

Ceasefires and elections

Harry Barnes and Gary Kent

Harry Barnes is the Labour MP for Derbyshire North East and a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee at Westminster and the British–Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. He is also Joint President of the cross-party peace group New Dialogue.

Gary Kent is the Westminster correspondent of the Belfast magazine *Fortnight* and a political activist.

By the beginning of 1996, the main paramilitary groups had maintained their ceasefires since late 1994 but little progress had been made in finding an agreed basis for inclusive talks. The Conservative government in London was nearing the end of its term and finding it difficult to maintain majority support for its policies in parliament.

The issue of decommissioning was becoming a major stumbling block. Although the IRA had begun a ceasefire in September 1994, there had been no negotiations on decommissioning. There had been significant ministerial contact with Sinn Féin and also with the loyalist parties whose paramilitary wings had declared their own ceasefire in October 1994.

The need for a new impetus

It was hoped that the Independent Body on Decommissioning headed by Senator George Mitchell would provide a way forward. When it reported in January 1996, a central recommendation was that decommissioning of illegally held paramilitary weapons should be parallel with, rather than prior to, all-party negotiations.

Mitchell's recommendation was accepted by John Major's government and by the UUP. The government also highlighted another Mitchell proposal: that there be elections to a Northern Ireland political forum. Those elected would constitute the pool from which the parties would draw their negotiating teams for the all-party talks. Major's actions caused consternation among many Irish nationalists and Sinn Féin in particular, even though inclusive talks were a central Sinn Féin demand. It was

said that the Conservative government was hostage to the UUP to maintain its very small majority in the Commons. Yet the party had voted more often with the Labour opposition than with Major's government, whose parliamentary majority was probably more imperilled by restless right-wing backbenchers.

However, Sinn Féin's inaccurate view that Mitchell's report had been 'binned' became the conventional wisdom. The IRA now had an apparently plausible excuse for resuming its war. On 9 February it broke its ceasefire with the massive Docklands bomb in London which killed two civilians. It is, however, increasingly clear that the Docklands bombing was planned well in advance of Major's response to Mitchell. The British and Irish governments' response to renewed IRA violence, including the destruction of Manchester city centre and the bombing of the British Army headquarters in Lisburn, was to suspend contact with Sinn Féin.

There was also a considerable upsurge in the activities of peace groups such as the Peace Train and the umbrella STOP 96 organization whose supporters were antagonistic to Sinn Féin–IRA.

Elections for entry into the talks

Sinn Féin did very well in the Forum elections, achieving its highest result for many years, and came close to overtaking the constitutional nationalist SDLP of John Hume. Sinn Féin's success reflected a widespread desire among many Catholic voters to boost what was seen as the peace faction within the republican movement.

The electoral system drawn up for the Forum elections allowed increased representation for smaller parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) – linked to the two main loyalist paramilitary groups. This also boosted the peace factions within the loyalist coalitions. For the first time, the newly formed Women's Coalition and the small Labour Party, both of which supported inclusive negotiations, won seats.

The government determined the terms of decision-making in the negotiations – the principle of 'sufficient consensus'. This required majority support for key measures within unionist and nationalist blocs and meant that the PUP and the UDP could ally with David Trimble's majority UUP to deliver the unionist part of this equation without having to rely on the votes of Ian Paisley's hardline DUP.

Impact of British and Irish elections

The peace process was in suspended animation due to the imminence of UK elections in May 1997 and the unexpected general election in the Republic of Ireland following the fall of John Bruton's coalition government in June 1997. The peace process benefited from the coincidental election of a majority Labour government and a viable Fianna Fáil government. The Labour Party was better positioned than the outgoing Conservatives to roll back international suspicion of the British government while Fianna Fáil, the party traditionally associated with the ideals of republicanism, was able to deal more decisively with the republican movement. They both had fresh mandates and motivation. Furthermore, Sinn Féin leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were elected to the London parliament and Sinn Féin also won a seat in the Irish Dáil. This gave the party increased political credibility, not least in the USA where it focused its energies on much needed fund-raising. The new British Prime Minister, Tony Blair moved quickly to establish that the search for peace in Northern Ireland and close co-operation with the Irish government remained high priorities for his government.

Steps towards cross-community talks

Blair cleared the table of the wreckage of past negotiations and deprived the republican movement of excuses for violence. He accepted an independent investigation into Bloody Sunday, when fourteen unarmed civilians were shot dead by British soldiers in January 1972. Within a fortnight Blair visited Northern Ireland to deliver a keynote speech which signalled that the Union was safe – probably for generations. This also helped sustain the loyalist ceasefire which had held since October 1994 despite the IRA's return to violence.

There has been a remarkable consistency of policy between successive British governments on the key concept of consent – that Northern Ireland should determine its own destiny. Furthermore, the idea that a British government should become a 'persuader' to edge unionists towards Irish unity was never accepted. Blair maintained a ban on ministerial contact with Sinn Féin but announced that talks with officials would open. He stuck to this despite the murder of two unarmed police officers in Lurgan by the IRA just weeks before Sinn Féin was re-admitted to multi-party talks after its declaration of a second ceasefire in July 1997.



Source: Pacemaker Press

On the day that Sinn Féin joined the all-party talks, Trimble's most vociferous opponents within the unionist camp – the DUP and Robert McCartney's UKUP – walked away from the negotiations. Trimble symbolically walked in with the UDP and PUP leaders. Both events effectively gave Trimble political cover to increasingly engage with republicans.

As what had become multi-party talks proceeded, UUP negotiators moved from proximity talks with Sinn Féin to direct bilateral negotiations. These unionists found it easier to take part in talks that involved Sinn Féin because technically they were remaining in talks that had been going on for many months rather than entering new talks with Sinn Féin.

When Trimble won the UUP leadership in 1996 he was widely perceived to be a hardliner who would be incapable of doing a deal with the nationalists. Republicans apparently calculated that he would not stay in negotiations and that unionist intransigence would be punished by the British and Irish governments imposing a deal over the heads of unionists. But Trimble stayed and eventually the Belfast Agreement was made and ratified by a massive majority of voters throughout Ireland as a whole.

The Mitchell Principles

Six principles proposed by the International Body on Decommissioning. Acceptance of them could be taken to indicate a commitment to non-violence. The principles were adopted by all parties as a test for entry into the talks. The relevant passage of the International Body's Report reads:

'Accordingly, we recommend that the parties to such negotiations affirm their total and absolute commitment:

- To democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;
- To the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;
- To agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission;
- To renounce for themselves, and to oppose any effort by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations;
- To agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree; and,
- To urge that 'punishment' killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions'.