

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION
IN NORTHERN IRELAND:
RECONCILING FORM AND SUBSTANCE**

by Clem McCartney

[December 20, 1993] After the First World War Winston Churchill stated that as the flood waters of war subsided, the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyone appeared again. He was referring to the re-emergence of the Irish situation unchanged by the upheavals and convulsions that had taken place elsewhere in Europe between 1914 and 1920. Recently, as the Berlin Wall crumbled and new states emerged in Eastern Europe, a recurring question was why people power was not transforming the situation in Ireland.

The answer was not hard to find. There was no consensus of people power to drive a new settlement.

Recent developments in South Africa and the agreement between the PLO and Israeli Government were a sign that the most hostile opponents could take an imaginative and courageous step of reconciliation. If there is a contagion theory of conflict resolution, Northern Ireland looked as if it had been inoculated against infection.

Breakthrough?

But now it appears that things have been moving and the situation is no longer as static as it has appeared. We have known for some time that discussions have been taking place on the side of those who represent the Catholic community and favor unification of Ireland. These have involved John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, representing constitutional nationalism, and Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, the political spokesperson for militant nationalism. The overt purpose of these talks was to find a formula for a republican cease fire. However, for a long time it was not clear what these talks were achieving apart from rousing the ire of Protestant unionists who saw a conspiracy between all those who wanted a united Ireland. Then suddenly, in September John Hume announced that he and Gerry Adams had produced a document that

could be the basis of a peace settlement.

Equally surprising, it came to light that there had been "channels of communication" between the British Government and Sinn Fein for a considerable time, after the government had been adamant that there was no contacts of any kind with Sinn Fein. On December 15 the British and Irish Prime Ministers produced the *Anglo-Irish Declaration*, and it became clear there had been other links. The Irish Taoiseach, or Prime Minister, had been communicating with Protestant loyalists.

Professional mediators might want to note that the mediation community was left on the sidelines. Intermediaries were church leaders and others whose primary quality was their credibility with the protagonists rather than their knowledge of conflict theory.

Assessment

It is too early to judge or even know what has been happening. Perhaps we can begin to consider how the developments support or challenge our ideas about how conflicts are resolved. And as in all conflict resolution processes we need to distinguish between the form and substance. How far do the public activities reflect what is happening under the surface?

At face value the process seems bizarre and hard to relate to normal negotiation processes. For example, the Anglo-Irish Declaration: the actual parties to the dispute were not directly involved, and there was no direct communication between them. In the end the Declaration said little that had not been said before and what it did say was hedged with reservations and conditions. Its key statement on self-determination is a prime example.

Why has so much emphasis been given to this document if it says little new and does not even include any mechanisms for implementing any action? If comparisons can be drawn, the one that springs to mind is the Central American initiatives in the Contadora Act and Esquipulas process that led to the end of the Nicaraguan civil war. The common feature is that declarations in each case provided a context in which the actual

protagonists could begin the process of negotiation.

The important purpose of the Anglo-Irish Declaration is to provide an opportunity for the IRA to declare a cease fire and join the other parties in negotiations, unlike the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 that was designed to marginalise them.

Reaction to Violence

Like the Esquipulas process, the public statements have to be put in the context of an existing public wish for an end to the conflict and a desire by the parties to negotiate a settlement. That wish is now much more widespread in Northern Ireland. Many people now do not believe that their political aspirations are worth the death and destruction that has been happening. The violent incidents that occurred in October crystallized that thinking and had a positive impact on the search for resolution.

Internal Debate

The Declaration is very cautious. But its primary contribution is to offer the *opportunity* for the militants to end their violence. There is often a misunderstanding about how militant opposition movements change their stance. There are always those within the movement who favor some kind of negotiated end to the conflict and those who feel the conflict has to continue. People do not change their minds easily. However, external developments may strengthen the hand of one or other point of view in the debate so that they are given permission, however grudgingly, to pursue their strategy. So now we are waiting to see if the Declaration has strengthened one or other element within the movements.

We must recognize that the shift towards a process of settlement has been developing for some time. It is unlikely that the log jam was broken by liberals and pacifists, but in an internal debate within the militant groups. As long as two years ago, some Republicans began to consider that a new strategy was needed. To outsiders it was evident that Republican violence was not advancing their cause or was doing so infinitesimally slowly.

It could be argued that it was hindering the cause of a united Ireland because it was making the Protestants more entrenched. One part of the new thinking was the recognition by republicans that the loyalist community had to be taken into account and could not be ignored as puppets of the British Government.

Smokescreen?

Conspiracy theorists, whether they support or oppose the Declaration, argue that the form of the process has little relation to the substance. They argue that the British Government and republican movement have decided the terms on which violence could end. However they had to concoct a formal process by which this can come about. One aspect of this is assuring the Unionists that they are not going to be sold out. From this perspective it is hard to see the two governments going to the trouble of making their announcement if it was not going to have the desired effect of bringing about a cease-fire. Equally the Sinn Fein hesitancy about responding and the possibility that they may accept it grudgingly is a way to make it seem that they have made few concessions.

Chances of Success

So what are the chances of success? One lesson we have learnt from other situations is that timing is crucial. There is every reason to believe that the time is right. Those involved want a way out. However, the way the governments have promoted the Declarations have not been particularly adroit. A wider consensus could have been found, and many implementation issues seem not to have been considered.

These limitations reflect the main weakness of the process. It would be better if it had grown from within as a result of dialogue between parties. The irony is that the effect of the government driven approach is that at least it may now be possible for real dialogue to take place with the opponents.

Clem McCartney is affiliated with the Centre for the study of Conflict, University of Ulster, Coleraine, Northern Ireland. He is a member of the Steering Committee of the Second European Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution.