



THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT: ENDING WAR AND ENDING CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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The 1998 Agreement that ended Northern Ireland's bloody civil war has often been attributed to many of the remarkable individuals involved in the peace process. But how much of a difference did they really make? James Steinberg explores this question by examining the interaction between structural factors, the peace process, and efforts made by key individuals involved in the process. He also looks at what lessons this history holds for future peace negotiations.

Twenty years ago, Northern Ireland's bloody civil war ended with the signing of the "Good Friday" Agreement.¹ The scale of the conflict may seem small in terms of absolute numbers of those killed and wounded when compared to larger tragedies of the 20th century.² Nevertheless, its duration, spanning nearly 30 years from the onset of the "Troubles" until the Agreement was signed in 1998, and its pervasive impact — not just on Northern Ireland, but on the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and even the United States — more than justifies the importance attached to the achievement of peace. Since 1998, implementing the Agreement has proved difficult and the peace remains fragile, tested now by the fallout from Britain's "Brexit" vote. Yet, the Agreement remains one of the most important examples of how a decades-long sectarian conflict can come to an end.³

There have been many books and articles written

by participants, journalists, and academics that have sought to describe the process leading up to the Agreement and to explain why it came about.⁴ Peace, like victory, has a thousand fathers, and studies of the peace process have identified a wide range of factors that arguably contributed to the outcome. Why then yet another article on this topic? My contribution seeks to "bridge the gap" between two complementary perspectives: the viewpoint of a diplomat deeply involved in the negotiations and that of a teacher and scholar of international relations and conflict resolution.⁵ My goal is twofold: to help practitioners think about how to orchestrate the various tools of diplomacy in support of current and future peacemaking efforts,⁶ and to contribute to the long-standing academic debate among historians and political scientists about causal explanations in international relations. In particular, I want to examine the interaction between structural factors (such as demographics, economics, and the end of

1 As with almost every issue, large and small, involving Northern Ireland, even terminology is controversial and tinged with partisan overtones. In the United States, the Irish Republic, and among Northern Ireland nationalists, the agreement is commonly referred to as the "Good Friday Agreement." Among unionist, it is often called the "Belfast Agreement." In this essay I will use the "1998 Agreement" or simply the "Agreement," to describe the outcome of the peace process.

2 Approximately 3,500 people were killed during the Troubles. Of these, a little more than 1,500 were from the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, 1,250 from the Protestant community, and the rest (around 700) from outside Northern Ireland (including British security forces). See, "Statistical Breakdown of Deaths in the Troubles," Wesley Johnston, accessed May 8, 2019, http://www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/troubles/troubles_stats.html.

3 This paper largely focuses on the events leading up to the 1998 Agreement, but, in order to assess what happened and why, I touch briefly on subsequent developments, without going into detail into the many follow-on negotiations involving the Agreement's implementation.

4 This paper draws on a number of these studies, as well as my own personal involvement, beginning in the 1980s as an aide to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, and, more substantively, as director of policy planning at the State Department (1994–1996) and deputy national security advisor to President Bill Clinton (1996–2000). The studies include Eamon Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001); Thomas Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Ending the Troubles* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); George J. Mitchell *Making Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Cathy Gormley-Heenan, *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Maria Power, ed., *Building Peace in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); Tim Pat Coogan, *The Trouble: Ireland's Ordeal 1966–1996 and the Search for Peace* (Boulder, CO: Roberts Reinhardt Publishers, 1996); Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon, and Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921–2001: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif, 2002); Paul Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2007); Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

5 At least one other scholar-participant has written extensively about the peace process: Paul Bew, long-time professor of Irish Politics at Queens University, Belfast, was an advisor to David Trimble.

6 The idea for this essay arose out of a RAND conference designed to help those involved in the Afghanistan peace process think about lessons learned from past peace conferences. I am grateful to RAND for its support of the initial research on this project.

the Cold War), the peace process, and efforts made by key individuals involved in the process.

In any analysis of this kind, the question of agency looms heavily. The Northern Ireland peace process involved many remarkable, dynamic individuals, in and out of government, who populate the narrative. It is relatively easy to describe the decisions these individuals made, while it is somewhat more complex to explain their motivations and calculus (although memoirs abound, there is always danger that the accounts are self-serving).⁷ More challenging is the question of how much, if any, difference these individuals made, or whether the deeper economic and social forces at work would have led to an end of the conflict independent of the peace process itself. The very vividness of the first-hand accounts of events and the colorful personalities of the central players may contribute to over-attribution of causality. Almost every major actor in the drama has, at one point in time, been “nominated” as the “indispensable” figure in making the Agreement possible, from David Trimble and John Hume, who were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, to Gerry Adams and his co-negotiator Martin McGuinness, George Mitchell, Tony Blair, Bertie Ahearn, Bill Clinton, Monica McWilliams, May Blood (of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition), and even the shadowy MI5 agent who helped broker key talks between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the British government in the early 1990s.

For this reason, I begin my analysis by examining the broader, structural factors, before delving into the specifics of the negotiators and the negotiation. I then turn to the motivations and goals of the principal actors: the political parties in Northern Ireland, civil society, and the three governments involved (the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States).⁸ Next, I look at the negotiating process leading up to the 1998 Agreement. Finally, my analysis turns to some conclusions about how to assess the impact of the various factors and the potential implications of that analysis for future peace processes.

The Historic, Economic, and Social Context

The conflict in Northern Ireland — the Troubles — in its violent form spanned three decades, from about 1968 to 1998. It led to the loss of thousands of lives and even more casualties, affecting Catholics and Protestants; paramilitaries and civilians in the North; British security forces serving in Northern Ireland, England, and on the European continent; and British civilians who were victims of IRA attacks in England. The violence caused billions of dollars of economic harm and left deep social and psychological scars. It had its roots in the complex history of Ireland’s relationship with Great Britain, especially the settlement that led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the partition of the island into the Irish Free State and the “province” of Northern Ireland, the six northern counties on the island that opted out of the Irish Free State under the provisions of the treaty. The source of the Northern Ireland conflict was, in part, political — the legacy of the dispute among Irish nationalists about whether to accept, even temporarily, the partition of Ireland. It was also social and economic. While Catholics made up most of the island, Protestants composed the majority in the six Ulster provinces. For historic and geographic reasons, the counties of Ulster were more industrialized and prosperous than the more rural south, and wealth and political power was largely controlled by Protestant elites.⁹ Thus, class, religious and ethnic distinctions, as well as a legacy of *de jure* and *de facto* religious discrimination against Catholics in the North all combined to set the stage for sectarian strife.

But just as the violence erupted in the 1960s, societal and economic forces began to change this equation. Differential birth rates and patterns of emigration led to a relative increase in the Catholic population of Ulster. Immediately after the partition in 1921, the percentage of Catholics in Ulster was just under 35 percent,¹⁰ but by the time of the 2001

7 In addition to George Mitchell, see, for example: Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years: Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries* (London: Hutchinson, 2007); Gerry Adams, *An Irish Journal* (Kerry: Brandon, 2001); Gerry Adams, *Hope and History: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (Kerry: Brandon, 2004); David Trimble, *To Raise Up a New Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Belfast Press, 2001); Kate Fearon, *Women’s Work: the Story of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), as well as the memoirs of President Clinton, Prime Minister Major, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Marjorie “Mo” Mowlam, etc.

8 Some might fairly argue that I have left out one key group of actors — the civil servants and policy advisors (including government ministers) who played a role that was somewhat independent of their political masters. This group includes important figures such as Peter Brooke, Quentin Thomas, Jonathan Powell, and Mo Mowlam on the British side; Martin Mansergh, Sean O’Huiginn, and Paddy Teahon on the Irish side; and Tony Lake and Nancy Soderberg in the United States — to name just a few — as well as the advisors to the various parties in Northern Ireland. For a rich, first-hand account of the role of officials on the British side, see Graham Spencer, ed., *The British and Peace in Northern Ireland*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

9 Within the Protestant community there were significant class and social differences. Although the dominant forces in Northern Ireland were Protestant, many Protestants were also poor or marginalized, and these differences accounted in part for the divisions and strains within the unionist community, a dimension richly documented in Dean Godson’s biography of David Trimble: *Himself Alone: David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism* (London: Harper Collins, 2004).

10 1926 census. Hennessey puts the Catholic percentage at about 33 percent at the time of partition. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 2.

census the proportion had risen to 40.2 percent, compared with 45.6 percent non-Roman Catholic Christians.¹¹ Equally important, Catholics make up an even greater share of the younger population, a plurality in all age groups up to 39 in the 2011 census, with predictable consequences for the future makeup of the Northern Ireland electorate. The growing Catholic population meant that Catholics — if they chose to participate — would have a growing voice in the politics of the province, even under a pure majoritarian governance model without a formal power-sharing arrangement. Thus, provincial self-governance provided, at least in theory, an alternative, or complementary strategy to empowering the Catholic/nationalist community in Ulster. Perhaps even more significant, it opened up the prospect that at some time in the foreseeable future, a majority in the North might favor leaving the United Kingdom and joining the South, a possibility that both the Irish and British governments foresaw and implicitly endorsed by enshrining the principle of “consent” in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.¹²

Changes in the economic fortunes of the two parts of the Irish island also had an impact on the course of the conflict and the eventual peace agreement. During the second half of the 20th century, the economy of the Irish Republic was transformed, fueled to a considerable degree by the entry of Ireland and the United Kingdom into the European Union in 1973.¹³ This trend began to take effect in the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s with the emergence of high rates of growth in the South, earning the Republic the sobriquet “Celtic Tiger.” At the same time, demographic and economic forces, combined with negative impact from the Troubles on investment prospects in Ulster, led to a relative

decline in the economic performance of the North.¹⁴ The result was a growing convergence in living standards between the two parts of Ireland. By 2018, GDP per capita in Northern Ireland was less than half that of the Republic, although this figure, in part, reflects the outsized role of multinationals in the South. But even by more conservative estimates, the standard of living today is at least relatively comparable, North and South.¹⁵

The source of the Northern Ireland conflict was, in part, political — the legacy of the dispute among Irish nationalists about whether to accept, even temporarily, the partition of Ireland. It was also social and economic.

The improved economic fortunes of the South enhanced the attractiveness of the Republic as an economic partner for Northern Ireland, especially among the business community, increasing interest in cross-border cooperation. This was particularly true for border districts, which were among the poorest parts of both North and South. This trend accelerated with completion of the Single European Act in 1993, which both deepened economic ties among E.U. members and diminished the significance of the border between the North and South.¹⁶

11 "2001 Census, Key Statistics, Table KS07a," Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/2001-census-results-key-statistics-report-tables.pdf>; See also "Background Information on Northern Ireland Society," Conflict Archive on the Internet, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/religion.htm>, for the long term trends. In the most recent census, Catholics now make up 45 percent of the population, while Protestants make up 48 percent. "2011 Census: Religion in Northern Ireland," Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/census2011analysis/religion/religionCommentary.pdf>. Charles Landow and Mohammed Aly Sergie, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, Council on Foreign Relations, last updated March 12, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/background/northern-ireland-peace-process>.

