Political Discourse as an Instrument of Conflict and Peace: Lessons from Northern Ireland

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THE ROLE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN CONFLICT
TRANSFORMATION: EVIDENCE FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

Katy Hayward

Abstract

This article introduces this volume by constructing a model for analysing political discourse as an instrument of conflict and peace, drawing on evidence from the Northern Ireland case. It identifies three processes, or stages, in a peace process in which political discourse can play a unique and crucial role: (i) the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place, (ii) the facilitation of agreement between moderate and extreme positions, and (iii) the forging of common ground. The motivating thesis of this research is that discourse analysis is a vital resource for deepening our knowledge of why, how and when violence can erupt and peace can be built.

Introduction

If politics is about bargaining, persuasion, communication and cooperation, it is one of the most important uses of discourse in the social world. These discursive features of political activity are particularly fraught in a context of societal division. This is not least because a conflict situation confers even greater political weight on ideology and identity (both discursively constructed). Similarly, political language plays a crucial role in the transition out of conflict, as implied by the maxim attributed to Churchill: “jaw-jaw is always better than war-war”. Language can support and promote war just as it can be used to support and promote peace (Schäffner and Wenden, 1999).

This has long been recognised in the case of Northern Ireland. It was evident during the conflict, as seen in the decision by Irish government in 1971 and the British government in 1988 to impose broadcasting bans on Sinn Féin (amongst other groupings associated in some way with paramilitary activity) until the IRA ceasefire in 1994. And from the early 1990s onwards, in a period of political sensitivity surrounding cautious negotiations, top-level recognition of the power of political discourse was
exemplified in the care taken by the two governments to issue joint statements on Northern Ireland, such as the “Downing Street Declaration” made by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds on 15 December 1993 (HMSO, 1993).

With regard to the specific matter of conflict transformation, the fundamental assumption in most peace processes is that political debate and dialogue needs to replace violence as the expression of dissent and difference. This view is articulated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain (2007), in his assessment of the model of the Northern Ireland peace process. He claims that key actors need, “to prevent violence filling the vacuum left by the absence of political engagement”. Such political engagement, he argues, centres on “inclusive dialogue at every level, wherever there is a negotiable objective”. Conflict transformation, he concludes, therefore requires “the taking of risks to sustain that dialogue and to underpin political progress”. Although Hain is referring here to secret negotiations as much as to public statements, the principle that the communication of political views is an alternative to conflict is integral, he suggests, to the approach taken to the Northern Ireland peace process by the British and Irish governments and top-level third parties.

The purpose of this article (and this special issue as a whole) is to examine the transformative potential of political discourse in contexts of (violent) political division and post-conflict agreement. In doing so, it draws upon the research presented in this special issue. This field work on various dimensions of – and parties to – the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland has been conducted by scholars from a range of disciplines with specific consideration of the role of political discourse. The significance of political discourse in such an arena relates to the fact that it may be used to legitimise, accompany, disguise or substitute for change in political activity and policy. These various possibilities point directly to what is simultaneously the greatest strength and the greatest difficulty of discourse as a topic of study: its enigmatic relationship with practice and context. In fact, the three elements of language, practice and context are inseparable (see Fairclough, 2001, below). I contend that analysis of discourse can, therefore, provide some insight into the processes involved in the transition from conflict to peace. In the case of Northern Ireland, this has meant the creation of a socio-political environment through negotiation and political agreement that has enabled the minimisation of direct sectarian violence. As with most of the contributors in this special issue, I am concerned here not so much with the linguistic (de)construction of particular texts but rather broader analysis of the instrumental use of discourse by key political players.
Political Discourse: Theory and Practice

According to Fairclough (2001), the term “discourse” refers to each of three levels of the social world – language/text, practice/interaction and context – and, importantly, the connections between them (see Figure 1 below, source: Fairclough, 2001, p. 21).

![Diagram of Discourse as text, interaction and context]

Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context

The two elements in Figure 1 that I wish to elaborate in relation to the subject of this article relate to the role of discourse as text and as interaction. First, the text of political discourse (be it presented in a speech, interview or newspaper report) embodies processes of production and interpretation of ideas as well as influencing the interaction that shapes these processes. Secondly, what is termed here “interaction” reflects as well as affects wider conditions for the production and interpretation of ideas. When I transfer this model to a “political” arena (as used by the type of party and community actors examined in the research presented in this special issue), it is possible
to identify two crucial dimensions in the role of political discourse that are of relevance to the issue of conflict and its transformation. These discursive dynamics of political and social change may be further elaborated in relation to what I here term “power” and “principle”. These core elements can determine the effectiveness and endurance of political discourse in a context of conflict (transformation).

**Power: Politics as Discursive Action**

Politics affects the way people think about, communicate regarding, and act in relation to social conditions and facts. For this reason, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) designated all social systems to be inherently political constructions. More particularly, as Howarth (1998, p. 275) claims, “political practices serve to constitute (and undermine) discourses and the identities they form”. The relationship between the changing political world and the language used to describe and appraise it, or between conception and action, is close and crucial (Skinner, 1989, p. 6). The changing relationships of power that characterise the transition from conflict to peace (or vice versa) are, to a degree, the manifestation of the discourses of political actors. I note in particular that the subject (speaker of the text, in this case usually a politician) seeks to manipulate the potential of the discursive text to affect the other two realms of practice and context as much as to reflect them.

It is accepted that political constitutions, laws and norms reflect dominant discourses, namely the language/ideology of those in society who hold the reins of structural power (ref. Foucault, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991). The greater the actor’s power, or capacity to change the socio-political and structural environment, the more the actor’s discourse is likely to affect the wider context for public interaction. Put differently, the power of an actor is related to the strength of the effect of a text of his/her words on individual or group behaviour and experience. This is most obvious when considering official discourses (i.e. the language used by actors as representatives of the government or state), as has been done by Catherine O’Donnell and Aaron Edwards in this volume in relation to the Irish and British governments respectively. By having the capacity to shape the rules governing the production and reception of discourse in the public sphere, such actors are able to manage the interpretation (and, in effect, the meaning) of political discourses by a wide range of actors (for analysis of this effect, see Haidar and Rodriguez, 1999). Even if power is not achieved democratically (through persuasion to vote a certain way), it is still achieved through discourse to a degree in that it is used to persuade individuals to act a certain way.
Role of Political Discourse In Conflict Transformation

(including violently) for a particular end. Analyses of the discourses of political parties, community representatives and former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland contained in this special issue reveal the importance of the concept of power in discourse of a range of groups directly involved in conflict and its transformation.

**Principle: Discourse as Political Action**

Discourse is “socially constitutive” (Wodak et al., 1999, p. 8). It generates and produces social conditions, maintains, legitimates, and reproduces them. On account of this, Ball et al. (1989, p. 2) have designated conceptual change to be “a species of political innovation”. Because conceptual change attends any reconstitution of the political world, political change and conceptual change must be understood as one complex and interrelated process (Farr, 1989, p. 30-32). Moreover, a key element of discourse theory is the notion that actors/agents and systems/structures in the social and political realm “undergo constant historical and social change” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 6). Discourse is central to this process of change and, importantly, to the impression of stability through its role in bringing together concepts, interaction and context. There needs to be movement in all three realms for real change to take place. However, again, this depends on the power and influence of the speaker of the text and, crucially, its reporting in the public realm. The role of the media, particularly local printed media, in Northern Ireland is acknowledged throughout this volume.

The closer a text appears to relate to/address individual citizens’ experience of social conditions and their interpretation of them, the more influence it will have. This is because of the congruity (as noted above) between dynamics of interpretation and production. More broadly, there needs to be a certain consistency and logic in the relationship between text, practice and context as put forward by the speaker. This can be “explained” through the ideology maintained by political parties (among other communal/elite actors) on behalf of particular groups. Wenden and Schäffner (1999, p. xx) claim that, “ideologies shape group and individual attitudes which, communicated in discourse and determining other social practices, can either facilitate or hinder the achievement of peace”. In their influential work on *Language and Peace*, Schäffner and Wenden (1999) work with a definition of “peace” as the absence of structural violence. This is necessary
because, they note, other forms of violence can continue through discriminatory practices, institutions and ideologies (Wenden and Schäffner, 1999: xxii). Whilst O’Donnell and I, as co-editors of this volume, also acknowledge that discourse (in its three forms of text, practice and context) can perpetuate structural violence to an even greater extent than direct violence, our evidence-based assessment of the role of discourse in the case study of Northern Ireland would lead us to a necessarily delimited definition of “peace”. This is not least because we are as interested in what might be termed the “positive” as well as the “negative” effects of political discourse in the transition from conflict. This is particularly evident regarding the role of discourse as a medium for upholding the ideology or principles of a particular group. Such principles help to affirm the historical integrity of their group, to rationalise the stance taken by group leaders in response to the present situation, and to imagine the ideal position of the group in the future. This is closely related to the effect of political discourse on socio-political change, which is a theme that underlies our analysis on the transition from conflict to peace.

**Political Discourse in Northern Ireland**

In a situation of conflict or ineffectual democracy the lack of political engagement (as mentioned by former Secretary of State Hain in the above quotation) means that the ability of political discourse to effect change – or even representation – in political interaction and the political landscape is stymied. In Northern Ireland, the lack of real political power held by local politicians together with lack of representation (and potential for holding power) in the UK parliament embedded inequality at the macro level for all in Northern Ireland for much of the duration of the Troubles. The absence of a forum via which political discourse could be directly effectual has implications for its contents (“source domain”), for what it purports to be describing (“target domain”) and the connection between the two (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 2).

Analysis of political discourse in such a situation in Northern Ireland here is intended to offer an insight into way in which political actors and core community leaders (in this case those representing loyalism [Orange Order] and republicanism [former IRA prisoners]) managed and legitimatized the transition from conflict to peaceful agreement. The “agreement” referred to here is actually two documents, eight years apart: that between the political parties in April 1998 in the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement (which was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP]) and the most significant
amendment to it since, in October 2006, the St Andrews Agreement (which centred on agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP). Within Northern Ireland, the 1998 and 2006 Agreements have been carefully presented so as not imply radical change to the ideologies and goals of the parties concerned. The key to their success has been being able to place moves made as tactical or as pragmatic: always in line with the interests of one’s own group. This has been achieved in no small part through political discourse, as examined in detail in the articles contained in this volume.

Synopsis of this Special Issue

The collection begins with Sissel Rosland’s analysis of competing political discourses about “legitimacy” in the context of the early 1970s. Her research may be seen to reaffirm Burton’s (1978) analysis of the situation in Belfast at the start of the Troubles. Conflicting interpretations of how power is made manifest were, according to Burton, at the heart of the spiralling conflict itself. Rosland elaborates this theme in her article here, by analysing difference between political discourses within Northern Ireland at the time. Unionists, she argues, saw power as being conferred by majority rule and through state sanction. Nationalists, however, related questions of power to “universalist” principles of human rights and equal citizenship, principles which extended far beyond the remit of the Northern Ireland parliament or, indeed, the United Kingdom. Rosland here uses the subject of internment – and the themes of “law”, “democracy” and “violence” connected to it – to illustrate conflicting interpretations of power and legitimacy in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Such ideological conflict was exacerbated by a growing emphasis by political actors on ethno-national or religious identity. Such discourses are particularly difficult to address and debate in the traditional forums for democratic dialogue, even if such forums are in place and effective, which they certainly were not in Northern Ireland at this time. Demands were therefore made through the political discourses of various “players” in the conflict, both party and paramilitary, to actors and institutions outside Northern Ireland, while within Northern Ireland the same groups used political discourse to define themselves against each other.

The two most important recipients of these demands were the Irish and British governments. Each was under pressure to act in response to the conflict not only in practical terms but also as a result of its ideological association with the discourses of power and principle at conflict within Northern Ireland. Catherine O’Donnell’s article here examines the discourse
of Irish political parties south of the border during the Troubles and the peace process. She shows that as well as sharing a common concern to prevent the spread of republican upheaval into the Irish state, the mainstream political parties in the south came to articulate a common discourse which balanced the ideal of Irish reunification with the pragmatic acceptance of Northern Ireland’s inclusion within the United Kingdom. Aaron Edwards also looks at the discourse of mainstream political parties outside Northern Ireland, in this case that of Tony Blair’s New Labour party. Edwards shows the way in which the discourse of this party regarding Northern Ireland had to be quite dramatically moderated on its accession to government in 1997. As with O’Donnell (both in this volume and elsewhere [2007]) and Hayward’s (2008) analysis of the discourse of Fianna Fáil as the largest Irish political party, Edwards shows that political discourse of the British Labour Party played a crucial role in modifying certain ideological principles in order to facilitate the peace process in Northern Ireland and to garner public and party support for it.

Laura Filardo-Llamas, as the linguistics expert among the contributors to this volume, has performed the difficult task of comparing in detail specific discursive texts put forward by each of the main political parties in Northern Ireland in immediate response to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement of 1998, namely the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin as nationalist/republican parties and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the DUP as unionist/loyalist parties. The latter of these was the only party which refused to participate in the final negotiations of, and Executive arising from, the 1998 Agreement. By analysing texts spoken by the leaders of these four parties (John Hume, Gerry Adams, David Trimble and Ian Paisley respectively), Filardo manages to include a discussion of the importance of personalities in the peace process in Northern Ireland. This is no more evident than in the case of John Hume who, as Peter McLoughlin argues in this volume, was a lynchpin in the peace process. Hume’s importance was not because some supporters of his party had to be convinced of the power of the “ballot box” (as was the task for Gerry Adams) or because his was the largest party in Northern Ireland (as was the case for David Trimble) or because his party was capable of amplifying and building on underlying scepticism of the peace process (as Paisley’s DUP did between the Agreements of 1998 and 2006). Instead, the importance of Hume’s role centred on his use of political discourse to conceptualise a way forward for negotiations between the two governments and political parties across the spectrum in Northern Ireland. As McLoughlin’s article elaborates, concepts that proved to be crucial to the 1998 Agreement (without which the
2006 St Andrews Agreement, which this time included the DUP, would not have been possible) originated in the language of the SDLP leader – so-called “Humespeak”.

The change in the positioning of the DUP between the 1998 Agreement and the 2006 Agreements is one of the most interesting elements of the long walk to peace in Northern Ireland. The article by Amber Rankin and Gladys Ganiel in this volume shows just quite how extraordinary this change has been by exploring the theme of paramilitary violence in DUP discourses that lambasted the 1998 Agreement and opposing parties (especially the UUP) for their participation in it. Just as Filardo’s article shows that ambiguity – and room for interpretation by the various parties – was crucial to the acceptance of the 1998 Agreement, so Rankin and Ganiel show that the DUP’s predominant role in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement (and the new power-sharing Executive established as a result in May 2007) necessitated that such issues as paramilitary violence be downplayed in contemporary DUP political discourse.

The final two articles in this volume address the role of political discourse outside of the realm of government or political parties in Northern Ireland throughout the peace process. Both articles use large-scale fieldwork using survey and interview data to analyse attitudes and discourses within two influential groupings in loyalism and republicanism (the Orange Order and former IRA prisoners respectively). These two particular groups have proven to be significant in the caution and decisions exercised by political parties in relation to the peace process. James McAuley and Jon Tonge’s article analyses the membership of the Orange Order, which has been an important constituency of support for both mainstream unionist parties. Indeed, much of the DUP discourse analysed by Rankin and Ganiel may be interpreted in the light of that party’s attempt to attract the support of Orange Order members away from the moderate UUP. McAuley and Tonge conclude that the maintenance of the traditional elements of Orange discourses, much of which centre on Protestantism, and clear positions regarding cultural symbols and practices, such as Orange Parades, is seen by members as crucial to the endurance of this community and, thereby, the constitutional link with Great Britain.

Tonge and McAuley also participated, together with Peter Shirlow, in a major project examining discursive and identity change within the republican community since the peace process in Northern Ireland. The article by Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley in this volume considers the question – one close to the heart of many unionist politicians – of the extent to which republican ideology has essentially changed since the 1998 Agreement.
analysis of the discourse of former IRA prisoners shows that, similarly to their loyalist counterparts, these actors do not conceive republican ideology to have been compromised or weakened by the peace process. Rather, they assert that the “other side” is the one that has moved to facilitate agreement. Moreover, they consider it vital that republican principles be maintained through in the new political environment of Northern Ireland, from the highest levels of Sinn Féin’s sharing of power in the Executive to the ground level of cross-community interaction.

What this collection of articles on this case study encapsulates, therefore, is the fact that the greatest power of political discourse lies in its ability to be interpreted in very different ways at different levels. Analysts such as ourselves may be able to show critical junctures at which the uses of particular terms altered, or to show different themes in the language used by key players in the course of the conflict and peace process. Certainly, hints of change or compromise in the discourses of parties to a conflict are what third parties, elite facilitators of negotiations and, indeed, opposing parties wish to hear in a peace process. However, what gives these players power and relevance is their ability to convince their wider base of support that they are bringing the exercise of power closer to home, that they are remaining true to their principles and making progress towards a shared goal. I will now outline three categories for analysing these apparently contradictory dynamics of political discourse as an instrument of conflict and peace.

The Role of Political Discourse: A Framework for Analysis

In order to set a context for the elaboration of these case studies that encapsulates the enduring elements in the connection between political discourse and socio-political change – that is to say, power and principle – this article works from four core propositions:

1. Political discourse offers insight into the blend of ideology and practice and into the wider (socio-political) context
2. Change in political discourse goes hand in hand with change in political practice and environment
3. Conflict transformation in a divided society requires change in political discourse and its context (the two are inseparable)
4. Discursive difference (and the environment for this) is as important for peace as shared discourse

From these propositions, the hypothesis put forward in this article is that political discourse can perform a unique and crucial role as an
instrument of conflict transformation in relation to three processes: (i) the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place, (ii) the facilitation of agreement between moderate and extreme positions, and (iii) the forging of common ground (for discourse and interaction). Each of these will be considered in turn, looking at the particular role of political discourse with regard to the process, examples from Northern Ireland, and lessons that can be taken for wider analysis of political discourse and conflict transformation.

Framing Negotiations

Political discourse can affect the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place in three main ways. First, political discourse on power can be used to justify a new course of action by the party concerned that is considered necessary preparation for the negotiations to follow. In this sense, justification by political actors for the use of the power and responsibility that their supporters have given them is tested frequently and over a long period of time to ascertain the trustworthiness of the leaders at the negotiating table. For similar reasons, when political actors step into the realm of preparing for negotiations with the “other”, discourses of principle are needed to reassure their supporters of their integrity. This integrity would mean that they uphold principles founded on the essential nature and shared ideology of the group in question. Related to this, political discourse on what the actors see as opportunities for progress must make consistency with both past achievements and future ideals apparent.

Experience in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, given the role of the grandest questions of national identity and state legitimacy in exacerbating the conflict, the conceptual framework for negotiations involved the discourses on power that centred on the reconfiguration of arrangements for constitutional and territorial representation in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. As O’Donnell describes in this volume, by the early 1990s, there was broad cross-party consensus among southern Irish parties regarding the necessity of cooperation with the British government, recognition of the legitimacy of British governance over Northern Ireland, and support for inclusive multi-party negotiations. She also shows that consensus existed among Irish
political parties regarding discourses of principle, namely that the goal of Irish reunification was unimpeachable as a political ideal but almost inconceivable as a political goal. This contrasted with the rather fluid interpretations in British politics regarding principles for addressing the “Northern Ireland question”. As Edwards depicts in relation to the New Labour party alone, there was little intra-party let alone inter-party consensus on the principles for negotiating the future of Northern Ireland. One thing that both British and Irish mainstream parties do have in common (as noted by McLoughlin) is that they were heavily influenced by the principles for negotiation espoused by John Hume as SDLP leader. Whilst the articles here by O’Donnell and Edwards illustrate the role of official or governmental discourse in influencing the ideological – and strategic – positioning of parties prior to negotiations, McLoughlin’s article serves as a reminder that this process of discursive influence is not merely a top-down one. Moreover, the common approach to the Northern Ireland peace process that was evident among the British and Irish governments, EU Commission and US administration was due in no small part to the influence of the SDLP discursive principles. Such principles facilitated a shared approach at the highest levels to Northern Ireland, approaches that were concerned to uphold “unity by consent”, a “three stranded approach”, and “agreed Ireland”, amongst other things.

The key to the success of these principles in the peace process in Northern Ireland is that they were ambiguous enough to allow those who subscribed to them to appear to be maintaining the integrity of their long-held principles and to be drawing a line of continuity between past and future. In the case of nationalist/republican parties (south as well as north of the border), these terms were used in effect as synonyms for well-established ideals of a united Ireland, etc. In the case of unionist and British parties, these terms represented a flexibility of ideology within Irish nationalism and an acceptance of an integral “British” dimension to the future of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP’s engagement with external actors and the imprint of its ideology on the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 gave it an authority and influence in relation to framing the peace process. Nonetheless, as McLoughlin and Filardo’s articles reiterate, this did not automatically translate into electoral success or political power. The focus on bicommunal or ethno-national identity in political activity and institutions established after the 1998 Agreement meant that the SDLP in effect drew itself out of the circle within which political bargaining would take place. The SDLP’s discourses for post-Agreement Northern Ireland did not correspond with the
resulting political construct. This indicates that progress after the framework for negotiations has been set does not necessarily correspond with a group’s contribution to that framework.

Facilitating Agreement

Once the groundwork for negotiations has been laid, political discourse can play a vital role in enabling agreement to be reached between moderate parties, moderates and hardliners, or between extreme ideological positions. Political discourse on power at such a time is of particular interest, because real power is at stake according to the discursive line followed by participants in the negotiations. The priority of political actors as negotiators, is to balance the requirements of power with the possibility of holding it. Discourses of principle are also under particular pressure when it comes to facilitating agreement; “agreement” by definition means agreed terms, but does it also mean agreed meanings? Certainly, the room that is necessary for bargaining in order for those “at the table” to make progress must be enabled by the discourses they espouse.

Experience in Northern Ireland

Engagement in negotiations towards an agreement has always required in Northern Ireland the discursive acceptance of the norms of participation. Political discourses on power within parties that have held a seat at the negotiating table have centred on the assumption of their essential equality with the other players. This has been more difficult for some parties to accept than others. The articles by Rankin and Ganiel and Filardo-Llamas in this volume indicate that unionist parties have struggled to articulate discourses during the process of making peace agreements that allow them to accept the equal bargaining position of Sinn Féin in particular. Regarding the actual substance of these negotiations, as noted above, it is difficult to find accommodation – or democratic peace – between parties distinguished primarily by ethno-national principles. It is for such reasons that, as Tonge (2007) has argued, principles are “downgraded to tactics” for hardline parties. McIntyre (2001) contends that such principles in republican discourse (namely those on Irish identity and unity) had pretty much always been tactical, from the start of the Troubles, and were used to cover for reactionary violence, rather than to inspire it. Bean (2007) puts a more
modest interpretation forward, suggesting that, in the case of Sinn Féin, it was the particular context of the peace process that led the party to accept the norms of other parties in order to find agreement with them. Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley’s article recounts the effects of this tactical change in republican party discourse among hardline supporters of republican principles; what is notable is that their support of Sinn Féin has been conditional on being able to identify an ideological continuity between party tactics and political principles. Discourses of all parties in relation to an agreement intended to formalise a peace process must be seen to enable (internal and contextual) change to occur. Yet, in the case of Northern Ireland, the most successful parties in electoral terms have been the slowest to change but have ultimately come the furthest in both discourse and practice.

Forging Common Ground

The stability of any common ground revealed through a peace agreement may be determined to a large degree by the discourses of those sharing power. The very fact that new actors are holding power has huge significance. If political discourse has “consequence”, is a co-operative or a competitive discourse more likely? Aside from the particularities of the context, the nature of political discourse chosen by parties at this stage depends in part on their assessment of whether progress towards their goals is best achieved through co-operation or competition with one’s political opponents. This is not least because, judging by what has been outlined above, the common ground that has been forged is less likely to have been constructed from shared principles than through the acceptance of (the existence of) different principles. The construction of some shared political space as a result of an agreement can mean that political competition is more direct and, according to the particular terms of the political agreement, this competition could either be directed most severely at opponents within each community or at those representing the “other” community. Either way, parties from a “hardline” tradition may be the ones most comfortable with using the type of political language and (media-aware) tactics necessary in a forum of direct political competition.

Experience in Northern Ireland

The outstanding question in Northern Ireland is whether those now sharing power (the DUP and Sinn Féin) be forced to confront the legacy of
their historical polarising discourses, or are they the ones best placed to redress it? As several articles in this volume show (Rankin and Ganiel, Shirlow et al., McAuley and Tonge), the moral discourses of parties (including that used in the past) makes forging of common ground not only difficult but controversial. Taken together, articles in this volume provide evidence from Northern Ireland that some (particularly hardline) actors have the ability to blend conciliatory public discourses with oppositional private discourses in order to make political progress. Sinn Féin, for example, had already become adept at the use of emotionally-driven cultural factors in political activity prior to the 1998 Agreement (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998). Such skills have proven useful in the party’s competitiveness for support from within nationalism and against unionism in new forums for political engagement in Northern Ireland. Moderate parties, such as the UUP, are not as practised or as comfortable with discourses of otherness and defence that the new forum of direct political competition (including within own communal group) appears to have required (Hogan, 2007). Two of the parties that have benefited the least in electoral terms since the successive suspension (between 2000 and 2007) of the institutions established by the 1998 Agreement are the SDLP and the centre-ground Alliance Party; it is perhaps no coincidence that these have been the main parties to engage directly and meaningfully in discourses of a “shared identity” in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

Evidence from Northern Ireland would suggest that it is important to consider political discourse as a crucial factor when seeking to understand the processes involved in the escalation of conflict or the transition to relative peace. We are not at a stage in Northern Ireland where we can confidently assess the “success” of the peace process; nor is our theoretical framework comprehensive enough to draw anything more than tentative lessons regarding the potential of political discourse in conflict transformation. Figure 2 (below) summarises the key themes regarding the “power” and “principle” dimensions of political discourse in stages of conflict and conflict transformation.
First, in relation to *power*: analysis of the connection between discourse and political activity/change indicates the necessity of providing a forum in which political discourse has the possibility of effecting real change. Within Northern Ireland, the polarising influence of different discourses was further exacerbated by the suspension of Stormont and its replacement with “direct rule” from Westminster in 1972. This in effect removed the shared (albeit highly flawed and integrally unequal) forum for political debate and activity within Northern Ireland. At the very least, by having political responsibility, key actors should choose their words more carefully before addressing a public audience. Ideally, the conditions of local democratic representation will provide a forum for the peaceful articulation of ideological principles and, crucially, the practical application of political responsibility. What we have seen in Northern Ireland is that active (and conceptual) input into the architecture of a peace agreement is ultimately not as important as being seen to be ready to lead in the post-agreement context. Both qualities depend on the use of political discourse and the marriage of “power” and “principle” therein.

On the issue of *principle*, Northern Ireland witnessed rapid polarisation between parties when the touchpaper of identity was lit by key political actors in order to prove (to their own community) the seriousness of their demands. Such demands centred on policy issues that brought together the most sensitive points of principle with the need for pragmatic accommodation (such as policing or decommissioning). These issues were only agreed upon at the negotiating table through what might be termed a “fudging” of specifics and grew in significance in the post-agreement context. It is with such controversies – and ambiguities – in mind that Aughey (2002) has termed the 1998 Agreement a “paradoxical reality”. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind (as reflected in my use of the term “conflict transformation” rather than that of “resolution”) that it is possible, even desirable, to have conflictual discourses in a post-agreement political arena. Whether these have the capacity to stymie all progress depends in part on the discursive strategies adopted by core political actors in relation to their assessment of the attitude of their own communities as well as their opponents (plus, of course, the potential critics within their own party). The analyses of the contributors to this volume reveal why some political discourses have been more enduring and influential than others at
different stages along the path from conflict to relative peace in Northern Ireland.

Endnotes

1 Whilst I acknowledge that the term “conflict transformation” is often conscientiously applied to processes outside the realm of (party) political activity, it is my intention to highlight the relevance of the insights provided by Lederach (1995), Francis (2002), Miall (2004) and other theorists of conflict transformation to this “political” sphere. I do this not least because I believe the importance of discourse as a medium and driver of contextual change derives from the fact that it supersedes societal divisions (such as “community” and “elite”) and is often used to connect them.

2 O’Neill’s (2003, after Habermas) argument for a forum for the free use of communicative reason in order to confer legitimacy on a post-conflict political arrangement relates to this awareness.

3 It should be noted that the electoral fortunes of political parties changed quite dramatically in the ten years after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998; this may be characterised in summary by the growing dominance of the “hardline” parties of the DUP and Sinn Féin and the weakening position of the “moderate” parties of the UUP and SDLP. In the election to the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 1998, the SDLP won just under 22 per cent of first preference votes (24 seats in the Assembly), the UUP won just over 21 per cent (28 seats), the DUP won 18 per cent (20 seats) and Sinn Féin won over 17 per cent (18 seats). In the March 2007 Assembly elections, the DUP won 30 per cent of first preference votes (36 Assembly seats), Sinn Féin won 26 per cent (28 seats), the SDLP won just over (16 seats) and the UUP (18 seats) won just under 15 per cent each. Source: Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive (ARK) <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections> (August 2008).

4 For a fascinating application of notions of membership categorisation in political discourse, see Leudar et al. (2004).

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NARRATIVES OF LEGITIMACY: POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE EARLY PHASE OF THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Sissel Rosland

Abstract

This article examines the discursive construction of legitimacy in the early phase of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The empirical material covers the debate on internment without trial from 1971 till 1975 – a debate which involved conflicting claims of legitimacy. Some strongly defended internment as a legitimate step in the fight against the IRA, whilst others regarded it as an illegitimate measure employed by a corrupt political regime. These conflicting claims of legitimacy entailed a conceptual battle concerned with the construction and authorisation of political order. The article explores this battle along three dimensions: law, violence, and democracy.

Introduction

On the 9th of August 1971 the government of Northern Ireland introduced internment without trial. Internment was meant to curb the escalating conflict in Northern Ireland. However, when internment was ended four years later, this aim had not been reached: Cease-fires had come and gone; peace proposals had emerged and failed; and more than 1,300 people had died.

This paper will explore the construction of legitimacy in Northern Irish political discourse in the early phase of the Troubles. The empirical focal point is the debate on internment. The general conclusion of many commentators has been that internment alienated the Catholic population in Northern Ireland (see Arthur, 2001, p. 114; Murray, 1998 p. 18; McAllister, 1977, p. 97-103; Ruane and Todd, 1997, p. 130; Staunton, 2001, p. 276.) The undermining of state legitimacy can be seen already in the process of re-politicisation in the late 1960s. This process was, however, accelerated and shaped by internment which accentuated a wide range of contentious issues.
The debate on internment involved conflicting claims of legitimacy: some strongly defended internment as a legitimate step in the fight against the IRA, whilst others regarded it as an illegitimate measure employed by a corrupt political regime. These conflicting claims of legitimacy entailed what I, inspired by Frank Burton’s (1978, p. 104) phrase, will call “a conceptual battle” concerned with the construction and authorisation of political order.

Interpreting Legitimacy

The concept of legitimacy is used in a variety of disciplines due to its usefulness in the conceptualisation of the process whereby authority is produced not by force but by voluntary obedience (Barker, 1990, p. 11). It has been pointed out that studies of legitimacy have dealt with a growing number of institutions, linking their stability and the consensus they enjoy to the existence of legitimacy (Zelditch, 2001, p. 40). But the concept of legitimacy is not only applicable to a situation of stability. By paying attention to disobedience, light may be cast on the conditions of and reasons for obedience, since it is often the case that the reasons for behaving in a particular way are more clearly stated when that form of behaviour is threatened or in decline, than when it is commonplace (Barker, 1990, p. 6).

The concept of legitimacy has been closely connected to the name of Max Weber, and he represents what we might call a “subjectivist” approach to legitimacy (Weber, 1978). He stressed the empirical and historical character of legitimacy, rather than its normative validity. To Weber it was not legitimacy as such, but the search for legitimacy, which characterised states, and he was subsequently interested in studying how authority and compliance were justified. “Legitimacy” as used by Weber was thus both a belief held by subjects and a claim made by rulers (Barker, 1990, p. 59).

In studies that have dealt with issues of legitimacy in conflicts, different conceptions of legitimacy have been employed. One approach has dealt with non-state violence as a problem or as a challenge to the state. The concept of legitimacy is rarely explicitly discussed in such studies, but it is taken for granted that legitimacy derives from the law (see, for example, Phillips, 1990, p. 77 and Wilkinson, 1990, p. 48). Since legitimacy here is viewed as a mere reflection of law, other claims to legitimacy seem to be overruled and ignored.

This approach has been challenged, however, and starting from a critical view of Jürgen Habermas’ theories, the political theorist Shane O’Neill O’Neill has developed a framework for a critical discourse theory of
democracy (see O’Neill, 2000 and 2002). O’Neill stresses the importance of linking legitimacy to other sources than current law: for a law to be legitimate it is also necessary that the law be passed without violation of the free use of communicative reason (O’Neill, 2000, p. 506).

