



HOW THE 'NORTHERN IRELAND MODEL' DID NOT DEFEAT THE IRA

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My paper is a critique of what in my opinion is an historically deficient IRA and politically naïve attempt to promote a fallacious account of the peace process in Northern Ireland which can only serve as aid and comfort to terrorist and insurgent groups in the states to which the so-called 'Northern Ireland model' is applied.

Terrorism has not ended in Northern Ireland. The threat from dissident republicanism is higher than at any time since the Real IRA's Omagh bombing twelve years ago. The body tasked with monitoring terrorist activity in Northern Ireland noted in its report in May 2010 that:

The threat from dissident activity in the 6 months under review has been higher than at any time since we first met in late 2003. The seriousness, range and temp have all changed for the worse... the groups remain highly active and dangerous.¹

In a report published this week it noted that the threat remained 'dangerously lethal' and that the attacks using home-made bombs had doubled between March and August of this year.² Jonathan Evans, Director General of the Security Services (MI5) admits that when the agency was given overall responsibility for national security and intelligence work in Northern Ireland in October 2007 their working assumption was that the residual threat from terrorism in Northern Ireland was low and likely to decline but 'Sadly that has not proven to be the case and we have seen a persistent rise in terrorist activity

¹ Twenty-Third Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission, 26 May 2010, 4-5.

² 'Penultimate report says dissident threat "lethal"' *Irish News* 5 November 2010.



and ambition in Northern Ireland over the last three years.’³ The Independent Monitoring Commission also notes that while the threat is serious ‘itis in terms of weaponry, money, personnel and support the present dissident campaign in no way matches the range and temp of the Provisional IRA campaign’. However, this should not encourage complacency since the threat of a terrorist movement is always relative to the capacity of its opponents and precisely because of the peace process the state’s security forces today are no match for those that, as this paper will argue, defeated the Provisionals.

In the rush to promote a Northern Ireland model of dealing with insurgency and developing a peace process this fact is too often ignored. Instead the claim of the former leaders of the Provisional IRA, now comfortably ensconced in the government of the province: that the dissidents are ‘criminals’ and ‘micro-groups’ with no popular support, is recycled by British ministers and the media. However, the persistence of a violent republicanism is directly relevant to the question this seminar is supposed to answer. Too much about what is written about the Northern Irish peace process treats it as a supreme example of how negotiations with terrorist organisations can in specific cases bring terrorism to an end. If it has turned out that in fact terrorism has not ended then the utility of Northern Ireland as a model for ending terrorism through negotiation needs to be questioned.

This Northern Ireland model has been influential in Spain where the radical Basquenationalist movement and its terrorist core has promoted the ‘Irish model’ of conflict resolution. In March 2010 a number of noted international figures signed the Brussels Declaration which hailed what was described as important shifts in the position of ETA and its political representatives and welcomed ‘the new commitment of the pro-independence Basque left to exclusively peaceful and democratic methods of obtaining its objectives.’⁴The

³ Security Service MI5 website :<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/dissident-irish-republicans.html> accessed 28 October 2010/

⁴ Brussels declaration quoted in Rogelio Alonso, *ETA y Batasuna Propaganda, Internacionalisacion y Recomposicion del Nacionalismo Radical*, Especial Papeles de FAES , 21/10/2010, No. 149, 10-11.



language was straight from what have been portrayed as a key element in the Northern Irish peace process- the Mitchell principles committing parties to peaceful and democratic methods. Three of the signatories were internationally known and respected Irish figures: John Hume , Betty Williams (both Nobel prize winners) and the former President of Ireland and UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson. No mention was made in the press coverage of the declaration that Hume's co-winner of the Nobel award, the former Unionist leader, David Trimble, was not one of the signatories.

One of the signatories was former Prime Minister Tony Blair's Chief of Staff , Jonathan Powell. Powell has written a book devoted to the Irish peace process in which he and his boss played central roles and as Powell's view of the Irish peace process's lessons for other conflicts has been influential, this paper will argue that it is incorrect in its depiction of the dynamics of what happened in the 1990s in Ireland and proposes a flawed model for others to follow.

