

Introduction

This book is a collection of experiences and perceptions by senior British officials about their role in the Northern Ireland peace process. It does not take account of the long history of British association with Ireland and Northern Ireland, which has been extensively researched and analysed already. Nor does it contextualise the peace process within the historical tensions and difficulties that have bedevilled the British–Irish relationship since the seventeenth century (Foster 1988; Jackson 2003; Bew 2007). Equally, it does not seek to view the recent phase of British–Irish relations as a continuum of decision-making that led to the separation of Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic in the 1920s, and relate that to the subsequent violence and conflict that persisted up until the end of the twentieth century (Patterson 2006; Fanning 2013; Townshend 2013). Rather this is a work that examines the end of the modern period of conflict in Northern Ireland (which began in the late 1960s and became more popularly known as the Troubles) through inside accounts of British Government officials working at the centre of what became known as the ‘peace process’.

Analysis of efforts to develop peace in Northern Ireland often attributes the inception of the peace process to dialogues between Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams and the Social Democratic and Labour Party’s (SDLP) former leader John Hume in the late 1980s. However, attempts to forge peace have a longer timeline and some historical context is called for. The foundations of an attempt to bring about an end to conflict in Northern Ireland can be most obviously seen in the Sunningdale Agreement (SA) of 1973 (the SDLP’s Seamus Mallon later famously described the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 1998 as ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’), negotiated between the British and Irish governments with the direct involvement of the Northern Ireland parties, and, since then, the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985, negotiated between the British and Irish governments without the direct involvement of the Northern Ireland parties. The demise of the power-sharing Executive that evolved from Sunningdale, which, had it succeeded, would have averted a further twenty-five years of conflict, was stymied at one level by a lack of clarity about the extent of Irish influence and what a Council of Ireland (established at the Sunningdale Conference and consisting of a council of ministers and a consultative assembly with equal

numbers of representatives from Northern Ireland and Ireland in the Council assisting in the development of ‘executive and harmonising functions and a consultative role’, and equal numbers of representatives from both jurisdictions in the Assembly having ‘advisory and review functions’ (Bew and Gillespie 1999: 73)), set up under the Agreement, would mean for Irish involvement in Northern Ireland’s affairs. As Bew observed, this lack of clarity ‘succeeded in inflating nationalist aspirations, while at the same time raising loyalist fears of the Council as a means of forcing them into a united Ireland’ (Bew 2007: 512). Not surprisingly, given this ambiguity, the SDLP saw the Agreement as an opportunity to develop institutions that would support the transition to a united Ireland (as one of its founder members, Paddy Devlin, put it, the context provided by the Council of Ireland ‘would create and sustain an evolutionary process’ supportive of the transition to Irish unity (quoted in Bew 2007: 512)), confirming unionist and loyalist fears about the diminution of Northern Ireland in the process. As an indication of differences in understanding about what Sunningdale could achieve, former Northern Ireland prime minister Brian Faulkner, who became chief executive of the power-sharing arrangement, in his account of the period recalls particular concern about the SDLP’s use of the word ‘identification’, sensing that its motivation was not just to bring supporters along, but to facilitate Irish unification ‘in practice’ (Faulkner 1978: 229). The failure of the Agreement led to both the British and Irish governments ‘isolating and insulating themselves against the repercussions’ of the fallout, and so entrenched the likelihood of conflict for the long term (Craig 2010: 191).

Although the SA stipulated the key principle of consent (in paragraph 5 it stated: ‘The present status of Northern Ireland is that it is part of the United Kingdom. If in the future the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become part of a united Ireland, the British Government would support that wish.’), it was largely opposed by unionists from its inception. British prime minister Edward Heath did little to help Faulkner, resisting his objection to Irish involvement in the formation of a new police authority (Bew and Gillespie 1999: 74) and contributing to the impression that Faulkner was unable to prevent nationalists from gaining further influence and control (Bew 2007: 512). For Faulkner, Sunningdale did not last because ‘the loose ends of the threads’ of the Agreement precipitated confusion that was seized upon by unionist opposition and used to galvanise ‘Paisley and his cohorts into new militancy’ (Faulkner 1978: 226). Faulkner’s later admission that Sunningdale had left many things as ‘unfinished business’ also intimated that the Agreement had provided too much latitude (as Faulkner saw it) ‘to amend, alter and generally interfere with the negotiations’ (*ibid.*: 244), creating a lack of concision about what the outcome of those negotiations would mean. Although the Executive itself had understood the nature of decision-making and why compromise was important, among party representatives and members outside

