Talking to Terrorists:
Clandestine Diplomacy in the Irish Peace Process

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Abbreviations

APNI – Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
CIRA – Continuity Irish Republican Army
DUP – Democratic Unionist Party
GOC – General Officer Commanding
INLA – Irish National Liberation Army
IRA – Irish Republican Army
MP – Member of Parliament
OIRA – Official Irish Republican Army
PIRA – Provisional Irish Republican Army
RIRA – Real Irish Republican Army
RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAS – Special Air Service
SDLP – Social Democratic and Labour Party
SF – Sinn Fein
SIS – Secret Intelligence Service
UDA – Ulster Defence Association
UDR – Ulster Defence Regiment
UFF – Ulster Freedom Fighters
UK – United Kingdom
UUP – Ulster Unionist Party
UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force
1. Introduction

1.1 Establishing the conflict

Tensions in Northern Ireland can be traced back as far as 1609 to the plantation of Ulster by, the predominantly Protestant, English and Scottish settlers. As might be expected for a conflict that has survived for such a lengthy period, significantly varying levels of intensity have been experienced over the course of that conflict. That part of the Northern Ireland Conflict that this paper is concerned with is the period euphemistically referred to as ‘The Troubles’, which broke out in 1968 and ended with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in April 1998.¹ The renewed intensity in violence in 1969 resulted from the widespread rioting and public disorder that was borne out of the civil rights marches staged by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), beginning in 1967. The NICRA demands appear modest in retrospect.² However, the backlash from the loyalist community and the sectarian violence that ensued proved devastating for the Catholic community. The severe rioting that occurred on 12-14 August 1969 in Bogside, Derry, forced the British Government to deploy the army in order to protect civilians. Troops were sent to Derry to quell the disturbances on 14 August and they entered Belfast the following day. However, after just four days the GOC in Northern Ireland, Lt. Gen., Sir Ian Freeland stated that ‘the ‘honeymoon’ period would be short lived, that it had reached its peak and that the army would soon become an object of both Protestant and Catholic hostility’.³

The IRA were strongly criticised by the nationalist community for abandoning them during the sectarian violence of August 1969. Internal disagreements concerning abstention led to the formation of the breakaway Provisional IRA Army Council. However, this explanation of the IRA split is rather simplistic. In fact, divisions went much deeper than the issue of abstention and ‘concerned the whole course of the

¹ The first bloody encounter of the troubles occurred in Derry on 5 October 1968 when civil rights marches clashed with the police – Kennedy-Pipe, Caroline, 2000: 27.
² (i) To defend the basic freedoms of all citizens; (ii) To protect the rights of the individual; (iii) To highlight all possible abuses of power; (iv) To demand guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association; (v) To inform the public of their lawful rights. Available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/crights/nicra/nicra781.htm
³ Quoted in Niall O’Dochartaigh (1997), From Civil Rights To Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles. Available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/troops/chap4.htm
1960s reassessment, the nature of the IRA leadership’s policy towards developments in the North and the movement’s non-performance in the riots of August 1969. The Sinn Féin Ard Fhéis on 11 January 1970 confirmed the split in the IRA when approximately a third of the delegates opposed to the cessation of abstention walked out to form Provisional Sinn Féin. The Provisional IRA began as the minority element but during the period until 1972 they gained the ascendancy in the republican movement.

The sustained violence during the ‘troubles’ claimed the lives of 3,377 individuals in Northern Ireland. In nominal terms this does not appear to be a particularly high number but taken as a proportion of the overall population of Northern Ireland it is a remarkably high figure.

1.2 Explaining the conflict

Northern Ireland consists of the six counties in the North-eastern corner of the island of Ireland. The overwhelming majority of the population identify themselves with either the Protestant or Catholic community, with the Protestants comprising the majority of the population. The conflict in Northern Ireland is generally analysed according to sectarian divisions, with the Protestant community supporting a continued union with the United Kingdom and the Catholic community favouring a united Ireland. Protestants maintain that they hold a stronger link to English and Scottish culture than they do to the Irish owing primarily to their shared religious identity. This is certainly an oversimplification of the complex arrangements and opinions involved in the Northern Ireland Conflict but one which tends to hold true for the most part. Having served as the enforcers of British colonial rule, the Protestant community ensured that it remained the privileged community on the island of Ireland. Consequently, nationalists in Northern Ireland have accused the state apparatus of favouring the Protestant community who have controlled both the political and economic realms.

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4 Smith, 1997: 83.
5 Henceforth, I refer to Provisional Sinn Fein as Sinn Fein.
6 Henceforth, I refer to Provisional IRA simply as IRA.
8 The six counties of Northern Ireland are Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone.
9 Protestant and Unionist will be used interchangeably in this paper, as will Catholic and Nationalist.
As part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland is ultimately controlled by the government in Westminster. Nationalists have viewed the British Government as a colonial oppressor, favouring the Protestant community, with whom they share a religion. Under such circumstances the nationalist community was convinced that the British Government was working alongside loyalist groups, as the perception was that these two entities were working towards the same end. ‘[Loyalist paramilitary groups] have seen themselves as nothing more or less than an extension of the state’s forces’. As a consequence of this viewpoint, these groups are often not displeased with accusations of ‘state’ collusion as such acts would tend to increase their legitimacy as they would act as a recognition by state forces that Loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces were on the same side. Collusion serves to reinforce ‘their self-image as agents of the state’. Therefore, it was often in the interests of Loyalist paramilitaries to play up the extent to which they were being aided by the security forces. The British Government faced the problem ‘that the unbalanced composition of the security forces implied that only one of the two communities was affected, thus undermining the perceived impartiality of the security forces and damaging Westminster’s credibility as a neutral arbiter’.

However, the British population at large never felt much sympathy for the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, who were widely perceived in the early 1970s as having discriminated against the Catholic minority. The British Government would not bow to pressure from Republican paramilitaries on the separation of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom but it was prepared to act as a neutral arbiter in introducing a more equitable system to Northern Ireland. Despite occasional excesses and certain instances in which collusion appears to be a reality, Stevenson highlights that following the implementation of direct rule from Westminster in 1972 ‘the inequities in civil rights, housing and unemployment that Stormont had perpetuated were substantially ameliorated’.

This paper identifies 1994 as the pivotal year in which the various parties in the Northern Ireland Conflict began to take steps to end that conflict. The IRA ceasefire

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10 Rolston, 2005: 193.
11 Bruce, 1992: 214.
12 Neumann, 2003: 159.
that year and subsequent loyalist ceasefires paved the way for the start of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, which culminated in the signing of the Belfast Agreement on 10 April 1998. This agreement was a landmark victory for the people of Northern Ireland who had lived through twenty-five years of ‘troubles’ violence. The following section outlines the precise research that this paper will accomplish in relation to the Northern Ireland conflict.

1.3 Research Question

This paper seeks to analyse the elements that led to the 1994 IRA ceasefire agreement, with particular emphasis on an analysis of the role that the secret backchannel between the British Government and the IRA played in those negotiations. An analysis of the causes and motivations leading to the secret talks is paramount to this discussion and will form the dominant part of this study. Given the apparent stalemate in the conflict, this paper maintains that it was in the hands of the British Government that the political initiative to instigate the start of talks to end the conflict remained. Having recognised the existence of certain elements within the republican movement who appeared predisposed to the prospect of ending the armed struggle it was essential that contact with these individuals be made by the British side. Consequently, it is essential that motivations behind the British Government’s involvement in negotiations be explained. Entering into talks with an organisation that a government has labelled as terrorist is a decision not taken lightly and a thorough assessment of the benefits and expectations behind such a move are a vital component to understanding why such negotiations were engaged upon.

However, both sides had to decide to negotiate and the decision for the IRA to talk to the British Government was no easier than the decision that the British Government faced. Therefore, the evolutionary path of the IRA’s strategy will be explained, allowing for an assessment of the development of both its military and political objectives. Bueno de Mesquita questions whether engaging with terrorists will actually resolve violent conflict or act to increase the level of violence. This paper will highlight that talking to terrorist organisations can be beneficial to the resolution of conflicts.

14 The Belfast Agreement is also widely referred to as the Good Friday Agreement.
1.4 Value of Research

Despite the existence of a number of examples of clandestine diplomacy, it remains an area of enquiry that has been neglected in the field of intelligence studies.\textsuperscript{16} Intelligence services have been used at times to engage in dialogue with groups or individuals that the government is unable to be seen publicly to have any communication with. In the case of terrorist organisations the problems that are associated with negotiation are discussed below. However, some form of communication with these organisations is often beneficial, perhaps necessary, in order to stem the tide of violence. Talking to each other is always more beneficial than completely ignoring one another because at least in such a situation each party will have a better idea of where the other stands in relation to their demands. Owing to the apparent importance of the secret backchannel of communication between the British Government and the IRA in ensuring progress in the peace process, this paper maintains that an examination of that backchannel is essential to an understanding of the peace process as a whole.

