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Abstract

New Labour's superintendence of the Northern Ireland peace process has re-opened debate about the party's stance on the "Irish question". While some commentators hold the view that it remains ideologically wedded to the nationalist goal of Irish unity, it could be argued that Labour's Northern Ireland policy has been characterised by an ambivalent non-interventionist approach. The "peace strategy" pursued by Tony Blair's three administrations between 1997 and 2007 is examined in light of the political discourse articulated by key actors within New Labour itself. Moreover, the interpretive approach in British political science is utilised to illuminate key variables, such as ideology and values, driving the party's view on sovereignty in the United Kingdom more broadly. In applying this analytical framework the article explains how New Labour's policy towards Northern Ireland underwent significant adaptation under Blair's leadership and why it finally achieved its overarching objective of consigning the violent conflict to atrophy.

Keywords: *David Trimble, Irish unity, New Labour, Northern Ireland peace process, political discourse, Tony Blair, United Kingdom*

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INTERPRETING NEW LABOUR'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

Aaron Edwards

Abstract

New Labour's superintendence of the Northern Ireland peace process has re-opened debate about the party's stance on the "Irish question". While some commentators hold the view that it remains ideologically wedded to the nationalist goal of Irish unity, it could be argued that Labour's Northern Ireland policy has been characterised by an ambivalent non-interventionist approach. The "peace strategy" pursued by Tony Blair's three administrations between 1997 and 2007 is examined in light of the political discourse articulated by key actors within New Labour itself. Moreover, the interpretive approach in British political science is utilised to illuminate key variables, such as ideology and values, driving the party's view on sovereignty in the United Kingdom more broadly. In applying this analytical framework the article explains how New Labour's policy towards Northern Ireland underwent significant adaptation under Blair's leadership and why it finally achieved its overarching objective of consigning the violent conflict to atrophy.

Introduction

One problem with Tony [Blair]'s fundamental view of Northern Ireland is that the process is the policy, that as long as the process is being sustained and you are giving plenty of evidence that you believe in the process, even if you can do nothing else, that is sufficient policy. (Peter Mandelson, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, cited in the *Guardian*, 14 March 2007)

I would tell Tony that, no matter what, we had to try to keep things moving forward, like a bicycle. If we let the bicycle fall over, we would create a vacuum and that vacuum would be filled by violence ... By the end, we had realised peace was not an event but a process. (Jonathan Powell, former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Tony Blair, 2008, p. 5)

This paper considers the underlying ideological dynamics of New Labour's "peace strategy" in Northern Ireland by concentrating on three key components in its political discourse: *devolution, bipartisanship and consent*.¹ It is argued here that these concepts underwent significant shifts in meaning after 1994, which permitted Tony Blair to move his party from a position of "persuaders for Irish unity" in the early 1990s to a position of "neutral arbitration" when returned to power in 1997. Moreover, in order to understand its "peace strategy" more fully these "endogenous" changes must be considered in light of the "exogenous" constitutional reconfiguration of the United Kingdom polity. Indeed, it is argued here that New Labour's policy towards Northern Ireland should be understood, can only be understood, in relation to the party's successful synergy of both of these key drivers in its political discourse.

The "New" in New Labour's Northern Ireland Policy

Drawing on the interpretive work of Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006) this article critically analyses New Labour's political discourse on the Northern Ireland peace process. In methodological terms, the interpretive approach is concerned with traditions, contexts and dilemmas in politics. "Tradition", in the sense that Bevir and Rhodes deploy the concept, acts as a backdrop but does not fix everything; it is "an initial influence" on actors that colours their later actions but is always contingent (Finlayson et al., 2004, p. 150). In many ways traditions are enabling ideological backdrops, against which actors are permitted to make informed choices within a specific socio-political context. Moreover, when an actor becomes conscious of the rigid restrictions that may be placed upon their future actions by adhering to such traditions it is possible for them to lighten their ideological baggage by embracing a new idea. The point at which this self-realisation occurs is known as a dilemma. As Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p. 36) explain: "A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs and associated traditions".