the Executive there was a lack of understanding about ‘why their leaders were drifting away from the straight course of party dogma’ (Bloomfield 1994: 199).

But, even though the ambiguity of Sunningdale contributed to its demise (unlike the later GFA, which depended on it), it is clear that it was the scale of unionist and loyalist resistance that ultimately made the Executive untenable. Just after the Agreement was announced a Fianna Fáil minister, Kevin Boland, took to the Dublin courts to protest that Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, which claim Northern Ireland as part of Ireland, were not compatible with the Sunningdale recognition of Northern Ireland’s status. This challenge created problems for the Dublin Government, who, in response, claimed that the Agreement was not inconsistent with the Irish claim and that Northern Ireland was not outside Irish jurisdiction, confirming to unionists that the Agreement would offer the Irish a route to unification, a fear that dogged the Agreement constantly (Faulkner 1978: 246–7). And, while the Executive was striving to build a shared politics, with Protestants and Catholics working as a coalition to deliver political and social change, this aspiration was being pursued within a context of continuing violence in Northern Ireland that further divided the communities (Faulkner 1978: 240). Moreover, the general election of February 1974, which effectively functioned as a referendum on the Executive, exacerbated unionist dissent against power-sharing, with the result that eleven of the twelve House of Commons seats were won by those who opposed the Executive. The election had come too soon for those in the Executive who felt that the advantages of accommodation had not been given long enough to show success (Devlin 1993: 252; Bloomfield 1994: 198). Although the election result did not finish the SA at that point, it did augment unionist and loyalist reaction and so provided them ‘with the mandate they needed to support their actions aimed at ending power-sharing and, more importantly, stopping the Council of Ireland’ (Bew and Gillespie 1999: 82).

Against the background of a newly elected Labour Government, under Harold Wilson, anger fermented into support for an Ulster Workers’ Council strike from 15 May, leading to power cuts and factory closures. The strike resulted in the end of the Executive on 29 May, the day after the strike ended, proving to nationalists that unionists did not want to share power after all and encouraging nationalist leaders to look more to the Irish rather than to the British for any future settlement (*ibid.*: 91). In the words of SDLP politician Paddy Devlin, what the short life of the Executive had shown was ‘the necessity that it would have to be incorporated as a mandatory principle in any future formula to create peace and political stability’ (Devlin 1993: 250). The SA was also to provide a lesson that was heeded in the GFA of 1998, namely, the ‘need for inclusion and the need for public demonstration of support for such an agreement’ (Tonge 2008: 58) (both of which were shaped through a much longer build-up to the GFA, and because attitudes around armed conflict had changed).

For Devlin, as direct rule was imposed from London, the election result ended the ‘goodwill we were rapidly generating’ (*ibid.*: 252), and its collapse was used by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) to stress how the Irish Government had capitulated to the British and a ‘fascist victory’ (Rees 1985: 88). Northern Ireland secretary Merlyn Rees was to later note how power-sharing had not been able to work in a climate of civil unrest perpetuated by unionist–loyalist resistance, on the one hand, alongside an intensifying PIRA bombing campaign, on the other (*ibid.*: 89). But, for Rees, the failure of Sunningdale was ostensibly down to Dublin and London, who ‘had ignored the reality of the situation in the North of Ireland and especially the lack of support there for the Faulkner Unionists’ (*ibid.*: 90). A ‘reality’ that Rees saw as evidence of a dogged and trenchant ‘Ulster nationalism’ (*ibid.*: 91).