Let us examine Powell's main theses :

The most important change of all was in the attitude of the British government which, became prepared, after many ears of trying to ignore the problem of Northern Ireland, to devote considerable time and attention to it.⁵

This is simply wrong: it might be a fair criticism of successive British governments' 'hands off' approach to Northern Ireland during the time (1921-1968' when it was ruled by the Ulster Unionist Party whose maladministration gave rise to the civil rights movement and the crisis of the late 1960s out of which the Provisional IRA emerged. But British governments and prime ministers devoted a very considerable amount of time to Northern Ireland after 1968- abolishing the Unionist dominated parliament in 1972 and attempting two years later to reconstitute the state in Northern Ireland on the basis of power-sharing between nationalists and unionists and with an institutionalised Irish dimension to recognise the distinct national identity of the North's Catholic

⁵ Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008) 312.



minority. The Sunningdale Agreement in December 1973 anticipated the central provisions of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 but was brought down by Unionist opposition and the IRA's military campaign to force British withdrawal. In its aftermath the British government considered a series of radical shifts in policy, most importantly it looked at the possibility of a phased withdrawal from Northern Ireland. It also opened lines of communications with the IRA leadership – something it had done with harmful effects in 1972.

Powell informs his readers that neither Blair or he 'had any historical baggage on Northern Ireland, one of the advantages of relative ignorance about its history. We were of a younger generation and the war against Irish terrorism was not our war.'⁶ The implication that historical ignorance is a benefit for dealing with states enduring violent conflict is a startling one although unwittingly revealing about Blair's subsequent disastrous Iraqi intervention. Only historical ignorance can explain how Powell can write 'One of the lessons that comes most starkly out of the Northern Ireland experience is the importance of maintaining contact. It is very difficult for governments in democracies to be seen to be talking to terrorists who are killing their people unjustifiably ' Well throughout 1975 and into 1976 the British government was in regular and institutionalised contact with the Provisional IRA. These contacts did not break down even after the IRA resumed full-scale attacks . They eventually broke down because the IRA leadership who negotiated them was increasingly criticised and ignored by key sections of the IRA in Northern Ireland led by Gerry Adams. Contacts were broken off in 1976 because it became clear that those in the ascendant in the IRA were not interested in talking unless the British state gave into to their maximalist demands.

⁶ Powell, *Great Hatred*, 35.



A STALEMATE?

Rather than the most important change being in the attitude of the British government it was within the IRA that the fundamental rethinking took place. Powell's analysis, like other examples of writing about the Northern Irish peace process fundamentally misunderstands the reasons for this rethinking. A common theme in explanations of the development of the peace process is the notion that by the end of the 1980s both the IRA and the British state recognised that a military stalemate existed.⁷ Audrey Kurth Cronin sums up the argument:

By the early 1990s both sides of the sectarian divide seemed to sense a stalemate, with a danger that the relentless tit-for-tat violence could escalate. The British shared this view, resolving not to give into terrorism by withdrawing but also believing that the violence could not be ended by military means.⁸

In fact the British had never believed that there could be a military solution- the disastrous decision to support the introduction of internment without trial in 1971 and to send the Paratroopers to police a civil rights march in Londonderry in 1972 leading to Bloody Sunday have tended to distract focus from the long-term strategic view of the limits of military power in Northern Ireland. This is summarised in the British Army's own analysis of its deployment in Northern Ireland, Operation Banner :

The British Army is unique in Northern Ireland in its success against and irregular force. It should be recognised that the Army did not 'win' in any recognisable way: rather it achieved its desired end-state, which allowed a political process to be established without unacceptable levels of intimidation....The violence was reduced to an extent which made it clear to the PIRA that they would not win through violence⁹

⁷ Richard English, *Terrorism How To Respond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 76.

⁸ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 47.

⁹ *Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland*, Prepared under the direction of the Chief of General Staff, July 2006, 8-15.



However, it is also made clear that this achievement was long in the making and it raises the question of why having defeated the 'insurgent IRA' by the mid-1970s it was unable to prevent its adaption and evolution into a terrorist organisation: the process associated with the rise of Gerry Adams and his allies and the declaration of the 'Long War' strategy in 1977.

WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG?

To understand why it took another quarter of a century to defeat the IRA it is necessary to factor in the unique political circumstances of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Here one glaring difference with other European states facing a violent ethno-nationalist movement needs to be emphasised. In 1993 in the Downing Street Declaration signed by the Prime Minister, John Major, and the Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds the British government declared that 'they have no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland.'¹⁰ It is most unlikely that a Spanish government could contemplate such a statement with regard to the Basque Country or the French on Corsica. The fundamental historical reality, one ignored by the IRA, was that this was as true in 1972 as it was in 1993. Ireland had in an age of submarine-launched nuclear weapons lost any strategic value it had for the British state and from the 1960s onwards the cost of providing the citizens of Northern Ireland with the same level of public services as the rest of the UK necessitated a substantial annual subvention from the British Treasury. Politically none of the main British parties organised in the province which was regarded by the British political and administrative elite as a 'place apart' which many of the would have dearly loved to be shot of.