In the field of intelligence studies ‘clandestine diplomacy is not only intrinsically interesting, but also a useful way of further exploring problems and challenges in studying the subject’.\textsuperscript{17} Clandestine diplomacy wed the political to the intelligence world in a marriage of secrecy providing an instrument of positive influence in peace negotiations. However, there are important ethical dilemmas raised surrounding clandestine diplomacy that will be touched upon in this paper. The most important justification for conducting this research is concerned with that of including paramilitary organisations in peace negotiations in the hope of attaining a lasting peaceful resolution. The case of Northern Ireland is of particular importance as

[The Northern Ireland Peace Process of the 1990s was] the first successful attempt to include the political representatives of paramilitary groups in a political settlement…. [and it] appeared to set a precedent well beyond Northern Ireland in showing that the main insurgent group…could be persuaded to abandon its military campaign in exchange for nothing but a place at the negotiating table.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Scott, 2004: 330.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid: 331.
\textsuperscript{18} Neumann, 2003a: 154.
1.5 Potential Difficulties

When studying matters of intelligence one must always be wary of certain things, especially when investigating a matter that is a relatively recent event. We must ask ourselves three fundamental questions: (i) How do we know about things? (ii) Who is telling us? (iii) For what reason?19 The study of clandestine diplomacy presents particular difficulties with respect to the extent and quality of the evidence available. With clandestine diplomacy it is rare to have information from both sides and with secret talks there is a noted absence of documentary evidence. Therefore, ‘evaluating the importance of secret intelligence channels needs to be done within a broader framework of decision-making and diplomacy. And [we should acknowledge] that that which is secret is not a priori more significant’.20 A significant part of the following study aims to explain the motivations behind the decisions of the British Government and the republican movement to enter talks that eventually led to the 1994 ceasefire and the development of the Northern Irish peace process. ‘Given the lack of candour on the part of the authorities, any analysis of the Government’s motivation must necessarily be speculative’.21 Furthermore, the Sinn Féin and IRA leadership have taken a policy decision not to disclose detailed information surrounding the decision to take the 1994 ceasefire.22 Consequently, the explanations produced in this paper regarding these motivations cannot claim to be definitive but will rather be drawn from the anecdotal evidence available.

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2. Talking To Terrorists

2.1 How to get engagement started?
In addressing the question of why the British Government decided to negotiate with the IRA it is first important to outline several methods by which engagement might be started with terrorist organisations. The initiation of talks with those who have been designated terrorists poses difficult problems for governments. A government who negotiates with terrorist groups can be accused of lending legitimacy to those who have engaged in acts of terrorism and thus create the impression that engaging in such acts will prove successful. Furthermore, conflicts that have lasted for prolonged periods will most likely have witnessed atrocities carried out by both sides. Each side will tend to view the other as illegitimate and often view it as essentially evil. This ensures that the negotiation process will be arduous while this mutual hatred leaves the initiation of a negotiation process as one of the greatest obstacles. Often preconditions or certain acts of good faith are demanded of the terrorist organisation. These might prove impossible for that organisation to deliver, as it was the promise of entering into talks which would yield the conditions that would allow these demands to be met.

Byman has offered several methods for beginning engagement with terrorist organisations short of open or official talks.\(^\text{23}\) Diplomacy by declaration is an established means of talking without the need for conducting formal talks. Such an option uses formal statements by governments to send messages to terrorist organisations. These messages often include instructions on what is expected of that organisation should it wish to further certain objectives of theirs or if it wishes to enter into more formal talks. This method was utilised heavily in Northern Ireland, with frequent statements indicating British Government policy released by British Government officials. ‘For example, on 15 December 1993 leaders of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland issued the “Downing Street Declaration,” which offered the PIRA a role in negotiations over Northern Ireland’s future should it reject violence’.\(^\text{24}\) Declarations are often vague but allow governments to engage with

\(^{23}\) Byman, 2006.
\(^{24}\) Ibid: 404.
terrorists while at the same time giving them the freedom to condemn their acts of violence.

Alternatively, there exists the method of ‘megaphone diplomacy’. This method attempts to use media interviews instead of formal declarations to convey their message to the other side. In the case of Northern Ireland, it is clear that both the British Government and the leadership of the republican movement sought to use this method to send messages to the other side about its position and analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland. The benefit of such a method is that both sides are able to await the emergence of acceptable conditions or concessions before even considering entering into any negotiating process.

A more private method of communication that maintains the deniability of communication is to make use of intermediaries. These persons are expected to operate discreetly and will tend to hold a certain degree of trust with both sides. These persons tend to be either completely removed from the conflict (members of a foreign government) or community members who are considered to hold a certain level of neutrality (often religious leaders). One example of such an intermediary in Northern Ireland is the Redemptorist priest Father Alex Reid who was used to channel messages between both sides. Father Reid had also played a significant role in mediating republican feuds in Belfast during the 1970s.

A fourth way in which engagement can be initiated is through the use of intelligence officers whose activities remain secret and whose communication with terrorists will tend to be denied by the government. The backchannel that existed between the British Government and the IRA is the means of communication that this paper is primarily concerned with. The risks that are associated with such an approach will be discussed in due course.

There are occasions on which low-profile official talks might be entered upon. These talks are not deniable and, therefore, highlight to the terrorist organisation the

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government’s commitment to talks. This approach was attempted in 1972 when the British Government held ministerial-level talks with the IRA.

Having discussed the potential methods available to governments when seeking to initiate a dialogue with terrorist organisations this paper now turns to a discussion of the potential risks and rewards associated with talking to terrorists through the method of clandestine diplomacy.

2.2 Potential Rewards

The principle value of clandestine diplomacy is its deniability. This allows for communication to be entered upon with adversaries who the government would be unable to talk to publicly, often due to the fact that they continue to engage in armed attacks or terrorist violence. One significant point that must be recognised is that ‘clandestine diplomacy presupposes a willingness to talk to an adversary, even if talking may not lead to negotiation’. Proponents of clandestine diplomacy take the view that it is better for each side to know what the other is thinking through a process of dialogue than to ignore each other completely.

Engaging in talks with terrorists can bring an end to their violence by providing an opportunity to reason with them and convince them of the merits of abandoning armed struggle. Talks might be popular with certain elements within the terrorist organisation and anathema to others within the organisation. Thus, they have the potential to create internal tensions within terrorist organisations which can lead them to implode.

Talks can yield these potential results through a number of processes. The most important is arguably the potential to change constituent opinion. The potential exists, that if a terrorist organisation is offered the prospect of talks, this will have a consequent impact upon the opinions of those who support the organisation, who will view such a prospect in a positive light. The pressure to cease violent activity is

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26 Scott, 2004: 337.
28 Byman, 2006.
increased in the light of such a situation as the group fears losing support and sympathy for its cause.

The decision to engage in talks may also act to strengthen the position of moderate elements within the terrorist organisation. Stevenson argues that the decision by American officials to deal with Adams in 1994 was an intricate part in bringing about the IRA ceasefire that year and further acted to strengthen Adams’ position in the organisation at the expense of those who favoured the continuation of the armed struggle.29

A corollary to the above notion is the idea that even if talks do not succeed in convincing the entire group of the merits of a peace process they will at least foster divisions within the organisation. The British believed that, in the event of a failure of any talks, the IRA would at the very least be weakened as an organisation as a consequence of the decision to engage in talks in the first place. However, the creation of divisions within a terrorist organisation is a double-edged sword, as I will explain below.

There is also an intelligence-gathering purpose behind talks, which can operate to ‘provide additional information on a terrorist group’s true priorities and on which members of its leadership have the most influence’.30 Finally, we must consider the risks of not negotiating. Refusing to engage in talks can create the impression that non-violent means are hopeless because the government is unwilling to talk, conveying a sense of intransigence. Consequently, not negotiating can act to strengthen the terrorist movement, and the likely consequent government repression that would accompany such an increase in terrorist strength would only continue the spiral of increased support for the terrorist organisation.

2.3 Potential Risks
It is also necessary to recognise the significant risks that emerge from the decision to open dialogue with terrorists. The most significant and most frequently cited objection to engaging with terrorists is that any recognition of such an organisation

rewards the use of terrorism.\textsuperscript{31} Terrorist groups are on a constant crusade to gain legitimacy for their action, often claiming the justness of their acts of violence. To recognise and to negotiate is to admit that the demands of these organisations are not only legitimate but also that the manner in which they seek to achieve the implementation of these demands is somehow permissibly rewarded. Therefore, this might serve to increase the level of terrorism.

Byman argues that recognising and negotiating with terrorists might be worthwhile if there was some chance of success but highlights that most talks end in failure.\textsuperscript{32} ‘Talks with the United Kingdom in the 1970s discredited older PIRA members and led to the rise of a younger, more radical cadre who continued violence with little progress for over twenty years’.\textsuperscript{33} However, this does not seem any reason not to attempt to bring about a peaceful resolution through talks.

