

Peacemaking in Northern Ireland:

A model for conflict resolution?

Speech by Peter Hain MP

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## **Introduction**

For more than three decades Northern Ireland endured one of the most violent and intractable conflicts to threaten a democratic state in any part of the world. Those long years brought into sharp focus the fundamental issues that have underlain the 'Irish Question' for centuries - the British presence in Ireland, the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, the tensions between unionism and nationalism, the search for equality between all sections of the community and, perhaps above all else, the use of terrorist violence to achieve political ends.

In this speech the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Right Honourable Peter Hain MP, explores the main causes of conflict in Northern Ireland and explains the key factors that have underpinned the peace process in the past two decades. With the IRA's war at an end and devolved government restored from 8 May, reflecting an historic agreement between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein to share the reins of power, this is an appropriate moment for the Government to reflect on the lessons that have been learned and how, ultimately, the peace was won. While Government policy on Northern Ireland forms the core of the speech, the Secretary of State has taken the opportunity to cast his remarks in a broader context by offering some observations on other conflicts around the world. In doing so he has drawn on his experiences living under apartheid in South Africa and his interest in other parts of the world, derived from his time as a Minister in the Foreign Office.

It is a reality, accepted by all sides, that the peace process has transformed the situation in Northern Ireland and relationships throughout these islands. More than that, it should stand as an inspiration - and perhaps guidance - to others as they go about the business of conflict resolution.

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## **Peacemaking in Northern Ireland: A model for conflict resolution?**

Those of us who had the good fortune to take part in the events of 8 May 2007 in Belfast, when Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness launched their power-sharing Government at Stormont, will have come away with a series of extraordinary images of history in the making. It was one of those 'it would never, ever happen' days. Like the picture of Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams meeting together six weeks earlier, they are images which resonated around the world because of the extraordinary level of international interest and goodwill that has been shown throughout the political process in Northern Ireland.

We have welcomed politicians and journalists from every major country but especially from areas of recent or current ethnic conflict: South Africa,

the Basque region of Spain, the Middle East, Kashmir, Colombia, Kosovo, Sri Lanka and many more. After all the horror and bigotry of the past, since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 progress in Northern Ireland has been an inspiration to other parts of the world that the journey towards lasting peace can be completed. If one of the longest running conflicts in European history can be resolved, then there is hope for even the most bitter and seemingly intractable disputes across the globe.

This level of international interest led me to think that it might be useful to bring together some of the factors guiding British Government policy in Northern Ireland and some of the lessons we have learnt. It is not intended to be an academic analysis. That is for others. This is a politician's view of a political process which has, I hope, ultimately become a kind of 'worked example' of politics as the art of the possible. Indeed, what politicians in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish Governments have achieved in that small part of Europe has stretched beyond belief the definition of what most thought possible.

It is not my intention to make close parallels with other conflicts or suggest solutions. Again that is for others. But you will understand if I draw on some of my own experience in South Africa and elsewhere. Finally, while I want to concentrate for obvious reasons on the last ten years of this Government's approach, it is important to provide some context by touching on some of the earlier phases of the conflict and the responses of successive British Governments.

### **The origins of 'the Troubles'**

It is often said that Northern Ireland has too much history. Certainly anyone getting involved in its political life will find themselves subject to endless history lessons. These may go back 15, 30, 80 or 800 years, depending on the point being made. As Secretary of State from May 2005, I've lost count of the number of conversations in which the events of a century and more ago were referred to as if they happened yesterday. There is a serious point here, in that one of the keys to resolving the conflict has been an ever greater understanding of its roots. That understanding has deepened, not only within the Governments, but much more importantly it has developed within the parties and communities of Northern Ireland. Self-understanding and the reading of history is something I want to return to a little later in this lecture, because, as we shall see, knowing a lot of history is not enough: to make progress, each side has to understand the other's history.

The decades of violence in Ireland which have now come to an end, and which became known as the Troubles, were in one sense a further and more extreme expression of the generational cycle of violence on the island of Ireland, rooted in the long legacy of the tense colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland. When Ireland was divided in 1921, Northern Ireland was created in conflict. Public disorder and inter-community sectarian violence, which had been a feature of 19th century Belfast, broke out on a large scale in the early 1920s, and the IRA continued to attack the new northern state. For the next 50 years Northern Ireland existed in a state of simmering insecurity: unionists felt under threat from their southern neighbour, and from the Catholic population within Northern Ireland, and set about fortifying their own numerical dominance through systematic discrimination and political gerrymandering. Meanwhile nationalists felt trapped within an alien state, treated as second class by the majority administration, and abandoned by the southern state with which they identified. London, regarding the Irish question as shelved, looked away. Ignoring the problem allowed it to grow, until the conditions were created for a conflagration engulfing the whole community.

