

“Taoisigh & Prime Ministers’ policies towards extremists in Northern Ireland 1985-1996: A Learning Process?”

Dawn Walsh³⁸

Abstract

Several different explanations of policy change based on notions of learning have emerged in policy literature. These explanations can largely be divided into those that deal with policy learning and those relating to policy adaptation. Policy learning is a fundamental process that involves re-thinking primary values, altering the goals of policy and constructing complex cause and effect chains as the result of processing new knowledge in the policy area provided by epistemic communities. Policy adaptation, on the other hand, is an ad hoc process of change where fundamental values remain constant and only the means of achieving goals change not the goals themselves. This paper applies these possible explanations to the case of the policy change effected by the British and Irish governments in relation to negotiating with extremists in Northern Ireland 1985-1996; a policy change that has been cited as being pivotal to the success of that peace process. (150 words)

Introduction

‘We will not negotiate with terrorists’ is a refrain that is commonly heard flowing from the mouths of various statesmen across the globe in relation to a multitude of different groups involved in politically motivated acts of violence. It is a refrain Prime Minister John Major vehemently endorsed in numerous speeches to the British House of Commons in relation to the various paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. To enter into talks with such people would ‘turn [his] stomach’ (Dixon, 2001, pp361). In reality, however, conflict resolution is not so black and white.

By the time the Good Friday Agreement was signed at Belfast in 1998 political parties with connections to paramilitaries on both sides had been included in the negotiations. Notwithstanding the conditional nature of their public inclusion in talks, there had clearly been a departure from the policy being pursued by both governments at the time of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. At that time the Taoiseach and Prime Minister were attempting to end the conflict by reaching an agreement that empowered the

³⁸ Dawn Walsh, 27 is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. In 2003 she graduated with an honours degree in Political Science. After a short break which include a period working in the House of the Oireachtas (Irish parliament), she return to Trinity to complete an M.Phil in International Peace Studies. Here she developed a long-standing interest in the Northern Ireland peace process including writing on issues, leadership in the peace process and the cross border elements of the Good Friday Agreement. She is currently undertaking her PhD research at Dublin City University examining the use of independent commissions in the Northern Ireland peace process and was the recipient of the 2010-2011 Paddy Moriarty Postgraduate Fellowship.

moderate parties and removed support from those pursuing violent means. By 1996 they had visibly altered this policy to one that sought to co-opt the fringes into mainstream politics.

This change in how governments felt extremists must be treated in order to end the conflict is extremely significant. It shows a recent case where governments attempted to end a small war not by military or security means but by entering into talks with those previously excluded. The focus of this paper is to ascertain whether this change was as a result of policy learning by the Taoisigh and Prime Ministers or if it was the result of an ad hoc process of alteration in response to particular events (policy adaptation).

Policy adaptation and policy learning

In *When Knowledge Means Power* (1990) Ernst Haas offers a clear dichotomy which addresses the significant differences between policy learning and policy adaptation. Haas explains the differences between policy learning and adaptation by asking who learns, what is learned and to what end does the learning occur?

In relation to who learns Haas argues that in the case of policy learning epistemic communities are central. They provide policy makers with consensual knowledge from which new purposes can be derived. In the case of policy adaptation there is no central role for an epistemic community. The actors involved in policy-making simply change their policies on an incremental basis due to the ambiguous lessons of history.

In policy learning 'what is learned' is a whole new nested problem set. The consensual knowledge provided by the epistemic communities allows not just for more efficient methods of achieving existing goals but for new interconnected understanding of issues to be constructed. In policy adaptation the role of new consensual knowledge is not central; what is learned is much more restricted. More efficient means of achieving existing goals may be ascertained. There is not a broad reassessment of the nature of the problem.

To what end does learning take place? In policy learning the end of learning is a fundamental reassessment of values that underpin policy aims. Values are deeply held over long periods of time and to propose that they would be re-examined with change in mind shows how policy learning is transformative of fundamental beliefs. Policy adaptation does not involve such fundamental examination of values. Consequently, although policy adaptation may involve achieving more aims through new routes it does not operate to the same fundamental end as policy learning.

