situation and a high stakes process. By the 1990s, the Northern Ireland conflict was entering its third decade. Thousands had been killed, there had been numerous attacks on government figures, and tit-for-tat killings were gripping Northern Ireland society. Bringing peace to Northern Ireland was no mean feat. However, in the midst of the painstaking meetings and momentous moments, there were glimmers of humour. From sarcastic remarks to hilarious gestures, these were ubiquitous throughout the peace process.[1] Questions arose, why were these humourous remarks being made? Did humour have a role in the Northern Ireland peace process? And if so, what kind of role did it play?

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Using the Northern Ireland case study, this article demonstrates that humour can have several purposes in peace processes. Firstly, humour can play a positive role in initiating contacts and in the initial meetings of a peace process. Once these contacts are made, humour can assist in developing and advancing these relationships as confidence tries to be built through a peace process. Thirdly, this article shows that humour can be utilised to demonstrate solidarity and defuse tensions within negotiations. Evidence suggests that the most significant role humour played during the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland was to express frustrations. Humour was used to express frustrations, internally and externally, in a way to make their voice heard without escalating the situation. Additionally, humour is riddled in the memoirs written by key players reflecting on the peace process. However, this article does not argue that humour was the key reason for the success of the Good Friday Agreement, nor does it argue that it was a pivotal factor. Rather humour was evident throughout the peace process in a number of ways, which broadens our understanding of peace processes more generally.

The article draws on archival material, especially the material collected as part of the Writing Peace Quill Project at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. This archive material involves papers from a wide range of actors from the peace process from the UK National Archives, the Irish National Archives, the UVA Miller Center Presidential Oral Histories, Senator George Mitchell, former senior Irish civil servant Dermot Nally, former Alliance Party leader Lord John Alderdice, former Women's Coalition leader Monica McWilliams, and former Ulster Unionist Party [UUP] leader Lord David Trimble. It applies memoir material from key individuals from the peace process such as former Taoisigh, Prime Ministers and the political figures of the period. Furthermore, the article uses interview material with key participants in the peace process, such as former civil servants and ministers, that were gathered by the author.[2] The triangulation of data enables the cross-referencing of inaccurate accounts and ensures the validity of the arguments made. Through analysing this material, the comical sections were selected. Therefore, this article does not want to disproportionally portray that the negotiations were constantly humourous and downplay the seriousness of the negotiations. Rather, it aims to consider the successful and unsuccessful use of humour in the context of the negotiation, and to analyse what kind of role it played within the peace process when used.

The article systematically addresses the role of humour within the Northern Ireland peace process in four primary ways, in (i) initiating contacts and meetings, (ii) developing relationships and confidence building, (iii) demonstrating solidarity and defusing situations, and (iv) expressing frustrations and objections. Furthermore, in the post-conflict context, humour has been utilised by the key actors to reflect on the Northern

Ireland peace process. However, before it does that, it firstly covers the theory used to analyse humour during the Northern Ireland peace process, and background information of the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. Nonetheless, before it does this, the article presents the current state of the literature and the broader background to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Literature review

The literature on the role of humour used by the key actors of peace processes themselves is rather thin. However, Tsakona and Popa (2013) in their special issue pose the question of: whether the analysis of political humour could turn to how and when humour is, or could be, used to implement policies and create new potential contexts? They challenge the obvious narrative that humour is too unserious to be involved in potential drafting of agreements and treaties and argue that in fact it can allow people to see others' perspectives better and be more tolerant to others' ideologies (Tsakona & Popa, 2013, p. 6). Much of this article will ask the same question and use the Northern Ireland case study to do so. Whilst they state that there is much literature on the media's use of humour in analysing politics and how politicians use humour overtly when addressing the public, there has yet to be much literature on the covert use of humour by those in the political sphere (Tsakona & Popa, 2013, p. 3). This research will aim to contribute to this gap.

In an attempt to contribute to the gap in discussion of political humour that Tsakona and Popa (2013, p. 1) raise, Sørensen (2013) analysed how humour can be used in political stunts to challenge particular figures and show their opposition to their power. According to Sørensen (2013, p. 80) no matter how the subject of the joke reacts, the prankster will always benefit from it. The ways people challenge individuals in power with humour can be done through five different manners of humour according to Sørensen (2013, p. 71), which involves supportive humour, corrective humour, naïve humour, absurd humour, and provocative humour. Sørensen (2013, p. 81) also argues that humour can be an effective avenue to raise frustrations, awareness, and present alternatives.

Whilst the current literature does not consider the role of humour in the Northern Ireland peace process, especially from a top-down perspective as this article does, scholars have analysed the role of humour during other peace processes from a bottom-up perspective. Kanaana reflects how the Palestinians reacted to the peace process by collecting Palestinian folk narratives, including jokes, humourous stories, anecdotes, and rumours. They specifically analysed why jokes were centred around certain peace initiatives and how these jokes captured the mood of the Palestinians towards the

peace process. Kanaana (2017, pp. 68–80) analyses humour during the peace process at the end of the Gulf War and argues that using humour is one of the safest forms of expressing a wide variety of socially unacceptable impulses because it distracts from the intention behind it or makes someone hesitant to question what is behind it. Nevo and Levine (1994, pp. 125–145) consider Israeli humour during the Gulf War, and similar to Kanaana, they too consider the use of humour by the local population, not by the major players themselves. They found that much of the humour during the Gulf War by the Israeli population was considered 'humour through tears', the attempt to distort tragic reality by making it laughable.

This kind of humour from the population is evident in the Northern Ireland case. For example, after UK Prime Minister Tony Blair admitted to shaking Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams' hand when the two first met, the Prime Minister was greeted by a mob of unionist women in East Belfast throwing rubber gloves at him. Initially confused, Jonathan Powell (2009), Blair's Chief of Staff, explained to Blair that they were throwing the washing up gloves at him as a gesture that he should have worn them before shaking hands with Adams. Therefore, despite it not being within the scope of this paper, it is evident that humour was definitely used by the citizens of Northern Ireland to express their opinions about the peace process. Indeed, an analysis of the use of humour by the population would tell us a considerable amount regarding how they felt about the peace process and complement the work of Fairclough and Fairclough (2012, pp. 17–21) on how political jokes can represent wider political reality within a community.