The political risk remains high given the nature of success which is usually incremental rather than immediate. The IRA continued to stockpile its arsenal and maintained its cell structure even after several years of the peace talks following the 1994 ceasefire.\textsuperscript{34}

As discussed above, talks may create divisions within a terrorist organisation. This can lead to the formation of splinter groups that may continue violent attacks, which increase in intensity and level of destructiveness. The emergence of RIRA and CIRA and the attacks they have carried out are clear proof of this danger.

There is also a significant risk to the individual intelligence officer or intermediaries used to run the backchannels of communication. There are often factions within terrorist organisations who will be completely opposed to any form of communication with the ‘enemy’ and exposure to these elements poses substantial risks to the safety of both the government and paramilitary negotiators.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Byman, 2006.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid: 407.
\textsuperscript{34} Stevenson, 1997.
\textsuperscript{35} Scott, 2004: 331.
Finally, it is necessary to assess the situation thoroughly and attempt to judge whether the terrorist organisation is merely seeking to buy time to regroup and rearm.

2.4 Motivations
2.4.1 Villainizer’s Dilemma

Before making an assessment of the particular motivations underlying the British Government’s decision to engage in talks with the IRA I wish to highlight the concept of the Villainizer’s Dilemma which appears in the literature on negotiations with terrorist organisations. This states that:

Villains, once designated, are usually denied the privilege of negotiating with other countries [/organisations] directly to resolve the problem. However, without this channel for negotiation, the designator country also limits its own options, relying entirely on sanctions to resolve the conflict. Herein lies the “villainizer’s dilemma.” By villainizing a group or state, the designator country seeks to punish and pressure the villain to change its behavior. Sanctions and negative incentives are mobilized. But in doing so, the villainizer greatly limits the possible ways of finding a solution. Responsibility for resolving the crisis is shifted almost entirely to the villain, who must comply with the sanctions imposed and change its villainous behavior before anything else will be forthcoming for the designator country.36

The existence of this dilemma leaves three options: (i) Escalate the sanctions regime, (ii) Take limited strategic military action, (iii) Negotiate with the villain. By the late 1980s the Northern Ireland conflict had arguably reached something of a stalemate. At the very least neither side seemed to be gaining or losing much. This position of stalemate benefited the British Government and particularly the unionist community who continued to hold on to the union with the United Kingdom. However, the optimal situation was for the conflict to reach a peaceful resolution and remaining in a stalemate actually did not benefit any side, as the conflict would continue to claim lives without any side actually ‘winning’.

36 Spector, 1998: 49
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Judging the above options to the Villianizer’s Dilemma yields the impression that the best solution was to negotiate. Escalating the sanctions regime would have had an adverse impact upon the nationalist community and those Catholics who were not undertaking an active role within the republican movement. This would likely increase the recruitment potential for the IRA, which would not be in the interests of either the British Government or the unionist community. The policy of internment introduced on 9 August 1971 proved an abject failure, with poor, outdated intelligence resulting in the arrests of many who had not been involved in Republican activity for long periods of time.37 The failure of internment to capture active members of the IRA was compounded by the increased levels of support for the IRA that arose out of the internment fiasco. Taking strategic military action was difficult against an adversary such as the IRA who did not control any particular territory or have any bases to launch attacks against. They moved within the Catholic community and any attack would likely cause resentment amongst Catholics at large as it would most certainly end up causing harm to members of that community. The best option for the British Government was to be proactive in resolving the conflict and attempt to negotiate with the terrorists.

2.4.2 Motivating Decisions

Why then did the government decide to engage in talks when they did? The motivation for decisions to negotiate may revolve around: (i) the perceived negotiability of the issue,38 (ii) reaching ripe moments and critical turning points,39 (iii) introducing creativity heuristics that reframe the problem,40 (iv) finding perceived power symmetry between the parties,41 (v) favourable assessments in the prenegotiation phase.42

Conducting intelligence such as secret negotiations can often overlap with gathering intelligence and conducting deception.43 In fact, this has been cited as one of the key motivations leading to the opening of a channel of communication with the IRA in

38 Ikle, 1964; Zartman and Berman, 1982.
42 Stein, 1989.
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1990s. Intelligence had suggested that there were certain elements within the republican movement who were eager to bring the conflict to a resolution. There had been factions within the republican movement in the late 1960s that were favourably disposed towards reaching a peaceful settlement to the conflict and their existence was part of the reason for the fracture in the IRA in 1969. The potential for failure was ever-present in any talks with the IRA of course. However, it was important for the British Government to gauge the level of support for a peaceful settlement to the conflict. Conducting talks with the republican movement would allow the intelligence services to gain a fuller picture of where the IRA as an organisation stood both in terms of willingness to maintain the armed struggle and their relative strength to carry on that campaign.

In addition to the intelligence gathering purpose that clandestine diplomacy offers, the British Government may have entered into negotiations with the IRA in the expectation that they could influence the organisation towards adopting a political rather than military approach to the conflict. However, it is important to question what the government can offer a terrorist group?\textsuperscript{44} The IRA’s raison d’être was the reunification of the island of Ireland and the removal of the British presence on the island. However, the British Government would never be able to promise this given the reality that the ‘principle of consent’ took precedence in any negotiation over the future status of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the British Government could not make unilateral decisions regarding the sovereignty of the government of the Republic of Ireland. One of the most important things that the British Government could offer was the conferring of legitimacy on the republican movement. However, that the talks would remain secret would deny the IRA that legitimacy. The key negotiating tool on the side of the British Government was the ability to admit Sinn Féin to the peace process. As a consequence of the Sinn Féin leadership’s fear of being excluded from the negotiations, this was a particularly important bargaining chip when it came to discussions with the republican movement.

\textsuperscript{44} Byman, 2006: 408.
Opinion polls had indicated that the population of Ulster was war-weary and desired peace.\footnote{Better Secret Than Sorry', Financial Times, 30 November 1993, p.18.} Taken together with the intelligence assessments of the republican movement’s evolving strategy it appeared that a critical turning point had been reached and the British Government perceived an opportunity for negotiations had arrived.

The major problem for the British Government in talking with the republican movement was the accusation that terrorism was being rewarded. This was proved when the backchannel was revealed in 1993 and the government came under massive criticism for talking with the IRA. Critics were particularly disturbed that the government would consider talking with terrorists considering the increases in the level of violence during the early 1990s. The British Government argued that they were acting to essentially save lives and find a solution to the problems that had plagued Northern Ireland for so long. In the view of the government any possible means of solving the conflict had to be attempted.

2.4.3 Consequences Of The Stalemate
The stalemate reached in the conflict appeared to be producing some debate within the republican movement. As a consequence, the British Government were interested to see how far this debate had progressed and to find out if there was a desire for a peaceful resolution how widely held that desire was. Dixon argues that the British had long accepted that a purely military victory over the IRA was unachievable.\footnote{Dixon, 2002: 727.} In contrast, Neumann contends that few British politicians were willing to admit that the ‘war against the IRA’ could never be won.\footnote{Neumann, 2003a: 156.} One notable exception was the Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke who argued that a military defeat of the IRA was highly improbable. In an interview in November 1989, Brooke stated that the security forces could contain the IRA but that he found it ‘difficult to envisage’ their military defeat and noted that ‘imaginative’ steps would be pursued if there was a cessation of violence.\footnote{‘Is It Really Over? – IRA Ceasefire – Northern Ireland – Focus’, The Sunday Times, 4 September 1994.} ‘[Brooke’s] statements about the impossibility of military victory...
demonstrated that, even on the British side, some people were capable of the fundamental reassessment that was necessary for a peace process to emerge’.49

The London and Dublin governments had a difficult task in dragging the opposing sides in the conflict to the negotiating table. This required balancing the claims of both unionism and nationalism. The 1973 Sunningdale Agreement was ‘overbalanced’ against unionism and this mistake could not be allowed to re-occur.50 The British Government faced the difficult task of having to act neutral and as a champion of unionism simultaneously. The public overtures of both Northern Ireland Secretaries since the late 1980s served to upset this balance and alienate the unionist community who felt that they were being betrayed by the British Government. Upon taking office in 1992, Prime Minister John Major ensured that the Northern Ireland problem remained a priority for his government and during his time in office he developed a good relationship with the Irish Prime Minister, Albert Reynolds. When the secret backchannel talks were revealed it outraged the unionist community who could not understand how the British Government could talk to the IRA while the armed violence continued. With IRA violence escalating and intensifying, domestic pressure on John Major’s government was significantly increased.