Extremists, exclusion and spoilers

The change in the British policy in relation to negotiating with extremists has been highlighted as being one of the most important developments that made ending the conflict in Northern Ireland possible. Small wars are often fought against states by groups who hold extreme aims or grievances and are determined to see their goals achieved or the grievances dealt with. In turn states often refuse to recognise these groups as being in any way legitimate in their aims or methods and thus adopt certain policies to end the war by dealing with them but rule out negotiations. It is often argued that permitting them to enter into negotiations would legitimise their tactics or even appease them (Spector, 2003, pp2).

A number of the most widely used strategies for managing the issue of extremists reflect this idea. Elimination, for example, is a popular policy adopted by leaders when faced with extremists. It seeks to use intelligence information, the law and physical force to identify, locate and apprehend extremists or key leaders of extremist groups. This may also entail the seizing of funds from such groups and efforts to ensure international funding networks are dismantled.

‘Expanding the middle’ is another tactic that is often employed. It seeks to establish conditions that grow the more moderate segments, thus attracting more moderate members of extremist groups toward a position of tolerance and away from a commitment to the destruction of the other (Bartoli & Coleman, 2003, pp4).

Such security related policies towards the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in particular can be seen in Thatcher’s policies towards Northern Ireland (Thatcher, 1993, pp379-415). The idea of ‘expanding the middle’ by supporting the SDLP (Social Democratic Labour Party) is also a policy clearly pursued by both Thatcher and Fitzgerald. Such policies that seek to sideline extremists may not be the most effective way end small wars or conflicts.

Some peace processes result in lasting peace, others break down and the war resumes. The emergence of extremists who want to ‘spoil’ the peace process greatly accounts for this variation. Spoilers often originate from extremist groups. They pose a great risk to those seeking to make peace. Minimising and overcoming this risk is one of the greatest challenges facing those engaged in seeking to end wars, big, small old or new (Stedman, 2003, pp104-105).

Zahar makes an important distinction between inside and outside spoilers. This terminology relates to the position of the group in negotiations. Those who have been

involved in the negotiations are insiders. If they are to consider spoiling they need to take into account not only the costs associated directly with returning to violence but those associated with losing the 'peace dividends' (Zahar, 2003, pp119). The 'peace dividends' may take many forms such as of positions of power promised to the group or aid promised to their supporters. They also have to take into consideration the damage that will be done to their international reputation if they are seen to renege on promises they have signed up to.

'Outside' spoilers are those who have been excluded from negotiations. These groups are more likely to view peace as a threat. The exclusion of a group from negotiations that result in a particular peace agreement means that the agreement's success can be seen as evidence of the irrelevance of the group and can thus undermine their political significance and threaten their continued survival. Financially, outside groups that benefit from the war economy have no interest in peace. Their exclusion means that they have not had an opportunity to negotiate side deals that allow them to benefit from the peace. It is in the interest of such groups to continue the violent conflict so that they can continue to reap the monetary rewards (Zahar, 2003, pp118).

In short, actors included in negotiations have a vested interest in the success of the agreement. Any gains they have made are dependent on its survival. In contrast groups left out of the negotiations have no stake in peace and they may even have extensive stakes associated with the continuation of the violence. This logically indicates that a management strategy for extremists that seeks to exclude them from a peace process makes it more likely that they will seek to destroy that process.

Operationalising the model

The hypothesis of the research on which this paper based is that: the Taoisigh and Prime Ministers' policy change to negotiate with extremists in Northern Ireland was caused by policy learning not policy adaptation. In order to make this hypothesis testable the differences between policy learning and policy adaptation were compiled into a four-fold typology that clearly allows for the observation of theoretical concepts. The presence of the four main observable implications will be investigated:

- original values examined;
- purposes redefined;
- new nested problem sets constructed;

- new purposes derived on the basis of knowledge provided by epistemic communities.