There are many ways of looking at the course of what came to be known as the "Troubles", but one could usefully divide them into three phases. An initial convulsion of violence with immediate causes; a long and bitter struggle as opposing sides 'dug in' and became locked into a sustained violent conflict; and a final phase where the understanding of all parties developed - in part through the sheer weariness of war - to the point where the seeds of a resolution could be sown. Each phase has its own lessons. I want to concentrate on the final phase of conflict resolution, but to do so I should touch briefly on the earlier periods.

### **From feet on the streets to blood on the streets**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the British Government was faced with a crisis for which it was ill prepared. Since the North was partitioned from the South in 1921, Westminster had taken little interest in Northern Ireland for

nearly half a century and paid the price of its neglect. The Wilson and Heath Governments were confronted with unionist administrations at Stormont which offered far too little reform far too late to meet the rising tide of anger at discrimination and political exclusion of the nationalist population which had manifested itself in the Civil Rights marches of the late 1960s. It is arguable that the proposed reforms to housing and other areas of discrimination, and to policing, could have been enough to move Northern Ireland forward in relative peace. But, with a significant part of unionism in complete denial about the need for reform, and some prepared to use violence to thwart it, coupled with the Provisional IRA's decision to wage war against the British State, Northern Ireland was set on a course where killings entrenched bitterness and made the argument about reform almost academic.

Once devolved government had become untenable and Westminster had to take control in Northern Ireland - through the imposition of direct rule in March 1972 - successive Governments had clear and relatively consistent objectives: first to stop the violence by imposing order in an emergency; and second to address the underlying causes of conflict by achieving a power-sharing arrangement, with an Irish (Dublin) dimension, based on equality. In short, there were security objectives and political objectives.

While the overriding responsibility of British Governments was, like any Government, to stop the killing and to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland, it became increasingly and painfully clear that there could not be an exclusively military solution to the problem. The first Commander of Land Forces in Northern Ireland was quick to point this out. The army could contain the terrorist campaign, but it could not address the causes.

There were significant successes, but also mistakes, in security policy. Allowing the unionist administration to introduce internment without trial in 1971 was a disaster. It is questionable whether it could in principle have worked in preventing the IRA from developing into a sophisticated urban guerrilla army. But the determinedly one-sided application, based on flawed intelligence, ensured that it backfired catastrophically. Serious errors in handling public disorder - in 1970 the curfew and searches of the nationalist Falls Road area which was, in effect, under martial law and, most dramatically, the events of Bloody Sunday in 1972 (where 13 were killed in shootings by British Forces) -

contributed to a comprehensive reversal of early hopes that the 'hearts and minds' of nationalists could be won over. That is not to say that nationalists embraced violent alternatives - the vast majority never did -

but it helped to create a further alienation from the institutions of the state which meant the IRA invariably had sufficient community support for its violent campaign.

But British Governments did not immediately accept that this would be a long war. There were intensive efforts to prevent a slide into a terrorist conflict. While attempting to address the issue of discrimination and disenfranchisement, Willie Whitelaw as Northern Ireland Secretary held secret

talks on behalf of the Government with an IRA delegation, including Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, in July 1972. The instinct to keep in dialogue and keep open channels of communication even through the most difficult times is one I want to return to.

Early contact with the IRA reinforced the impression that they were locked into objectives which simply could not be negotiated: they equated the British presence in Ireland with the British army, or Crown forces as they preferred to describe them, and their understanding of the unionist people as the real 'British' presence was unsophisticated. It was also clear that a combination of political ideology, inexperience and the inspiration of European and other international guerrilla movements had led them to believe they could actually achieve these ultimate objectives by violence. At that stage they clearly held that non-violent means were not only inadequate for the defence of their communities but that, without an armed campaign, the politics of the time would never attain their republican goals. However their understanding of the real long-term impact of this violence was chronically misguided: it would only drive them further from those they needed to persuade and force the British and Irish Governments to concentrate on security to the detriment of politics and in turn bring the two Governments closer together. Paradoxically, their disregard for the destruction of the Northern Ireland economy was inimical to their goal of Irish unity.

### **The long war**

Once the IRA's course was set, so was Northern Ireland's for the foreseeable future. Successive Governments in the 1970s and early 1980s

concentrated on security - notably through the policy of 'localisation' or 'Ulsterisation' of the security forces. The only viable way of handling long-term local conflict, localisation also had its problems. It inevitably entrenched the bitterness between the communities because an attack on local members of the security forces increasingly became - or was seen as - an attack on the Protestant unionist community. It also strained the allegiance of individuals. While the vast majority responded with restraint and professionalism, there were certainly others who colluded with loyalist paramilitaries in murder, intimidation and sectarian attacks. More generally, the almost complete identification of the unionist community with the Royal Ulster Constabulary as 'their police force' made policing a particularly contentious political issue throughout the Troubles and a major challenge during the resolution of the conflict.

