



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

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## **Abstract**

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

## **Keywords**

Cycle of violence, peace process, Northern Ireland

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

Even world leaders like US Secretary of State John Kerry find themselves making such statements when faced with four years of the Syrian quagmire that has high casualties and millions of displaced people. Resolving conflict is about repairing the broken relationships that gave rise to the conflict in the first place, often involving a power imbalance between a majority and a substantive minority. Yet it is important not to introduce artificial supports into a process that will eventually be withdrawn. The parties must reach realistic conclusions about what is achievable in a process and not what someone else may get for them. The overall challenge is to get out of the red zone [see Diagram 1 below] of many years of tit-for-tat cycles of violence, to re-ignite political negotiations to end the conflict and bring the protagonists into the blue zone where they



engage in peace talks around the table.

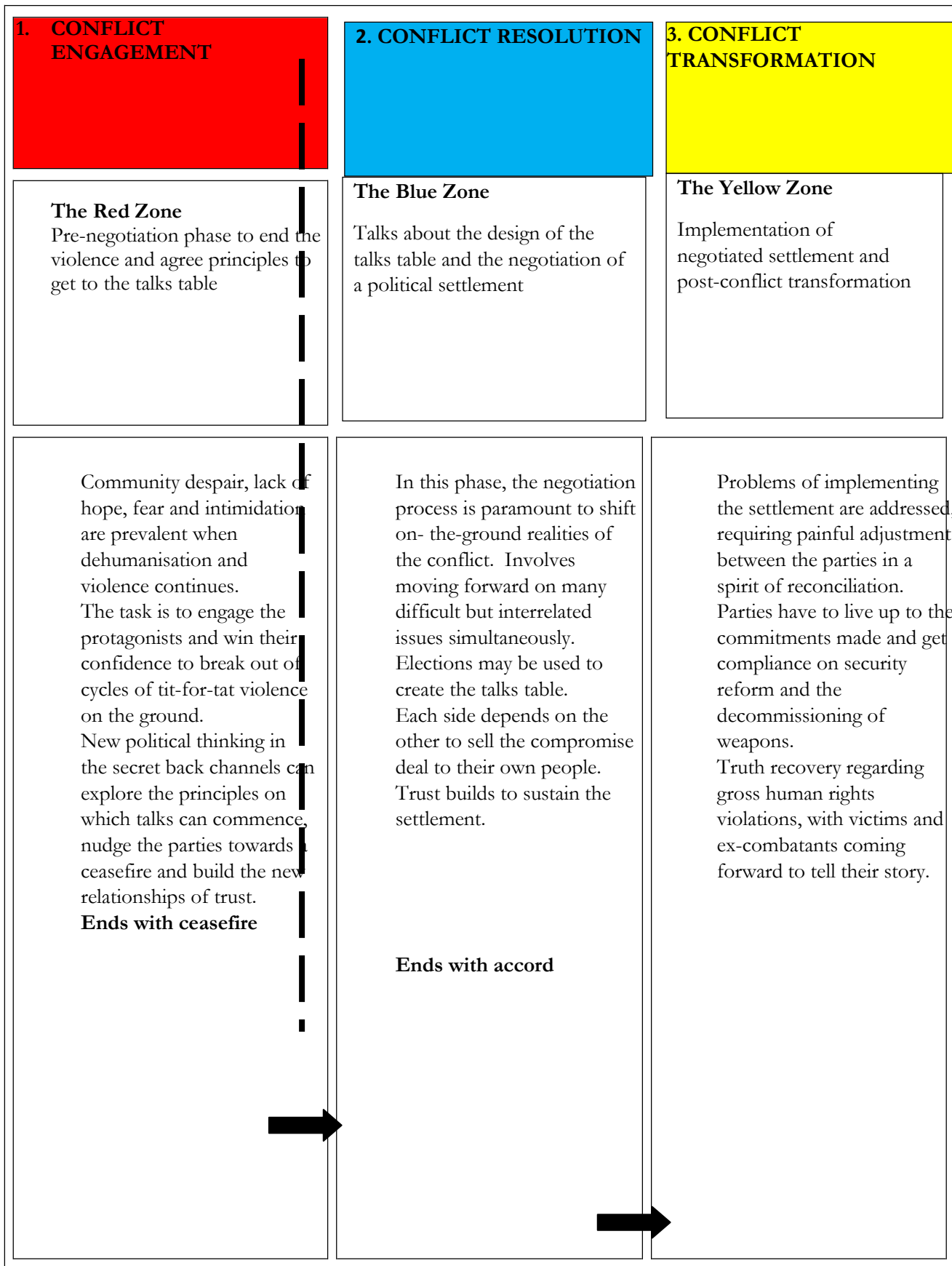
But how do you stop the violence which blocks parties from entering into a talks process? How do political negotiations get started? What are the political conditions that have to be in place before governments can begin to talk to groups engaged in violence? The Northern Ireland peace process shows that at least four factors need to come together to create a 'ripe moment' (Zartman 2000) in order to break the cycle of violence:

