

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

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KIERAN NEESON, SEP 29 2010

Comparison with other cases of ethnic conflict plays such a large role in political discourse that it tends to be taken for granted. Comparison usually encounters a good deal of scepticism. Unhappy nations like unhappy people, feel themselves to be unique[1]. However analogies with other places have had a place in the politics of Northern Ireland since before the start of the troubles. In general, these analogies appealed more to nationalists than it did to the unionists. It was only after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 did these unionist attitudes change. Although the Northern Ireland problem could be compared with numerous cases of ethnic conflict[2], for the purpose of this essay the main focus will be the comparison of Northern Ireland with South Africa, Israel/Palestine, the Basque Country and Corsica both in historical perspective and accessing the role of peace process and how they influenced one another in the international scene. Some reference will also be paid to the cases of Sri Lanka and Cyprus.

It is generally accepted that during the early 1990s Northern Ireland was greatly influenced by the events in South Africa and Israel/Palestine. The three cases were examples of deeply divided societies with a high potential for inter-communal violence. South Africa seemed to be the most intractable and insoluble of the three. However with its subsequent peace process and its transition to democracy in 1994, Northern Ireland felt the international pressure to change. Ironically the Northern Ireland peace process has now become the inspiration for other conflicts. According to Guelke,

“In the early to mid 1990s the main focus was on the contribution of the South African transition to the Northern Irish peace process. In the late 1990s Northern Ireland's own miracle in the form of the GFA came to be seen as the model for the resolution of conflict in other deeply divided societies, providing the inspiration in particular of the peace process in the Basque Country and Corsica. Further, despite the difficulties the implementation of the GFA encountered, the example of the settlement in Northern Ireland was seen as particularly relevant also to the continuing quest for peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East”.[3]

South Africa

In the public perception there is a vague but nevertheless unshaken belief that a common thread runs through the troubles in Northern Ireland, South Africa and the territories occupied by Israel. In all three nationalisms, territory is of prime importance in the perception of what the nation is all about. It is the very importance of territory in the perception of the nation which makes it so difficult for all three nationalisms to accept the notion of partition[4]. In addition to territory all three nationalisms place great importance on national self-determination, history and religion[5]. The comparison between Northern Ireland and South Africa has received much academic attention. For example as O'Malley points out that,

“The two conflicts share common structural characteristics typical of divided societies. The dominant community (Afrikaners in South Africa, Protestants in Northern Ireland) came from settler populations, and the subordinate community (blacks in South Africa, Catholics in Northern Ireland) was indigenous. In both cases, the dominant community asserted equal claim to the land. Afrikaners trace their roots back to a trading-post their forbearers

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

established on the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. Protestants trace theirs to the plantation of Ulster in 1607".[6]

Furthermore O'Malley says that both governments tried to promote allegiance to the state on the basis of law. They pursued policies that supplemented military measures to combat political terrorism by increasing the use of the judicial process and both ended up subverting the judicial process. Also, because both governments went out of the way to present the problem of violence as one of law and order or internal or national security, Catholics and blacks alike lost faith in the police, the whole paraphernalia of the legal and judicial system, and therefore, in the states themselves[7]. However, historically the lines of sympathy were different from what they are today. At the start of the Twentieth Century it was Irish nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism that was paired as they had been engaged in a similar struggle against British imperialism. Indeed Irish nationalists volunteered to fight on the Boer side in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902. The reversal of sympathy between Afrikaner and Irish nationalism occurred in the 1960s. A pivotal point was in 1960 when the UK government planned to host an exhibition to celebrate the British Commonwealth in Belfast in which the South African High Commissioner was to open. The unionist government refused to give its consent partly because of the memories of the Anglo-Boer war. A further landmark development was a speech made in 1963 in the South African parliament by Minister of Justice BJ Vorster in which he criticised the Northern Ireland Special Powers Act as draconian saying that it had no place in a Western liberal democracy. The speech was picked up by the civil rights movement who were campaigning to abolish the Act.