While security predominated, the Heath, Wilson and Callaghan Governments also made regular attempts to achieve a power-sharing agreement. Ultimately they were unsuccessful because the two sides were simply too far apart and the unionist community too fractured. In the light of criticism of recent events that we have now 'got the extremes into Government' in Northern Ireland, it is worth remembering that the parties we came to describe as the moderate centre - the UUP and SDLP - themselves not only found power-sharing too

great a challenge in the 1970s, but were fierce opponents. They too had a long way to travel before the courage of their leaders facilitated the Good Friday Agreement process.

British Governments also attempted to address the immediate social and economic causes of the Troubles. Heroic efforts to compensate for the decline in manufacturing industry and the collapse of inward investment -

the latter a direct result of the Troubles rather than a cause - led to a significant increase in Westminster's subvention. While this was inevitable in the short term, and certainly contributed to the eventual economic revival in the late 1980s, it has left a legacy of an unbalanced economy heavily reliant on public sector employment and spending.

More significantly, successive Governments at Westminster demonstrated what can be achieved in reversing discrimination through political will and good legislation. The Fair Employment Acts of 1976 under Labour and 1989 under the Conservatives were absolutely critical to the final resolution of the conflict, as was the operation of the Housing Executive, originally created by the last unionist administration in 1970 to take the allocation of public housing away from sectarian political influence. The result of these policies was that two of the core drivers of the unrest behind the Troubles had all but disappeared by the time of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In 1990 an independent report had concluded that discrimination in the provision of public housing was no longer an issue. Catholic and Protestant unemployment rates have closed and, while there is certainly still a differential, no-one now argues that systematic discrimination is still a feature: indeed, Northern Ireland has the most comprehensive equality legislation in Europe.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of these social and economic factors, and any discussion on the resolution of conflict in Northern Ireland which ignored them would be worthless. The reality is that it took a great deal to ignite civil unrest and violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s - it did not happen easily. Decades of systematic discrimination and disenfranchisement brought people onto the streets where centuries-old constitutional divisions could not. By addressing the discrimination, Governments helped to remove the causes claimed, however unjustifiably, by paramilitaries and cleared the way to a more fundamental consideration of the underlying relationships between the communities.

This was to give what became the peace process a firm foundation: once the IRA had become committed to a political process in the late 1990s, even if it had wanted to return to violence, it is very questionable whether it could have relied on the degree of community support necessary to do so and which it had previously relied upon.

The long conflict ground on through the early 1980s, adding further terrorist atrocities to an ever lengthening list. The political handling of the special category status dispute at the Maze prison (essentially a dispute about different views of recent history: were these 'political prisoners' or 'violent

criminals'?), spiralled into the 1981 hunger strikes, and is seen by many as an undoubted low-point for British policy. One of the hunger strikers, Bobby Sands, dramatically won a by-election from his prison cell, his subsequent death provoking intense bitterness and entrenching the hard lines of the conflict. Irrespective of the merits of the arguments for and against recognising that paramilitary prisoners were in some sense 'different', the policy confirmed, not just republicans, but broad nationalism, the Irish Government and international opinion, in their perception of Britain as inflexible and obdurate. Like Bloody Sunday, it also radicalised another generation.

But from this low point a number of positive strands emerged. First, the British and Irish Governments were drawn or pushed together, at first through mutual self-interest, and, then, increasingly from a sense - aided by their positions as partners within a new European Union dispensation -

that they could achieve together in Northern Ireland something which neither could achieve alone. This found concrete expression in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and in the British-Irish relationship of the last ten years, to which I will return.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement effectively moved the debate on from the immediate causes of the conflict to the fundamental issue of identity, and the rights of nationalists to have their sense of belonging recognised by both Governments. The Agreement liberated nationalists, notably John Hume, to show that, even in its own terms, the IRA's campaign no longer had justification. Leaving aside the human tragedy, events like the Enniskillen bomb of 1987 - when the IRA killed eleven people at a Remembrance Day service - as with previous such attacks, served merely to undermine the republican political project and were counterproductive even in terms of the then self-defined 'ballot box and armalite' strategy of the republican armed struggle.

Within republicanism, the realisation - born of political mobilisation during the hunger strikes - of the potential offered by politics, coincided with the growing acceptance that, while the IRA might not be defeated, it could never win a war against the security forces. The hugely productive re-evaluation of objectives within nationalism, led by the SDLP's John Hume, influenced republicanism and, of course, led to the unprecedented 'Hume-Adams talks' from 1988. Hume's mantra that Northern Ireland's dispute was not about land, but about people and identity, helped to change the terms of debate. Hume challenged the romantic nationalist and republican notion that the problem was a British presence on Irish territory. He argued that the real challenge for nationalists was to make unionists feel that their identity could be protected and valued in an agreed Ireland. It was a re-visiting of history which was productive at every level, including within the two Governments.