12 "If in the future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland" the two governments "will introduce and support in the respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish." To be clear, even those sympathetic to the nationalist cause did not believe that demography would change the outcome quickly. Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement*, 28.

13 Andy Bielenberg and Raymond Ryan, "Irish Economic Development: Past, Present, Future?," *Irish Examiner*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/irish-economic-development-past-present-future-231714.html>; "Economies of Ireland, North and South, Since 1920," Encyclopedia of Irish History and Culture, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/economies-ireland-north-and-south-1920>.

14 John Bradley, "The History of Economic Development in Ireland, North and South," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, no. 98 (1999): 35–68, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/98p035.pdf>.

15 Peter Donaghy, "Is Northern Ireland Dramatically Poorer than the Republic?," *Sluggie O'Toole*, March 26, 2018, <https://sluggierotoole.com/2018/03/26/is-northern-ireland-dramatically-poorer-than-the-republic/>.

16 The importance of single market and more broadly the E.U. dimension was reflected in John Hume's first draft of what became the Downing Street Declaration. Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 111. It's worth noting that the challenge Brexit now poses to this "economics will drive politics" approach to all-island integration was foreshadowed in the divergent decisions of Ireland and the United Kingdom on the single currency. See Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement*, 26.

It is also important to consider how the wider international environment might have contributed to achieving peace in Northern Ireland. Some have suggested that the end of the Cold War reduced the salience of the U.S.-U.K. relationship and thus opened the door for greater U.S. engagement — including American President Bill Clinton's willingness to incur British Prime Minister John Major's anger by granting Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams a visa to visit the United States. To some extent, progress in solving other, arguably more difficult, conflicts — including the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and the Dayton Agreement, which ended the fighting in Bosnia — put pressure on the Northern Ireland protagonists to take similar "risks for peace." Finally, growing international attention to the problem of terrorism posed challenges to the IRA's ability to arm itself through ties with other terrorist organizations, such as Spain's Basque separatists and Columbia's Revolutionary Armed Forces, as well as through its previously vital ties to Libya under Muammar Qaddafi's rule.¹⁷

The Actors

The Northern Ireland Political Parties

The political landscape in Northern Ireland leading up to the 1998 Agreement consisted of two key parties on the Catholic side — the republican Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party¹⁸ — and two on the unionist side — the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party¹⁹ — along with smaller loyalist parties associated with Protestant paramilitaries,²⁰ and one non-sectarian party, the Alliance Party.

The Catholic Side

Sinn Fein, as a party, has its roots in the struggle for Irish independence in the early 20th century, but its deep involvement in Northern Ireland dates from the 1960s, and particularly from the 1969 party conference when the IRA split between the "official" wing,²¹ which favored peaceful political measures to protect Catholics rights and bring about the unification of Ireland, and the "provisional" wing, which sanctioned the use of violence (both to protect the Catholic community and to force the British to abandon Northern Ireland). The "provos" viewed efforts to introduce reform measures in the North or power sharing as simply a means to perpetuate British colonial rule.²² In the early 1980s, Sinn Fein shifted to a dual-track strategy known as "the ballot box and the Armalite"²³ — participating in parliamentary and local elections (IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands was elected to the British Parliament in 1981) while continuing its campaign of violence.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), formed in 1970 out of several smaller parties, was also committed to a united Ireland, but foreswore the use of force and focused much of its attention on the civil and political rights of Catholics under British rule. The SDLP believed that simply forcing the British out would not solve the problem — without the support of the unionist community, unification would simply continue the violent civil war (albeit under Irish rather than British sovereignty). The party emphasized the necessity for the Republic of Ireland to play a formal role in decision-making for the North. The SDLP saw this as a way to give expression to nationalists' sense of Irish "identity," to complement their British "citizenship" as residents of the United Kingdom.

The two parties (and their charismatic leaders, Adams and John Hume, respectively) were political rivals in the 1980s, contesting local elections in the North. Although Sinn Fein had some electoral

17 For an extensive treatment of the IRA-Libya connection, see Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, especially the "Prologue."

18 The term "republican" relates back to the divisions within the anti-British forces during the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1920. Republicans rejected the residual links to Great Britain retained in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Their efforts were partially vindicated by the creation of the Republic in 1949, which not only broke the formal ties to the United Kingdom but also included a constitutional claim, under Articles 2 and 3, to the counties of Northern Ireland. The repeal of these provisions was central to unionist support for the 1998 Agreement.

19 There was a third, smaller mainstream party, the United Kingdom Union Party, largely the platform for a prominent, anti-agreement Protestant member of parliament from Northern Ireland, Robert McCartney.

20 The DUP was affiliated with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force, which, together with the Progressive Unionist Party, was affiliated with the Ulster Defence Association. The perspectives of the loyalist parties are discussed in more detail below.

21 The "official" wing was heavily influenced by Marxist theory, and focused on the class conflict that it believed united the North and South rather than on the political identity of being "Irish," which had spawned the IRA at the beginning of the 20th century. See Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 56–79.

22 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 44.

23 The phrase was coined by IRA director of publicity, and long-time Adams ally, Danny Morrison in 1981: "Will anyone here object if with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?" Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 203.



success in its early efforts, its share of the nationalist vote fell throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and, despite early fears, Sinn Fein was not successful in overtaking the SDLP until after the signing of the 1998 Agreement.²⁴

During the late 1980s, Sinn Fein's views about the long-term prospects for achieving republican goals through violence began to shift. Analysts and historians have offered a number of complementary explanations for this crucial development. These include the "Ulsterization" of security, which reduced the number of British military targets and forced the IRA to attack indigenous Northern Irish security personnel;²⁵ the increasing effectiveness of British intelligence and security operations; and the inherent tensions in the "ballot box and Armalite" strategy, as IRA attacks, especially those resulting in non-combatant casualties, cut deeply into Sinn Fein's electoral support, both in the north and south of Ireland.²⁶

Adams publicly described this evolving perspective in an interview in 1988, in which he seemed to rule out the prospect of a military solution to the conflict.²⁷ This set the stage for a series of meetings between Adams and Hume leading, in 1993, to a joint agreement which included two key provisions:

As leaders of our respective parties we have told each other that we see the task of reaching agreement on a *peaceful and democratic accord* for all on this island as our primary challenge.

We both recognise that such a new agreement is only achievable and viable if it can *earn and enjoy the allegiance of the different traditions on this island, by accommodating diversity and providing for national reconciliation.*²⁸ (emphasis added)

24 In the first elections contested by both the SLDP and Sinn Fein in the early-to-mid-1980s, the SDLP led Sinn Fein by 5–6 percentage points. That margin grew to around 10 to 12 percent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sinn Fein finally overtook the SDLP in local elections and in elections to Westminster in 2001, in elections to the Stormont Assembly in 2003, and in European elections in 2004. For complete Northern Ireland elections results, see: "Election Results in Northern Ireland Since 1973," Elections: Northern Ireland Elections, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/gallsum.htm>.

25 Hennessey focuses on the "Ulsterization" of security in the North, which led to a reduced British military presence. This had the effect both of removing a major nationalist grievance and forcing the IRA to focus its violence on "Irish," albeit Protestant, victims, rather than what they considered the colonial oppressor. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 39.

26 Others, especially Moloney, argue that Adams' decision to move Sinn Fein to a political approach was part of a long-term plan conceived much earlier and which became more explicit around 1983–84. Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 240. Moloney also notes the decline in the Sinn Fein vote compared with the SDLP beginning with the 1984 European Parliament elections and accelerated by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement as well as the increasing effectiveness of British security operations and the electoral backlash stemming from a number of botched IRA operations. Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 326–49. The Enniskillen bombings, which led to the death of a number of non-combatants at a Remembrance Day event in 1987 was a particular turning point. Sinn Fein/IRA leader Martin McGuinness himself later observed, "Obviously it was going to deal a damaging blow to Irish Republicanism." Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 63.

27 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 41.

28 "John Hume/Gerry Adams Joint Statement," Sinn Fein, April 23, 1993, <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15217>.

The discussions between Sinn Fein and the SDLP took place in parallel with secret discussions between Sinn Fein and the British government.²⁹ This signal from Sinn Fein (and thus implicitly from the IRA itself) helped trigger a series of events — including the Downing Street Declaration and the decision by Clinton to grant Adams a visa to visit the United States, both discussed below — that were crucial to the 1998 Agreement. Most importantly, they led to the IRA ceasefire of 1994. Although this was not the first announced ceasefire, and although it did not last (the 1996 Canary Wharf bombing brought it to an end), it was seen both then and subsequently as a decisive shift in the trajectory of the conflict.

Sinn Fein's turn toward taking a political approach was, in part, a response to the improved prospect that its goal of unification might be achieved through peaceful means. It may also be attributed to backlash against IRA violence and Sinn Fein's continued electoral difficulties.³⁰

One of the key barriers to including Sinn Fein in the peace process was the nature of its ties to the IRA, the paramilitary organization responsible for most of the attacks on British and Ulster security forces and loyalist paramilitaries, as well as a number of high-visibility attacks in England, including a failed assassination attempt on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that killed one of her aides. The exact nature of the ties between the two groups was (and remains) hotly disputed, both in the lead-up to the Agreement and its implementation. Sinn Fein leaders always insisted that the two were separate and that Sinn Fein could not speak for the IRA.³¹ To some extent, this was a kind of deniability designed to

give the IRA flexibility to explore what was possible using Sinn Fein as a “cut out” to explore possible outcomes of the negotiations without actually committing the IRA to accepting the political route.³² At the same time, there is good reason to believe that at crucial moments the Sinn Fein leadership did not have sufficient clout within the IRA to bring about Sinn Fein's preferred outcomes, particularly on the issue of the IRA decommissioning its arms.³³ But here, too, it is impossible to rule out the judgment that this was a familiar negotiating ploy designed to persuade the other parties (unionists, Dublin, London, and Washington) that Sinn Fein had reached the end of its flexibility. Reg Empey, a key Ulster Unionist Party negotiator and unionist member of parliament, called the argument that Sinn Fein and the IRA were distinct a “charade.”³⁴

The Unionist/Protestant Parties

The dominant Protestant party in Northern Ireland for much of the 20th century was the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which, as the name makes clear, had as its central tenet preserving the union with the United Kingdom. Led from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s by James Molyneux, a strong figure who served as a member of parliament in Westminster, the UUP held uncompromising attitudes on the important issues facing Ulster: It opposed greater involvement and a greater voice for Catholics through power sharing in Ulster institutions (including in the short-lived provincial parliament, created in 1973), reforming the Royal Ulster Constabulary (seen by many Catholics as a sectarian force), and giving the Republic of Ireland a

29 For accounts of these discussions and the importance of maintaining confidential channels throughout the conflict, see: Peter Taylor, *Provos: The IRA and Sinn Fein* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) chap. 22; and Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, chap. 5.

30 The backlash also had its roots in the British strategy to move away from using British forces to provide security in favor of Northern Ireland security personnel, in particular the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The IRA could argue that violence against British forces was an attack on an “occupying force,” but attacks on the constabulary represented the killing of fellow Irish citizens.