2.4.4 A Radical Departure?
Why then did the British Government initiate and continue the secret backchannel communications with the republican movement? More importantly, did this demonstrate a radical departure in British policy? John Darby and Roger MacGinty have argued that the messages delivered through the ‘megaphone diplomacy’ of Brooke and Mayhew, together with the initiation of the secret backchannel represented a radical new departure in British policy.51 These acts clearly contradicted the British Government’s public stance of ‘marginalising those on the political extremes’.52 That the British Government had recognised a willingness among elements in the republican movement to end the armed campaign was the driving factor behind these moves. However, Neumann argues that ‘the British Government had never had any objection to the idea of inclusion, provided the

49 Neumann, 2003a: 156.
Republican movement committed itself to the principles of democracy and non-violence’. He further elaborates that the British strategy had continued to keep an open door to republicans to enter into the political process which on occasion had amounted to a pro-active strategy of ‘politicization’, which aimed at supporting the more politically minded elements within the movement.’

Dixon explains that the nationalist view portrays ‘the Irish peace process as a unilateral Irish initiative coming from John Hume and Gerry Adams supported by nationalist politicians in Northern Ireland and the Republic’. He disagrees that Brooke’s initiatives were radical and instead finds a remarkable continuity with past policy from the early to mid-70s. In fact the language used was such that ‘it was almost as if Sir Patrick [Mayhew] had dusted down and slightly rephrased what Merlyn Rees had said in the run-up to the 1975 truce. What was to follow had much in common with that process’. Brooke’s predecessor, Tom King has admitted that contacts with republicans began as early as 1988. ‘Given the continuity of these secret contacts, one may question whether the existence of the Backchannel alone should be regarded as an indication of a different approach’. Finally, an appreciation of the continuities in British policy can negate the argument that the end of the Cold War caused the readjustment in British policy in Northern Ireland.

2.5 Conclusion
What then was the purpose of the secret backchannel? Its initiation appears to have been ‘motivated by a spirit of exploration’ and was described by Brooke as ‘essentially an intelligence process’ carried out to understand the direction of the republican movement’s political and military strategy. The republican movement’s disposition to negotiate seemed to be changing and this created the sense that a critical moment had been reached in the conflict. The British Government were, therefore, concerned with attempting to investigate the possibility of ending the stalemate through a process of involving the republican movement in the political process. It

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54 Ibid: 159.
55 Dixon, 2001: 216
56 Ibid.
57 Taylor, 1997: 328-329
58 Neumann, 2003a: 163
was hoped that such involvement would lead to that movement’s recognition of the benefits of constitutional nationalism and lead to the cessation of the armed struggle.
3. Talking To The Enemy

In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty: six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfares, and of its exaltation among the nations.60

Byman suggests that certain questions should be posed when assessing whether a particular group can be moved away from violence through talks: (i) Can the terrorist group win outright? (ii) What is a terrorist group’s political position? (iii) Who wins a fair election? (iv) How strong is the movement vis-à-vis its potential rivals? (v) Are the leaders ideologically rigid?61 It can also be particularly insightful to use these questions to attempt to assess the motivations leading to the decision by terrorist groups to enter into talks. The following section will seek to include answers to the above questions in relation to the IRA and its political arm, Sinn Féin. A paramilitary organisation may see the option to enter talks as favourable if they are in a weak position as this may serve to ease pressure on that organisation and allow it to regroup. They may also view such an option positively if their organisation is in a strong position in which they might use their relative strength to demand concessions from the government. In addition, if a conflict has entered a situation in which no side is furthering its objectives then it might prove beneficial to seek alternative means to address the conflict and talking to each other can be considered such a route.

3.1 Republican Ideology

The republican ideology of the IRA is built upon the primacy of conspiracy, claiming a historical continuity with the revolts of the United Irishmen in 1798, the Young Irelanders in 1848, the Fenian uprising in 1867 and, most importantly, the Easter Rising of 1916. Padraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising,

61 Byman, 2006.
explained how the idea of ‘apostolic succession’ emerged out of the failure of republican insurrection. He proposed the notion that the continuation of acts of uprising ensured the survival of the republican ideal of an Irish state. There has always been a tendency towards elitism in Irish republicanism and, similar to those previous nationalist revolts, the IRA leadership tended towards the tradition of a nationalist vanguard. This meant that the republican leadership never took ‘more than a passing interest in popular opinion’. Consequently, the leadership of the republican movement has always sought to pull the movement in the direction it has felt appropriate.

The republican movement’s analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland is driven by a colonial explanation, which views the British involvement in Ireland as exploitative of the native population. An article in Eire Nua stated that ‘British soldiers and British administrators have never brought anything but death, suffering, starvation and untold misery to the people of this country. They will never bring anything else until they get out.’ Smith warns that ‘the image of complete British culpability risks promoting tunnel vision’ which can have a significant impact on strategic calculations. An analysis that is incomplete and blindly adhered to can cause the adoption of suboptimal strategies.

In contrast to the colonial explanation, the British Government had made moves during the early twentieth century to resolve the Irish problem. However, the Protestant community in the north of Ireland were adamant that the union would remain unbroken and they began to establish a loyalist movement that would ensure that no agreement would be forced upon them. The evolution of a loyalist army was further enhanced on 24 April 1914 when unionists landed a large consignment of arms at Larne with which they would resist any attempt to enforce the dissolution of the union and the creation of an Irish state. In fact, the British Government has reaffirmed on several occasions its unbiased intent for the future of Northern Ireland.

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62 Pearse, Ghosts Available at www.geocities.com/irishhumanrights/Ghosts.pdf
63 Smith, 1997: 104.
64 Eire Nua, Sinn Fein news sheet, n.p., January 1977
66 Jackson, 2004: 139.
and the lack of a selfish interest in the territory.\textsuperscript{67} However, the British Government has a responsibility to the Protestant community in Northern Ireland as well as the safety of the citizens of the territory over which they maintain control. Thus, the ‘principle of consent’ has taken precedence and the will of the majority and democratic politics have been strictly adhered to. Any analysis of Northern Ireland, therefore, has to take account of the wishes of the Protestant community who are the real obstacle to the achievement of a united Ireland.

### 3.2 Membership

It is important to have an appreciation of the different motivations behind joining the republican movement. Alonso warns that no single theory adequately explains why people joined the IRA.\textsuperscript{68} Instead, there existed a multitude of motivating factors behind membership. Firstly, there is the notion that individuals growing up in Catholic communities in Northern Ireland were predisposed to joining the IRA through a socialisation process, which was centred on membership of \textit{Fianna Eireann} and the ideological indoctrination that took place within that organisation.\textsuperscript{69} The romanticised concept of the republican movement produced members who labelled themselves as ‘very pro-republican without knowing what republicanism actually was’.\textsuperscript{70} The majority of members joined the movement at an early age and many can be accused of a desire to engage in nothing more than dangerous activity. When questioned about his motivations for joining the IRA one interviewee explained how the act of being given a gun was in itself a motivating factor to sign up.\textsuperscript{71} Most members have little political knowledge and were motivated instead by a gut reaction to the situation and events in which they found themselves.\textsuperscript{72} Others joined the IRA in order to defend the nationalist community from sectarian violence. Some members who had joined during the late 1960s attribute their involvement to the political ideals of the left-wing ideology that had inspired global unrest and protest movements during the time.\textsuperscript{73} Socialists also formed a significant element within the nationalist

\textsuperscript{67} Bew, Patterson & Teague, 1997: 69.
\textsuperscript{68} Alonso, 2003.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid: 11. \textit{Fianna Eireann} is an Irish Republican youth organisation.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid: 13.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid: 13.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid: 18.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid: 24.
tradition and a desire to unite the working class motivated their involvement. However, socialism did not really sit easily within the nationalist movement as the Protestant working class was effectively ignored.

From these varying motivating factors it is evident that some members were more concerned with achieving a united Ireland than others were. Those less political tended to be concerned with short term goals compared with carrying on a tradition of republican struggle. The IRA claimed not to be a sectarian organisation, yet both ‘unionism and nationalism became increasingly counter-factually defined identities, defined more by opposition to each other than by what they each stood for’. While certain individuals within the leadership were open to political change there existed a significant element of the membership who were reticent to any change in political or military strategy. This tended to result from their ideological indoctrination and enmity towards state (Protestant) institutions rather than out of any sound political rationale. However, the tendency towards elitism in the republican movement ensured that the leadership could always decide where the movement was headed. Other republican paramilitary organisations were active during the ‘troubles’ but the IRA remained the most prominent. In fact, Wilkinson goes so far as to describe the IRA as the best armed, richest and most experienced active terrorist organisation in Western Europe during the period 1970 to 1996. Considering the strength of the IRA relative to other republican organisations, the choices of its leadership were principal in deciding the direction that the republican movement as a whole would take.

