Bridging to the Other Side: The Northern Ireland Peace Process
Since the “Good Friday” Agreement

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The Peace Process in Northern Ireland has not been easy and may not endure or be completed. But the Good Friday Agreement among the parties stands as a monument to behold. Never in 400 years have the people of Northern Ireland come so close to a permanent solution of their conflict and societal troubles. Indeed, the Agreement and its gradual implementation show how a society can move away from bitter and durable conflict into a mode of peace and justice. The roles of two Americans (President Bill Clinton and former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell) in the Peace Process in Northern Ireland seem poorly understood and under-appreciated in the USA. This article tries to shed light upon their contributions and correct the neglected record.

Introduction

Struggles over peace between the Palestinians and Israelis, North and South Koreans, the Basque groups in Spain, and among about twenty sets of opponents from Sri Lanka and South Africa and Zimbabwe dot the globe. A strong-willed clergyman from Northern Ireland has stated: “A traitor and a bridge are very much alike, for they go over to the other side” (Kennedy-Pipe, 1997). Such a comment should give persons interested internationally in the management of conflict serious food for thought about coping with barriers to consensus, compromise, and reconciliation.

What about non-traitorous peaceful bridging? And what about active intervention by outsiders whose own national loyalties are not at stake in a bridging? The latter is evident in the roles Bill Clinton and George Mitchell have played in the Northern Ireland Peace Process, to which we return below. To what extent will President George W. Bush continue and build upon their substantial efforts?

A Prior Review of Peace Prospects

Before the Good Friday Agreement was reached on April 10, 1998 the writer was dubious about the likelihood of peace processes accomplishing a great deal in the near future in North and South Korea and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Patten, 1998). He did predict accurately that John Hume, a nationalist and head of the Social Democrat and Labour Party in Northern Ireland, might some day be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. But he failed to predict that the Peace Prize would be shared with David Trimble, elected leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

In 1998 it appeared North Korea might move before Northern Ireland in seeking some kind of reapproachment with its opponent. In fact, Northern Ireland made a jumbo step in its peace process in 1998. But in 2000 North Korea shocked the world by moving out of its posture as a national hermit to the world by making peaceful almost convivial overtures to improve relations with South Korea after 50 years of vitriol.
Irish Views of Clinton and Mitchell

In much reading about the conflict from 1968-1997 in Northern Ireland, as well as visits to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1997 and 2000 respectively, I have found widespread respect of the work of Clinton and Mitchell among the Irish people. Clinton’s foreign policy efforts in Northern Ireland stand out in a mixed bag of his other rather lackluster foreign policy endeavors. Mitchell’s work in Northern Ireland has already gone down in contemporary history as a model of conflict management, and he is talked about as a possible future Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

Clinton made three visits to Northern Ireland (1995, 1998, and 2000) during his presidency. No previous president has ever spent as much time and political effort to resolve the intractable situation in Northern Ireland as Clinton. For example, Irish Americans have consistently sought for almost 150 years to gain support for Irish independence from Britain. By the early 1900s President Taft supported the Irish Home Rule movement when the latter was in line with British policy. After World War I President Wilson changed US support for Irish independence. By 1921 armed conflict broke out in Ireland with the result that 26 counties on the island of Ireland established a “Free State” type of government while six counties in the north remained a part of Britain (Candaele, 2000). The division of the island into South and North remains to this day. In the late 1990s the conflict-charged social, political, and economic environments in Ireland in the early 1900s were made clear to the many Americans who saw the powerful movie Michael Collins.

The 1930s were bleak in Ireland and the world. Again, in the 1990s the massive poverty in Ireland during the Thirties was brought home to Americans in the chilling movie Angela’s Ashes. The period following, 1939-45, was equally dreary in Ireland, which remained neutral in the World War II setting. In these decades of virtual isolation and the subsequent early years of the Cold War, Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower displayed little interest in Ireland’s struggles. Undoubtedly, Ireland’s self-imposed insulation in foreign relations and alliances contributed to this lengthy period of relative uninterest.