It should be noted that some skeptics have suggested that Sinn Fein/the IRA never really embraced the political track, but rather, cynically backed the process leading up to the Agreement and ultimately the Agreement itself on the expectation that unionists would ultimately reject it, allowing Sinn Fein to revert to its traditional unification objectives after having demonstrated that compromise with Unionism was futile. See: Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement*, 30–31. Moloney disagrees, arguing that while IRA leaders Adams and McGuinness continued to make arguments of this kind to hardliners in the IRA, in fact, they had “made the choice for peace.” Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, chap. 17.

31 Most in the unionist community and in Great Britain believed that Adams was a member of the IRA's governing Army Council, an assertion consistently denied by Adams. McGuinness' links to the IRA were clearer. Moloney makes the most detailed case in support of the argument that Adams played a central, formal role in the IRA from the earliest days of the Troubles until the Agreement itself, although even by Moloney's account, there seemed to be a substantial disconnect between Adams' evolving political strategy and the active (and politically damaging) actions of the IRA in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as the use of “human bombs.” Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 347–49.

32 This was most obvious at the time the all-party talks began in 1997, when Sinn Fein accepted the Mitchell principles, allowing Sinn Fein to enter the talks, while at the same time the IRA indicated that it “had problems” with some aspects of the principles, thus preserving ambiguity about whether it had accepted exclusively peaceful means: “The Sinn Fein position actually goes beyond the Mitchell Principles. Their affirmation of these principles is therefore quite compatible with their position. As to the IRA's attitude to the Mitchell Principles per se, well, the IRA would have problems with sections of the Mitchell Principles. But then the IRA is not a participant in these talks.” “Mitchell Principles Problematic – IRA,” *Irish Times*, Sept, 12, 1997, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/mitchell-principles-problematic-ira-1.105491>.

33 In *A Secret History of the IRA*, Moloney catalogues the serious challenges to Adams' strategy during the key months leading up the Agreement.

34 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 281.

role in Northern Ireland affairs.³⁵

Although the UUP had strong ties to the Conservative (Tory) Party in Great Britain, there were also tensions, stemming from history, cultural differences, and economics, as well as an abiding fear that unionism was more important to the UUP (and Northern Ireland Protestants generally) than it was to Tories. This fear was stoked by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which opened the possibility that Ulster's ties to the United Kingdom could be sacrificed through the political process.³⁶ The 1990 statement by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke that "The British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland" further stoked these fears.³⁷

This unionist anxiety about depending on Westminster to protect their interests led to increasing unionist focus on autonomy and self-governance for Northern Ireland, in contrast to the arguments of "integrationists" like Enoch Powell, who argued that Ulster should be governed directly from Westminster, no different than the rest of the United Kingdom.³⁸ Some unionists placed their hopes on Conservative Prime Minister John Major's dependence on the votes of unionist members of parliament to maintain his parliamentary majority following the 1992 elections. That hope was undercut first by Major's decision to support the Anglo-Irish "Frameworks" document of 1996, seen by unionists as a sellout to the Irish, and later by Labour's victory in 1997. The unionists' desire to achieve greater control over their destiny played a crucial role in the final decision to accept the 1998 Agreement, as Empey later explained:

We had been dying death by a thousand cuts for 30 years. Unionism had been excluded from the decision-making process since 1972. Throughout that period, direct rule [by the U.K. government in London] had worked against Unionism. Policy decisions had been taken on a whole range of issues that were not in the interest of Unionism.³⁹

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The growing focus on autonomy as a way to protect unionist/Protestant interests in Northern Ireland played an important role in the rise of David Trimble as the head of the UUP. Although Trimble had a long history in unionist politics, he was largely overshadowed by other prominent UUP leaders, both among unionist members of parliament and constituency figures. His involvement in the Drumcree Orange Order parade in 1995 propelled his rise to the top, burnishing his apparently hardline unionist credentials by ostentatiously defying the British attempt to limit a Protestant parade through a Catholic neighborhood.⁴⁰ This association helped sustain his credibility with unionists, who, during the negotiations, were required to abandon traditional "red lines," including participating in talks with Sinn Féin in 1997 without prior decommissioning and, ultimately, signing the 1998 Agreement without decommissioning. Although Trimble

35 For a rich history of the evolution of the UUP during this period, see Godson, *Himself Alone*.

36 The Anglo-Irish Agreement had a complex impact on subsequent events. As noted above, it did appear to contemplate a political process that could lead to a united Ireland, as well as conceded a role for the South in Northern Ireland affairs. At the same time, this possibility was undercut by Thatcher's own hardline unionist sensibilities, reflected in her famous "out, out, out" speech of 1984, in which she ruled out the three solutions for Northern Ireland proposed by the Irish government — unity, federation, or joint authority (between the United Kingdom and Ireland). Thatcher justified the concessions in the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a way to gain Irish support for tougher security measures against the IRA. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 26.

37 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 72.

38 Hennessey argues that Molyneux did not share this distrust, despite the Downing Street Declaration, quoting Molyneux's statement, "There is no possibility of us being betrayed." Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 92. But the subsequent release of the British-Irish Framework Documents in 1995, which proposed to create North-South bodies with more than consultative powers, badly undercut Molyneux's credibility and helped lead to his replacement by Trimble. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 97.

39 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 251.

40 Trimble had earlier established his unionist bona fides by helping to bring down the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974, an earlier attempt at resolving the Northern Ireland conflict. Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 174. Trimble himself has argued, "I am a product of the destruction of Stormont," — the decision of the British government to abolish the Protestant-dominated Stormont, Assembly, first by direct British rule and then by a power-sharing arrangement with nationalists. Godson, *Himself Alone*, 25.



secured a majority of his party's council in support of the Agreement, the decision triggered a split within the UUP and ultimately contributed to the UUP's electoral eclipse by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The second leading party on the unionist side was the DUP, formed in the 1970s. Led by the fiery Presbyterian minister, Reverend Ian Paisley, the DUP was even more rigid in rejecting any accommodation with either the nationalists in Northern Ireland (especially through power sharing) or with the Irish government in the South. The DUP largely boycotted the peace negotiations, in part because it insisted on a complete and credible renunciation of violence and prior decommissioning before sitting down with any of the parties linked to paramilitaries (republican or loyalist). Ironically, following the Agreement, the longest period of stable devolved government in Northern Ireland came during a time when the DUP shared power with Sinn Féin (2010–17).⁴¹

The other key parties on the Protestant/unionist side were those associated with the loyalist paramilitaries. They were, in many respects, the counterparts of Sinn Féin/the IRA. These included the Progressive Unionist Party, headed by David Ervine and associated with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force, and the Ulster Democratic Party, headed by Gary McMichael and associated with the Ulster Defence Association.

Although the loyalists were, during the 1970s and 1980s, the most militant of the Protestant groups, they also suffered the most from the fighting — and their decision, much like that of the IRA, to turn from violence to political negotiations gave significant momentum to the peace process. The first evidence of this new orientation emerged in the form of a split between the two principal loyalist groups, the Ulster Defense Association, which remained committed to violence, and the Ulster Volunteer Force, which began to advocate for negotiations. Ultimately, both groups declared a ceasefire shortly after the IRA ceasefire of Aug. 31, 1994, and, in the ensuing years, became an important advocacy group within the Protestant/unionist movement at difficult moments in the negotiations.⁴²

Non-Sectarian Involvement

The Alliance Party was founded in 1970 as a pro-union, but non-sectarian, party. The Alliance was the only political party that sought votes from both the nationalist and unionist constituencies.⁴³ It received an estimated seven to 10 percent of the vote in the 1980s and 1990s and it participated in the Northern Ireland Forum (from which the participants in the negotiations for the 1998 Agreement were chosen) and won six seats in the first Northern Ireland Assembly election. Its leader, Lord John Alderdice, was an active participant in the all-party negotiation. One Alliance official later described the party's contribution as a “weathervane” — making sure that proposals were neither too pro-union nor too pro-nationalist and advocating for the integrity of the process, particularly the commitment to exclusively peaceful means.⁴⁴

Civil Society Groups

A variety of civil society organizations functioned as peace advocates and ultimately were involved in the talks that led to the Agreement through the election of representatives from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition to the Northern Ireland Forum and, as a result, the formal peace talks. These groups frequently complained that their representatives were excluded from key discussions, both formal and informal. It is hard to assess their specific impact on the signing of the 1998 Agreement. To some extent, they represented a concrete expression of underlying public sentiment, which yearned for an end to the violence, that would have had an impact on the traditional political leaders even in the absence of the groups' formal participation in the talks. Some analysts have argued that civil society organizations contributed by acting as honest brokers, broadening the agenda, and building public support for the Agreement's subsequent ratification and that their involvement helped make the Agreement more durable.⁴⁵ Skeptics like Fred Halliday, however, have challenged the importance of civil society in the Northern Ireland peace process:

41 Although the UUP held a plurality of unionist votes in the first election for the Northern Ireland Assembly, the DUP supplanted the UUP in the second election in 2003 and its margin over the UUP has grown since then. “Election Results.” UUP's troubles were earlier apparent in the 1999 European parliamentary elections, where it was outpolled by the DUP.

42 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 179–80. Hennessey argues, “The UFF [Ulster Freedom Fighters] and UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] support for the peace process was the decisive difference. It robbed extreme Unionism of a cutting edge.” *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 90.

43 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 44.

44 See Brian Eggins, *History and Hope: The Alliance Party in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: The History Press, 2015) fn. 162.

45 See Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstein, “Women's Participation in Northern Ireland Peace Negotiations Made Them Less Likely to Fair,” *The Hill*, April 13, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/383059-womens-participation-in-peace-negotiations-in-northern-ireland-made>.

[W]hen it comes to internal conditions, the central issue remains the intentions of the main military and political players....Protest, denunciation, scorn may play a role, but this is not enough to sway the 'hard' men and women....it comes through a decision by the nasty people that it is, at that particular moment, more advantageous to pursue peace than war.⁴⁶

Religious leaders were involved at various stages of the peace process, beginning as early as the 1960s, though as institutions they largely resorted to exhortation. Individual clergy, notably one Catholic priest, Father Alec Reid, did at times play a significant role.⁴⁷

The referendum that followed the signing of the Agreement revealed the differences between the two communities — while virtually all nationalists/Catholics voted to approve the Agreement, only about half of unionists voted “yes.” In the subsequent decision to go into government without decommissioning, the UUP ruling council split 58-42. But even on the Catholic side, a small splinter maximalist group, the “Real IRA,” continued to oppose the Agreement, including through the use of violence.

The Governments

The British Government

During the early years of the Troubles, the British government's strategy centered around a strong commitment to the “union” and a conviction that peace could only be achieved through a tough security posture. This approach was crystallized when Edward Heath's Tories replaced the Labour government of Harold Wilson in 1970.⁴⁸

In an attempt to quell the violence, in 1972 Heath abolished the Protestant-dominated Parliament of Northern Ireland, known as the “Stormont” Assembly,⁴⁹ which had exercised limited self-government in Northern Ireland since partition.