Explaining Ideological Change within the Labour Party

New Labour's political discourse on Northern Ireland could be said to have encountered such a dilemma. In line with Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p. 37) it is possible to demonstrate how, in order to "accommodate a new idea, people must develop their existing beliefs to make room for it, and its content will open some ways of doing so and close down others". This paper

examines how and why an ideological dilemma arose within the Labour Party vis-à-vis its political discourse on Northern Ireland. In re-defining their policy the architects of "New" Labour were keen to distance it from that of "Old" Labour. As Bevir and Rhodes (2003, pp. 197-198) elaborate:

New Labour rejects the command bureaucracy model of old Labour with its emphasis on hierarchy, authority and rules ... New Labour does not seek to provide centralised "statist" solutions to every social and economic problem. Instead New Labour promotes the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnerships held together by relations of trust ... Patterns of governance arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by beliefs of the agents as they in turn arise against a backcloth of traditions and dilemmas.

In the Northern Ireland context, as elsewhere, "the triumph of Blair's vision of New Labour over other strands of social democracy represents the outcome of a contingent political struggle" (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 140). The "contingent political struggle" – in the sense that it is employed in this article – is shown to be as hard-fought-out between New Labour's own left and right as it is with its electoral opponents in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

In her political memoirs Blair's first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam (2002, p. 162) reveals how the formulation of Northern Ireland policy - in the wake of her party's victory in the 1997 British general election - was born out of the necessity to balance internal tensions between several Labour interest groups:

As members of a party with a long tradition of fighting for justice and a fairer society, a lot of people in the Labour Party had been close supporters of the civil-rights movement in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, which translated for many into support for Irish nationalism. But [after 1997] we were no longer a campaigning opposition. We now had a clear position, standing, in my shorthand, for "neutrality, with fairness, justice and equality". That meant we could do things as a government to further those crucial values, while at the same times maintaining our neutrality in the talks.

However, the reality was somewhat more complex than Mowlam cared to admit, in that Labour's policy towards Northern Ireland ebbed and flowed according to a number of factors. Other variables not already mentioned included the personal interests of individual leaders, their dexterity in managing backbench critics in Parliament and the aims of certain Labour interest groups. Furthermore, it was a policy tempered to a large degree by

other domestic and foreign concerns of the day. Thus during his post-war government Clement Attlee (Labour leader, 1935-55) took a pro-unionist stance on Northern Ireland and invested heavily in passing legislation that secured the province's political survival. Such favourable rapprochement emerged directly from Northern Ireland's role in aiding the British war-effort. Conversely, during its long spell in Opposition under Hugh Gaitskell (Labour leader, 1955-63) Labour maintained a close association with the cross-community Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), thus maintaining a partitionist outlook. Only under Harold Wilson (Labour leader, 1963-76) did the party pursue a more green-tinged policy, something subsequently resisted by his successor James Callaghan (1976-79).

This ambiguous stance has led some critics, like Brendan O'Leary (2004, p. 196), to conclude that "Statements they [Harold Wilson and James Callaghan] made before or after their premierships showed they had formulated preferences substantively different from the status quo, but in office did nothing that significantly advanced these goals". The move in Labour Party circles towards open support for Irish unity was hastened under the leadership of Michael Foot (1979-83) and Neil Kinnock (1983-92). Significantly, by the time John Smith (1992-94) had taken over from Kinnock the Irish question had been subordinated to the wider electoral ambitions of the party, where it was to remain until Tony Blair assumed the leadership in the wake of Smith's untimely death.

It was under Blair that New Labour's policy on Northern Ireland underwent considerable adaptation between 1994 and 2007 in which a devolved settlement based on the "principle of consent", not "unity by consent", became the central plank in the governing party's peace strategy. Although in many respects it represented something of a clean break from the rigid "green" (i.e. sympathetic to the Irish nationalist aspiration for Irish unity) orthodoxy of the 1980s, it was nonetheless a by-product of the trade-off undertaken by Labour's leaders in a bid to make the party more electable while diffusing internal tensions on Ireland. Thus, the policy of "unity by consent" was dropped in favour of non-interventionism in Irish affairs. While this new departure was qualitatively different from the policy pursued under Wilson's Labour governments of 1964-70 and 1974-76, it does share common ground with that pursued under Gaitskell in the 1950s and early 1960s (see Edwards, 2007, 2009). An acceptance of majority consent, regionalism, and a locally devolved administration had long since formed the backbone of the party's immediate post-war policy towards Northern Ireland (Dixon, 1993).