In contrast to these (implicit or explicit) normative perspectives, some studies have applied a more subjectivist concept of legitimacy through studying how legitimacy has been established within a particular context (see Burton, 1978; also Sluka, 1989 and Feldman, 1991). The issue of legitimacy is particularly significant in a study by the sociologist Frank Burton (1978) who in his book The Politics of Legitimacy, argues that the quest for legitimacy is waged in a conceptual battlefield where: “claims and counter-claims represent ideological struggles within a discourse of legitimacy” (p. 104). Burton follows the subjectivist approach in examining the contextual and conceptual bases of these claims, rather than their normative validity.

This article analyses the construction of legitimacy as a discursive process. Having the historical character of the process of legitimisation at heart, this study resembles the subjectivist perspective of Weber and Burton rather than the normative perspectives. For the present purpose, discourse will be defined as practises that constitute the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). This concept of discourse highlights the constitutive aspect of language and implies that power is constituted by “regimes of truth” concerned with the creation of an ontological, political, and moral order (see Malkki, 1995, p. 194, and Foucault, 1980, p. 13).

The public utterances are embedded within a historical context, and in the debate the participants negotiate meanings which are never fixed but continually undergoing contestation and redefinition (Chadwick, 2000, p. 292). A central challenge when researching the discursive construction of legitimacy is to find a way to examine how participants in the public debate represent the relationship between the state and the people. In the case of the internment debate, three dimensions stand out as particularly significant in the construction of legitimacy: law, violence, and democracy. Firstly, law was significant since much of the debate related to the legitimacy of the emergency powers, which legalised internment without trial. Secondly, the debate was closely linked to the issue of violence: the escalation of paramilitary violence was given as the main reason for the introduction and continuation of internment, and in addition, the issue of state violence surfaced through allegations that internees had been subjected to torture. Thirdly, the debate exposed conflicting views on the characteristics of “true democracy” and the status of the Northern Ireland state as democratic or undemocratic.
In the following, we will explore how different narratives of legitimacy were constructed around these dimensions. But first, I will give a brief outline of the political situation at the time of the internment debate.

**Political Context**

The political landscape in which the debate on internment took place was rapidly changing. In contrast to the previous fifty years – in which the Unionist Party had stayed continuously in power and nationalist opposition had become something of an empty exercise – the state in Northern Ireland was gradually re-politicised in the late sixties. Inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was established, attracting support particularly from young Catholics, but also initially from Protestants. Thus in the early 1970s the composition of Northern Ireland’s political spectrum changed considerably.

On the unionist side, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was still by far the largest party. It was, however, experiencing a growing internal division as well as increasing opposition from other unionist parties, in particular by Rev. Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) founded in September 1971. DUP soon became an important force in Northern Ireland politics and a persistent threat to the traditional dominance of the UUP. The UUP was also challenged by a new right-wing pressure group, Ulster Vanguard, and several loyalist paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defence Association (UDA). On the other side of the political spectrum, the UUP also lost supporters to a new moderate and liberal party founded in April 1970. This party, called the Alliance Party, gained support from a section of liberal Unionists who had left the UUP and from some former members of the Labour party. The party hoped to draw support from both Protestants and Catholics.

On the nationalist side the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), founded in August 1970, rapidly became the most important political force rapidly surpassing the old Nationalist party. It presented itself as a radical, left-of-centre party and was backed by former supporters of the Nationalist party as well as members of the civil rights movement. The other strand within nationalist politics, the republican movement, was in 1970 split on the issue of recognition of – and abstention from – the Belfast and Dublin Parliaments. The party Sinn Féin then became two parties: Official Sinn Féin, a left-wing party, (also going under the name “Republican Clubs”)
which called for an end to abstentionism, and Provisional Sinn Féin, the party generally known as “Sinn Féin”, which remained abstentionist into the next decade.

**Dimensions of Legitimacy: Law**

The power to use internment without trial was laid down in the Special Powers Act from 1922. Whereas the government legitimised internment as the lesser of two evils, the anti-internment movement rejected the alternative altogether. In general, unionists presented the internment powers in terms of function and order, whereas the nationalist opposition portrayed them in terms of principles, human rights and freedom.

*Unionist Discourse on “Law”*

When introducing internment, the UUP government characterised the situation as war. The image of an emergency was supported by firm evidence: statistics showed that violence had escalated from the beginning of January up to the introduction of internment in August 1971. In an initial statement the government pointed out that the figures revealed, “not only a sustained, but a mounting pattern of violence, which could not be borne in any community determined to stay alive.” The government had no choice, it argued, but to enact the provisions of the Special Powers Act (Government Statement, 21 August 1971).

The use of emergency powers was not regarded as an ideal solution, but rather as the only viable option in the struggle for the restoration of order (Brian Faulkner, *The Guardian*, 16 September 1971). Captain Lawrence Orr, the leader of the Ulster Unionists at Westminster, was confident that, although internment would not reconcile the opposing factions in Ulster, it was certainly a step on the way to bringing order back to the streets (*The Guardian*, 16 September 1971). The Prime Minister Brian Faulkner claimed to know the identity of the perpetrators, and internment was thus a useful instrument, because it only affected people who had “murdered in cold blood” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 August 1971).

The fundamental trust in the internment procedures was an essential element in the unionist government’s defence of the emergency legislation. The prime minister declared that emergency powers were used with reluctance (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 August 1971) and he stressed that the government had established a three-man advisory committee to review pleas
made by individual internees (*The Guardian*, 16 September 1971). But in the end, the decision whether a person was to be interned or not, was in the hands of the prime minister. This should provide further reassurance, Faulkner argued, putting his own integrity and authority on the line as a guarantee for fair treatment: “I am not prepared to sign internment orders on anybody unless I am persuaded that person has played a very direct role in violence in Northern Ireland” (*Belfast Telegraph*, 9 August 1971).

In a letter to *The Times* the Unionist MP, James Molyneaux, explicitly declared that he regarded internment to be a denial of “fundamental liberties.” But, he argued, internment was not only about individual liberties, there were also other important liberties to preserve, he argued: “there is also the fundamental liberty of every British citizen to live at peace under the law.” Liberties had to be considered in context, he argued, and liberty to live at peace under the law ought to take priority (*The Times*, 16 August 1971).

As shown above, the unionist government viewed the internment powers as secure, just and legitimate because they were settled in current law. Within such a framework the only valid political question regarding internment was whether it served the purpose of restoring order or not. Some voices within the unionist opposition, however, presented another answer to this question. Ian Paisley argued against internment and rejected the Prime Minister’s claim that he had no choice but to introduce internment. He claimed that Faulkner had tried to mislead the country by announcing he was introducing internment as a last resort. According to Paisley this was a deliberate falsehood, as not all processes of the law had been used against the IRA (*News Letter*, 10 August 1971). Still, the unionist opposition mainly presented the internment powers in terms of function (for a further discussion, see Rosland, 2003).

*Nationalist Discourse on “Law”*

 Whereas the unionist government presented the emergency powers in terms of restoring order, the nationalist opposition immediately challenged this priority. A cross-party statement including politicians, priests and representatives of professional and business life in Northern Ireland, summed up this view, pointing out that preserving *human rights* rather than *order* was the most fundamental purpose of law:

A society without order is a distressed society, but a society without freedom is not a society at all. If a choice must be made between the legal preservation of order and the legal preservation of freedom,
freedom must take priority (Statement in *Irish News*, 4 September 1971)

The opposition built its case against the powers of internment around two issues. Firstly, that the power to intern was a perversion of law denying individual fundamental rights; secondly, that the unionist government used internment deliberately as a political weapon to silence the opposition. The opposition believed internment to be an indefensible evil itself, irrespective of circumstances (Statement in *Irish News*, 4 September 1971). Labeling internment “a perversion of law”, the signatories of the cross-party statement particularly stressed that the emergency powers eliminated the restraints on power. By lowering the standards for evidence of guilt, persons could be imprisoned on the basis of evidence that was unknown to them and which in ordinary law would be seen as inadmissible. The internees themselves protested against not being given the opportunity to defend themselves against decisive yet secret evidence (Statement by internees in Crumlin Road Prison, *Irish News*, 23 August 1971). In an open letter to the British Home Secretary, the Derry branch of the SDLP argued that the emergency powers in Northern Ireland did not adhere to the standards of English justice:

To you, internment in Northern Ireland may be only an abstract word in a faraway place. You well know that English law in England holds the liberty of the subject in high regard and that a man is innocent until proven guilty. Only in the gravest circumstances such as the major wars does your English Government set aside these laws and even then, they try to ensure the minimum affront to the dignity of the person and the maximum safeguard for rights and welfare. Contrast this with what you have allowed in Northern Ireland (*Irish News*, 18 December 1971).

Explaining the direct effects of this point, a leading article in the *Irish News*, observed that by using the Special Powers Act, members of the Police Special Branch were able to re-arrest men who had earlier been found innocent by ordinary juries. According to the newspaper this practise undermined individual liberty which was no longer protected by law, but was at the arbitrary disposition of Prime Minister Brian Faulkner (*Irish News*, 25 November 1971).

*Competing Approaches to Law*

To sum up, the crucial point of division on the issue of emergency powers concerned the balance between order and rights: whereas Faulkner and the government assigned priority to the restoration of order, their critics asserted that the most fundamental task of the law was to preserve the rights
of the individual and to restrain the power of the state. On this ground the opposition ruled out Faulkner’s “lesser of two evils”-argument, arguing instead that internment never could be the lesser of two evils.

It has been argued that by establishing what Homi Bhabha has labelled “counter-narratives” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 300), marginalized groups can resist hegemonic representations (Perry in Graham, 2001, p. 86). History has shown that whereas the “positive rights” approach has tended to support established authority, the theories of “natural rights” have been connected to opposition against authorities. The theories of Rousseau and other natural rights theorists produced a notion of legitimacy that transcended the procedures and authority of the state, thus making possible the idea of a legitimate revolution. With legitimacy residing in “a state of nature”, rather than in the state, a sense of essential commonality is produced beyond governmental procedures (Wolin, 1996, p. 41).

**Dimensions of Legitimacy: Violence**

To talk of legitimate violence in the debate on internment seem to be a contradiction in terms. The word “violence” was rarely used to describe what the speaker viewed as a “legitimate” use of force, whether this be by British soldiers or paramilitary “defenders” and “freedom fighters”; “violence” was the force perpetrated by one’s opponent.

In their proposed role as peacekeepers in the increasingly troubled society, the security forces had already entered the front stage of Northern Ireland politics before the introduction of internment. Yet, their critical function in the operation of internment regarding arrests and interrogation made the security forces even more contentious.  

**Competing Discourses on the Security Forces**

Almost immediately after the first arrests on the morning of 9 August 1971, there appeared allegations of brutal treatment of the internees (see for example *Irish News*, 10 August, 1971; *Irish News*, 13 August 1971). In a joint statement the SDLP, the Nationalist party, the Republican Labour party and NICRA proclaimed: “We demand that the military resume the role for which they were sent here, the protection of people and areas against sectarian attacks on their homes pending a political solution (joint statement, *Irish News*, 10 August 1971). The stories of mistreatment grew in number during the first months of internment as several internees got to tell their stories to the newspapers.” Under pressure from nationalists in Northern
Ireland, the government of the Republic of Ireland lodged a series of complaints at the European Commission of Human Rights at Strasbourg in December 1971. The Irish government alleged that British policy in Northern Ireland had degenerated to a military assault on the minority in violation of the European Convention of Human Rights (Boyle, 1974). Several persons also submitted individual petitions to the commission (Boyle, 1974).6

Nationalists, thus, in general described the treatment of internees as brutal and inhumane, and a violation of the rights of the individual. The ill-treatment was not in the main regarded as evidence of the evilness of the interrogators, but rather as the product of an aggressive state (see Rosland, 2003). Consequently, government inquiries into the matter could never be trusted. Legitimacy had to be authorised elsewhere, and it is consistent with this standpoint that nationalists looked to the Republic of Ireland and the international human rights commission for confirmation of the perceived illegitimacy of state violence in Northern Ireland.

In unionist statements, on the other hand, the security forces were portrayed primarily as responsible protectors characterised by virtues as heroism and victimhood. Already shortly after the introduction of internment, the Prime Minister hailed it as a great success, which allowed the security forces to work efficiently in their “relentless” struggle against the IRA (Daily Mail, 16 September 1971). In October, Faulkner concluded: “I think in the last three months that the security forces have got very positively and demonstrably on top of the situation” (News Letter, 27 October 1971).

When rumours of mistreatment started to circulate, the government, were keen to respond and assured the public that any claim of ill treatment would be impartially investigated (News Letter, 16 August 1971). Yet, questioning the mistreatment allegations, James Kilfedder of the UUP suspected that the internees, in order to safeguard themselves against charges of being informers, were fabricating allegations of Army brutality (Belfast Telegraph, 20 October 1971). At the same time he contended that the security forces should be allowed to use some kind of force, if this could shorten the conflict. One had to choose between the terrorists and the soldiers, Kilfedder argued, concluding that the soldiers’ lives ought to be regarded as more important than “the injured feelings of the terrorists” (Belfast Telegraph, 20 October 1971).

Although the general unionist view was that the security forces were to be trusted, there were some exceptions to this pattern. In some cases involving loyalist paramilitaries loyalist and unionist politicians criticised the Army for mistreatment. After an incident in the Maze prison in late 1973 that left several loyalist internees injured, both Ian Paisley and the UDA
condemned the troops for mistreating the internees (see Daily Mail 20 December 1973; News Letter, 20 December 1973; Irish Times, 20 December 1973). This occasional criticism, however, did not challenge the main representation of the security forces as protectors of common good.

**Competing Discourses on Paramilitaries**

The debate on internment exposes several conflicting interpretations of the justification and responsibility for paramilitary violence. According to the government, the IRA was organising “a campaign of murder” with the “responsibility for death and suffering of innocent people” (News Letter, 16 August 1971) and Prime Minister Brian Faulkner branded the IRA campaign “an armed conspiracy whose immediate purpose is to destroy the peace, stability and security in this part of the UK” (Daily Mail, 16 September 1971). The Prime Minister also stressed that the IRA was isolated from the Catholic population, which it claimed to be representing. The main distinction went not along religious lines, he argued, but between those who pursued their ends democratically and those who wished to impose their views by violence (News Letter 13.09.71 and Irish Times, 15 April 1974).

The Alliance party also to a certain extent supported the image of the isolated terrorist (see, for example, Oliver Napier in Belfast Telegraph, 12 August 1971). Yet, the Alliance Party believed that introducing internment would increase rather than curb the escalating violence (see for example Bob Cooper in Irish News, 21 August 1971 and Oliver Napier in Irish News, 26 July 1974). Alliance reflections on terrorism thus, instead of drawing a definite line between the agent of violence and the victim, indicated that “the terrorist” could be both an agent of violence and a victim.

This logic was taken even further in the statements of the SDLP, which firmly situated the republican paramilitary within Northern Ireland society. Although condemning their use of violence, the SDLP also viewed republican paramilitaries as “victims of the past”, thus placing the responsibility of paramilitary violence not only on the individual IRA members but on the Northern Ireland state (see for example John Hume in Irish Times, 3 December 1973). The paramilitaries were also frequently singled out as agents of counter-productive violence. Violence, then, was depicted as both immoral and futile:

We believe in political means and political means alone. Anyone who looks at our community to-day must be convinced that other than political means only leads us deeper and deeper into the mire and
increases the suffering of all our people (John Hume, Iris News, 1 July 1974)

Hume also argued that the responsibility for ending internment rested partly with the IRA: if violence stopped, there would be no justification for the continuation of internment (Irish News, 1 December 1973).

Few statements in the debate on internment, even from the republican movement, explicitly defended the IRA as a violent agent. The purpose of the IRA violence, however, was made very clear: it was to break the political, economic and cultural connection with Britain. Republican statements insisted that they had a mandate for their struggle from both the people and the internees and the desire was that “the Irish people should enjoy justice, peace and prosperity, in a free united Ireland” (Long Kesh Comhairle Ceanntair, Sinn Féin, Irish News, 28 March 1972). In contrast to “the isolated terrorists” in the unionist statements, the “republican struggle for freedom” was presented as the manifestation of a birthright, a battle symbolised by the loyalty to the graves of the past.

The loyalty of the loyalist paramilitaries, although to a different object, took on some similar features. The sacrifice of the loyalist paramilitaries in defending Protestants and the Union was a significant part of the representation of the “betrayed defender”. According to loyalist groups, the loyalist paramilitaries were defence forces helping the security forces. The loyalist groups thus felt betrayed when the British Government introduced internment of loyalists in February 1973.

The loyalist paramilitaries were not given a prominent role in the different accounts of internment until after the internment of loyalists. The moderate unionist representation of the loyalist paramilitaries is quite interesting, for it shows that even though most acts of loyalist violence were condemned, it seemed to be important not to be considered an opponent of the loyalist internees. At some point it looked like the unionist parties almost competed to be seen as the strongest supporter of the loyalist internees (see, for example, Roy Bradford in News Letter, 29 September 1973 and Edward Burns in Irish Times, 4 October 1973). Several unionist representatives also initiated motions demanding the release of loyalist internees only, and several district councils adopted such motions (see Irish Independent, 28 November 1973 and 21 December 1973; Belfast Telegraph, 13 December 1973 and 20 December 1973).

Nationalists challenged this reasoning and initially branded the loyalist paramilitaries as extremists, who attacked innocent Catholics. However, this image began to change after the first internment of loyalists in early 1973.
Loyalists were now, particularly in republican statements, also portrayed as class brothers and victims of internment, suffering in the same way as republican internees (see, for example, the statement by the Republican Clubs, Irish News, 31 January 1974; also joint statements printed in the Irish Times and Irish News in August 1974).

*Competing Approaches to Violence*

In a study of the discursive (de-)legitimisation of violence it is important to consider how the agents of violence are portrayed in the political statements: by presenting the agents of violence within a particular context the acts of violence might be explained and rationalised. With some exceptions, discourses on violence in the debate on internment echoed the various parties’ representation of the use of emergency powers. On the one hand, the unionist movement in general legitimised state violence through an official legal mandate and the function of restoring order. In the case of the loyalist paramilitaries there was an ambivalent approach, however, and the question of purpose and context seem at least partly to come in to play when separating loyalist and republican violence. On the other hand, nationalist discourses stressed alternative sources of legitimacy. In the case of the republican groups, they referred to discrimination as well as human and national rights when justifying republican violence. Within the SDLP, however, violence seemed in general to have been delegitimized through references to moral values and inalienable human rights.

*Dimensions of Legitimacy: Democracy*

In the debate on internment all political parties presented “democracy” as the legitimate form of government. It is generally held that it is the commitment to popular rule which sets democracies apart from other political systems (Dalton, 1988, p. 206). This maxim was generally recognised in the internment debate, but the debate exposed conflicting representations of democracy. Some connected democracy to the procedures of the existing institutions of government; others linked it to ethnic/national rights. They also had different views on how the people were to conduct their “legitimate right to power”. Were the preferences of the people to be secured through institutionalised channels of representation, or should the people themselves defend their interests directly?

*Unionist Discourse on “Democracy”*
To the Ulster Unionist Party, democracy was a set of procedures for the
election of representatives who carried out “the rule of the people”. The
decision to introduce internment was taken to protect this democracy. James
Molyneaux observed that:
in every election during the past 50 years they have shown their
determination to remain part of the United Kingdom under the Crown.
The electoral system is the same as in other parts of the United
Kingdom – universal franchise of one man one vote. Is democracy to
remain in Ulster or is the gun to take its place? (The Times, 16 August
1971).

Comments by Prime Minister Faulkner followed similar lines. Those
who had been interned were interned because of their disrespect for the
democratic means: “the essential conflict is between democracy on the one
hand, on the other those who wish to bypass democracy by terrorist means”
(Irish Times, 27 November 1971).

In general the unionist government disapproved of non-parliamentary
methods and it berated both individuals and the elected representatives of the
nationalist opposition for withdrawing from public bodies and declaring
support for a rent and rates strike (Government Statement, 21 September
1971). Although confirming the right to free speech (News Letter, 13
September 1971), the government promulgated a six-month ban on parades
and demonstrations when introducing internment: the security forces should
not be diverted from their essential tasks at such a critical time (Belfast
Telegraph, 9 August 1971).8

The unionist representations of democracy changed somewhat,
however, with the suspension of the Stormont parliament in March 1972 and
the subsequent negotiations on power-sharing with nationalists. After the fall
of Stormont and the agreement on power-sharing, the UUP found itself in a
grave internal conflict: would a power-sharing assembly and Executive be
democratic institutions?

Brian Faulkner, the leader of the power-sharing fraction, viewed the
power-sharing process as the route to a restoration of a Northern Ireland
parliament, and thus also to peace, order and good government (News Letter,
12 December 1973). Faulkner utterly rejected ideas of an independent Ulster:
“Independence from Great Britain, of any style, under any name, and in any
circumstances, is repugnant to our ideals, in complete opposition to our basic
policy, and would be ruinous to our secure future and disastrous for our
economic well-being” (Irish Times, 6 March 1973).

The opponents of power-sharing in the UUP had a different
interpretation and argued that the Council of Ireland proposed in the
Sunningdale Communique was the first step to a united Ireland. They therefore went into the United Ulster Unionist Council coalition with the DUP and Vanguard. Austin Ardill of the anti-power-sharing wing of the UUP claimed that the aim was, “to bring about the restoration of full parliamentary democracy in Northern Ireland” (News Letter, 26 February 1974). This was despite the fact that the anti-power-sharing wing of the UUP also supported some non-constitutional actions such as the Ulster Workers Council strike (which eventually brought down the power-sharing institutions). John Taylor, also of the anti-power-sharing wing, stressed that the power-sharing institutions did not have the consent of the majority of Northern Ireland (News Letter, 2 March 1974). In contrast to Faulkner, Taylor did not rule out an independent Northern Ireland. In a joint statement with the Vanguard leader, William Craig, he stated that:

we don’t agree with those who would accept membership of the U.K. at any price. If the British Government is not prepared to offer Ulster sufficient powers, then we are of the opinion that a negotiated independence for Ulster could be the best course of action for loyalists (Irish Times, 17 January 1973).

The Democratic Unionist Party primarily commented on the suspension of Stormont in terms of British citizenship rights (News Letter, 27 March 1972). The calls for independence were strongly disputed by the DUP which instead advocated a stronger integration of Northern Ireland in the Union. This did not mean that the DUP was not also concerned with the “loyal Ulster people”. Even though the DUP primarily defended constitutional means of politics (see News Letter, 16 February 1972; 27 March 1972) and Ian Paisley did not support the loyalist strike in the wake of the internment of loyalists (Irish Times, 8 February 1973), the party regularly defended the actions of loyalist paramilitary groups (see Rankin and Ganiel, this volume).

**Nationalist Discourse on “Democracy”**

Whereas both the DUP and the majority of the unionist parties related democracy to the rule of the majority, this view was strongly contested by nationalists. The SDLP generally stressed the importance of political representation, but did not regard the majority rule of the UUP in Northern Ireland to be real democracy. During the debate on internment the key element in the SDLP vision of real democracy was above all inclusion. New political institutions had to be built in order to include all sections of the community.
Although established as late as 1970, the SDLP had by the introduction of internment in August 1971, already acquired the experience of working both inside and outside the existing political institutions. The party’s seven Stormont MPs decided to pull out of Stormont in the summer of 1971 in protest against the unionist government. When internment was introduced in August, the party supported a rent and rates strike and extended its boycott of public institutions (Irish News, 10 August 1971). Despite such support for civil disobedience, however, the position of the SDLP did differ from that of the civil rights and internees’ groups (see below), since it continuously stressed the importance of political representation and responsible leadership. In John Hume’s words, this was a time for brains, not for brawn (Irish News, 11 September 1971).

But even though the SDLP-deputies wanted to lead the people, they also recognised the importance of being in touch with popular sentiments. Representatives should not be too far ahead of the people, Gerry Fitt explained, when he refused to participate in talks with the unionist government after internment (The Times, 30 September 1971).

Still, after the suspension of Stormont and its involvement in talks on power sharing, the SDLP resumed its cooperation with the British government and reversed its previous commitment not to participate in any institutions as long as internment remained in force. Now, representation and influence, it was claimed, made it possible for the SDLP to lobby for the release of internees. The SDLP leader, Ivan Cooper, warned against the dangers of taking politics back into the streets: “Demonstrations at this time will not bring internment to an end and will not secure the type of change needed in this community” (Belfast Telegraph, 9 August 1973).

It was important for the SDLP to have an Irish dimension included in the Sunningdale Agreement. The majority within the party believed that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland could not give its full allegiance to a state that existed purely in a British context (Murray, 1998, p. 22). Even though the Executive broke down the party still held on to the constitutional approach to politics and the vision of partnership “not merely in Northern Ireland and within Ireland, but in a very real sense between the two islands themselves” (John Duffy, Irish News, 20 July 1974).

Civil Rights Movement and Republican Discourse on “Democracy”

When internment was introduced, NICRA immediately called for public demonstrations throughout Northern Ireland and for workers to prepare for a general strike (News Letter, 10 August 1971). The association
claimed that the people themselves ought to be safeguarding their rights against incursions from the government: “We believe the greatest weapons of the people in the campaign are civil resistance and disobedience” (Ian Barr [chairman of the NICRA branch at the prison ship, Maidstone], Irish News, 15 September 1971). The internees in the Long Kesh internment camp similarly supported popular control and direct action stressing that: “Republicanism is concerned with the right of the people to control the political, economic and cultural life of our country” (Irish Times, 28 July 1972).

In other words, people should not wait for the politicians to act in their defence; the people should act themselves. The strong belief in the wisdom of the people and the fundamental distrust in politicians were common to both NICRA and the various internees groups established in the internment camps. The internees in Long Kesh claimed for example that, “the ordinary man having borne the brunt of the suffering over the past few years against the might of the British Army, must assert his will on the wily politicians who even now are snarling at each other in their attempt to claim political capital from a false victory” (Irish News, 25 April 1972).

The internees at Long Kesh rejected the SDLP’s claims that its strategy would eventually secure the end of internment, claiming that while the people suffered, the SDLP connived with the enemies of Ireland and reneged on all its promises: “You speak for no other than yourselves” (Irish News, 6 December 1975). Although sharing a common view on popular participation, there were nonetheless differences between the republican groups. Whereas the Republican Clubs supported some kind of political action inside the existing structures, the Provisional republicans, both inside and outside the internment camps, ruled out such action. In the Provisional view, democracy could never be achieved through “partitionist institutions” (Irish News, 6 December 1975). The Irish people could only achieve justice in a free United Ireland, and it was important that the people rejected the “palace-seekers” who wanted to divert people from the true national aim (Irish News, 28 March 1972).

Competing Approaches to Democracy

As we have seen above, the representations of democracy differed considerably among the political parties. The UUP in the first year of the debate, and later the Faulkner unionists defended representation in elected institutions as the main system of popular rule. The SDLP and the anti-power-sharing fraction of the UUP, also stressed the importance of
representatives, but departed from “the responsible model” in that they did not rule out civil disobedience. The civil rights association and the republican (at times also loyalist) groups played down the role of the representative in politics altogether, and connected popular rule to direct popular action.

Another significant difference concerns the issue of majority rule versus “inclusive” government. Here the initial pattern was that the unionist parties viewed democracy as majority rule, whereas the SDLP, the Alliance party, the NICRA, and the republican groups considered the practice of majority rule exclusionary and undemocratic. When the Stormont parliament was suspended, however, this pattern changed. The UUP split on the issue of a power-sharing Executive, and the SDLP came under criticism from NICRA and, in particular, internees and Provisional republicans for taking part in the Executive. Now the unionist parties did not agree as to which measures would secure democracy: the DUP claimed that democracy could only be safeguarded if the Union was retained. Faulkner and his supporters chose power-sharing whereas his critics in the UUP and Vanguard indicated support for an independent Northern Ireland. In this matter, the logic of the latter resembled that of the Provisional republicans. Both perspectives linked democracy to some sort of ethnic/national right to autonomy, rather than to participation in the existing institutions.

Conclusion

The analysis of the political debate on internment has revealed that the dominant unionist representation of legitimacy was linked to the state in an almost tautological relationship: the internment powers were legitimate because they were settled in law; force used by the police and the army was legitimate because they had a mandate from the state; and democracy was viewed as the implementation of majority rule as set down in the governing procedures of the state. Consequently the principal points of reference for legitimacy were the procedures of the state and the “will of the majority”.

Within such a framework, opposition to the state became illegitimate by definition, and the only valid political question regarding internment was whether it served the purpose of restoring order or not. Internment was aimed at restoring order by removing the “terrorists” from the streets. The “terrorists”, portrayed as isolated characters without context and history, and with the creation of fear as their only rationale, played a decisive role in the unionist construction of legitimacy, proving that the conflict was a matter of order, rather than of state legitimacy.
But nationalists saw things differently: many felt that the unionist hegemony had been clearly exposed in the 1960s and internment accelerated the ongoing process of political mobilisation of the nationalist community. The political mobilisation was taken to a new level by a wide-ranging withdrawal from public positions, an illegal rent and rates strike, and through an intensified campaign of protest.

The nationalist counter-narrative of legitimacy was above all exposed in the way nationalists challenged the unionist priority of the order of society over the rights of the individual. In the nationalist narrative, human rights were made the defining source of legitimacy and consequently, rights were made a product of being human, rather than being a citizen in a state: if the state violated these rights, it could not be regarded legitimate. Nationalists also increasingly turned to international sources for validation of their approach, thus “removing” legitimacy from the political and territorial confinements of the state, and relocating it at an international level.

There is no doubt that the division between a dominant narrative of legitimacy on the one hand, and a counter-narrative on the other, was deep in the debate on internment. Still, the debate on internment also exposed another line of division, supplementing this dualism: between a political centre on the one hand, and a politically marginalized periphery on the other.

The fall of Stormont in 1972 changed the balance of power in Northern Ireland: the UUP lost governing powers, and the unionist opposition lost the power it had acquired by being the closest challengers to the UUP. The SDLP, on the other hand, increased its influence: From being a party permanently blocked as a minority in Northern Ireland, the party now became the “voice” of the minority in talks with the British government and in the power-sharing Executive. This alteration of power relations challenged, or perhaps more accurately supplemented, the general pattern of a unionist hegemonic narrative of legitimacy contested by a nationalist counter-narrative.

The SDLP developed a more functional approach to law and democracy during its participation in the power-sharing executive. The keyword behind this transition seems to be “trust”; the SDLP’s experience of increased political influence went hand in hand with the development of faith in the processes of government. In contrast, parts of the UUP, the DUP, and the loyalist paramilitaries went in another direction after the suspension of the Stormont parliament (and also the internment of loyalists). With the Stormont government replaced with a British government defending power sharing and internment of loyalists, the sense of faith and assurance of
political influence were disappearing. Legitimacy was now disconnected from the existing institutions of government and situated in principles of British civil liberties or in the idea of Ulster self-determination.

The construction of legitimacy must therefore be viewed in relation to trust and influence: political pragmatism and functionalism, which legitimised the call for the restoration of order, required a sense of trust in the system and a confidence of political influence. In contrast, the lack of trust and influence seems to have fostered an approach based on rights and principles external to the established institutions of government; an approach which could justify resistance and change.

**Endnotes**

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1 In that period, a total of 1981 persons were held without trial: 107 “loyalists” and 1874 “republicans”.

2 In the two years prior to internment, 66 people were killed; in the first seventeen months of internment, the number had risen almost tenfold to 610 (Dixon, 2001, p. 118). Following the suspension of the Northern Ireland government in February 1972, internment was continued by the British government.

3 Weber’s concept of legitimacy has been criticised, particularly for its non-normative character. Jürgen Habermas (1996) has stressed the importance of employing a normative concept of legitimacy through an understanding of the relationship between solidarity and communication.

4 The Compton Committee was set up to investigate allegations that the men being interrogated after their arrests on 9 August 1971 had been subjected to brutal treatment (Elliott and Flackes, 1999, p. 211). The report, acknowledged that there had been ill treatment of internees, but it rejected claims of systematic torture. Another committee (the Parker committee) investigating the methods used in interrogating, later held that the methods were justified in exceptional circumstances (Elliott and Flackes, 1999, p. 391).
For example, one of the internees, Patrick Shivers was awarded £15,000 in February 1974 by the Ulster High Court in damages for wrongful arrest and torture (News Letter, 14 February 1974).

The Commission determined that some techniques employed in 1971 did constitute torture and that other procedures were inhumane and degrading (Donohue, 2001, p. 121). Yet, the Commission was overruled in the European Court of Human Rights in 1978, which rejected the word torture, but accepted that the internees had suffered ‘inhuman and degrading treatment’ (Coogan, 1995, p. 129).

There could be various explanations for this. This type of statement might have been censored by the newspapers, which declined to publicise what may be viewed as violent propaganda. It might also relate to the fact that republican statements tended to deal more with the effects of state violence.