From 1960 to the present three American presidents having Irish ancestral roots gradually supplanted the long-held foreign policy of Irish neglect. In 1963 President Kennedy became the first American chief executive ever to visit Ireland. His visit was popular but his mind while there was mainly on foreign policy toward Cuba, the Soviet Union, Berlin and East Germany, on the Communist threats in Vietnam and Laos, and maintaining relations with Britain and NATO.

In 1984 President Reagan visited Ireland and, like Kennedy before him, made a popular appearance and a trip to the village of his ancestral roots. Also, similar to Kennedy, he was primarily concerned while away from the USA with foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and European nations who were American allies. The Vietnam War had ended, but the Cold War had not. Relations with Britain were still crucial to the USA and special in his foreign policy views.

Reagan, however, did address the Irish Parliament in Dublin. In this speech he condemned Americans who supported terrorism in Northern Ireland but he made clear that the USA would not interfere with Irish affairs.

He and Prime Minister Thatcher had a close relationship and shared many compatible political and philosophical views. Thus in 1985 (the next year after his visit) Reagan supported Thatcher during the discussions that led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement which formalized a consultative role for the Irish Republic in any peace process (Candaele 2000).
The many background developments in Northern Ireland in the period from 1968 to the end of the Reagan Era and of the Cold War in 1991 cannot be detailed in this article, but have been amply discussed elsewhere. See the important work by Adams (1996), Darby (1997), Geraghty (2000), and particularly Farren and Mulvihill (2000), which has the most persuasive and up-to-date perspective by one co-author (Farren) who is a well informed and insightful member of the present-day Northern Ireland Assembly.

But turning to Clinton in 1992 directly after the Cold War it is clear that his Presidential primary campaign signaled a much more pro-active role of the American Presidency in Northern Ireland than that of any of his predecessors and, in time, heavily involved George Mitchell. Clinton began the foreign policy change by promising a group of Irish Americans that he would support sending a special envoy to Northern Ireland (who later turned out to be George Mitchell) and would grant Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams a visa to visit the United States. This was a bold stroke in policy because the Sinn Fein was generally viewed as the political component or arm of the IRA (Irish Republican Army), which, in turn, was viewed by many (American and European) as largely a militant terrorist group (Geraghty, 2000). This policy change was also seen as a change in the United States' special relationship with Britain.

Adams had begun in the late 1980s preparing philosophical and political foundations for moving the IRA toward political alternatives (Adams, 1996). The time was ripe for this in other ways as well. Encouraged by Jean Kennedy Smith (the new US Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland) and US Senator Ted Kennedy (her brother and a powerful long-service Democrat, who himself was also influenced by an Irish moderate nationalist previously mentioned, namely, John Hume) Clinton acted. However, British Prime Minister John Major objected to the Adams' invitation to the USA, as did the US Department of State, but the demurrers were overridden by Clinton.

Adams was thus granted a visa early in 1994. The decision by Clinton helped set the stage in that year for an IRA cease-fire and ended, as well, Britain's long-held "free hand" approach to governing Northern Ireland.

Anglo-Irish Agreement and 1994 Ceasefire Benchmark

On December 15, 1993 the Irish and British prime ministers issued a Joint Declaration that was mainly intended to respond to an apparent significant shift in Sinn Fein's position on the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the troubles on the island of Ireland. The Declaration dealt with the following: the right to self-determination of the people living in Ireland; the conditions under which the status of Northern Ireland might change to become part of a separate and sovereign united Ireland; and the terms by which those political parties currently supporting the use of violence for political ends could be admitted to negotiations with other parties and with both governments in the search for new political institutions, North and South (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is a unique one because it was not a conventional plan for peace in either a structural or a cultural sense. It did not promote an interest-based resolution of either side nor did it deal with the seemingly irreconcilable identity-related cultural and religious differences of the Irish. Instead the agreement focused on creating new relationships in Northern Ireland and transformed the conflict to one defined by an array of forces within Northern Ireland and between those forces and their immediate external referents, namely, the Republic of Ireland and Britain (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

The unionist political parties in Northern Ireland did not agree with the Declaration but otherwise it was widely endorsed in Ireland, North and South, and by the main churches, trade
unions, employers, and the like. In the U.S. President Clinton and leading members of Congress warmly welcomed the Declaration (Ruane and Todd, 1996). In the European Union (EU) a majority of the members of the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers also welcomed it. In addition, loyalist paramilitaries supported it.