### 3.3 Republican Strategy

Throughout the ‘troubles’ the IRA’s inferior numbers relative to that of the British Army and the security forces discounted the possibility of driving the British out of Northern Ireland through direct military engagements. Defeating the British in a conventional military sense was impossible so the IRA relied on the use of guerrilla tactics. This meant employing ambushes, planting bombs and engaging in other forms of low-intensity warfare after which they would disappear into the Catholic

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74 Alonso, 2003: 34.
75 Delanty, 1995: 259.
76 Wilkinson, 2006: 43
population, who acted as their camouflage. The IRA strategy was premised on the notion of sustained pressure. Owing to their regularity and unpredictability, small-scale military attacks would carry a ‘degree of psychological pressure out of proportion to their destructive consequences’. This would see the morale of their opponent eventually wear out and force the withdrawal of the British from Northern Ireland as a consequence of the ‘inordinately high economic and political price incurred in trying to retain control’. The IRA expected that they could wage limited war ‘until Britain is forced to sit at the conference table’. The problem was that they expected that any negotiations would be carried out on IRA terms and the inviolable objective of Irish unity would mean that any negotiations were predetermined to end in complete failure.

Republicans believed in the primacy of the armed struggle as a consequence of the apparent futility of the constitutional path in realising the republican ideal, as demonstrated by the failures of both Daniel O’Connell and the Home Rule movement. However, ‘the risk of employing armed force without having clearly defined policy objectives is that a group such as the republican movement will end up as a permanent military conspiracy where the use of violence becomes internally legitimised as an end in itself rather than as a means to achieve anything politically tangible’. The cycle of violence that continued throughout the ‘troubles’ bears testament to this notion as the IRA can be argued to have gained little headway in their struggle to achieve a united Ireland.

3.4 Motivations
3.4.1 Consequences Of The Stalemate
By the late 1980s a leading faction within the political leadership of the republican movement had realised that a stalemate had been reached and their objections to ideological rigidity formed an intricate part of moving the peace process forward. The position of the IRA by that time was not favourable for the achievement of their objectives. In fact, it is arguable that the only potential that the republican movement had was to ensure the continuation of the cycle of violence. They were suffering in

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77 Smith, 1997: 96-97
78 Smith, 1997: 96-97
80 Smith, 1997: 23.
terms of a loss of manpower, material and support for the armed struggle. During 1987-88 twenty-six members died violently and in January 1988 an arms find at Five Fingers Strand in Donegal meant the loss of five machine guns, 100 rifles, 100 pounds of explosives and 50,000 rounds of ammunition. Furthermore, attacks during that period were leading to the deaths of an unacceptable number of Catholic civilians, which served to severely erode support for the republican movement’s armed campaign. Significantly, IRA operations were being stifled at this time both by the existence of informers within their ranks and the increased success of the security forces, which was likely a result of the existence of these informers. ‘There is evidence that by the mid 1980s the IRA had fought itself into a political and military stalemate with the British state’. It is near impossible to envisage that the IRA could have achieved its objectives of forcing the British to withdraw and bringing about a united Ireland given the position that it had reached in the late 1980s.

The evidence that the IRA had fought itself into a political and military stalemate with the British Government appears evident. It is as a consequence of this realisation that the republican movement began to move towards a more favourable disposition towards the methods of constitutional nationalism. It is important to understand that there had always been republican elements that saw the end of violence as preferable but it was during the late 1980s that this way of thinking began to enter into the minds of prominent members in the republican leadership.

3.4.2 The Move Towards Constitutional Nationalism

Gerry Adams began talks with John Hume in 1988 to discuss their respective analyses of the Northern Ireland conflict. The British and Irish governments were aware of the existence of the Hume-Adams talks despite these talks remaining secret from the public. These talks had been started with the help of Father Alec Reid, a proponent of intra-nationalist dialogue, who had helped to mediate republican feuds during the 1970s and was a trusted figure on both sides. Adams and Hume met on a further four occasions the following year. These meetings were a risky venture for both parties, as they each had to contend with criticism from their own camps. Their importance cannot be understated as they represented an apparent shift in republican ideology

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82 Dixon, 2002: 727
towards a more favourable appreciation of the role played by constitutional nationalism. It also indicated the awareness on the part of the IRA that they had been unable to achieve the objective of Irish unity and that doing so would require some form of broader alliance.\(^\text{83}\)

Sinn Féin held on to the belief that the British Government continued to maintain control over Northern Ireland out of self-interested reasons, citing the problems as a product of colonialism. In a letter to Hume, Adams wrote: ‘British interference in Ireland has and continues to be malign because its presence has and continues to be based on its own self-interests’.\(^\text{84}\) The SDLP accepted the British Government’s word that they were effectively neutral on the issue of Irish unity and instead Hume stressed the problems caused by divisions among the Irish people in Northern Ireland. ‘Both parties agreed that the Irish people had a right to self-determination. But they differed on how to exercise that right, given clear Ulster unionist hostility to Irish unity.’\(^\text{85}\) In 1989 Sinn Féin did not appear to be making the transition towards constitutional nationalism when Adams stated at the Sinn Féin Ard Fhéis that

> The history of Ireland and of British colonial involvement throughout the world tells us that the British Government rarely listens to the force of argument. It understands only the argument of force. This is one of the reasons why the armed struggle is a fact of life, and death, in the six counties. [Republican violence was] not merely a defensive reaction by an oppressed people. It sets the political agenda.\(^\text{86}\)

These sentiments indicate that the armed struggle was still viewed as the primary method by which the republican movement would engage. However, at the same time, Adams was talking about an “unarmed struggle”. He continued to commend those engaged in the armed campaign but in private recognised the impossibility of defeating the British through force and the desire for peace among the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

\(^{83}\) English, 2004: 265  
\(^{84}\) Adams, 1988.  
\(^{85}\) English, 2004: 264.  
\(^{86}\) Ibid: 266.
Support for Sinn Féin in elections appeared to have plateaued and had not moved above 12% in the three elections carried out between 1985 and 1993. Support for the SDLP increased from 18% to 22% in the same period. Terrorists are more likely to abandon violence if they expect to win at the ballot box. That Sinn Féin were not the majority nationalist political party acted as a disincentive for the IRA to end their armed campaign and thus caused further problems for the republican political leadership in directing the movement towards the constitutional route.

Republican propaganda caused further difficulties for political progress to be made by creating unrealistic public expectations. The political elites who were interested in negotiating a compromise settlement had to re-frame the goals of the republican movement and re-educate their supporters accordingly. This re-structuring of republican strategy left those elements open to negotiation vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, inconsistency and ‘selling-out’. The Sinn Féin document ‘Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland’ recognised both Northern Ireland’s economic dependence on Britain and the potential of a Protestant backlash following a British withdrawal. This document marked a significant shift in the republican perspective. ‘[The] struggle between the SF leadership and grassroots republicanism may help to explain the slow and contradictory shifts in SF rhetoric during the period as the Adams leadership strained to sell a new strategy to the wider movement’. It was essential for the Sinn Féin leadership to present their entry into any political negotiations as a strength rather than a weakness. The ideological changes in the IRA did not occur suddenly. Instead, the leadership phased in these changes over a lengthy period of time. It can be assumed that the secret Backchannel talks remained secret from the vast majority of IRA membership. Thus, when the ceasefire was announced in 1994 the leadership had already prepared republican activists somewhat for the shift in strategy.

87 http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/gallsum.htm
90 Sinn Fein, 1992; Lochery, 2006 – explanation of Northern Ireland’s economic dependence.
3.4.3 Continued Military Struggle

However, that talks were being conducted both with the SDLP and with the British Government in secret did not preclude the IRA from continuing its armed struggle. Smith has argued that

In any conflict the tactical efficiency with which military operations are executed will be meaningless unless they form part of a coordinated plan to achieve political ends, because the success of a strategy can only be judged with reference to the attainment of the overall political objective.\(^{93}\)

It is important to question in this light whether the armed struggle was proving counter-productive. By 1972 the IRA had effectively torpedoed its own strategy through the over-escalation of a low intensity conflict. This resulted from two factors: (i) the unpolicised nature of the IRA at the time, (ii) the absolutist nature of republican ideology.\(^{94}\) It appeared that a similar scenario was repeating itself during the early 1990s. Beuno de Mesquita has argued that government concessions can cause terrorist organisations to become more militant. Moderates accept concessions and the terrorist organisation is left in the hand of extremists, which can potentially lead to increases in militantism.\(^{95}\) IRA violence certainly increased following the initiation of talks through the secret backchannel but it was not as a consequence of the organisation falling into the hands of more militant leaders. Adams continued to provide the direction for the republican movement though the increased level of attacks does indicate that some difference of opinion existed within the republican movement. It is plausible that Sinn Féin were using the IRA as part of a ‘good cop-bad cop’ routine in order to ensure their involvement in the peace process talks.

The IRA had always valued attacks on the British mainland more highly than any violence perpetrated in Northern Ireland. This was a result of the increased media attention that was devoted to such attacks and the significance of increasing the pressure from the British public on their government to extricate themselves from what was perceived as a distant conflict. The conservative MP Ian Gow, a longstanding unionist sympathiser, was killed by the IRA on 20 July 1990. On 17

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\(^{93}\) Smith, 1997: 102

\(^{94}\) Ibid: 111, 116.