The deterioration of relations in Northern Ireland led Wilson to contemplate a British withdrawal, in which all British funding would be ended within five years, but it was clear that such a decision, if taken, would reinforce Protestant control and make the possibility of civil war highly likely (Bew 2007: 517). It was this doomsday scenario that discouraged rather than encouraged pursuit of the withdrawal plan and led to Northern Ireland being returned to direct rule (*ibid.*: 518). According to Craig, what lay behind Wilson’s consideration of withdrawal was the belief that Northern Ireland should move towards unification with Ireland because Protestants would ‘realise their true interests lay in rapprochement and possible reunion with Dublin’ (Craig 2010: 182). Wilson also believed that a PIRA bombing campaign in Britain in 1974 would mean there was public sympathy for withdrawal, thereby helping to vindicate such a move. However, the outcome of Wilson’s approach to Northern Ireland after Sunningdale, rather than withdrawal, was to commit to a process of ‘Ulsterisation’ where the conflict would be contained as much as possible in Northern Ireland by security and military means, designed to criminalise the conflict in an attempt to sap the violence of political legitimacy and public support. The impact of this strategy was to make a political solution to the Northern Ireland problem a remote possibility; indeed, it served to exacerbate the conditions of conflict. At one level, the SA and Executive had demonstrated that ‘structures of settlement’ could be found, but, at another level, that without sufficient public and cross-party consensus there was no ‘means with which it could be implemented’ (*ibid.*: 195).

The intense conflict, social unrest and political polarisation that led to the collapse of Sunningdale had shifted by the mid- to late 1980s as the futility of conflict became increasingly evident to both republicans and the British (if not openly admitted). The civil rights protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s were transformed and undermined by the explosion of violence that occurred after Bloody Sunday in January 1972, when the PIRA dramatically expanded in response to the British Parachute Regiment killing thirteen unarmed civil rights

protestors (a further man died shortly after, with dozens wounded). Within six months, a secret meeting had taken place between the PIRA leadership and Northern Ireland secretary Willie Whitelaw in London, but had failed miserably. Whitelaw was later to write: 'The meeting was a non-event. The PIRA leaders simply made impossible demands which I told them the British Government would never concede. They were in fact still in a mood of defiance and determination to carry on' (quoted in Bew and Gillespie 1999: 54). The meeting, which was followed within two weeks, on 21 July, by one of the most violent days of the Troubles (known as Bloody Friday), nevertheless revealed the value of contact between the British and the PIRA, which was sporadically used throughout the Troubles (and known as 'the link') and enabled avenues of dialogue to be maintained that would later lead to the emergence of the 'peace process' in the late 1980s (O'Dochartaigh 2011; Taylor 2011: 1–48; Huband 2013: 42–55).

Spiralling conflict made the possibility of ending it a distant prospect until after the hunger strikes in 1981, when ten republicans (Bobby Sands being the most popularised and mythologised of the strikers (Spencer 2015)) starved themselves to death in protest at being treated as criminals rather than as political prisoners and because of poor prison conditions (Beresford 1987). Although the conventional explanation of this period is that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher showed intransigence towards ending the strikes and allowed men to die, this dominant portrayal has since been challenged both by individual republicans (O'Rawe 2005) and in recently released government papers (Hennessey 2013) that confirm an offer made to the Sinn Féin leadership, which was held back from the hunger strikers to enable Sinn Féin to capitalise politically on widespread Catholic and republican anger, media attention and growing international pressure, all of which Sinn Féin sought to exploit. The hunger strikes created a political platform for republicans, and Sands was elected as MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone in March 1981, two months before his death, demonstrating a groundswell of support that the Sinn Féin leadership sought to use in order to transform republicanism from a military movement into a political one.

The AIA of 1985 was an attempt by the Irish and the British governments to neutralise the growing popularity of Sinn Féin by responding to the wide concerns of democratic nationalism. By enabling conditions that would help nationalist politics to gain support, the British and Irish believed that this would arrest Sinn Féin's rise, which was closely aligned with the actions of the PIRA. The message of Sinn Féin's political progress was one of violence gaining political credibility, to the detriment of democratic politics, and the Agreement was designed to counter and reverse this development. Importantly, the Agreement adhered to the principle of consent, as in Sunningdale, where any change to the status of Northern Ireland could come about only if the majority

living there agreed to it. It also continued with the Irish Government playing a ‘consultative’ role in Northern Ireland, but with a more specific focus on security and justice (lacking in Sunningdale). The path to the AIA is explored in Chapter 2, where the background to the Agreement is outlined, and then followed by interviews with the two leading British officials who negotiated on behalf of the Thatcher Government at that time: Sir David Goodall and Lord (Robert) Armstrong. This period offers a point of focus for understanding how the seeds of a peace process grew and how the endgame of talks and negotiations developed, but, interestingly, more because of the perceived disadvantages created by the AIA rather than any perceived advantages.

The transition from military republicanism to political republicanism is extensively explored in a number of fine studies (O’Brien 1995; De Breadun 2001; Mallie and McKittrick 2001; Taylor 2001; English 2003; Moloney 2002), which provide detailed background on the emergence of the peace process and how it took shape both indirectly and directly from the late 1980s, resulting in the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) of 1993 and a PIRA ceasefire in August 1994, before the GFA of 1998, which formalised the structures and processes needed to consolidate peace and power-sharing that were fully secured by 2010. There are also numerous excellent academic overviews of this period (Hennessey 2000; Dixon 2001; Bourke 2003; Cochrane 2013), as well as journalistic accounts (Mallie and McKittrick; 2001; Taylor 2001; Godson 2004; Millar 2009), and a raft of material from Irish and British government ministers and officials (from the Irish Government, Finlay 1998; Delaney 2001; Ahern 2009; Reynolds 2009, and from the British Government, Major 1999; Mowlam 2002; Blair 2010; Campbell 2013, and, by far the most comprehensive account, Powell 2008). Other valuable contributions are made by representatives of the various parties in Northern Ireland, and the American role is highlighted by senator George Mitchell’s narration of chairing the negotiations (McMichael 1999; Mitchell 1999; Adams 2003; Farren 2010). All these portrayals give necessary context and highlight the range of complexities and difficulties in working to secure a peace settlement.

However, what many of these contributions lack is an expansive analysis of the work carried out by senior civil servants throughout the period. Though a number of the above studies make reference to such individuals, there is no comprehensive or detailed picture of the roles played by civil servants at different times, or how those roles intersected with the political process across a period that included successive governments and changing political demands and expectations. It was very much the work of civil servants within both the British and Irish governments that gave substance to negotiations by distilling complex issues of difference into a point of common focus. To understand what that work entailed and how civil servants created interlocking approaches to what at times appeared to be irreconcilable oppositions is what this book is

about. The success of the peace process was not just the result of efforts by political leaders like Albert Reynolds, John Major, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair (vitaly important though they all were), but was achieved through the skills of those working in the background on text and dialogue that would create what one senior civil servant referred to as ‘zones of convergence’. The challenges faced by British officials in reaching the GFA (which similarly applied the consent principle from both the SA and the AIA) to secure power-sharing and subsequent areas that required further attention after Good Friday (notably on matters of decommissioning, policing and justice) inform the discussions that follow.

Although most of the chapters in this book provide material that supports historical examination of how the dynamics of peace in Northern Ireland emerged and developed, it is clear that the book is less an historical overview (although Chapters 1 and 2 provide historical accounts of efforts to achieve peace before the peace process) and more an analysis of experiences and practical responses within the peace process from 1990 until formal agreements on power-sharing and policing and justice in 2010. The SA is an indication of the longevity of attempts to bring about peace in Northern Ireland, but it was the development of a highly formalised process of political engagement from 1990 onwards that did so (even if that process may be seen as an extension of Sunningdale and, to a much lesser extent and for different reasons, the AIA), and the contributors to this book (far from the entire team) indicate the scale of attention and effort needed to make that process work.

Structure and content of the book

The structure of the book adheres to a composition of individually written chapters and extended interviews. This combination offers a considered development of specific areas alongside elaboration of more general contextual factors that affected interpersonal relations, and the dynamics and tensions of the peace process. What links the two approaches is that, in this instance, they are both drawn from experience and recollections that indicate how problems were worked through and overcome at textual, performative and practical levels. The extended interview offers a different insight into the work of British peace politics. The spontaneity of the interview elicits articulations and memories that are not worked through in the same way as the drafted chapter. Verbal responses work in a less concise (even if articulate) way, partly because the interview is a work in progress, shaped by questions, but not ultimately restrained by those questions. In my view, questions should be about releasing comment rather than capturing it, thus allowing the interview to be a relatively free-flowing exchange that both converges and diverges on points of interest and concern. All the interviews for this book were semi-structured in format and most of the respondents were interviewed at least twice.

The structure of the interview itself does not follow the same linearity as the written chapter. It moves, jumps about, settles on some points and skates across others, and in doing so it is a reflection of the patterns of conversation, where response and counter-response play off each other. It should be noted that one of the intentions when conducting the interviews was to ask respondents some similar questions about areas that have long fascinated me, and to look for consistencies and differences of perception in response. What were the Sinn Féin negotiators like and how did they compare with unionists and others? How is it possible to maintain principle whilst advocating pragmatism? Were some better at dealing with ambiguity than others? How did movement occur and how was leverage applied? What is the relationship with the interpersonal setting of the negotiating room and translating the outcome of that experience to text? Is personality as important as policy? Was the peace process a metaphorical as well as a literal project? How essential was creativity? Was the peace process a moral as well as a political exercise? How central was strategy in comparison with tactics? And so on. Such questions fascinate because they move analysis away from literature-induced argument and interrogation back into the remembered heat of the negotiation setting and, in that sense, help to build a picture of what things were like inside the room in a way that much academic work fails to do.

What is of particular fascination, perhaps, is that the interview is often mysterious and unpredictable in terms of where it leads and what comes out of it. Attitudes and recollections shift, but what is being emphasised by the respondent is more often than not a matter of importance to them and is revealing because of that. The interview may be constrained by the parameters of set questions, but, in this instance, those questions were largely open and functioned more as a focus for conversation rather than as a mechanical form of measurement. Persuasion is as much a performative process as it is a practical one, and the interview material seeks to quarry this largely uncharted area in negotiations. Behind the questions and responses is a narrative about behaviour in its complexity and how that behaviour informed the intentions of peace-building. Therefore, not only is this book about the key moments within a process that required those such as the contributors here (along with the Irish, the political parties and many others too) to work tirelessly to reach an agreement, it is also a testimony to the importance of human relations, political imagination and the tortuous road of moral introspection when seeking to draw proponents of violence into accepting the argument for ending that violence through the dynamics of talk and text. The connection between these two areas is obvious enough. The concision of the text is a result of the fluid, explorative, responsive forms of conversation and talk that preceded it. But what happens in the transition from one to the other in this multilayered and changeable world of negotiations, and how does the static formality of text reflect the intentions

of movement that gave rise to it? From the perspectives of British officials that is what this book sets out to examine.

In Chapter 1, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, a Northern Ireland cabinet secretary to three unionist prime ministers at Stormont in the 1960s, and a senior adviser to three secretaries of state in the 1980s, gives a personal account of his role in the construction of certain key documents and speeches in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the formative stages of the peace process. In this examination, he compares the quest throughout this period with the metaphor of scaling Mount Everest, viewing some early initiatives as developments to explore unfamiliar terrain rather than examples of a credible movement towards the summit. He discusses the nature of his own involvement in developing ideas, or in blending the ideas of others in effective terminology, while reminding the reader how swiftly and brutally events on the ground could overtake or undermine a promising political development. It is in this setting that Bloomfield discusses the impact of the early efforts of Terence O'Neill to improve 'community relations'; the belated proposals by Brian Faulkner to breathe new life into an expiring Stormont system; the milestone revelation in Whitelaw's Green Paper of 'power-sharing and an Irish dimension' as key elements in any political settlement; and the timely impact of the Whitbread speech made by Peter Brooke, with its renunciation of any 'selfish strategic or economic interest' in Britain's involvement with Northern Ireland. The chapter reveals the crucial interaction between the right and duty of ministers to decide, and the duty of civil servants to offer advice as well as respond to orders. Bloomfield makes it clear that, whatever the skill needed to draft effective and telling words, the true credit must rest with the politicians willing to give effect to them. Moreover, as he reminds us, the long search for peace and stability required the brave deeds of very many as well as the well-chosen words of a few.

In Chapter 2, Sir David Goodall and Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, who were key negotiators for the British Government on the AIA, discuss the development of interpersonal relations with the Irish and indicate how the Agreement led (if not directly or as intended) to the GFA of 1998. The chapter, which consists of a combined interview with both Goodall and Armstrong, elaborates on the security concerns of the Thatcher Government and the political concerns of the Irish about Sinn Féin's political advancement, and how both these positions were managed to shape dialogue and a joint approach to addressing the Northern Ireland problem. Both interviewees provide an inside picture of the dynamics and tactics used at the time of the AIA (which was to set out the parameters for a deliberative and coherent plan to help end conflict in Northern Ireland), and discuss how it provided a context for political accommodation, as well as creating the mechanisms for addressing and confronting the rise of republicanism.

The ‘constitutional issue’ has historically been highly contentious in Northern Ireland and Irish politics. Chapter 3, by David Hill, briefly sets the scene for this by examining the reasons why the constitutional issue is of such significance to unionists, nationalists and republicans, and charts the evolution of attitudes in the Irish Republic towards the constitutional status of Northern Ireland: through the Treaty, the Irish Civil War and the emergence of the ‘constitutional claim’ in the Irish Constitution of 1937, to the tradition of ‘verbal republicanism’. It will then show how the various formulations of ‘the constitutional claim’ and ‘the constitutional guarantee’ evolved during the talks process and ultimately allowed all the different perspectives on the constitutional issue to be accommodated within the concept – endorsed and validated by a ‘double referendum’, held on both sides of the border on the same day – that the achievement of a united Ireland would require the support of majorities in both parts of Ireland.

In Chapter 4, an extended interview with Sir John Chilcot outlines the management direction taken by the British team in negotiations, and considers the development of trust and relationships both within the team and with others as part of the peace process. Chilcot also highlights the importance of using leverage and argument within the negotiation setting and talks about using creative possibilities when coming up against perceived intransigence and obstruction. During the later stages of the peace process, Tony Blair spoke about the need to go *through* rather than *around* problems and concerns. Here, Chilcot will talk about both these directions, and offers an insightful picture of negotiation strategy operating at macro- and micro-levels. He also talks about interim positions and long-term positions, as well as the interconnections that existed between these two points of focus, and how they were each used to try to pressure the respective parties into movement and eventual agreement.

Chapter 5 discusses some features characteristic of intercommunal conflict and disputes involving minorities within states. They typically involve, for example, differences in a mix of ethnic, racial, linguistic religious and/or cultural characteristics, are often long-standing, complex and difficult, and involve contrasting accounts of reality because of differing historical narratives. They also commonly involve a profound sense of injustice, with differing grievances on each side, often accompanied by formal rituals of remembrance and celebration. Sir Quentin Thomas differentiates, for analytical purposes, between ‘incumbents’, ready to defend the status quo, and ‘challengers’, who seek a new arrangement, such as secession. He considers the differing options and objectives of the incumbents and the challengers and what distinguishes them. In particular, the incumbents seek, by repression or co-option, to reconcile the challengers to the current dispensation, or some modification of it, whereas the challengers seek to demonstrate that, without change, it is not viable. The chapter then identifies, against that background, five preconditions to the