Assessing groups and opportunities

a former government minister’s perspective

Marjorie (Mo) Mowlam was appointed the British government’s Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by newly elected Prime Minister Tony Blair in May 1997. A process of talks chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell was underway to end decades of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, but without Sinn Féin, the political party closely associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Shortly afterwards Blair announced that Northern Ireland Office (NIO) officials could talk to Sinn Féin officials as long as the IRA were preparing to stop violence and declare a ceasefire. The IRA restored its ceasefire in July and Sinn Féin joined the peace talks in October. After intensive negotiations, the Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement) was signed in April 1998. Mowlam continued in her post until October 1999.

Accord: When you took office as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, how did you build your understanding of the various armed groups operating in Northern Ireland?

Mo Mowlam: I read what I could, I talked to everybody I could: civil servants, people in the public, journalists, authors, and I think I got a reasonably rounded picture of the various groups. I managed to get reasonable briefs on both sides and didn’t have any particular problems. I always made a note of where the information came from, so I knew that if there was any bias towards or against Sinn Féin I’d be aware of it from knowing what the source was.

You say there were no problems, but one challenge for a government representative is to try and avoid having an overly partisan perspective. Within the structures of the British state there must have been many different understandings of and approaches to the armed groups, especially the Republican ones.
There were some individuals more able to comprehend that we were going to talk to Sinn Féin face-to-face and publicly, and others who found it harder, particularly if they had lost loved ones. I would listen to all my advisors, the civil service, the security services, everybody — but I made the final decision. I evaluated the information I was getting — as well as the source — and I put it in context and decided which way I went next. That was what it was to be the Secretary of State.

The possibility that some people might try to obscure your (and other people’s) understanding of the Republicans especially must have been something you had to deal with. A report in the Irish Sunday Tribune in July 1997 alleged that the IRA’s newly announced ‘complete and unequivocal’ ceasefire would in fact be limited to only four months, and some believe this story was the result of an attempt by Northern Ireland security forces to scupper developments in the peace process.

In the case of the newspaper article, all I could do was not join the doubters and stick to what I knew. I didn’t know if the ceasefire was serious or not, I didn’t know who was not telling the truth. I just went along assuming it would last.

From the stuff I’d read on Bloody Sunday [13 January 1972 when British soldiers shot dead a number of protestors] it was clear that not everybody would be playing it straight. And so I took that into account on every piece of information I got, whether it was from Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin, which would be biased towards their aims, or whether it was from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) or the security forces. I always used to bear in mind that the security forces’ information was being filtered through RUC officers on the desk. So I took that into account when understanding the value of that information.

Did you try to change the way security or intelligence services worked at all?

Why should I? It was safer for me to interpret than to take them on and try and change them or question their whole being. I was after progress don’t forget. I wasn’t after reform, I wasn’t after change, I wanted progress in the peace talks.
How did the previous government’s experiences affect your approach?

I will never forget the moment when Patrick Mayhew [Secretary of State for Northern Ireland 1992-1997] had to come to the House of Commons in 1993 and say the government and the IRA had been talking secretly for several years. There was outrage – more on the government benches than our opposition ones. I actually felt sorry for him having to admit they had been talking in private while using very different rhetoric in the Commons. I think it made both Tony Blair and I clear that we wouldn’t talk in secret: if and when we got into government we’d do it quite openly. Which we did.

Did you try to engage the IRA directly during your time as Secretary of State?

Why would I? Sinn Féin and IRA were much the same thing.

Is there any sense in which they can be considered separate as opposed to one organization?

I considered there to be two organizations but some people overlapped. There were clearly people who were members of both.

How did you perceive the IRA’s decision-making process in relation to Sinn Féin’s activities at the negotiating table?

Sinn Féin clearly had to consult with the IRA before they reached decisions on matters they discussed in the talks process. They always agreed or objected ‘in principle’ and would have to go back and consult with the rest of Sinn Féin and with the IRA before they would announce a decision. We had to give them the space to do that.

I don’t think they were ever overruled by the IRA. I didn’t really perceive any divisions nor did I see that relationship change much. There must have been difficulties as with all sides in the talks process, but they were never brought to the fore. Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams knew pretty much what the IRA were thinking anyway.

So you gave them room to deal with their own internal dynamics as long as the peaceful dialogue was progressing. Did you learn more about their ways of working as the talks progressed?

They clearly had an efficient communication system within the party and to the IRA. I came to respect their structure and their organization, particularly in relation to the press. They always got their press releases out quicker than us, and I thought we had an efficient press office. However quickly I moved, Sinn Féin were always first. I eventually learned that they had a desk for America, a desk for Ireland, a desk for the north, a desk for Britain, all well-structured. Occasionally I used to go to their room at the talks process and it was full of people working away. So I learned how efficient they were and how we couldn’t beat them on the press side.

A hallmark of your style was the willingness to talk to people face-to-face. You tried to prevent the talks process from collapsing in January 1998 by visiting the Maze Prison and talking to prisoners from both sides.