The Alliance Party also generally argued that civil disobedience was not a legitimate democratic method; instead the party called for talks and a campaign that could foster understanding (see for example Robert G. Cooper in Irish News, 21 August 1971 and Basil Glass in Irish News, 13 June 1974).

The Republican Clubs (Official Sinn Féin) viewed elections as one of many ways to voice public opinion, rather than the main channel of popular influence. When they decided to contest elections, the Long Kesh branch of this group supported the move, arguing that by participation in the elections, they were putting forward progressive and revolutionary politics to the electorate (Irish News, 21 June, 1973).

Some branches of NICRA also argued against the participation in the existing structures. One branch of NICRA, for instance, sardonically remarked that the SDLP and the Republican Clubs “nearly broke their necks to get involved in another British institution which clearly has not a hope in hell of achieving any scrap of democracy” (Bannside and District Civil Rights Association, Irish News, 8 July 1975).

References


POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND AND ITS FUNCTION IN THE TROUBLES AND PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Catherine O’Donnell

Abstract

Despite some historical divergence, political parties in the Republic of Ireland shared some key objectives in response to the Troubles. Most consistently, each of the main parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) sought to undermine support for the IRA in Northern Ireland and de-legitimise arguments by Sinn Féin and the IRA. Over the course of the peace process, such common priorities developed into a wider shared discourse on the principles for agreement in Northern Ireland. The parties in the Republic soon established a vocal consensus incorporating support for the Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Féin involvement in politics in Northern Ireland, reconciliation, and a pluralist republicanism. The emergence of this common discourse has been essential to the legitimacy and durability of the peace process.

Introduction

Thinking about what caused the conflict in Northern Ireland, why it went on for so long and how and why it came to the end it did we often dwell on the mobilisation of nationalism and unionist divisions in the 1960s, politicisation of the republican movement in later years, the changing policies of the British and Irish government and the development of thought within unionism and loyalism. Thus we quite often prioritise political developments, political processes and relations, ideology and strategy. This volume is a welcome opportunity to examine how political discourse (as the communication in speech or written form of policy positions and ideological points by political parties and actors) fits into this complex web. Doing so helps us to provide a more complete explanation as to the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process. Political discourses offer a lot in terms of understanding the motives and decisions of key players, their interpretation
of developments and also inform us of their audiences. Political discourses do not develop accidentally and are generally employed with intent and purpose. In the Irish case, as will be demonstrated here, the political discourses used by the main parties in the Republic of Ireland on the subject of Northern Ireland since the outbreak of the troubles help to explain to us why the peace process took the shape it did and why it was that the Irish government and, in particular, Fianna Fáil, played a key role in this.

Nationalism and the unresolved “national question” on Northern Ireland were always accepted as central to Irish politics and accounted to a large extent for party political divisions (See Mair, 1987). This was the case since the Civil War, which followed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, led to the split in Sinn Féin and the subsequent formation of Cumann na nGaedheal (later Fine Gael) and Fianna Fáil. Given its opposition to the Treaty and emergence from Sinn Féin in 1926, Fianna Fáil presented itself as the true heir of the republican tradition in Ireland and as the party likely to realise the dream of a united Ireland. At the outbreak of the Troubles in the late 1960s and early 1970s this division on the “national question” was brought into focus again. The Arms Crisis of 1970, where members of the Fianna Fáil government were accused of assisting in the importation of arms to the IRA in Northern Ireland (See O’Brien, 2000), together with the use of traditional anti-partitionist language by Fianna Fáil meant that Fianna Fáil was once again confirmed in the public mind as the more devout republican party. This was particularly so when contrasted to Fine Gael’s decision to champion the principle of consent - that is that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland could not be altered without the consent of a majority of people there (Noonan, 2006; Harte, 2005; Fine Gael, 1979, p. 4). The development of their respective party discourses on Northern Ireland is central to understanding how the parties differed on the subject.

It is in this context that this article examines the official discourses used by the main political parties in the Republic of Ireland when they refer to Northern Ireland. It seeks to illustrate the different functions which political discourse in the Republic has played during the conflict as well as during the peace process. In the first section the article will look at the political discourses employed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the course of the Troubles. Section Two will show that political discourse in the Republic on Ireland has also played a key role in the peace process. An agreed political discourse reflecting the consensus that has emerged on Northern Ireland plays an important role in the operation of the peace process and the implementation of Good Friday Agreement.
Official Discourse during the Troubles

During the conflict both parties shared a common aim to de-legitimise the IRA and Sinn Féin but they approached this in different ways. Fine Gael advanced an alternative discourse as a challenge to Sinn Féin and found itself a friend to the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in Northern Ireland. Rejecting Sinn Féin, Fine Gael endorsed the SDLP as the legitimate representative of nationalism in Northern Ireland. Seeking to fortify the SDLP position and interpretation of politics and the conflict in Northern Ireland, Fine Gael’s policy and discourse was often similar to that articulated by the SDLP. Fine Gael also often concurred with SDLP proposals for the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland and this is seen most clearly through Fine Gael’s involvement in the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4 and the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Fianna Fáil in contrast sought to discredit Sinn Féin and the IRA’s violent campaign by adopting an alternative but equally strong republican and anti-partitionist position. Fianna Fáil sought to disown Sinn Féin and the IRA as descendents of the 1916 Rising republican tradition and instead claimed that mantle for the Fianna Fáil party. At the 1985 Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis party leader, Charles J. Haughey, said:

Fianna Fáil, as the Republican party, is proud to be the political embodiment of the separatist, national tradition that is central to the freedom and independence of the Irish nation. Republicanism for us means adherence to the principles of the 1916 Proclamation, which asserted the right of the Irish people to national freedom and sovereignty, and which guaranteed religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunity to all citizens. (Haughey, 1985).

It was not just in its use of republican anti-partitionist language that Fianna Fáil sought to undermine the IRA and Sinn Féin. In the era of the Jack Lynch leadership (1966-73), as we will see, Fianna Fáil matched this discourse with a reunification policy at Anglo-Irish level aimed at removing the reasons for IRA violence.

Fianna Fáil Discourse on Northern Ireland

Jack Lynch was leader of Fianna Fáil and Taoiseach at the outbreak of the Troubles. While calling for reform and expressing concerns for the nationalist population in Northern Ireland, Lynch was publicly critical of
IRA violence and stressed that the Irish government “have no intention of using force to realise this desire [re-unification]” (Lynch, 1971, p. 10). He also maintained that “there is no solution to be found to our disagreements by shooting each other. There is no real invader here” (Lynch, 1971, p. 22). Throughout the Lynch years and into Fianna Fáil’s time under subsequent leader, Charles J. Haughey, the party rejected violence as a legitimate way to redress problems in Northern Ireland or as a way to pursue Irish unity. Like Lynch, Haughey rejected an IRA mandate:

All but a tiny minority understand that violence can never bring a solution and that it serves only to perpetuate division and hatred. Let us make it absolutely clear that no Irish Government will tolerate any attempt by any group to put themselves above the law or to arrogate to themselves any of the functions of the Government. There is only one army in this State, one police force and one judiciary, appointed under the Constitution, to uphold the laws. The Government, acting for the people, will ensure that these laws are effective and are enforced. Democracy will be defended and the rule of law upheld. That is an essential element of national policy. (Haughey, 1980).

Yet despite consistently stating that the IRA campaign did not have a mandate (Lynch, 30 November 1971), Fianna Fáil argued, from the outset of the Troubles, that Irish unity was the only viable long term solution for Northern Ireland. Like Éamon de Valera before him, Lynch claimed that Ireland’s right to national self-determination underlined the party’s belief in unity as the ultimate solution (Lynch, 1 November 1968). At the 1969 party Ard Fheis, Lynch made clear that his government’s concentration on human rights, discrimination and reform in Northern Ireland did not “in any way indicate the abandonment by us (Fianna Fáil) of our just claim that the historic unity of this island be restored” (Lynch, 1969). Lynch believed that the emerging troubles in Northern Ireland were a direct consequence of partition and that their resolution lay in the undoing of partition. He also placed the blame for partition squarely with the British government. In October 1968, Lynch claimed that “partition is the first and foremost root cause. And partition arose out of British policy” (Lynch, 8 October 1968). In an address to the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group some weeks later he repeated the view that “the clashes in the streets of Derry are an expression of the evils which partition has brought in its train” (Lynch, 30 October 1968).
It is not merely in Lynch’s rhetoric that the claim to unity was expressed. Lynch also attempted to pursue this claim at a political level and for the first time in the history of the party, Fianna Fáil actively pursued a policy of reunification at Anglo-Irish level. While it is not the intention here to substantially quote from the archives, a look at the records from meetings at Anglo-Irish level reveals the rationale for Lynch’s reunification-based discourse and policy.

At a meeting with the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, in September 1971 Lynch reiterated that “partition was imposed and its existence always constituted a threat of violence because of the efforts to maintain Unionists in power” (Lynch, September 1971). Significantly, Lynch went on to say that “The IRA is a by-product of that situation (where the majority continued in power in Northern Ireland)” and if the British Prime Minister “could find it possible to state that the unification of Ireland would have to be the ultimate solution and gave an assurance of interest in working towards this end, this would be enormously helpful at the present time” (Lynch, September 1971). The Irish government and Lynch were of the view that if the British government were to move towards a policy of Irish unification then the reasons for the IRA would cease to exist. According to Lynch, support for the IRA could be diminished if a political initiative was put in place to move towards unity and to improve conditions for nationalists in Northern Ireland. Lynch clearly believed in the legitimacy of the call for a united Ireland and interpreted the conflict in Northern Ireland in these terms. More importantly Fianna Fáil believed that addressing the reasons for IRA violence was the key to bringing the conflict to an end in the short to immediate term. Thus Fianna Fáil attempted to gain progress towards Irish unity at a political level believing that if the Irish government could prove that constitutional avenues could offer progress towards unity this would both remove the reasons for IRA violence and undermine support for the IRA.

So while Fianna Fáil criticised IRA violence, its approach from the outset of the Troubles was to articulate a strong republican discourse and anti-partitionist policy at governmental level in the pursuit of a united Ireland as an alternative to the IRA violent campaign. The problem was that Lynch had no success in his attempts to put in place an initiative for Northern Ireland that might result in a united Ireland. This was mainly due to the fact that the British government did not accept that the Irish government had any right to be involved in discussions relating to Northern Ireland (See Bew et al., 1997, pp. 43-4) but also due to the reality of unionist opposition to such an outcome. As such Lynch endorsed the IRA pursuit of Irish reunification in
his choice of language but could not deliver any progress on this through constitutional mechanisms. In fact Lynch’s inability to match anti-partitionist language with delivery at Anglo-Irish level further underlined for IRA supporters the argument that constitutional politics could not deliver. The failure of this approach also reinforced the republican discourse (in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) which stressed British responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland.

Despite failure at this point, Fianna Fáil remained consistent in its attempts to make political progress towards a settlement involving unity as a mechanism to remove the reasons for IRA violence. In the 1980s Haughey believed this settlement would develop at an Anglo-Irish level. He argued that Northern Ireland was a failed political entity and stressed the need for the Irish and British governments to ‘work together to find a formula and lift the situation onto a new plane that will bring permanent peace and stability to the people of these islands’. In Haughey’s view this new Anglo-Irish approach would begin with “a declaration by the British Government of their interest in encouraging the unity of Ireland, by agreement and in peace [and this] would open the way towards an entirely new situation in which peace, real lasting peace, would become an attainable reality” (Haughey, 1980). While this is not exactly how it panned out, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the potential benefits of a peace process persuaded the republican movement of the progress that could be made politically if violence was absent.

While still seeking the mechanism to illustrate to republicans that constitutionalism could deliver progress towards unity, Fianna Fáil continued its use of anti-partitionist language and a strong republican position as an alternative to Sinn Féin and the IRA campaign. For Haughey this involved a rejection of the principle of consent and an insistence that talks with unionists would only involve discussion as to the form of a united Ireland and not about whether reunification might happen – “when we speak of the need to secure the agreement of the unionist population that agreement applies to the new arrangements for, but not to the concept of, a united Ireland” (Dáil Éireann Debates, Vol. 361, Cols. 2579-2600, 19 November 1985). Haughey’s rationale for this was similar to that of Lynch’s as seen above in his meetings at Anglo-Irish level and this is illustrated in the response by Haughey to The Unionist Case (a submission to the Taoiseach and leader of the Opposition by unionist Robert McCartney). In this response, Haughey argued that the Irish government’s position on Northern Ireland must aim to limit the strength of Sinn Féin and the IRA. Haughey believed that if the Irish government abandoned the claim to Irish unity then
republican violence would increase as nationalists in Northern Ireland would feel abandoned and the IRA’s argument that no option other than violence was open to them would appear to be strengthened. Haughey wrote:

It is a great illusion to suppose that if the Irish government were to recognise the validity of partition and to abandon the concept of a united Ireland that this would necessarily bring a diminution of violence. On the contrary, the only likely consequence would be a threat to the stability of the twenty-six counties as well as the six counties. An Irish government, which would abandon the fundamental democratic aspiration of the Irish people on both sides of the border, would invite repudiation possible in a form, which would only aggravate the existing conflict in Northern Ireland (Mansergh, 1986, p. 574).

Thus the use of traditional republican rhetoric by Fianna Fáil in the 1970s and the 1980s and indeed more recently was and is aimed at undermining the ideological arguments put forward to justify the IRA campaign. Success towards a united Ireland at a political constitutional level was pursued in order to highlight the futility of violence and limit the level of support for IRA violence and Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, in particular. It was and is also intended to limit the electoral threat from Sinn Féin. It must be said also that the articulation of a united Ireland reflected and continues to reflect the long-term position of Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil does not necessarily dispute the IRA or Sinn Féin’s interpretation of the conflict in Northern Ireland and agrees that unity is the ultimate solution. Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil shared a use of anti-partitionist centred discourse but what differentiated the two parties was Fianna Fáil’s belief in constitutional mechanisms as the correct and most successful approach. It was the shared interpretations that ultimately convinced Sinn Féin that it could adopt a political approach which involved building a working relationship and an agreed position with the Irish government. It is for this reason also that in working with the Irish government, Sinn Féin prefers to work with an Irish government led by Fianna Fáil (See Adams, 2003, p. 197 for views on this).

Fine Gael and the Labour Party Discourse on Northern Ireland

The common objectives by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour in seeking to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA have already been outlined.
What then was it that distinguished the Fine Gael approach in terms of discourse to that of Fianna Fáil and how did these discourses function together? Did they act to complement or oppose each other? These are some of the questions addressed in this section.

Given its history as a strong defender of the constitutional tradition in Ireland, its declaration of the Republic in 1949 coupled with a celebration of the State’s connections with the British State and Commonwealth (See O’Donnell, 2008) it is not surprising that it was Fine Gael and not Fianna Fáil that reacted to the outbreak of the Troubles with attempts at reassessment and debate on the “national question” and Northern Ireland. This was very much influenced and led by the party’s leader from 1977-87, Garret FitzGerald, who had a significant interest in Northern Ireland. Fine Gael members saw the party as having a role in reshaping attitudes and interpretations and in leading debate and discourse in the Republic as to Northern Ireland, republicanism and the achievement of a united Ireland. This was outlined by the party’s spokesperson on Northern Ireland and prominent border TD, Paddy Harte, in a speech to the Fine Gael Ard Fheis, 20 May 1978. He said:

The challenge facing [the] Fine Gael leadership is to continue to guide southern opinion in the correct direction towards Irish nationhood and to involve the Party at all levels throughout the Republic in promoting better understanding of the complexities of Northern Irish life (Harte, 20 May 1978).

Like Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, Fine Gael and Labour reaffirmed the ideal of a united Ireland (See Hayward, 2004, pp. 23-24), but they did not seek to present a strong republican position but rather alternative argument and alternative policy positions. Instead while Fianna Fáil talked about the ultimate solution of unity, national self-determination and Britain’s responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland, Fine Gael, in agreement with the Labour Party, only talked about unity coming about through consent. On this point, Fine Gael has been consistent. In 1969, Fine Gael was proactive in its unilateral endorsement of the principle of consent and this has remained party policy (See Fine Gael, 1969 in Harte, 2005; See also Fine Gael, 1979, p. 4; Noonan, 2006; Deenihan, 2006). We’ve seen above Fianna Fáil’s alternative interpretation as to what the principle of consent entailed and indeed this represented much of the disagreement between the two parties through the 1970s and 1980s.

Another point rejected by Fianna Fáil but on which Fine Gael and Labour did not shift was the need, in their view, for the Republic to become
more pluralist. They argued that Ireland’s legislation would have to be made more attractive to unionists. FitzGerald, Harte and others in Fine Gael acknowledged that constitutional reform in the Republic was necessary before Unionists would contemplate unity. As early as February 1972, Paddy Harte talked about the need for “the foundations of a new and just society” to be assured before unity could take place. He argued that:

Reunification is not yet on the agenda and we in the Republic have many changes to achieve before it will even be acceptable for debate by the most moderate of Unionist. Nothing short of a completely new Constitution leading in the direction of a Pluralist Society will be sufficient as an initial step on our part (Harte, 21 November 1972).

Harte consistently argued that “Ireland united must mean the total acceptance of the policies, the cultures, the traditions and the religious beliefs of all Irish people and the freedom to express and practice these things in a natural way. Unless this is accepted Irish unity is a myth and an illusion and Irish nationhood can never be gained” (Harte, 4 October 1978).

Harte’s views reflected those of his leader, Garret FitzGerald, who also stressed the need for a more pluralist republic as a prerequisite to unity (FitzGerald, 1972, pp. 142-57) and, as Taoiseach, set about the completion of a “constititutional crusade” (Mair, 1987, p. 97). He outlined his party’s policies for government as including “the creation of a pluralist society as a basis upon which to build a new relationship between North and South” (Dáil Éireann Debates, Vol. 337, Col. 577, 1 July 1982). Thus Fine Gael’s discourse centred around what former Fine Gael leader, Michael Noonan, has described the twin pillars of Fine Gael thought on Northern Ireland, that is, an acceptance of the principle of consent and a recognition that “there’s an obligation to try to accommodate difference by having a more pluralist society down here” (Noonan, 2006).

As already mentioned Fine Gael’s policy and discourse on Northern Ireland (in particular the emphasis on the principle of consent and unity) was very much influenced by the SDLP. While in government in the 1980s, Fine Gael sought to bolster the position of constitutional nationalism in the North and this was the rationale for FitzGerald’s pursuit of an Anglo-Irish process which led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (See FitzGerald, 1993, pp. 191-2). Fine Gael had up to this point stressed consent and pluralism and seeking agreement with Protestants in Northern Ireland. However, now that the SDLP was perceived to be facing an electoral threat from Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, Fine Gael prioritised a deal with the British government in
order to strengthen the position of the SDLP. Through the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Irish government sought to bolster the SDLP by securing nationalist representation in Northern Ireland and an Irish dimension – both of which were key demands made by the SDLP.

**Discourses as Functions of Politics in Northern Ireland**

Fine Gael’s motivation in signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 is well known in terms of undermining the electoral threat which Sinn Féin posed to the SDLP in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Hunger Strikes there in 1981. In addition to this, the Anglo-Irish Agreement also affected a reassessment within the republican movement and forced a debate among its members as to the gains that could be made at political level (On republicanism and the peace process see English, 2003). This was an important, if unplanned, outcome of Fine Gael efforts. Fianna Fáil’s use of republican anti-partitionist discourse is important here too. Given Fianna Fáil’s republican position up to that point it was the obvious party in the Republic from which Sinn Féin sought assistance in the late 1980s when it looked for a way out of its isolating armed struggle (See O’Donnell, 2003; Mallie and McKittrick, 2001)).

These are important points in understanding the emergence of the peace process in the late 1980s but what functions did the two alternative set of discourses utilised by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael play in this? The answer to this lays in understanding the parties’ objectives and assessing their success in these. As outlined, both parties were concerned to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA’s argument in favour of violence in Northern Ireland as well as to limit support for the republican movement. Fine Gael was particularly concerned with the effect of growing support for Sinn Féin in the 1980s on the SDLP in Northern Ireland. Fianna Fáil was also fearful of the effect on their support base in the Republic. How successful were they in their efforts?

Fine Gael’s main achievement was in its traditional concentration on the principle of consent and pluralism as a way of reaching out to unionists and in gaining recognition for these ideas. In contrast, Fianna Fáil’s historical articulation of the Irish right to national self-determination and vocalisation of its belief in unity as the only acceptable outcome successfully maintained the republican constituency in the Republic mainly in the Fianna Fáil fold and acted as a deterrent to those in the Republic who might otherwise have supported Sinn Féin and the IRA if a republican vacuum had been allowed to exist. It also meant that Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin had many ideological points in common and enabled it to bring Sinn Féin into mainstream constitutional politics in the 1990s.
Thus both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael played important roles, through their choice of discourse, in creating the conditions for the peace process. Fine Gael incorporated the principle of consent into official political discourse in the Republic. Fianna Fáil, through its anti-partitionist discourse and concentration on self-determination, provided the avenue for which to bring Sinn Féin into discussion from the late 1980s onwards. Both sets of discourses had important goals and eventually played complementary roles in the development of the peace process and in framing the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately they shared the same agenda to undermine support for the IRA. Both parties would now claim the peace process as an endorsement of their individual positions and discourses on Northern Ireland since the beginning of the Troubles.

**Political Discourse and the Peace Process**

A central part of the peace process experience in the Republic has been the development of a cross-party political and ideological consensus on long-term and short-term policies and goals for Northern Ireland. This new political consensus plays a key role in maintaining the peace process and in implementing the Good Friday Agreement. The political parties have been articulating a discourse on Northern Ireland that illustrates the emergence of agreement on a number of levels. The consensus reached by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on Northern Ireland is based on their support for the Good Friday Agreement which both parties endorsed in 1998 (See Bertie Ahern, *Dáil Éireann Debates* Vol. 489, Col. 1029, 21 April 1998 and John Bruton, *Dáil Éireann Debates* Vol. 489, Col. 1038, 21 April 1998). By endorsing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael agreed on the reformulation of the relevant Articles the 1937 Constitution of Ireland and an ideological formula involving the concepts of self-determination and the principle of consent. Both parties have declared their immediate goal for Northern Ireland to be the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement with unity as a long-term objective. The Fianna Fáil manifesto in 2002 asserted the party’s priority to “secure lasting peace in Ireland through the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement” without “prejudice to the ultimate goal of achieving a united Ireland” (*The Irish Times*, 26 April 2002). Under successive leaders, Fine Gael has supported the peace process and has also articulated the long-term objective of unity (Deenihan, 2006; Hayes, 2006; See also Coveney, 2004).

As part of their shared support for the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process the language of the peace process as espoused by the main
parties in the Republic has been framed within the terms of reconciliation and a peaceful settlement. There has also emerged a common understanding between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (and Sinn Féin) on the meaning of republicanism as democratic, pluralist and as accepting of the principle of consent. This development in reflected in many of the party leaders’ speeches. The Fine Gael leader, Enda Kenny, describes the republic as one that “upholds and practises true republican traditions - freedom, pluralism, justice, equality, brotherhood” (Kenny, 2007). Former Fianna Fáil leader, Bertie Ahern, has agreed: “We value religious liberty and practice religious tolerance. Our success in Ireland is based on democratic republicanism and is inspired by the principles of equality and fraternity” (Ahern, 2004).

Also central to the agreed discourse in favour of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement is the central role for Sinn Féin within the peace process and politics in Northern Ireland. Both parties have talked about the peace process as existing only through the inclusion of Sinn Féin. For example, former leader of Fine Gael, Michael Noonan, has stated that “certainly there is no peace process without Sinn Féin” (Noonan, 2006) and former Deputy Leader of Fianna Fáil, Mary O’Rourke, has also argued that “there was going to be no process without them (Sinn Féin)” (O’Rourke, 2005). This belief in Sinn Féin inclusion is a major component of what the discourse of the peace process involves.

Both parties are also in agreement though that the peace process does not mean that Sinn Féin should be considered suitable for government in the Republic. Fianna Fáil have taken this position on the grounds that ‘Northern Ireland is a different environment’ and therefore “different considerations apply” (Treacy, 2005). Fine Gael’s Brian Hayes has also argued that putting Sinn Féin in government in the Republic would be wrong on the basis that “the Republic is not the North. We don’t have divided allegiance in this part of the island. The Northern Ireland Assembly is a regional parliament, established with the purpose of bringing together the divided and sectarian society that is Northern Ireland” (Sunday Independent, 17 October 2004).

What does this mean for Northern Ireland?

The first section of this article outlines the function which the chosen discourses by the parties in the Republic played in the course of the troubles in Northern Ireland and the emergence of the peace process in the late 1980s. Similarly, the language used by the parties in the Republic plays a significant part in ensuring the longevity of the peace process as the accepted political initiative for Northern Ireland and has contained any support for an
alternative approach. This shared discourse among the parties in the Republic and in Britain has had a highly significant impact in ensuring the maintenance and legitimacy of the peace process in the public mind.

If we remember the situation in the aftermath of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement we can understand the importance of political consensus for political peace initiatives. While Fianna Fáil continued to implement the Anglo-Irish Agreement when it came to power in 1987, Haughey consistently endorsed the idea of a process that would “transcend the existing framework for Northern Ireland” (Haughey, *The Irish Times*, 23 April 1988). This opened up the opportunity to renegotiate the Agreement and to find a process that would replace it. No such prospect exists now. The existence of cross-party support for the peace process in Britain means that this new cross-party agreement in the Republic on Northern Ireland is even more significant. Both governments have been firm in their support for the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, the peace process and more importantly the inclusion of Sinn Féin. This has been particularly important in forcing the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and, more recently, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to engage with the peace process as a political reality. Both governments became converted to the peace process despite unionist opposition and unionists have been forced to respond to this (On the unionist experience of the peace process see Farrington, 2005). In short, the emergence of a cross-party discourse, which reflects the consensus that exists in the Republic, as well as in Britain, on short-term and long-term policies for Northern Ireland, has removed the political space for an alternative initiative for Northern Ireland.

In addition, the cross-party endorsement of the constitutional change that was involved in the Good Friday Agreement was crucial to gaining overwhelming public support for change and ensured the relatively uncontroversial referendum campaign in the Republic in 1998. If the parties in the Republic had disagreed on the Good Friday Agreement (as was the case with the Anglo-Irish Agreement) the entire project would have been weakened.

**Conclusion**

The role and purpose of political discourse is an important component of attempts to understand the conflict and peace process in Northern Ireland. As has been illustrated by the other contributions to this volume, the articulation of key ideas, political and ideological positions by the parties in Northern Ireland are central to this. Equally important has been the official
political discourse on Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland. This has played important but differing roles in the Troubles and the peace process.

Throughout the Troubles Fianna Fáil discourse centred around the right to national self-determination, unity as the ultimate solution and British responsibility in relation to Northern Ireland. Fianna Fáil pursued a reunification policy and discourse with the aim of removing the reasons for IRA violence through constitutional progress towards unity. It also sought to limit the level of support for Sinn Féin and the IRA in the Republic by providing a strong republican alternative and avoiding a republican vacuum from which Sinn Féin could benefit. While Fianna Fáil could not demonstrate in the 1970s and 1980s that constitutional mechanisms could provide progress towards unity it successfully limited the appeal of militant republicanism in the main to Northern Ireland. By the late 1980s when Sinn Féin sought to bring republicans into mainstream politics, the ideology and language that it shared with Fianna Fáil opened up an avenue through which to establish the pan-nationalist alliance which became so central to the peace process (See O’Donnell, 2007).

Fine Gael, and Labour, also sought to undermine the credibility of the arguments articulated by the republican movement in justifying IRA violence. Fine Gael articulated a challenging and new discourse on Northern Ireland based around the principle of consent and a pluralist society in the Republic prior to unity. It was very much influenced by the SDLP and its policy in the 1980s had the objective of bolstering the SDLP in the North against an electoral threat from Sinn Féin in the years after the IRA Hunger Strikes. Much of Fine Gael’s language on the principle of consent and republicanism as a pluralist and democratic concept provided the framework for the Good Friday Agreement and the language of the peace process (See O’Donnell, 2008). The short-term policy and discourse differences between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had important complementary impacts on politics in Northern Ireland. As a result of its commitment to removing the reasons for IRA violence, Fianna Fáil provided much of the basis and rationale for the peace process by making a process involving Sinn Féin likely. By emphasising the principle of consent, Fine Gael provided much of the framework for the constitutional reform undertaken by the Republic of Ireland through the Good Friday Agreement.

The language by the parties in the Republic continues to have an important function for Northern Ireland as the peace process develops. While the aim throughout the conflict was to undermine Sinn Féin and the IRA, the aim now is to endorse the peace process as the only political initiative for Northern Ireland. Key to achieving this has been the cross-party consensus
that has emerged in the Republic of Ireland (and in Britain) during the peace process on ideological, short and long-term policy points in relation to Northern Ireland. This consensus and shared discourse is key to explaining the durability of the peace process despite the problems it has faced.

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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. 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) 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. 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” 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.

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.

References


LEGITIMISING THROUGH LANGUAGE: POLITICAL DISCOURSE WORLDS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AFTER THE 1998 AGREEMENT

Laura Filardo-Llamas

Abstract

This paper employs the hypothesis that one of the functions of political discourse is to legitimise a perceived point of view by promoting certain representations of a socio-political reality. It could be argued that the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement creates a paradoxical reality in Northern Ireland because its language is so vague that it can be interpreted in different ways. This paper analyses linguistic categories used in the text of the Agreement to reveal the type of peaceful reality promoted and the constructive ambiguity used to facilitate agreement. It argues that the success of the peace process depended to a large extent on the particular nuances of discourse in and around this crucial document.

Introduction

As John Whyte (1990, p. viii) notes Northern Ireland is one of the most researched places in the world. Most studies on Northern Ireland are aimed at explaining the conflict by relying on sociological, political or economical theories. This research differs in its attempt to understand this conflict situation by relying on the different perceptions that may be politically transmitted about one single reality. In order to do so, this article looks at political discourse through a discourse analysis framework, and specifically through one characterised by its deep linguistic foundation.

One of the key features of political discourse is that it is a useful way of spreading political beliefs, which are mostly related to the identity shared by those involved in the communication process. This identity is evoked by means of the ideological beliefs which imbue a text and which can, in turn, be defined as mental representations that social groups have both about their own social practices and about the practices of other groups in society (Van Dijk, 1996, pp. 12, 19). Therefore, the ideologies that underlie a text are frequently related to the construction of social and political groups, and in most cases, they are determined by the position of the group in society, and, in particular, are framed “in relation to one or other group that are seen to
threaten the basic interests of the own group” (Van Dijk, 1996, p. 19). These shared mental representations, which include ideological knowledge as well as more general and cultural knowledge, are known as “common ground” (Van Dijk, 2001). Mental representations perform an important function in the process of communication of political discourse as they involve the construction of a mental frame that is shared by the speaker (e.g. the politician) and the addressee. Furthermore, it is such shared identity between communicators which motivates the legitimising task of political discourse (Chilton, 2004, p. 23).

Consequently, the objective of this article is to demonstrate how political discourse in Northern Ireland has a legitimising function of specific actions or world views about reality, and how this function can be unveiled through careful linguistic analysis. It is important to note that these views are frequently opposed on an ideological, political and discursive ground. Hence, it can be argued that the mentioned linguistic structures serve to establish a relationship between legitimisation and the creation of a “paradoxical reality” (Aughey, 2002, p. 2) that may be discursively transmitted. Therefore, we will compare how the representatives of the two main Northern Ireland ideologies – nationalism and unionism – make use of those strategies to justify or oppose the 1998 Agreement.

Analyzing Political Discourse

Language and Legitimacy

The approach elaborated in this paper arise from established research that relates language to conflict – or language to peace (see Wright, 1998; Schäffner and Wenden, 1995; Dedaič and Nelson, 2003). A core assumption underlying discourse analysis is Billig’s (2003, p. xviii) belief that human conflict begins and ends via talk, hence establishing an inextricable link between “war” and communication.

It can be argued that words frame, mobilize and motivate political thought and action. According to Van Dijk (1997, p. 28), one of the main reasons for the appearance of human conflict is the promotion of the “ideological square”. This is the strategic and underlying principle of political discourse, and it can be defined as a semantic polarization in which propositions have an evaluative nature which promotes the emphasis/de-emphasis of our/their good/bad actions. As a consequence, a polarization between “us” and “them” is created, and this results in the discursive construction of an “ingroup” and an “outgroup”.
This idea serves to support the previously mentioned link between language and conflict: a connection which can be expressed in two ways. On the one hand, “language works through discourse to communicate and reproduce ideologies that support the use of war as a legitimate option for resolving national conflicts as well as inegalitarian and discriminatory social institutions and practices” (Wenden, 1995, p. 211). On the other, discourse serves to reproduce and spread the socio-political oppositions that may characterise a given society, as the “socio-political square” and the polarization between the “ingroup” and “the outgroup” can be discursively constructed; a process in which certain linguistic structures may have a prominent role.

