The Role of Reason in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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"Peace in Northern Ireland took so long to achieve because though the politicians tended to be reasonable, the rival populations were not."

The issue of deducing whether the factor preventing peace in Northern Ireland was the 'unreasonableness' of either the communities or politicians is in truth a relatively simplistic means of explaining a complex problem. The crux of the issue lies instead in ascertaining whether an action was universally recognised as being 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' by specific target groups. In so far as the conflict polarized public opinion as much as political opinion – evident in the continuous highly sectarian voting patterns throughout the Troubles – it is obvious that the definition of what is 'reasonable' or not will vary depending on personal interpretation.[1] This essay argues that both sides in the struggle ultimately (and successfully) portrayed and interpreted the conflict as one of self-defence, and thus, by extension, all action taken was viewed to be necessary – and therefore reasonable.

What is deemed 'reasonable' is not abstract and objective, but a malleable definition manipulated to suit the objectives of each side. Due to this conflicting definition of what was 'reasonable', it became impossible for the warring sides to be reconciled, and therefore peace was only achieved when the traditional stance of Republicanism gave way to the Unionist position. To further this point is the fact that while both sides in the communities and the political sphere had the potential to be 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable', arguably much of the violence stemmed from political encouragement of the perpetuation of the conflict – through the use of rhetoric which incited the masses, in order to better politicians' political leverage when the negotiation of a peace settlement became a plausible option.

When analysing a conflict as complicated as the one in Northern Ireland, ordinary concepts and definitions do not seem to apply as uniformly as one would suppose. The notion that 'reasonable' represents something objective, which was accepted by all sides to the conflict to have one and the same definition, is false. Indeed, the essay question posed hangs upon the *assumption* that 'reasonableness' is a term which equates to 'moderation'. That is also false. Not surprisingly, as in the past many peace settlements have allegedly been based upon a moderation of opinion, a refusal to compromise is seen as 'unreasonable'; and this is essentially what occurred throughout the Troubles. In reality the problem in Northern Ireland is characterized by political and social extremity based upon the ethnically stratified nature of the province, justifying the distorted definition of what is deemed to be reasonable.[2] The conflict is viewed in many ways to be one of self-protection in that the Unionists believed that any Republican advance threatened the existence of their country, and one where Republicanism held that any Unionist government was an infringement of their rights as 'Irish' people. As a result the conflict saw both sides assault both the opposition and factions within their own ranks to ensure that the protection of their own values and ideas remained intact. Once this vision is accepted, action is necessary and hence 'reasonable'.

One rationalization which can explain a shift in moderation amongst politicians is the concept that a politician's incentives to behave in a 'moderate' or 'reasonable' fashion are increased according to the structural realities which being in office presents, and it is this that truly determines the extent of moderation.[3] Consequently, politicians who provide the opposition to government, and thus can act without being required to shoulder any responsibility for the potential failure of decisions, are less likely to act 'reasonably' and more likely to posture for advantage.[4] This was demonstrated by virtually all politicians throughout the period, who freely advocated the merits of extremism when in opposition and then moderation when in government. A memorable example includes Terence O'Neill, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland between 1963 and 1969, who, compelled by the structural realities of government to be reasonable and attempt to compromise with the Nationalists, was denounced in 1966 by the Reverend Ian Paisley as a "traitor". Decades later Paisley himself, when confronted with the responsibilities of being leader of Northern Ireland's largest party, entered into a power-sharing agreement with the most extreme variety of Nationalists: Sinn Fein.[5] Another example is provided by the destruction of David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionists at the Good Friday Agreement, who destroyed his career and party in attempting to be 'moderate' when he endorsed Senator George Mitchell as chairman of the all-party talks, instead of joining Paisley in opposing it. That act of moderation shows Trimble's awareness of a personal responsibility to keep the peace process moving. Mitchell later admitted that had Trimble joined the opposition, the process would have surely ended there.[6]

The obvious counterargument, that this theory does not stand up to scrutiny when applied to the Republicans, can be dealt with by simply pointing to the fact that Sinn Fein's links with the violence of the IRA arguably encouraged, or compelled, Gerry Adams to behave less 'reasonably', because he has long been as concerned with protecting his own life as adhering to the structural constraints that being in government provide. Indeed, so successfully was Adams able to portray himself as resisting Unionism that he remains alive and leader of Sinn Fein despite having conceded most of the Republican case to the Unionists. Moreover, even for Adams, his argument that he had little choice given that Catholics are in a minority provides powerful evidence of the fact that bearing the burdens of power ultimately compels politicians to be moderate regardless of their political starting point.