1. The realisation and mutual perception of a hurting stalemate between the main protagonists where neither side is going to win;
2. The emergence of political leadership that sees the political opportunity of arriving at a ceasefire and/or settlement and is prepared to take risks for peace;
3. The forging of a number of key political ideas that pumps political oxygen into what is seemingly a hopeless and despairing situation and provides a political way out of the conflict for the party leaders;
4. International high level political initiatives to support efforts to gain a ceasefire and move towards the creation of the talks table.

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



**Diagram 1: Sequential Phases of a Peace Process Architecture**





## Seeds of Irish peace process

It began with what republicans saw as a tragedy involving the deaths of ten republican hunger strikers at the Maze Prison during 1981 but led to the unintended consequence of the Provisional IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein, changing their strategy from being a purely military focused organisation to becoming a mainstream political party. The basic concept of the Hunger Strike was self-sacrifice and was rich with historical symbolism. It evoked the revered Fenian and Easter 1916 tradition of turning failure into success: “the cause is more important than your life”. On 9<sup>th</sup> April 1981, about halfway through his hunger strike, Bobby Sands was elected an MP to the British House of Commons with the news going right around the world. The H-Block hunger strike election campaign was run by Jim Gibney and Tom Hartley of Sinn Fein for what many nationalists saw as a modest demand to regain political status for IRA prisoners (Moloney 2007, Beresford 1987). The British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, refused to give in publicly but offered a compromise privately (O’Rawe 2010, Hennessey 2014) that Sinn Fein refused to accept.

The funerals of the dead Hunger Strikers had huge emotional resonances within the nationalist community. There was an enormous outpouring of public support that brought thousands onto the streets to attend the funerals whenever each of the ten Republican prisoners died over a period of several months. It saw the biggest single political shift in the Nationalist community on the narrowest of fulcrums. Suddenly Gerry Adams in Sinn Fein and his ‘kitchen cabinet’ of Gibney and Hartley woke up to the possibility of harnessing this shift and transforming it into a political opportunity. Danny Morrison asked the question at the 1981 Ard Fheis [annual conference]: “...will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand, and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?” (English 2004: 225).

While a dual strategy of guns and votes is chilling to democrats, it proved a crucial turning point for Adams who began to float ideas about how politics could deliver Republican objectives where violence could not. Loyalist leader Gusto Spence understood the significance: “Without Margaret Thatcher’s ham-handling, we wouldn’t have had the political strength Sinn Fein gained...Consequently we wouldn’t have had the peace process” [Garland 2001: 243]. Ultimately militants will only be convinced if they see the political benefits of winding down violence.

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

On the back of nationalist reaction in the wake of the Hunger strike, Gerry Adams was elected an MP for West Belfast in 1983 and in the process defeated the more moderate Gerry Fitt, one of the founders of SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party]. Up to that point, Sinn Fein had a policy of abstaining from taking seats in any elected chamber, whether Dublin, Westminster or Belfast. It was long held as a core value of the republican tradition going back to 1918. However, it was becoming clear that

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the IRA could not win an outright victory in their struggle to remove the British from Ireland, nor could they be defeated militarily. This realisation began to force the pace of debate about the need for a new strategy that would advance the political aims of the movement and at the same time raise its game to a higher political level. The northern faction now led by Adams and McGuinness thought it would be done by votes while the southern and more ideological traditionalists wanted to continue and if possible intensify the military struggle.

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

Having already replaced Ó Brádaigh as President of Sinn Fein three years earlier in 1983, Gerry Adams and his Belfast ‘kitchen cabinet’, now took complete control of the organisation from the southern leadership and together with McGuinness embarked on an unprecedented political partnership that went on to contest local and Westminster elections successfully. All of this political shift amounted to an ‘internal ripening’ (Lilja 2011) that put in place the first building block of the peace process.