Once it was accepted as the basis of a common understanding, it followed that the British Government could at least aspire to a role of neutrality: it could

declare that it had no constitutional preference, no preferred outcome for Northern Ireland, beyond lasting peace. The political outcome should be a matter for the consent of the majority.

This neutrality was in practice the private position of successive British Governments - reflecting perhaps the sheer indifference of the majority of the British public. But the open declaration by the Secretary of State Peter Brooke in 1990 that Britain had no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, made clear that republican political objectives were legitimate, if pursued peacefully. Just as important, by positioning the British Government in constitutional neutrality, it became absolutely clear that republicans needed to persuade unionists that their identity could be safeguarded within a united Ireland. Even the most entrenched republican could see that bombing people was unlikely to bring about this change in other people's hearts and minds, and the republican leadership, especially Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, was already several steps ahead.

It is fair to say that unionism was not going through the same re-appraisal of its position and history. This was not just the result of a habit of dominance which was hard to shake off. It had more to do with suffering a bitter terrorist campaign which it felt was aimed at its very existence and indeed its identity, with hardly a unionist family being unaffected, directly or indirectly. Violence had the effect of reinforcing the sense of siege which unionism has felt at some level since the Plantation of Ulster in 1609 when Protestant Scots were settled locally to provide 'British' counterweight to the Catholic Irish population. Equally, the sheer brutality and savagery of the loyalist paramilitaries' sectarian campaign, as well as causing untold misery (and, again, bitterness amongst the many Catholic victims), greatly damaged perceptions of unionism at home and abroad. Meanwhile those within unionism who dared to think progressively were liable to be seen as traitors who had no regard to the suffering of the community. In short, terrorism was destructive of exactly the kind of people and ideas necessary to resolve the conflict. Building political capacity was a long-term challenge for unionists.

The years after the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement - while certainly increasing unionist anger and paranoia - did at least allow others, including in the Republic, to re-evaluate the deep-rooted fears of unionists. Anyone who doubted the analysis in ATQ Stewart's brilliant 1977 study, *The Narrow Ground*, began to see unionism acting out these fears in the wake of the Agreement. While acknowledging that the Agreement did finally put pressure on unionists to take part in power-sharing and accept an 'Irish dimension', policy makers began to explore a more sophisticated understanding of the conflict as a tale of two minorities - the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland and the Protestant/unionist minority on the whole island. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement was an attempt directly to address the relationships between these minorities and between them and the two Governments. It was a three-strand relational approach with people and identity at its heart rather than territory, because all sides had reached the conclusion that this had little to do with territorial claims or even sovereignty. They were yesterday's



dispute, maybe the product of history, but the result of asking the wrong questions.

This 'agreed Ireland' approach became the basis of sustained efforts by the British and Irish Governments during the late 1980s and early 1990s to achieve a political settlement. The Brooke-Mayhew talks hosted by the then Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, and the Downing Street Declaration of 1994, positioned the British Government as a facilitator of an agreed way forward, working closely with its traditional antagonist the Irish Government. Just as the British Government's position was shifting to that of constitutional neutrality, the Irish Government also developed the doctrine of Irish self-determination to include the consent of the majority within Northern Ireland. These positions were liberating to those on both sides who wanted a solution. It is to the credit of the British and Irish Prime Ministers, John Major and Albert Reynolds, that they were also able in the early 1990s to shift the emphasis from a power-sharing arrangement without Sinn Fein to the possibility of including all parties. The IRA ceasefire of 1994 underlined that possibility, even if it did not finally secure it.

That ceasefire collapsed of course under the strain of reconciling the issue of weapons decommissioning and political talks and, in my view, constituted a misreading of republicanism by John Major. When Tony Blair's Labour Government came to power, it was faced with a stalled process under the very able leadership of Senator George Mitchell and the opportunity to rebuild strained relationships. Crucially, Tony Blair and his inspirational first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam were willing to build a new relationship with Sinn Fein and to take seriously republican political objectives and aspirations.

### **Building blocks for resolving the conflict**

In skating across nearly thirty years of conflict I have identified a number of lessons, each of which would repay further study. On the positive side, there was a relatively consistent underlying Government strategy: countering terrorism, developing political structures unique to Northern Ireland's problems and, most important, social and economic reform and regeneration. There were notable successes in all of these: the security forces brought paramilitaries to the realisation that they could not 'win' (the British Government having concluded relatively early in the Troubles that the IRA could not be eliminated militarily); the 1973 Sunningdale power-sharing proposals and the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement were significant steps forward, and the former well ahead of its time; social and economic policy-making did address discrimination and economic decline. But in these decades there were also failures and lessons to be learnt, some of which I have mentioned. The localisation of security tended to deepen the ethnic fault-lines in society; political progress waited on political understanding and that took time; social and economic policy was insufficiently coordinated with security and political policy - there was too much 'segmentation', or insufficient 'joined up

government' even when the levers of power were concentrated in the hands of a single group of Ministers.