Irish republicans arrived at the comparison with South Africa by a different route. With their adoption of the 'long war' strategy in the mid 1970s their justification for violence became more difficult. This is where comparisons with other conflicts came into play. Both the ANC and the PLO were attractive to republicans. By the 1980s the comparisons sustained part of the republican rhetoric and propaganda. For example a 1983 wall mural pictured women militants from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), the South West African People Organisation (SWAPO) and Cumann n mBan (women's section of the IRA)[8]. Indeed because of these comparisons between republicans and the ANC, unionists themselves now identified with the cause of Afrikaner nationalists and white Rhodesians as examples of other communities under siege and unfairly criticised by the outside world[9].

The peace processes of the 1990s reinforced the use of the two comparisons as they became the basis for legitimising the republican movement's adoption of a peace process strategy[10]. The South African analogy gradually became the principle one used by republicans. South Africans too showed considerable interest in both the peace process in Northern Ireland and the use of South Africa as a model for political progress. The IRA ceasefire inspired repeated references to the comparison with South Africa and with Israel/Palestine. Often both cases were mentioned, but where there was reference to only one it tended to be the South African case, as it was the analogy that Sinn Féin (SF) clearly preferred.[11]

The ANC was flattered by this comparison. Subsequently the ANC provided support to SF throughout the peace process. For example, Gerry Adams visit to South Africa at the invitation of the ANC in 1995; the influence of the ANC in persuading republicans to accept the GFA; and their influence in convincing the IRA to open their arms dumps to international inspectors including former ANC chief negotiator Cyril Ramaphosa. These were seen as evidence that comparisons had an impact on the establishment of relationships between political forces in the two societies. Furthermore, these links present no obvious benefits to the ANC and, on the contrary, risk damaging the ANC's image in Britain. This points to how strongly the ANC has been influenced by comparison of the two societies, or to be more precise, a particular version of the comparison, since other comparisons exist of the similarities between the two societies that would not require the ANC to identify with the provisional IRA[12].

The British and Irish governments also emphasised the analogies after the release of their Downing Street Declaration in December 1993, when pressing for a positive response from the republicans. The Declaration was presented as an initiative on a par with steps towards a political settlement in South Africa and the Middle East. The South African comparison played an important role in the campaign against discrimination in Northern Ireland, for example the MacBride principles on fair employment had been modelled on the Sullivan principles, a similar employment code for American firms operating in South Africa that had been launched in 1977.

However fundamental differences do exist between the ANC and the Irish republicans, and also with the outcome of

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

the peace process in South Africa and Northern Ireland. The ANC represented the majority of Blacks and was engaged in a genuine war of liberation. Any attempt on the part of militant republicans to equate the actions of the IRA with the actions of Umkhonto we Sizwe is, both politically and morally indefensible. The former lacked political legitimacy and moral standing; the latter had both[13]. The outcome of the peace process in South Africa and Northern Ireland, in terms of what the parties who initiated the comparisons have sought, is quiet ironic. As Guelke points out,

“The National Party in South Africa looked to Northern Ireland to get a consociational outcome, but what in fact it got, after a brief transitional period, was majority rule. By contrast, the republican movement in Ireland looked to South Africa to get an anti-colonial outcome and what it got was the consociational settlement of the GFA”. [14]

Israel/Palestine

In Israel/Palestine, both Arabs and Jews have in the past sought succour from the Irish case, the Jews taking, at various times, the Catholics and Protestants as their model[15]. Both the Northern Irish case and Israel/Palestine share similar analytical comparison; double minority problems; siege mentality of the dominant community; partition of land; segregation of the opposing communities; and security issues, to name a few. The political comparisons were evident during 2002 when Israeli flags were erected in loyalist areas of Belfast in response to Sharon's offensive against the Palestinian authority. According to Guelke, ‘the unmistakable message on the loyalist side was that loyalists preferred Sharon's war process to Blair's peace process’[16]. This was seen as significant as loyalism had little historical basis for such sympathy with Israel. From a historical perspective it could be argued that Israelis had more in common with Irish nationalism. As briefly mentioned before, during its ‘long war’ strategy, republicans placed themselves in comparison with the PLO. However, republicans identification with the Palestinians had been dampened by the fact that figures such as Yasser Arafat found it expedient to link the Palestinians and militant Irish nationalism in any significant way.

