Gerry Adams, Albert Reynolds and John Hume, Dublin, September 1994

The early stages of the Irish peace process

Martin Mansergh

Most important events in history have multiple causes and the Irish peace process is no exception. It came into being through a combination of factors: the war-weariness associated with prolonged political and military stalemate; the courage displayed by governments and constitutional parties in dealing with the politicians close to paramilitary forces; the examples of breakthroughs and peace processes elsewhere in the world; the creation of a political alternative by a democratic nationalist consensus; the economic need for peace and stability; the active partnership between the British and Irish governments (even if there were often strains in the relationship); and the unprecedented high priority commitment given by a US President to peace in Ireland, including a willingness to act as ultimate guarantor. The overwhelming public desire for peace in both Northern Ireland and the Republic was perhaps the most critical factor of all. It had been consistently displayed over a long period and reflected a great deal of valuable and unsung work for peace by countless individuals and organizations.

By the late 1980s, despite much political and diplomatic effort, the prospect remained one of prolonged political and military stalemate. In protest against the republican movement's repugnant campaign of violence, constitutional nationalist politicians had ignored their political demands and refused to have any contact with 'representatives of terrorism'. But they had failed to reach a cross-community political settlement that would marginalize the paramilitary organizations and create the political consensus that might make it easier to force an end to their violence. On the other hand, violence was not yielding significant political advance for republicans, although after the hunger strikes by IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison in 1980–81 they began to gain electoral support, receiving ten per cent of the vote in elections for the new Northern Ireland Assembly in 1982. Tentative

Martin Mansergh is a member of Fianna Fáil. He was special adviser to the Taoiseach 1987–94 and since 1997, and head of research for Fianna Fáil 1981–87 and 1994–97.

Source: Crispin Rodwell

feelers were put out, and John Hume, leader of the constitutional nationalist party the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), sought a direct encounter with the IRA which he had to abort. But it took the catalyst of the Enniskillen Remembrance Day massacre of 8 November 1987 to start the dialogue that marked the beginning of the peace process. After Enniskillen, many people felt that the time might be ripe for dialogue to bring violence to an end. First of all, there was a moral duty to try and prevent any more Enniskillens, and secondly there was a sense that the futility of a continuing campaign of violence was becoming obvious to all.

Without a peace strategy Sinn Féin was unlikely to make any further electoral progress in either part of the island. No Sinn Féin candidate came anywhere near winning a seat in the 1987 general election in the South, although two abstentionist candidates incarcerated in the H-blocks of the Maze Prison had been elected to the Dáil in June 1981. Any remaining public tolerance of continuing paramilitary atrocities was sharply diminishing. The physical capacity to continue had to be distinguished from the moral and psychological capacity to sustain an armed struggle that increasingly had no obvious point. Sinn Féin needed to break out of political isolation and clearly hoped to form a pan-nationalist front that would reinforce its demands without necessarily requiring the complete abandonment of the armed struggle.

A private proposal

In November 1987 Father Alex Reid, a Catholic priest who for many years had been involved in conflict mediation in Belfast, wrote a discussion paper setting out the principles of self-determination and consent on which could be based the dialogue and negotiation necessary for a political settlement, including circumstances in which the British government would depart from Ireland.

The paper accepted the republican position developed around the time of the 1918 all-Ireland general election (held under British rule) that self-determination should be by the people of Ireland as a whole and that self-determination meant consent. But the paper argued that this could only be realized by the twofold consent of the people of the nationalist tradition and the unionist tradition and that this in turn could only be achieved through dialogue and agreement. The paper proposed a constitutional conference that the British government would be prepared to sponsor and facilitate. The author was satisfied 'that the British have no longer any colonial interest in Ireland, that is, they have no political, economic, strategic or military interest of their own for remaining in Ireland', and that they were willing to declare this if it would make a significant contribution to the cause of peace in Ireland. But they would not set aside the Government of Ireland Act 1920 (the partition act) until alternative constitutional provisions had been worked out and agreed on by the Irish people.

