

Jonathan Powell

The lessons of Northern Ireland: security is not enough: ten lessons for conflict resolution from Northern Ireland

Report

Original citation:

Powell, Jonathan (2011) The lessons of Northern Ireland: security is not enough: ten lessons for conflict resolution from Northern Ireland. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR008. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43488/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

© 2011 The Author

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

➤ Security is Not Enough: Ten Lessons for Conflict Resolution from Northern Ireland

Jonathan Powell

Northern Ireland is of course *sui generis*. Its conflict was unique and so was the solution. There is no Northern Ireland model that can be picked up and imposed on conflicts elsewhere and drawing facile parallels can be misleading.

But it is equally wrong to suggest that there are no lessons to be learned from Northern Ireland, from the mistakes we made and from the successes we achieved. Those lessons can be applied elsewhere, with care, by those seeking lasting settlements to armed conflicts so they can make their own mistakes rather than repeating ours. This paper sets out ten lessons I learned from over a decade of involvement in trying to bring peace to Northern Ireland.

First, there are no purely military solutions to insurgencies. Hugh Orde, the former Chief Constable of Northern Ireland, has wisely pointed out that there are no examples anywhere in the world of terrorist problems being 'policed out'. In the end if there is a political problem at the root of the conflict then there has to be a political solution. That is not to say that security measures have no place. On the contrary, they are essential. Without security pressure downwards, insurgents will find life comfortable and have no incentive to make the tough decisions necessary for peace. But security pressure by itself without offering a political way out will simply cause the insurgents to fight to the last man.

In Northern Ireland the British army and the police could have contained the IRA indefinitely, but they were never going to wipe them out. It was only the offer of negotiations that eventually brought the violence to a close. Some commentators, largely on the right, believe that the IRA was badly penetrated by the security services and that if only they had been allowed to get on with the job unencumbered by political interference they would have finally defeated the IRA. That is what I call the 'security delusion'. Its adherents believe that one more heave would have solved the problem. But it is a delusion. It is true the IRA were infiltrated and true they were exhausted by the long military campaign, but they were not going to collapse however long we kept fighting them.

Some point to Sri Lanka as proof that there can be a purely military solution to an insurgency. It is true that Prabhakaran, the leader of the Tamil Tigers, appears to have been insane enough to believe he could win a conventional military campaign against the Sri Lankan armed forces. He was proved wrong. But it is a mistake, unfortunately, to believe that this conventional military victory will be the end of the story. Unless the underlying Tamil grievances are addressed politically it is probable that the terrorist campaign will start all over again and such a campaign will be impossible to resolve by purely military means.

The second lesson is that you cannot stop the violence without talking to the men with guns. We were criticised in Northern Ireland for undermining the political centre by focussing on the IRA. But that was exactly the point. Unless we could get the IRA to stop we would not bring peace to Northern Ireland.

There is however a Catch 22 to this need to talk which leads governments to do it in secret, as the British government did from 1973 to 1993. Democratic governments cannot be seen to be talking to terrorist groups while they are killing their people; but terrorist groups will not give up fighting unless the governments can convince them there is a political way forward to achieve their aims. If it had been known that John Major's government was communicating with the IRA, just as the IRA were letting off their bombs in Warrington in which they killed two young boys, there would have been public revulsion. John Major was quite right to say that it would turn his stomach to talk to the IRA. But he was also quite right to be communicating with them even as he said those words. If he had not done so there would have been no peace. The secret correspondence with Martin McGuinness offering a political way out led to the IRA ceasefire in 1994.

Governments are sometimes accused of appeasement for talking to insurgent groups. That is to misunderstand the nature of appeasement. Chamberlain's mistake at Munich was not in talking to Hitler. That was a sensible thing to do. It was to believe that by offering Hitler a slice of Czechoslovakia he could buy him off. Accepting the terrorist demands under the threat of violence would be appeasement. But talking to terrorists is not the same as agreeing with them. We talked to the Republican movement but we never offered them the united Ireland that they had been seeking by force. On the contrary we persuaded them to accept the principle of consent whereby the status of Northern Ireland could only be changed by the will of the majority.