To give just one example of the region's precarious place in the affections of the British elite in 1974 / 1975 the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, seriously

¹⁰ P. Bew, P. Gibbon & H.Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-2001 Political Forces and Social Classes* (London:Serif, 2002) 220.



considered a policy of phased withdrawal from the province.¹¹ With neither Labour nor the Conservative parties committed to long-term maintenance of the Union, and with no organic connection between the British political elite and either of the two communities in Northern Ireland, it was unsurprising that as a former senior British official described the situation ‘there was no single narrative dictating the course of events’.¹² Or as the British Army’s analysis puts it in its delineation of the obstacles to the defeat of the IRA:

There was no single authority in overall charge of the direction of the campaign, but rather three agencies, often poorly coordinated: Stormont followed by the NIO; the MOD; and the RUC....for most of the campaign there was little coherence and synergy. There was little evidence of a strategic vision and no long-term plan.¹³

THE ROLE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND IN PROLONGING THE CONFLICT

Another major obstacle was the 300 mile land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland:

The Border ...was a problem at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. From August 1969 to the later stages of the campaign republican terrorists used the Republic as a safe haven....in the late 1970s it was considered that PIRA simply could not survive without refuge in the Republic and the Border also offered opportunities for fundraising from smuggling activities. In 1988 ten of the 16 PIRA Active Service Units operated from South of the Border.¹⁴

Although the IRA did not recognise the legitimacy of the Irish state, in its Standing Order Number 8 it instructed volunteers not to target members of the Irish police or Army. The IRA assisted by a political culture which contained a

¹¹ J.Bew, M. Frampton & I. Guruchaga, *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country* (London:Hurst, 2009) 58-59.

¹² Sir Brian Cubbon, former Permanent Under Secretary, Northern Ireland Office in *Ibid.*, 72

¹³ *Operation Banner*, 8-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-4.



strong strain of anti-British and anti-Unionist ideology . The largest party in the state, Fianna Fail, emphasised its republican roots and its opposition to the partition of the island. As a government minister explained to the British ambassador in 1973

He emphasised the need for absolute secrecy and discretion. This, he said, stemmed from the age-old instinctive fielding on the part of the most Irishmen that it was a bad thing for Irishmen to cooperate with the British in clobbering fellow Irishmen, however rascally the latter might be. However stupid and out of date this attitude might be, it was still a factor that had to be taken very much into account¹⁵

Although particularly under the Coalition Government of 1973-1977 cross-border cooperation between the Garda and the RUC did improve, the Irish were adamant that there could be no direct contact between the Irish security forces and the British Army. This slowed down effective responses to IRA attacks as did the strict limitations imposed by the Irish on over-flights of its territory by British helicopters who were following suspicious vehicles and IRA men fleeing south after attacks in the North. The independence of the judiciary in the Republic meant that it was common for IRA suspects to be freed. Evidence obtained from the RUC was not admissible in the Irish courts. Until the late 1980s British requests for the extradition of terrorists were routinely refused on the grounds that the violence was politically motivated.

In the previous IRA campaign (1956-62) the Irish government had been instrumental in smashing it by introducing internment without trial . This was not considered an option after 1969, in part because of the one-sided way in which internment had been introduced in Northern Ireland in August 1971. However another key difference was that in the 1956-62 campaign the Northern state was secure and British involvement was secondary. After 1969 the Unionist state was in crisis and the resultant involvement of the British state in a central role, awakened amongst all Irish nationalists the hope that the crisis would

¹⁵ National Archives, London, FCO 87/247, Sir John Galsworthy, British Ambassador Dublin to W.K.K. White, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 26 April 1973.



provide an opportunity for movement in the direction of Irish unity. The result was that the Irish state did not have an interest in the defeat of the IRA campaign except in terms which would ensure that the British ceded it – the Irish government – a major increase in its influence over Northern Ireland. There was therefore a broader political constraint on the British campaign against the IRA: the need to keep Dublin and the non-violent nationalist party in the North, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) inside.