\(^{95}\) Bueno de Mesquita, 2003.
September of that year the IRA shot dead a British soldier as he emerged from a recruiting office in Prime Minister Thatcher’s constituency of Finchley in London. The Backchannel talks had been opened by late 1990 and as a gesture of cautious engagement the IRA announced a Christmas ceasefire. However, the attacks continued again and on 7 February 1991 the IRA launched a mortar attack on Downing Street in which no one was injured. A bomb at Victoria Station on 18 February killed one person and injured forty others. An IRA bomb at London Bridge Station on 28 February 1992 injured twenty-eight people. The attacks on mainland Britain sought to focus the attention of both the electorate and politicians on the Irish issue and this gave rise to increased activity around the UK general election of April 1992. That election was highly significant given the loss of Sinn Féin’s only seat, held by Gerry Adams as West Belfast MP, to the SDLP. This significant loss could have meant that the IRA would return to the sole tactic of armed struggle and forget the political side of the equation. The IRA response was immediate with London’s Baltic Exchange being bombed on 10 April causing the death of three people and £800 million damage. This one bomb had caused more damage than the combined damage of all other IRA bombs since 1969. Eighteen civilians were injured on 27 February 1993 when an IRA bomb exploded in Camden, London. On 20 March 1993 an IRA bomb in Warrington led to the deaths of three-year old Jonathan Bell and twelve-year old Tim Parry. On 24 April 1993, the IRA rocked the financial heart of London when they exploded a bomb at Bishopsgate, causing the death of one person, many injuries and millions of pounds worth of damage. They continued to maintain that they had not been defeated and that they would only end their armed campaign in the event of British disengagement from Northern Ireland.

Violence continued apace in Northern Ireland. In one of the worst incidents of the early 1990s, the IRA killed seven Protestants when a landmine blew up the van in which they were travelling near the Teebane Crossroads on 17 January 1992. The Teebane killings led to a spate of retaliation attacks by loyalist paramilitaries. On 5 February 1992 the UFF shot dead five Catholics in a betting shop on Belfast’s lower Ormeau Road. ‘Whatever its intention, violence by loyalists or by republicans tended

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Talking To Terrorists

– in practice – often to stimulate rather than stifle further killing by the other side’.98 The sectarianism continued with destructive consequences for the people of Northern Ireland. On 23 October 1993 an IRA bomb exploded in a fish shop on the Shankill Road causing the deaths of nine Protestants as well as the bomber. The response to this attack was highly significant as Adams statement to the incident on 24 October 1993 criticised the IRA action saying: ‘It was wrong. It cannot be excused’.99 The political leadership were beginning to show their irritation publicly for the negative impact that the armed campaign was having on the opportunities for Sinn Féin involvement in the peace process. A real shift in the republican movement was becoming evident.

3.4.4 Seeking Ways Out Of violence

Despite the continued attacks it was clear that the IRA was looking for ways out of the violence. The 1992 Sinn Féin document ‘Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland’ was evidence of this. ‘Speaking in early April 1993, an IRA spokesperson argued that the resolution of the Northern Irish conflict required ‘dialogue which is both inclusive and without preconditions’.100 The republican movement had already come to the realisation that they lacked the power to achieve a united Ireland on their own. However, that no preconditions should exist was a notion that was unacceptable to the British Government and the other parties involved in peace negotiations. An end to IRA violence had to predate any Sinn Féin entry into the talks’ process. In order to facilitate the clarification the Downing Street Declaration, the IRA agreed to suspend military action for three days in April 1994. They argued that it was the responsibility of all to overcome the obstacles to peace. However, they explained that the responsibility lay primarily at the door of the British.

The IRA continued to demand that there would be no cessation of violence until Sinn Féin was granted participation in the talks' process. However, on 31 August 1994 the IRA announced that

Recognising the potential of the current situation and in order to enhance the democratic process and underline our definitive commitment to its

100 English, 2004: 280.
success the leadership of Oglaigh na hEireann have decided that as of midnight, Wednesday, 31 August, there will be a complete cessation of military operations. All our units have been instructed accordingly….Our struggle has seen many gains and advances made by nationalists and for the democratic position. We believe that an opportunity to create a just and lasting settlement has been created. We are therefore entering into a new situation in a spirit of determination and confidence: determined that the injustices which created the conflict will be removed and confident in the strength and justice of our struggle to achieve this.  

In doing so they had abandoned their demand that Sinn Féin enter talks before any cessation of violence. However, the ceasefire did not just materialise from nothingness. The process leading towards the ceasefire had been building for almost a decade and had been ‘leadership led and leadership-driven’. The IRA had to ensure that their membership did not view this ceasefire as a surrender. They explained to activists that the struggle was not over but merely opening up another front. Supporters of the IRA were being asked to make a substantial leap of faith in this respect given the reality that Sinn Féin had been viewed as adjunct to the IRA campaign. There was scepticism surrounding the degree of leverage that an unarmed republican movement would have. However, ‘prior to the IRA’s 1994 ceasefire, the apparent victories achieved by ‘pan-nationalism’ over the British Government during the Irish peace process indicated the influence which republicans could achieve through an unarmed struggle’. This explanation allowed the Sinn Féin leadership a viable explanation for involvement in the peace process.

Adams had recognised the victory of constitutional nationalism, which had been sealed with the overwhelming support for the Downing Street Declaration, and thus was eager to ensure that Sinn Féin would have a role to play in the peace process. As the central personality on the republican side in the peace process, he commanded a great deal of respect and, as such, his judgement was trusted. Activists were willing

102 Quoted in Mallie & McKittick, 1996: 316.
to believe that there was another way to achieve the goal of a united Ireland. The 1994 ceasefire was a historic moment in the Northern Irish conflict and paved the way for the evolution of the peace process that led to the 1998 Belfast Agreement. It was not the end of the troubles, though it was the beginning of the end.

3.5 Conclusion

Alonso disagrees with the military stalemate argument, contending that the reason for the end of IRA violence resulted from their political defeat. However, this paper explains how the republican movement required what was effectively a military defeat to force a re-analysis of the conflict and a readjustment of existing ideology. By the late 1980s the republican movement had realised its inability to achieve a British withdrawal and united Ireland by itself. Republicans recognised the benefit of working with constitutional nationalists but understood that no possible link could be fully formed until the IRA called an end to its armed campaign. A re-analysis of the Northern Ireland conflict had been undertaken which accepted that the colonial explanation was outdated. Furthermore, it sought to incorporate the unionist community into republican analysis, admitting that community had rights while not accepting a unionist veto over all political movements. Therefore, progressing down the path to a solution to the conflict necessitated an end to violence and the removal of the demand for a rapid British withdrawal. The recognition of a stalemate forced the republican leadership to re-evaluate its strategy, which on this occasion resulted in the abandonment of the ‘apostolic succession’ notion in favour of a more pragmatic solution aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement. The decision to enter talks with the British Government was a direct consequence of the realisation that a stalemate had been reached and that alternative means to achieve a united Ireland had to be explored.

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4. The Backchannel

A line of communication has existed between Sinn Féin and the British Government for over twenty years. It has not been in constant use. It has been used in an intensive way during such periods as the bi-lateral truce of 1974-75 and the Long Kesh hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981. It was reactivated by the British Government in mid-1990, leading to a period of protracted contact and dialogue between Sinn Féin and the British Government.\(^{107}\)

On 28\(^{th}\) November 1993 secret Backchannel communications between the British Government and Sinn Féin were revealed in an article by Eamonn Mallie in *The Observer* newspaper.\(^{108}\) Mallie claimed that the discovery had been made possible following the leaking of documents by a Unionist MP. The following day Patrick Mayhew, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, confirmed the existence of a Backchannel and made public the texts of messages exchanged from February to November of that year. The revelation of the Backchannel was particularly embarrassing for John Major who had told the House of Commons only a week earlier that the prospect of talks with Sinn Féin and the IRA ‘would turn my stomach. We will not do it’.\(^{109}\) He went on to state that

If and when there is a total ending of violence, and if and when that ending of violence is established for a significant time, we shall talk to all the constitutional parties that have people elected in their names. I will not talk to people who murder indiscriminately.\(^{110}\)

At a time when unionist fears were running high, owing in part to the emergence of a powerful pan-nationalist movement, the fact that the British Government were conducting secret talks with the IRA created a sense of betrayal amongst the unionist community. Furthermore, this revelation occurred during a period of some of the highest levels of violence in the Northern Ireland conflict since the early seventies, which did little to assuage unionist fears or temper loyalist violence.\(^{111}\)

\(^{107}\) Sinn Fein (1994), *Setting the Record Straight: A Record of Communications Between Sinn Fein and the British Government October 1990- November 1993*, p.3 (copy in LHLPC).


\(^{109}\) Commons Hansard Debates, 1 November 1993.