Whilst there is no literature on the role of humour in the Northern Ireland peace process, Bramsen (2021) scrutinises agnostic aspects of interaction which occurred in the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2020, of which humour was analysed. Bramsen (2021, p. 1338) notes how humour was used as a manner of interacting, and elements of self-irony indicated some degree of second-order perspective and the ability to hold positions and identifies lightly. Bramsen (2021, p. 1339) also notes that the number of times MLAs laughed in 2020 compared to the first five nears of the Assembly demonstrated a significant increase in laughter. Bramsen's work is central in the debate of humour within Northern Ireland. This article aims to contribute to this discussion by assessing what role humour played before the Assembly sat within the context of the peace process running up to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The literature partly addresses the negative impact of the use of humour. Indeed, it appears that it can be a double-edged sword. How humour is perceived, and its subsequent impact, is down to the receiver. Humour can be used to hurt people or make them happy (Sørensen, 2013, p. 69). Humour, despite perhaps being delivered with good intention, can be misinterpreted, or regarded as insulting, particularly in different

intercultural exchanges or settings. Brown et al. (2019) consider how humour is perceived and argue that how humour is received depends largely on the kind of humour being used. For example, they highlight that affiliate humour, self-enhancing humour, aggressive humour, self-defeating humour, and self-disparaging humour have different impacts. For example, Brown et al. (2019, p. 132) claim that self-deprecating humour is perceived as positive.

Scholars of humour theory, such as John C. Meyer (2000, pp. 310–331), consider the power and variety of roles humour can play in communication. Firstly, Meyer highlights that whilst laughter is traditionally associated with indicating the experience of humour, it is not the only one. Such an experience can also be demonstrated by smiles, grins, or even sudden exhalations. Meyer (2000, p. 311) argues that within communication, humour has two main functions to unify or divide. He highlights how politicians cleverly use humour to unite their audience behind them and dividing the audience from the opposition. According to Martineau (1972, pp. 101–125) humour can serve as a 'lubricant' and an 'abrasive' in social contexts. Indeed, humour can smooth, solidify, integrate, refine relationships, or bring a greater level of credibility within a group. However, conversely, it can also cause friction within a group too (Meyer, 2000, p. 317).

According to Berger (1993), Raskin (1985) and Meyer (2000, p. 312), there are three primary ways humour emerged in human thought: through perceptions of relief, incongruity, and superiority. Firstly, relief theory is centred around the idea that people experience humour when stress or tension has been reduced in a certain manner. Thus, a release of nervous energy. According to Meyer (2000, p. 312), communicators can be aware of this and attempt to tell a joke at a beginning of their remarks to defuse a potentially tense situation. Secondly, is the incongruity theory where people laugh at what surprises them or is odd in a nonthreatening manner. Indeed, Meyer (2000, p. 314) argues that politicians utilize this type of humour to portray opponents' actions as irrational. He uses George Bush portraying Al Gore as 'Mr Ozone', alluding to his advocacy of strict environmental regulations, to demonstrate his point. Thirdly, there is the superiority theory, where people laugh at others because they feel triumph or superior to them in some manner (Meyer, 2000, p. 314; Gruner, 1997). This kind of humour is more than unexpected, it builds upon seeing oneself as right or triumphant 'in contrast to one who is inferior, wrong, or defeated' (Meyer, 2000, p. 314). This highlights the reasons why people may laugh at someone's joke. Nonetheless, Meyer explains some of the intentions behind the individual delivering the joke or using humour in the first place.

Meyer states there are four messages humour can give in social situations. The first is identification, where the audience is familiar with the humour and enhances the speaker's credibility. Identification humour serves to solidify the

commonality between the communicators. This is a safe way of communicating that normally may be blocked by lack of socially acceptable outlet. This manner of humour grows and deepens relationships whilst uncertainty is reduced (Meyer, 2000, p. 318). The speaker attempts to make the audience feel superior in that they a brought to an equal level with the speaker.

Secondly is the clarification of issues of positions, where the audience has lower degrees of familiarity to the humour topic. This is where communicators use humour to sum up their views in distinct memorable phrases or short anecdotes, which helps clarify issues and positions without a sense of correction to anyone involved (Meyer, 2000, p. 318). The humour subsequently serves to educate to clarify issues relating to the topic. This clarification function and the above identification function usually unify communicators.

Thirdly, is enforcement. Where the communicator enforces norms delicately 'by levelling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience'. Meyer (2000, p. 320) uses Reagan to exemplify this. Reagan used humour to speak against what he regarded as an oppressive federal government by making his audiences laugh at incongruities rather than criticise the government harshly. Thus, he managed to avoid being negative and critical, but still managed to note his disagreement.

Fourthly, and finally, is differentiation. In this situation, communicators usually use humour to contrast themselves with their opponents to make either an alliance or distinction. Here the audience tends to be very familiar with the topic, nevertheless, usually disagrees with the humour's target. Meyer (2000, p. 322) exemplifies this though a lawyer joke 'Q: Why don't snakes bite attorneys? A: Professional courtesy'. Evidently, this function of humour divides one group from another. However, it can also have a dual function and unite one group against another. Different to the first two functions, this differentiation function, alongside the enforcement function, tend to be more divisive as they rely on someone's disagreement (Meyer, 2000, p. 323). According to Meyer (2000, p. 327), divisive humour is effective to 'push away the 'other' and to show that they or their opinions are beyond the pale of common values being invoked'.

This article contributes to the existing literature and provides the first analysis of the role of humour within negotiations of a peace agreement. This research is important because the Northern Ireland peace process is used internationally as a case study on how to achieve a successful peace process. Northern Ireland has been used as inspiration globally in places such as Colombia. Therefore, in order for the right lessons to be taught globally, we need to ensure that we have as deep of an understanding of the peace process as possible. Humour is a part of human nature, present on a daily basis internationally and used for a variety of functions in social interactions. Therefore, it is integral to see how humour played out through

interactions during the peace process in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, this article provides further insight into the role of humour during negotiations and shines a light on the nuanced characteristics of negotiations. Indeed, with recent key negotiations surrounding Brexit and intense conflict breaking out in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, the importance of understanding the intricacy of negotiations is as prevalent as ever. Brown et al. (2019) highlight a need for greater study on how humour is perceived. This article will aim to contribute to this gap by addressing how humour can be perceived within peace negotiations. Furthermore, this article enhances our understanding of the strategic use of humour especially within the art of negotiation (Cann & Matson, 2014; Martin, 2007).

Theory and framework

To address the role humour played within the Northern Ireland peace process, this article utilises Meyer's theory four classifications of why people use humour, which include: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. The article also pulls on Berger (1993), Raskin (1985) and Meyer's (2000, p. 312) ideas that there are three primary ways humour emerged in human thought: through perceptions of relief, incongruity, and superiority. Using these theories this article will analyse the role of humour within the following framework: (i) initiating contacts and meetings, (ii) developing relationships and confidence building, (iii) demonstrating solidarity and defusing situations, and (iv) expressing frustrations and objections. Nonetheless, before it does that, the article firstly provides historical background to the context of the talks and conflict.

Background

The Northern Ireland conflict, also known as the Troubles, spanned from 1969 to 1998.[3] The main actors were the republicans, loyalists, and the UK state. The republican movement mainly compromised of the Provisional Irish Republican Army [PIRA] and its political wing, Sinn Féin. Their primary aims included communal defence of Catholic communities, and the longer-term aim of a fully independent 32 county Ireland (English, 2016). However, the UK state and loyalist paramilitaries, namely the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] and the UDA [Ulster Defence Association], were committed to maintaining Northern Ireland within the UK. Within the UK state there were many actors. The Northern Ireland Office [NIO] was established in March 1972 as a result of direct rule. It was led by a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and a team of civil servants. The NIO had a team in London and Belfast. Furthermore, the Home Office and Downing Street ministers and civil servants also worked on the 'Northern Ireland problem'. On the security

side of the UK state there were several actors, mainly the police service the Royal Ulster Constabulary [RUC] and their intelligence wing Special Branch, the British Army, MI5, MI6, GCHQ, and the Special Air Service [SAS]. On the Irish side, the Northern Ireland 'problem' received attention from the Taoiseach and Department of Foreign Affairs which included ministers and civil servants. The conflict ended in 1998 with the historic signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but the big question is, how did we get there?

When exactly the peace process in Northern Ireland began is disputed, and indeed there were numerous stages and agreements within the Northern Ireland peace process. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 under British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald brought an Irish dimension into Northern Irish affairs. This agreement succeeded in initiating more formal cooperation between civil servants in London, Dublin, and Belfast. The Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 between John Major and Albert Reynolds affirmed both the right of the people on the island of Ireland to self-determination. These agreements paved the way for the discussions which led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which brought peace to Northern Ireland. Therefore, this article considers the role of humour from the discussions leading up to the Anglo-Irish Agreement to the Good Friday Agreement. During this period there were many phases and avenues towards a peace process, from secret channels between the Republican movement and British intelligence and the Hume-Adams talks, to secret meetings between government ministers and political leaders. This next section of this article considers the use of humour at each level of this peace process, in the following ways: (i) initiating contacts and meetings, (ii) developing relationships and confidence building, (iii) demonstrating solidarity and defusing situations, and (iv) expressing frustrations and objections.

Role of humour in initiating contact and meetings

In the first meeting between a Sinn Féin leadership and British Prime Minister since Lloyd George, Tony Blair made the historic statement of shaking Republican leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness' hands. In the same meeting, Adams gave a private gift to the British Prime Minister, an Irish harp made from local materials. As he gave Blair the gift, Adams 'commented that it was the only part of Ireland Sinn Féin wanted the Prime Minister to keep' (PREM 49/119, Meeting with Sinn Féin, 13 October 1997). This joke mirrors enforcement humour introduced by Meyer, where Adams manages to note his disagreement with the British presence on the island of Ireland, without being viewed as inherently critical or aggressive. Indeed, a powerful move and tone to begin their discussions (Meyer, 2000, p. 320).

Meyer (2000, p. 311) argues that the audience who receives the joke determines how it is interpreted and what the actual function the humour used serves. Martin McGuinness' historical joke, in an attempt to break the ice when Sinn Féin went to No.10 for the first time, is an example of such a dynamic. As he entered the Cabinet Office McGuinness remarked, 'So this is where all the damage was done'. Blair's Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell (2009, p. 23) was unimpressed and recalls his reaction:

> We all froze, taken aback by this opening gambit, and I said, 'Yes, the mortars landed in the garden behind you. The Gulf War Cabinet on this side of the table, including my brother Charles, the Prime Minister's foreign affairs adviser, dived under the table, before one was injured'. McGuinness looked hurt. 'No, I meant this was where Michael Collins signed the Treaty in 1921'.

This joke tells us a considerable amount. Firstly, as Powell notes this highlighted Republicans' long historical memories, whereas the British Government officials had shorter memories and instantly thought of the IRA attack on Downing Street in 1991. Secondly, this shows a desire by Sinn Féin officials to begin the discussions with humour, to begin on the right foot. This joke made by McGuinness resembles identification theory where the communicator attempts to use humour to highlight a commonality of their position to defuse a potentially tense situation and create an atmosphere that would better facilitate further interaction between the two sides (Meyer, 2000, pp. 312–317; O'Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983, pp. 175–191). Evidently, the joke did not have the desired effect of the identification theory. Thirdly, this mirrors Martineau's (1972, pp. 101–125) idea that humour can either have a solidifying impact or actually create fiction. In this case, the use of humour by McGuinness appears to have caused friction at least for a moment.