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

### **Increased security cooperation**

Following the Hunger Strike in 1981, the British Government embarked on a new effort to establish a minimal level of political functioning under a system they described as rolling devolution within Northern Ireland. In the election to a new Northern Ireland Assembly in October 1982, the unionists successfully fought back to hold off the increased turn out by nationalists and republicans at the polls. However, the moderate nationalist SDLP and Sinn Fein, the political representatives of the Provisional IRA, refused to take their seats and consequently the British initiative stumbled.

The incoming Irish government in 1983 led by the Taoiseach/Irish Prime Minister Dr Garret FitzGerald was alarmed by the electoral success of Sinn Fein whose vote exceeded the SDLP by a margin of three to one in the Lower Falls by-election in Belfast. If that trend was to continue, it could undermine the moderate nationalism of John Hume’s SDLP party within Northern Ireland which was committed to an agreed Ireland through dialogue. If repeated in the south, that momentum could even destabilise the



Republic. FitzGerald was very worried: “Unless a political solution was found that would enable the [nationalist] minority to identify with the system of government in Northern Ireland, it would be impossible to solve the security problem (FitzGerald 2010: 363).” He had great difficulty in explaining to Mrs Thatcher that these two issues of nationalist political alienation and non- identification with the security forces and structures of justice were inter-twined.

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

Following the Brighton attack, a concerted high level political effort was made between Garret Fitzgerald and Margaret Thatcher that involved summit meetings, diplomacy and back channels. When they met at Chequers in November 1984, Fitzgerald went over the issues again of why a nationalist minority needed special treatment in terms of policing/security and political momentum. Amazingly, out of the clash of polar opposite views between these two heavyweights, Mrs Thatcher suddenly felt “We’re now tackling the problem in detail for the first time” (FitzGerald 1991: 521), showing that she loved intense political argument. Ideas about a joint border zone and a joint security commission got discussed but the Irish side were unwilling to go in this direction because they would be taking on responsibilities without power. The Irish would have to be politically involved in any security instrument. At this stage, Mrs Thatcher was opposed to any Irish involvement.

Despite disastrous press conferences following the summit, when Mrs Thatcher turned down the three political options put forward in the New Ireland Forum report in her famous “out, out, out” riposte, there followed a yearlong round of negotiations that led to the Anglo Irish Agreement in November 1985. Most of the progress was made at the high civil service level. It involved Sir Robert Armstrong (Cabinet Secretary), Sir Robin Butler and Sir David Goodall on the British side and Dermot Lally (Government Secretary), Noel Dorr and Michael Lillis on the Irish side. President Ronald Reagan applied some pressure on Mrs Thatcher to sign the Agreement even though she strongly opposed the newly created intergovernmental entity becoming a joint authority, thereby undermining British sovereignty (Mallie & McKittrick 2000). From their once differing perspectives, the two governments created an intergovernmental conference for improving political relations and a cooperation mechanism to be based in Belfast to work on security matters. For the first time since partition, both governments



gave Unionists a strong guarantee on the principle of consent – that no change in the status of Northern Ireland would come about without the consent of a majority of the people living there (O’Leary & McGarry 1996).

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

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

### **Unionist backlash**

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

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

Despite all the political progress between the Governments and within republicanism, the shrill sound of republican rhetoric around the removal of the British presence in Ireland served only to make Unionists and Loyalists more suspicious of republican motives. The Unionist community were now





asking themselves did this now mean they had to go? They were in fact the British presence in Ireland and no amount of violence, or historical revisionism would change that fact.

With the ongoing improvement in relations between the British and Irish Governments, the question was where would the substantial shift in unionism come from? Were there leaders who could go beyond negative identity politics and come up with a new vision of what unionism could be in the changing political landscape? [see Berti, Heifetz Knobel & Mason (2015) for further elaboration]. We describe this as the fourth building block together with an absent building block 5 in Diagram 2.

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

### **Mutual Hurting Stalemate**

Despite the best efforts of British security forces to manage the security threat, the low intensity war of bombs and shootings perpetrated by paramilitaries continued unabated. The IRA still had the capacity to do a lot of damage as a result of their acquisition of semtex and heavy arms' shipments which they got from Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. An IRA bomb killed 11 civilians and injured another 63 at the Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen in 1987 honouring the dead of previous wars. The images were horrific and the public was shocked. The next year 1988 saw further deaths on each side. In Gibraltar, three unarmed IRA activists were killed by the SAS in a controversial 'shoot to kill' incident. Their bodies were brought back to Milltown Cemetery in Belfast, where 3 mourners were killed by a loyalist Michael Stone. Two days later at another funeral, two British Army corporals are killed in a car nearby. Eight British soldiers are killed and 28 injured at Ballygawley. Three IRA men are shot dead by the SAS in Tyrone.