\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Dixon, 2002.
4.1 Opposing Versions of Truth

The revelation of the existence of the Backchannel presented difficulties for both sides involved and required a delicate and thoughtful explanation to the constituent audiences of each party. The propaganda battle that ensued can be explained by the fact that neither side wished to present the impression that it had somehow lost. Given the fact that the peace process was only in its infancy the parties involved in that process did not wish to show any signs of a weakened position. Instead, they sought to present an image of continued vitality.

4.1.1 The British Government’s Version

Following the revelations, the British Government claimed that talks had begun after they had received a message from Martin McGuinness in February saying that the conflict was over and that they needed the British Government’s advice on how to end it. The following message was claimed to have been delivered orally:

The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close. We wish to have an unannounced ceasefire in order to hold a dialogue leading to peace. We cannot announce such a move as it will lead to confusion for the volunteers because the press will misrepresent it as surrender. We cannot meet Secretary of State’s public renunciation of violence, but it would be given privately as long as we were sure that we were not being tricked.\(^{112}\)

The article that appeared in *The Observer* on 28 November 1993 provided a transcript of an aide-memoire that was apparently delivered orally to Martin McGuinness together with a written document. The importance of this initial revelation cannot be understated. Therefore, that transcript is presented here:

In handing over this written message - and you need make no bones about the fact that it is a written message that you are handing over - you should emphasise that this process is fraught with difficulties for the British Government, as must be obvious. They are nevertheless prepared to tackle these and accept the risks that they entail. But it must be recognised that all acts of violence hereafter could only enhance these difficulties and risks, quite conceivably to the point when the process

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would be destroyed. If that were to occur, the British Government would consider that a potentially historic opportunity had been squandered. The paper gives out substantive advice in response to the initial message. As it makes clear, we wish to establish whether this provides a basis for a way forward. We on our side are ready to answer specific questions or give further explanation. You should also emphasise to your interlocutor the British Government's acknowledgement that all of those involved share a responsibility to work to end the conflict. We agree on the need for a healing process. We wish to take a positive view of these developments and hope that it will be possible to continue to do so. You should be aware that the above has been personally approved by SOSNI [Secretary of State for Northern Ireland]. In fact, all but the first sentence of the first paragraph is his own wording. In other words, it is not negotiable. 113

The version of events presented by the British Government sought to quell criticism levelled at their decision to engage with the republican movement. That republicans had initiated contact was used as a justification for the engagement.

4.1.2 The Sinn Féin Version

However, republicans expressed surprise at receiving a ‘response’ from the British Government because they denied ever sending the above message. What seems to be closer to the truth is that the British did receive a message but that this message had been compiled by the intermediaries used by the British Government and the republican movement instead of coming directly from Martin McGuinness himself. English states that the message was actually drafted by the intermediaries, then passed on to the MI5 operative ‘Fred’, who proceeded to make further changes before the message finally reached the British side. 114 So a message had been sent but it had not been sent by the IRA. The purpose of this message had been to stimulate the talks' process, which it accomplished successfully. The statement outlined what the majority of republicans thought but were unable to say publicly owing to the constraints of republican ideology and the fact that this message appeared to admit defeat.

‘In SF’s account the British had initiated [reopened] contact in 1990 and had driven the process by sending representatives, messages, advanced copies of speeches, confidential documents and ultimately a proposal for face-to-face meetings’. After leaving office in 1995, in line with the Sinn Féin version, Peter Brooke confirmed authorising the opening of contacts with Sinn Féin in 1990, acknowledging that Margaret Thatcher had approved the decision on the advice of MI5. This contradicted the official government line which held that the Backchannel had been initiated in 1993. The authorisation to instigate contacts was given only months after the IRA carried out the assassination of Ian Gow MP, a close friend of Margaret Thatcher. Brooke has stated that in 1990 he gave authorisation to an MI5 officer, John Deverell, to initiate contacts with Sinn Féin on the basis of ‘deniability’. This meant that if questioned about these contacts the government would deny any and all knowledge of them. Sir Patrick Mayhew, who took over the position as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland after Peter Brooke, admitted that the Backchannel had been in existence since 1990 but that the Backchannel did not gain real importance until 1993 when messages of significance began to pass through the channel. ‘It was not until 1993 that the Back Channel was used by the British to put forward an actual proposition, the idea of a secret conference at which they would attempt to convince the republicans that their violent campaign was unnecessary. It was during this period that the channel really came to life’.

So, sifting through the propaganda and spin-doctoring reveals that the British Government had in fact embarked on a process of dialogue with the IRA in 1990 in order to convince them of the benefits of unarmed struggle. The Backchannel had, as Sinn Féin claimed, been in existence for over twenty years but had remained dormant for most of the 1980s following contacts during the 1981 hunger strikes. These contacts continued at a lower level but were reactivated in 1990 as a result of intelligence reassessments concerning the political and military strategies of Sinn Féin and the IRA which suggested to the government that at least some in the republican leadership were looking for opportunities to bring an end to the armed conflict.

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4.2 Evolution Of The Backchannel

Following the introduction of SIS into Northern Ireland by Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1971, lines of communication between Sinn Féin/IRA were developed. In June 1972, Martin McGuinness, then commander of the IRA’s Derry Brigade, suggested to Sean MacStiofain, the IRA Chief of Staff, that they offer William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a ceasefire if he agreed to meet them. Publicly Whitelaw refused to meet with the IRA but talks were held in secret. The IRA-Whitelaw talks which followed did not produce any results given the IRA’s inability to negotiate anything less than their demand for the withdrawal of British forces and the reunification of the island of Ireland. As Whitelaw recalls dismissively:

The meeting was a non-event. The IRA leaders simply made impossible demands which I told them the British Government would never concede. They were in fact still in a mood of defiance and determination to carry on until their absurd ultimatums were met.

The talks were a failure but both sides agreed to maintain the official channel of communication through the MI6 officer, Frank Steele. The IRA-Whitelaw talks, therefore, established the principle of a secret channel of communication.

In March 1974, Michael Oatley succeeded Frank Steele and, together with a Foreign Office representative, James Allan, was charged with maintaining the line of communication that had been established. Denis Bradley, a former priest, acted as the intermediary through which the Backchannel operated. The Backchannel worked by allowing Oatley to meet with IRA representatives, sometimes with Allan, and for messages to be passed through Bradley. The Backchannel remained relatively dormant until the 1980-81 hunger strikes when the IRA contacted Bradley. Oatley was then contacted by Bradley and a resolution to the protests was attempted to be negotiated. The Backchannel again went into a state of sustained hibernation until Michael Oatley met with Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness in October 1990. Oatley was retiring and wished to introduce the new representative who would replace him to

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119 Scott, 2004: 335
120 Smith, M, 2004: 379.
the republican leadership. ‘The dialogue involved a chain which also drew in former Catholic priest Denis Bradley as well as an MI5 officer known as ‘Fred’ [and]…ran fitfully, from October 1990 until November 1993’. The intelligence officers operated under strict guidelines governing contacts with the republicans. However, it is clear that there was some entrepreneurial creativity engaged upon. Oatley was successful in developing contact on his own initiative and in gaining the trust of his adversaries. The creativity shown by Oatley in contacts with the republican movement surely aided the effectiveness of the process but the personal initiative that Oatley engaged on was illegitimate in the sense that it was unlikely to have been officially sanctioned. Clandestine diplomacy raises interesting questions about how far individual intelligence officers should be allowed to pursue their own initiatives.

Peter Brooke, using the method of ‘megaphone diplomacy’, sent out powerful signals to the republican movement. Arguably his most important speech was the ‘Whitbread Speech’ he delivered on 9 November 1990 in London, addressing a group of businessmen on the theme: ‘The British Presence’. In that speech he reaffirmed the ‘principle of consent’, whereby there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of the population. He went on to admit the legitimacy of the aspiration to a united Ireland but stated that this could not be created through violence or forced on an unwilling population. Perhaps most importantly, he argued that ‘the British Government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland’. Brooke defined the British role as helping, enabling and encouraging progress towards peace in the province. This was a declaration that both angered and upset the unionist community who felt abandoned by the British Government who appeared non-committal at best to maintaining partition; while the republican movement was intrigued that such a statement would be made.