Of course talking to terrorists can be counterproductive if badly handled, as for example in the past with the FARC in Colombia. It can legitimise the armed group; it can provide perverse incentives – one terrorist leader with whom I have dealt announced he was going to “pile bodies on the table” to increase his negotiating

leverage with a burst of violence before negotiations started; and the offer of talks can convince the terrorists that they are winning and encourage them to intensify their campaign. But all of these are questions of timing and tactical handling rather than arguments against speaking to terrorist at all.

Third, insurgent groups will not just surrender. In December 2004 we got very close to brokering an agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin but it fell apart at the last minute when the DUP demanded photographs of the decommissioning of IRA weapons and Ian Paisley made a speech calling on Republicans to wear ‘sackcloth and ashes’. For the IRA that smacked of surrender and they refused to sign up.

Insurgent groups need a narrative to explain to their supporters what they have achieved and why all the sacrifice was worthwhile. If an agreement looks like abject surrender they will reject it. For that reason it is a mistake to insist on preconditions before beginning talks. As I said above, democratic governments find it very hard to be seen to talk to insurgent groups until there is a ceasefire. But to demand additional pre-conditions before talks can start is usually a mistake. In Northern Ireland it is easy to see how the Major government came to make decommissioning of terrorist weapons a pre-condition, but it was a mistake to do so. John Major did not want to find himself negotiating under the threat of violence and so he demanded a permanent ceasefire. When it became clear that would not be forthcoming, he demanded instead that they decommission all their weapons. Not surprisingly they refused to do so, and the government watered down its demand to decommissioning the majority of its weapons, to decommissioning some of its weapons and finally to decommissioning a token amount of its weapons. All of these demands were rejected too and talks were stymied. It took us more than ten years to work our way through the problem caused by the precondition of decommissioning. It is far better to address these issues in the negotiations themselves rather than making them a prior condition to be met before the talks can commence.

Fourth, there are many conditions that need to be in place before negotiations can succeed, but perhaps the most important is that both sides need to believe that they cannot win militarily. If either side thinks

it can win, it will not negotiate seriously but instead seek tactical advantage from the negotiation. In Northern Ireland the British army was clear by the early 1980s that it could contain violence at 'an acceptable level' indefinitely but it could not win an outright victory. They therefore understood the need to seek a political settlement. On the other side, Adams and McGuinness had joined the Republican movement very young, but by the mid 1980s they were well past fighting age. The IRA had tried the short sharp shock, the long campaign, the mainland campaign, and the armalite in one hand and the ballot box in the other, but none of them had driven the Brits out. They knew the IRA could never be defeated but they also realised they could not achieve their objectives by purely military means. So they too started casting around for a political solution first by talking to John Hume and the Irish government and later by seeking entry to the all-party talks process.

Fifth, there needs to be political leadership on both sides. In Northern Ireland Adams and McGuinness risked not just their political careers but their lives in leading their movement into a peace the movement would not have accepted at the beginning of the process; David Trimble and John Hume both sacrificed their political parties and their careers in order to achieve peace; Ian Paisley, having contributed to the start of the Troubles, decided after a close encounter with his maker in 2004 that he wanted to end his life as Dr Yes rather than Dr No; John Major stood to gain nothing politically from starting a peace process in Northern Ireland and yet decided to do so; and the fact that the British and Irish Prime Ministers, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, were willing and able to work seamlessly together for a decade made peace possible. Without political leaders prepared to take risks there will be no peace.

More than that there needs to be political momentum to achieve peace. Tony Blair deliberately used the magnitude of his landslide election victory in 1997 to jump-start the process. His first visit out of London as Prime Minister after the election was to Northern Ireland to reassure the Unionist population that the new government would not sell them out in his speech in Balmoral. And he set a clear deadline for an agreement one year after the election, and stuck

to it despite calls to abandon the deadline as too dangerous. If he had left it until later, when he was politically weaker, he may well not have succeeded. In his biography Tony Blair accuses me of saying he had a 'Messiah complex'. In fact it was Mo Mowlam who said to me that he thought he was "f...ing Jesus". But if he hadn't believed that it was possible to reach an agreement in Northern Ireland and believed that he could achieve it, there would have been no agreement.