Devolution

In his resignation speech on 10 May 2007, Tony Blair made just one minor reference to Northern Ireland in which he said, "I think Northern Ireland would not have been changed unless Britain had changed". Change in Britain, and in government policy towards the province, under Blair centred round major constitutional and territorial adjustment, which saw an effective return to devolved government in the three peripheral regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Labour's commitment to devolution remained strong during Blair's decade as Prime Minister and in some ways demonstrates how New Labour sought to redress the issue of sovereignty in the absence of a more radical "Old" Labourist agenda. Arguably, Blair, rather than seeing devolution as an effective conflict management tool, viewed its utility through the much broader prism of constitutional reform. Before coming to power he remarked:

I find it odd to say the least that the government proposes devolution for Northern Ireland as part of a package designed to keep the Union together but says that devolution anywhere else is irresponsible and reckless (Blair, 1996, p. 82).

The empowerment of the ordinary citizen became a recurring theme in New Labour discourse throughout its first three terms of office. It is evident in a speech made by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Hain (2006)² at the time of the St. Andrews Agreement, when he pointed out that: "Devolution gives local politicians the power to take local decisions about local issues. I hope they will grasp this opportunity and fulfill the obligations for which they have long been elected". In New Labour discourse this decentralisation of governance sprang from both a deep-seated belief in empowering ordinary people *and* in a firm commitment to achieving a peaceful settlement to this most enduring of conflicts.

A commitment to reconfigure the constitutional landscape of the UK was the key point of differentiation between New Labour's policy towards Northern Ireland and that of its political counterparts or predecessors.³ As indicated above constitutional reform remained a crucial element of New Labour's vision for a "New Britain", wherein power was devolved to the constituent (or peripheral) parts of the UK in a way that reflected the party's own radical democratic socialist tradition. Tony Blair's vision for a "New Britain" is evident in his Maiden speech to the people of Northern Ireland, delivered at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society in Belfast in 1997:

I want to see a Union which reflects and accommodates diversity. I am against a rigid, centralised approach. That is the surest way to weaken

the Union. The proposals this government are making for Scotland and Wales, and for the English regions, are designed to bring Government closer to the people. That will renew and strengthen the Union.

However, it must be borne in mind that devolution was conceived for an altogether different purpose in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. As Bradbury and Mitchell (2005, p. 295) point out:

In Scotland and Wales the purpose of devolution had been to accommodate national feeling within a decentralised UK. In contrast, in Northern Ireland devolution had been a mechanism to reconcile implacably opposed nationalist/republican and unionist/loyalist perspectives on the nature of government and to assist a wider "peace process" for scaling down sectarian violence between and within the two communities.

A devolved, power-sharing arrangement between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists became the preferred outcome for the settlement of the local conflict. On a much broader level devolution, as a form of federalism, is a useful conflict management device for application in conflicts where ethno-nationalist feeling has spilled over into violence. While there is disagreement in the academic literature about the effects of federalism on ethno-nationalism (Hechter, 2004, p. 296), with some commentators arguing that it exacerbates it and others that it accommodates it, few would argue that it plays no role at all. In Zartman's (2004, p. 154) view:

Despite the fears of many governments, autonomy is not a down payment on secession: Cancellation of autonomy is. When minorities are granted self-government in autonomy, it gives them something to do that takes their minds off of secession and conflict and puts the emphasis on skills at governing rather than on contesting government.

By emphasising devolution in New Labour's political discourse Blair was afforded the opportunity to push the case for greater autonomy for the UK regions, while at the same time taking the sting out of what M.L.R. Smith (1999, p. 80) has called the 'single most destabilizing force in British politics for a generation'. Despite the Conservative Party's hostility towards devolution New Labour was able to successfully maintain "at least the façade of bipartisanship" (Powell, 2008, p. 88) on Northern Ireland affairs.

Bi-partisanship

Bi-partisanship has been defined by Dixon (2001, p. 345) as, "a general agreement between the two main British political parties on the principles of the constitutional approach towards the conflict in Northern Ireland". The

acceptance of the so-called “principle of consent”⁴ in constitutional matters has been central to the creation of a common approach to the conflict by British political parties. However, bi-partisanship has not always been the motivating factor behind Labour Party policy on Northern Ireland, as indicated above. In 1981, owing to pressure from its left-wing who were aggrieved by Margaret Thatcher's handling of the republican Hunger Strikes, Labour officially declared itself in favour of a united Ireland, albeit by the reaching of democratic consent within Northern Ireland (Dixon, 2006, p. 119; see also Edwards, 2009, Chapter 7). Nevertheless, the explicit meaning behind this change in policy was later elaborated on by the former Labour Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Kevin McNamara, who remarked “Because I believe that unity by consent is the only viable strategy for ending partition, I am convinced that the party should be actively pursuing such a policy” (*Tribune*, 1 December 1989).