It was not until April 1991 that contact was made again when Oatley informed Martin McGuinness that the loyalist paramilitaries were about to call a ceasefire. During that same month the first serious cross party talks since the 1973 Sunningdale

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conference took place. These talks included representatives from the British and Irish
governments as well as those from the UUP, DUP, SDLP and APNI. Sinn Féin were
excluded from these talks and feared being sidelined from the peace process in favour
of their nationalist political rivals, the SDLP\(^{129}\). The British Government claimed that
they saw no particular outcome for the Brooke/Mayhew Talks but it was clear that
they desired an agreement that involved limited constitutional change.\(^{130}\) Two
months later ‘Fred’ began contacts with the republican movement. Following the
statements made by Brooke the Backchannel activity notably increased. Adams
launched an initiative in August 1991 proposing talks aimed at reaching a political
settlement. Adams stated on 20 August that he had written to both British and Irish
governments, as well as political and religious leaders, explaining his readiness to
engage in talks aimed at achieving a solution to the Northern Ireland troubles.\(^{131}\) On
21 August 1991 he stated that
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\text{We [Sinn Féin] believe that peace can be achieved, we are prepared to take political risks, we are prepared to give and take, we are committed to establishing a peace process.}^{132}
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In April 1992 Patrick Mayhew replaced Peter Brooke as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He continued to convey signals to the republican movement. In December of that year he acknowledged the legitimacy of the aspiration to a united Ireland so long as that aspiration was advocated constitutionally. He reiterated the sentiments of earlier statements in affirming that any change to the status of Northern Ireland must have broad agreement that has been fairly and freely achieved. The republican response to Mayhew’s speech was hostile, while Ian Paisley, leader of the hard-line DUP, accused Mayhew’s speech of carrying a heavy bias towards republicanism.\(^{133}\) In the aftermath of the British general election in April 1992 and a change in the Irish government the composition of the delegations to the talks, which had begun in April 1991, had been radically altered. The Brooke/Mayhew Talks ran into difficulty as soon as they began to address the major issues. The Northern Irish political parties were unable to agree over the governance of the territory.

\(^{129}\) Henceforth referred to as the ‘Brooke/Mayhew Talks’ (1991-1992) as they have become commonly referred to as.

\(^{130}\) Neumann, 2003: 150.

\(^{131}\) English, 2004: 270.


\(^{133}\) English, 2004.
Furthermore, the unionist parties would not move on the question of cross-border relations until the Irish government made a commitment to amend articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland, which claimed sovereignty over the ‘whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas’. On 10 November 1992 Mayhew decided to call an end to negotiations. ‘Following the collapse of the Mayhew talks in 1992, the British stepped up their secret contacts with Sinn Féin and investigated the possibility of a face-to-face meeting to persuade them that there was no longer any need for the armed struggle’.

The Backchannel communications with the republican movement were part of a parallel diplomacy mission that was disguised publicly as being comprised solely of the Hume-Adams talks and the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The highly publicised Hume-Adams talks in April 1993 emerged with a statement that endorsed the crucial nationalist view that the Irish people as a whole possessed the right to national self-determination. Hume presented the final draft, the Hume-Adams initiative, to the Irish government. This document ‘negated the principle of consent, the need for agreement, and it asked Westminster to abandon its role as neutral arbiter’. This document was unacceptable to the British Government. Therefore, the London and Dublin governments had to be seen publicly to distance themselves from the Hume-Adams initiative and on 15 December 1993 they offered their own initiative: The Downing Street Declaration. The Downing Street Declaration affirmed the right to Irish self-determination but with the qualification that this could only come about through the will of the majority, which effectively meant the unionist veto remained. The consensual approach that underscored the Declaration won widespread support. Republican responses, however, remained sceptical. They viewed Northern Ireland as an artificially constructed entity, designed to maintain unionist supremacy in the region. Despite this, they recognised that without unionist support there could be no peace.

134 Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland), 1937-1999 version.
1993 signalled the first year of the ‘troubles’ in which the British army did not kill anyone. However, the IRA bombings of that year meant that a meeting with Prime Minister John Major was untenable. The IRA violence had actually increased during the secret talks' process as if to demonstrate their level of resolve. This was perhaps thought to be a means of strengthening their bargaining position. However, if the IRA thought that they were going to get Sinn Féin to the conference table through a bombing campaign then they were mistaken. The British Government’s approach to the secret talks became notably cooler following the Bishopsgate bombing in April 1993, which caused a massive financial and political impact. ‘The timetable clearly shows...that the Government, far from being galvanised by the bombing, effectively closed down any serious dialogue with republicans shortly afterwards’. Following the revelation of the backchannel on 23 October 1993 the backchannel communications effectively came to a close. The British Government were demanding a full cessation of IRA violence as a precondition for including Sinn Féin in the peace process. The potential for such a cessation to appear as an IRA surrender was significant and as such it was difficult to envisage it as a plausible option. However, on 31 August 1994 the IRA announced an indefinite ceasefire paving the way to the inclusion of Sinn Féin in the talks' process.

4.3 Strength Of The Backchannel
The Backchannel proved remarkably resilient over the years surviving many incidents that might have acted to destabilise it or force it to shut down completely. It resisted closure despite the mortar attack on Downing Street on 7 February 1991, the deaths of two children by the Warrington bombing in March 1993 and consistent violence carried out in Northern Ireland, Britain and mainland Europe during the secret talks. Dixon notes how rhetorical shifts by Sinn Féin towards moderation were often accompanied by an escalation in violence by the IRA with the reassertion of fundamentalist positions. John Major has written that 'the IRA leadership had their own perverted logic. For them, an offer of peace needed to be accompanied by violence to show their volunteers that they were not surrendering'. However, the Bishopsgate bombing on 24 April 1993 appears to have signalled a change in the

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141 Major, 1999: 433.
government’s willingness to engage with the IRA with the backchannel traffic considerably slowing down after this incident. The revelation of the backchannel and the controversy over who initiated contact and what was said effectively brought the backchannel communications to a close.

4.4 Significance Of The Backchannel
The backchannel communications may have been nothing other than a ‘Machiavellian British scheme’ to explore the willingness of republicans to discuss resolutions to the conflict short of a British withdrawal. However, Smith has argued that without the backchannel and the ‘creative ambiguity’ that accompanied it, the Northern Ireland peace process would never have been allowed to develop. The backchannel is praised as having laid the foundation for the breakthrough in 1994. When the backchannel was revealed the British Government came under serious criticism and disparagement seethed from both opposition and government benches. ‘[However,] in the longer term political realities dictated by both sides had to pick up where they left off and move ahead with more public diplomacy’. Contrary to the nationalist view, the initiative shown by the British Government in seeking to engage in talks with the republican movement highlights the role that the British Government played in initiating the peace process.

5. CONCLUSION

By the late 1980s the Northern Ireland conflict had effectively reached a stalemate. The British Government were unable to defeat the IRA militarily, while the republican movement was incapable of achieving the objectives of forcing the withdrawal of the British and bringing about a united Ireland. The republican movement was forced, as a result of the situation that had emerged, to engage in a re-analysis of the Northern Ireland conflict, which found their colonial explanation outdated. The republican leadership had agreed upon a less dogmatic examination of Britain’s role within the province, which accepted that a speedy withdrawal by the British was impossible. Furthermore, recognition of the unionist community’s role within Northern Ireland had been accepted. This demonstrated a clear contrast with republican intransigence in the previous two decades.\(^{146}\)

‘The Provisionals’ so called war of liberation ha[d] been a long drawn-out scourge that ha[d] failed to defend or advance the cause of Catholics in the North.’\(^{147}\) It was recognised that the armed struggle had achieved nothing other than the perpetuation of a cycle of violence that was more often than not sectarian rather than anti-colonial. In terms of the nationalist movement, constitutionalism had emerged as the only viable means of seeking to achieve a united Ireland.

The British Government held the initiative in moving the peace process forward given the stalemate that had emerged. Talking with the republican movement was by no means a radical departure in policy for the British Government but merely a continuation of the spirit of inclusion, which had been ongoing since the early 1970s. The re-opening of the Backchannel in 1990 had been engaged upon with the knowledge that a critical reassessment of republican strategy was underway in the late 1980s. It began as an intelligence operation designed at discovering the extent of the support within the republican movement for an end to the armed struggle. It evolved into a means whereby both sides could deliver messages to each other explaining motivations behind actions taken. Often public statements were explained as

\(^{146}\) Alonso, 2004: 699.

necessary while privately the British Government gave advice to the republican movement on how best to abandon the armed struggle. The republican movement needed to ensure that they made an honourable withdrawal from the armed campaign and that their supporters did not view the cessation of military action as either a surrender or failure. Instead, the republican movement portrayed the 1994 ceasefire as nothing more than the opening of a new front in their continued struggle for a united Ireland.

That the two sides were afforded the opportunity to continue dialogue was vital. Given the propaganda that both sides had to engage in to satisfy their constituent audiences it was necessary that the long-term intentions of both sides were explained to the other side. The Backchannel facilitated the entry of Sinn Féin into the political process by allowing the republican movement express its realisation, privately, that the armed struggle would not achieve the objectives that it had set itself. It allowed for the peace process to be choreographed such that all actors would gain the optimal level of support from their constituent audiences.

The decision to engage with the republican movement was followed by an increase in the level of violence. However, the moderate elements within the movement retained control and in the long-term that violence subsided. This paper has argued that talking to terrorists can prove beneficial to the resolution of violent conflicts. As has been previously stated, the Backchannel laid the foundation for the 1994 ceasefire agreement. It provided the means whereby the peace process was allowed to develop successfully and can, therefore, claim to have played an intricate role in the peace process.
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