One of the most recognisable and controversial moves by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland [1997-1999] Mo Mowlam was her meeting with the UDA-UFF prisoners at the Maze prison in the final months of the negotiations. The UDA-UFF prisoners had withdrawn their support for the talks in early January 1998. The security forces were anxious that loyalist opposition would derail the talks process, especially after the key loyalist leader Billy Wright was murdered a fortnight prior (Mullin, 1998). Risking her political career, Mowlam visited the loyalist leaders on 9 January 1998, in an attempt to get the loyalists' confidence in the talks process. During this meeting, Mowlam (2003) was reassured that she had done the right thing when the prisoners had changed out 'from the casual prison uniform of shorts and had put on long trousers. It was a symbolic act that gave me great comfort that I had done the right thing'. She recalls the meeting as successful, particularly because 'As the meeting went on we all became more relaxed and an

element of humour even emerged'. The political representatives of the loyalist prisoners praised the visit by Mowlam claiming her visit had been 'instrumental' in bringing the loyalist paramilitaries back from the brink (Murray, 1998). In that case the humour was a by-product of improving atmosphere in the talks rather than a conscious tool used by either side. Therefore was humour in this case mirrors Martineau's idea that humour is a good lubricant to sooth and solidify relations, even between terrorists and government ministers.

Humour also played more of a double-edged role in negotiations. In the 25th Anniversary events at Queen's University of Belfast, Senator George Mitchell (Belfast Telegraph, 2023) recalled the very first day of all-party talks in June 1996 when David Ervine shouted across the room to Senator Mitchell:

> Senator, if you are to be of any use to us there is one thing you must understand.
>
> What is it? I asked.
>
> With a smile on his face, he replied: We in Northern Ireland will drive one hundred miles out of our way to receive an insult.
>
> I laughed, thinking it was a joke. But as I looked around the room they weren't laughing. They were nodding in agreement.

This use of exaggerative humour supports Sørensen's (2013) claim that humour can be utilized to raise awareness of certain issues. This is particularly effective here as the joke raises awareness of the different cultural background between those Northern Irish in the talks, and the chair, Senator Mitchell, who came from the US.

Humour in developing relationships

Humour helped develop relationships. And September 1993 was no different, when then recently appointed US Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy Smith attempted to have a proactive role in the peace process. Prior to the meeting, the British viewed her efforts as undermining their progress and were counterproductive due to her lack of knowledge on Northern Ireland. Subsequently, the British decided to brief Kennedy Smith on the Northern Ireland situation during her visit to Ireland. Civil servant Peter Bell was tasked with briefing the Ambassador. Bell recalled after the meeting:

> All in all, a very interesting hour and a quarter. I did my best not to come across as the stuffy Brit and, in fact I quite warmed to Mrs Kennedy Smith, who laughed, I hope sincerely, at my jokes, and had a pleasant twinkle in her eye for most of our encounter. She certainly seemed someone one can do business with and, whatever her initial starting point … and current level of knowledge,

> someone who at least seems prepared to learn. (CENT_1_24_27A, Extracts Mtgs with US, Meeting between P N Bell and Mrs Kennedy Smith over breakfast, 9 September 1993)

What is striking about this encounter is how charmed and willing to cooperate Bell was with Kennedy Smith after their meeting. The document notes that whilst it was evident Kennedy Smith was not fully aware of the situation in Northern Ireland 'whatever her initial starting point … and current level of knowledge', after laughing at Bell's jokes throughout the encounter, Bell felt she was someone the UK government could 'do business with'. Despite not being able to know what the jokes were from the archival material, we can see just by Kennedy Smith laughing at Bell's jokes, that the relationship between them strengthens and becomes rather positive. Indeed, McLachlan (2022, pp. 29–50) suggests in their research that laughter can be an acknowledgement of continued solidarity with the speaker.

Humour plays a role in the relationship between NIO civil servant Tony Beeton and member of Sinn Féin delegation, Siobhan O'Hanlon. Their relationship began as they were used as a low-level channel to organise meetings and communicate between the NIO and Sinn Féin, during the 1995 IRA ceasefire period. From a document that notes the topic of conversation between the two during this period, it is evident that the Beeton-O'Hanlon line was used to raise potential spoilers to peace such as RUC behaviour (CJ 4/11698, Telephone call from Siobhan O'Hanlon, 15 August 1995). In a phone call between Beeton and O'Hanlon after a phone call between Ancram and McGuinness and a day before their scheduled meeting. Here there are small signs of growing trust and endearment as O'Hanlon laughs at Beeton's comments that McGuinness would not snub senior civil servant Quentin Thomas, 'I added that I was equally confident that McGuinness would not cold-shoulder Quentin Thomas at the Meeting and she agreed, with a slight laugh' (CJ 4/11698, Meeting with Martin McGuinness, 27 September 1995). The use of humour by Beeton mirrors the clarification theory by Meyer, where he stresses his position on a certain issue [that Quentin Thomas was going to be attending the meeting] but in a manner which unifies the two parties. This also mirrors Sørensen's (2013, p. 81) argument that humour can be an effective tool to raise awareness and present alternatives to the suggested narrative. These documents are from 1995 but more broadly in 1996 and 1997 we can see the Beeton-O'Hanlon channel increasingly being used as this relationship develops.