Sinn Fein and the IRA did not. The Unionists in Northern Ireland soon vetoed it. Suspicions and distrust were everywhere to be seen. Many of the issues related to the processes to be used, and the controversy over the procedures caused logjamming of the negotiations over the next three years (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

Getting Past the Blockage

Political changes in Britain in 1997 are important circumstances to consider in analyzing why and how the logjam was broken. The Conservative Party in Britain lost a number of by-elections and became bitterly divided over EU membership concerns. Then the British general election in May swept the Conservative Party out of power in one of the greatest defeats in British parliamentary history. The Labour Party was returned under Tony Blair with a very large parliamentary majority.

In Northern Ireland Sinn Fein won 16 percent of the vote and two MPs. John Hume’s Social Democrat and Labour Party received 24 percent of the votes cast. These results gave a combined Irish nationalist vote of 40 percent of the total votes cast for the first time in history. Also, the Sinn Fein was now de facto in a stronger political position than ever before. The British government thus offered the IRA a chance to enter negotiations if it would renew its ceasefire in a demonstrable way. The IRA complied, and the stage was now largely set for resumption of negotiations.

The Irish unionist parties were still not on board, however, and there were fears and apprehensions. The unionists thought betrayal by Britain was quite possible. It was expected the existence of a new British government determined to force the pace in negotiations in which Sinn Fein would participate very soon after an IRA ceasefire with no prior arrangement that the IRA would disarm required too much acquiescence by unionists. Two unionist parties actually did walk out in protest. Those that stayed in negotiations did so more to test the Sinn Fein’s credibility than anything else (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

History shows that following Sinn Fein’s entry into the negotiations in September 1997, the talks proceeded with increasing intensity and ended in agreement the following April (1998) on Good Friday. Public response was extremely positive and conveyed a sense of relief that agreement had been achieved. A referendum held at the end of May 1998 in North and South showed that 95 percent of those people voting in the South and 72 percent in the North voted in favor of what has since become known as the Good Friday Agreement (Darby 1997).

The conflict in Northern Ireland was transformed because there were changes in power relationships. The major political parties were changed, as previously indicated, and some new political behavior emerged. By the late Spring of 2000 it was possible for a member of the Sinn Fein to be elected Mayor of Derry, the First Sinn Fein mayor in all Ireland since 1921! With Blair at the helm in Britain and Clinton in the US, a younger and different set of political styles were evident in the international politics of Ireland (not to mention continuing support by the Prime Minister…Taoiseach…of the Republic of Ireland, Bertie Ahearn).
Mitchell’s Role in Good Friday Agreement

In organizational terms the negotiations prior to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement were conducted in three key committees and two sub-committees. Parallel negotiations took place. Thus talks on new arrangements for Northern Ireland proceeded simultaneously alongside similar negotiations for North-South and for new British-Irish arrangements. Each of the three committees focused upon one of the three sets of relationships which have come to be called Strands or Strand Committees (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

The first, called the Strand 1 committee, dealt with relationships between the communities in Northern Ireland and proposals for new political institutions there. The second, Strand 2 committee, dealt with North-South matters, viz all-island relationships and proposals for political institutions linking both parts of the island of Ireland. The third, or Strand 3 committee, dealt with East-West or, in other words, British-Irish relationships and proposals for institutional links between both parts of Britain and Ireland.

Two other sub-committees, as suggested above, also operated. One considered arrangements for the “decommissioning of military weapons” (or in plainer English arms control) which is proving to this day as very difficult to implement. The second sub-committee had a broader set of responsibilities that were termed “confidence building measures” or such typical initiatives as those for the treatment of prisoners, equality of opportunity, culture and language, economic development and human rights. All these second sub-committee topics could potentially contribute to the confidence of both communities in the whole negotiating process itself and whatever agreements might emerge from it.