The tacit acceptance of bi-partisanship by McNamara and other nationalist sympathisers in the 1980s - added to the increasing divergence between Labour and Conservative policies on Northern Ireland - led some observers to believe that a change-over in future government would herald a return of a British administration sympathetic to the concerns of Irish nationalists. Indeed, the NILP (Labour's ‘sister’ party in the province) had formally broke off its fraternal relationship with Labour on this very issue, when, following a meeting with Michael Foot, the local party accused him of pursuing “the idiotic and undemocratic policy of ‘rolling republicanism’ which was adopted at the last party conference” (*Belfast Newsletter*, 4 February 1982).

However, the integrity of the Labour Party's nationalist bias and its willingness to act on such instincts has been seriously questioned by some scholars. As John Whyte (1993, p. 107) pointed out, although “There has always been a minority in the Labour Party with united-Ireland sympathies” (including former Prime Minister, Harold Wilson), “the limits of the feasible have reasserted themselves, and in practice Labour governments, faced with the adamant opposition of unionists to any kind of united Ireland, have proved as committed to the union as Conservative ones”. Despite the ups and downs in the peace process, bi-partisanship remained the most consistent guiding principle of successive British governments throughout the Direct Rule period, far outlasting the fringe tendencies of some interest groups within the Conservative and Labour parties. In the House of Commons, as Cunningham has observed, “the bilateral management of Northern Ireland ... [soon became] the orthodoxy” (2001, p. 159).

Indeed, another dimension of New Labour's management of the peace process has been its ability to sustain its bilateral relationship with the Irish government, a process cultivated by John Major in the early 1990s. In its 1997 election manifesto, New Labour indicated its willingness to work with the Irish government to secure peace in the province, and from his first meeting with Bertie Ahern it later transpired that Tony Blair and the new leader of Fianna Fáil had "hit it off immediately" (Powell, 2008, p. 88). The personal chemistry between the two men, added to Blair's appreciation of the nuances of Irish history, meant that when Ahern later became Taoiseach a more concerted effort to solving the conflict could be adopted. As a result of this transformation in Anglo-Irish relations Blair became the first British Prime Minister in modern history to address the *Oireachtas* (Irish Parliament). His speech had a dual aim: to appeal to the two communities to reconcile their differences, and to reassure unionists that – unlike his predecessors - he was not harbouring an anti-partitionist agenda. Thus, he argued:

a framework in which consent is guaranteed is also one in which basic rights of equality and justice are guaranteed ... those who wish a united Ireland are free to make that claim, provided it is democratically expressed, just as those who believe in the Union can make their claim ... My point is very simple. Those urges to belong, divergent as they are, can live together more easily if we, Britain and the Irish Republic, can live closer together too (Blair, 1998).

It is in this context that Mowlam made the candid admission that Blair had dropped the term "persuader" because it was politically loaded and insensitive to the unionist community. Now, the emphasis was on bringing both communities together to negotiate a fair and equitable settlement. The logic behind this recalibration in Labour discourse was simple, yet proved flawed in the longer-term: shore up the moderates at the expense of the extremists.

Another point to highlight under the theme of bi-partisanship is that the policies of the Conservative and New Labour governments towards Northern Ireland were not that radically different. While tactics certainly varied - depending on the tempo of progress made on the political front - the strategy underpinning the British government's approach was not chameleon-like, changing according to the party in power. In fact, rather than stressing "consistent inconsistencies" acute to British policy, as Brendan O'Leary (1997) has suggested, it may be more profitable to agree with Michael Cunningham's (2001, p. 153) characterisation of it in terms of its "strategic continuity". By far the starkest illustration of this can be seen in relation to

the continuities of the Major and Blair governments (Patterson, 2001), when "London returned to its traditional role as an honest broker and facilitator for agreement" (Neumann, 2003, p. 186).