How much violence has there to be before parties say "enough is enough"? How much hurting has there to be before people shout stop? Zartman (2000) defines the mutually hurting stalemate as that point when the parties perceive the costs and prospects of continuing the conflict to be more burdensome than the costs and prospects of settlement. This opens a ripe moment when it becomes possible for political leaders to seize the opportunity to get out of the grip of the tit-for-tat spiral and open up a discussion around future solutions.

Looking back, it is possible to see that this ripe moment came in two waves – one in the late 1980's and one in the early 1990's after more atrocities. The British military strategists realised they could not beat the IRA militarily but they could certainly contain them. In fact, the IRA's operational capacity was being heavily undermined by informers and the success of British intelligence gathering through more effective electronic devices. BBC journalist Peter Taylor reported: "The Brits simply knew too much" (Taylor 2002: 308). On the other side, prominent IRA leaders began to accept they could not win, that the British military regime could not be defeated and there had to be negotiations. IRA ex-prisoner





Brendan Hughes told Taylor: “Otherwise the only alternative was [to carry on] a futile war which I didn’t think the leadership was prepared to do (Taylor 2002: 308).” They could keep the terrorism going but would they be any nearer their objective of British withdrawal and a United Ireland?

*Lesson 5: A peace process builds momentum when each side recognises that a military victory over the other side is not within their grasp and unattainable. However, leaders must prepare the ground for negotiations and to see whether dialogue is possible. Making contact with their enemy through private back channels becomes the first safe step.*