The presence of these observable implications will be considered in direct contrast with the four central observable implications of policy adaptation:

- behaviour changes as actors add new activities without examining the implicit theories underlying their actions – values are not questioned;
- emphasis is on altering means of action not ends – not the ultimate purpose;
- new purposes are added to old ones without worrying about their coherence;
- change is incremental (Tannam, 2001, pp496).

A wide range of data was examined with the explicit and sole intention of ascertaining whether or not policy learning is more evident than policy adaptation.

Original values examined

Key original values were examined over the period 1985-1996. Firstly, the potential to exclude the extremist groups, namely, Sinn Féin, from the political framework was reassessed. In the post-hunger strike years, Sinn Féin enjoyed increased electoral support. This worried the leaders and Fitzgerald³⁹ in particular feared that Sinn Féin could become the main party of Northern nationalism as well as increasing their representation south of the border. This fear motivated a policy that sought to exclude Sinn Féin from the political structures. It was believed that an agreement that supported the SDLP's role as representatives of the Nationalist minority could deprive Sinn Féin of its constituency and political legitimacy and thus make them irrelevant. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was such an agreement and in the years that followed the belief that Sinn Féin should and could be sidelined continued.

By 1996 there was an acceptance by Major and Reynolds that no matter how problematic it was to include Sinn Féin and their loyalist counterparts in the process, it was necessary for a settlement to be successful. A commitment to the Mitchell Principles was a necessary condition for the inclusion of any party and different parties were excluded at different points. There was, however, no longer a belief that such parties could be sidelined or an agreement reached without them. Their exclusion was temporary and used as a pressure tactic to punish and prevent violence by their armed colleagues. The belief

³⁹ Haughey was also concerned about the electoral threat of Sinn Féin but this was during his early period as Taoiseach and while in opposition. By the time his final period in office, which is the subject of this analysis, began this threat had decreased.

that they could be marginalised to the point of political extinction or a meaningful agreement reached in their absence was re-examined. The practicality and effectiveness of this belief was re-evaluated and a policy of cautious engagement through a ‘carrot and stick’ approach replaced it.

_____ Secondly, and more fundamentally, the legitimacy of the extremists as a political voice was examined. The view of them as simply representing a grave security threat was replaced by a more nuanced view of their role. Through the exchange of various position papers on issues such as self-determination and consent the leaders demonstrated a de facto acknowledgement that the extremists had political and constitutional concerns that were worthy of addressing. This represents a fundamental re-evaluation of values because it shows that the leaders did not enter into narrow contacts with the extremists seeking simply to put an end to immediate violence. The inclusion of constitutional elements in the discussions is indicative of leaders that fully recognised the necessity of taking into consideration the views of the extremists on constitutional matters. Together these new positions represent the adoption of values that recognise the importance of bringing extremists into the process both for the practical reason of ending the current violence *and* for the theoretical reason that the more inclusive the process the more likely it is to succeed.

Purposes redefined

_____ Values inform purposes and as a result it is only logical that if there was a real change in values this would be observed in the goals the Prime Minister and Taoiseach set themselves in relation to the extremists in Northern Ireland. As I’ve just mentioned, both redefined their purpose in relation to the extremists. By the early 1990s the aim of isolating and defeating Sinn Féin and the IRA, and the loyalist paramilitaries, had been replaced by an aim of finding a way forward in which Sinn Féin could be included. The rhetoric of defeating the IRA was replaced by a dialogue that recognised the significance that the Republican leadership could play in negotiating a broad political settlement. The aim became the construction of an environment in which the extremists could be brought into the political mainstream.