The only period when this consideration was not at the centre of British calculations was 1976-79 when Roy Mason was Northern Ireland Secretary when due to the entrenchment of political division between unionist and nationalist parties it was decided to concentrate on improving the economy and defeating the IRA. ¹⁶However, this policy did not survive the arrival of Margaret Thatcher in power in 1979. Here in one of the choice ironies that have characterised British policy in Northern Ireland, two spectacular IRA attacks: the murder of Lord Mountbatten, on holiday in the Republic and the killing of 18 soldiers with explosive devices detonated from the Republic ; which demonstrated the validity of the British contention that the territory of the Republic was a 'safe haven' for the IRA, would propel Thatcher towards a political initiative which accorded the Irish state a new and enhanced status in the governance of Northern Ireland.

British anti-terrorist strategy was constantly delegitimized domestically and internationally by the SDLP in conjunction with the Irish government which criticised the shift towards primacy for the police after 1976 on the basis that the RUC was a partisan force, drawn largely from the protestant/unionist community .John Hume, the SDLP leader, determined to internationalise the conflict by mobilising key Irish-American politicians to criticise the British policies for being biased towards the Unionists and reliant on a repressive and sectarian security apparatus in the province. It is impossible to understand Mrs Thatcher's approach to Northern Ireland without taking into account the decision of the

¹⁶ Cillian McGrattan, *Northern Ireland 1968-2008 The Politics of Entrenchment* (London: palgrave macmillan, 2010) 110-111.



State Department to halt a shipment of handguns to the RUC in 1979.¹⁷ The success of this campaign was evident in Mrs Thatcher's ditching of her intended policy of the maintenance of direct rule in other words of continuity with the Mason period, and instead re-launching a search for a new set of inter-party talks on possible structures of devolved government for the North. The lesson was clear to the Irish government and the SDLP : it was possible to use the threat of the IRA and Britain's desire for more effective measures from the Republic to improve cross-border security cooperation to extract political concessions on Northern Ireland from London. There is an interesting parallel here with the situation of Spain during the transition to democracy where as Paloma Aguilar has pointed out the PNV (the non-violent Basque National Party) derived considerable benefit from ETA's violence by indirectly using the threat of terrorism in its negotiations with the central government.¹⁸

However, despite the major political concessions to the Irish state involved in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, Mrs Thatcher would subsequently complain that Dublin had not delivered on her hopes of radical improvements in security cooperation.¹⁹ One particularly glaring example of the advantages the use of the Republic as a safe haven by the terrorists was the IRA unit which carried out the Enniskillen Remembrance Sunday bombing in November 1987, killing eleven people, and subsequently carried out a series of brutal sectarian killings. The core of it was eight individuals all of who lived in the south Donegal town of Ballyshannon a few miles from the border with Northern Ireland. The Irish police had files on them all but not sufficient evidence to prosecute them.²⁰

¹⁷ Bew et. al., 83.

¹⁸ Paloma Aguilar, 'The Memory of the Civil War in the Transition to Democracy: The Peculiarity of the Basque Case', in P. Heywood (ed.) *Politics and Policy in Democratic Spain: No Longer Different?* (London: Frank Cass, 1999) 12-13.

¹⁹ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993) 406-15.

²⁰ Sean Flynn, 'Known killers, free agents', *Irish Times* 20 January 1989.



INTELLIGENT USE OF ‘HARD POWER’: THE KEY ROLE OF RUC SPECIAL BRANCH

This highlights the radical difference between the capacity of the security forces north and south of the border. For it was also the case in Northern Ireland that the intelligence material on which terrorists could be identified will often not be useable in a court. However during the 1980s the northern security forces were able to develop a range of surveillance and human intelligence capabilities which enabled them to prevent a high percentage of IRA operations from ever being put into effect. At the centre of this was the RUC Special Branch. The early years of the Troubles had seen the overstretching and delegitimation of the RUC and the primacy of the GOC and the British Army in the war against terrorism. In 1975 this period ended with the decision to re-establish police primacy and from 1976 onwards army numbers were reduced while the locally recruited security forces were built up. For a period this inevitably produced intra-force rivalry and conflict but from the early 1980s a more harmonious set of relations between the RUC and the Army was established. This gave to Special Branch the decisive role in intelligence gathering and evaluation and also through the Tactical and Coordinating Group of it was ‘the hub that tasked and coordinated the executive arms of surveillance and armed response.’²¹