Each of these areas demands further discussion, but I want instead to move quickly to the final phase of the conflict. Rather than revisiting the agonising steps of the past ten years, I want to take a slightly different approach and to set out a number of key building blocks which this Government, and in particular Tony Blair, employed to move the process from agreement in principle to completion.

### **Resolving the conflict: 1997-2007**

Tony Blair knew from his first day in office that Northern Ireland would be a priority. There was a personal attachment to the issue from family connections and schoolboy holidays but, more importantly, a clear set of three objectives which have continued to guide his approach for over ten years. They were: the necessity to create a space without violence during which politics could begin to flourish; the identification of individuals with the courage and intention to lead their communities; and the search for a political framework which could accommodate the needs, aspirations and scope for compromise by all involved.

The necessity to create a space without violence was not in itself new: I have already pointed to the objective of successive direct rule Governments to achieve a stable security environment and to the destructive effect of violence on previous attempts to reach a political solution. But in the years after 1997 the Government very consciously took risks to achieve and maintain the IRA ceasefire, because the absence of conflict was an absolute prerequisite to progress. What is so destructive in terrorism is not just the wrecking of lives but the impact on the psychology of a community. Above all it obscures the natural desire of the majority for peace by entrenching bitterness and creating an entirely understandable hysteria in which voices of moderation can no longer be heard. It is desperately hard for people to focus on politics when they are under attack. This for our Government meant making concessions that went deeply against the grain not only for unionists, but for much mainstream British opinion.

An example was the controversial and painful republican and loyalist prisoner releases at the time of the Good Friday Agreement. It was essential to show paramilitary groups that a commitment to peace brought gains which could not be achieved by violence. Thereafter, continuously moving forward with small steps was to some extent an end in itself because time was critical: the longer the cessation of violence the stronger the desire for peace could grow and the more difficult the return to conflict. To 'keep the bicycle upright and moving' was a key objective and required constant intervention and even more constant attention of a forensic nature.

There were of course limits to the extent to which ambiguity and flexibility could be employed to keep the process in motion. Tony Blair's speech in 2002

set out very clearly the need for 'acts of completion' by republicans and argued that ambiguity, once a friend of the process, was now undermining it. It was no longer possible for republicans to pursue a twin track approach, with a political party and an active army, albeit on ceasefire. The transition to peace had to be completed. The paramilitary army was sapping confidence and becoming a break on political progress for everyone, including republicans. Clarity became the dominant requirement of the final part of the journey. But these messages could only be delivered effectively because they were built on relationships of some trust with leading Republicans.

## **Personalities matter**

Keeping the process in motion depended ultimately on the leaders involved. One of Tony Blair's core beliefs is that people and personalities matter in politics, and that building relationships of trust, even where deep differences remain, is vital. This may seem obvious, but is surprisingly often relegated to a place well below 'issues' in resolving conflict.

The key challenge for the Government was to identify the positive elements within the opposing communities and to encourage and sustain them. That meant establishing a relationship of trust with the individual leaders and understanding the pressures on them from within their own movement or party and from outside. Ultimately this meant making judgements about the extent to which those pressures were real or tactical.

In short, were they sincere in their attempts to resolve the conflict?

Identifying key leaders is critical to success. The leading personalities of republicanism and nationalism had remained remarkably consistent through the Troubles even if their thinking had evolved quite radically. By contrast, unionism, permanently divided, had not produced leadership that appeared capable of proposing or even grudgingly accepting a new vision for Northern Ireland post conflict. That fact makes the emergence of David Trimble in 1995 as a unionist leader of courage all the more remarkable and significant.

In making these judgements about the good faith and courage of individuals, Ministers had a number of tools available. 'Political intelligence' was gathered at a community level over many years by able Northern Ireland Office civil servants and gave a real sense of what the various sections of the community and their political leaders were feeling. Routine engagement with the media and opinion polling provided a further resource separate from the views of the parties themselves. In the case of parties allied to paramilitary groups, sophisticated counter-terrorist intelligence assessments were a significant factor. But the judgements ultimately have to be political and personal, based on instinct, and at crucial junctures, the product of private conversations between the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and individual leaders.

The consequences of those judgements have been far-reaching: most of the decisions taken by Government since 1998 have been coloured by the need to build or maintain confidence in one community or another, or to allow one leader or another space to manage their constituency. It has not been an easy balancing act in a place where politics is often seen as a zero sum game - success for one side is measured by the volume of complaints from the other side. Leaders can only move so far in advance of their community and managing the public sense of winners and losers is critical to their ability to deliver.