The problem of partition in both Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine is seen as pivotal in the resolution of the conflicts. However given the different historical conditions and trends, partition will be consolidated in the Palestine-land of Israel and weakened in Ireland. According to Smooha,

“The impending transformation of the Palestinian authority into a sovereign state will resurrect the pre 1967 border and crystallise partition. The majority of Jews and Palestinians are already resigned to two independent states west of the river Jordan. The Palestinian minority within Israel also strongly favours partition. World public opinion and the superpowers fully support and endeavour to facilitate the process. On the other hand, developments in Ireland favour diminution of partition. Gradual disengagement of the British and the increasing intervention of Republic of Ireland in Northern Ireland affairs; growing integration of Ireland and Great Britain into the European union will blur the border between Ulster and Ireland; and the possibility of a electoral Catholic majority in the foreseeable future in support of a united Ireland”[17].

By 2003 due to the breakdown of the peace process in the Middle East, the Northern Ireland peace process was being used as an example for Israelis and Palestinians. At a press conference at Hillsborough in March 2003 President Bush explicitly praised the Northern Irish peace process. He declared,

“Prime Minister Blair and I are committed to implementing the road map towards peace, to bring closer the day when two states – Israel and Palestine live in peace and stability. Peace in the Middle East will require overcoming deep divisions of history and religion. Yet we know this is possible, it is happening in Northern Ireland”[18].

The Basque Country and Corsica

Out of all the cases of violent conflict that has risen in Western Europe in recent times, three regions stand out for reasons of longevity and political organisation of the armed groups involved – Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and Corsica. Although each of the cases are different from one another in many aspects, in all three cases the groups have gone through historical development, in more or less the same period, during which they passed from

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

regionalism or federalism, to a position of adopting the unitary state as their final goal[19]. What is also significant is that the armed groups in each region have, over the past several years, declared a willingness to seek a non-violent approach to achieving their final goal, through a process of dialogue and alliance with other political forces.

While the cases of Northern Ireland and the Basque Country have much in common, there are also important differences in the context, the parties in conflict, and the issues at stake[20]. However despite these differences the IRA and the Basque separatist group ETA have had close links in the past. Their strategies bear marked similarities. In the 1970s both stressed Marxist and left-wing themes and adopted a Third world liberationist discourse. This enabled them to stress class as well as nationalist themes and compete with the left-wing breakaway factions. It also enabled them too mobilise international left-wing opinion and to gain financial support and arms from Communist regimes and the likes of Libya's Qaddafi[21].

By the mid 1990s, when the IRA had declared a ceasefire, ETA was in a position similar to that reached by the IRA in the mid 1980s, it could only disrupt the system but could not achieve a positive outcome for any of its aims. Effectively it could not go forward politically, but neither, they believed could it abandon its armed struggle. Nevertheless it was clear to many Basques that nationalists needed to go beyond the armed struggle. Gillespie points to the influences of the Irish peace process and the close links between Sinn Fein and Herri Batsuna (HB), ETA's political wing which encouraged the latter to follow a similar path[22].

The late 1990s saw a new approach emerge in both Northern Ireland and the Basque Country with the GFA and the Lizarra Declaration that followed soon afterwards. That these processes were so similar is no coincidence since the Basques had followed the Northern Ireland talks closely hoping to apply the lessons at home. Indeed the Lizarra meeting was called the Irish forum[23]. However a notable difference in the new approaches in the issue of consociationalism. In the Basque Country consociationalism is a non-starter, since there are not two clearly defined communities with their own structures and leaders. The problem, rather, is a division within the Basque community[24]. Furthermore the peace process in the Basque Country was unlike that in Northern Ireland. The right-wing Spanish government, fearful of the questioning of its national sovereignty, adopted a hard-line position and were supported by the opposition Socialist party. They declared that it would not pay any price for peace.