Sixth, peace is a process not an event. When I wrote my book on Northern Ireland, the cabinet secretary allowed me to read back through the No. 10 files for the ten years between 1997 and 2007. One thing above all else jumped out of the files at me, and that was the importance of having a process in place. With a process there is cause for hope and parties are kept busy. Without a process a vacuum opens up and is rapidly filled by violence. If nothing else a process allows you to manage the problem even if you cannot solve it. In the Middle East the outlines of an eventual settlement are pretty clear in terms of land and of refugees and even of what should happen to Jerusalem. But there is no process. Shimon Peres summed up the problem neatly, saying, "the good news is there is light at the end of the tunnel. The bad news is there is no tunnel".

Once you have the process up and running you must not let it stall. This is what I call the bicycle theory. Once the bicycle is up and moving do not let it fall over. If you do, you will find it incredibly difficult to pick it up again. Keeping it moving however requires ingenuity, coming up with a new way forward every time you meet a blockage, an ability to absorb political pain, as we had to do over the release of prisoners in 1998 and the Northern Bank robbery in 2004, and most of all a refusal to take no for an answer.

Seventh, there is a role for third parties. The British government had long refused to countenance any international role in Northern Ireland, just as other governments around the world refuse to allow external actors to play a role in their conflicts. The British government however changed its mind in the early 1990s by inviting Ninian Stephen, an Australian,

to chair the talks. Later they invited George Mitchell to play the role of referee, a role he fulfilled with remarkable patience and balance. Third parties can also be crucial in guaranteeing independence. The IRA found it far easier to put their weapons beyond use through an international commission on decommissioning chaired by a Canadian General than they would have done handing them over to the Brits or the Unionists. And an independent Monitoring Commission reassured the Unionist population that here was an independent arbiter of whether or not the IRA had gone out of business in a way the British government could not.

Eighth, breakthrough agreements are the beginning not the end of a peace process. If as our helicopters took off from Stormont on the morning of Good Friday 1998 we thought that the job was done we would have been sadly disappointed. It took another nine years to get the agreement implemented. The same lesson can be learned the other way round from the Oslo Accords. When they were announced there was a burst of enthusiasm on both sides. But neither side did anything to implement the agreements or even to sell them effectively, and disillusion soon set in and the process collapsed into another Intifada. It is exactly when the breakthrough agreement is announced that efforts should be redoubled rather than both sides collapsing in exhaustion and doing nothing.

Ninth, there will only be a lasting settlement if both sides can break through the political zero-sum game. If one side comes out of the negotiation looking cheerful then the other side feels that it has lost, regardless of the substance. The most bizarre example of this was the 1994 ceasefire. When the ceasefire was announced it was the Republicans driving around town honking their horns and waving their flags and the Unionists who were sunk in gloom, even though the ceasefire was exactly what the Unionists had been demanding for decades. This zero-sum game dogged us right through the negotiations and we only finally got to a settlement when the Republicans realised they had to think about the constituency on the other side as well as their own and participate in selling the agreement to that other constituency. Agreements will only stick if both sides come out of the negotiations feeling like winners, rather than feeling they have been forced to give in.

My last lesson is that there is no conflict in the world, however long lasting, however bloody, however frozen that cannot be resolved. Successive British prime ministers from Churchill, to Wilson, to Thatcher believed that Northern Ireland was insoluble. A series of previous attempts from Sunningdale in 1973 to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 to the Downing Street Declaration in 1994 had all failed. The eventual agreement in 1998 was correctly described by Seamus Mallon as "Sunningdale for slow learners" and contained many of the same elements as in 1973. But all of those attempts at peace were not in vain. The eventual success was built on those failures. It required the parties to exhaust all the other alternative options and for the cycle of blood to go through a full revolution before both sides were prepared to make the painful concessions that were required for a lasting peace. In the right conditions, with patience and political leadership the Northern Ireland conflict was solved. And so can all other armed conflicts if the same effort is applied at the right time. ■