It was a remarkably prescient document. It came with the moral authority of the Catholic Church, the initiative having the approval of Cardinal Ó Fiaich. It anticipated the statement made by Peter Brooke, the UK Secretary of State, in November 1990 as well as the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 (which formed part of the Belfast Agreement) and the eventual multi-party talks process of 1996–98 in its idea of a constitutional conference. There was not yet a clear recognition that in republican terms any settlement at this stage could only be an 'interim' one. The unspoken premiss of the entire paper was an understanding that an IRA ceasefire was necessary for all-party negotiations to take place.

An inter-party approach

As a result of the Anglo–Irish Agreement of 1985 which had formalized the influence of the Irish government in Northern Ireland's affairs, the SDLP were keen to challenge the assumptions underlying the republican struggle. Papers were exchanged between the SDLP and Sinn Féin in 1988. The SDLP maintained that the British government had become neutral and were prepared to back a united Ireland based on consent. The challenge was to win that consent. Sinn Féin contested British neutrality and held to a doctrine of self-determination that required the British government and the unionists to accept the majority will of the people of the whole island of Ireland without regard to the partition which had divided the island for over sixty-five years.

On two occasions Fianna Fáil, the party in government in the Republic, in parallel, ancillary and largely exploratory but secret talks with Sinn Féin leaders sought to convey to them the unacceptability of violence to the people of the South. Violence not only divided nationalist opinion in the North but also created divisions between nationalists north and south of the border, and among Irish Americans. The argument was put forward that nationalist Ireland was strongest and had achieved the greatest advances when it was politically united (for example during the New Departure in 1878 and under Sinn Féin 1918–21), and that this was only possible now on a peaceful and democratic basis. It was also a reality that NATO countries would never tolerate within their territory anything resembling 'a terrorist victory'.

It soon became clear both to the SDLP and to Fianna Fáil interlocutors that no meeting of minds was possible at this stage since there was no commitment to bringing the struggle to an early end. In those circumstances it would be dangerous and irresponsible to prolong a

dialogue that could be interpreted as collusive in the context of a continuing open-ended campaign of violence.

Waiting for favourable conditions

The mainly peaceful revolutions of 1989 in central and eastern Europe, the unification of Germany in 1990 and, after the release of Nelson Mandela in the same year, the beginning of a negotiated transition to majority rule in South Africa, suddenly transformed problems that had previously looked frozen into situations that could be solved politically. Any background fears about the potential strategic role of Northern Ireland in a cold war context, sometimes expressed as an unreal Cuban analogy, were dissipated. Hope that more propitious conditions might arise for a breakthrough was not abandoned. Father Reid maintained regular contact between the Irish government, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. The Taoiseach Charles Haughey had already offered to reconvene the New Ireland Forum, which had met in 1983–84 to consider future constitutional arrangements in the event of an IRA cessation of violence and include Sinn Féin.

Other initiatives were taken by non-official groups to try to stimulate new thinking. On a number of occasions key figures in parties across the political spectrum were invited to participate in seminars to explore ways of moving the political process forward. For example, Eberhard Spiecker, a German lawyer, brought together representatives of the Alliance Party, DUP, SDLP and UUP, with Father Reid acting as someone who could provide an insight into Sinn Féin, at a private meeting at Duisburg. They came tantalizingly close to reaching an understanding of the potential basis for a political settlement. Similar meetings were organized by academics and non-governmental organizations, and while it was often difficult to agree the basis for a meeting with the parties, the interaction and discussion were invariably very useful and relationships were established which made a contribution to the subsequent formal negotiations.

British initiatives

A new, imaginative British Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, took office in July 1989 and after a hundred days made the remarkable acknowledgement that democratic governments, on the Cyprus analogy, sooner or later end up talking to terrorists. He said that although the IRA could be contained it was difficult to envisage their being defeated militarily and that if violence were ended he would not rule out talks with Sinn Féin. In 1990 he authorized the reopening of an indirect channel of communication involving Michael Oatley, an intelligence officer, and Denis Bradley, a Derry priest in the confidence of Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness. A year later, Brooke declared that Britain had no 'selfish strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland and was prepared to accept a united Ireland by consent. The statement largely settled one of the main points of contention between the SDLP and Sinn Féin in the late 1980s and was one of the key foundations of the peace process. In November 1990, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher resigned following an internal challenge within her party over her government's European policy. From a republican point of view she had been extremely antagonistic and was held responsible for the deaths of ten republican hunger strikers, including Bobby Sands, in 1981. Because of her triumphalist attitudes and the possibility that she would have proclaimed any ceasefire to be a republican defeat, it had always been difficult to envisage a ceasefire while she was in office. Her replacement by the milder, more pragmatic John Major brought a change in atmosphere which made such a ceasefire more possible.