Both aspects are closely connected, and from them comes the idea that language plays an indirect role in promoting values, beliefs and social practices that justify (Schäffner and Wenden, 1995, p. xxi) political policies or particular world views as presented by politicians. Justification and legitimisation are synonymous – mainly because “within the perspective of political philosophy the notion of justification might be related to legitimacy” (Chilton, 2003, p. 95). Thus, as argued by Chilton (2004, p. 23), one of the key functions of political discourse is legitimisation, defined as “the promotion of representations,” a pervasive feature of which “is the evident need for political speakers to imbue their utterances with evidence, authority and truth.”

Language and Representation

In addition to legitimisation, one of the main features of political discourse is representation. Representation and legitimisation are achieved in political discourse through what Chilton calls “discourse worlds”: the “reality” that is entertained by the speaker, or meta-represented by speaker as being someone else’s believed reality. There are various meaning ingredients that go into these discourse realities, but the essential one is the projection of ‘who does what, to whom and where’. (Chilton, 2004, p. 154)

Legitimisation and its fulfilment through the creation of discourse worlds helps us understand how, and why, different parties react in different ways to specific events or situations, such as the variety of responses by political parties in Northern Ireland to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement of 1998. The concept of “discourse worlds” explains the subjective and ideological representation that the political parties make of that “reality” and how they do so by presenting that subjective view as a “universal truth”.

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Taking this into account, we establish the main hypothesis that it is through political discourse that a particular world-view about certain socio-political aspects or actions is legitimised. This legitimisation is achieved through the strategic, ideologically-motivated – and sometimes also unconscious – manipulation (Chilton, 2002) of language with the aim of promoting certain values.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

In order to analyse the legitimising function of political discourse, our starting point is the critical discourse analysis paradigm (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1993) because it highlights the inextricable link that exists between language and society (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271-280). The objective of critical discourse analysis is to “interpret and understand how and why reality is structured in a certain way” (Wodak, 1989, p.14), and do so by relying on linguistic analysis.

Within this paradigm, both Fairclough (1989) and Van Dijk (1993, 2001) propose a theory which is based on three components, mainly aimed at explaining the connection between language and society. The importance of this connection is also related to the legitimising function of political discourse. Given that legitimisation is achieved through specific discursive representations (Chilton, 2004, p. 23), it can be argued that those representations are determined by the ideological beliefs held by the persons involved in the communicative process, and that those ideological beliefs determine a social representation – or discourse world - that is, at least partly, connected to the identity of the communicator.

Those discourse worlds are frequently related to at least one of the main types of discursive legitimisation that can be identified, namely semantic, pragmatic and socio-political legitimisation (Martín Rojo and Van Dijk, 1997, p. 71). Semantic legitimisation involves the justification of a specific and subjective view of society which is frequently a reflection of the utterer’s point of view about society. This subjective representation tends to promote the creation and consolidation of ethnic – or national – identities, and it could be argued that in Northern Ireland it might be related to the perpetuation and justification (see Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999, p. 93) of the two communities, and the defence of Northern Ireland’s constitutional status as upheld by their respective political ideologies. Pragmatic legitimisation aims at justifying an action which is usually considered to be controversial such as the 1998 Agreement, whose existence and approval/disapproval is justified in different terms by each of the four main
Northern Ireland political parties. Finally socio-political legitimisation involves the justification of the social and political role that any instance of discourse plays in the situation in which it takes place, that is, it involves an authorisation of the uttering of that discourse.

**Methodology**

A link could be established between the different components of discourse, the type of legitimisation and the three-stages in the analysis. Thus, the description stage would involve doing a linguistic analysis of the text so that semantic legitimisation can be uncovered; interpretation would mean taking into account the immediate context to obtain semantic and pragmatic legitimisation; and explanation would require considering the broad socio-political practice to expose socio-political legitimisation. We will briefly explain below the type of analysis that has been done, although a more complete account can be found in Filardo (2008).

The first stage involves the description of the linguistic structures that form part of the text. This analysis consists of looking at three linguistic categories which we have elsewhere called “microlegitimisers” (Filardo, 2008), and which involve the identification of temporal, space and personal pronouns and indicators, the use of proper names and referential expressions, and the appearance of given metaphorical expressions. The use of these linguistic cues by Northern Irish politicians has been marked in the discussion below through the use of “inverted commas”.

The importance of those linguistic structures is highlighted by the fact that they are the indicators of a given discursive representation, and a subsequent (de)legitimisation of a given reality. That is the second stage of the analysis, which involves interpreting the “textual” cues we have previously identified. There are two main aspects included within the interpretation stage: the uncovering of the discourse world that pervades the speech, and the portrayal of the (de)legitimised controversial political action that motivates it.

Any textual feature has an (ideological) value which is related to the portrayal of three aspects: the subjects (participants) who are presented in the discourse, the relations that are established between those subjects, and the contents that are transmitted (Fairclough, 1989). Identification of subjects involves uncovering the (imagined) that is portrayed as being at the centre –
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or main space – in the discourse world, that is, the one whose beliefs are considered central to the speaker (Anderson, 1991). Besides, certain discursive ties and oppositions may be established with other communities, and that type of relationship is an indicator of the ideological similarities or differences between them. Those discourse participants – or communities – are characterised in relation to other certain cultural, historical, geographical and political entities and actions, which are frequently recalled by means of verb tenses and pronouns, and metaphorical and referential expressions. All these elements together make up the speaker’s discourse world, which is, in turn, the semantic legitimisation that is spread through the analysed instance of discourse.

This discourse world is the ideological point of departure for the pragmatic (de)legitimisation of a given political action – the Agreement, in this case. Uncovering this (de)legitimisation is the second aspect in the interpretation stage, and it involves looking at the relationship that is established between the controversial political action and the elements of the discourse world that have been previously identified. Therefore, we will mainly focus on the contents (Fairclough, 1989) that are transmitted and how those relate to the discourse participants and the relationships that are established between them.

Finally, any text is linked to and has a role in the social practice within which it is embedded. That takes us to the third and last stage in the analysis: explanation. Every instance of political discourse performs a political role in the political practice where it can be found (Fairclough, 1989). Therefore, the objective of this last stage is to see how that political function is discursively authorised, that is, we need to uncover how the text legitimises the socio-political context of practices which it gives expression to.

This methodological proposal has a double objective. On the one hand, it serves to show the link that can be established between language and society. On the other hand, it connects the creation of (discursive) conflict with the legitimising function of political discourse. These two objectives may be connected to a broader aim to highlight the validity of discourse analysis in the socio-political sciences as a means of raising our awareness of the social and political processes including “conflict”.

The selection of instances of discourse for the analysis has been based on three criteria. First of all, the “reality” which is discursively portrayed is the Agreement, which becomes the “thematic dimension” upon which text selection is based. This is justified by the different political reactions to this document, which were partly motivated by the ambiguity of the language employed (Alonso, 2001, p. 434-436; Bew & Gillespie, 1999, p. 359).
thematic criterion is connected to a “temporal dimension”, that is, the date – 10 April 1998 – when the Agreement was signed. Consequently, the first reaction of political parties to the Agreement allows us to see the initial response that is made to this document.

Finally, it is necessary to consider a “speaker dimension”, which involves looking at the portrayal of the Agreement by representatives of opposed ideologies, namely unionism and nationalism, and of different representatives within those ideologies. Thus, we have focused on the reaction of the four main Northern Ireland political parties: the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin (SF) on the nationalist side, and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on the unionist one.

The next two sections of the article compare how party leaders from both political traditions in Northern Ireland discursively (de)legitimised the 1998 Agreement. Four texts (the first formal public statements by each leader of the four main political parties in response to the announcement of the multi-party agreement on 10 April 1998) have been selected as the basis for analysis.

Nationalist Discourse on the 1998 Agreement

Both the SDLP and SF gave their support to the Agreement, although there were several differences in the ideological arguments – and strategies – used by each to do so. The main difference can be seen in the socio-political entity that occupies the central space in the speaker’s discourse world. On the one hand, Gerry Adams’ discourse world relies upon the centrality of the “community” to republicanism, with which he establishes an affective frame (Johnson, 1994, p. 210) through his use of an inclusive “we” (Wodak and others, 1999, p. 46) or by focusing on their shared beliefs. Besides, their cultural characterisation is based on a “united Ireland” (Adams, 1998), which becomes their imagined homeland (Billig, 1995, p. 174), and the central geographical space upon which Adams’ discourse world is based. On the other hand, Hume constructs a discourse world which is based on the centrality of the 1998 Agreement and the structures proposed in it. Those structures are perceived as an attempt to build a political space that is common to all the participants in Northern Ireland political life. Given the centrality of that political space, it is perceived as the imagined homeland within which his world is located. Thus, we do not have references to a “united Ireland” (Adams, 1998) as the imagined homeland, but to “an agreed
Ireland” (Hume, 1998), a phrase which acknowledges the necessary consent of all its members in order to be able to work.

It is this difference in the characterisation of the central entity in the discourse space the one that lies at the core of all the other portrayals. Thus, in Adams’ speech we do have references to the constitutional status – which do not appear in Hume’s one –, mainly aimed at delegitimising the Northern Ireland “statelet” (Adams, 1998) whose existence the republican ideology does not admit. Besides, the British government is only attributed a political role, which is, in turn, negatively evaluated because of its submission to the unionists’ will; the latter being metaphorically presented as children whose wishes need to be fulfilled. Besides, the role of the British nation is negatively portrayed because of the alleged wrongs they have committed in Ireland – as it can be seen in their carrying out negatively-evaluated actions such as “interference, occupation” or “involvement” (Adams, 1998) – and because of their perceived historical responsibility for the origin in the Northern Ireland conflict. This highlights one of the oppositions that underlies Adams’ speech: between republicanism and the British government.

That external opposition is connected to an internal one which can also be uncovered in this speech. The opposition between republicans and the British government becomes tied to the opposition between republicans and unionists through indexical references to “they” and “the British government and the unionists” (Adams, 1998). In relation to the portrayal about these groups, it should be noted that the existence of the republican community is legitimised through references to its historical roots (“those risen people throughout this island” [Adams, 1998]); a strategy which involves a perpetuation of that ideology throughout time by anchoring discourse in past events in order to justify the present (Chilton, 2004, p. 59). The historical legitimisation is also connected to a victimisation strategy (Alonso, 2001, p. 241), in which nationalists and republicans are said to suffer from the negative outcome of past events such as “British military and RUC harassment”, “the days of nationalist rule” or “the nationalist nightmare” (Adams, 1998). That victimisation can be contrasted to the positive role they attribute to themselves in preventing the other community – the unionists – from suffering from the negative actions they have experienced in the past, and it also contributes to legitimising the republican “struggle” (ibid). The republican struggle is justified not only because of their reaction to those negative past actions – “partition”, or “British militarism”(Adams, 1998) – but also by relying on the previous historical existence, in their view, of a united Ireland.
The positive representation of republicans is highlighted through their commitment to peace – which is often contrasted to the negative “blocking of progress” and “preparation for war” (ibid) which are metaphorically attributed to the unionist community – and through their representation as contributors to the peace process.

The lack of a geographical imagined homeland in Hume’s speech, and the importance of the common political structures proposed in the Agreement serve to justify Hume’s construction of discourse participants, as they all form part of one single imagined community which is bound together by the “new” (Hume, 1998) shared identity that can be created through the Agreement, and indexed by means of an inclusive “we” which is frequently accompanied by the determiner “all” (Hume, 1998). Moreover, that new identity does not involve “diminishing” one’s previous identity, as different “shades of opinion” (Hume, 1998) can be encompassed within it. Relations between the members of that new community should, in Hume’s (1998) view, be based on “partnership” and “participation”, two concepts which index the future and which are contrasted to the previous – and still existing – relations that are based on mistrust and division; two concepts that, as we have already seen, still underlie Adams’ discourse world.

Likewise, Hume also constructs a discourse world in which the central political space is occupied by the SDLP, mainly because he and the SDLP see the Agreement as incorporating the party’s beliefs. This also contributes to a positive representation of the self, which is endowed with an authority trait, and is presented as the source of epistemic truth (Chilton, 2004, p. 60). Thus, we can see how all the aspects that form part of Hume’s discourse world are, unlike the ones in Adams’, aimed at transmitting an image which is based on the lack of opposition, either between the two traditional Northern Ireland communities, or between the political parties that represent them.

Because of the centrality of the Agreement and its future implementation, that temporal reference is the one which underlies Hume’s discourse world. In particular, the future is indexed both through the auxiliary verb “will” – which emphasises the certainty of whatever is being signalled (Chilton, 2004, p. 60) –, and through references to “a positive future” (Hume, 1998). This future time is given a central role in the new Northern Ireland political life, and it is contrasted with the past, which is constantly characterised in a negative, and which should be forgotten. For this reason, Hume argues that the only possible structures that will work in Northern Ireland must be based on changing the future and creating new relations and new structures that do not involve or “recycle” (Hume, 1998)
any of the elements of the past. Besides, it is the “responsibility” of Northern Ireland inhabitants to contribute to and control those future changes; ideas which serve to issue a deontic command for political parties to “work together” for “creating new agreed political structures” (Hume, 1998).

In the case of both politicians we find a pragmatic legitimisation of the Agreement, although that is discursively portrayed in different ways which are intrinsically connected to the socio-political elements that underlie each politician’s discourse world. First of all, Adams highlights the unquestionable role at the Talks of those who are allied to this community, namely “republican negotiators” and “the Irish government” (Adams, 1998). Besides, he also emphasises the positive outcome the republican community may obtain from this document by presenting it as a transitional “stage” (ibid) in the path towards the final destination of a united Ireland, an idea which is portrayed by means of the metaphorical conceptualisation (PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS TRAVELLING ALONG A PATH TOWARD A DESTINATION), which is at times nested within the conflict metaphor (STRUGGLE IS A JOURNEY) (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 45, 53, 73). This “stage” is part of an overall “struggle” within which other historical “phases” in republicanism are included, such as the 1916 proclamation of the Republic, the civil rights movement or the hunger strikes. Historicism reappears as a legitimising method when Adams places the historical origin of the Agreement with the IRA ceasefire; something which contributes to depicting the IRA as having an active and voluntary role in the promotion of peace.

Furthermore, the legitimacy of the Agreement is based on the weakening of the Union because negative aspects of British legislation – referred to as the “British territorial claim” (Adams, 1998) – have been revoked, and all-Ireland co-operation has been increased by the creation of all-Ireland bodies. Republican fears about the Agreement are also counteracted by locating them on an unreal world, indexed through modality indicators (Chilton, 2004, p. 60).

In Hume’s speech the Agreement is also legitimised, although he relies on the importance of the future, and the unique “opportunity” (Hume, 1998) this accord offers for solving the conflict, overcoming and healing past and still inherent divisions in Northern Ireland, and for creating one single identity within which all the Northern Ireland traditions can be included. This is based on the Agreement’s opposition to conflict and sectarian victories and on its representation as “common success” (ibid) for both of the communities. Thus, the need of endorsing this document is highlighted because it represents a new beginning. Consequently, any possible rejection of the Agreement based on existing fears is discarded by focusing on its
positive achievements. These ideas are endowed with a high degree of certainty, spread through the use of the present simple tense, and the categorical commitment of the speaker to truth and validity that this tense implies (Fairclough, 1989, p. 120).

Finally, in the case of both politicians we can see a socio-political legitimisation of their speech, which is mostly based on either the speaker’s role as leader of the party and on the centrality of SF for the implementation process— in the case of Adams – and on the centrality of the SDLP and its actions and principles – in the case of Hume. Nevertheless, we can see slight differences in how those strategies are employed. Whereas Hume relies on the authority-role attributed to the SDLP to justify the deontic command – issued mostly through modal verb (Chilton 2004, p. 60) – for a “yes” vote at the referendum, Adams stresses the prominent role of SF and republicans, as they are the ones that have to work with the unionist community. Thus, Adams’ speech has a double socio-political legitimising function aimed, on the one hand, at persuading his own community to endorse the Agreement, and, on the other, at stressing the importance of SF to perpetuate the existing “peace” (Adams, 1998).

**Unionist Discourse and the 1998 Agreement**

Unlike in the case of nationalists, there is division within the unionist political spectrum in relation to the Agreement, which is supported by the UUP and opposed by the DUP. Thus both parties portray a discourse world with recurring elements but presented from different perspectives. Key aspects in speeches of the UUP leader, David Trimble, show that the 1998 talks lie at the heart of his conception of the political reality. They are described as a “battlefield” (Trimble, 1998); a word based on the metaphorical conceptualisation (POLITICS IS WAR) (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 51) which shows Trimble’s perception of the existing division between the two Northern Ireland communities. Given the prominence of the talks, the central political space is occupied by the UUP, who had an active role at the negotiations. Besides, it is the only unionist party to be evaluated positively as it was the only one fighting for (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 69) the interests and goals of the unionist people, or in other words, the maintenance of “the Union” (Trimble, 1998). On the contrary, the behaviour of the other unionist parties is delegitimised by focusing on their negative role at the negotiations, on their “running away from the talks” (ibid) and abandoning the unionist community, and on their lack of policies for the future. Thus, we observe how Trimble conceives Northern Ireland political life in terms of a division
within the unionist community, which has been curiously the recurrent pattern in the last 30 years of conflict (McKittrick and McVea, 2001, p. 232), and which, as we will see below, also prevails in Paisley’s speech.

The intrinsic opposition within unionism is not the only one in Trimble’s discourse world, which is also characterised by an antagonism with republicanism; an ideology – which together with the political party standing for it, SF – is always characterised by its commitment to “violence” (Trimble, 1998). For Trimble, that violence implicitly delegitimises both the political role of SF, which is referentially linked to the IRA through phrases such as “SF/IRA” (ibid), and their historical struggle for a united Ireland.

We can see that the same double opposition underlies Paisley’s speech, although in this case centres on Northern Ireland, a place which is presented as the imagined homeland of the unionist community, and whose existence is historically legitimised. It is the importance of this central space that lies at the hart of Paisley’s conception about Northern Ireland society and their constant fear of living as a minority in a united Ireland.

Thus, the portrayal of discourse participants is based on their commitment to the maintenance of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK, and this involves the broad opposition between nationalism and unionism. For this reason there is a double portrayal of unionists, ones whose behaviour can be legitimised because it is “customary” (Paisley, 1998) and committed to the maintenance of the Union – mainly by opposing the Agreement, at this moment. In addition, the political actions of those ‘exceptional’ unionists who support the Agreement are delegitimised because they do not seem to defend the Union. This evaluation is connected to the type of ideological relationship established with both groups by means of deictics. This is because Paisley distances himself from the latter group while he places the former at the deictic centre, and creates an ideological connection between them and the self, which is presented as the source of epistemic truth, authority, and knowledge about the future.

Nationalist and republicans are presented as the enemy by means of (POLITICS IS CONFLICT and POLITICS IS WAR) metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 51). Its political representatives – SF – are characterised as being inextricably linked to violence, not only explicitly but also through referential expressions such as “IRA/SF” (Paisley, 1998). Therefore, SF’s tie with the IRA “terrorist” organisation is stressed, and the latter is deprived of any political justification for its violent actions. Because of this, the relationship between the two communities seems to be dominated by the underlying opposition between them and by a feeling of mistrust, which results in a conflict pattern underlying Paisley’s statement. Paisley and the
DUP’s role is justified because they have to fight against (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 69) those who are opposed to the preservation of the Union, regardless of their ideological unionist or nationalist background.

The “Union” (Trimble, 1998) is presented as the geographical centre in Trimble’s discourse world, and its existence as a separate entity from the rest of the island is legitimised by means of reference to it through its legal name – “Northern Ireland” (ibid). Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in this case, the role of this area within the UK and the British Isles is highlighted. Thus, it can be argued that a Northern Ireland imagined homeland is delimited for the unionist community, not a Northern Ireland on its own, but one whose Britishness needs to be acknowledged. History plays an important role in justifying this trait, because it is linked to past events, such as the Act of Union, aimed at maintaining the Union. Trimble also places himself within that historical tradition, which is likewise used to legitimise his party’s support of the Agreement.

This different portrayal by the two unionist leaders about the same reality serves to explain the difference in their response to the Agreement, which Trimble legitimises not only through reference to historical facts, his party’s achievements on the maintenance of the Union, but also through the UUP’s centrality to the Northern Ireland peace process and its meaning as a “new” (Trimble, 1998) beginning which shall be contrasted to previous negatively evaluated attempts to restore peace in Northern Ireland, such as the Anglo-Irish or Sunningdale Agreements. By means of the same “journey” metaphorical conceptualisation employed by Adams, this document is presented as a “settlement” (Trimble, 1998), that is, it is the end of a completed process, an idea which is highlighted through the employment of the passive voice and the past perfect tense (Kress and Hodge, 1979, p. 129). That completion implicitly neglects the slightest possibility of future negotiations about the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Agreement is legitimised by highlighting its role as a guarantor of the Union, and by stressing unionist achievements in the document, amongst these is the “restoration of democracy” (Trimble, 1998) via the creation of a new Northern Ireland Assembly and the devolution of powers from Westminster can be underlined.

This image of the Agreement is contrasted by the one presented by Paisley, for whom this document presents a threat to one of the pillars of unionism – the existence of the Union because it “would place the Province on the road to” (Paisley, 1998) a united Ireland. It shall be noted that the same metaphorical expression employed by Adams – and Trimble – reappears with a change in the ideological value. The “threat” strategy is also
important as we can see that this speech is permeated by the “negative stance” (Aughey, 1996, p. 76) that characterises the DUP, and which is based on their saying no to a united Ireland.

Socio-political elements connected to the Agreement – such as prisoners, decommissioning or policing – are also employed by both politicians in different ways. Trimble tries to downplay unionist fears about the Agreement, and worries about the disbandment of “the RUC” (ibid) are rejected by presenting it as an impossible event in an unreal and impossible world – indexed by means of negative modality indicators such as “cannot” or “will not” (Chilton, 2004, p. 60) –, and also by showing the necessary defensive role of the RUC against the threat from “Republican terrorists” (Trimble, 1998). Likewise, other controversial aspects such as the “early release of prisoners” (Trimble, 1998) or the possible involvement of paramilitary-related parties in government are presented as necessary steps for the return of peace to Northern Ireland, but ones whose implementation will be partly determined by the unionist behaviour.

On the contrary, Paisley relies on these elements, together with conflict and war metaphors to delegitimise the Agreement, which has been “enthusiastically endorsed” and “warmly welcomed”, with a subsequent “dilution and diminution of the “Union” (Paisley, 1998). First of all this document is presented as having a perceived nationalist historical origin, which is placed on the Hume/Adams talks, and which can be seen in the name given to it by Paisley: “the Hume/Adams Agreement” (Paisley, 1998). Furthermore, those aspects of the Agreement which are negative for the unionist community are portrayed as part of the real world, and are presented as completed actions, two traits which are recalled through the uses of the verbs “will” and “can” (Chilton, 2004, p. 60). We can see this, for example in Paisley’s (1998) references to the legal historical origin of Northern Ireland as “our 1920 Act”, his insistence of referring to the republican political party as “IRA/Sinn Féin”, his description of “terrorist prisoners”, and his condemnation of the “sacrifice” of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. All those aspects contribute to promoting an image of the Agreement as an anti-peace accord which is immoral because of what Paisley (1998) views as republicans’ merely strategic (and therefore uncertain) commitment to peace, dishonesty in the negotiations, and the Northern Ireland Office’s “black propaganda” campaign aimed at its endorsement.

Finally, we can see that both speeches legitimise different socio-political aspects. Trimble tries to justify his role as leader of the UUP and within the negotiation of the Agreement, a role criticised by some within his
party. This is achieved mainly by the constant employment of a “presidential I” (Blas Arroyo, 2000, p. 7) and by placing himself as part of a historical unionist tradition, in such a way that his political actions are linked to those of his predecessor, Lord Molyneaux.

On the contrary, Paisley does not focus on his role as leader but he legitimises the uttering of the statement, which is presented as a necessary event in order to clarify the Agreement to the Northern Ireland people. Thus, the role of the DUP is justified because it is presented as the only source of morality and, consequently, as the party to be trusted. The positive function of the self in the “No” campaign is contrasted to the negative depiction of the Northern Ireland Office, which is presented as “bribing and browbeating” (Paisley, 1998) the Northern Ireland people. Thus, the DUP’s political performance at this time is justified as a necessary challenge to the “deception and duplicity” (ibid) of the others.

Conclusion

We have seen in this article that political discourse has a legitimising function which is aimed at justifying specific discourse worlds in which social elements and political actions are included and linked to a given ideology. This has been proved in the Northern Ireland context, where the Agreement – and the reality surrounding it – is discursively portrayed in different ways by each of the political representatives, in such a way that it results in the creation of a paradoxical reality. Besides, we have seen how a linguistic analysis of political speeches becomes a useful tool for uncovering legitimising strategies, as they allow us to see how language is used with certain political and discursive objectives. The inextricable connection that exists between language and peace (or conflict) is evident (Wright, 1998; Schäffner and Wenden, 1995). In fact, in Northern Ireland that relationship becomes clear if we take into account that pre-Agreement overt physical conflict is transferred to political discourse after this document is signed, when the political arena – and discourse, which is its explicit manifestation – becomes the site for political struggle.

The analysis of the linguistic strategies – or linguistic weapons, to continue with the conflict conceptualisation - employed to fulfil that legitimising function shows that the four Northern Ireland political parties tend to resort to the same strategies. All of them employ deictics, referential expressions and metaphors, and frequently they do so in the same way. In fact, a comparison of the obtained results shows that they may even draw on the same linguistic forms, as we have seen, for example, in the case of the
‘journey’ metaphorical expression used by Gerry Adams, David Trimble and Ian Paisley to portray the Agreement. It can also been seen in the use of the first person plural pronoun “we” by the four political leaders with different social referents, depending on the actual needs of the speaker. How those linguistic structures are interpreted depends on the common knowledge shared between communicators; a knowledge which is similar if the audience belongs to the same ideological community, but which differs when they belong to an opposed one. It is because of this ideological opposition, and the impact it has in the interpretation of language, that discourse analysis becomes even more interesting because it helps to explain socio-political events and processes by relying on the analysis of language at different historical times.

Thus, the analysis of post-Agreement language shows that the conflict pattern has been transposed to the political arena, where we can find discursively-created oppositions that reproduce the ones that had previously caused physical conflict – such as republicans opposed to the British government and the unionist community, or unionists opposed to republicans – although sometimes they also replicate political oppositions – as we have seen in the case of the division within unionism. Hence, we may argue that discourse reflects socio-political oppositions, which are, in turn, related to the legitimising function of political discourse, in as much as each political representative needs to justify different social elements. Nevertheless, it can also be argued that discourse changes may result in socio-political changes (Filardo, 2008) because if discourse stops reproducing socio-political oppositions, that may result in a dilution of those oppositions in “real” life. Consequently, it can be claimed that the ambiguity of the language of the Agreement has allowed the creation of a discursively paradoxical reality which is manifested through different nuances of discourse, which lie, in turn, at the heart of the success of the peace process as we know it today.

References


“Humespeak”: THE SDLP, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

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Abstract

This paper explores the vital role played by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the formulation of a new political discourse and conceptual approach to the Northern Ireland problem. In particular, it shows how John Hume, party leader through the 1980s and 1990s, helped to propagate this discourse, and in doing so influenced policy-making in London and Dublin, and thinking within the republican movement. Although the paper emphasises the importance of this influence, it concludes by considering the reasons why the Ulster unionist community have remained so unresponsive to the political discourse of Hume and the SDLP.

Introduction

This article examines the political discourse of Northern Ireland’s SDLP. In doing so, it aims to show that many of the concepts and themes of the SDLP’s discourse helped to shape the ideological parameters of the Northern Ireland peace process. In this, the article is limited in its scope. Clearly, a great number of actors have contributed to the discourse and ideology of the Northern Ireland peace process, and there is not room here to explain the way that the SDLP’s ideas have interacted with those of other parties to the conflict. In particular, changes in northern Irish nationalist thinking – many of which have involved the SDLP – have both fed upon and fed into similar shifts in southern Irish nationalist ideology. As such, whilst the focus here is on the SDLP, the party should be considered as part of the wider Irish nationalist “family”. Accordingly, this article is intended as a contribution to the wider literature on the evolution of Irish nationalist discourse. For the SDLP’s discursive and ideological innovations must be seen as related to and interactive with changes in the language of other members of the broader nationalist family.1

In order to draw out the SDLP’s role in this complex process, the article focuses on a select number of concepts which were particularly common to the party’s discourse from the 1970s through to the 1990s. It does not claim that these concepts were completely unique to the SDLP, and indeed aims to show that other actors were often thinking in similar ways.
However, the article explains how the party deployed these concepts in a consistent, almost idiosyncratic fashion, a style which served to make such ideas part of the SDLP’s own distinctive language and ideological approach to the Northern Ireland problem. In turn, it shows how some of the SDLP’s particular word formations were adopted by other parties to the problem, and thus became integral to the language of the Northern Ireland peace process. In doing so, the paper lays great emphasis on the role of John Hume, leader of the SDLP from 1979 to 2001. Such was Hume’s importance in the propagation of the SDLP’s ideas that his distinctive political parlance even earned it own epithet: “Humespeak”. Though this term was often used disparagingly – referring to the repetitiveness of his language – even critics recognise the extent to which Hume’s particular phraseology has dominated the discourse of the peace process (Cunningham, 1997; McGovern, 1997).

The specific concepts which the paper examines are “the three strands”, “the Irish dimension”, “the two traditions”, and finally the notion of “an agreed Ireland”. Whilst exploring each of these terms individually, the paper aims to show that they are interrelated, and together form a mode of political discourse distinctive to the SDLP. Having considered these concepts, and the extent to which they influenced the thinking of the British and Irish governments, the paper then looks at a specific debate which took place between the SDLP and the republican movement from the late-1980s. This dialogue, revolving around the issue of British interests in Northern Ireland, proved crucial to the evolution of republican thinking, and the subsequent Irish Republican Army (IRA) ceasefire of August 1994. In this respect, the etymological origins of the peace process can again be related to the SDLP, and in particular to the party’s leader in this period.

The Three Strands

As Gerard Murray’s meticulous study of the SDLP has shown, a three-level approach towards the resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict was conceived by the party as early as 1971 (1998, pp. 15-16), that is a over a quarter of a century before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) created a political settlement by the same means. This approach was initiated by John Duffy, one of the SDLP’s earliest policy-makers, in a set of internal party papers which he completed in September 1971. Duffy’s papers described three sets of relationships which he felt must be addressed in order to resolve the Northern Ireland problem: relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland; relations between the North and South of Ireland; and relations between Britain and Ireland (Murray, 1998, p. 15).
It was only in the 1980s, however, that this three relations thinking became evident in the SDLP’s public discourse. Arguably, this reflected the political developments in this period, which created a context more favourable to the three relationships approach. In particular, the warming of relations between the British and Irish governments, culminating in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985, appeared to broaden the framework within which the Northern Ireland problem was being considered. This met with positive response from the SDLP, with Hume telling the British House of Commons that the AIA provided

[for] the first time … a real framework within which to address the problem. The problem is not just about relationships within Northern Ireland … it is about relationships in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland (Hansard, sixth series, vol. 87, col. 780).

Through the remainder of the 1980s, Hume continued to articulate this three relationships approach as the most appropriate way to resolve the Northern Ireland problem. His persistence, it seems, eventually paid off. Indeed, for when the Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke, announced his intention to convene political talks between the local parties in March 1991, he told the House of Commons that “discussions must focus on the three main relationships: those in Northern Ireland … among the people of the island of Ireland; and between the governments” (Hansard, sixth series, vol. 188, col. 765).

By the time the Brooke talks began, the three relationships had been rebranded as “the three strands” by British officials. However, the origins of this approach in the thinking of the SDLP were plain to see. Moreover, when Brooke was replaced by Patrick Mayhew in April 1992, the new Northern Ireland Secretary continued to organise inter-party talks in accordance with the three strand model. Although these discussions ended with little progress, when negotiations recommenced in 1996, again they were based upon the three strands. Eventually, the talks concluded in April 1998 with the announcement of the GFA. This Agreement established new political institutions to accommodate the two communities in Northern Ireland; new arrangements to facilitate co-operation between the North and South of Ireland; and new structures to co-ordinate relations throughout the UK and Ireland.2

The particular design of the political institutions created under each strand of the GFA were, of course, the result of bargain and compromise between the Northern Ireland parties and the British and Irish governments (see Hennessy, 2000). However, that the GFA was drawn from the three strands schema shows how the SDLP shaped the basic terms of the
settlement. For, as demonstrated, the three strands approach finds its origins in documents written by the party in the early 1970s. The three-level thinking of these documents, promoted more vigorously by the SDLP from the 1980s onwards, shows the significant influence which the party had in creating the essential parameters of the peace agreement that emerged in 1998.