One of the most notable relationships which grew during the peace process was of Mo Mowlam's with Sinn Féin. According to the historical record, the initial meeting between McGuinness and Adams did not go well and the two sides got off on the wrong foot. Subsequently, Mowlam suggests that they restart the meeting 'only this time, no cocks on the

table' (Cooke, 2010). It appears here that Mowlam was trying to defuse the situation by making Adams and McGuinness laugh by saying something they did not expect a Secretary of State to say. Another example of the humourous relationship between Mowlam (2003, p. 175) and the Republicans can be seen after Sinn Féin's first meeting to Downing Street, the Sinn Féin delegation had a photoshoot outside No.10:

> Having pictures of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness splashed on every newspaper's front page standing outside No. 10 beside a big twinkly Christmas tree was certainly a risk for a British Government to take at that time … I jokingly suggested to Gerry that he should use it as his official Christmas card that year. He wrinkled his eyes, said he'd already got one, and then smiled.

This humour resonates with the humour theory of identification, where Mowlam uses humour to attempt to make the Sinn Féin delegation feel like an equal to her. This in turn eases tensions between the two parties according to Meyer (2000, p. 318). Both Mowlam and the Republican movement's key leaders enjoyed a joke. For example, in a meeting between Martin McGuinness and Paul Murphy, Murphy (interview with author, 7 February 2024) remarked to McGuinness that he was visiting Derry the next day for a meeting and to see the walls. McGuinness quickly remarked that 'that's alright Paul, I'll call the boys off'. Evidence suggests this humourous relationship between the government and the Republican delegation allowed a deeper relationship to grow, which was key to the Good Friday Agreement.

Mowlam's jokes did not always have the desired effect, however. One of the most difficult relationships she had during her time as Secretary of State was with the leader of the largest party the UUP, David Trimble. Indeed, this relationship deteriorated so much that Trimble liaised primarily with the UK Prime Minister Tony Blair by the end of the talks, unlike most other parties. However, it must be noted that Mowlam's mannerisms and use of humour were not the primary reason for this deterioration. Indeed, Trimble perceived Mowlam being too willing to make concessions to republicans, and therefore believed his own agenda was best served bypassing her.

Mowlam places great importance on the role of humour in negotiations. For example, Mowlam (2003, p. 123) in her memoirs recalls 'Occasionally we would, at the end of the session joke over something else on the news, Martin more than Gerry. Martin is a more open person than Gerry'. Senior Irish diplomat David Donoghue (2022, p. 62) also picked up on this and remarks, 'Her [Mowlam's] relaxed banter with people such as Martin McGuinness and David Ervine [Progressive Unionist Party leader] created an uneasy contrast'. NIO civil servant, and one of the key negotiators of the Good Friday Agreement, Chris Maccabe (interview with author, 22 November 2023) also found through negotiations that humour was always there with Republicans

and witnessed their 'quick, intrinsic, inherent sense of humour'. Mowlam (2003, p. 204) also attributes significance to humour when dealing with international audiences such as the US during the peace process:

> When I gave a tin plate, costing ninety-nine pence, with a picture of the Changing of the Guard on it, to Bill Clinton he laughed and said it was a great gift. Because of the formalities when dignitaries visit another country, a bit of humour can make a difference. I think with a mixture of determination and humour I got our message across in the US.

Interestingly, NIO civil servant David Crabbe (interview with author, 22 November 2023) recalls that similarly the Irish Government diplomats were very convivial and loved to joke. This is interesting because according to Wanzer et al. (1996, pp. 42–52), people who are perceived to appreciate humour readily tend to be more popular with others. Studies have shown that humour is traditionally linked with strength and warmth (Müller & Ruch, 2010, pp. 368–376). Perhaps then it is no surprise that Sinn Féin, the Irish delegation and Mowlam tactically used humour as a strategy during the peace process.

Solidarity and defusing situations

The Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds's (2009, p. 312) memoirs do not mention humour much; perhaps this is reflective of his business background. However, one event he recalls humour being apparent was when the Downing Street Declaration was signed in December 1993:

> There was a lot of banter around the table, a lot of hand-shaking and back-slapping; champagne was served- orange juice for me, I was still teetotal. As Robin Butler remarked to me, we'd 'come a long way from Baldonnell!'

This joke by the UK Cabinet Secretary to the Irish Taoiseach about a particularly hostile meeting between the Irish and British demonstrates Butler's attempt to show solidarity with the Irish. By comparing it to the infamous rocky meeting the joke by Butler highlights how much their relationship had developed.

It emerges that identification humour was utilized by civil servants at the NIO when initiating their first in person meetings with the Republican movement in 1994. Former NIO civil servant Chris Maccabe (interview with author, 22 November 2023) recalls how the NIO team joked over dinner the night before the meeting which they called the 'last supper'. They jokingly named it the 'last supper' because there had been a decision to not body search the Sinn Féin delegation. It was felt that 'regardless of their pasts there was nothing to suggest that any of them would be joining exploratory dialogue with anything but pacific intentions, and after confirming that no one on either government teams had any objection, the secretary of state approved a policy of no searching' (Maccabe, 2015). Evidence suggests that

identification humour here was effective, as the audience was very informed about the context of the 'last supper' joke. It appears that this humour was a manner for them to express their anxiety and build solidarity between the NIO civil servants before the meeting.

Humour was used by Blair when he and his Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell met the leadership of the Orange Order during the Good Friday negotiations. Blair and Powell were met with an unproductive meeting with the Orange Order, as Blair (2011, pp. 161–162) recalls the meeting in his memoirs:

> Strangely it was with the Orange Order that Jonathan lost his cool. We were having one of those interminable, circular and unproductive meetings around whether, where, how the march might be done, and the Orange Order were making their points. One of them made a childish remark about my involvement. Suddenly, I became aware of a rumbling to my right followed by Jonathan leaping to his feet, virtually throwing himself across the table, face red with anger, shouting: 'How dare you talk to the British prime minister like that? How dare you?'. We were all speechless with amazement. Except Jonathan, who was full of speech, somewhat repetitive but making his point with great clarity. The Orange Order chap was quite shaken. So was I. As I say, I'd never seen him like that before. We had some words afterwards along the lines of 'You should have taken your tablets this morning', and I've never seen him like that since. No one ever quite behaved normally around the issue of Northern Ireland.