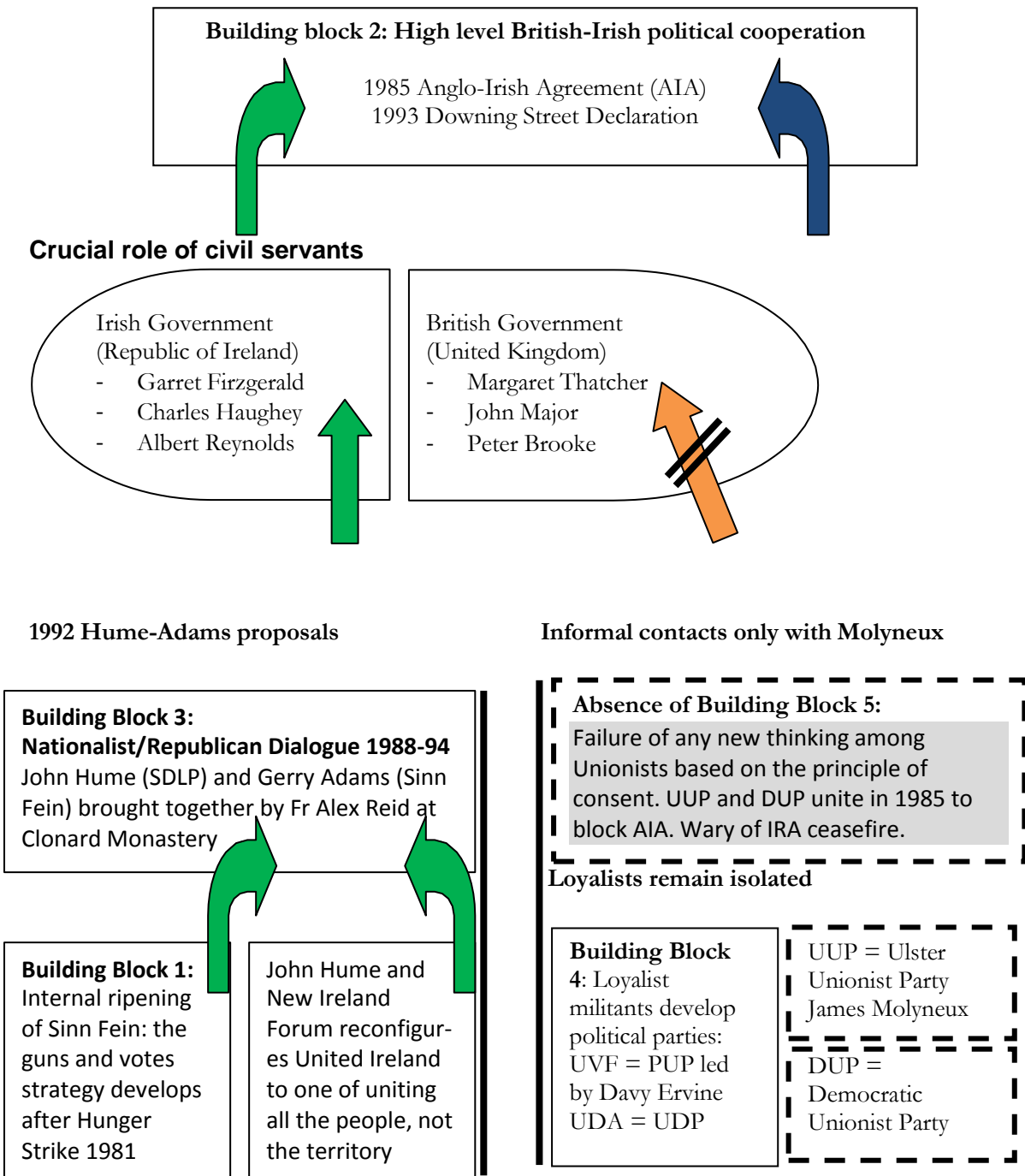
### **Back channel private dialogue**

In 1987, Fr. Alex Reid, a Redemptorist Priest in the Clonard Monastery in West Belfast, accelerated his efforts to get a clear set of principles and objectives from republicans that could bring them into an exchange of ideas with other nationalist parties like the SDLP, the moderate nationalist party, led by John Hume and the Irish Government headed by the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. He approached each of them with a set of six principles and twelve stepping stones that had been developed in a secret and unofficial channel of communication between Gerry Adams and Cardinal Tomas O Fiach, the Catholic Primate of

Ireland. In January 1988, John Hume took the risk of speaking directly with Gerry Adams for preliminary talks at Clonard Monastery (Moloney 2007). Hume was committed to dialogue and had been a leading contributor to the New Ireland Forum where four nationalist parties in Dublin 1983-4 had met to reach a nationalist consensus.



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





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

*Lesson 6: Ethnic conflict has traditionally been focused around issues like territory, power and resources. It is actually about people. In Ireland the violence was perpetrated with the goal of uniting territory. However, it was the people who were divided in their minds. Sometimes it is about creating a unity of hearts and minds acting in common purpose to make each other secure in their differing identities.*

John Hume and Gerry Adams continued to meet in secret for another four years to tease out key concepts (Adams 2003: 76-84) around:

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

New understandings emerged between them on how to reframe “the British presence in Ireland in a manner which leaves behind a stable and peaceful situation” (Adams 2003: 78). They shaped the Hume-Adams proposals, a set of principles that ultimately became part of the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993 following top level negotiations between the two governments. This third building block offered a way out of the conflict.

### **A new British-Irish political landscape**

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, the international context changed to enable a more favourable environment within which a peace process could be born. Political changes in London saw the departure of Mrs. Thatcher and the appointment of John Major as Prime minister in November 1990. He put Northern Ireland on the front burner and made it a priority. Peter Brooke became his Northern Ireland Secretary of State. Brooke was a shrewd political operator with a good understanding of Ireland, its history and politics, because of his Irish roots. He reopened the secret channel with the IRA senior leaders that went through Brendan Duddy, the Derry businessman (Moloney 2007: p406), and got back the dramatic message that the IRA wanted to end the conflict. John Major pondered whether it was genuine and believable (Major 1999: 431): “Were the Provisionals really ready to end violence? Or was it just a ploy? Did they wish to suck the government into negotiations in which they

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would demand unjustifiable concessions in return for an end to their killing of the innocent? If that failed, would they then blame us for the renewal of violence?" Jonathon Powell, Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair, had similar thoughts some years later: "It is very difficult for governments in democracies to be seen to be talking to terrorists who are killing their people unjustifiably. But it is precisely your enemies, rather than your friends, you should talk to if you want to resolve a conflict." [Powell 2008: 312].

Brooke was keenly aware of how republicans heard language and wanted to indicate a British willingness to help bring the conflict to an end. In November 1990, he made an astonishing public statement approved by John Major that echoed back what he knew was of strategic importance for the Reid/Hume/Adams back channel. He said the British government had "no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland .... Britain's purpose is not to occupy, oppress or to exploit." (Major 1999: 435). What this meant was that if a clear majority of the people in Northern Ireland wished to leave the UK, Britain would not force them to remain. "It is not the aspiration to a sovereign, united Ireland against which we set our face, but it's violent expression." It was hard for the unionists to hear this message, deeply unsettling them, because they had come to rely on the Thatcher dictum that Northern Ireland was, as she put it, "as British as Finchley [her constituency in England]".