### **Aligning international influence**

Judgements about key leaders within Northern Ireland were complemented by the alignment of international interest. A British Prime Minister, like Tony Blair, prepared to devote unprecedented time and energy to solving the problem as a real priority, came into power to find a strong, confident Irish Government, led by Bertie Ahern, and a US President in Bill Clinton who was influenced by the large and politically significant Irish American community and open to positive intervention or support. All three were prepared to work to a shared strategy. As other parts of the world have discovered, these alignments of leadership and circumstances do not come along often: failure to seize the opportunity can mean condemning another generation to conflict. It is one thing to feel that a dispute - whether in Northern Ireland or the Middle East - will eventually be resolved, but another to grip it in such a way that resolution does not wait for generations, with all the intervening violence and turmoil. There is no inevitability about the timescale of a conflict, however deeply rooted.

The internationalisation of parts of the process - for example the management of decommissioning by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning under Canadian General John de Chastelain, Andy Sens from the USA and Tauno Nieminen of Finland - has made an important contribution. Along with the international element to the Independent Monitoring Commission, it has reassured key constituencies at critical moments, injecting trust which the British and Irish Governments could not at times provide.

It is also worth noting that those with experience and credibility from other conflicts played a role in encouraging those in Northern Ireland. The advice and reassurance of the ANC, including the active involvement of Cyril Ramaphosa, was particularly helpful to the republican movement.

Additionally, as the brief overview of the Troubles has illustrated, the bi-partisan approach to Northern Ireland taken by Labour and Conservative Governments has, despite its ups and downs, provided a stability against which both have been able to take risks. I appreciate, however, that is not the position in so many conflicts around the world where domestic political disagreement, especially between main political parties, is a further stumbling block to progress.

### **Political framework**

With space and momentum created by the absence of violence and the regular energetic intervention of the Prime Minister, the challenge was to find a political framework which could allow opposing political leaders to govern together without compromising the basic principles of their constitutional identities.

In practice, this requires a good deal of creative thinking by politicians and their officials. It was not difficult to see that a 'consociational' model of government was the most likely to fit Northern Ireland's unique dispute, although there are plenty of other forms of power-sharing. But the devil has been in the detail: for example, each tilt towards or away from Irish Government involvement was a matter of real difficulty in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement. And who would have predicted that a 19th century Belgian lawyer - Victor d'Hondt - would hold the key to the selection of a coalition in Northern Ireland? These detailed structures are secondary to a basic political will to agree, but they can, if handled wrongly, prevent such a political will from becoming a political agreement.

The strength of the Good Friday Agreement and other negotiations culminating in last year's St Andrews Agreement, was its attempt to be holistic. It did not simply address the constitutional framework, but looked at the broader political hurdles: policing, human rights, victims, equality etc. Dealing with those issues has been at least as difficult as the constitutional model. Policing has always had the potential to destroy any agreement, partly because law and order goes to the heart of legitimacy of the state, and partly because the police were in the frontline in the conflict with paramilitary groups and suffered greatly: reforming policing opened the rawest wounds of the Troubles.

It was these emotive issues - policing, prisoner releases, decommissioning of weapons - which touched the lives of so many individuals, rather than the constitutional framework itself which threatened the process on so many occasions.

Monitoring and influencing public opinion has been a key part of this process at every point. No Government expected unionism to embrace a consociational approach with enthusiasm, still less one with a North-South dimension. But acquiescence by the majority of unionists who wanted peace and wanted a settlement was the key. Once again, time itself was an objective - keeping the process on track for as long as it took for the physical force tradition in republicanism to be ended, and for as long as it took unionism to get comfortable with the fundamentals of a new political framework.

Equally, however, there comes a point when the process needs to be brought to a head. This was one of the key issues I faced as Secretary of State during my time from May 2005, and I decided that real deadlines had to be set in 2006. I determined, with the backing of both Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, that the Government had to take the risk of the process collapsing in order to force the parties to resolve their differences. Furthermore, that the costs of failure to the parties would be serious. This was, first, in terms of loss of salaries and

allowances for Assembly Members together with substantial public funding of their organisations which they had enjoyed for years. And, second, the wrath of voters opposed to some of my domestic reforms, notably the introduction of water charges from which Northern Ireland alone in the United Kingdom was exempt. Water charges proved to be the dominant issue of the election campaign in February/March 2007, the age old enmities and divisions paling by comparison.

## **Dialogue**

At the heart of this process - and arguably as its ultimate objective - has been the development of dialogue at every level. It is worth reflecting on this for a moment, because I know that the risks and compromises involved in establishing dialogue often dominate and frequently destroy the chance of progress almost before it begins. That much is certainly a feature of the Middle East peace process, where, from time to time, both sides have imposed pre-conditions which effectively have blocked any dialogue from beginning. Pre-conditions can strangle the process at birth.