The messaging of the humour used here by Blair appears twofold. Firstly, the joke Blair says at the time 'You should have taken your tablets today' resonated with identification humour, where it serves to solidify the commonality between the speaker [Blair] and the audience [Powell]. The humour used here defuses the situation and provides a sense of relief and solidarity between the two. The second joke in this text 'No one ever quite behaved normally around the issue of Northern Ireland' is clarification humour as Blair reflects on the time. It is a witty quip that summarises Blair's views on the Northern Ireland 'problem', in a memorable manner without offending anyone.

A more overt example of humour used to defuse situations came in July 1996 in a long day of bilaterals and deliberate press briefings by the DUP and SDLP. When responding to Ian Paisely's letter of 22 July, the Secretary of State highlighted that the proposals in the 'Opening Scenario' paper had effective been overtaken, and that the paper was no longer on the table. According to the UK civil servants reporting of the meeting:

> Paisley subsequently went out to the press claiming that the Chairman's powers had been 'emasculated' (which prompted Senator Mitchell to say that he would wish to speak to his wife before she had a chance to read the newspapers!) and that his wings had been clipped. The UUP were subsequently obliged to tell the press that this was no victory for the DUP in that the 'Opening Scenario' paper had been removed from the table by the Irish as long ago as 12 June. (CJ 4/12309, Talks Tuesday 23 July 1996 Summary, 24 July 1996. Available: https://www.quillproject.net/resource_collections/351/resource_item/25191)

Here it appears Mitchell uses differentiation humour to contrast himself with Paisley to make either alliance with the other actors in the room such as the UUP, SDLP and British Government, divides Paisley and the DUP from the other groups (Meyer, 2000, p. 323). Indeed, Mitchell uses differentiation humour well here to push away Paisley and the DUP and 'to show that they or their opinions are beyond the pale of common values being invoked' (Meyer, 2000, p. 327). By highlighting that Paisley's opinion is beyond the pale of common values, he diminishes Paisley's attack on him and the process. Subsequently, by taking the wind out of Paisley's sails through the use of humour, Mitchell manages to defuse the situation from escalating further into more people seeing value in Paisley's points.

Humour in expressing frustrations and objections

The most significant role humour played during the peace process in Northern Ireland was to express frustrations. Humour has historically been utilised to express frustration in a manner that would not be taken so seriously to escalate the situation, whilst still making your voice heard (Sørensen, 2013, p. 81). Clarification humour was used by the Irish delegation to express frustration. For example, in June 1993, in a meeting between Dermot Nally and Robin Butler, Nally provided a rather gloomy assessment of the prospects of peace talks, due to the hurdles surrounding media leaks, and that from:

> the experience of proposals which had emerged in 1920, in 1972 and 1973, for North/South arrangements or institutions, it was likely that any outcome of the talks would be so diminutive as not to be worthwhile insofar as we were concerned. (Dermot Nally Papers UCDA P254/10, Meeting of the Butler-Nally Group, 13 June 1993. Available: https://www.quillproject.net/resource_collections/341/resource_item/23413)

Nally concluded that '[i]n short, if looks as if the talks, in their likely format, if they ever got off the ground, were like flogging a dead horse in a blind alley' (Dermot Nally Papers UCDA P254/10, Meeting of the Butler-Nally Group, 13 June 1993. Available: https://www.quillproject.net/resource_collections/341/resource_item/23413). This witty and memorable phrase was an effective manner for Nally to clarify his position on the magnitude of the task ahead. According to Meyer, this type of humour usually unites parties. Indeed, the Nally-Butler relationship became instrumental in the peace process.

Humour was also used to express frustration regarding those on the 'same side'. Indeed, Mo Mowlam remarked to Jonathan Powell (2014, p. 180) once, that Tony Blair thought he '*was* fucking Jesus'. This use of enforcement humour is tactical. It is noted in the archives that there were tensions between the NIO and Number 10 during this period as they differed in approaches to the peace process. Mowlam often felt that Number 10 would often bypass her and deal with the 'Northern Ireland Problem'

without her and the NIO. Furthermore, she also felt that Number 10 were not working fast enough to bring peace to Northern Ireland. Therefore, this use of enforcement humour is used by Mowlam to note her disagreement to and frustration with Blair's approach to the peace process, in a manner which avoids being overly critical and negative.

During the Blair period, the NIO received a copy of an interview Martin McGuinness had done with Barry Cowan, where he denies being a member of the IRA and IRA Army council. On the side of the document of the interview received by the NIO, a civil servant has written 'There are liars, damned liars and then there's Sinn Féin press statements' (CJ 4/12380, McGuinness interview with Barry Cowan, 17 December 1995). This use of differentiation humour suggests that the person who wrote the note is attempting to contrast the UK government to the Republican movement. Indeed, suggesting that they are truthful and moral, and Sinn Féin on the opposite end. This perhaps suggests a NIO frustration with Sinn Féin tactics too.

Sarcastic humour was evident in a letter from May 1997 the Prime Minister's Private Secretary John Holmes to Prime Minister Tony Blair who was a few days into the job at that point stating, 'It will not be difficult to be in listening mode with Paisley, although he is often the soul of joviality on these occasions. Robinson is much cleverer and more difficult to deal with' (PREM 49/108, Letter from John Holmes to Prime Minister, May 1997). It is evident that Holmes is using clarification humour to express his frustrations regarding Paisley. However, perhaps he is also using this humour to highlight to the Prime Minister that he should be aware of Paisley and Robinson's antics. Indeed, by noting that it would not be difficult to be in listening mode with Paisley, Holmes clarifies his position in a quick and memorable manner, and educates the intended audience, in this case the Prime Minister. This mirrors Sørensen's (2013, p. 81) argument that humour can be utilized to raise frustrations and awareness on a particular issue.

