

Reflections on the Irish 'peace process' - what Gerry Adams should have said to Mahmoud Abbas

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The Northern Ireland 'peace process' is said to have lessons for how other ethno-national territorial conflicts can be resolved; and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams was invited by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to advise on peace in Palestine/Israel. Adams focused on the fact that the USA had been central to initiating a break-through in Ireland/Northern Ireland, but in Palestine/Israel it is part of the problem, bankrolling a belligerent Israel and losing any semblance of being an 'honest broker' for peace.

However, he could also have focused on the fact that after two centuries of national struggles involving Irish nationalists, unionists and the British state, including nine decades of partition, Ireland/Northern Ireland exemplifies the intractability of ethno-national conflict and the high failure rate of nationalistic territorial 'solutions'. Ireland's positive lessons need to be balanced by its negative ones.

Positive and negative lessons

On the positive side, most of the political violence in Northern Ireland has now been stopped, obviously a major achievement for conflict management (and the stage of the peace process about which Gerry Adams was best qualified to advise Mahmoud Abbas - and the Israeli Government if it was listening). The Good Friday Agreement (GFA), ratified in June 1998 by 94% of Southern Irish and 71% of Northern Irish voters (including a narrow majority of the Northern unionists), effectively made the mid-1990s paramilitary cease-fires permanent. And it already contains most of the ingredients necessary for a self-sustaining resolution of conflict, even if some are only embryonic or not quite in place.

It established a consociational power-sharing regional government of Irish nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland (Strand 1); and North-South cross-border institutions drawn from the Northern and Southern parliaments and government departments with its own secretariat (Strand 2), which radically undercuts the rival claims to absolute territorial sovereignty which bedevil national conflict. There are also East-West inter-governmental institutions linking Ireland and Britain (Strand 3); and additional bodies dealing with equality and human rights. This combination of 'partition *plus* power-sharing *plus* cross-border institutions' is a crucial improvement over previous failed strategies of 'partition with some internal integration' and especially over 'partition with majoritarian domination'.

On the negative side, however, the GFA has not succeeded in resolving the conflict. In reality Northern Ireland has not progressed very far beyond the early management stages of its peace process, and any lessons from it have to be heavily qualified. Firstly, while the paramilitary cease-fires have greatly improved the situation, the conflict between nationalists and unionists continues, albeit more peacefully, and some argue that it has been further institutionalised and reinforced by the internal power-sharing or consociationalism at the heart of the GFA. Secondly, for most of the eight years since 1998, the GFA has actually been in suspension, and since 2002 Northern Ireland has been under 'Direct Rule' by the British Government in London with the Irish Government in Dublin as its 'junior partner'. In consequence, the GFA's innovative cross-border political institutions, formally dependent on Northern power-sharing and jointly operated with the Republic of Ireland, have been seriously curtailed.

The current impasse

Now the two Governments are trying yet again to pressure Northern Ireland's nationalist and unionist parties to re-engage in a power-sharing government. Another deadline passed yesterday, 10th November, when their ambiguous responses were assumed to mean 'agreement in principle', and in practice the latest supposedly 'final' deadline of November 24th is unlikely to be properly met either, but the process will probably continue. By the 24th the parties are supposed to agree the First and the Deputy-First Ministers for a power-sharing government to be established next March - respectively, Ian Paisley leader of the now dominant unionist group, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and Martin McGuinness nominee of the main nationalist party, Sinn Fein (SF). If they don't agree, the Governments threaten that Direct Rule from London will be consolidated.

This 'external rule' is anathema to Irish nationalists, though to be accepted as partners in government (and especially by Paisley's DUP) SF has to support Northern Ireland's police force which many of its supporters distrust as still a politically biased 'unionist' force. Before it agrees, say SF, local control of the police and justice system must be restored. The converse threat facing the DUP is that if it does not agree to share power with SF, Direct Rule will bring the full operation of the cross-border institutions; with the London and Dublin Governments in close partnership there will be *de facto* 'joint sovereignty' over Northern Ireland. Seen as further moves toward Ireland's political re-unification, this is anathema to unionists, and Paisley is trying to 'sell' power-sharing to his own supporters as 'the lesser of two evils'.

But Paisley's problem is that his entire political career over fifty years has been based on opposition to other unionists (such as David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party, the UUP) sharing power with nationalists. Many of his supporters continue to hold to that position, appearing to hanker after an unobtainable return to unionist majoritarian domination, and the DUP has done little to prepare them for a radical shift in policy. In contrast, SF has been adept at managing 'political somersaults' (not least operating the British institutions of Northern Ireland government which previously the IRA tried to bomb out of existence), though supporting the police is still too big a jump for a sizeable minority of its supporters. Hence delay and prevarication with each party blaming the other, while both also seek to consolidate

their present electoral dominance of unionism and nationalism respectively (the DUP over the 'more moderate' UUP, SF over the 'more moderate' nationalists in the SDLP). But prolonged Direct Rule would remove much of the DUP's reason for existence, and it would curtail SF's electoral/governmental ambitions in the separate Southern Irish electorate by denying it governmental kudos in the North. Hence the probability is that both the DUP and SF will eventually agree a power-sharing government, particularly as their key 'sticking points' are now perhaps less about substance than about sequencing - who agrees to what first - as they inch forward, playing for time to convince their own supporters.