It is true that entering into dialogue - even secret dialogue - with paramilitary groups carries risks. The real risk may not be so much one of political embarrassment, but rather the danger of encouraging an armed group in the belief that its campaign is working. Yet if one of the keys to resolving conflict is identifying positive elements and encouraging those leaders who are prepared to contemplate an end to violence, then dialogue is a key way of making that judgement. And my view is that, in order to achieve results, it is worth erring on the side of being exposed for trying to talk - even to those seen as 'the enemy' and maybe still engaged in paramilitary or illegal activity and therefore 'dissidents' from a process. That was attempted with republicans from the early 1970s and, despite public criticism, I have engaged with loyalists linked (and in the case of some individuals directly) to the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Ulster Defence Association whose record of violence and criminality has been much more current. Of course there need to be clear objectives and clear messages: it needs to be understood that an end to violence is the pre-requisite to progress. And there has to be some discernible political programme, some negotiable objectives, for dialogue to make progress. As I have already shown, early exploratory talks with the IRA failed for this reason, where later engagement succeeded.

But trying is almost always worthwhile. A fruitless encounter can sow the seeds of later success. Contact at low level can pay off years later and handling small issues with integrity - for example the release of a prisoner to take part in talks - builds trust and confidence over time. Dialogue brings in those elements of the 'extremes' in a conflict or process which are capable of delivering the most obdurate constituencies. Indeed, as we saw recently in Northern Ireland (and more than a decade ago in South Africa) bringing the most polarised parties to the point of agreement can be absolutely critical to

ensuring that any deal sticks. I am confident that the agreement in Northern Ireland will stick precisely because it was brokered between the two most polarised positions held by Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and Gerry Adams' Sinn Fein. That cannot be achieved without dialogue, even dialogue through a third party - in the case of Northern Ireland with the Government acting as a conduit between DUP and Sinn Fein. Democratic Governments should have the self-confidence in their own values to be able to take risks for peace where it is much more difficult for those locked in ethnic or communal struggle to engage with each other. Furthermore, identifying side issues which enable negotiators to demonstrate progress to their sceptical followers is important.

As I hope I have illustrated, in managing the resolution of a conflict Governments need to take risks at every stage to keep the process alive, to maintain momentum, to prevent violence filling the vacuum left by the absence of political engagement. Governments need to be dogged, determined, imaginative, inclusive and flexible, to try everything and never to give up in the face of inevitable set-backs and disappointments. In short, to show leadership. Democratic Governments have an absolute responsibility to keep optimism alive - if they cannot believe in the possibility of achieving lasting peace then how can they expect others who have suffered to do so?

### **Drawing the threads together**

I have set out some of the lessons we have learnt in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland in the hope that they will be helpful in spreading this optimism and underpinning the inspirational images of recent weeks. There are other important areas such as the role of victims and the handling of the past which, as we have learnt in South Africa, deserve separate treatment and to which we must return before too long.

But today I want to conclude by drawing together some of the threads which I hope are already visible. I have argued that over the past ten years a number of key principles have guided the Government's handling of Northern Ireland: the need to create space and time, free from violence, in which political capacity can develop; the need to identify key individuals and constructive forces; the importance of inclusive dialogue at every level, wherever there is a negotiable objective; the taking of risks to sustain that dialogue and to underpin political progress; the alignment of national and international forces; the need to avoid or resolve pre-conditions to dialogue; perhaps above all the need to grip and micro-manage a conflict at a high political level, refusing to accept the inevitability of it. And to do so, not intermittently, but continuously whatever breakdown, crises and anger get in the way.

I have resisted the temptation to apply these principles to other conflicts and I look forward to discussing this with you. But even a quick glance at this

checklist of key principles throws up some obvious points. In the Middle East there is a strong sense that the conflict has not been gripped at a sufficiently high level over a sufficiently sustained period - efforts and initiatives have come and gone and violence has returned to fill the vacuum. International forces have not been aligned and dialogue has been stunted. Periodic engagement has led to false starts and dashed hopes.

In Iraq, the failures of covert intelligence were compounded by the absence of political intelligence: a comprehensive lack of understanding of the sectarian forces and fault lines present across the country. The problem was compounded of course by post-invasion policy failures.

The security situation has remained complicated and there are still serious concerns over levels of sectarian violence in parts of the country. This is particularly the case in Baghdad and the surrounding provinces, where Multi-National Forces are working in partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces to reduce the levels of violence and give key Iraqi figures from across the political spectrum, the chance to make real progress towards national reconciliation.