Together with a range of British Army and MI5 intelligence and surveillance resources this hub provided the basis for what the Operation Banner document terms the ‘manoeuvrist’ approach which was aimed at denying the terrorist the initiative something which it was commonly claimed the terrorist always holds in that he normally chooses the time and place of the attack. The aim of the manoeuvrist approach was to indirectly deny the terrorist this initiative. Examples are ‘rummage searching’ to counter IEDs ; moving to threaten the gunmen’s withdrawal and attacking terrorist finances rather than the terrorist himself.²²The most spectacular of the operations aimed at impeding the IRA’s capacity to operate was the capture in October 1987 of the *Eksund* loaded with

²¹ W.R. Matchett, *The RUC Special Branch Model- Is Value in Irregular Warfare*, unpublished paper, 22 September 2010, 14-15.

²² *Operation Banner*, 8-9.



150 tons of arms and munitions donated by Libya to the IRA. The information came from an MI5 agent who was a member of the IRA's Executive and it ensured that IRA plans for a 'Tet Offensive' to force the British to the negotiating table was still-born.²³ Other high level informants who we know about included Sean O'Callaghan for a time head of the IRA's Southern Command²⁴, Freddy Scapaticici- a key figure in the IRA's Internal Security Unit, recruited by RUC Special Branch in 1978 and later working for the Force Research Unit of British Army Intelligence and Denis Donaldson, a senior member of Sinn Fein who also travelled throughout Europe and the Middle East on arms procurement missions for the IRA and who was a Special Branch Agent from 1986.²⁵ The result of the security forces use of this battery of informers and information from surveillance both human and electronic was pungently described by one IRA man:

If they (the IRA) could have intensified the war they would have intensified it. I can understand the republicans who say that it is a sell-out and we should have intensified, but see just from my time from when I was operating in this district, it was hard to fuckin' move. I would say for every twenty jobs we went out on only one came off, ...²⁶

From this perspective the notion that there was a military stalemate at the end of 1980s is mistaken. Of course the British could not eradicate the IRA but this was not the objective and never had been. Instead it effectively downgraded its capacity to operate to such an extent that it was, from the point of view of the state and most citizens of Northern Ireland not much more than a obscene and sometime deadly nuisance. The logic is pithily summarised in the Operation Banner analysis:

Much of the motivation of the terrorist came through a wish to glamorise a somewhat third-rate way of life, through esteem amongst the republican

²³ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2002) 326-29

²⁴ Sean O'Callaghan, *The Informer* (London: Corgi Books, 1999)

²⁵ David McKittrick, 'The spy's tale: the life and death of Denis Donaldson', *The Independent*, 6 April 2006

²⁶ Rogelio Alonso, *The IRA and Armed Struggle* (London: Routledge, 2007) 157.



community or, more simple, in bars or with women. Denying terrorists the opportunity to commit terrorist activities will tend to undermine that aspect of motivation.²⁷

Of course the IRA could continue but the prospect before the middle-aged Adams and McGuinness was years more of justifying a clearly dead-end struggle while any political ambitions they had, particularly that of becoming a significant political force in the Republic – where Sinn Fein support at the end of the 1980s stood at less than two per cent- could be forgotten. Accounts which explain the peace process in terms of military stalemate ; a changing international context post the collapse of the USSR and the role of external actors like the EU and the USA, deal at most with second and third order influences in compared to this basic military reality: the IRA was beaten . This is fully recognised in this analysis of the IRA's declaration of a cessation in 1994 by one of their volunteers who commented on a recent *Guardian* article by the veteran Sinn Fein propagandist Danny Morrison in which he had traced the peace process to the existence of a military stalemate:

To claim as he does that the IRA did not win but had not lost either is demonstrably wrong . The political objective of the Provisional IRA was to secure a British declaration of intent to withdraw. It failed. The objective of the British state was to force the Provisional IRA to accept...that it would not leave Ireland until a majority in the North consented to such a move. It succeeded.²⁸

WHAT WAS THE PEACE PROCESS REALLY ABOUT?

If the IRA was effectively defeated by the time of its cessation in 1994 what then was the peace process about. Given that neither Jonathan Powell nor his master, Tony Blair were in government when the cessation occurred what are they talking about when they talk about the peace process as if it is broadly

²⁷ *Operation Banner*, 8-10.