With the benefit of hindsight one could argue that Blair sacrificed old Tory shibboleths about talking to terrorists for the benefit of safeguarding momentum in the peace process, certainly this is true with regard to his negotiations with republicans (see Edwards, 2008a; Powell, 2008, p. 313). The revelations by Peter Mandelson (who replaced Mowlam as Secretary of State between 1999 and 2001) confirm as much. Some years after leaving Northern Ireland, Mandelson claimed that:

In order to keep the process in motion [Blair] would be sort of dangling carrots and possibilities in front of the republicans which I thought could never be delivered, that it was unreasonable and irresponsible to intimate that you could when you knew that you couldn't (*Guardian*, 13 March 2007).

Mandelson's criticisms serve to reinforce the view that New Labour had discontinued its dogmatic nationalist approach to Northern Irish affairs. By shoring up the unionists – while appearing to grant concessions to republicans - Blair was actually creating the conditions for the two groups to come together. That he chose to do so by applying a mixture of "carrot and stick" tactics points to Blair's sense of conviction politics noticeable elsewhere, particularly in relation to foreign policy (see Chandler, 2003).

Nevertheless, Blair's relationship with unionist MPs, for example, was not bound by the same rules that prevailed during his predecessor's time in office. Ulster Unionist MPs had proved crucial in maintaining the Conservative balance of power in the House of Commons for the duration of John Major's government. With his 165 seat majority Blair was under no such obligation, though he chose to keep unionists onboard, albeit while endeavouring to reach out to republicans. Yet Blair chose to mollify unionist concerns about his new government's agenda and sought to stress his party's support for the "principle of consent" vis-à-vis the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

Consent

Although New Labour did undergo a certain amount of "greening" during much of its long spell in opposition in the 1980s, close reading of the party's discourse on Northern Ireland would challenge the assertion that its policy was ostensibly anti-partitionist in its strategic outlook. Even during the most radical phase of its Northern Ireland policy, the party's leadership (including spokesman Kevin McNamara) did not endorse the left-republican

view held by some Labour politicians (such as Ken Livingstone) that, once in power, the party should coerce unionists into a united Ireland. In a report McNamara co-authored with Mo Mowlam and Jim Marshall (McNamara et al., 1988, p. 10), they declared, "openly to all the people of Northern Ireland that we seek to persuade them of the merits of Irish unity and to win their support for it". As already indicated the principle of "unity by consent" constituted the cornerstone of "Old" Labour's policy until 1994, when "New" Labour gravitated towards support for a political arrangement based on the "principle of consent" (see Neumann, 2003, p. 148; Powell, 2008, pp. 11-12).

The shift is evident in Blair's maiden speech on Northern Ireland, in which he was at pains to set out his newly elected government's agenda on consent:

My message is simple. I am committed to Northern Ireland. I am committed to the principle of consent. And I am committed to peace. A settlement is to be negotiated between the parties based on consent. My agenda is not a United Ireland – and I wonder just how many see it as a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future. Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority here wish.

Two important themes are discernable in the above extract. Firstly, that Blair was keen to reassure the unionist community that his recent electoral triumph posed no direct threat to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Secondly, that New Labour's intentions for the future peace and prosperity of Northern Ireland were genuine, and that any impending British government initiative would be grounded firmly in the principle of consent. Blair's speech was important because it signalled a radical departure from the "green" dogmatism, which was widely perceived to buttress Labour policy on Ireland (Dixon, 2006, p. 133; Powell, 2008, pp. 12-13). A discursive shift in New Labour's policy implied that constitutional change (whatever form it may take) must be negotiated by all of the parties to the conflict and then be ratified by *both* unionist and nationalist communities.

This was an important first step in New Labour's bid to instigate a strategic sea-change in its policy. As Blair's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, recalled:

This policy [of Irish unification by consent] had been an uncomfortable compromise cobbled together in the early 1980s to split the difference between two irreconcilable wings of the party: a small but highly motivated band of pro-unionists and the "Troops Out" movement. The

result was a green-tinged ambition to achieve a united Ireland by persuading the unionists to participate in it, even though it was perfectly obvious the unionists were not going to be persuaded. Tony replaced this mishmash with a policy of neutrality, where the job of the British government would be to help reconcile the two communities in Northern Ireland and find a solution that both could accept (2008, pp. 79-80).

Thus, New Labour had moved away from the old ideal of "unity by consent" towards a new umpire-like stance on the peace process.