In 1991 Peter Brooke at last achieved his ambition of starting political talks between the constitutional parties on the totality of relationships. While outwardly contemptuous, republicans had always to be aware of the possibility that at some point these talks might just succeed. The paramilitary organizations would be placed under huge pressure if they had contributed nothing to an agreed political settlement endorsed by the people in referendums in both parts of Ireland, as proposed by John Hume. With no military breakthrough, despite the IRA's possession of a sophisticated arsenal imported from Libya in 1985–86, and with the increasing effectiveness of the loyalist paramilitaries, the situation was ripe for a renewed push for peace.

The search for agreed perspectives

With ideas crystallizing around the concept of a joint declaration by Taoiseach and Prime Minister, John Hume presented Taoiseach Charles Haughey in October 1991 with the sketch of a draft declaration – an idea supported by Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Féin. Its broad themes covered the need to overcome the legacy of the past, the opportunities provided by the European Union with its constructive ethos and the right to self-determination (with a time frame for it to be exercised). This should happen in the context of the Irish government's recognition of the necessity for the consent of the people of Northern Ireland and the establishment of a nationalist convention or forum that would give Sinn Féin a platform.

These ideas were developed by the Irish government and the exchange of papers continued under the new Taoiseach Albert Reynolds. Direct dialogue between the

Irish government and Sinn Féin was eventually resumed. From December 1991 the British Prime Minister was made aware of the possibility of an initiative. Sinn Féin wanted a declaration that reflected its ideology as faithfully as possible. The Irish government's principal concern was that, despite the adoption of language more associated with the republican movement, the proposal should remain compatible with Ireland's international obligations, and notably the principle of consent under the Anglo–Irish Agreement. The SDLP leader had the most pragmatic attitude to the content of the draft declaration.

Whereas Charles Haughey had had a cautious attitude to the initiative, the importance and controversial nature of which he recognized, Albert Reynolds came to office imbued with the idea that peace was a moral imperative. He often described his intentions to an unsuspecting public by saying that he was seeking 'a formula for peace'. He aroused the non-committal interest of Prime Minister John Major who, with new Secretary of State Sir Patrick Mayhew, now put greater emphasis on trying to establish a new phase of political talks. But the inter-party talks that were revived in April 1992 broke down seven months later at the time of the Irish general election. The unionists alleged constitutional inflexibility by the Irish government and declined to return to the talks.

John Hume had kept senior British officials informed of what was happening, but both governments also had their own direct lines to Sinn Féin. The British government was in parallel exploring the republican movement's readiness for peace. However, the position was complicated on the British government's side by its narrow parliamentary majority and consequent growing dependence on the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) for its maintenance in office until 1997. Far from being influenced towards more direct engagement with the republican movement by bombs that caused considerable damage in the City of London in the spring of 1993, the government concluded an informal political alliance with the Ulster Unionists in the summer of 1993. At that point it received from the Irish government the draft declaration to which the republican movement had given only tentative backing, nervous of the unlikely possibility that the British might accept it as it stood. The document has subsequently been referred to in popular parlance as 'Hume–Adams', though in private republicans referred to it at that time as the Dublin government's initiative rather than theirs. The declaration of principles was initially entirely nationalist in character. From the British government's point of view it had Gerry Adams' fingerprints on it and consequently they were not prepared to accept it as a basis for negotiation, though they did discuss it with Irish officials. Albert Reynolds, however, was absolutely determined to pursue the initiative and refused to take no for an answer. He was prepared if necessary to reformulate the paper as a purely Irish initiative and confront the British government's reluctance to move on it. 'Who is afraid of peace?' was his clarion call. At the same time, it was clear that if the proposal were to be adopted by the British government it would require modification and amplification.