_____ This new goal involved the employment of a new set of instruments. Moves such as the lifting of the broadcast ban on members of Sinn Féin, the issuing of visas for the US

to Adams and Cahill, and the statement by Brooke that the British had ‘no selfish interest’ in Northern Ireland all sought to create an environment where an IRA ceasefire could be achieved. Securing an IRA ceasefire was a top priority of the leaders, not simply as an alternative to military force in ending the violence and suffering but in order to create a situation where extremists could be brought into negotiations with the governments and constitutional parties.

_____ There is an important issue to be highlighted here. The Prime Minister and Taoiseach were not always in agreement as to how far the policy of coaxing an IRA ceasefire should go. Downing Street strongly opposed the granting of the US visa to Gerry Adams, a position that they made clear to both Dublin and Washington. They felt that such privileges should be held back as examples of what could happen after a ceasefire, not used as enticements before the ending of violence.

New nested problem sets constructed

_____ In 1985, the understanding on which the Anglo-Irish Agreement operated defined the problem as being one that could be solved by creating new institutions with the moderates. This approach failed to realise that the conflict could not be ended without fully taking into consideration the role of the extremists.

_____ The extremists were not simply violent criminals to be dealt with through security measures. They also held positions on principled issues regarding the broad political position of Northern Ireland. These positions were supported by significant numbers within their communities. Thus the new understanding of the conflict realised that these positions had to be addressed.

_____ There was an appreciation that securing a ceasefire was not an end to the conflict. It was one very important goal but was interconnected with goals that sought to moderate the extremists’ positions on political issues. It is this understanding that allowed Reynolds to defend his support for the issuing of Adams’ and Cahill’s visas for the US. While such a move may have seemed unwise while violence continued, it represented a reasoned expansion of goals to a position where securing a ceasefire and inviting the Republicans into constitutional politics were both being pursued due to their indivisibility.

_____ Furthermore the casual relationships between the aims of different groups were taken into consideration. When redrafting the Hume-Adams’ document that eventually comprised a large part of the Downing Street Declaration Major and Reynolds recognised

that the Nationalist/Republican origins of the document would be a problem for the Unionists. To this end they went to great lengths to ensure it was viewed as a neutral document written by the governments.

New purposes derived on the basis of consensual knowledge provided by epistemic communities

_____It has been said that success has many fathers (John F. Kennedy, 1961). This is undoubtedly true in the case of the Northern Irish peace process. The role of actors such as Dr. Martin Mansergh, John Hume, Fr. Alex Reid and Archbishop Robin Eames has been the subject of many papers and books, and in relation to this paper these actors take on a particular significance. The role of these actors in providing consensual knowledge to the governments over the period in question is a strong indication of policy learning. Knowledge and those who provide it are central in Haas' distinction between learning and adaptation.

The 'muddle through' incremental style of policy change that Haas terms 'adaptation' does not utilise outside knowledge to a great effect. This contrasts with learning (and the previous three indicators of such) which is not possible without the dissemination of new knowledge. The examination of values, alteration of aims and reconstruction of cause-effect chains is only possible because of the existence of previously unavailable knowledge.

_____The arguments put forward by Fr. Reid are an example of this new knowledge. While his role as facilitator of the contact between the Taoiseach of the time and Sinn Féin is often praised, the most important element of Fr. Reid's involvement in relation to the hypothesis being tested in this paper is the consensual knowledge he provided that persuaded Charles Haughey to begin a process of contacts that ultimately led to a fundamental policy shift by the Irish leaders. Similarly, the role of John Hume in promoting dialogue, both between the leaders and with extremists in order to secure a lasting peace, has been highlighted as being extremely important (O'Leary, 2003, pp81). While the massive role played by John Hume in the peace process is far beyond the scope of this paper, his involvement is illustrative of policy learning in the way in which it served as the provision of knowledge to leaders.

Such new knowledge does not immediately become embedded in policy. The change in policy towards the extremists in Northern Ireland took over a decade to become fully embedded but this gradual nature of change should not be confused with

incrementalism that Haas associates with adaptation. While the process of change was gradual it was not ad hoc, in the way adaptation is, because of the involvement of the epistemic communities. They provided the knowledge that seeped into policy making over time to inspire an examination of fundamental values – the very process by which policy learning occurs. The presence and consideration of such knowledge is sufficient to support the hypothesis being examined in this paper.