Secretary General of Ireland's Foreign Ministry Noel Dorr cleverly used '[*sic*]', to humourously enforce norms delicately, when reporting on an informal dinner between British and Irish officials, where Robin Butler the UK Cabinet Secretary was present:

> Butler Speaking at one point of the British commitment said: we were the moving spirit of the Agreement because we saw it as a very important way of bringing peace to the island of Ireland- especially our part of it [*sic*]. (DFA 2020 23 16 1, Discussion at Informal Dinner of British and Irish Officials, 9 November 1988)

Through this intelligent use of sic Dorr subtly notes his disagreement through enforcement humour regarding British occupation of Ireland without being overtly critical or negative. This would be aimed at and align the Irish delegation with the clever use of humour.

One of the sticking issues for the Irish delegation was the issue of another inquiry into the events surrounding Bloody Sunday.[4] Former Irish Diplomat David Donoghue (2022, p. 99) recalls that:

> Building on the work done on the Bloody Sunday issue by the previous Irish Government, Ahern told Blair that everyone in Ireland wanted to see a new inquiry. He subsequently ratchets up the pressure on Blair to the point where the latter told him in a resigned fashion: ‘If I don’t do this, when will you ever speak to me again?’ ‘Never’ Ahern responded, tongue in cheek.

It appears that Ahern applies enforcement humour to attempt to get the British onside. This use of humour indeed allows Ahern to stress his disagreement with the British reluctance, without being aggressive or overly critical.

According to Mowlam (2003, p. 204), humour was instrumental to help get the message across. Humour was also used by key actors of the peace process to make certain points. For example, in the final hours of the Good Friday Negotiations, the Ulster Unionists said they would not support the agreement due to the Irish Language Act. They state that if there was going to be an Irish Language Act, they demanded a language act for the Ulster-Scots dialect, Ullans. In response to this last-minute demand by the Ulster Unionists, Ahern quips to the Ulster Unionists and suggests that maybe David would like to speak some of the ‘fecking thing’ [Ullans]’ (Blair, 2011, p. 173). This differentiation humour suggests that Ahern did not regard the Ulster-Scots dialect to be of the same standing as the Irish language. This dismissive humour attempts to divide those indifferent about the Ulster-Scott dialect [the majority] against those who felt passionate about the dialect [the minority]. If Ahern had simply said that he regarded the dialect as not of the same calibre it could have escalated the situation, especially in the final hours of the negotiations. However, by using the differentiation kind of humour, he demonstrated that the unionists’ opinions were ‘beyond the pale of common values being invoked’ (Meyer, 2000, p. 327). By saying this tongue in cheek comment, Ahern makes his point that he believes the unionists are clutching at straws and are being petty yet does not escalate the situation to an unsalvageable point.

As aforementioned, the use of humour played its most significant role when expressing frustrations. However, why is humour used to express frustration? Was it because it was difficult to express otherwise? What effect does it have? Evidence suggests that humour is used to express frustration because individuals can express their reservations without escalating the situation. It appears that the point is better received if it was expressed in a humourous manner than in a more serious tone. Often the impact of the use of humour to express frustrations is minimal and is merely used as an outlet of frustration within ‘their own side’, such as the Dorr ‘[*sic*]’ comment. However, by making the joke and expressing their frustration internally through humour, it perhaps serves to make the individuals feel heard and not escalate the situation further.

Humour in reflecting

In the memoirs of the key actors of the peace process humour was used to reflect on the peace process in Northern Ireland (Garrick, 2008, pp. 169–182). This use of humour in reflection could be utilised for a number of reasons. Firstly, humour could help participants in the peace process make sense of their memories. Secondly, it could help them express their frustrations in a polite manner and make comments about situations and people they found frustrating without causing offence. Or, thirdly, it could be used as a clever way to fight the narrative war that's occurred in post-conflict Northern Ireland.

Humour is evident in the participant seminars conducted by Coakley and Todd (2020, pp. 139–140). In the seminars, those involved in the discussions leading up to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 meet to reflect on the period. Interestingly, one thing that united the participants during the discussion was the laughter when reminiscing about Thatcher repeatedly calling the Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald 'Gareth'.

> Dermot Nally: I still remember Mrs Thatcher when she came to the Dublin council and she said 'Garret' – or I think it was Gareth?
>
> Michael Lillis: 'Gareth, she said 'Gareth', yes.
>
> Robert Armstrong: She always said 'Gareth!'
>
> Dermot Nally: [*doing an impression of Thatcher*] 'Gareth, I am doing everything possible for you. I'm going around here smiling all day' [*laughter*].

This kind of humour is characteristic of the differentiation function where it unites one group against another. Indeed, the target in this instance is Thatcher, and the others note their disagreement of her either through the humour used or their laughter. This team of civil servants worked well together and developed a strong relationship built on mutual respect. It is impossible to determine how much of a role humour played in the establishing and building of this relationship. Nonetheless, from the transcripts, it is evident that humour was a characteristic element to the relationship.

Thatcher's (2011, p. 400) memoir provides evidence of her frustration with FitzGerald when reflecting on a meeting they had in December 1984 in Dublin Castle, for the European Council:

> We had a short discussion in which he [FitzGerald] pleaded that extra sensitivity was needed in what was said after eight hundred years of misunderstandings. I felt at the end that I had gained an insight into every one of those eight hundred years.

This use of exaggerative humour mirrors the clarification theory, where Thatcher uses a distinct memorable anecdote to express her feeling that Fitz-Gerald's recalling of history was unnecessary.

When reflecting on the Northern Ireland peace process, Blair also uses exaggerative humour throughout his memoirs, particularly when expressing his frustrations with the unionist parties. In the final moments of the Good Friday negotiations the UUP decided to make new demands. Firstly, they wanted the building of the Maryfield Secretariat, which was established through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, permanently closed. Blair (2011, p. 174) recalls:

> They wanted the physical building closed. 'Fine, we'll use it for something else,' I said. 'No,' they said, 'we want Maryfield shut. Closed. No longer in use. For anything.' It was as if the building had become a political manifestation of the dispute, which I suppose in a sense it had. By now, I didn't care. I would have taken a crane and concrete block round and demolished it myself if it meant they signed up.

This use of exaggerative humour is a clever manner where Blair can express his frustrations with the UUP. Of course, the UK Prime Minister was not going to drive a crane into a governmental building, but the exaggerative statement allows Blair to express his exasperation with the UUP in a manner which is not as scathing. Blair expresses his annoyance with the UUP once again regarding the issue of Ullans. As aforementioned, the UUP decided in the final moments of the negotiations that if the Irish language was getting its own Language Act, that Ullans should receive equal recognition. Reflecting on this moment, Blair (2011, p. 173) recalls, 'By this time, nothing surprised me. They could have suggested sitting the Assembly on Mars and I would have started to draft options'. This exaggerative humour demonstrates Blair's frustrations with the UUP and how unreasonable he believes they were being during negotiations.

Challenges of assessing role of humour during the Northern Ireland peace process

There are a number of challenges to assessing the role of humour during the Northern Ireland peace process. Firstly, all files from the talks are not declassified. Therefore, currently it is impossible to know if humour occurred at each stage of negotiation, for example during the Hume-Adams talks from the mid-1980s onwards. Due to the lack of equal access to each stage of the talks it was impossible to count the number of times humour or laughter occurred during negotiations, like the Bramsen study. It would have been valuable to have a systematic analysis assessing whether the levels of humour and laughter varied during different parts of negotiation. However, it is currently not possible to do this.

Secondly, much of the material of this article has originated from memoirs and recorded conversations occurring many years after the negotiations themselves. Therefore, there is a danger that situations recalled can seem

humourous in reflection, but perhaps were not as humourous when they actually occurred. Indeed, individuals could be recollecting with rose tinted spectacles. Another issue with recollection is that people remember humour more than the average conversation. Therefore, there is a danger that the conversations and memoirs perhaps overstate times where humour occurred and therefore allowing humour to disproportionately represented in the negotiations, compared to the actual day to day use of it.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that humour was a double-edged sword and impacted peace negotiations in four primary ways. Firstly, it was used often in initiating contacts and in the initial meetings between different sides. Indeed, the use of humour did not always have the intended result, as the McGuinness joke when he entered Downing Street for the first time demonstrates. Secondly, humour also played a role in developing relations during the peace process, especially between the Republican movement and the British state. Humour was evident at many different levels of channels between the British and Republican movement which highlights its usefulness as a negotiating method. Evidence suggests that humour helped in strengthening the US and British relationship regarding Ireland during this time too. Thirdly, it was found that humour was used to demonstrate solidarity within the same side. This was particularly evident on the British side, in London and in the NIO in Belfast. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, humour was used by the key actors of the peace process to express their frustrations. In most of these contexts, humour created a safe space for objections and annoyances to be noted without escalating the situation, and sometimes to change negotiating outcomes. This was done internally and externally by all sides. Evidence suggests that the Irish government team used humour particularly effectively to note their objections and frustrations. Whilst the British also used humour more internally to create a sense of solidarity during the negotiations. The 'hilarity' during the peace negotiations themselves was much less overt, perhaps more often internal to each side [and not easily accessible to researchers] than between IRA and British government.

Reflecting on the article, perhaps the role of humour in the Northern Ireland case plays a particularly distinctive role due to there being a culture in Northern Ireland, and the UK and Ireland more broadly where humour and self-irony plays a major role in day to day life. A comparative study with other peace processes, such as the Colombian peace process, would be interesting to see how the role of humour changes vis-à-vis other contexts. There are other unanswered questions within this paper. For example, some civil servants suggest that they used humour within their reports so they

would have the minister's attention. Indeed, they highlighted the importance of standing out amongst the hundreds of reports ministers would have to read, and many would use humour to be noticed. Therefore, further research could consider the use of humour in report writing specifically and the rationale behind it. Secondly, this paper does not fully consider how different cultures impacted how actors used and responded to humour. There are any different cultures in Northern Ireland itself, from nationalism, unionism, republicanism, loyalism to different religious backgrounds. More broadly, there would have also been cultural differences and tensions between the Northern Irish, Irish, and those from mainland Britain. There would have also been individuals from a range of social classes involved in the talks. This all would have played a role in the humour utilized but also how that humour was received. Finally, it would be interesting to see if the use of humour would be as valuable if the actors involved in the negotiations were more international and diverse.

Outside of Northern Ireland, this article has broader lessons relevant to peace processes internationally. What is evident throughout the article is the positive role humour can play throughout a peace process, in the overt obvious ways of initiating contacts, maintaining relations and defusing situations. However, also it allows people to express their frustrations in a manner which would not be possible in a normal context. Indeed, it appears that the humour used by the actors of the peace process was not *just* a joke.

Notes

1. For more on the Quill Project see: https://www.quillproject.net/m2/library_collection/4
2. This research received ethical approval to conduct interviews with participants of the peace process. Ethical approval was given by the Social Sciences & Humanities IDREC ethics committee at the University of Oxford with the approval number of R89794/RE001. All subjects provided appropriate informed consent. Informed consent was obtained by providing an information sheet to the participants prior to the interview explaining the aims and objectives of the research. Each participant signed a consent form agreeing to be part of the study.
3. For the Northern Irish conflict (see Bennett, 2023; Coakley & Todd, 2020; English, 2003; Lagana, 2023; Leahy, 2020; McKittrick & McVea, 2012; Moloney, 2007; O Dochartaigh, 2021; Taylor, 1997).
4. Bloody Sunday was when the British Army shot and killed thirteen civilians during a civil rights march in Derry/ Londonderry on 30 January 1972.

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Data availability statement

Much of the data for this research article is utilised from the Quill Project at Pembroke College, University of Oxford's Writing Peace project, which is using archival material and the Quill software to understand the penning of the Good Friday Agreement in a new light. To access the Writing Peace platform, see: https://www.quillproject.net/m2/library_collection/4.

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