The Irish Dimension

“The Irish dimension” is a term which the SDLP used to refer to the need for a political settlement which extended beyond Northern Ireland, involving the Irish as well as the British state. In this respect, the concept ties in with the party’s three relationship thinking, and particularly the emphasis on relations between the North and South of Ireland. For the SDLP, political linkages between the two jurisdictions were required to give institutional expression to the identity of Northern Ireland’s nationalist community. Just as the British identity of the Ulster unionist community was reflected in the Union with Great Britain, so, the SDLP argued, the Irish identity of the northern nationalist community must be recognised through political structures connecting it with the Republic of Ireland. As Hume reasoned:

Any solution which does not take account of the Irish dimension is doomed to failure. SDLP policies clearly commit the Party to a solution that takes account of both basic loyalties in the community and both must be taken into account if any solution is to be found (Irish News, 22 May 1975).

The party’s emphasis on the need for an Irish dimension to any settlement of the Northern Ireland problem has led the term to become very much associated with the SDLP. However, the phrase was actually first used in a British government document, The Future of Northern Ireland: A Paper for Discussion (1972). Here the term was used to suggest that any regional settlement must also recognise Northern Ireland’s position within Ireland as a whole … Whatever arrangements are made for the future administration of Northern Ireland must take account of the region’s relationship with the Republic of Ireland (HMSO, 1972, paras. 76, 78).

The SDLP read this as an acceptance by the London government of the arguments advanced in Towards a New Ireland – a document which the party had issued a month before the British discussion paper. In Towards a New Ireland, the SDLP had firmly set its face against any internal solution to the Northern Ireland problem: “Any re-examination [of constitutional arrangements] must therefore take place, not in a purely Six County context,
but in an Irish context” (SDLP, 1972, p. 1). In this, the SDLP made clear that it would not be party to a settlement that did not involve the Irish government in some way. As such, when London seemed to accept this position by recognising an “Irish dimension” to the problem in *The Future of Northern Ireland*, the SDLP seized upon what was actually a Whitehall term (*Irish News*, 8 November 1972), adopting the phrase as part of its own political nomenclature, and using it henceforth.

The Irish dimension found its first institutional expression in the Council of Ireland which formed part of the failed Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. Like the North-South structures created by the GFA 25 years later, the Council of Ireland was intended to promote co-operation between the two parts of the island. However, whereas the all-Ireland institutions of the GFA were sharply defined, the powers and political remit of those agreed in 1973 were more open to interpretation. For this reason, many unionists opposed the Council of Ireland, believing that it would work to erode the Irish border, and undermine Northern Ireland’s position within the UK. This concern ultimately led to the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement, and the inter-communal power-sharing government which it had created for Northern Ireland.

Because unionist opposition to Sunningdale had been directed mainly towards the Council of Ireland, following the Agreement’s demise, the London government moved away from the idea of an institutionalised Irish dimension. The feeling amongst British officials was that the Council of Ireland had been a step too far for unionists. Had the Sunningdale settlement involved only a power-sharing arrangement within Northern Ireland, it may have survived. The SDLP, on the other hand, remained firmly opposed to any internal settlement of the Northern Ireland problem, arguing that this would deny the political identity of the nationalist community. Even in the immediate aftermath of Sunningdale’s collapse, the party responded vigorously to media speculation that this might lead to a weakening of the SDLP’s commitment to North-South institutions. “The Irish dimension is fundamental to SDLP policy”, argued Austin Currie, a co-founder and leading member of the party: “Whether or not it is realised in a Council of Ireland or any other structure is a matter for discussion” (*Irish Times*, 19 June 1974).

Through the political inertia of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the SDLP continued to hold to this line, insisting that the Irish government’s involvement in Northern Ireland was a *sine qua non* of any settlement to which it would be a party. In defending this position, the SDLP used the term “the Irish dimension” so frequently that, as suggested, the phrase came to be
considered as one of party’s own. Even the British government – at this time looking to distance itself from the whole notion of an Irish dimension – appeared happy to forget that the phrase had first appeared in one of its own discussion papers. But whilst the term was invented in Whitehall, the idea of an Irish dimension was integral to the SDLP’s thinking – as was evident in the party’s earliest political documents (Murray, 1998, pp.12ff). Moreover, by continually using a phrase coined by British officials, the SDLP made it impossible for the Irish dimension to slip from the political agenda. By refusing to contemplate any settlement which did not involve the Irish government, the SDLP effectively vetoed any movement by London towards an internal solution of the Northern Ireland problem – an option obviously favoured by the unionist community.

Of course, the Dublin government was also crucial in pushing the Irish dimension. In particular, in the early 1980s, the administrations of Garret FitzGerald carefully avoided any anti-partitionist rhetoric, but insisted that Dublin should play some role in the administration of Northern Ireland. An Irish presence in the structures of governance in the region, it was argued, would serve to address the sense of political alienation that had become apparent amongst the nationalist minority in this period (FitzGerald, 1991, pp. 473ff). As such, it was not only the SDLP’s obstinacy over the Irish dimension, but also the Dublin government’s insistence that it should be involved in Northern Ireland, and indeed the sympathy for this position among the international community, particular in the US, that together pushed the British government towards the logic of the 1985 AIA. Under the terms of this accord, Dublin was given a limited but nonetheless significant role in the governance of Northern Ireland. More than a decade after Sunningdale’s demise, the Irish dimension was restored.

Although the 1998 GFA ostensibly “transcended” the AIA, the essential architecture of the earlier accord remains in place. Despite unionist opposition, the inter-governmental institutions of the AIA were reformed rather than replaced by the GFA (O’Leary, 2001, p. 68). The SDLP had some influence in this decision, with the party still opposed to any settlement lacking an Irish input. However, more important was opinion in London and Dublin. In essence, the two governments were unwilling to abandon the political machinery which had, since the mid-1980s, allowed for far more effective management of the Northern Ireland problem. As such, under the terms of the GFA, Dublin retains the role it has held since 1985, as guardian of the nationalist minority’s essential interests. This, in addition to the new North-South structures created by the GFA, shows that the Irish dimension is still in effect.
The role in Northern Ireland which the Dublin government acquired through the AIA, and the position which it continues to hold today, is less than the SDLP would have liked. In 1985, the party had been hoping for something closer to joint British-Irish sovereignty over Northern Ireland. In 1998, the SDLP had sought North-South structures with greater political potential, institutions which could have evolved with more dynamism, leading ultimately to the reunification of Ireland. However, the Irish dimension to both the AIA and the GFA owes much to the SDLP’s refusal to accept anything less than the British government had originally offered in its 1972 discussion paper.

The Two Traditions

The idea of “the two traditions” – or the same concept articulated in different terms – appeared in nationalist commentaries some years before the onset of the Northern Ireland conflict. Indeed, John Whyte highlights the 1950s in particular as a period in which mainly southern writers such as Michael Sheehy and Donal Barrington began to consider the problem of partition in terms of “two distinct peoples in Ireland” (Whyte, 1990, pp. 119-20). In this interpretation, partition was not imposed upon Ireland by the British government, but a rather an inevitable response by London to the seemingly irreconcilable differences of these two “peoples”: Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists. Implicit in this thesis was the idea that it was for the “peoples” of Ireland – with the emphasis being on nationalists – to work to overcome those differences. This, it was suggested, was the only way to end partition and unite Ireland.

Following the outbreak of communal violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, and the formation of the SDLP in 1970, the new party clearly drew upon these ideas, articulating a gradualist approach towards Irish unity as the ultimate solution to the conflict. However, the party also used this discourse of divided peoples – or “the two traditions” as it became in the SDLP’s phraseology – in explaining its immediate proposals for the pacification and stabilisation of Northern Ireland. For this end, the SDLP argued, could only be achieved by establishing political structures which recognised the identity of both political “traditions” in Northern Ireland, Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist (SDLP, 1972, p. 4; 1974a, para. 1.3). In essence, this meant creating an Irish dimension – that is all-Ireland political structures – as a counterbalance to the pre-existing British dimension – namely the political Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As the party plainly stated in its 1975 manifesto: “There is an Irish Dimension to...
the problem. There is a British Dimension to the problem. Any solution must take account of both” (SDLP, 1975, p. 3).

In effect, then, the SDLP used this two traditions thesis to support its arguments in favour of an Irish dimension. This tendency was most notable in the period after Sunningdale’s collapse. At this time, many commentators proposed that the SDLP abandon its pursuit of an Irish dimension, and content itself with an internal settlement of the Northern Ireland problem – this, it was claimed, being the only basis on which unionists might be persuaded to share power with the nationalists. The SDLP rejected such suggestions, arguing that without institutional recognition of its Irish identity, the nationalist minority could not be accommodated within the Northern Ireland state (SDLP, 1974a, paragraphs 1.1-1.3). The two traditions thesis thus provided the ideological rationale for the party’s continued commitment to the Sunningdale formula of power-sharing and an Irish dimension. As Hume reasoned:

Partnership between our two traditions – both within the North through power-sharing, and between North and South through the Irish dimension – accepting and respecting our differences will in time build trust and confidence to replace distrust and prejudice (Sunday Press, 16 March 1975).

In the late 1970s, such arguments made little headway with either the unionist community or the British government. Buoyed by their defeat of Sunningdale, from 1974 onwards, unionists became increasingly inflexible. Not only did they remain opposed to the idea of linkages between the North and South of Ireland, but unionist leaders now refused to share power with the SDLP even within a wholly internal political arrangement. The British government, meanwhile, was unwilling to enforce a settlement upon an intransigent majority, and so appeared to abandon all hope of establishing a local settlement in Northern Ireland. Instead it settled into the role of ruling the region directly from Westminster. This seemed to appease the unionist community. After all, direct rule from London secured the majority’s essential political objective, maintenance of the Union with Britain. The nationalist community, on the other hand, grew increasingly disaffected. Recognising this, the SDLP continued to press for a change in British policy towards an arrangement that would acknowledge the identity of both communities. As Hume argued:

The problem here cannot be solved on the basis of one identity alone and whether wittingly or unwittingly, British politicians run the risk of promoting violence in the North by not accommodating the two different identities in it (Irish News, 9 May 1978).
The extent of the minority community’s alienation became apparent in the early 1980s, when republican prisoners began a series of hunger strikes in order to gain political recognition from the British government. The hunger strikes mobilised even moderate sections of the Catholic community, those who had shown no previous sympathy for the republican movement. In turn, this led to fears in both London and Dublin that the moderate nationalism of the SDLP would now be eclipsed by the radical republicanism of Sinn Féin (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 2002, p. 202).

It was partly to restore the credibility of the SDLP that the Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, established the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4. This initiative, originally proposed by the SDLP (Murray, p. 124), brought the northern nationalist party into conference with its southern counterparts, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party. Although contemporary commentators derided the exercise as attempt by the Irish establishment to “save” the SDLP, the party had ambitions beyond its electoral struggle with Sinn Féin. It hoped to use the Forum to forge an ideological consensus among constitutional nationalists in both parts of Ireland, creating a unity of purpose that would, along with the goodwill of the international community, press the British government into action on Northern Ireland (Hume, 1984, p. 24). The SDLP’s success in achieving such consensus was evident in the conclusion of the New Ireland Forum report, which committed all of the participating parties to the two traditions thesis as the basis for a solution:

The validity of both the nationalist and unionist identities in Ireland … must be accepted; both of these identities must have equally satisfactory, secure and durable, political, administrative and symbolic expression and protection (Dublin Stationery Office, 1984, article 5.2.4).

Although the 1985 AIA did not adopt any of the specific political structures that were proposed by the New Ireland Forum, it certainly drew upon the thinking behind the initiative. As Todd argues:

Explicitly, the AIA recognized the need to acknowledge the rights of the two traditions in Ireland and to … recognize the identities of the two communities in Northern Ireland …

The implication, when the AIA is read in the light of the New Ireland Forum Report, is that the nationalist community in Northern Ireland as a part of the wider Irish nationalist tradition has a right to the institutionalized recognition of its identity … through the involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland (1995, p. 822).

The same political logic and discourse informed the terms of the Northern Ireland peace process from its earliest days. This was clear to see in
the Joint Declaration for Peace – or the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) as it is more commonly known – which formally launched the process in December 1993. Here the British government promised to work with its Irish counterpart to encourage, facilitate and enable the achievement of … an agreement over a period through a process of dialogue and co-operation based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland (HMSO, 1993, para. 4).

In the 1995 Framework Documents – wherein the two governments provided the blueprint for a political settlement in Northern Ireland – the influence of the two traditions discourse was even more evident in the stipulation that “any new political arrangements must be based on full respect for, and protection and expression of, the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland” (HMSO, 1995, para. 10 (iv)). Finally, the GFA was also suffused with a language with recognised the equal legitimacy of the two political traditions in Ireland (see the Agreement, Constitutional Issues, para. 1(v-vi)).

All of these references show the extent to which the two traditions discourse became ingrained within the philosophy of the peace process. However, again this mode of thought can be related to ideas first expressed by the SDLP in the 1970s. Although the party was itself drawing on southern nationalist commentaries from the 1950s, the SDLP modified this thinking to reflect the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland. Specifically, the party developed practical proposals which – though based upon the rethinking of the 1950s – were not geared solely towards Irish unification, and in fact provided a conceptual framework within which Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist could both be accommodated in a still partitioned Ireland. In addition, it was the SDLP’s frequent and repeated use of a specific term, “the two traditions”, that led to its subsequent adoption by the British and Irish governments, and thus its establishment as a central discourse of the peace process.

An Agreed Ireland

Of all the concepts considered in this paper, the idea of an “agreed Ireland” is the one most intimately associated with Hume. However, it also relates to the concepts already discussed, particularly the two traditions thesis. Indeed, the idea built directly upon this thesis, suggesting that the two political communities in Ireland had to find mutually acceptable constitutional structures that would allow them to co-exist on the island which they shared.
– hence an agreed Ireland. Like the two traditions thesis, the concept of an agreed Ireland also became more prominent within the SDLP’s discourse in the aftermath of the failed Sunningdale Agreement, when the party tried to argue the validity of the power-sharing and Irish dimension formula which unionists had rejected (see SDLP, 1974b). However, it also appeared that Hume employed the phrase, an agreed Ireland, as a way to sate or at least to address the traditional nationalist desire for a united Ireland. For he used the term to suggest that any settlement which gave the two communities in Northern Ireland an equal say in the governance of the region, and any agreement which allowed nationalists to express a political affiliation with the southern Irish state, would in itself constitute “Irish unity”. For example, speaking shortly after the collapse of Sunningdale, Hume argued that:

If we get an agreed Ireland that is unity. What constitutional or institutional forms such an agreed Ireland takes is irrelevant because it would represent agreement by the people of this country as to how they should be governed (Irish Times, 17 June 1974).

This was an idea which Hume continued to articulate, ad infinitum, from the 1970s onwards. But whilst unionists vehemently opposed the all-Ireland implications of his thinking, Hume’s arguments did eventually find favour with the two governments. This was most apparent in the DSD of 1993, where the British government stated that its primary interest was “to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement among all the people who inhabit the island,” and committed itself to “work with the Irish Government to achieve such an agreement … based on full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions …” (HMSO, 1993, para. 4). With this, Hume’s notion of an agreed Ireland became the ideological template for a solution to the Northern Ireland problem (Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, 2002, pp. 221-2). Though broadly flexible as to the particular political structures that would be created, this model provided two guiding principles to the subsequent inter-party talks. Any solution arising from these discussions would have to include all-Ireland institutions, and must win the consent of both political traditions.

The agreement that eventually emerged in 1998 is consistent with this model. Indeed, with the North-South structures created by the GFA, northern Catholics no longer reside in a polity entirely separate from that of their co-nationals in the Republic of Ireland. The minority community’s Irish identity is explicitly recognised by the Agreement (Agreement, Constitutional Issues, para. 1(vi)). By the same token, the Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland remains intact; unionists’ political identity has in no way been diminished. In this, the GFA has created a political framework capable
of accommodating both traditions on the island of Ireland. Hume’s contribution to the conception of this framework, and in particular his idea of an agreed Ireland, was highly significant.

“No Selfish Strategic or Economic Interest”

Having explored four major concepts which contributed to the discourse and thinking of the Northern Ireland peace process, it is now worth considering the particular political exchanges which led to the cessation of hostilities in the mid-1990s. For here again, we can see the influence of the SDLP, particularly in the verbal formulations that were used.

Of crucial importance was the dialogue between the SDLP and Sinn Féin which began in 1988. This debate was, in the first instance, inspired by the two parties’ rival interpretations of the 1985 AIA. Sinn Féin saw the Agreement as an imperialist stratagem: by allowing Dublin a limited role in the administration of the region, republicans felt that London was trying to stabilise British rule in Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin, 1986). The SDLP, however, saw the AIA in quite a different light. In particular, Hume focused on Article 1(c) of the Agreement, wherein the British government had promised to support and indeed legislate for a united Ireland if this was shown to be the wish of a majority within Northern Ireland. Hume presented this commitment as, effectively, a declaration of British neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland. With this, he sought to overturn republicans’ imperial interpretation of the conflict:

This is a clear statement by the British government that it has no interest of its own, either strategic or otherwise, in remaining in Ireland. It is a declaration that Irish unity is a matter for Irish people, for those who want it to persuade those who don’t (Hume, 1986, p. 382).

Publicly, Sinn Féin rejected Hume’s reading of the AIA. But behind closed doors, a debate was taking place within the republican movement. After the astonishing electoral gains of the early 1980s, Sinn Féin had reached a ceiling in its political support. This was partly attributable to the AIA, which has restored the confidence of constitutional nationalism, but more important was Sinn Féin’s relationship with the IRA. Whilst it continued to defend the actions of the IRA, Sinn Féin found that it could not win significant support beyond the republican heartlands, where Catholic voters remained loyal to the SDLP. If Sinn Féin was to have any influence beyond its core constituency, it would have to engage with its moderate rival. Recognising this, the Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, began to put out political feelers towards the SDLP (Adams, 2003 pp. 53ff.)
In spite of the risks involved, Hume finally agreed to formal talks with Sinn Féin, beginning in early 1988. In essence, the SDLP used these discussions to restate and refine its reading of the AIA, and in particular its view that the British government was now neutral on the possibility of Irish unity. As Hume argued in a letter delivered to Adams at the outset of the talks: “Britain is now saying that she has no interest of her own in being here and that her only interest is to see agreement among the people who share the island of Ireland” (Hume, 1988, p. 4). For the SDLP, therefore, the British government was not the primary obstacle to Irish reunification. Rather it was the unionist community, and their deep-rooted resistance to that end. Thus, the key to achieving a united Ireland was to persuade unionists to consent to it.

Despite such arguments, throughout the 1988 talks, Sinn Féin stubbornly rejected the idea of British neutrality on Northern Ireland, and restated their old colonial interpretation of the conflict:

The claim that Britain is neutral ignores their role as a pawnbroker and guarantor of unionist hegemony … Britain’s continuing involvement in Ireland is based on strategic, economic and political interests (Sinn Féin, 1988, p. 12).

Although the SDLP-Sinn Féin talks appeared to end in stalemate, Hume took what republicans had said here as a challenge (Hume, 1996, p. 115). He now turned to London, seeking confirmation – straight from the horse’s mouth as it were – of his conception of the AIA and of British neutrality vis-à-vis Irish unity. Peter Brooke, the Northern Ireland Secretary from 1989, proved receptive to Hume’s approaches, and took seriously his suggestion that the republican leadership was becoming more open-minded (Mallie and McKitterick, 1996, pp. 107-8). Brooke responded in a speech to his Westminster constituency on November 9th 1990, in which he famously declared that: “The British government has no selfish strategic or economic interests in Northern Ireland” (Irish Times, 10 November 1990). The striking similarities between this formula and the terms in which Sinn Féin had rejected the SDLP’s neutrality thesis seem more than coincidental. It appears that someone was telling Brooke exactly what republicans needed to hear a British minister say.

Following Brooke’s speech, Hume was able to return to Adams claiming vindication of his interpretation of the AIA. This led to further talks between the two leaders which evolved into the so-called “Hume-Adams initiative”. The essential purpose of this initiative was to find agreement on a form of words – acceptable to the British and Irish governments, but also to the republican movement – which would be included in a joint London-
Dublin declaration regarding the terms on which Sinn Féin could join all-party talks towards a settlement in Northern Ireland. Though understandably unnerving Ulster unionists, the Hume-Adams dialogue achieved huge support throughout nationalist Ireland, and eventually forced the two governments to respond with the DSD of December 1993 (Mallie and McKittrick, 1996, pp. 117ff.).

The phraseology of the DSD stands as a testament to the extent to which the document drew upon the Hume-Adams initiative, despite presentation to the contrary (Bew, Patterson and Teague, 1997, pp. 205-6). In order to maintain unionist support for the process, the two governments could not be seen to adopt a text which Adams had any part in creating, the Sinn Féin leader being seen as a terrorist in Protestant eyes. But though the terms of the Hume-Adams dialogue were diluted, the primary inspiration for the DSD was plain to see. Most significant in the text was an affirmation of the position given by Brooke three years previously, the British government declaring that it had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland”, and thus represented no barrier to a united Ireland achieved by peaceful means (HMSO, 1993, para. 4).

After considerable deliberation with the republican movement, the IRA eventually responded to the DSD by calling a ceasefire in August 1994. The DSD, of course, was not the sole reason for this shift in strategy. Indeed, the republican movement had for some years been moving towards a more political approach (English, 2003, pp. 187ff). Moreover, if any one explanation can be given for the cessation of the armed campaign, it was the realisation that, though the IRA could no be defeated, neither did it have the military capacity to force the British state from Northern Ireland. By the late 1980s, many senior republicans had accepted this reality. However, persuading the movement as a whole to abandon the armed struggle and adopt a purely political strategy was no easy task. Crucial in the process were the various statements regarding British interests in Northern Ireland that were made in the early 1990s. These allowed the Sinn Féin leadership to suggest that there had been a radical shift in British policy towards Northern Ireland, and that this should be tested by republicans’ also changing tack.

On this level, the early peace process appeared as a game played essentially between the British state and the republican movement. However, as demonstrated, Hume and the SDLP helped to write the script for the crucial first exchanges between the two sides. Prior to the SDLP-Sinn Féin talks of 1988, republicans appeared unwilling to even entertain the idea of British neutrality regarding Northern Ireland. But as well as creating such
thoughts amongst the Sinn Féin leadership, Hume prompted the British
government to make public announcements that would encourage the
acceptance of such ideas amongst the wider republican movement. These
statements proved vital to the development of the Northern Ireland peace
process. In particular, without the “no selfish strategic or economic interests”
mantra repeated by British officials throughout the early 1990s, there would
have been no IRA ceasefire in 1994, and no peace agreement in 1998.

Conclusion

The great historical legacy of the SDLP, and of John Hume in
particular, lies in redefining Irish nationalism. I deliberately do not say
Northern nationalism, as I believe the SDLP has radically changed the
thinking of the mainstream political parties in the South, as well as the
broad mass of constitutional nationalist thinking in both North and
South. Not only do I make that wider claim, but I also further claim
that the SDLP has radically changed the thinking of physical force
nationalism or republicanism as well. (Maginness, 2002, p. 33)

Notwithstanding the ostentatious nature of this assertion – and indeed
despite the fact that it is made by a member of the SDLP – it has credibility.
With its birth in August 1970, the SDLP became the primary political
expression of the reformist tendencies that emerged within northern Irish
nationalism in the 1960s. Throughout the 1970s, the party consolidated this
position by articulating a discourse and approach to the Northern Ireland
problem that departed significantly from traditional anti-partitionist
nationalism. Even in this early period, the SDLP enjoyed considerable
influence within Irish government circles, but the real breakthrough came
with the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4. With this, the party had opportunity
to fully imbue the southern state with its political philosophy (Murray, 1998,
pp. 123, 141), and hereafter successive Irish governments adopted a
distinctively SDLP phraseology. In turn, the London government also took
on something of the SDLP’s discourse. This was evident in the AIA of 1985,
and even more so the DSD of 1993, after which the two governments were
united in their use of a lexicon at least partly conditioned by the terminology
of Hume and his party. However, as Maginness points out, the SDLP also
helped to change the thinking of physical force republicanism. Clearly, it was
aided in this effort by the willingness of the British government to confirm
the arguments which the party had made to Sinn Féin. But looking at the
particular formulations which figures such as Peter Brooke chose to use, it
seems that by the early 1990s Hume had established a direct line of
communication with the Northern Ireland Office, which was listening with great interest.

There is, however, one party to the Northern Ireland conflict who have proved impervious to “Humespeak”. Ulster unionists have retained a particular distrust for Hume and his discourse. Cunningham suggests that this is a result of the perceived ambiguities in Hume’s political language. Demonstrating his point, Cunningham provides a quotation from a Protestant clergyman which he suggests “neatly encapsulates criticisms that have been levelled at John Hume”:

Protestants are really puzzled by what they feel is the ambiguous attitude of Catholics and their failure to define ordinary concepts in a clean, straightforward way … Protestants sometimes find it very difficult to understand the sophistry, the playing with words which we (sometimes) get from Catholics (Cunningham, 1997, p. 13).

Perhaps the best example of such “sophistry” is Hume’s “agreed Ireland”. For many unionists, this phrase provided the “verbal sleight of hand” by which Hume disguised his true ambition (Bew and Patterson, 1985, p. 99). Put simply, an agreed Ireland was Humespeak for a united Ireland. (O’Brien, 1994, p. 177). However, the unionist reading of Hume’s agreed Ireland underestimates the extent to which the concept allowed Irish nationalists, and particularly northern Irish nationalists, to accept a political settlement which fell short of a united Ireland. It did so by promising constitutional arrangements with an all-Ireland dimension, structures which allowed northern nationalists to feel some form of political association with the Irish Republic, the state which best represented their national identity. At the same time, an agreed Ireland offered the same for unionists – that the institutions created would respect their rights and identity, and would require their consent. This, at its most basic level, is what Hume’s agreed Ireland was all about. It was an attempt to square the circle between Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism, to provide political structures which would satisfy both. With the GFA, this Herculean task may have been accomplished. The 1998 Agreement has, for the first time in Irish history, created institutions which have secured widespread acceptance amongst both political traditions on the island.6 The GFA has achieved an agreed Ireland, and Hume and the SDLP have played no small part in this.

Endnotes

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grateful to Jennifer Todd and the editors for their constructive comments. All errors are my own.

1 An appreciation of the SDLP’s place within the wider process of change in Irish nationalist discourse can be gained by reading this piece in conjunction with the article by O’Donnell in this volume, and those by Hayward (2004), Ivory (1999), and Shirlow and McGovern (1998).

2 For an overview of the different institutions of the GFA, see O’Leary (2001).

3 Northern Ireland comprises six of the 32 counties of Ireland. However, Irish nationalists have traditionally used the term “the six counties” as a means to delegitimise the Northern Ireland state. The implication is that the “six counties” are only a part of what would be a more “natural” political unit: a 32 county united Ireland.

4 For a detailed discussion of this thinking, see McLoughlin (2006).

5 FitzGerald had been thinking in similar terms, but modified Hume’s idea of a convention of Irish nationalist parties to one which would, at least in principle, be open to Ulster unionist contributions (FitzGerald, 1991, pp. 462ff.). FitzGerald and Hume were alike in much of their political thinking, and their convergence over the New Ireland Forum initiative shows just one example of the overlap and interplay between revisionist nationalist tendencies in both parts of Ireland.

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Exit polls suggested that the GFA won only a slim majority of support among the unionist community in the 1998 referendum. Unionists’ traditional aversion to power sharing with nationalists was clearly exacerbated by the prospect of republicans also participating in the government of Northern Ireland. Following this, the failure of the IRA to decommission its weapons, allied to instances of continued republican paramilitary activity and Sinn Féin’s refusal to accept new policing arrangements in Northern Ireland, saw unionist backing for the GFA fall further. However, more recently, the resolution of these issues appears to have assured unionists of republicans’ commitment to purely democratic methods. Accordingly, most sections of the Protestant community have now, if not embraced, at least accepted the GFA as providing the most equitable solution for the stable governance of Northern Ireland.

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DUP DISCOURSES ON VIOLENCE AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

Amber Rankin and Gladys Ganiel

Abstract

This paper analyses the Democratic Unionist Party’s (DUP) discourses about paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland. Drawing on narrative analysis of DUP discourses reported in Northern Ireland’s largest unionist newspaper, the News Letter (1998–2006), it explores the relationship between the party’s identity, its discourses about republican and loyalist paramilitaries, and the impact of these words on the DUP’s electoral success and on the peace process. The paper argues that these discourses may haunt the progress of peace-building, not least because the DUP will find it hard to disentangle itself from a history of scepticism and nay-saying even as it takes a leading role in a devolved Executive designed by an Agreement it long-scorned.

Introduction

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and its founder, the Rev. Ian Paisley, have been controversial throughout Northern Ireland’s Troubles and its current post-conflict transition. In 1971 Paisley, then a young firebrand evangelical preacher, founded the party with substantial support from members of the Free Presbyterian Church, which he also had founded. Paisley, his party, and his church were often regarded as prophets of war, not of peace. In particular, the DUP had an ambiguous relationship with violence. Around the time of the DUP’s founding, Paisley and other members of the party were accused of shadowy dealings with loyalist paramilitaries. Although Paisley and the party publicly disassociated themselves from loyalist paramilitaries, suspicions about their true involvement remained. Further, Paisley’s fiery rhetoric was regarded as inciting paramilitaries to violence. The story of an imprisoned loyalist paramilitary bemoaning the day that he ever listened to “that man Paisley” has become apocryphal.

Paisley was once regarded as the politician who would always say “no” to compromise with Irish republicanism, particularly in the guise of Sinn
Féin. That has made the DUP’s decision to share power with Sinn Féin in the Northern Ireland Executive all the more stunning. Images of First Minister Paisley laughing and joking with Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin (who has admitted that he belonged to the Irish Republican Army (IRA)) are amongst the most surprising and iconic of the recent transitional period.

Throughout the Troubles the DUP was the “second” party of unionism, trailing the long-established Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) at the ballot box and in terms of respectability. It was the UUP that claimed to speak for “mainstream” unionism, whilst the DUP was said to appeal to the fringes. The DUP’s constituencies were the unlikely bedfellows of rural-dwelling evangelical Protestants and urban, working class loyalists – including, it was assumed, those who were involved in paramilitarism. It was the UUP that negotiated the 1998 Belfast Agreement, while the DUP walked out of the talks. The then leader of the UUP, David Trimble, was honoured with a Nobel Prize for his work at the negotiations, but at home in Northern Ireland Trimble and the UUP struggled to implement the Agreement. This was due in large part to the DUP, which effectively tapped in to unionist disaffection with the terms of the Agreement and the UUP’s inability to convince Sinn Féin to deliver on IRA decommissioning. During most of this time the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended and the region was ruled directly from Westminster. DUP discourses about violence were prominent throughout this transitional period, when it overtook the UUP as the leading unionist party in terms of electoral success and respectability. Indeed, the DUP now confidently describes itself as the mainstream unionist party and its current leader, Peter Robinson, has made overtures to the UUP about forming some sort of united unionist party or movement.

This means that the way the DUP has talked and continues to talk about violence is significant. The party’s discourses about violence can be placed into two broad categories: denouncing and denying. On the one hand, the DUP denounce republican paramilitaries for initiating and perpetuating the armed struggle, which the DUP regards as illegitimate. This includes a consistent linking of Sinn Féin with the IRA. Prior to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2007, it included the claim that unionists should not share power with Sinn Féin until the IRA had decommissioned. Without IRA decommissioning, Sinn Féin would remain “unreconstructed terrorists.” On the other hand, the DUP denounced loyalist paramilitaries for taking up arms, whilst at the same time denying that their party or their party’s rhetoric had any impact upon loyalist paramilitaries. Loyalist paramilitaries often were reduced to criminals or thugs.
What meaning do these discourses have in what is once again being hailed as a “new Northern Ireland,” where Paisley shared tea and a power-sharing executive with McGuinness? This paper argues that there are direct relationships between the DUP discourses about violence and the party’s identity, its electoral success, and the outworking of the peace process. Drawing on narrative analysis of DUP discourses recorded in Northern Ireland’s largest unionist newspaper, the *News Letter* (1998-2006), it explores those relationships. The first part of this paper outlines how we gathered, categorised and analysed DUP discourses about violence, including the relationship of those discourses to the party’s identity and its electoral success. Here, we argue that the DUP’s use of discourses denouncing republican violence has allowed it to retain its identity as the “true” loyalist party, and the most able defender of the union with Great Britain. This was important in a context in which it appeared that the UUP was impotent to lead unionists and protect their interests. When the DUP gradually began to moderate some of its policies on power-sharing, those discourses worked as a “smokescreen” or a cover as it took previously undreamed of positions. The DUP could be said to have adopted the UUP’s positions and its policies, but it was able to present itself as uncompromising on its core principles.