In 1973, the British government proposed a new approach, the Sunningdale Agreement, returning most of the previous powers (other than security) to a reformed Northern Ireland Assembly, which would take decisions under a power-sharing arrangement between unionists and nationalists. Sunningdale also included a role for the Republic of Ireland in the form of North-South bodies designed to foster cooperation across the island. Each of these elements were to feature prominently, 25 years later, in the 1998 Agreement. While Sunningdale was narrowly embraced by the UUP under its leader Brian Faulkner (as well as by the SDLP), grass roots unionist opposition crushed the agreement and pushed Faulkner from his leadership role.

Heath's successor, Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, was strongly unionist both by personal inclination and by Tory politics. Her hardline instincts were reinforced by the 1984 IRA attack on the Conservative party conference in Brighton in which she narrowly escaped and a key advisor was killed.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Thatcher's decision to conclude the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement without consulting unionist leaders was, in retrospect, a pivotal moment toward launching the peace process. Although her goal was to gain Irish support for a tougher crackdown on the IRA, her willingness to accept an Irish role in Northern Ireland affairs stunned unionists and helped fuel a sense that devolution (regional self-government) and power-sharing, rather than dependence on Westminster, was a more reliable means of protecting unionist interests.

Thatcher's successor, John Major, was less personally wedded to unionism, and some credit him with making the major decisions — including the Downing Street Declaration and the Anglo-Irish Frameworks document⁵¹ — that ultimately led to the 1998 peace agreement. Major indisputably demonstrated considerable courage in engaging with his Irish counterparts (and indirectly with the IRA). But these actions further deepened unionist suspicions, and Major's dependence on unionist votes for holding onto his parliamentary majority

46 Fred Halliday, "Peace Processes in the Late 20th Century," in *A Farewell to Arms: From "Long War" to Long Peace in Northern Ireland*, ed. Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke, and Fiona Stephens (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 285. See also the essays in *Power, Building Peace in Northern Ireland*.

47 Moloney offers a detailed look at the role of the Catholic Church and key clergy.

48 That said, even under the Tories, there were periodic efforts to talk directly with the IRA, including the secret 1972 Cheyne Walk talks between Secretary of State for Northern Ireland William Whitelaw and an IRA delegation, including Gerry Adams, which led to an early, but brief ceasefire.

49 One of the early Northern Ireland Prime Ministers, James Craig, called it "a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant state." Godson, *Himself Alone*, 26.

50 Prior to taking office in 1979, Member of Parliament and Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Airey Neave, had been killed by a splinter republican paramilitary group, the Irish National Liberation Army.

51 The British and Irish governments issued "Frameworks for the Future" in February 1995, with proposals on all three strands of the talks. Unionists most strongly objected to provisions that allowed the two governments to decide on the authority of a future North-South body, without the prior consent of a future Northern Ireland Assembly. See Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 92–99.

constrained his room to maneuver, which led him to emphasize a permanent cessation of violence and prior arms decommissioning as pre-conditions for Sinn Fein entering peace talks, tests that nearly collapsed the process.

Although the centrality of the Northern Ireland issue came, over time, to define the two parties less and less, there remained a perception that Fianna Fail was more nationalist.

It was thus somewhat ironic that the 1997 election of Prime Minister Tony Blair, from the more traditionally “green” Labour Party, helped pave the way for the 1998 Agreement. Although unionists historically mistrusted Labour, Thatcher’s and Major’s actions had damaged unionist faith in the Tories. Moreover, during his first weeks in office, Blair made a major effort to demonstrate his support for the “consent” principle, which was fundamental to the unionist approach.⁵² In addition, Blair’s broad support for devolution (for Scotland and Wales as well as Northern Ireland) helped ease unionist fears that self-government for Northern Ireland was a first step toward leaving the Union or being given second-class status within the United Kingdom.

The Irish Government

The issue of Northern Ireland has played an outsized role in Irish politics. The identities of the major political parties in the South were built on their approach to unification. Fianna Fail, the party of Eamon de Valera, rejected the partition of Ireland and the continued ties to the Irish crown in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, which created the Irish Free State. Fine Gael was the heir of Michael Collins and the pro-Treaty forces, who acquiesced

in the exclusion of the six northern countries from the Irish Free State. Fianna Fail’s subsequent 1932 electoral triumph led to the enshrinement of a constitutional claim (in the 1937 Constitution) of sovereignty over the entire island of Ireland, a key point of contention in the 1998 negotiations until the very end. Fine Gael, by contrast, took a much harder anti-IRA line, opposing direct talks with Sinn Fein or the IRA.

Although the centrality of the Northern Ireland issue came, over time, to define the two parties less and less, there remained a perception that Fianna Fail was more nationalist. This was reflected in the approach of Fianna Fail Taoiseach Charles Haughey and, later, Albert Reynolds (who replaced Haughey in 1992), who worked hard to get Sinn Fein into the peace process. By contrast, Fine Gael Taoiseach John Bruton (1995–97) took a tougher line on decommissioning that was much closer to the British view and was considered more sympathetic to the unionist view on the importance of consent.⁵³

Initially, the elevation of Fianna Fail’s Bertie Ahearn in 1997 seemed to presage a throwback to greater support for more maximalist demands of Sinn Fein and the SDLP, although Ahearn made gestures designed to reassure unionists.⁵⁴ This more traditional Fianna Fail approach was reflected in the draft agreement Blair and Ahearn presented to the peace conference in the crucial final days of negotiation, which leaned heavily toward the nationalists’ insistence on strong and quasi-independent North-South institutions. The tabling of this draft nearly caused the talks to collapse. However, in the face of unionist revolt, Ahearn agreed, against the advice of his aides, to radically dilute these provisions in order to secure unionist agreement — a decision which has led some to nominate Ahearn as yet another candidate for the “indispensable actor” award.⁵⁵

The United States

Two competing forces shaped U.S. policy toward Northern Ireland during the early years of the Troubles. On the one hand, the United States and the United Kingdom shared a strong political bond, with historic roots reinforced by the Cold

52 Specifically, Blair indicated his support for the “triple lock” — the requirement that any change in the status of Northern Ireland required the agreement of the parties in the North, the public in the north through a referendum, and the approval of the British parliament. Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 104.

53 Albert Reynolds dubbed Bruton “John Unionist.” Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 435. It was during the administration of an earlier Fine Gael prime minister, Garrett Fitzgerald, that Ireland first accepted the idea that unification should only come about with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland, leading to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

54 After taking office, Ahearn announced “irrendentism is dead.” Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 106–107.

55 Hennessey observed, “It is doubtful that any of his Fianna Fail predecessors would have had the vision to do this.” *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 167.

War. These ties inclined Washington to defer to London on what the United Kingdom saw as a domestic conflict. Pulling in the opposite direction was a large and active Irish Catholic diaspora that sympathized with the plight of the Catholics in Northern Ireland. Irish Americans were largely in favor of Irish unification, though divided between those who came to support Sinn Féin/the IRA (IRA sympathizers in the United States provided substantial financial and material support to the group)⁵⁶ and those who opposed violence and supported the SDLP. The latter group had strong adherents in the U.S. Congress (including leaders such as House Speaker Tip O’Neill and Sen. Ted Kennedy) but the executive branch largely prioritized U.S.-U.K. ties.

Clinton had no prior involvement in the issue before taking office, but, in an unscripted moment during the presidential campaign, indicated his openness to granting a U.S. visa to Adams, who had been denied entry in the past because of his links to the IRA.⁵⁷ As a result, unionists were apprehensive when Clinton was elected. Despite the campaign statement and the presence on Clinton’s National Security Council staff of former Kennedy aide Nancy Soderberg, during his first months in office, Clinton initially adopted the pro-British line of the State Department, which opposed granting Adams a visa without the IRA first renouncing violence. But in January 1994, Clinton decided to grant the visa at the urging of Irish Taoiseach Reynolds, members of Congress (including Kennedy, who himself changed his position at the urging of Hume), and Clinton’s White House staff. Clinton had been persuaded that it was more likely to achieve an IRA ceasefire by granting the visa without precondition, a judgment that seemed to be vindicated by the IRA ceasefire in August 1994, although at the time Major was furious with Clinton.⁵⁸

U.S. involvement following the issuance of the visa followed two tracks. First, there was an effort to promote economic development and investment in Northern Ireland to demonstrate the benefits peace could confer to both communities.⁵⁹ This

was followed by more direct diplomacy through the appointment of former Senator George Mitchell to lead the negotiations and Clinton’s own personal involvement. During his dramatic visit to Belfast at Christmas 1995, Clinton went out of his way to emphasize his consultations with Trimble, leading one former unionist member of parliament, Roy Bradford, to observe at the time that the visit “significantly changed the feeling among unionists that the American agenda is exclusively nationalist.”⁶⁰ Clinton’s willingness to lend support to unionist positions came into play again in the peace process end game, when, in a phone call with Trimble, Clinton backed up Blair’s commitment to “bring down” the power-sharing agreement if the IRA did not begin decommissioning following Sinn Féin’s entry into government.

The Peace Process

The Formal Process

During the early 1990s, momentum began to build for launching a formal peace process for the first time since the failed Sunningdale conference of 1973. Initial talks began in 1991 (the inter-party or Brooke-Mayhew talks) involving the moderate parties — the two main unionist parties (the UUP and DUP), the SDLP, and the Alliance Party — and excluding the parties associated with the paramilitaries — Sinn Féin and the loyalist parties. The British government began a secret back channel dialogue with Sinn Féin in 1990 but the initiative failed and was shelved in 1993 because the British government insisted on a permanent end to violence as a condition of Sinn Féin’s participation in the peace process.⁶¹

Following a wave of violence in October 1993, and with talks on the brink of collapse, the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland issued the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993. The declaration addressed a number of the key principles to govern any settlement and opened

56 Irish American support for the IRA, including money and weaponry such as the notorious “Armalite” (AR-15), is discussed in detail in Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 114–15.

57 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 150.

58 Shane Hickey, “Major Was Furious with Clinton for Granting Adams a Visa,” *Irish Times*, Dec. 28, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/major-was-furious-with-clinton-for-granting-adams-a-visa-1.3738286>.

59 This initially took the form of the Northern Ireland Investment conference in Belfast chaired by George Mitchell and U.S. Commerce Secretary Ron Brown.

60 Roy Bradford, “Straws in the Wind Show Signs of Hope and Change,” *Irish Times*, Jan. 3, 1996, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/straws-in-the-wind-show-signs-of-hope-and-change-1.18637>.

61 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 70–74. Moloney argues that the secret process dates back to indirect contacts between Adams and Northern Ireland Secretary of State Tom King in 1986 or 1987. Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 247. Notably Moloney argued that Adams acted without the approval of the IRA Army Council.

the door for Sinn Fein to participate in formal talks following a renunciation of violence, including a “handing over of arms.”⁶² In response, the IRA, in August 1994, announced “a complete cessation of military operations,” but the two governments insisted that the action was insufficient and that the IRA had to commit to a permanent renunciation of violence and arms decommissioning to participate in negotiations. In an effort to break the stalemate, the two governments established an international body, chaired by Mitchell, to look into the decommissioning issue. The group produced a report that concluded that the IRA/Sinn Fein would never accept decommissioning as a pre-condition,⁶³ but proposed instead that all parties be required to affirm a set of principles (“the Mitchell Principles”), which included, *inter alia*, a commitment to total disarmament.