I talked to prisoners from both sides because if you talk to one side and not the other they feel cheated. Because they distrusted each other so badly if you didn’t give the same to both sides they would think they’d been done down.

I was asked to go to the Maze by Loyalists. When Gary McMichael [leader of the Ulster Democratic Party, which has links to the paramilitary Ulster Defence Association] came across to London with two associates, I knew it was serious because the Loyalists don’t have that much spare money and they had made the effort to bring three people to London. Gary said his people in the Maze didn’t think there was any point in continuing with the peace process. That was serious because if they pulled out, Sinn Féin-IRA would pull out and they would return to fighting. So I checked with the head of the my Department, I checked with the head of the civil service, I checked with my mum (she always had a common sense view of these things) and it made sense to go in.

How did this kind of contact assist your understanding of the armed groups?

It made me understand quite a lot about their hierarchy and motivation, and a little of how they were structured. They treated me with respect. Because of the heat in the prison they all wore shorts and t-shirts, but when I went in they put on long trousers and gave me one of the only chairs in the prison with arms (because they can break off the arms and use them as weapons), so that meant they were making an effort and considered the meeting important. They talked quite clearly about how they believed they weren’t getting enough out of the talks and didn’t see much point in staying in. I tried to convince them that there was a point and they shouldn’t feel disillusioned, that their side was doing very well and that McMichael was a very good negotiator. They went back and reported to the rest of the Loyalists in the prison and after two hours they returned and the message came out that they were going to stay in the peace process.
You clearly understood the importance of actions, context and unspoken signals. Did you have a clear sense of exactly who the prisoners were in terms of where they stood within their various groups?

Well, I knew they were important – because they had lost their freedom and the people on the outside doing the negotiations hadn’t, and so that was a clear distinction and why they were so important to folks outside. That’s why you had to go in and talk to them and convince them not to break, because they were clearly important to the Shinners or the Loyalists outside. I think I found it easier to talk to people in all political parties because of my class. Unlike many previous Secretaries of State, my roots were similar to those of many people I was talking to. Unlike many previous Secretaries of State, my roots were similar to those of many people I was talking to. I also found humour very useful in the talks and I do have a good sense of humour.

They weren’t difficult to talk to. I’d talked to a fair number of Loyalists outside the jail and the only difference is the ones inside had been caught doing something and the ones outside hadn’t. So, it was quite easy to talk to them, and to the Republicans too who were very similar but with a different perspective. Both the Shinners and the Loyalists were the same inside and outside the jail, but some of them had been caught and some hadn’t – that was the only distinction in their minds, so I took this into account all the time.

Was this kind of initiative something you considered a new and bold step?

No. I thought it was the common sense thing to do and the necessary step to hold them all in the process. I only realized how much of a risk it was perceived as when I went to the prison gym afterwards to meet the press and it was packed. I realized then it was perceived as an odd thing to do, which I can’t understand because without doing that the talks would have broken down. I wanted the talks to keep going.

One of the biggest challenges to understanding all sides in the conflict must have been the various attacks and atrocities that were committed during the peace process. To cite just one case, two RUC officers were killed by the IRA quite soon after your appointment. What did you understand about the meaning of groups’ violent actions during this time?

Like most actions on both sides, they weren’t trusting what was happening, they didn’t know where we were going. They didn’t know us well enough to know we were going to play it straight, and they were testing us.

They wanted to be sure we knew they would continue violence if we didn’t play straight. I basically understood them as a group of people willing to talk, but there had to be more trust. I was prepared to shake hands and treat them as human beings, because otherwise you won’t get a good relationship for talking. I believe in talking rather than shooting. That’s my basic philosophy on how to bring people to peace. But it helps if they know you have the means to use force which was what previous governments had done.

But this must have been quite difficult. There are many cases where governments do refuse to talk to people engaged in violent activities.

Well we said if they went onto ceasefire we’d talk. They went onto ceasefire and we talked. We did in fact exclude Sinn Féin from the talks for seventeen days in February 1998 after it appeared the IRA had been involved in the deaths of two men. The IRA’s definition of a ceasefire was different to everyone else’s, and they probably didn’t see the killings as breaching a ‘cessation of military activities’, but rather ‘disciplinary’ attacks.

In conclusion, what advice would you offer to other government officials, elsewhere in the world, who are attempting to understand and engage with armed groups operating in their country?

I wouldn’t give a blanket recommendation and would begin by saying every conflict is different. But I think there are lessons on specifics we did that worked. It is important to consult with people and be inclusive. You must include the whole of society not directly involved in talks, and so bread and butter issues, particularly the economy, are important. Involve all the various groups in society so they know what is happening and you have to keep the people with you if you’re going to have social change. I worked hard to keep all the parties in the talks. Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern [the Irish Prime Minister] talked only to Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party, and I went around everyone else who would be wondering what was happening (i.e. why weren’t they being included? What was going on?) making sure everybody felt good about what was happening. That’s where I got the “tea lady” reputation from!

On governments engaging armed groups, all I would say is you don’t fight terrorism with weapons and bullets. You fight it by talking to them. That’s the overall message I think I have.