In the second part of the paper, we consider how these discourses may continue to impact on Northern Ireland’s political transition. It is not clear how the DUP’s historic condemnation of Sinn Féin and the illegitimacy of the IRA’s armed struggle will affect their relationships in the power-sharing executive – and thus their ability to govern Northern Ireland effectively. Paisley and McGuinness developed what appeared to be a warm and effective working relationship, surprising almost everyone. It is not clear what sort of relationship McGuinness will have with Paisley’s successor as First Minister, Robinson. It will take time for trust to develop between the parties. It also is not clear if the DUP has developed effective, new discourses to explain its participation in the Executive to its erstwhile followers. With the DUP sniping at its heels, the UUP failed in this regard. The DUP now has a hardline (if smaller) rival, Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), sniping at its heels. Also, it is possible that discourses that disassociate the DUP from loyalist paramilitarism may absolve their party – and the wider unionist community – from recognising and addressing their own ambiguous attitudes about violence. In such a situation, the challenges of integrating former loyalist paramilitaries in society may not be adequately addressed. The DUP’s discourses about violence may continue to haunt the party as it attempts to participate in a transition to peace.
Analysing DUP Discourses

This analysis is part of a wider project on the DUP, which includes considering its public discourses and the presentation of the party in the public sphere. There are a number of sources that could be used for this analysis, including party statements, press releases, policy documents, the party’s email and text messaging services, and so on. However, we were interested in not merely how the DUP wishes to present itself (which would presumably be reflected in its own materials), but in how the party is presented in the media. An analysis of all media outlets would have been beyond the scope of this project, so we chose to focus on the presentation of the party in Northern Ireland’s largest unionist newspaper, the News Letter. This can be justified on the following grounds. First, newspaper reports generally reproduce longer and more substantial quotations from politicians and more in-depth analysis than would be expected on television news programmes. We wished to analyse substantial discourses, not sound bites. Second, the News Letter is widely recognized as the region’s leading unionist newspaper and would be likely to contain substantial information about the DUP. The News Letter is used by unionist politicians as a platform for their electoral bids and spreading their political positions. Indeed, DUP members frequently write letters to the editor and op-ed pieces. It also is interesting that the editorial tone of the News Letter changed between 1998 and 2006, synchronising its sympathies with whichever unionist party was in power. Finally, the letters to the editor allowed us insight into what the unionist community was thinking and feeling towards the DUP and political events. Although letters to the editor may be unrepresentative or impressionistic (as would be the comments of callers on phone-in radio programmes, or political chat websites such as Slugger O’Toole) they provide interesting contextual information about some of the emotions and events that surrounded the articulation of the DUP’s discourses.

The data from the News Letter was gathered using the Lexus Nexus search engine and the newspaper’s website. The keyword used for the search engine was “DUP.” Rankin carried out this aspect of the research, June-December 2006. These articles, with dates ranging from January 1998-December 2006, amounted to nearly 8,000. Ganiel read each article chronologically, identifying “codes” for themes which were relevant to the research questions about the wider project on the DUP. For the purpose of this paper, the codes which were relevant were “paramilitarism,” and “security and policing.”2 Re-reading the codes that corresponded with these broad themes, we identified the dominant DUP discourses about violence.
These will come as no surprise to followers of Northern Ireland politics, as they are discourses that have been prominent in the public sphere. When it came to republican violence, the party denounced violence by focusing on the immorality of “terrorists” (Sinn Féin) in government and the lack of decommissioning. When it came to loyalist violence, the DUP cast paramilitaries in the role of deviants who do not represent the unionist community, or as criminals. It should be stated, however, that there was a notable lack of discourses about loyalist paramilitaries. Whilst the IRA were denounced nearly every day, discourses about loyalist paramilitaries were infrequent and usually prompted by specific events, such as feuding amongst rival loyalist groups.

It is worth recording some examples of these discourses, so that their strength and vigour can be adequately grasped. The emotive nature of these words provides some insight into why, historically, Paisley and the DUP have been accused of inciting others to violence. As Northern Ireland continues its political transition, it is important to record, highlight and consider its occasionally harsh public discourses. This raises broader questions (which are beyond the scope of this article) about the role that such discourses play in political transitions, especially as parties and citizens adjust to new power relationships and political configurations. It also raises questions about why political parties continue to use such discourses. For instance, did the DUP continue to talk in such terms as a matter of principle, or because it was a strategy to overtake the UUP, or both? Or were there other reasons? Because of the nature of the data analysed in this article, we can only raise such questions, not answer them definitively. As such, the bulk of the following sections of this article are largely descriptive, and should be seen as part of a preliminary process of “making sense” of discourses about violence in post-conflict transitions.

*The Immorality of the Inclusion of Sinn Fein*

The DUP’s criticisms of Sinn Féin and the IRA are not new. The party’s discourses about “terrorists in government” are in continuation with what the party said for decades during the Troubles. This is an example from an article from 1998, shortly after the Belfast Agreement was approved in a referendum. The DUP, despite having opposed the agreement, decided to participate in the Assembly:
[Paisley said]: “I’m thinking of those that were maimed by his [Gerry Adams] cohorts. The families that were torn apart, the people that were smashed and turned into vegetables by IRA violence.”

Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness stared straight at Mr. Paisley and accused him of running away. “You refused to come into negotiations but you come trundling into this room now because you are afraid you are going to be left behind. But I’m afraid you’ve already been left behind.”

Peter Robinson shouted back at Mr. McGuinness, making loud reference to “your Semtex and Armalites” (News Letter, 2 July 1998)

Here, Paisley’s comments about “vegetables” and Robinson’s about “Semtex and Armalites” clearly identify Sinn Féin with the IRA. The fact that Robinson is described as shouting adds to the emotion of the words. In the following narrative, from before the agreement negotiations were completed, Robinson focuses on the immorality of even talking with Sinn Féin because of their association with the IRA. He argues that it is corrupt and obscene to even allow them to negotiate:

The [DUP] said the public was appalled at the “political corruption” and have no confidence in unionists who are attending the talks. … Deputy leader Peter Robinson said, “the responsibility for the corruption lies with the government and those parties that support the obscenity of trading with terrorists. … The Official Unionist leadership complain that Sinn Féin/IRA are active and involved in terrorist incidents yet it was the Official Unionist leadership that agreed to let them in without handing over their weapons and it is they who sit around the negotiating table with Adams, McGuinness and company in a few weeks if the Provos decide to return.” (News Letter, 24 February 1998)

Discourses such as this allowed the DUP to present the inclusion of Sinn Féin in talks and later in the Assembly as undemocratic and morally wrong. Indeed, the religiously devout amongst Paisley’s followers might even interpret these discourses to mean that sharing government with Sinn Féin would be against God’s will. Such discourses played well in a Northern Ireland in which Protestants increasingly believed that Catholics had benefited from the agreement, whilst Protestants had not (Mitchell, 2006, p. 32-33). This raises questions about whether people speaking for the DUP truly believed that it was immoral to include Sinn Féin in government, or
whether they saw an electoral advantage in criticising the UUP for compromising with Sinn Féin, or both.

The Lack of Decommissioning

When the IRA failed to decommission within two years of the Belfast Agreement (as had been suggested, though not required, in the negotiations and agreement), the DUP accused the UUP of being soft of terrorism. The DUP framed its discourses about decommissioning as a matter of trust: Sinn Féin and the IRA could not be trusted because the IRA had not verifiably decommissioned and the UUP could not be trusted because they had not negotiated a deal that required decommissioning. The UUP was presented as giving concession after concession to the IRA, with the IRA using its hidden caches of guns as leverage in negotiations. Even when the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) confirmed that the IRA had completed acts of decommissioning on several occasions, the DUP questioned the trustworthiness of those statements.

For example, the IRA announced an act of decommissioning in October 2003 and this was verified by retired Canadian general John de Chastalain. However, when de Chastalain’s press conference did not provide substantial or, in particular, photographic detail of what he actually witnessed, the DUP immediately cast doubt on what had happened and criticised the UUP and the IRA. The comments made by Paisley in reaction to this press conference epitomise this discourse:

“The IRA has made the UUP look ridiculous with this pathetic effort. … What on earth was David Trimble talking to Gerry Adams about? This is a demonstration of the most inept form of negotiation by the UUP imaginable. They are utterly unfit to represent unionism. Today indicated that nothing has changed in the IRA. Once again they are willing to milk the process for all they can get and make only weasel words and a hidden gesture. There is no evidence whatsoever of any reduction in the IRA capacity. This is yet another con.” Mr. Paisley said the language used by Gerry Adams and the IRA failed to state that the war is over or the IRA would disband. (News Letter, 22 October 2003)

Further on in this same report, Paisley criticises the “language used by Gerry Adams and the IRA” (note again the direct connection made between Sinn Féin and terrorism) for failing to explicitly state that “the war is over”. This is a neat reflection of the fact that opposing parties have been acutely aware of each other’s discourse throughout the conflict and peace process.
As mentioned above, the question of decommissioning became a crucial issue of debate and competition within unionism. The DUP’s refusal to accept the IMC’s word on IRA decommissioning was not just a source of objection to the power-sharing Executive and Sinn Féin’s position in it; it was also a strong point of contention with (and a good means of attracting votes away from) the UUP. Paisley questioned the trustworthiness and the competence of the UUP in this speech to launch the 2003 Assembly election campaign. Once again he claimed that concessions had been delivered to the IRA, and played on unionist concerns about all-Ireland structures and the possibility that Sinn Féin’s Gerry Kelly (a former IRA prisoner) could be Minister for Policing and Justice:

This election offers a simple choice. Four more years of Trimble-delivered concessions to Sinn Féin/IRA or the opportunity to negotiate a new and fair deal that unionists as well as nationalists can support. This election is an opportunity to deliver a verdict on what Trimble and the “Official Unionists” have done over the past five years. They signed up to a deal, which has delivered concessions to the IRA, not just on one day in 1998, but for every day since. The pain and betrayal felt by unionists at the Belfast Agreement has not passed with time but has intensified as the terrorists have made a mockery of the democratic system. The unionist community stands at a crossroads. One path leads to implementing the current Trimble/Adams deal, which will deliver permanent terrorist representation in government, galvanising the embryonic all-Ireland structures with Sinn Féin consent required for major political decisions and Gerry Kelly as minister for Policing and Justice. The other road is a new deal, a democratic deal. (News Letter, 23 October 2003)

The DUP’s discourses about the IRA’s lack of decommissioning changed over time. When the IRA began with acts of decommissioning, witnessed first by de Chastalain and later by the IMC, the DUP questioned the integrity of the witnesses and the lack of detail in their reports. During negotiations to restore the Assembly in December 2004, the DUP demanded photographic evidence of decommissioning, which was rejected by Sinn Féin as an attempt to humiliate the IRA. Any hopes that a deal could be salvaged were put on hold days later after the Northern Bank robbery in Belfast, which is believed to have been carried out by the IRA. The DUP also talked about Sinn Féin needing a “decontamination period” after decommissioning, to allow them to become “fit” for democratic government. When Methodist minister Harold Good and Catholic priest Fr Alec Reid were invited to
witness decommissioning, the DUP even doubted their testimonies, considering them naïve. However, by the time of the negotiations in October 2006 in St Andrews, the DUP seemed to equate Sinn Féin’s willingness to sign up to the Policing Board as “proof” of the IRA’s decommissioning. This is how Paisley explained his decision to go into government with Sinn Féin in May 2007:

“In politics as in life, it is a truism that no one can ever have 100% of what they desire. They must make a verdict when they believe they have achieved enough to move things forward.” The DUP leader said Sinn Féin’s acceptance of the rule of law at its ard fheis [annual convention] three months ago had met that test. “Support for all the institutions of policing has been a critical test that today has been met and pledged, word and deed. … Recognising the significance of that change from a community that for decades demonstrated hostility for policing has been critical in turning the corner.” (News Letter, 9 May 2007)

After years of denouncing claims of IRA decommissioning as inadequate, this is, undoubtedly, a significant change. But questions remain about whether unionists accept the DUP’s explanations for its decisions. In the quotation above, Paisley equated Sinn Féin’s recognition of the police with IRA decommissioning, allowing the party to claim that it had succeeded where the UUP failed. It is not clear whether this is enough to satisfy all of Paisley’s followers. The DUP has made little attempt to articulate sustained practical, moral or theological discourses to justify sharing power with Sinn Féin.

Denying: Loyalist Paramilitaries as Deviants and Criminals

Far fewer of the DUP’s discourses engaged directly with loyalist paramilitarism. Those that did were usually in response to direct accusations about DUP links to violence; or particular events such as loyalist feuds. The lack of discourses about loyalist violence as compared to the almost constant discourses denouncing the IRA is worth considering. The DUP developed discourses about the rising crime rate, blaming it on the implementation of the Belfast Agreement – particularly the scaling down of the police and army. However, noticeably absent from those discourses was any recognition that an increasing proportion of crime and violence was now carried out by loyalist – not republican – paramilitary groups.

The following response by Minister of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Jeffrey Donaldson, a former UUP MP who defected to the DUP in
opposition to the 1998 Agreement, appeared on the Letters page. He was responding to comments made by the UUP’s Dermot Nesbitt, who tried to equate the DUP with the IRA and accused Donaldson of socialising with Martin McGuinness:

Dermot’s case is based on his assertion that, at one point, he observed I was standing near a table where Martin McGuinness was seated with others, a kind of “proximity socialising”.

I did not speak with Martin McGuinness in the reception and, when I challenged Dermot on this point in a BBC Talkback interview, he withdrew his allegation that I was socialising with Mr McGuinness.

… In the Donegal debate, whilst I concentrated on exposing republican failure to end their terrorist activities, Mr Nesbitt continuously attacked the DUP and at one point, rather pathetically, sought to equate the DUP with the IRA. To borrow a phrase, it was rather like being savaged by a “dead sheep”. It is becoming absolutely clear that, having lost the support and trust of the unionist community, people like Dermot seem determined to prevent the DUP from delivering a fair deal for unionism as it would only expose his past failings. After all, it was Dermot who promised South Down unionists that he would not sit in government with any party with “guns under the table, on the table or outside the door”. He broke his word and became a government minister alongside Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brun without a single IRA bullet being decommissioned. (News Letter, 6 August. 2004)

Donaldson denies and dismisses Nesbitt’s accusations about DUP links with violence by equating them (quoting from the famous put-down by a British Labour Party MP of his Conservative counterpart in Westminster) to “being savaged by a dead sheep.” He then goes on to draw his argument back to an accusation against the UUP, once again blaming the UUP for the IRA’s lack of decommissioning.

On occasion, the DUP has condemned loyalist paramilitaries. In this example from August 2005, during a feud between the Loyalist Volunteer Force and the Ulster Volunteer Force, the DUP MLA, Edwin Poots, describes loyalist paramilitaries as criminals who were oppressing their own people:

Loyalist paramilitaries claim to exist because of the republican threat against their community, but the reality is that people in the loyalist community are living in fear not from their traditional enemy but from people within their own community. The ongoing feud within elements of loyalism is causing huge damage and demoralising the unionist
community. For decades republicans have attacked and killed thousands of Protestants, but today there is a clear reality that Protestants could be attacked by so-called loyalists as well as republicans. The murder of four Protestants, by these so-called loyalists, has caused dismay and has totally demoralised the Protestant community.

Poots goes on to say that loyalist paramilitaries were now doing the work of the IRA by unleashing misery on their communities:

Why does the IRA need to continue their campaign of terrorism when so-called loyalists will do the job for them? ... The current campaign is not about defending Ulster. It has more to do with protection money, extortion and drug dealing. While the IRA are using their guns to squeeze concession after concession out of the British government, loyalists have turned their guns on themselves and have turned to criminality, extortion and drug dealing. As a public representative I appeal to these so-called loyalists who are oppressing the Protestant community to get off the backs of your own people. Instead, get involved in restoring normality to deprived Protestant areas and divert your energy to setting up programmes that will provide a better future for your children. (News Letter, 24 August 2005)

Paisley responded in a similar way to loyalist attacks on Catholic property in his constituency:

“My view on the attacks is a simple one. ... There are people in Ballymena who know who are doing this and they should be supporting the police and getting the PSNI on the job of bringing these people to order. These attacks have been universally condemned by all law abiding people in Ballymena.” Mr Paisley claimed there had also been a series of attacks on Evangelical and Protestant churches in the Province and said a window was smashed at his own church in recent days. He added: “On both sides there is this cancer and the only way it can be fought is by the people who know who is responsible. There are people in Ballymena who know who those people are. They don’t come in the middle of the night and go away in the middle of the night. They are people living in the area. ... They should desist at once. They have no place in the community whatsoever. If they think they can speak for the people of Ballymena then they should stand for election and see what kind of response they get.” (News Letter, 31 August 2005)
Paisley uses characteristically strong words: “they have no place in the community whatsoever.” The earlier comments from Poots dismiss loyalist paramilitaries as criminals who are terrorising their own people, rather than “defending Ulster.” Over the years, the DUP have consistently denied the legitimacy of loyalist paramilitary violence – as well as the possible involvement of party members in it. This has allowed the DUP to present itself as a party with “clean hands”, democratic and morally fit to exercise power. However, there are those who contend that the DUP has not satisfactorily explained its former links with paramilitaries (Brewer and Higgins, 1998; Mitchel, 2003; Moloney, 2008). Further, reducing loyalist paramilitaries to criminals and thugs may absolve the party and the unionist community from facing up to the role loyalist paramilitaries have played over the years.

Identity and Discourses about Violence

Since its inception in 1971, there have been two major strands in the DUP’s identity: loyalism and evangelicalism. The loyalist strand emphasises the DUP’s identity as a tough, straight-talking party tenaciously clinging to the link with Great Britain. It will not “sell out” at any cost, unlike the “softer” UUP. Until it overtook the UUP in the 2003 Assembly elections, this strand made the DUP appear as if it was on the edge – a party of protest that was the brash, vocal, “thought police” of unionism, as Jackson (1999) has put it. The evangelical strand emphasises the DUP’s identity as righteous and morally trustworthy (Mitchel, 2003, p. 171-212; Bruce, 1986, 2007; Smyth, 1986). Free Presbyterians and other evangelicals remain over-represented in the ranks of party representatives (Mitchell, 2008a; Bruce, 2007; Ganiel, 2006; Southern 2005).

The appeal to the party’s evangelical identity can be seen below in the way Paisley draws on Biblical themes to denounce the immorality of Sinn Féin and unionists who did business with them. The colourful language about weapons and genocide, and the venue at which it was spoken, an Independent Orange Order demonstration in Portglenone in 2001, appeals to the party’s loyalist identity:

To vote for taking into the Executive of Northern Ireland the Roman Catholic IRA/Sinn Féin with all their weaponry carefully preserved for the genocide of the next Protestant generation, is an act of darkest treason. Yet, Orangemen in the Assembly cheered after they had defeated their brother-Orangemen and fellow Protestants by joining ranks with the political representatives of the IRA murderers, thus
succeeding in that Iscariot treachery. Today, those same Orangemen, besashed, will sport themselves as defenders of the Faith and maintainers of the Union. A return to the basic principles of Orangeism is imperative. (News Letter, 13 July 2001)

As in Paisley’s address above, discourses about the immorality of terrorists in government often included religious overtones, including the idea that the IRA should not only decommission their weapons, but that they should “repent” before Sinn Féin should be allowed to participate in government. Perhaps the most famous of these was Paisley’s 2004 “sackcloth and ashes” speech to party supporters in Ballymena. Here is an example from an article describing criticism of the speech:

Ian Paisley yesterday brushed aside the “delicate” nature of the peace talks, when he reminded republicans that they were not the only ones who had suffered throughout the Troubles.

The DUP leader decided to ditch the diplomatic approach and expressed his inner feelings, when he told reporters in Downing Street that he stuck by comments he had made last weekend to party members – that the IRA should be humiliated and made “to wear sackcloth and ashes” for their crimes.

… “There is no excuse for what they (the IRA) did,” the DUP leader said. ‘Every day the security forces have to wear sackcloth and ashes … They have to do that – that is all right for the security forces (according to republicans). But as for us, we are immune to it – that is their (republicans) attitude.” (News Letter, 1 December 2004)

Discourses such as these have allowed the DUP to present itself as remaining true to both the evangelical and loyalist strands of its identity.

**Relationship between Discourses and Electoral Success**

It is important that the DUP seems to remain true to its identity. This allows the party to present itself as vigilant and trustworthy, at the same time providing security as it makes changes that – on the surface – do not reflect its traditional loyalist and evangelical identities (Ganiel and Dixon, 2008; Ganiel, 2007). For instance, even before it agreed to share the Assembly Executive with Sinn Féin in 2007, the DUP had committed itself to power sharing and had worked with Sinn Féin at other levels of government. Beyond its tough discourses about violence, the party utilised other narratives to accomplish this. For example, the party has consistently
claimed it opposes the Belfast Agreement. So first, it justified its participation in institutions set up by the agreement on the grounds that they would destroy the agreement. Then, they justified their participation by saying that if they were the largest party, they would “re-negotiate” the agreement and get a new, “fair deal” for unionism. Now, by referring to the points agreed during negotiations at St Andrews in 2006 as “the St Andrews Agreement”, the DUP can claim that it has done just what it said (Ganiel, 2007).

Such discursive tricks have allowed the DUP to retain its appeal to traditional loyalists and evangelicals and to tap into widespread Protestant dissatisfaction with the Belfast Agreement. At the same time, the gradual shift of their policies in a more UUP-like direction has attracted moderate unionist voters. Tough discourses about violence and the agreement have provided a smokescreen for significant policy changes. These have been accompanied by discourses that contrast the DUP’s tough stance with that of the supposedly weak UUP. This can be seen in the following narrative from MLA Norah Beare, who criticised the UUP’s willingness to sit in government with former paramilitaries. This statement is from June 2006, just a few months before the St Andrews deal:

I fail to see how any unionist worth his salt could issue a statement on restoring devolved government but make no mention of the obstacle created by paramilitary and criminal activity … I speak to many people and I know that they share my party’s desire to get down to sorting out the bread and butter issues for ourselves […] but they also want us to make sure we get the basics right so we have a government which is truly democratic.

They do not want to go back to the old Ulster Unionist tactics of bowing the knee to republicans, entering a government prematurely, discovering republicans have still not delivered and then being forced to go back to square one and being no better off. (Beare, 20 June 2006)

Of course, words alone do not explain the DUP’s electoral success. The DUP has a much stronger grassroots presence than the UUP, and individual ministers are often regarded as hard-working on bread and butter issues. The UUP has had its own internal problems, including bitter divisions that often left the party paralysed. And the IRA itself might even be considered a key player in the DUP’s electoral success, as its ambiguity about decommissioning played into the party’s hands (Moloney, 2008; Bruce, 2007; Farrington, 2006).
That said, the question remains whether the words that have helped propel the DUP to electoral success will come back to haunt them now that they must exercise power. At a basic level, traditional loyalists and evangelicals may feel betrayed by images of Paisley and McGuinness in cosy collaboration. It is possible that the DUP could lose those voters. In December 2007 a group calling itself Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) was launched. This grouping, which claims branches in 12 of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland, initially described itself as a movement, not a party, and is led by former DUP member and current MEP Jim Allister. Allister resigned from the DUP in protest after its decision to sit in government with Sinn Féin. In his statement announcing the launch of TUV, Allister (2007) said: “TUV will occupy the traditional unionist ground so wantonly abandoned by others for the sake of office.” TUV contested a by-election in Dromore in 2008, splitting the unionist vote and paving the way for a UUP victory. Allister remains the most visible and vocal public critic of changes in DUP policy. Similarly, a group calling itself Concerned Free Presbyterians was established after Paisley entered government with Sinn Féin. They claimed that Paisley’s decision had compromised his Christian witness, and eventually Paisley agreed not to put himself forward for re-election as Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church – a position he had held since its inception. Further, the Grand Chaplain of the Orange Order and a prominent evangelical within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Rev. Stephen Dickinson, issued a statement in support of TUV (Dickinson 2007). The next part of the paper considers in more detail how the DUP’s discourses about violence may impact on the political transition.

Discourses about Violence and Political Transition

With the DUP and Sinn Féin now sharing power in the Assembly, it may be tempting to look at the DUP’s discourses about violence and ask, “so what?” The past is the past, words are only words, and now it is time to move on. But to do so would be to fail to raise wider questions about issues that it may be necessary to address in post-conflict, transitional societies, such as relationship-building, truth recovery and reconciliation, and re-integrating ex-combatants into society. It also is not certain if the DUP needs, or has, alternative discourses to replace their previous discourses about violence.

First, it is not clear how the DUP’s harsh words about Sinn Féin and the illegitimacy of the IRA will affect their relationships in the Executive. Many of the DUP’s discourses about IRA violence conveyed a lack of trust.
Could the IRA be trusted to stop killing people? Could people associated with the IRA be trusted to govern democratically? Does Sinn Féin need a “decontamination period”? These discourses not only reflect a lack of trust by members of the DUP, but also reflect attitudes that are present at the unionist grassroots. The DUP and Sinn Féin are now sharing government, but it is unlikely that trust has developed overnight. Further research on political parties in Northern Ireland might concentrate on how trust was built between these parties to the extent that they agreed to enter into government. It also is worth considering further steps that might be taken to build trust. The DUP’s emotive discourses about IRA violence should also serve to remind us that people at the grassroots – especially unionists who have lost loved ones to IRA violence – may still not trust Sinn Féin or the IRA. Accordingly, grassroots confidence building measures should be considered.

Second, it is not clear that the DUP has convincing discourses to explain to its constituencies its change in direction. Thus far, the party has justified its decision to share power in the Executive by appealing to “democratic” principles and claiming that Sinn Féin’s recognition of the police can be equated to making the IRA “go away.” This can be seen in the following narrative from MLA Mervyn Storey, from June 2006. In advance of the St Andrews negotiations, Storey was explaining what it would take for the DUP to share power with Sinn Féin:

as desirable as devolution is, it must be rebuilt upon solid foundations. Previous attempts to establish devolution in the Province have failed. Why? Because basic fundamentals like a solid, unshakable democratic footing and accountability were missing … [no other democratic country in the world] would tolerate the presence of the associates of unreconstructed terrorists and gangsters within their government.

The simple and straightforward standard that all those wishing to wield power within a devolved administration in Northern Ireland should be demonstrably committed to solely peaceful and democratic methods is not one made up by the Democratic Unionist Party. It is universal … We know where we want to get to – democratic devolution. There is now nothing left to negotiate. Parties either sign up to the basic standards of democracy and abide by them or there can be no place in any Executive for them. (*News Letter*, 8 June 2006)

A second way that Paisley and his wife have used to justify the DUP’s decision is to appeal to Paisley’s authority as a man of God. This discourse has not been dominant in the secular public sphere of newspapers and other media, but has surfaced in the Free Presbyterian magazine the

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Revivalist. Moloney (2008, p. 502-503) cites an editorial in the May 2007 issue of the magazine which claims that Paisley “was God’s ‘specially anointed’ leader,” and drew on that authority in his political decisions. In her column in the same issue, Paisley’s wife Eileen wrote: “Like the Israelites of old treated Moses so they treat today’s God-anointed leader. They refuse to believe that God is already working in the most unexpected places and in the hearts of the most unexpected people. Again, like the Israelites, they prefer to remain in the wilderness of the past than move into the promised land of a better and happier future” (quoted in Moloney, 2008, p. 503).

That said, it is not certain that either of these discourses have won the hearts and minds of dissatisfied unionists. Indeed, there have been rumblings from the unionist grassroots that people were disappointed that Paisley and McGuinness seemed to be enjoying each other’s company so much as they acted out their duties as First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The existence of TUV and Concerned Free Presbyterians indicate that the DUP’s discourses have not been entirely effective. Further research on TUV and Concerned Free Presbyterians could attempt to gauge the depth and breadth of unionist opposition to DUP-Sinn Féin power-sharing.

Third, the DUP’s denial about its relationship with loyalist paramilitaries could have implications for truth recovery and reconciliation. Most of the biographies of Paisley or analyses of the DUP from the 1980s and 1990s consider the question of the party’s relationship with loyalist violence (Bruce, 1986, 2007; Moloney and Pollak, 1986; Smyth, 1987; Cooke, 1996; Moloney, 2008). All acknowledge at least some links, although Bruce (1986, 2001) downplays them. Bruce’s (2007) later work on Paisley is even more strident in its defence of Paisley’s non-violent credentials. But Moloney (2008), Brewer and Higgins (1998) and Mitchel (2003) claim that, at the very least, Paisley’s anti-Catholic rhetoric stirred some paramilitaries to violence. More recently, O’Callaghan and O’Donnell’s (2006) analysis of materials from the Public Records Office, Northern Ireland, demonstrates that in the mid-60s, the Royal Ulster Constabulary’s Inspector General believed that what was called in the documents the “Paisleyite Movement” consisted of the following groups: the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee, the Ulster Protestant Volunteer Division, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Corps, the Ulster Protestant Action Defence Committee and the Ulster Volunteer Force. O’Callaghan and O’Donnell argue that the information in these documents contributed to the decision to ban the UVF at the end of 1966. Although this predates the formation of the DUP, Paisley’s very personal involvement with these groups bears consideration. It is likely that many nationalists do not believe the denials of
Paisley and the DUP about their involvement with or responsibility for loyalist violence. Therefore, it is worth asking to what extent should public knowledge about Paisley and the DUP’s relationship with violent groups be part of a “truth recovery” process in Northern Ireland? Of course, this should be set in the context of the violence of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups and the security forces. At this stage, it is not clear what shape Northern Ireland’s truth recovery process will take, so it is also worth considering how a lack of truth recovery may impact on the potential reconciliation of people from groups with violent histories – including Sinn Féin and the DUP.

Fourth, the DUP’s denial of involvement with paramilitaries, coupled with their harsh condemnation of their current activities, raises questions about the integration of ex-combatants into society (See also Mitchell, 2008b). DUP discourses about loyalist paramilitaries have tended to cast them as people who are outside of the pale, not worthy of inclusion in the community. (Occasionally, loyalist paramilitaries are deemed worthy to re-enter the unionist fold if they become Christians by being “born again” or “saved.”) These discourses may reflect a wider unionist attitude about violence, which focuses blame on a select few. This absolves the rest of the community from responsibility for violence, brushing over ambiguities about turning a blind eye to tacit support for violence, including not only terrorist atrocities and punishment beatings, but the violence associated with some Orange parades. In such a situation, the challenges of integrating former loyalist paramilitaries in society may not be adequately addressed. For instance, it is not clear if or to what extent this item is even on the DUP’s agenda.

The material presented in this paper should be seen as part of a preliminary process of documenting hardline discourses about violence during Northern Ireland’s peace process. It aims to raise questions about the appropriateness of such discourses as Northern Ireland transitions from physical violence to peace. It has demonstrated that the DUP has used discourses about violence to secure its own identity as a party and to overtake the UUP in electoral terms. But using discourses about violence in these ways means that the party now faces challenges in working political institutions with people it has spent years denouncing – and in justifying this change to its supporters. The party also faces challenges in coming to terms with violence in its own past and that of the unionist community. This serves as reminder that even as power-sharing is implemented, issues and attitudes around violence remain unresolved and unaddressed. Such ambivalence about violence is common in transitional societies. This ambivalence may
hinder the progress of peace building. With that in mind, political parties and other policy makers would do well to consider the public impact of continued violent discourses.

Endnotes

* We are grateful to Katy Hayward and Catherine O’Donnell for their organisation of the Peace Lines conference in Dublin in June 2007, and for the helpful comments of those who participated.

1 It is worth initially clarifying the terms “unionism” and “loyalism.” Unionism is an umbrella term for the population of people in Northern Ireland who favour retaining the union with Great Britain. The overwhelming majority identify with the Protestant religious tradition. “Loyalism” generally refers to a population of unionists who are considered more “extreme” or “hardline” about their loyalty to Great Britain. See Todd (1987) for a fuller explanation.

2 Other codes included: peace process, the surrender process, the delegitimisation of Trimble and the UUP, morality, the security threat, victimisation, renegotiation, the Assembly, cross community relations, cultural issues, Jeffrey Donaldson (related to his transfer from the UUP), education, Europe, funding, gender, local politics, moral issues, “no” campaign, non-involvement in talks, North/South dimension, parading, party growth, party member activity, power-sharing, protest, religion and politics, social/economic issues, unionist disunity, and US involvement. The coded data is stored at the Belfast campus of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.

3 “Official Unionist” is another name for the Ulster Unionist Party.

4 “Provos” is short for the “Provisional IRA.”

5 The Independent Orange Order is a fraternal organisation for Protestants. It is smaller than the main Orange Order, from which it separated near the beginning of the last century. Both groups are exclusively Protestant and their main activity is organising parades throughout the summer months. The largest parades are on the 12th of July and commemorate the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over a Catholic force at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. These parades are often contentious, especially if they pass through predominantly Catholic areas.

6 The Concerned Free Presbyterians group had an interactive website which disseminated their criticisms of Paisley and the DUP. But after Paisley’s decision to step down in September 2007, the content of the site was taken
down. Now the visitors are greeted with the message: “This website has now been ‘put beyond use’.” <http:www.concernedfreepresbyterians.com> (December 2007). We downloaded and saved electronically a substantial portion of the postings on the website before they were removed.