The report provided the British government a way out of the decommissioning stalemate, and the governments in London and Dublin announced that they would convene talks in June 1996 that would be open to all parties that accepted the Mitchell Principles (but without a decommissioning pre-condition). They did insist that the IRA restore its ceasefire (which the group had broken in February 1996) in order for Sinn Fein to participate, which happened in 1997.

The process of selecting delegates was a complex formula based on elections to a Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. Delegates to the negotiations were chosen by members of the forum in a way that ensured the negotiations would be dominated by the major parties but would also guarantee the participation of smaller parties, including those associated with the loyalist paramilitaries, as well as women, Labour, and the Alliance Party.⁶⁴ The process included arrangements for expelling any party that violated the conditions of entry. The hardline unionists

(the DUP and the United Kingdom Union Party) walked out at the outset, in part, in protest of the selection of Mitchell to chair the negotiations. But the UUP stayed in, partially because it didn’t trust the British government to protect its interests.⁶⁵ The hardline unionists walked out again when Sinn Fein was admitted to the talks in July 1997. Mitchell believes that their absence gave the moderate UUP room to negotiate, and that, had they stayed, an agreement might not have been possible.⁶⁶

The talks were divided into three strands: The first, chaired by the United Kingdom, was focused on governance issues for Northern Ireland. The second strand was focused on relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and was chaired by Mitchell and Harri Holkeri, a former Finnish prime minister.⁶⁷ The third was focused on Irish-U.K. relations, and was chaired by the two countries’ governments. Decisions were taken on the basis of “sufficient consensus.” For Strands Two and Three, this required a majority of each side (unionist and nationalist) separately, plus an overall majority of all delegates, as well as agreement by the two governments. Strand One had similar requirements, except the Irish government had no vote.⁶⁸ This arrangement meant that, at least theoretically, the UUP and SDLP could do a deal without either Sinn Fein or the DUP. Blair and Adams met following Sinn Fein’s entry into the talks, the first time a Sinn Fein leader had met with a British prime minister in 76 years.⁶⁹

The negotiations were protracted and by late 1997 were largely at a stalemate. This was followed by a rash of sectarian killings, which threatened to derail the process.⁷⁰ In January 1998, the British and Irish governments tabled a short document that had been negotiated with Trimble.⁷¹ In March 1998, Mitchell announced a deadline of April 9 for conclusion of the talks. The choice of date was not

62 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 81–83.

63 Mitchell reached this conclusion after consulting with the head of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Hugh Annesley. This conclusion was shared by Chilcot: “if you set a long time condition, a period of rehabilitation in which no violence took place, it would not happen.” Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 79.

64 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 42–45.

65 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 50, 60.

66 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 110.

67 The third international chair was John de Chastelain, former chief of Canada’s defense staff.

68 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 102.

69 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 113.

70 As a result of the violence, the governments voted to expel, at least temporarily, both the Ulster Democratic Party (linked to the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Freedom Fighters) and Sinn Fein. Although the decision risked collapsing the talks, in the end, it buttressed the credibility of the condition subsequent approach by demonstrating the government’s willingness to carry out its threats against non-compliant parties. Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 134–42.

71 Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 115–18. The document, called “Propositions on Heads of Agreement,” included almost all of the key features that ended up in the final Agreement.



entirely arbitrary, as the legislation that established the forum was due to expire in May 1998.⁷² In addition, Mitchell believed that the agreement had to be completed, and a ratifying referendum held, before the “marching season” in July, a time of high tensions in Northern Ireland.⁷³ The parties reached an agreement on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, after side interventions by Blair (in the form of a written letter) and Clinton (in the form of a telephone call with Trimble) designed to assure the unionists that the agreement would not be implemented if the IRA failed to move forward with decommissioning. All told, the formal talks lasted 21 months.

The Informal Negotiations

The formal peace process unfolded in parallel with a complex set of inter-related secret and informal negotiations. These included talks between the British and Irish governments; between the British and Sinn Fein/the IRA; and between the Irish and various parties, including Sinn Fein, the SDLP, and the unionists. They also included dialogue that took place in Washington in connection with

various parties’ visits to the United States and frequent contacts in Northern Ireland between U.S. diplomats and all the Northern Ireland parties.⁷⁴ Notably, there were almost no secret negotiations between the Northern Ireland parties themselves, with the notable exception of the Hume-Adams dialogue in the late 1980s.

The secret talks allowed the parties to escape the pre-conditions barriers that impeded public dialogue with “terrorists,” but at the same time, the periodic exposure of the secret talks did pose challenges to the governments’ credibility and angered the moderate parties who felt their anti-violence stance was undermined by the governments’ willingness to negotiate with parties associated with active paramilitaries.

The Agreement and Its Aftermath

The Agreement mirrored the three-strand approach of the negotiations.

Strand One established the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. “Key decisions” could only be taken by “cross-community” consent defined as:

72 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 103; Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 22.

73 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 143–46.

74 Among the most consequential of the secret talks were the meetings between Sinn Fein and a British MI5 agent, “Fred,” which led to the Peter Brooke statement that Britain had “no strategic interest” in Northern Ireland, and to the Sinn Fein-Reynolds meeting. See Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, chap. 6. Another important secret channel was between the Irish and loyalist paramilitaries, fostered by a former unionist leader, Roy Magee. Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 140.



1. either parallel consent, i.e., a majority of those members present and voting, including a majority of the unionist and nationalist designations present and voting; or
2. a weighted majority (60 percent) of members present and voting, including at least 40 percent of each of the nationalist and unionist designations present and voting.

The Executive is run by the first minister and deputy first minister, jointly elected on a cross-community basis under the same rules for making key decisions in the Assembly.

The jurisdiction of the devolved government was initially based on areas previously within the scope of the Northern Ireland government departments but could be enlarged with the approval of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Strand Two represented the North-South dimension: It created the North-South Ministerial Council and the North-South Implementation Bodies. The Agreement provided three different mechanisms for “all-island” actions: through the adoption of common policies, through coordinated policies implemented separately by the Northern Ireland and Irish governments, and through actions by North-South “implementation bodies.” To provide nationalists some confidence that the North-South dimension would not be subject to a unionist veto, the Agreement provided that the council had to agree on at least 12 “matters” for cooperation through cross-border institutions, drawn from a list of permissible subjects.⁷⁵

Strand Three established the East-West dimension: the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. The council consists of the two national governments plus the devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, with a focus on “practical co-operation” on issues within the competence of the devolved governments, while the intergovernmental conference involves only the two national governments and was designed to give the Irish government a voice on non-devolved issues, in particular, security issues.

The Agreement resolved the constitutional issues by enshrining the principle of consent:

opening the prospect of unification with the South but only with the consent of a majority of the North. The Republic of Ireland agreed to amend its constitution to eliminate claims to sovereignty over the North,⁷⁶ while the British government repealed the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, which, in fact, provided a British veto over the status of Northern Ireland. The Agreement protected the option of dual citizenship for residents of Northern Ireland, irrespective of whether, in the future, Northern Ireland remained in the United Kingdom or became part of Ireland. It additionally included human rights provisions that specifically addressed some of the major Catholic concerns, including the establishment of a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. There were also hortatory provisions on issues such as economic development and linguistic diversity.

The Agreement largely sidestepped several of the substantive issues underlying the conflict. Although recognizing the importance of reconciliation and the need to address victims of violence, the Agreement established no mechanisms for this purpose. It deferred to subsequent decisions by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning on matters relating to the timing and modalities of decommissioning.⁷⁷ Similarly, the parties deferred to a newly created Independent Commission on Policing with regard to questions of policing and justice. Finally, the Agreement included no timetable for the withdrawal of British security forces and emergency powers.

The implementation of the Agreement has faced significant challenges over the past two decades.⁷⁸ During the first decade following the signing of the Agreement, the British government twice had to restore direct rule, in 2000 and 2002, the second time for a period of five years. The first devolved government was led by the moderate parties (the UUP and SDLP) but subsequent elections have promoted Sinn Féin and the DUP to the fore. On the plus side, paramilitary violence has largely disappeared, though dissident groups remain a threat, and the British no longer play a direct security role. For an extended period following the Hillsborough Agreement (2010), when the two communities finally agreed on important issues not addressed in the 1998 Agreement (especially policing and criminal justice), the institutions

75 Agriculture, education, transport, environment, waterways, social security/social welfare, tourism, E.U. programs, inland fisheries, aquaculture and maritime, health, accident and emergency services, and urban/rural development.

76 The amendment was approved by referendum in both parts of Ireland in May 1998.

77 Interestingly, the approach used by the Decommissioning Commission drew on the experience of disarming the Kosovo Liberation Army. See Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 276.

78 For a summary of developments since the Agreement, and on-going issues, see Kristin Archick, *Northern Ireland: Current Issues and On-Going Challenges in the Peace Process*, Congressional Research Service, March 12, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21333.pdf>.

were functioning reasonably well. The Northern Ireland economy received a significant boost in the first decade following the Agreement, notably in lowered unemployment rates. Since the 2008–09 recession, growth has been much lower, but comparable to the rest of the United Kingdom.⁷⁹ Notably, the difference in unemployment rates between Catholics and Protestants has narrowed dramatically.

But political scandal in 2017 led to institutional paralysis, which remains unresolved.⁸⁰ Inter-communal mistrust remains high, and volatile issues including language, parades, and symbols continue to be flash points. Despite intensive discussions since the Agreement was signed, there is still no agreed mechanism to address historical legacy issues. Brexit further complicates the prospects for the future. The DUP supported Brexit while a modest overall majority — 56 percent — opposed it. Sinn Féin has called Brexit “the most serious threat in the history of the peace process.”⁸¹

Who and What Made the Agreement Possible?

We are now in a position to take on the difficult question of judging the importance of three factors — circumstance, people, and process — in achieving the 1998 Agreement.

There has been considerable debate about and attention given to the importance of individuals

to the successful conclusion of the Agreement. Many of the participants themselves are quite explicit in crediting the efforts of individuals. For example, in an article written after the signing of the Agreement, Trimble singled out Blair, Ahearn, and Mitchell for credit.⁸² Mitchell, in turn, focused on Blair and Ahearn,⁸³ as well as David Ervine, head of the Progressive Unionist Party.⁸⁴ Analysts, too, have weighed in, crediting, *inter alia*, Adams, Major, and Reynolds.⁸⁵ One well-connected BBC commentator later claimed that Father Alec Reid’s role was “absolutely critical” to the peace process.⁸⁶

In addition, analysts have focused on the personal relationships between key actors in the peace process, both positive and negative, as well as lack of relationships, as important factors. For example, Clinton’s strong ties with Blair facilitated coordination, in contrast with his frosty relationship with Major. Major’s strong personal relationship with Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds contributed to their ability to manage the sharp substantive differences between the two countries’ priorities.⁸⁷ Indeed, many assessments of why the process succeeded focus on trust-building exercises such as the extended Adam-Hume dialogue of 1988–93 and the decision to move the talks from Northern Ireland to the U.S. ambassador’s residence in London after the Agreement was signed but before it was implemented (providing a sharp contrast with tensions arising from the lack of personal contact or direct talks between the parties during the negotiations that produced the Agreement).⁸⁸

79 Archick, *Northern Ireland*, 19

80 Ben Kelly, “Why Is There No Government in Northern Ireland and How Did Power-sharing Collapse?” *The Independent*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/northern-ireland-talks-latest-power-sharing-deal-stormont-sinn-fein-dup-a8893096.html>.