²⁸ 'We the IRA have failed' in Anthony McIntyre, *Good Friday: The Death of Irish Republicanism* (New York: Ausobo Press, 2008) 7.



conterminous with their period in government between 1997 and 2006? After all this is the period from which all the lessons pertinent to the Basque country and other conflict situations are drawn. If one reads the accounts given by Powell, Blair and also by another powerful insider, Alastair Campbell, Blair's press secretary and confidant, then it appears that it is all about getting Sinn Fein into the multi-party talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement and then ensuring that formation of a new government for Northern Ireland in which Sinn Fein would have a central role. All these accounts share one basic assumption that peace in Northern Ireland could not be established and guaranteed without republican inclusion. In this process the fact that throughout the talks and after then when Sinn Fein was actually in government the IRA continued to exist as a organisation that recruited, fund-raised through criminal activities and enforced its version of order through the policing of opponents up to and including kidnapping and murder is ignored.

Blair, Powell and Campbell lacked a history of involvement in Northern Irish affairs. Their knowledge of the local situation was provided by a largely compliant Northern Ireland Office who detected that Blair saw in Northern Ireland a theatre where he could play the role of international statesman and was not going to allow local realities to deter him from his objective. Blair's criticism of the previous Conservative Government was that it did not respond positively and quickly enough to the IRA's first cessation leading the organisation to go back to violence with the Canary Wharf bombing in February 1996. At core of the Conservative approach to the cessation were the issues of its permanence and the decommissioning of IRA weapons as a precondition for Sinn Fein's inclusion in multi-party talks. For Powell reflecting on Labour's stewardship of the peace process the lesson they drew from the Conservative experience was that 'it was always an error to set a precondition to a negotiation'²⁹.

In fact that the main reason why the first cessation occurred was that the British insisted on an end to the campaign as a precondition for Sinn Fein inclusion in

²⁹ Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred*, 317.



the talks.³⁰ However, the lesson that Blair and his advisers drew from the IRA's subsequent breaking of the cessation with the bombing of Canary Wharf in February 1996 was that the key to a peaceful resolution was that the process of negotiation be maintained whatever the behaviour of republicans: 'talking should not be seen as a reward to be held out or withdrawn'³¹. This gave Sinn Fein a decisive leverage on the process which marked it from the beginning.

The issue where Blair's management of the process had the most corrosive effect was on the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. Again the Powell view is clear: 'It is best to leave the issue of weapons to the end of the peace process.'³² The centrality of this issue to the negotiations which led to the Good Friday Agreement was that for those moderate unionists in David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party, to go into government with Sinn Fein without the IRA beginning the process of getting rid of its weapons risked political suicide. Even their participation in multi-party talks with Sinn Fein laid them open to attack by their more militant unionist opponents in Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party and divided the UUP. But for Blair it was sufficient that Gerry Adams accepted the Mitchell Principles, drafted by the former US Senator, George Mitchell, on democracy and non-violence. These involved a commitment to democratic and peaceful means of resolving political issues; to the disarmament of all paramilitary organisations and to renouncing the use of force or threat of force to influence the outcome of all-party negotiations.³³ As current supporters of the application of the Northern Irish model to the conflict in the Basque country make much of the relevance of the Mitchell Principles it is important to register that the principles served as a convenient fig-leave of democratic compliance for republicans who were happy to make verbal commitments of their desire for decommissioning and then use the continued existence of the IRA and its arsenal as a means of blackmailing the British government into concession after concession. They also continued to murder alleged drug-dealers and dissident

³⁰ Henry Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: A Political History of the IRA* (London: Serif: 1997) 244.

³¹ Powell, 312.

³² Ibid., 317.

³³ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2002) Appendix 6



republican opponents as well as continue criminal activities including the largest bank robbery in the history of the UK and Ireland over the next nine years – with no serious repercussions from the British authorities.