Corsica's position in the French state differs from that of Northern Ireland of the Basque Country. It is an Island in the Western Mediterranean which has been under French control since 1769. By the 1960s, with Corsicans distaste for the French class system that ruled the country and the economic crisis of the 1950s, Corsican disillusionment with the French grew. There emerged violent clandestine groups, the most notable was the Fronte di Liberation Nationale de la Corse (FLNC). Its links with Irish republicans dates back to the 1980s. When the French government outlawed the FLNC in 1983 its links with the Provisional IRA was given as one of the reasons for the ban[25]. By the late 1990s a peace process was emerging with Northern Ireland providing an influence. As Letamadia and Loughlin point out,

"Despite problems, there developed, in the 1990s, a willingness to come to grips with the Corsican problem and a dialogue opened up between nationalist, autonomists, and some mainstream political groups on the Island. The IRA ceasefire and peace process also exercised important influence on the radical nationalists of the various armed groups emanating from the FLNC. John Hume's role was particularly admired by the autonomists of UPC (roughly the equivalent of the SDLP)"[26].

As part of the peace process, for the first time, political parties from all shades of opinion were invited to a conference on the Aland Islands of Finland. On several occasions the Northern Ireland peace process was referred to. In his opening speech, the former French Minister of the Interior, Pierre Joxe said, 'if the Northern Irish can find a solution, why can't we Corsicans?'[27] This was followed in 1999, by the French Prime Minister inviting various groups from Corsica to talks in Paris.

While the three cases of Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and Corsica may have different features, what is remarkable in that the phasing of the different conflicts seem to correspond quite closely, moving from early regionalism to separatist nationalism. However, while the armed struggle did influence the political agenda, in none

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

of the three cases was its capability of achieving the nationalist political goal of setting up an independent state[28]. By the 1990s with the new context of globalisation and greater integration of Europe, traditional conceptions held by nationalists changed dramatically. With Irish republicans it was the realisation that armed struggle had reached its limits. The same process worked in the Basque Country with the rapprochement between PNV and HB, and in Corsica between radical nationalists and traditional parties of the left and right. However, one key difference between the three was the attitudes of the national governments. Neither, the French or Spanish were keen to emulate the initiatives taken by the British.

Other cases of which to access the role of comparison of Northern Ireland and other ethnic conflicts are that of Cyprus and Sri Lanka. There are a number of resemblances among the cases of Sri Lanka, Cyprus and Ireland. In each case the majority community in the Islands as a whole constitutes 3/4 to 4/5 of the Islands population. The minority in each case has been concentrated in the North-East of the Island. In each case it has sought to buttress its position through support outside the Island from people with whom it has a cultural and national affinity[29]. While the established unity of the Island is an important difference between Sri Lanka and Ireland, there is considerable interest in Sri Lanka in the GFA, partly because of a recognition by the authorities that military means alone will not end the conflict. The manner in which the GFA cuts across traditional zero-sum views of sovereignty provides a model potentially of considerable relevance to progress towards a settlement of the Cyprus problem. But there would have to be a vast improvement in relations between Greece and Turkey for that potential to become reality[30].

To conclude, it is clear that comparisons of Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict provide great influence. Although, not without these differences, the case of South Africa and Israel/Palestine, especially during the 1990s enabled Irish republicans to accept and engage in a new peaceful political discourse. The South African analogy and to a slightly lesser extent, the Middle Eastern one were prominent in reactions to and explanations of the ceasefire[31]. During difficult times in the Northern Irish peace process, the ANC helped in persuading republicans that a peaceful strategy was the right course to take. With the signing of the GFA in 1998, the Irish peace process is now an example to other cases of ethnic conflict, most notably the ones discussed – the Basque Country, Corsica, Sri Lanka, Cyprus as well as Israel/Palestine after the original peace process broke down. Finally Guelke, sums up the influences and importance of comparisons in relation to the peace process, stating that,