81 Connla Young, “Sinn Féin Say Good Friday Agreement Facing Its Biggest Threat,” *Irish News*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/12/04/news/sinn-fe-in-say-good-friday-agreement-facing-its-biggest-threat-1202189/>.

82 Gormley-Heenan, *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 37, quoting David Trimble, “The Belfast Agreement,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 22, no. 4 (1999), <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ilj/vol22/iss4/2/>. Moloney argues, in *A Secret History of the IRA*, that Adams’ triumph was part of a long-term strategic plan that took years to bring to fruition. It may well be that, unlike Trimble, Adams was guided by a masterplan. But the fact that it took Adams 25 years to realize this goal suggests that favorable exogenous factors, as well as Adams’ efforts, were necessary for the plan to succeed.

83 Mitchell credits Ahearn’s willingness to reopen the “Strand Two Agreement” (against the advice of his aides), which he had reached with Blair just days before the Good Friday Agreement: “Had Ahearn insisted on the Strand Two provisions he had worked out with Blair, there would not have been a Good Friday Agreement.” Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 171.

84 Gormley-Heenan, *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 37–38, quoting George J. Mitchell “Toward Peace in Northern Ireland,” *Fordham International Law Journal* 22, no. 4 (1999), <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ilj/vol22/iss4/2/>.

85 Thus, Moloney, in arguing that the credit belongs to Adams, asserts, “The Irish peace process was a not a spontaneous phenomenon, tossed around by forces outside its control, nor was it forced upon its architects by the fortunes of war. The process was like a precooked dinner whose basic menu had largely been decided long before most of the diners knew the meal was planned.” Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, xvi. At other points, Moloney indulges in what feels like a parody of the “Cleopatra’s nose” version of counterfactual analysis: “If Annie Adams [Gerry Adams’ mother] had not insisted on making the move to Ballymurphy [an IRA stronghold in West Belfast], the IRA might never have been led by Gerry Adams, and Irish history would now look very different.” Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 46.

86 Peter Crutchley, “IRA Ceasefire 20 Years On: The Priest Who Brokered the Peace,” *BBC News*, Aug. 31, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28812366>. This view is echoed by Moloney: “To say that Father Alec Reid is the unrecognized inspiration of the peace process would be an understatement.” *A Secret History of the IRA*, 223.

87 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 115.

88 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 218. One British government official observed, “The body language changed after Winfield. Before that it was always stiff and stilted, but afterwards they no longer seemed stiff and stilted in each other’s presence. Winfield was the psychological breakthrough.” Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 264.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the role of agency is to say that circumstance dealt each of the major players a reasonably favorable hand which facilitated agreement, but that each played the hand quite skillfully.



Clinton's various meetings — with Trimble in Belfast during his 1995 visit and with all the key leaders during the annual St. Patrick's Day events in Washington D.C. — and especially his close ties with Blair, all seem to have contributed to the successful outcome as well. But subsequent difficulties with implementing the Agreement raise questions about just how much trust was generated, and, therefore, how much it might have contributed to the Agreement in the first place.

Of course, there is no definitive answer to the agency question, to the counterfactual "but for" claim.⁸⁹ There seems little doubt, for example, that Adams' belief in the efficacy of political action rather than violence and Trimble's willingness to engage in power sharing represented breaks from the past that were staunchly opposed by others in their parties until the very end (and beyond). At the same time, the two men's rise to positions of power reflected broader forces. In the case of Sinn Féin/the IRA, Adams' interest in pursuing a political solution was strengthened by the public backlash against violence, particularly after British security forces withdrew from the front lines. Indeed, it can be argued that Adams only turned to the political solution once the "ballot box and Armalite" strategy had failed. For Trimble, political changes at Westminster, which had nothing to do with Northern Ireland, left Northern Ireland's unionists more isolated and dependent on themselves to protect their interests through devolution. In that sense, both Adams and Trimble had the fortune of being at the right place at the right time to assume leadership.

Similarly, those who would give the laurel to Blair and Ahearn can argue that they succeeded in achieving, in relatively short time, what Major and his various Irish counterparts failed to accomplish. Yet, it is also possible to argue that what constrained Major, and what empowered Blair, was the size of the parliamentary majority — a fact that had little or nothing to do with their Northern Ireland policies.⁹⁰ Major has also been singled out for his willingness to engage both with Dublin and Sinn Féin, but here,

too, his choices were highly constrained. While the security strategy had blunted the IRA's efforts, there was widespread belief within British security circles (parallel to thinking in Sinn Féin) that force alone could not bring the conflict to an end.

One way to try to answer this question of agency is to examine SDLP leader Seamus Mallon's widely-quoted aphorism that the 1998 Agreement was "Sunningdale for slow learners."⁹¹ The implication of his statement is that, had "faster" learners been around in 1973–74, power sharing and North-South cooperation based on the principle of consent might have succeeded much earlier and the war might have ended much sooner.⁹² Yet, it is hard to see in the context of the violence of the first years of the Troubles that there was much that unionist leader Brian Faulkner, or any other unionist leader, could have done to rally unionist support for power sharing, or that a different British prime minister (much less a different Taoiseach), through force or guile, could have countered the ferocious unionist opposition to the Sunningdale agreement. Similarly, it is difficult to see who within the IRA could have carried the day in favor of accepting the legitimacy of a reconstituted Northern Ireland Assembly and the unionist veto over Irish unification. (It is notable that Adams himself was propelled into a leadership role by his critique of the IRA's 1975 ceasefire.)⁹³ Finally, there seems to have been no plausible Conservative leader (much less one from Labour) who could have pushed the deal through over the violent unionist opposition. In other words, Sunningdale failed, not because of poor leadership (or "slow learners"), but because circumstances were not propitious for an agreement that embodied the key principles of consent, power sharing, and cross-border institutions. Put another way, the structural changes that were just beginning to work themselves out following the onset of the Troubles were a necessary condition to the acceptance of the framework that was on offer, but they were rejected by both Sinn Féin/the IRA and the unionists in 1973.

89 The narrative presented in the earlier sections of this essay is a form of "process tracing," which helps clarify the key decisions and those responsible for the decisions. By itself, however, this approach can't really answer "what mattered" — either as necessary or sufficient cause. For this reason, counterfactual analysis is particularly useful. For a discussion of some of the considerations and difficulties, see Jack S. Levy, "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 2015): 378–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602>; Francis J. Gavin, "What If? The Historian and the Counterfactual," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (September 2015): 425–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070610>; and Neil J. Roese, ed., *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking* (London: Psychology Press, 1995).

90 See for example Mallie and McKittrick's judgment: "The election of 1997 transformed the peace process." *Endgame in Ireland*, 213.

91 See Mary Holland, "A Very Good Friday," *Guardian*, April 11, 1998, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1998/apr/12/northernireland>.

92 Hennessey challenges at least part of the claim, arguing that the 1998 Agreement had a much weaker North-South dimension which allowed for unionist acceptance. Thomas Hennessey, "Slow learners? Comparing the Sunningdale Agreement and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement," in *Sunningdale, the Ulster Workers' Council Strike and the Struggle for Democracy in Northern Ireland*, ed. David McCann and Cillian McGrattan (Manchester: Manchester University, 2017).

93 See Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 142.

At the same time, it is possible to imagine that the 1998 Agreement might have failed. It is plausible that crucial decisions in the run-up to the Agreement might have gone a different way — Ahearn's decision to revise the agreement he had reached only days before on the North-South institutions, Trimble's willingness to accept Blair's promise on decommissioning, or Mitchell's decision to impose a firm deadline. In other words, the structural forces may have been necessary, but alone they were insufficient to account for the fact that the Agreement happened when it did, in the precise shape that it took.

Of course, all of the central actors faced considerable constraints on their freedom of action. For example, Trimble spent an extraordinary amount of time and effort dealing with internal dissension within his party, and on several occasions was forced to renegotiate after finding that he could not sell a proposed deal to them. Adams, too, emphasized the constraints he faced from other leaders and the rank and file.⁹⁴ Even Hume faced internal dissension when he launched his dialogue with Adams. It is reasonable to assert that these protestations also reflected a well-known negotiating tactic — “My hands are tied.”

But it is also true that many of these leaders made important choices along the way that built sufficient credibility with their constituents to give them the necessary leeway. This was dramatically illustrated following the brutal IRA attack on a loyalist headquarters in Belfast's Shankill Road on Oct. 13, 1993. Adams' appearance as a pall bearer at the funeral of one of the IRA gunmen led many to believe that his action would kill any hopes for making progress toward peace. Yet, two months later, Adams used his credibility with the IRA to persuade its Army Council not to reject publicly the Downing Street Declaration, issued just two months after the bombing. Both governments later acknowledged that Adams' failure to participate in the funeral would have irreparably damaged his credibility with the IRA.⁹⁵ More broadly, Adams

and McGuinness demonstrated extraordinary dexterity in managing the almost unimaginable process of bringing the IRA leadership to accept the unthinkable changes in republican orthodoxy embodied in the 1998 Agreement. Similarly, Northern Ireland Secretary of State Mo Mowlam's audacious decision in January 1998 to meet with the loyalist prisoners at the Maze Prison is frequently credited with saving the process, despite the outcry of the UUP.⁹⁶ Even Trimble's notorious “dance” with the DUP's Ian Paisley at Drumcree can be seen in this light.⁹⁷ As Martin Mansergh, senior advisor to several Fianna Fail Taoiseachs during the peace process, observed, “the thin centrist strand made a valuable contribution but was not nearly strong enough to support a settlement on its own.”⁹⁸ The inclusion of parties associated with hard-line positions complicated their interactions with each other and with the governments but strengthened their legitimacy with their bases when the time came to do a deal. This argues strongly for the importance of individual choice.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the role of agency is to say that circumstance dealt each of the major players a reasonably favorable hand which facilitated agreement, but that each played the hand quite skillfully.⁹⁹ Each saw, earlier than many others, the path forward that led to the Agreement. It is certainly possible to imagine that others who might plausibly have been in their place — even those who shared the same basic approach to the conflict — might not have sealed the deal when it came about. At the same time, the very fact that the Agreement ultimately found implementation through a pact that featured Paisley as first minister is a reflection of the power of the forces pushing to end the fighting. Agency played an important role in the timing and precise terms of the Agreement, but arguably a much less significant one in the broader turn away from violence.