Blair was warned by David Trimble at the beginning of the process of the dangers of bringing Sinn Fein into talks unless he extracted a substantive movement from republicans on weapons: that they would agree to begin the process of decommissioning along with their participation in talks: '(Trimble) said we were conceding too much to the IRA because there was no mechanism to throw them out. The UUs were overemotional and saw conspiracies everywhere.' So Alastair Campbell wrote in his diary about a meeting with Trimble on June 24, 1997. For Blair and Campbell the 'UUs were overemotional and saw conspiracies everywhere'.³⁴ Subsequent developments showed just how justified were Trimble's concerns. For Sinn Fein were able to obtain major concessions without any progress on decommissioning: the agreement to free all paramilitary prisoners within two years; to set up an independent commission on the police; to create a human rights commission – not such a concession it might appear but the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission interpreted its role as investigating only state violations of human rights allowing the IRA and loyalists to continue threatening, beating and murdering members of their communities. The Patten Report on policing was a major victory for republicans: while not conceding Sinn Fein's demand for the abolition of the RUC it delegitimized it by changing its name and symbols and effectively emasculating Special Branch which had played such a key role in the defeat of the IRA. The Northern Ireland Office encouraged a wholesale clearing out of the senior ranks by a generous early retirement package with the result that the accumulated knowledge of dealing with subversives was destroyed. Police culture was to be civilianised and the emphasis on 'normal' policing. A set of oversight bodies including an Oversight Commissioner and a Police Ombudsman- the first occupant of the post being the wife of a nationalist politician- were created to ensure a 'human rights compliant' force. The Chief

³⁴ Alastair Campbell & Richard Stott, *The Blair Years Extracts from The Alastair Campbell Diaries* (London: Hutchinson, 2007) 215.



Constable of the PSNI is now answerable to a local minister and to a policing board which includes local politicians including prominent members of Sinn Fein. If Northern Ireland were like any other part of the UK then these human rights, oversight and democratic controls might be uncontroversial although it is doubtful if any police force in the rest of the UK has to operate within so many constraints. But the persistent and growing dissident threat demonstrates Northern Ireland's distinctiveness and the fear must be that one of the reasons for the growth of dissidents stems from the failure of the personnel and policing culture of the PSNI to get to grips with it.

Champions of the peace process point to the fundamental concession that Adams and republicans made in the Good Friday Agreement on the basic constitutional issue: that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the support of a majority of its people- what Adams had previously denounced as the 'Unionist veto'. However, as the IRA had failed miserably in thirty years of armed struggle to force Northern Ireland out of the UK this 'concession' is better seen as a belated recognition of reality.

However, Tony Blair's management of the peace process, allowed Adams to trade in the massively degraded and contained terrorist capability of the IRA for a major increase in Sinn Fein's political and ideological hegemony within Northern Ireland's nationalist community. Powell's account of the twists and turns of the peace process from 1997 is most convincing in its detailed depictions of how not only did Adams and McGuinness extract one concession after another but used their frequent trips to Downing Street, to transform their image from apologists for the IRA to internationally-feted 'peace-makers' whose every word was hung on by a usually uncritical and compliant media. The political results in Northern Ireland were the replacement of the SDLP by Sinn Fein as the predominant nationalist political party and as more and more unionists responded to their not unfounded perception that the peace process was a one-way process of appeasing republicans, the DUP increasingly threatened the UUP's electoral leadership. A direct result of the peace process was that by 2007 the two parties that had done so much over the previous 35



years to divide and polarise the population along sectarian lines were now ruling Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein's dominance within the nationalist community has been associated with a legitimisation of their terrorist campaign which is portrayed as an inevitable and legitimate response to state and unionist violence and discrimination. The fact that it was the non-violent civil rights movement which created the conditions for the radical equalisation of the positions of Catholics and Protestants since the 1960s is ignored in this narrative as is the fact that the IRA's campaign was not about the reform of the state securing equality for Catholics but a united Ireland pure and simple.

But perhaps the most corrosive effect of Sinn Fein's peace-process produced dominance is in the area of victims. It is no surprise that the issue of the victims of the Troubles is a difficult one for republicans as they were responsible for 58.3 per cent of all deaths with Adams' Provisionals killing 1781 people (48.1 per cent) Loyalist terrorists were responsible for 29.7 per cent of fatalities while the security forces killed only 9.9 per cent.³⁵ Despite this the focus of Blair's peace process ensured that it would be agents of the state who have so far borne the brunt of official scrutiny. It was judged politically expedient to respond to a long-standing nationalist demand into Bloody Sunday with an announcement by Tony Blair in January 1998 of a public inquiry chaired by Lord Saville. Twelve years and £195 million later the report into 13 deaths produced little that professional historians had been able to establish from official archives at a tiny fraction of the cost.³⁶ When David Trimble resigned as First Minister in July 2001 because of the failure of the IRA to engage with the body charged with overseeing the decommissioning of terrorist weapons, Blair made more concessions to Sinn Fein at negotiations at Weston Park. Peter Mandelson who was then Secretary of State has subsequently admitted his anger and opposition at the time to what he describes as a 'disaster....a whole number of

³⁵ D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney, C. Thornton & D. McVea, *Lost Lives* (Edinburgh & London: Mainstream, 2004) 1534.