The question is: 'does Northern Ireland provide us with any pointers that could assist the efforts of the coalition in Iraq on the way forward?' The answer is, 'possibly.' For example, like in Northern Ireland, we and the Government of Iraq have been keen to harness the influence of neighbouring powers, each of whom has an interest in the future stability of Iraq. This will need dialogue, including with Sunni and Shia representatives. It also requires a strategy to tackle the rise of Islamist extremism in Iraq.

Similarly, the terrorist threat from Al Qaeda is fundamentally different from the terrorist threat that existed in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. It is not rooted in political objectives capable of negotiation, but rather in a reactionary totalitarian ideology that is completely opposed to democracy, freedom and human rights. Negotiation with Al Qaeda and its foreign Jihadists in Iraq is therefore politically and morally out of the question.

However, there is one important lesson from Northern Ireland that we can use in Iraq: just as legitimate grievances in Northern Ireland fuelled republican sympathies, grievances in Iraq provide fertile territory for Iraqi militants. Addressing people's grievances, as we did in Northern Ireland, can undercut the extremists who seek to inflame and exploit them, so creating more fertile ground for a political process to complement engagement by the elected government of Iraq.

In Sri Lanka where I became involved and I visited as Foreign Office Minister, one of my predecessors as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, is engaged in attempts by the Sri Lankan, British and Norwegian Governments to help broker a new way forward. There is much work to be done, not least in accepting that there cannot be a military solution for either side, that the absence there of sustained bi-partisanship between the two main



parties is an obstacle, and in developing viable forms of devolution to suit the particular history of Sri Lanka, reconciling bitterly competing Sinhalese and Tamil interests.

I hope also that resolving the conflict in the Basque region of Spain will make progress in the coming months because the lessons certainly apply there too. Once again those on all sides in Northern Ireland have played and continue to play a useful role. And there are other unresolved conflicts around the world, from Kashmir to Western Sahara, which could benefit from our experience.

The global threat from international terrorism and the turmoil in the Middle East present the world with an opportunity to address long-running conflicts, to address their root causes and to drive forward their solutions. The debate on foreign policy underway in the United States offers the possibility of framing new ways of resolving conflict, balancing commitment to security solutions and military intervention against the political will necessary to address underlying causes. Both are essential but we urgently need to redress the balance: to match our commitment to global security with our commitment to global justice and human rights, to global development and global conflict resolution. The Northern Ireland experience, bitter as it was, gives the United Kingdom a strong voice in advocating this re-balancing of Western foreign policy.

## **Conclusion**

I began by saying that history has bedevilled Northern Ireland. What happened on the 8 May 2007 was a decisive moment in which the people, through their politicians, decided to break free from history, to shape a new history. But that is a process in itself, and no-one is under any illusions that it will be completed quickly. The faultlines in Northern Ireland society, created centuries ago and deepened by violent conflict, will take generations to close over, just as the joy of a non-racial democracy in South Africa has not abolished the awful legacy of apartheid. But beginning the process on the basis of politics alone is what really matters - that is the real triumph of the past few years and I hope the inspiration to those parts of the world that cannot yet even see as far as the starting point.

## **Postscript**

At Hillsborough Castle on a beautiful sunny afternoon on 'Devolution Day', 8 May 2007, I hosted a reception to thank all the Northern Ireland Office civil servants who were packed into the Throne and Drawing rooms for their work over the years. The chief guest was the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who also expressed his gratitude and admiration, with a few anecdotes about the Castle (the Secretary of State's official residence) which has hosted key negotiations over the years.

Some of those present - and their predecessors - had experienced tough times: prison staff for example, who had been targets for killings and attacks; or the despair of yet another crisis. I spoke then of - and record now - some of the most dedicated and able civil servants I had ever worked with in ten years of government. The story told in this pamphlet is also a tribute to them, and their achievements, and not just the politicians they have served with such distinction. They, together with Tony Blair's Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell (an indispensable figure throughout the last ten years of the process) - had quite literally helped make history that day.

Peter Hain

### **Right Honourable Peter Hain MP**

Born in Nairobi and brought up in South Africa, Peter Hain was educated at Pretoria Boys High School, University of London and Sussex University.

Mr Hain achieved international prominence as a result of his work in the anti-apartheid movement. He played a leading role in the campaign to secure a 'Yes' vote in the 1997 devolution referendum in Wales. He is a former head of research with the Union of Communication Workers and a former chairman of the Tribune newspaper.

Peter Hain was first elected as Member of Parliament for the Neath constituency in April 1991. Since 1997 he has held the post of Minister in the Welsh Office, Minister for Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and the United Nations in the Foreign Office, Minister for Energy at the DTI and Minister for Europe at the Foreign Office. He was promoted to the Cabinet in October 2002 when he became Secretary of State for Wales. He became Leader of the House of Commons in June 2003 while retaining his position as Secretary of State for Wales.

Peter Hain MP was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in May 2005 and remains Secretary of State for Wales.

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