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“FAITH, CROWN AND STATE”: CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES WITHIN THE ORANGE ORDER IN NORTHERN IRELAND

James W. McAuley and Jon Tonge

Abstract

Despite a decline in membership in recent decades the Orange Order remains one of the largest and most significant organisations within civil society in Northern Ireland, representing a significant proportion of the Protestant population. The Orange Order claims a moral and political rationale to opposition to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and many of the political consequences that have followed. Drawing upon a large membership survey of the Orange institution (the first such survey ever undertaken), and abetted by in-depth semi-structured interviews, this paper examines core political and social attitudes of Orange Order members in a post-conflict environment. It identifies core discourses on offer within Orangeism, and how these structure responses to contemporary events. It concludes that the maintenance of “traditional” discourses within the Orange Order (seen by its critics as a barrier to the modernisation of unionism) may be key to its endurance against the odds in a changing political context and increasingly secularized world.

Introduction

Orangemen interpret the Boyne as the conclusive victory of the Protestant Reformation in the British Isles. Their incessant marching is to demonstrate that all Protestants, but particularly those who live in Northern Ireland, must maintain a constant vigil against Rome. (Boyd, 1995, p. 60)

If being British and wanting to live under the Union Jack still means as much to the people of Northern Ireland as it did for their forefathers, then they will have to make the same determined stand. (Orange Standard, May 2007)

This paper highlights contemporary political ideologies and discourses within Orangeism and in particular, considers how it has positioned itself through political and cultural reactions to the peace process in Ireland. The Orange Order (correctly entitled the Loyal Orange Institution) is a large and complex voluntary, communal organisation. While it once claimed a
membership of up to 120,000 (one in three of all Protestant males in Northern Ireland) the current strength of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland is estimated at around forty thousand members (Stevenson et al., 2007, p. 110). For many Protestants it continues to offer a central focus for social life and, although its political importance has declined drastically in recent decades, it retains an important cultural and religious influence in many parts of Northern Ireland. This paper identifies crucial political alignments and realignments within Orangeism that have taken place in recent years.

In so doing, this paper draws directly upon public declarations and texts produced by the Orange Order (mainly taken from the monthly publication, Orange Standard) and on material drawn from interviews with members. Within this, two important bands of discourse need to be recognised. First, those that contain “internal” messages; in many ways Orangeism represents a classic discourse community, representing a group of people, “who share common ideologies, and common ways of speaking about things” (Little et al., 2003, p. 73). Second, the Orange Order also projects “external” messages that seek to frame and position the Order within distinct moral, social, and political arenas of life.

Beyond this, we then seek identity several, sometimes overlapping, discourses within contemporary Orangeism that give it political expression. We identify those discourses that unite Orangeism and give its membership a sense of identity and continuity. We then highlight political and cultural discourses that give the Orange Order much of its contemporary dynamic. Finally, we suggest how these discourses are drawn upon to construct visions of the future within Orangeism. To begin, however, we outline the collective and organisational bases of the Orange Order within which such discourses are formed.

Collective Identity and the Orange Order

The Origins of the Orange Order

The origins of Orangeism rest in the agrarian conflict of late eighteenth century Ulster and in sectarian conflict that emerged in and around County Armagh (Smyth, 1998). By far the most detailed (and best) account of the period remains Gibbon (1972), who clearly outlines how both Protestant and Catholic peasants organised in opposition, through agrarian secret societies, which became manifest in a series of violent confrontations. As a result,
Protestants formed the Orange Order in 1795 after a period of prolonged confrontation (Roberts, 1971) the grouping taking its name from William of Orange who defeated the Catholic King James II (Senior, 1966).

It developed structures and organisation that mirrored the Freemasons (Dewar et al., 1967) and as a symbol of its collective solidarity the Order began to organise public meetings (the first Boyne commemoration parade taking place in July 1796). It remained largely rural-based, often organized in direct opposition to the rise of the nationalist United Irishmen; indeed Orangemen were armed and used by the government to militarily confront them. The Order also found growing support from the Protestant gentry, which noted the progress of Orangeism, “then gave support, finally took over and reorganized the movement, and used it as an instrument to preserve Protestant ascendancy” (McCaffrey, 1967, p. 144).

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s Orangeism “expanded rapidly in the face of resurgent nationalism” (Mitchel, 2003, p. 135) and by the late 1880s the Orange Institution had become well established in Ulster’s growing urban centres, with Belfast’s expanding bourgeoisie displaying an ever-increasingly involvement in its organization. This was given further momentum through political resistance to the Home Rule movement. Intensified political agitation meant that Britain was forced to consider the granting of some limited self-government to Ireland – “Home Rule”. Protestants became increasingly fearful of political dominance by a Catholic majority. As Jackson (2001, p. 119) suggests, the “significance of the Orange Order in terms of the ideological and institutional groundwork for Unionism can hardly be overstated”.

Structures and Activities of the Orange Order

As a result, Orange Order membership expanded rapidly, playing a central role as Protestant Ulster sought to formulate coherent political opposition to reflect their perceived social, cultural and religious distance from the rest of the island, as “resistance to Home Rule injected the Order with new life and enabled it to recruit all classes to its ranks” (Crawford, 1987, p. 29). The organisation structures of Orangeism that developed at that time largely remain in place today. Membership of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland is organised into a hierarchal pyramid structure. At the base are about 1,400 Private Lodges to which every member must belong (Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 2008). The style of these varies considerably, “some being fervently evangelical, others little more than social drinking clubs” (Mitchel, 2003, p. 137). Within the broad structure of the Order,
private lodges elect representatives to District Lodges, which in turn send representatives to the County Lodge level. There are 12 County Grand Lodges representing Antrim, Armagh, Belfast, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Leitrim, City of Londonderry, Londonderry County, Monaghan and Tyrone, which then elect representatives to the governing body of the organisation, with 300 representatives (Bryan, 2000, p. 97–102; Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 2008).

Today the Orange Order is perhaps best known for its parading tradition, and the public demonstration of membership on the streets (Bryan, 2000). By far the most prominent, are the set of parades held annually on or around the Twelfth of July, to commemorate the victories of King William III (William of Orange) in the religious wars of the late seventeenth century (Elliott and Flackes, 1999, p. 381). In July 2007, for example, tens of thousands of members marched to 20 venues across Northern Ireland. In Belfast, the parade consisted of 134 lodges (including two from Scotland and one from Canada), supported by 69 marching bands and two floats (Belfast Telegraph, 13 July 2007).

Elsewhere, there were also smaller demonstrations in the Republic of Ireland and even reports that some members of the Irish Regiment serving in Basra had held their own demonstration (Rusk, 2007). More formally, the Order has an organised membership in Scotland (by far the largest outside of Ireland), England, Australia, New Zealand and Canada and the USA, as well as smaller groupings in countries such as Togo and Ghana (Harland-Jacobs, 2008; Patterson, 2008; Sweetman, 2000). These are all places where Orangeism found root on the back of emigration and Empire military service and active church representatives (Jess, 2007, p. 160).

**Discourse and Ideology**

This section of the paper considers how we can begin to understand the discourses that unite Orangeism and give its membership a sense of identity that is relevant to contemporary society. In particular, the interventions of Foucault, particularly through his argument that the subject is constructed through discourses of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977 and 1978) and that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1989, p. 49) have positioned contemporary debates around discourse within the social sciences.
The concept of discourse has developed across a multitude of disciplines (see Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990; Howarth, 2000; Parker, 2002; Vighi and Feldner, 2007) and has become increasingly contested and challenged (Hall 1996, 2006; Sutherland, 2005; Žižek, 2005). The approach advocated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 1987) which conceives “all objects of inquiry or knowledge as discursive” (Purvis and Hunt, 1993, p. 492) have further structured debates concerning the nature of political discourses. Within the parameters of this paper, we place ourselves in the camp that seeks to continue to link discourse with ideology. Here we recognise that discourses “enable, they constrain, and they constitute” (Storey, 2006, p. 101). And with regard to shared identification, such as is found within the Orangework, we subscribe to Doane’s (2006, p. 256) view that:

On the one hand, discourses shape the mental models, or “common sense” beliefs, through which individuals interpret social reality; on the other hand they collectively reinforce or transform ideologies.

**Official Discourses of Orangeism: Faith, Loyalty and State**

There are several, sometimes overlapping, discourses currently on offer within Orangeism. Here we classify these as: official discourses; discourses of continuity; political discourses; discourses of unity; and, discourses of cultural resistance. The official discourses framed by the Orange Order are most readily identified by the “resolutions” adopted annually at the Twelfth of July parades. These resolutions are categorised under three headings: faith, loyalty, and state. As Stevenson et al. (2007) explain, resolutions are: “addressed or “spoken to” at all demonstrations across Northern Ireland by invited Orangemen who hold positions relevant to the resolution (i.e. politicians for speeches on “state” and “loyalty”, clerics on “faith”) or members of the County level of the organization” (Stevenson et al., 2007, p. 110).

The resolutions around “faith” emphasise the claim to be a religious organization, and that its members should have “a sincere love for their heavenly Father” and that they should “make the Holy scriptures the rule of their faith and practice” (Smyth, 1995, p. 3). Orange membership also involves “an unambiguous rejection of the themes of the Roman Catholic Church” (Smyth, 2001, p. 128). The Order is “directly opposed to the ecumenical movement” (Orange Standard, July 1988), and those Protest churches involved in that movement, as “the naivety of ecumenical-minded
Protestants never ceases to amaze” (*Orange Standard*, June 2003). It continues to oppose the secularisation of Sunday, to promote the “traditional Ulster Sabbath” and to call for “Sunday observance” (*Orange Standard*, June 1999).

This emphasis on the religious role of the Order needs to be set in context. Religion remains a “key ethnic marker” in Northern Ireland (McGarry *et al.*, 1995, p. 212). For the Order the maintenance of the Union is central to the defence of Protestantism, and the defence of Protestantism is core to the defence of the Union. Hence, Orange Order membership is also an expression of political identity and support for unionism (McAuley and Tonge, 2007). The particular framing of this by the Orange Order can be seen directly in the other resolutions presented. The loyalty resolution in 2007, for example, highlighted the 25th anniversary of the liberation of the Falkland Islands. This was linked directly to the “sacrifice” of those 311 members of the Order who were killed during the Northern Ireland conflict. The final resolution around the state provided the most overtly political output stating that, “like many others within the unionist community, [Orangemen] share grave reservations about the presence of those in government whom we would not see as democrats in the accepted sense of the term” (cited in *News Letter*, 12 July 2007).

**Discourses of Continuity in the Orange Order**

Much of the strength of the Orange Order rests on an emphasis on cultural reproduction. This involves emphasis on continuity, both physically in terms of membership and in the reproduction of cultural memory. Joining is often a product of generational support for the Order and a communal sense of solidarity expressed through membership. Of those surveyed a large majority of members joining in the past twenty years did so for “family reasons” or because of “family traditions”. The following quotations from members discussing their reasons for joining, illustrate the point well:

> It was traditional, it was like sort of … very much family orientated … you know, sort of family blood. It was kind of the done thing, that when you came that age, you followed your fathers and your uncles and so forth (Interview AM01, Belfast).

> Family tradition, father, grandfather, grandmother, great grandfather, brothers, so [membership was] very much something that was within the family. It was very much a matter that my father had asked, “what
do you feel about joining the Institution?” I said, “well, I’ll give it some thought”. I knew that my grandfather was an Orangeman, and my grandmother was an Orangewoman. My great grandfather was an Orangeman. So, it was, it was part of my family heritage and also part of my culture of course (Interview AM02, Belfast).

It is important to recognise how, through these senses of tradition and longevity, Orange discourses relate to broader senses of unionist identity and are bound into a “grand cultural unionist narrative” (Porter, 1996, p. 87). Crucial within this process of self-identification are the ways in which collective memories are used to construct political identities and understandings. The reproduction of Orange discourses explains how members of the Order can best relate to the wider social and political world. Those memories, once brought to the fore, work to strengthen senses of identity (Norvick, 1999, p. 5). Several writers have, for example, firmly established the centrality of the Battle of the Somme in the formation of senses of loyalist identity (see Brown, 2007; Graham, 2004; Graham and Shirlow, 2002; Officer and Walker, 2000). Such constructed memories help determine the ways in which individuals formulate and secure their understandings of everyday life and how they connect to broader political collectives. Take the following extract from the Orange Standard (October 2006), which links the sacrifice in two World Wars directly to contemporary senses of loyalism and identity:

The people of Northern Ireland displayed their loyalty in Britain in two World wars, with great loss of life, through the sacrifice of its soldiers, sailors and airmen, and the 1,000- plus citizens of Belfast who died in the German air raids of 1941. … Northern Ireland Protestants have nothing to feel embarrassed about as far as their membership of the United Kingdom is concerned. They are as British as the people of England, Scotland and Wales, and that is the way it will remain for the foreseeable future.

Likewise, one of the resolutions at the 12th July demonstrations in 2008 highlighted the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele at the Somme campaign during the First World War, when the 36th Ulster Division sustained significant loss. As the Order expressed it, their “memory remains with us today and we pledge ourselves to remember those who gave their lives and hold their memory for future generations so that their loyalty, courage and sacrifice will never be forgotten” (cited in News Letter, 12 July 2007). Thus, Orange identities are framed and maintained by the strength of discourses that emphasise links to much broader communal political-cultural
memories, which in turn legitimise an identifiable set social and power relations within Northern Irish society.

**Political Discourses of Orangeism**

So while the Orange Order continues to project itself as “unashamedly Protestant and Unionist” (*Orange Standard*, October 1999) it is clear that from its inception the Order has been part of a broader formulation of political values, and a political dimension has “been part of its essence” (Storey, 2002, p. 64). As Roberts (1971, p. 269) put it:

The Order has never claimed that its political purposes and activities are unimportant, and the function of Orangeism as a creator and preserver of a complex political and social identity need not be regarded as a purely latent one. The motivation for many a member and leader has been political, not religious, and the political endeavours and successes of Orangeism may well be more apparent to non-members and enemies than any religious aspect.

Broadly, the political discourses of Orangeism are framed by the following worldview:

The Orangeman is at one a religious man and one concerned for the quality of life for people in the place where he lives. This is why there has always been in Orangeism the emphasis on religion and politics. In life there is no separation of the one from the other. It is inclusive of both, the spiritual and the practical, for the practical is the outworking of the spiritual in everyday living. As a man believeth so is he. We use “politics” in that wider sense for everything that matters in their lives from birth to death. It includes all that concerns people and politicians about how their country is governed, what they want to do with it and get from it. (*Orange Standard*, September 2003)

One member expressed this directly when he said: “the political background here is entirely different than anywhere else, because the politics here are not just about who’s best within the country; the politics here is, ‘do you want to be part of this country, ‘do you want to be part of that country?’” (Interview AM01). For many members, the question is one of balance between religious and political expression. Indeed, as Kennaway suggests, “the present generation of Ulster Protestants look at their religion through political eyes”, although he is critical of the fact that it is the former which has the greatest influence on the latter (Kennaway, 2006).

*Orangeism and the Ulster Unionist Party*

The traditional outlet for party political expression by Order members has been through the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Such links are longstanding. Indeed, the UUP developed directly from a meeting of the Orange Order, attempting to give the expression of Orange-Protestant-Unionist identity a more political direction, through the coherence attempt to
faith, crown and state

politicise the perceived difference of Ulster (Jackson, 1989; Walker, 1996). Following the formation of the Northern Ireland state, the Orange Order was instrumental in the UUP forging and maintaining its position of hegemony (Boulton, 1973; Kennaway, 2006) and Orange membership became obligatory for anyone aspiring to a position of leadership within the UUP.

A reciprocal relationship developed; the Order benefiting from members holding high political rank. Between 1921 and 1972 (when Northern Ireland came under direct rule from Westminster), all six Prime Ministers were members of the Order (Kaufmann, 2007; Millar, 2004, p. 19). Unionist politicians, especially at election time, presented themselves as key defenders of Protestantism and the Union, and drew directly on Orange mobilised support. Throughout much of the history of the Northern Ireland state, the UUP has looked to support from Orange Order to shore up its vote (with much success). Protestant-Unionism became the dominant discourse of the political ideology of the new Northern Ireland state as other social and political perspectives became marginalized. This ideology was reproduced through the Order itself, thus in the mid-1960s, for example, one leading Orangeman, the Reverend Ross was able to claim that:

We believe as Orangemen that our Order is the fabric of Northern Ireland. Without our great Order the social and political structure of the Six Counties would become flabby and anaemic. Orangeism is entwined with the very history of our Province. (Ross, 1964, p. 5)

While Orange Order membership has steadily declined over the past three decades, the organisation undoubtedly continues to hold a central position in the social world of many Protestants, orientating members and broader unionist reactions to political events. Thus, the Order continues to projects itself, “as a nerve that runs right through the heart of the Protestant community” (Orange Standard, August 2004). The formal relationship has changed noticeably in recent years, culminating in March 2005, when the Order announced it was breaking the alliance with the UUP, cutting directly political, religious and cultural bonds with Northern Ireland’s “establishment” party that had lasted for a century. While there were mixed views within the membership, the following is typical of those who supported the split:

Clearly you know, for decades it was aligned directly with the Ulster Unionist Party, until quite recently, I mean that’s something I think has benefited the Institution … Personally, I think it was long overdue, to break the link. I suppose the Orange Order was originally set up to protect the Protestant people, I mean that was one of its basic functions away back in the 18th century. So, I suppose, it had a certain
background in … you know where it probably aligned itself to one particular strong political party at the time. When the State was formed in the last century. But now the UUP doesn’t really speak for many in the Institution … I’d be more of a DUP man myself.

(Interview JM02, Belfast)

**Orangeism and the Peace Process**

The politics of Orangeism were brought into sharp relief by the peace process. Throughout the contemporary period, the leadership of the Orange Order, and much of its membership, have opposed the terms of the settlement brought about through the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (hereafter the Agreement), which they regard as part of an ongoing series of concessions designed to weaken unionist resistance to an all-Ireland and who remained convinced that the Agreement could not, “bring about a just and lasting peace” (Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 1998). Indeed, Martin Smyth, the former Unionist MP and ex-Grand Master recently claimed that the power-sharing Assembly, marked the: “erosion of democracy and … a sad decline in our national and international standards” (cited in McAdam, 12 July 2007).

By the time of the 2001 Westminster election, support for the pro-Agreement UUP was in noticeable decline, with a small majority of Orange members choosing the DUP over the UUP (Tonge and Evans, 2004). By 2004 this trend had become pronounced, with almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of Orange Order members surveyed declaring a voting intention for the DUP, compared to less than a third (29 per cent) for the UUP. The overall decline in unionist support for the UUP’s promotion of the Agreement was accompanied by political realignment within the membership of the Order (McAuley and Tonge, 2007).

We have offered explanations for the move of political support within Orangeism and the undermining of the UUP as the traditional party of Orangeism (McAuley and Tonge, 2007). Broadly, however, primary in any explanation of the shift in Orange support towards the DUP has been the dovetailing of Orange Order and the DUP’s perceptions that unionism has been in political, religious and cultural retreat because of the consequences of the Agreement. Orange Order members voted almost two to one (61 to 33 per cent) against supporting the 1998 Agreement (McAuley and Tonge, 2007; Tonge and Evans, 2005), making opposition within Orangeism more extensive than that in the broader unionist population, where some 57 per cent offered support for the Agreement (Hayes and McAllister, 2001).
The DUP and the Reordering of Orangeism

Part of the strength of the DUP response rested in its success to frame unionism in a particular way, drawing directly on common sense and collective understandings of defeat, victory, values and identity that are found across unionism. The DUP promotes itself as the only legitimate guardian against incursions by Irish nationalism and republicanism, while all other unionists are seen as ineffectual and/or complicit in the downfall of Northern Ireland. A key self-defined task for the DUP has been to undo the perceived concessions made by the UUP and to continue to put political pressure on republicans. Collective memories directly inform the contemporary political debate. In particular, the public discourse of the DUP projected the peace process as another in a long line of events attempting to dilute unionism – the end of the Stormont parliament, the arrangements made for a power sharing executive under Sunningdale, and the Anglo-Irish Agreement – to name but a few.

The DUP claim that they seek to return unionism to what they see as its doctrinal fundamentals is heard and understood by many Orange members. The overt opposition of the DUP to the 1998 Agreement and the positioning of the Party as the key defenders of the Protestant Unionism proved to be a centrifugal force causing the reordering of unionism (McAuley, 2002). The broad stance of the DUP in expressing both moral and political opposition to the Agreement was deeply meaningful to many within the Orange Order. Such changes have, in part at least, been brought about by a dramatically changed social economic profile in the membership of the Order. In particular what (Kaufman, 2007) refers to as the increased proletarianisation of the membership has meant changes in political affiliation towards the DUP.

Those self-identifying as working-class now form the bulk of Orange Order members, with fewer than twenty per cent defining themselves as middle-class (McAuley and Tonge, 2007) with most middle-class Protestants now clearly expressing social and political distance from the Orange Order (O’Leary, 1998; Pollak, 1996). The perspective offered by the DUP has continued to resonate with the membership; our sample indicates that since the Agreement was signed in 1998, more DUP than UUP supporters have joined the Order, and that support for the DUP continues to be dominant within the Order, although this has in turn been challenged following the entry of the DUP into a power sharing government with Sinn Féin.
Discourses of Unity in Post-Agreement Orangeism

The Orange Order continues to centre on the construction of unionist and Protestant unity in what are still perceived as uncertain political times. The Order argues that Protestants will increasingly turn to them to safeguard their interests (Orange Standard, June 2000). Thus, the leadership has increasingly projected the organisation as capable of unifying unionism. They appeal for the reconstruction of the “unionist family”, as it “is not too late for Unionists to get their act together and to defeat this evil conspiracy which seeks to destroy their position and this Province and put it under the heel of Dublin” (Orange Standard, April 2003).

Such calls for unity have become central to much of the public discourse of Orangeism, and can be seen in claims that for Orangemen: “the great desire is still for a single Unionist party” (Orange Standard, June 2005) and that the Order “will lobby for Unionist unity on all key issues” (Orange Standard, April 2005) or through demands that “Unionist parties must agree”, (Orange Standard, July 2005), that “Unionist unity must be achieved” (Orange Standard, September 2001) or that “Unionist unity is a priority” (Orange Standard, September 2002). Recently, the leadership has claimed that, “all Protestants who care for the welfare of this Province, and who cherish its place within the United Kingdom must go to the polls” (Orange Standard, May 2003) and that it is the duty of all members to vote, “if they treasure their British citizenship and identity” (Orange Standard, November 2003).

Sometimes the demands are made even more directly, such as, “Unionist must vote – or else!” (Orange Standard, May 2007); or that, “all Orange brethren must unite and vote” (Orange Standard, May 2005). In realpolitik this means promoting a political pact, between the UUP and the DUP. Such a view finds support from within the membership, which increasingly fears a split in the unionist vote in any forthcoming elections, and the likelihood of a strengthening of Sinn Féin representation. Hence the claim, that:

Whatever the future may hold for Unionism its aspirations can only be realised through all shades of Unionist opinion uniting and working under one banner. Uniting Unionism is as relevant to-day as it was 100 years ago (Alexander, 2005, p. 43).

This also draws on longer-standing discourses within Orangeism concerning the lack of political awareness and mobilisation of its members.
In 1995, for example, the Order produced a booklet to celebrate the organisation’s Bi-Centenary. In the editorial, Martin Smyth sought to position Orange Order as follows:

many of its members are deeply complacent, not only regarding their own spiritual standing, but about the future of Ulster. This Province has suffered defeat and humiliation at the hands of dedicated, articulate and cunning pan-nationalists, aided and abetted by some of the most powerful forces within the British establishment and the White House (Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 1995, p. 3).

These comments highlight another consistent discourse within Orangeism, that they must be eternally vigilant against those who would seek to undermine the core tenets of Protestant Unionism.

Discourses of Cultural Resistance: The Importance of Parades

For many Orange Order members the very existence of Northern Ireland remains under threat, as “enemies within and without threaten Unionism” (Orange Standard, September 1998). According to this discourse, these enemies are focused on one key objective, “the ultimate incorporation of the Province in an all-Ireland in which British, Protestant, Orange and Unionist culture and identity would be swamped and eventually eradicated”. The category consisting of those who seek to bring about the downfall of Ulster Protestantism is widely constructed. Take the following:

It is the traditional enemies of Protestantism and Unionism - Irish nationalism and republicanism - which is spearheading this attack on Northern Ireland’s loyal ethos. But it is being aided and abetted by Government policies which can only have one outcome - a weakening of Northern Ireland’s position within the United Kingdom. (Orange Standard, April 1999)

All of these discourses are woven together to place the Order at the heart of Protestant-Unionist responses to contemporary events. Wright (1996) suggests that a continual sense of siege is a “central reality of Northern Protestant society”. In the contemporary period they have pointed to what they believe as plans for the “de-Protestantisation” of Northern Ireland, as part of an “onslaught being waged against the British identity of the province” (Orange Standard, February 2004). At its utmost, some sections of Orangeism talked of “ethnic cleansing pursued by Irish republicanism for over 30 years” (Orange Standard, December 2002).

More recent discourses suggest that while the physical war has been replaced by “a cultural war being waged against unionism and Orangeism”
(Hume, *News Letter*, 13 July 2007, p. 35). “Orange culture” remains “under attack” (*Orange Standard*, August 2000) and that Orange members are involved in a “Culture war We Must Win” (*Orange Standard*, March 2008). As the *Orange Standard* expressed it:

The shooting and bombing “war” in Northern Ireland is hopefully over, but the battle for the hearts and minds of the people will be fought with greater intensity than ever. Let no-one be under any illusions. The campaign by republicans and nationalists to erode the British identity of Northern Ireland will be stepped up in many ways, and the Orange Order will need to be in the vanguard of resistance to this latest phase in the strategy of the republican-nationalist alliance to try and achieve their objective. (*Orange Standard*, July 2007)

Fears surrounding attacks on Protestant Unionism, both real and symbolic, continue. This takes several forms. Some are concrete, such as a series of arson on Orange Halls that have taken place over the past decade. Others rest on the wider belief that Orange culture is constantly and coherently being undermined. This has found its clearest expression around the issue of parading, which is now deemed to be “top of the republican ‘hit’ list” (*Orange Standard*, August 2000). There are over 3,000 Orange parades in Northern Ireland every year, of which a small number (around sixteen) remain disputed (Mullin, 1998). In recent years, restrictions have been placed on several parades, particularly those that are routed through interface districts (between Catholic and Protestant areas) or areas where Catholics are in a majority.

The most prominent of the contentious parades during the mid- and late-1990s – from the Protestant church at Drumcree near Portadown – remains unresolved. The reason why a reasonably obscure march to and from a Protestant church should have become international news and towards the top of the agenda of the Orange Order can only be fully understood if we consider the following words of Gordon Lucy, Chair of the Ulster Society in the early days of the saga. As he put it, there is, a perception “that if Orangeism lost this particular battle in the heartland of Orangeism, routes all over Northern Ireland would come under attack” (*Irish Times*, July 13 1996). Although the intensity of the conflict around Drumcree has ebbed since the 1990s it has remained central to the Orange psyche, and to symbolise much wider concerns about the perceived retreat of Protestant Unionism.

Importantly, such “anti-Orange” activity is seen as another challenge to Protestant cultural identity, and as part of a wider schema, which is “a product of a carefully prepared and thought out plan of action by Sinn Féin/IRA” (*Orange Standard*, August 2000). For the Order:
Marching has become an even greater focus of attention in recent years because republicans have decided that, having spent 35 years slaughtering members of the Protestant community with the gun and the bomb, they have now moved into the next phase of the plan to break Protestant resistance so as they can achieve their end goal – the destruction of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom (Orange Standard, August 2004).

This is sometimes presented as part of a wider campaign against Britishness and the Orange Order, of which the following views are indicative:

The hate campaign launched in the media against the Protestant people has been unrestrained and sustained. Newspapers have shamefully vied with each other to come up with some new angle to blacken the Ulster Protestants. (Orange Standard, September 1998)

No Orangeman is in any doubt that the media treats him, and the Orange Institution, with little understanding and less sympathy. (Orange Standard, October 1998)

**Discourses of the Future**

Despite the widespread changes in the political landscape of Northern Ireland, not least of which is the introduction of a working power-sharing devolved government, many within the Orange Order fear for their future. Many Orange members continue to be suspicious of the “other” community, even in the new political era. Take, for example, this statement from a leading member of the Orange Order made in early 2008:

I see Sinn Féin as the other side of the IRA coin, and in spite of what may have been said with regards to the IRA, their err, renunciation of violence and all the rest, I still see the organisation as having the potential if it ever needed to, to pick up its arms again, and err, there’s always been the big question mark, as to what extent all the arms were decommissioned and destroyed. There’s always going to be a big question mark over that. I know that, err, [unclear] and his group said that they were satisfied and that decommissioning had been comprehensive and complete, but there will always be a big question mark over that because there was, there wasn’t ever the opportunity of people who would have been very sceptical and most stringent in their demands with regards to verification, and the IRA refused the whole way down the line to allow these, err, very critical, very sceptical people to see what was going on. (Interview AM02, Belfast)
The fears of this section of the leadership have not been eased by the emergence of a devolved government and the agreement of the DUP to enter into a power sharing administration with Sinn Féin. As this member expressed it, his reactions were “surprise, shock and stunned”. He expanded as follows:

For the leadership of the DUP to have preached what they did preach for the years they preached, and … there was people probably done time for what that man preached, and then to backtrack, you know, either he was, he was right for 40 years and wrong for one year, or he’s been wrong for 40 years and right for one year, you know. So, history will tell us. (Interview JM02, Belfast)

At best some thought power-sharing “a price worth paying to get local government” or “a price that had to be paid” (Interview JM01, Belfast). At the same time, however, this member claimed he had “become more suspicious of them [Sinn Féin], more mistrusting” (Interview JM01, Belfast).

As the Orange Standard (June 2000) argued:

The decision of the Democratic Unionist Party to share power with Sinn Féin will not affect the long-term goal of the latter. To do their utmost to bring about a united Ireland … No-one in Protestant Ulster should be under any illusions.

Beyond this, there are concerns about how the Order can make itself relevant in an increasingly secularised society and engage with public discourses within civil society. In response, the Order has deliberately set about attempted to improve its often extremely negative public image, especially at times of disputed parades. Under the guidance of a new young, and often highly educated leadership grouping, for example, the Order has attempted to re-brand its Twelfth of July parades as community festivals. The most prominent of these is “Orangefest”, which the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (2008) now describes as “one of Europe’s largest cultural festivals with music, marching and street pageantry” undertaken in a “carnival atmosphere”. Such images are no doubt central to winning the culture war for the Orange Order, but the public relations campaign is far from won. Sinn Féin Assembly member John O’Dowd, for example, claimed that the “proposed ‘Orangefest’ will be seen as little more than ‘bigotfest’ in the eyes of the vast majority of people not connected to the Orange Order” (Sinn Féin, 2008).
Conclusions

In Northern Ireland, the boundaries between society and the state, between civil activity and the political realm remain blurred. This is readily identified in the roles undertaken by Orangeism and the structures and discourses of the Orange Order. Overtly, Orange discourse remains centred upon several core elements: the Protestant faith and Christian principles, loyalty to the Crown and to a state that guarantees civil and religious liberty. These discourses run alongside each other; sometimes they are overlapping, and often, members place different emphases on different strands.

Whilst in one sense contemporary discourses simply reproduce some of the traditional roles of the Order, the contemporary dynamic is different. Traditional alliances have become marginal to the political direction the Order seeks to take and the majority of its members. While there are different elements and discourses emphasised by members, for many politics and religion remain about the existence of the state. Some who have recently joined the Order have been attracted by the discourse of consistent opposition to what are seen as the negative consequences of the Agreement for unionists. Once they have become members, they have worked to strengthen this discourse. Others seek to modernise the organization and make it relevant in an increasingly secular and globalised society. What is clear, however, is that the overarching discourse is that all of these elements can only be guaranteed by the continuance of the Union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and the core belief that the Order must act as a bulwark to ensure the maintenance of the constitutional link that remains primary.

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THE MAINTENANCE OF REPUBLICAN IDEOLOGY AND TACTICS IN THE DISCOURSES OF IRA FORMER PRISONERS

Peter Shirlow, Jonathan Tonge and James W. McAuley

Abstract

The debate concerning ideology and ideological shifts during peace-building in Northern Ireland has generally failed to account for the attitudes and opinions of former combatants concerning the nature and meaning of discursively constructed identities and political strategies. This invisibility is peculiar in that debates concerning ideological shifts have been driven by academic analysis or by those former combatants who maintain that the Irish peace process is paralleled by core ideological abandonment. The material presented within this article indicates that former Provisional Irish Republican prisoners do not view the peace process as involving ideological ditching but instead that their commitment to republican discourse remains complete.