Conclusion

Having established the presence of policy learning this paper is an important first step in analysing the process through which an important policy change occurred. The British and Irish governments' approaches to ending the conflict in Northern Ireland underwent a fundamental change. This highlights how governments engaged in small wars may end them by engaging with groups previously only target for elimination.

Policy learning highlights the importance of the provision of new knowledge from epistemic communities in facilitating such policy changes. This is a key area in which further research would be useful. The author encourages others to investigate how epistemic communities provide such knowledge. In relation to this conflict suggestions for individuals and institutions that could be included in such research include: the US government, John Hume and the SDLP and some Church leaders, civil servants and political advisors. Alternatively additional research which examines whether governments have undertaken policy learning in relation to how they end various small wars in which they are engaged would also be useful.

(3,195 words)

References

- Bartoli, A., & Coleman P., (2003) 'Dealing with Extremists.' in *Beyond Intractability* Burgess, G., & Burgess H., (eds) Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Accessed on 12th April 2009 at: www.beyondintractability.org/essay/
- Bunreacht na hEireann (Pre-1998) available at: www.taoiseach.gov.ie
- Coakley, J. & Gallagher, M. (eds), (2002) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, Routledge, London.
- Dixon, P., 'British Policy towards Northern Ireland 1969-2000: continuity, tactical adjustments and consistent 'inconsistencies'', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*: Vol. 3 No. 3:340-368.
- Darby, J. & MacGinty, R., (eds) (2000) *The Management of Peace Processes*, MacMillan Press, London.
- Dorr, N. (2009) Interview with author at ISE, Trinity College Dublin May 12th 2009.
- Fitzgerald, G. (1991) *All in a Life*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin.

- Fitzgerald, G. (1999) *what happened to Good Friday?* London Review of Books, London.
 Assessed on 25th June 2009 at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n17/fitz01.html>
- The Guardian (2001) 'Thatcher suggested 'Cromwell solution' for Northern Ireland'
 Accessed on June 20th 2009 at:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/jun/16/northernireland.catholicism>
- Haas, E., (1990) *When Knowledge Means Power*, Stanford University Press, Berkley.
- Hansard (1987) 'Terrorist attack in Enniskillen' accessed on June 20th 2009 at:
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1987/nov/09/terrorist-attack-enniskillen>
- ICSR (2009) 'Engaging with Radicals: Do Negotiations Work?' accessed on June 15th 2009
 at:http://www.icsr.info/events/conferences/videos/1234454380Engagingwithradicals_0.pdf
- The Independent (1994a) 'Ulster players circle around peace: As Albert Reynolds urges Sinn Fein to adopt a policy of non-coercion of Ulster's Protestants at its conference in Dublin this weekend, David McKittrick reports on the unprecedented republican debate which could decide whether Ireland is to have peace or continuing conflict' accessed on June 10th 2009 at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/ulster-players-circle-around-peace-as-albert-reynolds-urges-sinn-fein-to-adopt-a-policy-of-noncoercion-of-ulsters-protestants-at-its-conference-in-dublin-this-weekend-david-mckittrick-reports-on-the-unprecedented-republican-debate-which-could-decide-whether-ireland-is-to-have-peace-or-continuing-conflict-1396260.html>
- The Independent (1994b) 'Government U-turn on Sinn Fein talks' accessed on June 12th 2009 at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/government-uturn-on-sinn-fein-talks-1388988.html>
- Kennedy, J., (1961) quoted in Safire, W., (1993) "Safire's New Political Dictionary" pp841-2, Random House, New York.
- MacDonagh, O. 'What was new in the New Ireland Forum' **The Crane Bag**, Vol. 9, No. 2, Irish Ideologies, pp. 166-170
- Maiese, M., & Burgess, H., 'Extremists and Spoilers' in *Beyond Intractability* Burgess, G., & Burgess H., (eds) Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder.
 Accessed on 15th April 2009 at: www.beyondintractability.org/essay/
- Major, J. (1999) *The Autobiography*, HarperCollins, London.
- Mallie, E., & McKittrick, D., (1996) *The Fight for Peace*, Heinemann, London.
- Mansergh, M. (2009) Interview with author at The Office of Public Works, Dublin May 12th 2009.
- Mitchell, G. (2009) On acceptance of his position as US envoy to the Middle East.
 Assessed on 25th July 2009
 at:<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/01/22/obama.mitchell/index.html>
- Nally, D. (2009) Interview with the author, Dublin May 12th 2009.
- O'Donnell, C., (2007) *Fianna Fail, Irish Republicanism and the Northern Ireland Troubles 1968-2005*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin.
- O'Kane, E., 'Decommissioning, Where did it come from and why did it stay so long?' *Irish Political Studies*, Vol.22 No. 1:81-101.
- O'Leary, B., (1987) 'The Anglo-Irish Agreement: Meanings, Explanations, Results and a Defence' in Teague, P., *Beyond the rhetoric: politics, the economy and social policy in Northern Ireland*, Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., London.