More fundamental problems

The 'real lessons' for other conflicts are therefore not quite the positive or straightforward messages envisaged by enthusiasts for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement - such as President Bill Clinton, one of its mid-wives. The Irish evidence is that 'peace processes' may simply be a long drawn-out continuation of conflict by other means; and that conflict management requires ingenuity, time and money, though it is less costly in resources and lives than *mismanagement* (as we saw in the wasted decades from the 1970s to the early 1990s when the British in Northern Ireland pursued a so-called 'internal solution' - a contradiction in terms when Ireland's partition and border is the central problem). As Michael Kerr (2005) shows for Northern Ireland and for Lebanon, conventional power-sharing or consociationalism is dependent on continuing external support, both 'carrots and sticks', with little prospect of becoming self-sustaining. Here Northern Ireland enjoys much the greater support (from the British and Irish Governments, the EU, and the US - the contrast underlined when Israel invaded Lebanon with US and UK backing); and it is a sobering thought that despite getting substantially more international support than many other peace-processes, Northern Ireland is still far from a genuine resolution of its conflict. Some indeed argue that all the external support may actually prolong matters, giving the local political rivals an inflated sense of their own importance, and freedom to indulge in irresponsible, time-wasting 'brinkmanship' knowing that the external 'conflict managers' (e.g., the London and Dublin Governments) will have to take responsibility for the ensuing problems. Conversely, it can be argued that continued dependence on external support means being at the mercy of political forces whose priorities by definition are usually elsewhere.

There is also the argument - often associated with the 'integrationist' advocates of socially assimilating rival ethno-nationalists - that the institutional guarantees, 'checks and balances' of consociational power-sharing have a built-in tendency to rigidify and reinforce the very divisions on which the conflict is based. Some 'integrationists' see this as already happening in Northern Ireland, in the so-called 'victory of the extremes' over the 'moderates' (SF over SDLP, DUP over UUP). However, as already noted, for most of the last eight years power-sharing has actually been in suspension and there are other reasons for the relative success of SF and the DUP (e.g., much better party organisation than their respective rivals). In fact, the 'integrationist' critics of consociationalism often seem to forget that there was a war to be stopped and that institutional guarantees of power-sharing are essential for stopping it. When the over-riding objective is to end violent hostilities and achieve 'ceasefires' with some initial, minimal agreement between

warring ethno-national protagonists, the consociationalists are generally realistic in insisting that elaborate, guaranteed and hence rather static power-sharing arrangements are essential. Timing and the stage of the conflict/peace-process are critical. For instance, at a recent conference on the 10th anniversary of the 'Dayton' power-sharing settlement of a two-part but single Bosnian state, most of us focused on criticising its decentralised consociationalism. But, coming from an earlier stage of a 'peace process', the Israeli geographer, Oren Yiftachel (2006), cogently argued *in favour* of a 'Dayton in Palestine', as preferable to its present partition, 'separation fence', violence and an undermined 'two-state solution'.

More radical remedies

What is now appropriate in Ireland may have limited relevance for conflicts at different stages. But static arguments about 'integration' versus 'consociation' are generally misleading; and consociationalism is necessary but not sufficient. It does indeed tend to reinforce and perpetuate divisions. If there is to be a move to self-sustaining conflict *resolution*, as distinct from continued dependence on external *management*, we need a shifting emphasis toward complementary and more radical remedies which (like the GFA's innovative North-South institutions) are *non-territorial* or *less territorial*, crossing territorial and ethnic borders.

Ireland shows that both the intractability of ethno-national conflicts, and the high failure rate of territorial 'solutions' such as partition, are rooted in the limitations of territoriality and modern statehood, where nationalism, sovereignty and democracy are all defined in mutually reinforcing territorial terms (see Anderson 2006). Flawed assumptions about them are typically shared by external 'conflict managers' from other national governments, as well as by the immediate protagonists. Their managerial 'solutions' primarily rest on control by separation and segregation, whereas conflict resolution requires cross-border contact and co-operation.

Where rival ethno-national groups are geographically intermingled (as in Ireland and Palestine), 'solutions' which attempt to impose nationalistic territoriality are at best doomed to generate further conflict, at worst are a recipe for 'ethnic cleansing' and continued disaster for all concerned (though some groups suffer more than others). Instead, solutions require the crossing of territorial and ethnic borders, whether state or local, material or symbolic, and not just in political institutions (as in the GFA) but also in civil society. Indeed the resolution potential of border-crossing institutions depends on the extent to which they foster living, functioning 'interest groups' or 'political communities' which cross the borders, in more creative conflicts over *non-national* issues. This is probably not something which Gerry said to Mahmoud. Real solutions - real resolutions - of ethno-national conflict need to break with nationalistic, territorialist conceptions and practices.

References

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Bufon M. and Gosar A. (eds) (2006) *Conference Proceedings, 'Dayton - 10 Years Later: Conflict Resolution and Co-operation'*, Sarajevo and University of Primorska, Slovenia.

Kerr M. (2005) *Imposing Power-Sharing: Conflict and coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

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1,980wds

NOT INCLUDED - who is a victim?

Some object when dominant ethno-national groups (e.g., formerly the Northern Irish unionists, the Israelis) see themselves as 'victims', but the truth is they often are victims of circumstances, and the fact that they may be victims of their own stupidity as largely makers of their own circumstances can be no consolation.....

esp. if zero-sum dominates - any gain for others = loss = victimhood