In autumn 1993, after a period of waiting, John Hume and Gerry Adams made public the fact that they had put a proposal to the Irish government for transmission to the British. Unionist and loyalist fears were greatly heightened and violence increased as it often did when there were signs of political progress.

The Irish government entered into dialogue using Protestant clergy as intermediaries with both the Ulster unionist leadership and the loyalist paramilitaries in order to defuse fears and rumours. It was necessary to incorporate some loyalist thinking and use language that addressed unionist concerns in the draft declaration.

The Downing Street Declaration

The key factors that led to the successful negotiation and conclusion of the Downing Street Declaration were the judgement of its acceptability to substantial sections of unionism, the determination of the Irish government to proceed with its initiative and the sympathetic support of American opinion. The business community in Northern Ireland had suffered from the Troubles and wanted to see them brought to an end. It was prepared to pay a political price for peace, provided it was not too high. Bill Clinton became US President in January 1993 with strong Irish–American backing and in the knowledge that the British Conservative Party had tried to assist his rival President Bush during the presidential election. In the mid-1990s the so-called 'special relationship' with the US, the cornerstone on which Britain had built its post-war foreign policy, was at a low ebb and its existence openly questioned in Washington. Throughout the century Britain has been anxious to prevent Ireland from clouding its otherwise excellent political relations with the US that counteracted the pressures exerted by the UUP members at Westminster.

The Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993, while recognizably retaining many features of the draft proposal passed by Reynolds to Major the previous June, also represented a challenge to the IRA. The British government's acceptance of the right to self-determination, subject to concurrent consent, its renunciation of any selfish strategic or economic interest, its commitment 'to encourage, enable and facilitate' the achievement of agreement between the people of Ireland and its promise to accept the admission of Sinn Féin to political dialogue with the other parties, and not just in a nationalist forum, challenged the whole rationale of continuing the armed struggle. It took another eight months for the republican movement to be convinced.

From clarification to ceasefire

In order to further encourage the IRA to move to a ceasefire a number of confidence-building gestures were made, notably the lifting of broadcasting restrictions in the South and the admission of Adams to the United States on a short visa. The Irish government provided a great deal of clarification of the Declaration but declined to move away from it despite the ideological difficulties for republicans created by the principle of consent. The British government was eventually persuaded to issue clarification as well and the Irish government had to provide the same to the UDA. The decommissioning issue figured nowhere in these exchanges.

In March 1994, after a long pause, IRA violence resumed but work continued on a framework document between the two governments to provide a foundation for resumed political talks. When eventually published in February 1995 it covered, in particular, equality issues, institutional structures for north–south co-operation in specified areas, balanced change to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution and amendment or repeal of the Government of Ireland Act 1920. Sinn Féin was sufficiently briefed to know that important negotiations were being prepared, with or without their participation.

The republican movement was faced with the necessity of making a decision in July 1994, having exhausted the possibilities of clarification, as well as the patience and expectations of the public, the SDLP and most of the Irish government. Albert Reynolds had made it clear on several occasions that he would reject out of hand any temporary or time-limited ceasefire and the republican movement was advised of the type of language that would be acceptable to him.

The IRA ceasefire of 31 August 1994 was intended to be permanent, even if many activists were left with the impression that the option of returning to violence still existed. Albert Reynolds moved fast to create momentum, meeting John Hume and Gerry Adams on 6 September, a week after the ceasefire. The British government on the other hand, believing in the virtues of procrastination, was much slower, more cautious and publicly the very opposite of euphoric about the end of the IRA campaign. It seemed, in fact, determined to look a gift horse in the mouth. Nevertheless, security on the border was rapidly reduced, border roads were reopened, support for economic reconstruction was sought from the US and negotiated with the EU, and the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation was convened.

The first IRA ceasefire was one of the most difficult and crucial achievements of the peace process. It was inevitable that there would be setbacks such as the IRA raid on 10 November 1994 when a Newry post office worker was murdered, an event which was used by the British government to bring forward the issue of decommissioning. But there was no warning that Albert Reynolds' government would collapse and momentum would be lost. It had been expected that the constitutional talks would start within six months but there proved to be a long and stony path ahead to real negotiations, an agreement and its implementation.