Introduction

This article examines the attitudes of former Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners regarding the transition from violence and the role they have played and continue to play in republican activism. The findings within this article indicate that these former prisoners do not view the peace process as involving ideological disbandment. Instead republican ideology remains centred upon the reproduction of established discursive conflicts, as promoted via non-militaristic means. It would appear that what IRA former prisoners mean by the peace process is articulated around the promotion of republican values and a discourse guided by the eventual achievement of republican goals. It is also understood that this and other republican beliefs have both presented and secured republican unity and allowed the leadership and the grassroots to refute accusations of “sell-out”, a feature that has historically dogged Irish republican movements.

Unsurprisingly, among those interviewed there is no sense that critiques of violent republicanism are correct in arguing that the IRA were terrorist-inspired and lacked ideological coherence (Alonso, 2001) or that republican coherence and discursive value has been abandoned in favour of the acquisition of political power (McInytre, 1995). There is some acknowledgement of a “management” of change and the shaping of
contemporary republicanism by the policies of the British state and the “complexities of this relationship between movement and community” (Bean, 2007, p. 13). The acceptance that there have been tactical shifts is couched in the presentation of a wider understanding of republican mobilisation. This acknowledges a tactical awareness, whether that has involved the use of violence, promoting the Irish language or serving in government within a partitioned Ireland, that was understood as an on-going reality throughout the conflict (Smith, 1995). Moreover, there is no denial among IRA former prisoners of the complexities of emerging out of armed conflict, but this is paralleled by an apparent sense of having maintained ideological congruity and transitions that are primarily strategic. Indeed, former IRA prisoners argue that it is not the structure of republican discourse that has changed but the presentation of ideology and the pinpointing of successful strategies that will achieve key goals (Adams, 1989, 1995; Maillot, 2005).

There has been a critique by other republican prisoners that contends that the peace process has been framed via a ditching of core republican principles. This contrary position suggests that the peace process is based upon elitist managerialism of former combatants has removed internal dissenters and censored any debates concerning the disjuncture of republican discourse (O’Bradaigh, 1996; Maloney, 2003; Patterson, 1989). We do not accept or deny the merits of these criticisms but instead argue that there is an equally valid requirement to understand those who generally reject such a perspective. Evidently, there is an insufficient knowledge, beyond leadership level, concerning the attitudes and opinions of the bulk of former republican prisoners.  

This paper further indicates how former IRA prisoners claim that they have not “abandoned” the ideological compass which “legitimised” violence and that the present nature of community and political activism is structured around a sense of republican authenticity. We address the construction, interpretation and meaning of discourse among republican activists by highlighting four key dimensions: (i) the interpretation and construction of legitimacy, (ii) the reasons for deciding to join a paramilitary organisation, (iii) imprisonment and the development of ideological beliefs, and (iv) the delivery of republican ideology in the post-conflict environment. It emerges that, for republicans, the manner through which resistance is articulated and, more importantly, practiced has shifted out of violence due to an internal reconsideration of normative rules needed to promote republican discourse (Graham and Shirlow, 2003; Tonge, 2005).
Despite shifts in their approach to politics and community activism, former IRA prisoners understand activism and ultimately the peace process as a route to Irish unification. Moreover, their attitude towards the “other”, mainly unionist and loyalist, remains based upon negative stereotyping and a mode of engagement centred on utilising inter-community contact as a means to persuade those who are pro-union of their ideological “folly” and the “incoherence” of unionism.

**Discourse and Republican Legitimacy**

*Analyzing Republican Discourse*

Discourse constructs social relations, through language, written and spoken texts, thus constituting the objects and subjects of the social world. Republican ideals are understood as the outcome of discursively fabricated classifications of belonging (Burton and Carlen, 1979) and republican involvement in the peace process remains guided by the inspiration and idea of a united Ireland. Such a process of discursive representation reminds us that all forms of loyalty-driven discourse are based upon different imaginings of community, practice and ideological delivery. Furthermore, the allegories and mythic representation of discourse in a divided society are unproblematic to those who hold particular and exclusive renditions of identity and power. That is to say that the contemporary peace process is not to be understood as the outcome of ideological rejection but of manoeuvre, resource competition and conflict via non-violent means. Republicans and their opponents remain tied to alternative notions of power relations and the maintenance of resistance towards an objectified other (English, 2003, 2006; Munck, 1992).

Republican discourse, as understood by our respondents, has evolved through identity-securing strategies and the raising of republican consciousness. The use of violence is understood by way of the stages of revolt, political development and commemoration. The promotion of the Irish language and culture and the development of links with a sympathetic diaspora are viewed as additional stages in the development of identity politics. Thus the shift in tactics has been linked to the move from “powerlessness” due to asymmetrical relations, to the governance and delivery of power through political “achievement” within an equality driven political landscape. Linked to this overall shift from “powerlessness” is an interpretation advanced by Stedman-Jones (1983) that identity and political expression is tied to discursive aspects of linguistic expression that do not
easily map themselves onto homogenous interpretations of political movements, but instead there is a need to appreciate how:

Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of social being. We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest itself. (1983, pp. 21-22, cited in Shirlow and McGovern, 1997)

Discourse within this analysis is studied via the medium of interests that are produced and reproduced via realities such as violent conflict, perceptions of conflict, perceived “successes” of that conflict and the capacity to express ideas and deliver actions that are influenced by fluid social, cultural and economic relationships that emerge during or parallel to conflict. The perception that a discourse will remain static and unwavering undermines the impact of such fluidity and also reduces conflict to an interpretation of violence and harm as opposed to understanding how other forces condition and explain transformation out of armed conflict. 

Acknowledging that armed action and the discourses attached to it are temporal and conditioned by the reproduction of society at various scales, especially in conflictual arenas such as Northern Ireland, is of importance. This results in a displacement of interest with the roots and dimensions of conflict and in so doing permits a concern with how conflict itself fashions the cognition and understanding of interests centred upon knowledge, experience and experimentation with tactics and discursive strategies (Foucault, 1972, 1973, 1979).

The use of violence by former IRA prisoners is understood as having required a language during and after the cessation of armed conflict that is defined via a chain of equivalence which encloses a particular perception of established and re-produced justification. This generally remains as a self-referential and self-sustained notion of legitimacy. Thus the discourse attached to studying the past may lead to an adoption of a language of peace but the discourse of that language remains viewed as avowedly republican and thus “legitimate”.

Crucially, discourse is concerned with the variable “discursive formations” which permit specific assertions and remarks to be made while others are excluded. A discursive formation is “a set of rules”; that is to say the code by which objects, subject positions and strategies are moulded, forged and created. As Foucault (1973) argued discourse is not simply
The Maintenance of Republican Ideology

concerned with written or spoken words but with the articulatory social practice of language, meaning and interpretation. As noted by Foucault:

These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of vocabulary, but the ordering of objects. “Words and things is the entirely serious title of a problem; it is the ironic title of a work that modifies its own form, displaces its own data, and reveals, at the end of the day, a quite different task. A task that consists of no- no longer-treating discourse as groups of signs...but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” (1972, p. 49, cited in Shirlow and McGovern, 1998)

Discourses of Legitimacy in Republicanism

The material obtained from extensive interviewing of former IRA prisoners provides an understanding of involvement in conflict and the delivery of a peace process and their influence over that process as understood by them. It grounds experience, legitimacy and the mobilisation of long-serving interpretations of history and conflict and the merging of these around ideas of developing and sustaining conflict transformation (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). With regard to overall senses of legitimacy, it was found that former republican prisoners view the conflict as a reaction to state “oppression”. Attitudes towards the peace process do not relate directly to academic determinations of conflict and peace building as they remain grounded in much closer experiences of conflict. The interpretation of moving out of violence is not understood as a process of ideological “ditching” or the emergence of a “mutual stalemate” (Zartman, 2003) but of the development of tactics and the impact of conflict upon opening up means to promote republican discourse (Hazelkorn and Patterson, 1995).

Like previous and contemporary forms of Irish republicanism the most significant condition for mobilisation is to be found in the agency of activists (Bean, 2007). Within republicanism the base has been attached to creative cultural mediums and organisational structures that sought to define collective identity (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998). The IRA deployed the language of community to not only instil nationalist “unity” but to also establish hegemony within the nationalist community. The building of such hegemony has been partly achieved through recent electoral politics, with Sinn Féin emerging as the dominant voice of Northern nationalism (McAlister, 2004; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). The use of violence
evidently undermined Sinn Féin’s capacity to become politically transcendent. Tonge (2006, p. 141) shows that:

By 1988, however, the political arm of the republican movement in Belfast was beginning to publicly question the utility of an armed struggle which undermined their political appeal to a local electorate anxious to see improvements in job opportunities and local services.

Ultimately, the re-mobilisation of Irish republicanism in the late 1960s, and its restructuring in the 1970s, saw a series of actions and long-term strategy developments that fermented the nature of constitutionalism as now articulated and practiced. The discursive shifts that have taken place within this particular version of republicanism have been set against the background of building the republican movement. Controlling, and then shifting, ideological capacity and meaning within the republican movement is understood as being centred upon a constant fusion of styles and strategic and tactical experimentation (Bean, 2007). Smyth (2005) has also argued that the capacity to move from a military to political position was generally unproblematic as the “empty signifiers” of “justice” and “democracy” were essentially:

multiple interpretations and capable of being integrated into disparate discourses. The absence of justice or democracy can be used to justify a reformist strategy, but equally both can be integrated into a justification for armed struggle. (Smyth, 2005, p. 144)

Smyth’s (2005) argument is crucial in that it highlights the fluidity within republicanism as a political discourse within itself. Thus the gaze and interpretation of republicanism has been overwhelmingly linked to the interpretation of violence and the mobilisation of armed conflict as opposed to understanding the various strands and opinions that produced republican discourse. The positioning of republicanism as merely violent generally obscured the extent and nature of internal ideological awareness and tactical shift. It also reminds us that the conflict was also shaped by state policy, the opening up of dialogue with Sinn Féin (primarily by John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party), the desire to build wider cognition of republican ideas, and the failure to build republicanism as a movement due to collective armed activism.

Reaction and Republicanism: Reasons for Joining Up
Joining the IRA was in many instances centred upon “events more than anything else” and the violence that emanated from an identifiable “other”. As noted by a female respondent, “a million things happened” and the sense of societal and political deterioration in the early stage of the conflict was a paramount cause of mobilisation. Many of those imprisoned in the early 1970s saw themselves as reacting to loyalist and state violence, unionist hegemony and state indifference towards aggrieved Catholic communities. The sense of “hitting back” as a mode of becoming involved and then adopting a more defined republican discourse was commonplace. For some respondents the sense of being part of a violated community was important:

Well, like most people at the time it wasn’t an ideological thing it was more a gut reaction to something that was happening at the time. (Male respondent 1, West Belfast)

This sense of community violation was also advanced through an appreciation of personal experience and the need for collective engagement. As noted:

It was because of what was happening all around us at the time. We were kids. Bombay Street was getting burnt down. Before that it was student riots, student protests. There was always trouble down around the Falls anyway. There were parades even then. I remember the Divis Street riots, not really understanding them but I knew it was sort of us and them. 1969 was the central year when everything changed. I watched the streets being burnt down around us … Back to school after the holidays, I heard all the personal stories of kids who had been run out of their homes with the house on fire. Everybody was joining the Fianna [the youth wing of the IRA] that seemed to be some sort of way of reacting against it, or doing something against something that you felt you were powerless against. It gave you some sort of strength. (Male respondent 2, West Belfast)

Whereas some respondents were drawn to, or cultivated into organisations, others came from families steeped in republican traditions. Even among those who did not come from such backgrounds, or in which such backgrounds were hidden, the sense of their being a notional republicanism was evident:

My older brother was in the Fianna and he had been from when he was fairly young. But I didn’t really notice until around 1969 that he seemed to be doing sort of secrecy stuff. New republicans in the area, old republicans in the area - I knew that
there was a, had an idea that there was an IRA. Every now and again their name would come up. But I had no real republican family ties. But I had republican records in the house, I heard songs at parties. (Male respondent 3, County Derry)

This capacity to locate republican family histories was important in that it established a sense of ideological lineage that was brought to the fore by the collapse of social relationships in the 1960s and 1970s. The primacy of 1966 (virtually invisible in academic analysis until recently) as the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising was also attached to senses of consciousness-raising and a need for republican re-mobilisation. In essence several factors influenced the discursive journey of republicanism; ideological mobilisation through the use of commemoration, socialisation and the goal of Irish unity; situational violence and the response to state and loyalist activity; structural factors conditioned by “second-class” citizenship and the demands for equality of recognition and anti-discrimination legislation. The fusion of these was constantly understood by the respondents as being the basis on which to utilise violence.

Although accepting that the motivation of early republican activists was reactive to the conditions and experiences of societal breakdown, in the early 1970s, it was constantly stated that those who engaged in violence at that time had a developed sense of economic, cultural and social injustice and an appreciation of a need to adopt a more wide-ranging republican ideology. Furthermore, it was postulated that any lack of ideological cohesion and discursive knowledge amongst IRA activists, during this time, was slowly and deliberately replaced by developed explanations and strategies that did more than merely react to violent events. However, it should be stressed that early violent reaction was neither merely inflexible nor obdurate but fashioned by senses of injustice and both vague and established notions of a republican heritage and discourse.

**Imprisonment and Discursive Fine Tuning**

*Education and Debate; The Long Kesh experience*

Virtually all respondents spoke of being inspired by prison debates within and between paramilitary groups. These debates provided an ideological vocabulary of what “people already felt and knew was wrong”. Furthermore such debates did not challenge the efficacy of violence, or promote a sense that armed conflict was to be dispensed with due to a
stalemate with loyalists or the British State. Within the prison arena republicans challenged dominant representations of them and also nurtured identities of resistance against prison authority (Corcoran, 2006; McKeown, 2001). Ironically, the republican challenge to British state authority and the associated process of their criminalisation opened up spaces of dialogue with the prison authorities that encouraged negotiating skills that would eventually be used in peace-building strategies.

For republicans ideological manoeuvring and future political approaches were influenced by the prisoners as well as by significant debates that were led by a wider republican community and influenced and supported from a much broader Irish nationalist alliance (Clarke, 1987). However, irrespective of the impact of former prisoners upon future discursively designed tactics and re-orientation, the organic nature of debate and dialogue within and even at times between republicans and loyalists was significant in bolstering alternative and future practices. It is noteworthy that former prisoners viewed themselves as the “IRA beyond bars, and not as a group that were removed from wider activities”.

Imprisonment also influenced a process that one respondent identified as a time to “learn a lot of things”. This sense of learning and a commitment to acquiring and developing a republican discourse was understood as a process of learning in developing a republican logic:

Long Kesh imprisonment in those days: we did read Irish history and we did get to political lectures, we did learn more about everything. It was your first chance to read books on communism, books on revolution, Che Guevara, Connolly. All the things that you wouldn’t have read when you were a teenager and probably wouldn’t have read. But in Long Kesh, all these books were being passed around. Everybody’s talking about them, everybody’s debating them. So you naturally want to be informed about it. You want to understand it. We did a lot of things in Long Kesh. It wasn’t just political education, it was military education. But there was also lots of sports and lots of ordinary reading and just messing about. So they were all forming some form of political understanding of what was happening (Male respondent 4, West Belfast).

Debates among republicans within prison aided the shifting of IRA tactics as they morphed more fully into politics, community activism and cultural expressionism. Central to these debates was how the IRA could create the ideas and actions that would lead to the abandonment of violence, but only when such a tactical disjuncture could uphold an activist driven and...
congruous republican discourse. Challenging an established modus operandi attached to violence was accompanied by maintaining a narrative of oppression and resistance along with a new repertoire of inclusion, and a future preference for the memorialisation of armed conflict as opposed to violent engagement (Shirlow and McGovern, 1998; McGovern, 2000). The nature of such debates was attached not only to moving out of armed conflict, but also discussing how to produce an alternative nationalist political culture within which the IRA would no longer be required to act as a armed bulwark against the British Army or armed loyalists, but would instead become agents of change through influencing alternative platforms and arenas.

With regard to imprisonment there are several process and attitudinal shifts that are of significance. The impact of imprisonment provided ideological coherence and a recognition that purist ideological explanations needed to be internally reviewed. As noted by a respondent imprisoned in the 1970s and 1980s:

I don’t know how well I would have articulated my views before I went to jail. I think jail was brilliant in terms of giving me the time to sit down and read and clarify my thoughts. I think all my thoughts were there, I had all the reasons and all that type of stuff. But I may not have had the clearer articulation of why and the times, dates, figures and trends and all that type of stuff - I might not have been clear on that. Jail gave me the time and the opportunity to clarify my own head. To have it in me. There have been times when - like the hunger strikes and things - you’ll be living in the moment, you’ll be just living - I mean events would have been right and wrong for you, or things happening would have been right and wrong. You would have been just almost dealing with them in the here and now, where going to jail and going through that type of thing - you can read history properly … It definitely gave me - I mean, one thing the jail did for me, it gave me this idea of being analytical and being critical. Not just to take something at face value on the moment, where I may have when I was a teenager or when I was in the middle of it. (Male respondent 2, County Derry)

_Ideological Capacity-Building_

The promotion of a non-violent republicanism was influenced by evident identity tapping and/or formation that defined a counter-hegemonic
project that was located in the capacity to weld together disparate forms of Irish nationalism. What emerged was predominantly class-based in terms of the republican electorate, but the glue that held together an emergent consciousness was linked to republican versions of land, folklore, oppression and ultimate delivery from British authority. It is arguable that the push towards ideological coherence within the prisons was required given that detainees needed a cultural and political vocabulary that was unifying and shared.

What is important to note is that the operationalisation of republican history and ideological coherence was achieved and mechanisms were found, such as awareness-raising, that created a culture of debate and dialogue that transformed the capacity for the emergence of collective action. The terrain of consciousness was crucial with regard to defining what was required in order to facilitate armed action and then ironically the displacement of that. Inadvertently, this layering of consciousness eventually established and upheld the rationale for non-violent political developments. Within the prison context republicans built a micro-society of ideological identification and dialogue.

A resistance discourse was dedicated to a series of platforms, which began with violence, was increasingly paralleled by political protest and consciousness-raising and eventually upheld the practice of constitutional politics. Republicanism shifted from a desire to seize control to a strategy of advancing and mobilising along an eclectic populist front. As stated by a republican former prisoner:

There was no master plan. We didn’t start out with a plan. We did things in tandem as we went along. We (prisoners) raised our ideas and then that of the community. We discussed the need for peace and then took it to our people. We moved from an old arrogant position that we were the leaders and the people would be led. We started to provide ideas and ways forwards and realised that if we removed that elitist crap about ourselves being right and others duped that people would listen to us. Eventually we realised that people wanted the violence stopped and we were now so close to them in so many ways, like through Sinn Féin and pressure groups, that we had to listen and then respond.⁴

Building the Political Dimension
The building of politics by Sinn Féin and the shifts that political activism encouraged, also points to a need to understand the issue of scale. The building of community and the raising of consciousness within that process could never establish a nationalist community within which there was a majoritarian fervour for armed struggle. The rhetoric of the 1970s and early 1980s, which presented the republican people as willing to become armed ambassadors of republican philosophy and a more significant guerrilla movement was unachievable and misplaced. In developing the idea of the republican “people” the republican movement came, by the mid 1980s, closer to developing a form of hegemony within highly segregated Catholic low income communities (Shirlow, 2006; Tonge, 2006). Republicans had completed the foundations of loyalty to them but had no apparent conventional political structure to erect. Therefore, the capacity to reform social welfare conditions, influence regeneration and housing strategies, and ultimately represent the electorate remained missing due to republicanism having insignificant influence over state agencies and institutions. The Hearts and Minds strategy undertaken by the British State and the use of public funding to support non-republican groups in Catholic communities furthered the nature of republican dislocation.

The capacity and recognition that republicans had established political corroboration and that a popular electoral mandate was to be enlarged, furthered the identification of prisoners, not merely in the historical sense of having suffered but as those who had part-framed and supported the creation of a form of republicanism that was increasingly relevant. The emergence of community cohesion between the IRA and the nationalist community came during the Hunger Strikes 1980-81 when the death of prisoners was to verify the extent of prisoners’ devotion to the cause. This devotion was translated into political support for IRA prisoners, who stood in elections North and South of the border, from those strongly opposed to the physical force tradition.

This forging of such a (previously unachievable) alliance indicated that the mobilisation of shared nationalist suffering created political dividends that violence could not fashion. In the longer term republican prisoners enjoyed a status linked not only to their incarceration but also as part of a broader movement that gained major concessions from the British state. The emotional power and resonance of these sub-groups (prisoners, advice workers, elected representatives, community workers) within republicanism was based upon their contribution both in the past and in the present regarding wider political mobilisation.
The maintenance of republican ideology

The military-political containment of paramilitaries from the late 1970s also increased the pressure on the movement to “thicken and re-direct the battlefield”. Near continual successes in elections toughened these demands and pointed towards new possibilities in community activism and wider understandings of politics. Such a proposition was more compelling to prisoners, given that the Sinn Féin was composed of former prisoners. A sense of mutual reinforcement was created between the imprisoned and the “politicos”. A key component in the role of devotion to the republican leadership was the nature and level of trust invested in them. Trust was not an imagined concept for the prisoner community but based upon a personal and shared experience. Moreover, the unfolding political developments of the 1990s and the Belfast Agreement, in particular, created international kudos for the republican movement. The release of prisoners also provided state recognition that the imprisoned were effectively political in their orientation. The issue of trust was thus fulfilled and republican former prisoners could locate political positives in the contribution that they had made.

Republicanism’s ‘Coming of Age’

For republican respondents developing ideas became a conscientious by-product of years of study and analysis within which the key emphasis was placed upon how “struggle” encompassed various forms of inequality beyond that which had emerged from British colonialism and the enactment of unionist hegemony. Resistance in a post-conflict situation was understood as being undertaken through multi-faceted and non-violent mediums. In particular, inequality and oppression in whatever form were to be challenged through the agenda of equality building, which ultimately was somewhat of a distance from the use of armed conflict to end the “colonial” domination that “caused” social inequity (McGovern, 2000). Republicans appeared heavily devoted to the idea that they were emerging unbroken and that the experience of prison is one of ensuring that “attempts by our captors to criminalise us and our struggle” had failed (Mac Giolla Ghunna, 1997, p. 2).

Republican prisoners espoused a mixture of pride in their resistance whilst recognising that their struggle had raised consciousness within the republican movement and facilitated a more sophisticated capacity to critique societal shifts. Articles and summaries of imprisonment, undertaken by former prisoners, consciously presents struggle as having being forged within a comparative international frame that included the historical tenets of Gramsci and the art of meaningful intellectual analysis and action as
articulated, for example, by the Palestinian academic Edward Said and the executed Nigerian environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa. The role of these international thinkers was linked to the identification of an internal republican intellectualism that had included “among their ranks a high proportion of writers, poets, musicians and artists, many of whom endured imprisonment and used those years to further their cultural activities” (Mac Giolla Ghuinna, 1997, p. 3-4). The self-presentation of an articulate movement was one of political repositioning and the coming of age of contemporary republicanism.

Republican ideological faith was to remain centred upon the achievement of a united Ireland. But the use of new vocabularies of inclusion, a less hostile and atavistic attitude towards the British state (who were, identified as persuaders for a united Ireland) and the notion that there were a range of mediums through which to achieve political power meant that the goal of unification was being articulated via new tactics. So much so that ten years after the Belfast Agreement Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin, was able to claim at the special Ard Fheis on Policing (28th January, 2007), that the role played by those who purchased An Phoblacht (a republican weekly newspaper) had been as important as those who had “picked up the gun”. Adams (2007, p. 1) during the same speech stated that:

Republicanism should never be about elitism or dogma or militarism. Republicanism always has to be about citizenship and people’s rights and equality. We are about making republicanism relevant to people in their daily lives.

**Working with the “Other”**

The shared journey upon which so many republican prisoners and Sinn Féin representatives could map their lives also meant that there was no compunction to analyse the reality that they conducting their various affairs as partly dictated by the British state and global forces beyond their control. In essence the republican movement and the IRA in particular maintained a disciplined leadership that could rationalise a re-positioning of activism. Discipline and the capacity of former prisoners to locate a community that recognised their “sacrifices” helped to pave the way for a smooth transition of republican practice. This transition was furthered by many republican former prisoners undertaking community-based employment within which the struggle, through civic as distinct from militaristic strategies, could be undertaken and in so doing maintain community status and republican congruity.
There is an important difference in that republican involvement in community work post-1998 not only strengthened republican activism, but also created a more seamless transition into civic society and thus removed a political vacuum that may have caused indifference to peace building initiatives. The more general trend amongst loyalists to return to more normal sites of employment did much to undermine the capacity of loyalism to cope with the tensions caused by the emergence of a post-ceasefire environment. In essence republicans emerged into a Northern Ireland within which their electoral fortunes and the influence over republican territory was ever-present and within which a narrative of sacrifice placed them within their communities with both status and influence. Republican former prisoners were now tied into a wider international arena within which their political influence was welcomed and partly-accommodated.

Comparing Republican and Loyalist Former Prisoners

There are a series of difference and also some similarities with regard to understanding how the micro-history of incarceration affected republicans and loyalists. Both sets of prisoners were influenced by internal debates although the numbers involved were greater amongst republicans. Each set of prisoners largely conformed to their respective leaderships inside and outside of jail. Many more republicans understood prison as a site of resistance against British and Irish state hegemony, whereas for pro-state volunteers such activism was undermined by the dimension of being essentially pro-British. One of the more significant differences was that many republican prisoners understood that “struggle” would continue in a post-imprisonment environment and that the vocabulary and skills needed to perpetuate republicanism required knowledge of how to pursue a non-violent conflict. In contrast, most loyalists thought of the conflict as having ended once they had been released or after the IRA had called a ceasefire, and as a result of this their struggle was to be represented by unionist political parties. For those who were to uptake a role in conflict transformation the emergence from prison had been framed by the experience of debate and dialogue within prison and the capacity to locate that knowledge within a landscape of post-conflict change.

In general, republicans retain an overtly hostile attitude towards loyalists which was juxtaposed by cordial personal relationships on a host of inter-community engagements. IRA respondents, as they did in the 1970s, still dismissed loyalism as sectarian, non-progressive, non-socialist, non-autonomous and criminal. As noted by a respondent “loyalism is misguided,
poorly led, self-seeking”. Loyalists as the following quote observes remain understood as dupes of British state practice:

The development in loyalism now has more to do with British strategy rather than internal development. (Male respondent 4, West Belfast)

Furthermore, loyalism is seen as community centric and ultimately reactionary:

Because they are interested in their community, they are interested in basic rights for their people. Their problem is that they don’t really want it for other people and they resent the others in society having it. So they’ll be reactionary whether it be to immigrants, blacks … nationalists, republicans. (Male respondent 5, West Belfast)

The Reasoning behind Community Activity

Despite this, most former IRA prisoners have determined a shared role to play in undermining the return of violence which is tied to their sense of status and legitimacy, and a collective belief that the peace process is insufficient regarding the capacity to quell sectarian violence, delivers social justice and challenging their shared experience of criminalisation. For IRA respondents, intra-community activity is understood as a tactic structured around persuading those contacted of the rationale of a united Ireland whereas Loyalists and Irish National Liberation Army respondents view such engagement as developing shared working class experiences and values.

Former prisoners have also been involved in creating alternative community narratives which link themselves into a post-ceasefire process. This has also involved challenging the mythic status of violence and in so doing diverting youth attention away from paramilitaries and sectarian violence. From this perspective, former IRA prisoners involved in community work and restorative justice programmes seek to reduce tensions and/or promote reconciliation. There is a sense of the need to create an intersection between agency and structure via the shift from a military to negotiator role.

Quasi-states also exist with regard to the political influence over territory. The broad swathes of Northern Ireland that return Sinn Féin representatives in places such as West Belfast and East Tyrone are effectively micro-states that are centred upon renditions of group loyalty and distinctive cultural interpretations of republicanism (Rolston, 1989; Ryan, 1995). Within such places the plethora of festivals and drama events held,
numerous wall murals, a growing community capital, various Irish language sites, republican advice centres and former prisoner group offices testifies to an overall strategy that has engendered a highly politicised form of spatial expansion and cultural cohesion during the conflict. The capacity to create and maintain republican solidarity both in terms of influencing place and gaining significant political and cultural power lies in this particular movement’s highly centralised leadership structures.

Such leadership structures, that have fashioned and framed republican transition, were heavily influenced by resistance strategies developed within the prison environment. The imprisonment of republicans between the early 1970s and 1998 and the impact of that imprisonment was historically unique in that militant republicanism could not be defeated. This contrasts to the internment of IRA prisoners during the Second World War and post-civil war periods when the forerunner of the present republican movement emerged into near political vacuums.

Conclusion

From the evidence presented above there has been no abandoning of a historical past and in many ways the beliefs regarding the “other” are sustained despite the development of inter-group activity. Legitimacy and interpretations of the past have not shifted in order to sustain the peace process, but instead conflict transformation has been assembled around locating shared concerns and promoting the efficacy of ideologies of community activism as opposed to violence. Political resistance is now articulated around non-violent means and the capacity to shift out of violence is based upon discourses of republican loyalty.

Activism, whether it is militaristic or political/community-based, is not interpreted within a temporal frame of past and present, but is understood as being influenced by a seamless political philosophy that mobilises strategies best suited to the advancement of republican discourse. Disengagement from armed struggle has, it is argued, neither altered values nor rejected or abandoned key principles, but instead the contemporary variant of republicanism is part of a discursive journey that has partly developed out of republican historicisation of armed conflict and imprisonment. Moreover, armed conflict, it is postulated, delivered the peace process, in that, as far as IRA former prisoners are concerned, it undermined British authority, provided negotiating strength and the capacity to deliver republican discourse via mediums such as community activism and political mobilisation.
Having been imprisoned provides legitimacy in itself, and this is now invoked to provide community-led strategies of transformation. Transformation is not about ideological decline or a separation from past motivations but instead the promotion of republican ideas within an environment they believe was altered by successful military interventions. Respondents view violence as the logical response to the denial of their respective rights, a situation that places them at odds within unionism in particular. Ironically, the use of violence has removed the need for violence and the Belfast Agreement, which they view in selective ways according to what “their side” had achieved, has created recourse to a *modus operandi* that seeks the same ideological commitments and goals through non-violent activity. Former IRA prisoners continually expressed the idea that violence was an option among other developing tactics and techniques and they invariably understand violence as being conditioned by the fluidity of circumstances.

The central logic through which republicanism is now practiced is centred upon a redefinition of the Easter Rising inspired notion that republicans were the embodiment of the Irish state. This long-established rendition was evidently insular, as indicated in the past by political abstentionism from Dáil Éireann and Stormont (the respective political chambers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) and via the simplistic notion that the removal of the “British” through armed resistance was achievable. Republicanism is now far removed from the irredentism of an ideology framed in an Irish society that was yet to be influenced by the welfare state, partition, the rise of conspicuous consumption, the emergence of the Celtic Tiger and the realities of thirty odd years of conflict in Ireland. By holding ministerial posts in the Northern Ireland Assembly and through political advances in the Republic of Ireland and the capacity to be part of a future Irish government Sinn Féin can now present themselves as state partners.

However, this does not mean that working with loyalists and unionists is infused with eagerness but instead republicans co-operate as part of the process of what they identify as building a united Ireland. Recognition of harm caused to undeserving victims is located but such an interpretation is either paralleled/secondary to the harm endured to ones own community. There is some sense of a need to stretch beyond exclusivist constructions of harm and to locate voices beyond political legitimacy. However, such a perspective is linked to a sense that violence was justifiable. In sum, the use of violence was not rejected via moral concerns but instead conditioned by a sense that it had bolstered negotiating positions, as evidenced by the huge
Canary Wharf and Manchester bombings, during the temporary fracture of the IRA ceasefire in 1996). The discursive frame which has emerged among former IRA prisoners suggests that their legitimacy had been proven as opposed to defeated.

Endnotes

* This paper is based upon funding received from the Leverhulme Trust (F/01 582/C). The project was entitled ‘Abandoning Historical Conflict? Former paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland’.

1 We here discuss the version of republicanism attached to the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin.
2 87 former IRA prisoners were interviewed or took part in focus groups.
3 There are obviously dissenting voices located around the Continuity and Real IRAs and there political associates. Also there may be dissenting voices that have not been public or accounted for, but in general it would appear that the majority of former prisoners have kept connections with former prisoner groups.
4 This quote is not from the project funded by Leverhulme but comes from work undertaken by the lead author.
5 This mid-1980s strategy was based upon British State funding within deprived communities in Northern Ireland. The aim being to fund non-republican/non-loyalist community groups so as to make them more relevant than those operating along the axis of politics and military action.
6 Adams made this point in Sinn Féin’s 1992 policy document, Towards a Lasting Peace. It was rejected by Tony Blair who dropped Labour’s unity by consent policy upon becoming party leader and dismissed the prospect of a united Ireland ‘in our lifetimes’ upon becoming Prime Minister (see Tonge, 2002).
7 Adams in Towards a Lasting Peace (1995 p. 95) argued that “you cannot be a socialist and a loyalist”.

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