³⁶ Henry Patterson, 'For many Saville has fallen short', *The Independent* 6 June 2010.



capitulations to Sinn Fein.’³⁷ Amongst the capitulations was the agreement to appoint a judge of international standing to investigate allegations of collusion between the forces of the state and terrorists. The inquiry by the Canadian judge, Justice Cory, investigated a number of high-profile incidents including the murder of the human rights lawyer, Rosemary Nelson, by loyalists, the murder of Robert Hamill also by loyalists, and the case of Patrick Finucane another lawyer who represented terrorist suspects and was murdered by loyalists. on the basis of Cory’s report the Secretary of State announced the establishment of public inquiries into a number of these cases. A number of Coroner’s Inquests into deaths at the hands of state forces are also to occur over the next few years.

Blair’s management of the peace process has therefore resulted in the focus on deaths during the Troubles shifting from the main perpetrators to those institutions which were central in ending the terrorist campaign. It is unsurprising that Republican-orientated victims group victims groups like *Relatives for Justice* emphasis the role of alleged state collusion in loyalist killings of Catholics. However, the recent government sponsored Consultative group on the Past chaired by the former Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, one of whose international advisers was the South African lawyer Brian Currin who has played in a central role the recent promotion of the Northern Ireland model in the Basque country, spent as much time in its report on allegations of collusion and state violence as on terrorist violence. Incidentally the word ‘terrorist’ does not figure once in the 160 pages of the Eames-Bradley report.³⁸ Underlying this inversion of the actual hierarchy of responsibility for Troubles death and the resultant tendency to treat the forces of the state as morally equivalent terrorist organisations is the peace process’s central dynamic of concession to Sinn Fein. One of its most destructive legacies has been that the Provisional narrative of the legitimacy of their campaign is now turned against them by the dissidents. After all down to

³⁷ Nicholas Watt, Patrick Wintour and Owen Boycott, ‘Blair guilty of capitulating to Sinn Fein’, *The Guardian*, 13 March 2007.

³⁸ *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past*, presented to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 23 January 2009.



the 1990s the Provisionals had no democratic legitimacy for their violence- most Catholics refused to vote for Sinn Fein. Their legitimacy was one drawn from the republican movement's historic commitment to use force to 'free' Ireland from British rule independently of what actual Irish men and women wanted. Indulged and cosseted by Blair and his colleagues, the Provisionals have continued to legitimise their violence while sermonising from government office against the dissidents. It is a position with no moral weight in those sections of Irish society, north and south, small though they are, which support the dissidents. In the words of the Belfast commentator, Malachy O'Doherty, 'Adams' continuing pretence that the IRA had a good war does nothing to discourage the new generation of republicans.'³⁹

In conclusion those who champion the Northern Ireland model would do well to consider some highly critical comments on it by one of those at the core of the Blair government who was also Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Lord Peter Mandelson. Blair claims that a key principle for success in peace processes is 'To proceed to resolution, the thing needs to be gripped and focussed on. Continually. Inexhaustibly. Relentlessly. Day by day by day.'⁴⁰ For Mandelson this Blairite nostrum was the source of a major corruption of the process: 'Tony's fundamental view was that the "process was the policy" even if you don't know what the process will achieve.' According to Mandelson to keep the process going Blair would 'accept republican demands which were excessive and unreasonable'. This 'unreasonable and irresponsible behaviour' was, he judged in large part responsible for the political destruction of David Trimble and the elevation of the extremes to a dominating position in Northern Ireland.⁴¹ Northern Ireland has many positive and negative lessons for states facing terrorist threats but the positive lessons pertain mostly to the period before 1997 while the negative ones relate to the period and the model now in vogue in Spain.

³⁹ Quoted in Martyn Frampton, *Legion of the Rearguard Dissident Irish Republicanism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010) 252.

⁴⁰ Quoted in David Runciman, 'Preacher on a Tank', *London Review of Books*, 7 October 2010, 6.

⁴¹ Nicholas Watt, Patrick Wintour and Owen Boycott, 'Blair guilty of capitulating to Sinn Fein', *Guardian*, 13 March 2007.