In many ways Blair had already prepared the ground for this shift in Labour discourse prior to coming to office. Following the announcement of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire in August 1994, Blair's advisers gave explicit instructions to Kevin McNamara that the party leader, not the party spokesman on Northern Ireland, would handle the media on the issue. Shortly afterwards McNamara was sacked, thus becoming an early casualty in Blair's wholesale clearout of its more "tricolour-waving" old guard. He was replaced by the more congenial and down-to-earth Mo Mowlam – a candid politician with a sharp mind and a deep interest in Northern Ireland affairs. Michael Cunningham (2001, p. 92) argues that "one has to be careful not to exaggerate the significance of these changes"; however, it soon became clear that New Labour had initiated a shift in its approach to the conflict and Mowlam "fitted in happily with the change in policy" (Powell, 2008, p. 80). This is despite the fact that Mowlam, along with Peter Hain and Clare Short (later to become Cabinet ministers in Blair's government), had been involved in pushing the "unity by consent" policy. By 1997, Hain and Short had embraced the new policy departure, although their personal views on the matter remain unclear (see Dixon, 2006).

In an interview just prior to the 1997 election, Mowlam spelt out "New" Labour's radical departure from "Old" Labour's pro-Irish nationalist agenda:

There is now a general acceptance that the future of Northern Ireland must be determined by the consent of the people as set out in the Downing Street Declaration [1993]. Labour recognises that the option of a united Ireland does not command the consent of the unionist tradition nor does the existing status of Northern Ireland command the consent of the nationalist tradition. We are therefore committed to reconciliation between the two traditions and to a new political settlement which can command the support of both (*Irish News*, 4 April 1997).

Mowlam had demonstrated her ability to think more holistically about what a potential settlement in Northern Ireland might look like. It also permitted Labour to distance itself from the Conservative policy of sympathetic support for the Unionist community, by maintaining a focus on both communities. Many of Blair's speeches during his decade in office reiterated the need for parties in the conflict to end terrorism as a means by which to achieve political ends. As he pointed out in 2001:

Look, underneath all the language and the detail of the agreement is this very simple concept that there has to be the notion of consent, that democracy rules, not violence, and alongside that there has to be justice and equality for all communities ... And in the end, what has really been accepted by everybody is that there is no solution to this issue of a military kind. Violence offers no way forward. We are never going to change Northern Ireland by violence.

The changing meaning of consent became increasingly tethered to the need to put clear blue water between the hard-headed realist view that war is simply a continuation of politics by other means and the idealist notion that democracy and co-operation offered a panacea for redressing the exclusivist nature of ethno-nationalism.

Conclusion

The overarching argument of this article has been that New Labour's "peace strategy" in Northern Ireland must be seen in light of "endogenous" ideological change within the Labour Party, as well as the "exogenous" re-configuration of territorial sovereignty arrangements in the UK more broadly. By concentrating on articulating the benefits attached to these rapidly changing constitutional arrangements, New Labour could situate their internal policy adaptation amidst the new realities of governance in Britain. As Powell (2008, p. 20) later reasoned, "No longer was devolution a mark of the exceptional status of Northern Ireland, but rather a process going on across the whole of the United Kingdom" and as such made it easier for New Labour to sell a deal of power-sharing for local politicians. Initially, government policy towards the parties in conflict was aimed at bolstering the moderates at the expense of the extremists, a favoured tactic of government sponsors of peace processes more generally (see Zartman, 2005). This strategy, put in place soon after New Labour gained power, was summarised by Mo Mowlam:

whatever had happened in the past, now the British government had to be, in my mind a referee, especially when it was important to the process to keep shoring up the moderate leadership on both sides

against the hardliners on the fringes. We had to make progress and try to reward either side for moving as we went along, so that they could say to their followers they weren't moving first or they weren't moving for nothing. It was essential to keep David Trimble and Gerry Adams in place, because without them it would have been much harder to sustain the peace process. (Mowlam, 2002, p. 164)

One of Blair's most significant early achievements was brought about by carefully tempering his discourse within a tightly controlled framework of reference for unionists. Thus, Blair encouraged David Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party to move towards a deal (see Trimble's comments in an interview with the *Guardian*, 14 March 2007) for the benefit of the wider unionist community.