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

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

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



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

### **Risking political credibility to end violence**

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

In a smart political calculation, Soderberg and Clinton calculated that by granting the visa, this would commit Adams to deliver the IRA ceasefire and enable the peace process to go forward. If he did not deliver, then Clinton would walk away from any further support (Mallie & McKittrick 2000). However, this would give opponents of Adams in the republican community the excuse to say: “They only want one thing: our capitulation and the destruction of the IRA.” In a last minute decision, the visa was granted and it turned out to be a public relations triumph for Adams, meeting members of Congress and appearing on TV talk shows. Adams scrupulously honoured the terms of the Clinton visa and only talked peace. When he returned home, Adams used the fact within Sinn Fein and the IRA that the Irish government had played a key role in securing his visa. The fact that the US went with the Irish position was proof that the peace process was advancing the political objectives of the republican movement. This changed the balance of power within the republican movement. If violence of any kind or even the threat of violence was to be continued, then all of the progress on the consensus between Dublin, Washington and the SDLP would melt away and they would be further back than ever.



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

## **Endgame**

The next step was for Sinn Fein to deliver the ceasefire. A group of Irish American businessmen assembled by Niall O'Dowd, New York publisher of the Irish Voice (O'Dowd 2011), played an important role in edging Sinn Fein/IRA along this road. As 1994 broke into spring, the internal debate sharpened inside republicanism about what was being sold out and for what in return. The hardliners argued that the history of IRA ceasefires had always weakened the organisation and damaged the armed struggle, pushing the line that the British and Irish governments wanted to destroy republicans. They believed any peace process involving the IRA would end the struggle to remove the British from Ireland and turn into a compromise. So it was vitally important for Adams, that having gone this far, to bring the whole movement with him and limit the size of any break away splinter group. The internal management of the republican movement to avoid a possible split was now becoming increasingly crucial. This is why Gerry Adams felt compelled to walk with IRA volunteers in carrying the coffin of a dead IRA man who was killed while planting a bomb on the Protestant Shankill Road in October 1993. That bomb killed nine people. He also needed to demonstrate publicly his identity as one of the people because he knew he had a big ask of the republican movement in the months ahead.

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

Following many secret meetings and the convening of an IRA army convention in the summer of 1994, the IRA was ready to take a decision. However, one more hurdle remained to be cleared. A visa was now required for veteran republican Joe Cahill to travel to the USA and reassure those who had supplied money for guns that the movement was moving into a new phase of the struggle, a phase characterised by political action and not military struggle. The key message was that the movement was united in its decision and that Adams and McGuinness had the support of the vast majority of the Republican family. When Taoiseach/prime minister Albert Reynolds again pressed Clinton to secure his approval for Cahill's entry into the US, Clinton remarked: "Have you seen this guy's CV?" To which Reynolds is reputed to have replied "I didn't expect you to read that he was a member of the Legion of Mary [conservative Catholic group]". Once again, Reynolds argued for a visa, the British opposed it and Clinton was told by his State Department that his political credibility was on the line. In the end, the visa was granted. However, all governments were weary of demands and tests. It was now time for Adams and Co. to call a



ceasefire. Cahill went to the US and fortyeight hours later on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1994, following 25 years of violence, the Provisional IRA called a complete cessation of military hostilities. For the first time in a quarter century, the guns and bombs of one of the most dangerous, disciplined and violent organisations fell silent. This was followed by the Loyalist ceasefire in October. The doors were eventually opened for Sinn Fein/IRA and the Loyalist parties to take their seats at the negotiation table.

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

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

When protagonists engage with each other, they build confidence, trust and credibility, giving reassurances of their desire to get to negotiations. While early stages of this work are best done secretly through back channel third parties shuttling between the parties, the power of direct face to face dialogue is huge in melting enemy images. It enables parties to hear and understand how past collective events have affected their community, to unravel the political trauma of what happened and to tease out the political issues that have to be addressed to get to a settlement. Here is where the pumping of political oxygen by the governments into the intense discussions enabled the nationalist parties to re-imagine the fractured relationships and to create new political frameworks. Yet the missed opportunity was not being able to engage the unionist parties in a similar de-escalation process [as shown on the right hand side of Diagram 2]. They were unable to win the confidence of their own Protestant community and forge growing relationships between Britain and Ireland, Ireland and Northern Ireland as well as within Northern Ireland.

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





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