Despite this structuralist argument, it is possible – indeed highly plausible – that politicians had further incentives to appear less 'moderate' when attempting to formulate peace, because the act of politics involves both rhetoric and manoeuvre.[7] In effect politics in Northern Ireland saw most politicians tailor their rhetoric to suit circumstances and events in order to achieve their political objectives. Whilst this is not particularly unusual in the world of high politics, the reactions that it garnered from the public were. Indeed politicians who used rhetoric and gesture in public speeches were able to incite the masses by exploiting the latent historical hatred and suspicion between the two sides, in order to polarize communities and thus increase their political leverage. Paisley's rhetoric and manoeuvre are so demonstrative of this theory that he was likened to the Grand Old Duke of York: 'He'll huff and puff to bring about a situation and then he'll come back from the edge'.[8] His ability to incite Unionists to take action against Republicans only increased his political leverage, because it presented the view that the public *themselves* were extremists and thus, any compromise agreement had to be made with more concessions from Republicans than Unionists to appease the people. The cunning of Paisley to use rhetoric in this way is indirectly explained by one scholar who argues much a similar position on the use of language in that 'political action needs to be explained – and rhetoric is part of a necessary explanatory framework'.[9] However, in Northern Ireland this rhetoric gained a momentum of its own amongst the population of both communities, and instead of being an explanatory method for the politicians also became a driving force behind further 'reasonable', i.e. necessary and sometimes violent, action. The Republicans played this game too; Adams was reportedly offered agreement to his terms days before he called off the Hunger Strikes in 1981. And yet he resisted until IRA prisoners had already died. His reasoning seem obvious in that, by gaining more sympathy and galvanising the core and extreme base of his supporters, he was able to argue from a much stronger negotiating position. What quickly became the norm was that extremism was not only 'reasonable' in the context of Northern Ireland, but was positively encouraged by everyone concerned as it was 'necessary' to perpetuate the hostility to increase bargaining power for the politicians.

The momentum caused by the use of rhetoric to incite animosity can be seen in the way in which the public consistently reacted to political events which, although they prevented peace, were not entirely unreasonable in a war deemed to be one of self-protection. The purpose was not to attain peace but defend a community. Under 'normal' circumstances, any attempt at a lasting peace would likely be welcomed by the majority of the population; however in

Northern Ireland the opposite seemed to occur. The rhetoric used by the politicians, which included historical propaganda, current events and sectarian interpretations served to rile the public into extremism which in turn perpetuated the conflict and prevented peace.[10] Indeed, "the people of Northern Ireland wanted peace, but not peace at any price".[11] The Ulster Workers Council strike in 1975 is evidence of the public taking political matters into their own hands in order to prevent a peace settlement that they believed was unreasonable. Lee Bruce describes the strike as a 'counter-reaction to the Republican irredentism and the refusal of Westminster to accept the democratic wish of the majority community'.[12] The Sunningdale Agreement did appear as though it could result in the coercion of Unionists into an all Irish Federal state, which clearly was not an appealing reality. This belief led to the collapse of the executive in Northern Ireland, ineffective implementation of the Sunningdale Agreement, and to the polarization of the SDLP which all combined to make peace less, not more likely.[13] As has previously been argued, politicians' self-interest in polarizing the communities in order to affect the weighting of any future settlement was evident in Northern Ireland and is demonstrated during the UWC strike incident, as Paisley and William Craig exploited the tension and fears felt to encourage the strike and disrupt the agreement from being implemented fully.[14]

Though this behaviour may seem 'unreasonable' and rather counter-productive, it was fully justifiable to a community and politicians who believed that their rights were being unreasonably ignored by the opposition. It is therefore apparent that though neither side would openly compromise, the actions of both the communities and politicians are justifiably 'reasonable' as they are seen to protect their interests first. In such a 'dirty' war it was perhaps more unreasonable for the opposition to expect otherwise.

In that this essay has argued that the actions of all parties involved were to a certain degree reasonable in that they aimed to protect the overarching principles of their communities, and has presented a further argument in that this conflict was stoked by politicians intent on increasing their political leverage, one must briefly poses an alternative, or additional, possibility as to why peace took so long to achieve. Given that none of the main parties involved were moderate in an objective sense, instead the DUP, UUP, Sinn Fein and the SDLP all positioned themselves on the extremities of the political spectrum, it may be possible that peace was prevented not by only the unreasonableness of the Northern Irish politicians, but by the continuous efforts made by London to construct a peace based upon a moderation of political opinion that according to Bruce simply did not exist at either a political or social level.[15] Even though the Republicans have since conceded their objectives (at least for decades to come), and signed up to the democratic principles of majority rule by agreeing to power-sharing with the DUP, there is 'not much sign of reconciliation at the popular level' suggesting that peace would not have been possible until one side yielded completely.[16] Due to the complexities of the conflict, it would be far too simplistic to apportion the responsibility of preventing peace to either the 'communities' or 'politicians' based upon their unreasonableness. Certainly, 'politicians' and 'communities' are not homogenous blocs of whom a universal judgement can be made in that within these groups existed those who were both reasonable and unreasonable at different times. As Maurice Cowling demonstrates, high politics was and is characterised by flamboyant rhetoric to rile the opposition and galvanise support.[17] In the Northern Ireland conflict rhetoric served many political ends but ultimately perpetuated the historical enmity, perhaps indicating that although total responsibility cannot be apportioned, the political sphere certainly did not live up to the responsibility of compromise that was necessary to solve the conflict.

[1] Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

[2] Lee Bruce, *Perfidious Albion: The application of British policy and strategy in Northern Ireland, 1970-74,* (Saarbrucken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG, 2009) p. 81

[3] Ed Moloney, *Paisley: from demagogue to democrat?,* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press Ltd, 2008) p. 530

[4] Bruce, p. 76

[5] Moloney, p. 100

[6] George Mitchell, *Making Peace,* (London: University of California Press, 2000) p. 47

[7] Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920-1924,* (Cambridge University Press, 1972)

[8] Moloney, p. 254

[9] Robert Crowcroft, "High politics, political practice, and the Labour party' (MS) p. 13

[10] Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

[11] Colin Irwin, '*The Northern Ireland 'peace polls", Irish Political Studies, 21:1*, pp. 1-14

[12] Lee Bruce p. 86

[13] Paul Dixon, pp. 144-147

[14] Lee Bruce, p. 83

[15] Bruce, p. 85

[16] Dixon, p. 320

[17] Cowling, pp. 1-12

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