However, as Trimble (2008) has recently admitted this was not always successful and had the adverse effect of completely transforming the political environment in Northern Ireland. Thus Powell (2008, p. 312) later confessed:

At first we tried to build from the centre, working with the UUP and the SDLP. But in the end perhaps it was inevitable that peace could only be made by the DUP and Sinn Féin on the principle of "Nixon goes to China" – it is only the extremes who can build a durable peace because there is no one left to outflank them.

In all of this Blair played a formidable role in the process by heavily investing his own time in developing "peace strategy". As John Rentoul has written:

Blair brought his own gifts and his own luck to the issue which has broken Prime Ministers and governments before. His relationship with Bill Clinton was one, but his negotiating skill, his ability to finesse issues of deep principle which Major, with his party's unionist assumptions, found difficult, and his unnatural personal persuasiveness were his unique contribution (2001, p. 418).

Encouraged by Powell (2008, p. 316) Blair sought to facilitate talks between the parties in conflict by coercing them with enforced deadlines and by encouraging the United States to apply its soft power as a useful third party mediator. Blair's amiable relationship with Bill Clinton developed significantly during the former's first term in office. Perhaps most importantly of all was Blair's personal drive to solving the Northern Ireland conflict, which was perhaps the one key component in helping to shape New Labour's political discourse on the peace process. As one critic wryly suggested:

The [1998 Belfast] agreement was testimony to his talent for creative ambiguity, his gift for persuasion, his negotiating skills and his

willingness to expend huge amounts of effort and ingenuity in a cause that he believed in (Rawnsley, 2007).

It is often said of Blair that he failed in the foreign policy arena (particularly in Iraq), but that he succeeded on the domestic front in Northern Ireland. This is perhaps a little too simplistic and does not take into consideration the remarkable dialectical relationship between the two conflicts in New Labour policy-making. Indeed, the tremendous synergy accomplished between the endogenous and exogenous variables driving Labour's peace strategy in Northern Ireland was underpinned by the need to reaffirm human rights, equality and democracy in societies where violence had become endemic. Perhaps Blair's "failure" in Iraq was not so much in the message he communicated but in the way it was interpreted.

Endnotes

* I would like to thank the editors for their suggestions on how to improve the article for publication. Any remaining errors are the author's sole responsibility. The views expressed in this article are the author's and not those of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the Ministry of Defence or any other UK government agency.

¹ "New" Labour is the pre-fix given to explain the modernisation of the core ideological parameters of the British Labour Party since Tony Blair became leader in 1994. The term itself was used by those inside the party who drew conceptual distinctions between "Old" Labour and "New" Labour in a bid to make the Labour Party more electorally relevant. It implied a break with the past dogmatism of the trade union dominated left-wing by the party's modernising right-wing.

² Rt. Hon. Peter Hain MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland between 2005 and 2007, made a similar claim in a guest speech to British Labour Party members at Queen's University Belfast on the eve of the talks leading up to the St. Andrews Agreement in October 2006. While his comments were largely welcomed, his musings over the benefits of an all-island economy caused something of a stir (Author's Fieldnotes, 10 October 2006).

³ It should be noted that this strategy of constitutional rearrangement has had some adverse effects, not least in fuelling the widely-held perception that devolution has weakened the union. Ten years after devolution in the UK, 63 per cent of respondents in an ICM poll for the *Sunday Telegraph* said that the union (between the constituent parts of the UK) had weakened under New Labour, while only 18 per cent thought that it had been strengthened (ICM,

2008, p. 7). The issue of devolution divides the UK's two main parties, with the Labour Party in favour of further decentralisation and the Conservative Party against. During his premiership John Major often made the point that devolution threatened the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the UK. As he wrote in his memoirs, "We advanced the argument, which I strongly endorse, that the Union still had enormous moral and political relevance in shaping our society. Moreover, it was, and is, vital in enabling the United Kingdom to exert its full influence in the world affairs. If the UK were to split into its component parts it would not wield the same influence. Its voice would be fragmented and marginalised" (Major, 1999, p. 421). However, the Tories did not oppose devolution for Northern Ireland, which was often seen as the only viable option for a settlement of the conflict.

⁴ The "principle of consent" refers to the internationally recognised legislation passed in Britain and Ireland after 1998 which states that the constitutional future of Northern Ireland will remain unchanged until such times as the majority of the people consent to a united Ireland.

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