“Firstly there is a widespread perception of the need to legitimise new arrangements, new institutions, new process of decision-making, and comparison assists in this. Secondly, comparison can provide an overarching framework for viewing the changes necessary to the success of the process. Thirdly, comparison may provide reassurance that a successful outcome to a process of difficult negotiations is possible. Fourthly, in almost all peace process it is vital to secure external support; Consequently, meeting international standards looms large in such situations: Models of what the international community considers legitimate inevitably matter”[32].

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[1] Halliday, F Peace Processes in the late twentieth century and beyond: A mixed record, in Cox, M, Guelke, A. Stephen, F, (eds), A farewell to arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement, Manchester University Press, 2006, p395

[2] See Wright, F. Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis, Gill and Macmillan, 1987, who looks at Algeria, the Southern States of USA and Northern Ireland among others.

[3] Guelke, A. Political Comparisons: From Johannesburg to Jerusalem, in Farewell to arms? P369

[4] Neuberger, B. Nationalisms Compared: ANC, IRA, and PLO, in Giliomee, H. and Gagliano, J.

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

(eds), *The Elusive search for peace: South Africa, Israel, and Northern Ireland*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p59

[5] See *Ibid*, pp59-62

[6] O'Malley, P. *Northern Ireland and South Africa: Hope and History at a crossroads*, in Mc Garry, J. (eds), *Northern Ireland and the divided world – Post Agreement Northern Ireland in a comparative perspective*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p277

[7] *Ibid*, p279

[8] Guelke, A. *The influence of the South African transition on the Northern Ireland peace process*, *The South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.3, no. 2, Summer 1996, p134

[9] *Ibid*, p133

[10] Guelke, A. *Political Comparisons: From Johannesburg to Jerusalem*, p373

[11] Guelke, A. *The influence of the South African transition on the Northern Ireland peace process*, p135

[12] *Ibid*, p144

[13] O'Malley, p283

[14] Guelke, A. *Political Comparisons: From Johannesburg to Jerusalem*, p374

[15] Halliday, F. P395

[16] Guelke, A. *Political Comparisons: From Johannesburg to Jerusalem*, p370

[17] Smootha, S. *The Tenability of partition as a mode of conflict regulation: Comparing Ireland with the Palestinian-land of Israel*, in Mc Garry, J. (eds) *Northern Ireland and the divided world*, pp330-331

[18] Guelke, A. *The politics of imitation: The role of comparison in peace processes*, in Guelke, A. (eds) *Democracy and ethnic conflict: Advancing peace in deeply divided societies*, Plagrave Macmillan, 2004, p169

[19] Letamendia, F. and Loughlin, J. *Learning from other places: Northern Ireland, the Basque country, and Corsica*, in *Farewell to arms?* P378

[20] For a good explanation of these differences see Keating, M. *Northern Ireland and the Basque country*, in *Northern Ireland and the divided world*, pp181-206

Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

Written by Kieran Neeson

[21] Ibid, p194

[22] Gillespie, R. Peace moves in the Basque country, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol, 1, No, 2, 1999, as quoted in Letamendia and Loughlin, p380

[23] Ibid, p382

[24] Keating, M, p202

[25] Guelke, A. The politics of imitation: The role of comparison in peace processes, p179

[26] Letamendia, F. and Loughlin, P. P388

[27] Guelke, A. Politics of imitation, p180

[28] Letamendia, F. and Loughlin, P. p390

[29] Guelke, A. Northern Ireland and Island status, in Mc Garry, J. (eds) *Northern Ireland and the divided world*, p248

[30] Ibid, p239

[31] Guelke, A. The influence of the South African transition on the Northern Ireland peace process, p140

[32] Guelke, A. *Political Comparisons: From Johannesburg to Jerusalem*, p375

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Comparing Northern Ireland with other cases of ethnic conflict

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