A similar analysis applies to assessing the role of process — both formal and informal — in ultimately reaching the Agreement. At its core, the

94 This was particularly true on the issue of decommissioning, where Adams repeatedly insisted on the limits of his influence over the IRA. His position was corroborated by the British head of the Northern Ireland police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary), Hugh Annesley, who, when asked by Mitchell at a key juncture in 1995 whether Adams could get the IRA to decommission before an agreement, replied, “No, he couldn't do it even if he wanted to. He doesn't have that much control over them.” Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 30.

95 Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 414–16.

96 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 221–23.

97 Godson describes the episode in detail. Godson, *David Trimble and the Ordeal of Unionism*.

98 Martin Mansergh, “Forward,” in *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, ed. Timothy J. White (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), ix.

99 Gormley-Heenan examines this problem at some length. *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 91–96.

most significant feature of the process was the focus on inclusivity,¹⁰⁰ especially the controversial decision to involve the parties associated with the paramilitaries before they unequivocally and demonstrably renounced violence, rather than seeking to achieve an agreement involving only the “constitutional” parties. From the early days of the Troubles through the early 1990s, both the British and Irish governments had pursued a different approach, seeking to marginalize the paramilitaries and limit the negotiations to the constitutional parties.¹⁰¹ By almost all assessments, the very presence in the negotiations of individuals strongly associated with the “guns” — McGuinness (Sinn Féin/the IRA), Ervine (Progressive Unionist Party), and Gary McMichael (Ulster Democratic Party) — which caused such heartburn for more traditional political leaders, proved central to bringing about an agreement that would stick. Thus, Major’s reluctant decision to find a way to begin inclusive talks following the Mitchell report proved vital.

A related feature of the process that was instrumental was the sequencing — the willingness to move the process forward without a firm commitment to a permanent ceasefire and at least initial steps toward the paramilitary groups decommissioning their arms. The decision to move from pre-conditions to “conditions subsequent” was another feature that distinguished this negotiation from the Sunningdale agreement and unblocked the stalemate that plagued the process during most of the Major years. The decision seems vindicated not only by the successful conclusion of the negotiations, but also by the subsequent IRA decommissioning and the relative low level of defection by dissatisfied members of the paramilitaries. It is not hard to imagine that a deal done by the SDLP and the UUP alone might have met serious resistance from the IRA and the loyalists, though of course, the declining effectiveness of violence, apparent by the late 1980s, might have tempered the scale and duration of the backlash.

At the same time, the inclusion of such diverse perspectives had an impact on the content of the

Agreement in two important respects. First, the parties’ mutual suspicions drove them toward a consociational model that blocked vetoes. This reduced the risk of either party being outvoted and thus made the Agreement more palatable to their respective constituencies.¹⁰² But this came at the cost of possible paralysis. Left on their own, an agreement involving only the UUP and SDLP might well have tilted the balance toward a more flexible approach. Second, the deep divisions even within the two camps led the parties to defer important decisions on key substantive issues ranging from the future of policing to the role of the North-South bodies, setting the stage for the predictable crises that followed.

A number of commentators have focused on the role of civil society in bringing about the Agreement, both as an outside force pressing the parties and as formal participants in the negotiations. It is difficult to assess how much the grass roots peace movement helped to build opposition to violence and thus facilitate the paramilitaries’ decision to give it up. Peace groups had been active throughout the Troubles, for example, in the women’s movement in the 1980s, with only limited success in bringing an end to the fighting. Several commentators have focused on the formal role of civil society organizations in the process. Maria Power, for example, concludes that “the negotiations leading up to the agreement demonstrated the centrality the peacebuilding or community-relations sector had in conflict resolution.”¹⁰³ Others give more measured judgments: “[W]hile the contribution of the [civil] sector was not crucial to the eventual outcome of the political negotiations in 1998, it was nonetheless positive and significant.”¹⁰⁴ These assertions are difficult to assess, most importantly because the formal process itself was relatively less important compared with the proliferation of secret channels and private negotiations, which excluded civil society.

Other features of the process seem less consequential. On the whole, the formal processes, especially the Stormont negotiations, played a very modest role at best. The combination of the

100 Inclusivity has several different meanings in the context of these negotiations. The term was sometimes used to refer to the inclusion of the full range of stakeholders, including civil society, but was also used more narrowly, by Sinn Féin and the loyalists, to refer to the protagonists in the conflict. See for example, Timothy J. White, “Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process: An Introduction,” in *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 7. Broad inclusivity of civil society was valuable but it was the inclusion of the former paramilitaries that was crucial. See Paul Dixon, “The Victory and Defeat of the IRA,” in *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process*.

101 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 19. This is an important difference between the 1998 Agreement and Sunningdale.

102 Whether the agreement is truly a consociational agreement is a matter of much debate among political scientists, see White, “Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process: An Introduction,” 4; and articles cited in footnote 2.

103 Power, *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, 8.

104 Feargal Cochrane and Seamus Dunn, *People Power? The Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector in the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006), 173.

setting, which was sterile and forbidding,¹⁰⁵ and the parties' unwillingness to deal with each other face-to-face in public settings, relegated the formal sessions to play acting, mostly designed to reassure the parties' constituents that they were holding fast to their uncompromising positions. Even in private, the parties rarely engaged with each other directly. This accentuated the importance of the governments (primarily the United Kingdom and Ireland, but, at critical moments, the United States as well) and Mitchell as go-betweens.

Much has been written about the role of Mitchell and his two colleagues as third-party mediators. On the substance of the negotiations themselves, the three chairs played relatively modest roles compared with the British and Irish governments. Indeed, during the crucial final days of the negotiations, Mitchell reluctantly gave the parties a draft proposal on Strand Two, drafted by Blair and Ahearn, against his own judgment since he believed the provisions were anathema to unionists and would torpedo the negotiations.¹⁰⁶ As noted above, much of the negotiations took place outside the formal process, where the role of the three chairs was limited. Nonetheless, Mitchell's personal integrity, reputation for impartiality, and patience played a valuable role in keeping the negotiations going. Similarly, the availability of the de Chastelain commission as a third-party means of validating decommissioning was critical to its attainment.

One area where the formal process arguably did make a difference was the use of deadlines, particularly to bring the negotiations to a conclusion. Mitchell imposed a two-week deadline in March 1998 ahead of marching season, which triggered an intense period of engagement leading to Mitchell's tabling of a "composite" document on April 6, including the abortive British-Irish proposal on Strand Two, which triggered the final crisis of the negotiations.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, the open-ended nature of the process following the first IRA ceasefire contributed to its breakdown in early 1996.

Lessons for Practitioners: What Does This Mean for Future Peace Negotiations?

The Importance of "Ripeness" and How to Recognize It

The experience of Northern Ireland strongly underscores a major factor highlighted in the literature on conflict resolution — the importance of ripeness.¹⁰⁸ The very fact that the parties adopted in 1998 what they had rejected in 1973 strongly suggests that changed circumstances played a critical role. But this observation is of limited value to the practitioner without some guidelines for assessing when circumstances are "ripe." While policymakers are often limited in what they can do to create the conditions that make a conflict ripe for settlement,¹⁰⁹ it is a vital tool of statecraft to be able to spot an opportunity when it is emerging. It is equally important to understand when a conflict is not ripe for negotiation: It can be argued that the premature effort leading to the Sunningdale agreement in 1973 actually contributed to prolonging the conflict.

Should this have been apparent to the British government at the time? One lesson of the Northern Ireland experience is that the secret channels developed in the late 1980s and earlier 1990s played a crucial role in providing the governments and the political parties themselves an opportunity to judge whether the circumstances were ripe for agreement before launching a speculative — and perhaps counterproductive — public negotiation. There were risks involved in secret diplomacy. The desire to preserve secrecy led the governments perilously close to public dishonesty, which, when exposed, endangered their credibility. Nevertheless, the groundwork that this diplomacy laid ultimately reduced the risks that each side took by engaging in the process. These secret contacts allowed the key parties to explore the implications of flexibility and to adapt their positions without the risk of

105 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 216.

106 See Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 164–65 and Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 173. "As I read the document I knew instantly that it would not be acceptable to the Unionists." Godson, *Himself Alone*, 327. As noted above, the ensuing crisis was only resolved when Ahearn agreed to walk back the draft and dilute the provisions opposed by the unionists.

107 In fact, the deadline actually slipped by a day; on the evening of the formal deadline the talks were still at an impasse. Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 177. The deadline also helped Adams gain IRA assent to enter the talks — his critics feared that an open-ended negotiation predicated on a continued IRA ceasefire would be used as a British ploy to weaken the IRA's operational capacity as well as its rank and file support. See Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, 471.

108 The classic statement is presented by William Zartman in "Ripeness: The Hurting Stalemate and Beyond," in *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.17226/9897>. As noted below, the approach I suggest here relies less on Zartman's idea of a "hurting stalemate" and more on the perception by both sides of a positive gain.

109 But not impossible. Arguably the decision to arm the Bosnians and bomb the Serbs during the Bosnia conflict, and the bombing of the Serbs in Kosovo, helped produce circumstances that made those conflicts "ripe" for settlement. See Zartman, "Ripeness," 244.

embarrassment if the gambits proved unsuccessful and the other side unforthcoming.¹¹⁰

Some commentators have focused on the idea of “stalemate” as a central characteristic of ripeness. Here, it is true that Sinn Fein had concluded that it could not “bomb” its way to Irish unification. British officials, especially in the security community, similarly concluded that despite the growing efficacy of their efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the IRA could not be “defeated.” Thus, some have argued that the more effective British security policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s worked to create a stalemate ripe for settlement. But it seems unlikely that stalemate by itself would have brought about the 1998 Agreement. The return to violence in the mid-1990s (after the initial ceasefire declaration in 1994), suggests that many in the IRA still considered violence (or at least the threat of violence) an important element of leverage in the negotiations. Similarly, some in the unionist community (dissenters within the UUP as well as the DUP and United Kingdom) were not convinced of the need to compromise. For this reason, I think it is more useful to see the Agreement as a result of the fact that each side could see the agreement as a “win” (at least in relative terms) rather than a product of a stalemate from which they sought to extricate themselves.

While policymakers are often limited in what they can do to create the conditions that make a conflict ripe for settlement, it is a vital tool of statecraft to be able to spot an opportunity when it is emerging.

Another feature of ripeness goes to the question of how the parties assess the impact of the passage of time on their chances of achieving their goals. The parties in this case reached an agreement because their assessments of time converged. The unionists believed that time was not on their side — that demographics and the politics of the United Kingdom were steadily eroding their leverage. So they accepted a power-sharing arrangement, which

they had firmly rejected as a matter of principle for decades, and acquiesced in the idea that sovereignty might be transferred from the United Kingdom to the Republic by a popular vote. In return, they got the Republic of Ireland to amend its constitution to repeal its claim of sovereignty over the six counties and secured a more limited form of North-South institutions. Trimble articulated this view in a speech shortly after the conclusion of the Agreement:

A number of responses were possible to the changed situation [the Hume-Adams process leading Sinn Fein to pursue the political track]... . I remember a parliamentary colleague saying...we should revert to saying No all the time... . The important point that I draw from this, generally speaking, is that it is not enough to be passive, to adopt a tactic or an approach that consciously or deliberately leaves the decision in the hands of other people. It is not always the way you like and you can never be certain exactly how it is going to work out.¹¹¹

Sinn Fein, too, was influenced by its assessment of the future. On the one hand, its leaders believed they had extracted most of what they could get from the use of violence. They also feared that they would be unable to sustain the IRA’s ceasefire much longer if they failed to produce a result through negotiations. But they also perceived that by making key concessions (e.g., abandoning their insistence that Britain renounce sovereignty over Northern Ireland and accepting the principle of consent), they could turn the passage of time in their favor by achieving an agreed unification through the ballot box. Thus, both unionists’ fears about the future and republicans’ hopes for it led each side to conclude that this agreement, with all its painful compromises, was better than walking away and taking a chance on the future.