Senator Mitchell was overall chair of the negotiations. He was assisted by a former Finnish Prime Minister, a Canadian General, and a small staff. Senator Mitchell took particular responsibility for Strand 2 and the confidence building measures sub-committee (Farren and Mulvihill, 2000).

A period of 18 months was consumed in the negotiations. Toward the end of it Mitchell announced that all the talks would close, with or without agreement, on April 9, 1998.

An intense round-the-clock series of sessions followed, directly involving all the persons negotiating as well as Prime Ministers Blair of Britain and Ahern of Ireland.

One day later on April 10 (Good Friday) an agreement was reached. Among the issues that focused attention on their being negotiated in detail at the end were: the proposed Northern and North-South institutions and three of the critical issues in the confidence-building area: police reform, decommissioning of arms, and the early release of paramilitary prisoners held in both the British and Irish jurisdictions. (These releases have now been fully implemented.)

Senator Mitchell in a book he wrote shortly after the Good Friday Agreement set forth his perceptions of the process and his peripatetic travels across the Atlantic for 18 months (Mitchell, 1999). His work and dedication to the tasks of peace-making were magnificent and will go down in the annals of conflict management to be studied for years to come.

Based upon his confidence in Mitchell, Clinton asked him to lead an international investigation of the sustained outburst of violence in Israel in the Fall of 2000. Mitchell accepted and once again found himself involved in turbulent politics and violence. By early 2001 an internecine battle raged in Israel and no letup was in sight despite extraordinary attempts made by Clinton, Mitchell, and Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The Mitchell
Commission of Inquiry into Israeli–Palestinian Violence is expected to issue its report by June 30, 2001.

Clinton in the lame-duck finale of his presidency (December 12-14, 2000) visited Ireland for the third and last time (North and South) with his wife and daughter. He was interested in seeing what could be done about the three remaining issues not yet resolved in Northern Ireland: how to get the IRA to give up its guns permanently (the decommissioning issue); how to improve the police force in Northern Ireland, which remains dominated by Protestants and is distrusted by Catholics; and how to reduce the British military presence in Northern Ireland (Rosenblatt and Miller, 12-17-2000). He also touched base once again with Blair and Ahern on the aforementioned December 2000 farewell trip to Ireland (Rosenblatt, 12-15-2000; and Rosenblatt and Miller, 12-13-2000).

Conclusion

The Good Friday Agreement confounded popular expectations about what its support level in the population might be. The people of Ireland clearly in overwhelming numbers want to move forward in the peace process. There is no going back. What could anyone go back to? There was much violence and too much hate in the past.

Clinton and Mitchell (two outsiders) have been daring bridge-builders in Northern Ireland (Bell, 1996). Many prominent politicians in Ireland have also been bridge-builders to the other side and tried mightily to reduce the conflict and move forward, among those being John Hume, David Trimble, Gerry Adams, and Bertie Ahearn. Tony Blair and John Major in Britain must also be seen as bridge-builders despite their well known political differences.

As we change administrations in Washington, DC we must ask whether the new President, George W. Bush, will take a personal interest in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement and its aftermath. President Bush’s demonstrated management style is to delegate public policy work and its implementation to the established line departments and agencies of the Federal government having the relevant jurisdiction. Thus he has indicated that the State Department under the leadership of General Colin Powell contains the channels and expertise that will be used to deal with all sides interested in conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. The President will managerially utilize State Department resources rather than involve himself directly in Irish affairs. Yet he has made it clear that the USA is ready to help the peace process. It seems reasonable to predict Powell and Bush will probably emerge as bridge builders and offer help when and if situations requiring it present themselves.

More than 40 million Americans have some Irish ancestry in their background. Many are hopeful that the US will support the peace process in Northern Ireland as it continues to evolve over a rocky road full of challenges for the Irish. As indicated above there is no road back, and the past is mostly a road marked by economic distress and societal misery. No one wants to re-travel those travails. We need to think of bridges instead and then cross them.
References