- O'Leary, B., 'An Taoiseach: The Irish Prime Minister', *West European Politics* Vol. 14 No. 2:133-62.
- O'Leary, B., 'The Conservative Stewardship of Northern Ireland, 1979-97: Sound-bottomed Contradictions or Slow Learning?' *Political Studies*, Vol. 45 No. 4.
- O'Leary, B., (2003) 'The Anglo-Irish Agreement: Folly or Statecraft' in O'Leary, B., & McGarry, J., *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Agreements*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Rafter, K., (2002) *Martin Mansergh, A biography*, New Island, Dublin.
- Rafter, K., 'The Irish Government and the Peace Process, 1992-94, 'An Observer's Perspective' *Working Papers in British Irish Studies*, No.30:13-18.
- Reynolds, A. The Irish Government and the Peace Process, 1992-94, 'A Political Perspective' *Working Papers in British Irish Studies*, No.30:1-13.
- Reynolds, A., (1993) Statement by the Taoiseach, Mr. Albert Reynolds, on the [Joint Declaration](#) on Peace. Wednesday, 15 December 1993. Accessed on 23rd June 2009 at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/ar151293.htm>
- Spector, B., 'Negotiating with Villains: Research Note,' *International Negotiation* No. 8 Vol. 3.
- Stedman, J., (2003) 'Peace Processes and the Challenges of Violence' in Darby, J. & MacGinty R., (eds) *Contemporary Peacemaking*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Stedman, J., (2006) 'Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,' in Druckman, D., & Diehl, D., *Conflict Resolution Vol.5*, Sage Publications, London.
- Tannam, E., (2001) 'Explaining the Good Friday Agreement: A Learning Process', *Government and Opposition*, Vol.36 No.4: 493-518.
- Tannam, E. (2009) In discussions with the author at the ISE, Trinity College Dublin.
- Tannam, E. (2009b) 'Explaining British-Irish Cooperation' (pending publication)
- Thatcher, M., (1993) *The Downing Street Years*, HarperCollins Publishers, London.
- The Times (2005) 'What was Margaret Thatcher's greatest achievement?' accessed on June 13th 2009 at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/article578011.ece?token=null&offset=0&page=1>
- Ury, W., & Patton, B., (1991) *Getting to Yes*, Penguin Books, New York.
- Wolff, S., (2007) 'Conflict Management in Northern Ireland' in Koenig, M., & de Guchtneire, P., (eds) *Democracy and Human Rights in Multicultural Societies*, Aldershot, Ashgate.
- Zahar, M., (2003) 'Reframing the Spoiler Debate in Peace Processes' in Darby, J. & MacGinty R.,(eds) *Contemporary Peacemaking*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York