This sense of ripeness helps explain why the terrorist attacks that plagued the peace process throughout the 1990s (the IRA Shankill Road bombing in 1993 and the subsequent loyalist revenge attacks or the Canary Wharf and Manchester bombings in 1996, for example) did not derail the talks. Once the parties had made the strategic decision to seek

110 Gormley-Heenan, *Political Leadership and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 14, quoting Paul Arthur, *Peer Learning: Northern Ireland as a Case Study* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1999), 10. “The participants shared a concern that something needed to be done and that at the very least they should explore each others’ options. Track two presented the best opportunities to do so. The absence of the media, the physical location, the neutral back up support, all were as far removed as possible from the rawness of Northern Ireland’s political arena.”

111 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 257. See also, Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 19.



peace, violence actually seemed to have served as an impetus rather than a barrier to compromise.¹¹²

Understanding each party's assessment of the impact of time can help the peacemaker both decide when to intervene and how to use these assessments to achieve an agreement. The Dayton Accords, which ended the Bosnian War, are instructive. It was at the moment that the Serb forces saw the tide of battle turn against them, but before the Bosnians and Croats had the means to defeat the Serbs on their own, that the United States had maximum leverage in bringing about an agreement.

The Impact of Process on the Shape of the Outcome

Many have held up the process leading to the 1998 Agreement as a model of successful conflict resolution. Whether the process contributed to the success depends, of course, on the definition of success. There is little doubt that the Agreement has led to a decrease in intercommunal violence. Including the paramilitaries made it less likely that they would attack the process or the agreement that the process produced. Equally important, it gave them a stake in taking on dissidents who wanted to challenge the Agreement. Although splinter groups persisted on both the republican and loyalist sides, their impact has been marginal.

But this process decision has come at a cost. Because the process helped lead to a consociational agreement that protects the rights of the two communities but deferred tackling many of the underlying sources of conflict (e.g., policing, economic equality, etc.), the peace continues to be fragile, sectarian tensions remain high, and the institutions created by the agreement are barely functional, at best.¹¹³ These concerns were raised by many of the civil society participants during the negotiations, but their voices were marginalized in favor of the priority attached to getting the men with the guns to lay down their arms.

In this respect, there are important resemblances to the way in which the Dayton process shaped the substance of the Dayton Accords, which ended the fighting in Bosnia. Both processes included the hard men who had stoked the conflict, resulting in agreements that, in somewhat similar ways, froze sectarian identity in the framework of the settlement and thus perpetuated the underlying conflict. In both cases, hopes that the passage

of time and public pressure would lead to an evolution of the political arrangements away from their sectarian roots have been disappointed.

Of course, including former paramilitaries in peace negotiations does not guarantee this kind of result. In South Africa, the Africa National Congress party and the apartheid government created more unitary structures in their peace agreement, which included explicit elements of reconciliation. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say that the shape of the peace process in South Africa contributed both to the success of the agreement and its limitations. The lessons of these cases are clear: Practitioners need to consider the potential long-term costs of a peace process that focuses primarily on the short-term goal of ending the fighting. One commentator has called this the choice between a "no more shooting" and "no more fighting" type of agreement.¹¹⁴

Empowering the Peacemakers

The analysis of the role of agency in the Northern Ireland peace process suggests that people do matter. However, the practitioner's tools for creating "peacemakers" is limited. But practitioners can help support the people who have both the inclination and the capacity to make the choices for peace. Throughout the Northern Ireland peace process, the governments involved made conscious efforts to support those whom they believed wanted to, and were capable of, making the deal — from Clinton granting Adams a visa to his embrace of Trimble during his visit to Belfast, to Mo Mowlam's visit to the Maze prison to meet with loyalist paramilitaries.

Of course, these kinds of efforts require finesse. Sometimes embracing a peacemaker can backfire — arguably Clinton's support for Shimon Peres after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination did Peres more harm than good. In Northern Ireland, there was considerable wariness about outside parties — whether from Dublin, London, or Washington — attempting to influence events in Ulster. In some cases, such outside involvement ended up raising suspicions, rather than enhancing the authority those outsiders sought to promote.

Third Party Guarantors

For the Agreement to work, it was critical for the unionists to believe that, whatever long-term

112 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 129.

113 See Timothy J. White, "The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Peace in Northern Ireland," in *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, ed. Maria Power, 38–40.

114 See Maria Power, "Introduction," in *Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, 4.

risks they might run in terms of demographics, etc., the IRA's cessation of violence — and the resort to exclusively peaceful means — was not simply tactical. To some extent, unionists saw decommissioning as reducing the IRA's capability to return to war. But most recognized that the IRA might easily replace any arms it destroyed. More important was the unionist belief that, because the IRA had so strongly resisted decommissioning in the past, an agreement to decommission was a real sign of peaceful intent. For that very reason, however, the IRA was unwilling to take even modest steps on decommissioning until the deal was complete.

The success in breaking this stalemate — and the unionists' ultimate willingness to accept decommissioning as a subsequent condition of the Agreement — highlights the importance of credible interlocutors and third-party guarantors. Only when Blair gave Trimble his personal assurance that he would eject Sinn Fein from the Northern

Ireland Executive if the IRA failed to decommission (a commitment reiterated by Clinton in the closing hours), did Trimble agree to go along.¹¹⁵ The British government had helped earn that credibility through its actions, for example, when Mowlam temporarily ejected Sinn Fein from the talks in February 1998 after a series of killings linked to the IRA, at the risk of collapsing the talks. Trimble's willingness to accept the procedures for decommissioning depended on the credibility of a report from an independent commission rather than relying on the word of "interested parties."¹¹⁶

Sequencing

The challenge posed by decommissioning was, perhaps, the most consequential of a recurring set of problems surrounding sequencing. By the early 1990s, the contours of the Agreement had emerged, but issues of sequencing proved a major obstacle to progress. Whether Sinn Fein's participation

in talks should follow or precede a ceasefire or whether Adams' visa to the United States should be made conditional on a cessation of violence are just two examples. As late as 1995, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Patrick Mayhew's insistence that some act of decommission precede Sinn Fein's entry into the talks (even after the IRA had entered into a ceasefire) nearly collapsed the whole project.¹¹⁷ Willingness to accept a condition subsequent rather than a pre-condition was a major test of how much each side was willing and able to take risks for peace. Sinn Fein, in particular, insisted that it needed prior actions by the British and Irish governments to permit it to move forward.

Practitioners need to consider the potential long-term costs of a peace process that focuses primarily on the short-term goal of ending the fighting.

The problem of sequencing in regards to decommissioning returned following the conclusion of the 1998 Agreement, when the question arose of whether decommissioning had to precede Sinn Fein taking its place in the Northern Ireland Executive. This impasse was again resolved in a review conducted by Mitchell, which led to the pre-condition being dropped.¹¹⁸ As Quentin Thomas, a senior British civil servant, observed, "the question is whether one accentuates the positive and seeks to bring people in when they appear at the door of democracy and want to join talks. Or whether you hold them there and subject them to some examination to see whether their shoes are clean."¹¹⁹ Perhaps Clinton's decision was the easiest, as he had the least to lose if the IRA returned to violence after Adams was issued the visa. But even there Clinton risked causing complications in the U.S.-U.K. relationship.

Practitioners face strong pressure to impose pre-conditions to negotiations. They fear that entering into open-ended negotiations may be perceived as a

115 On Blair's decommissioning side letter, see Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 169–70.

116 This view of the role of third parties is, thus, distinct from the focus on third parties as "neutral" mediators. What mattered most here was not neutrality but that third parties could offer something of value to the parties themselves. This more traditional understanding of the role of neutral actors in peace processes was illustrated by the creation of the Independent Commission on Policing, which produced a blue print for policing reform — something the parties themselves were unable to accomplish.

117 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 25.

118 The IRA completed decommissioning in 2005.

119 Mallie and McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland*, 205.

sign of weakness and may subject them to domestic criticism for abandoning important red lines.¹²⁰ Yet, the imposition of pre-conditions often becomes a straightjacket, as the other side is unlikely to give up valuable leverage without some confidence in the overall shape of the outcome. The secret negotiations in the lead-up to the Agreement helped reduce the danger that Sinn Fein/the IRA would simply pocket dropping the pre-conditions, but in the end the British and Irish governments understood that the only possibility of reaching an agreement was to take that risk. It was crucial that the governments establish credibility that they would enforce the conditions after the Agreement was signed. Practitioners can draw an important lesson from this on how to avoid the pre-condition trap.

Substance

The parties involved in the peace process made little effort to resolve the substantive issues that divided them. The constitutional and process issues that formed the heart of the Agreement largely involved broad issues of principles. By contrast, the substantive concerns — policing, criminal justice, social welfare — were areas where the details were as important as the principles. For these kinds of issues, the parties chose to defer resolution by handing the problem to independent commissions (for things like decommissioning and policing), to the Assembly (on devolved issues), and to the British and Irish governments (on non-devolved issues). The last minute snag on Strand Two illustrates the problem of dealing with detail. The Irish government and the nationalists wanted strong substantive commitments on the scope of North-South bodies, but in the end had to settle for broad language and hope that the specifics could be agreed to later.¹²¹ This approach facilitated concluding the Agreement at the expense of littering the landscape with landmines that have continued to dog its implementation. Thus, practitioners face a choice in deciding whether to tackle detailed issues of substance similar to the issue of inclusivity — whether to seize a short-term gain (e.g., stopping the fighting) at the risk of long-term costs (e.g., perpetuating underlying sources of conflict).

Conclusion

The 1998 Agreement came at a time of considerable post-Cold War optimism about the prospects for resolving long-standing political conflict, from the Middle East to the Balkans to Colombia. The passage of time has tempered those hopes, as many conflicts have proved resistant to settlement, and even those agreements that have remained intact have largely proved disappointing in bringing about true reconciliation. The 1998 Agreement certainly falls into that category, but the brutal violence has not re-emerged. As the international community contemplates future peacemaking efforts, in Afghanistan, Yemen, South Sudan, and beyond, the Northern Ireland peace process continues to offer important lessons to scholars and practitioners alike. 

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120 For a discussion of the problem of “open” diplomacy (without preconditions) see Oriana Skyler Mastro, *The Costs of Conversation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

121 Mitchell, *Making Peace*, 175.