

Marching On Together? SA and the Northern Ireland Peace Process

Comparisons between conflict and peace in South Africa and Northern Ireland—although reinforced by a number of important links—are often misplaced. For one, the conflict in its current form in Northern Ireland is likely to be more protracted than that in South Africa. Here, future challenges are less likely to be those of ensuring parties remain committed to a fragile peace settlement over a long period of time, but have now turned to the substantial challenges of development and reconstruction. In the longer term then, any parallels between the two societies are likely to be diverging ones.

The high profile role played by **Cyril Ramaphosa**, former Secretary General of the ANC, as one of two international figures responsible for inspecting IRA arms dumps, continues the debate as to how lessons from South Africa's own transition can be applied in Northern Ireland. In this vein, and while Ramaphosa is the most visible element of it, a variety of 'peace and transition links' have been spawned between South Africa and Northern Ireland.

One of the reasons South Africa and South Africans have been relatively prominent in the Northern Ireland peace process is the result of a 'peace/transitions dividend'—a perception that South Africans have managed their transition and now are in a position to manage others. This is combined with historic links between the ANC and Sinn Fein.

So the Royal Irish Constabulary (RUC) have been co-operating with the South African Police Service (SAPS) to learn some lessons for its own transition to policing the post-settlement society. RUC officers however are keen to point to the differences between policing South Africa and Northern Ireland, presumably because they do not wish to be lumped along with the apartheid police. 'This comparison', on RUC officers suggests, 'is to nobody's advantage except the IRA/Sinn Fein because it suggests that dramatic changes are required'.

Earlier both the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (the Patten Commission) and the *Criminal Justice Review*, both bodies established under the terms of the Belfast Agreement, visited South Africa in search of lessons. Indeed, one member of the Patten Commission was a South African. Professor **Clifford Shearing**, from the Universities of the

Western Cape and Toronto, was a controversial appointment for Unionists, who had noted with unease his earlier writings on community justice initiatives in South Africa.

In the annual summer marching season this year, South African mediator, **Brian Currin**, sought to negotiate between parties to the now ritual stand-off at Drumcree. Here, the Protestant Orange Order have sought to secure 'their right' to march down the same road as they have done for generations. The Garvaghy Road however now runs through fiercely Republican territory and was blocked by the ruling of the Parades Commission—an independent body designed to rule on where and when such marches can take place.

To outsiders, given the spectre of violence on the streets and the harsh exchange of words between leaders, it may appear as if the fragile peace agreement is slowly being undercut. While such actions may weaken the peace deal, it is not at all clear that they have damaged it. Indeed, condemnation by prominent Protestant church leaders and Unionist leaders alike suggest that the actions on the streets are the work of an important constituency, but one increasingly declining in influence (as well as looking vaguely ridiculous) in both the eyes of the people of Northern Ireland and the world.

Apart from the role of Currin and others as well as an increasing number of academic links, the connections between the peace process in Northern Ireland and South Africa, have been shaped (hence presumably the selection of Ramaphosa) by good relations between the ANC and Sinn Fein. Such links between

the two conflicts has inevitably led, both in Northern Ireland and South Africa, to the temptation to compare both the nature of the conflicts as well as the attempts at peaceful transition which have followed them.

Perhaps more than the similarities between the societies it suggests that the South African transition has generated skills which make individuals closely associated with it marketable, and their skills transferable.

South African media coverage of developments in Northern Ireland have in the past lauded the role played by South Africans in securing a peace deal. In 1997, a conference in South Africa for all the parties in Northern Ireland sought to draw lessons from the South African transition which could be applied to the peace process being run in Belfast. Selected senior South African politicians, notably the National Party's chief negotiator **Roelf Meyer** and the ANC's **Mac Maharaj** have visited Dublin and Belfast to persuade the parties to keep on track. By all accounts, this influence, most clearly from members of the ANC, has been critical with Sinn Fein both in persuading rank and file members of the organisation to accept a ceasefire, and the ANC being in a position to suggest, that when the process broke down over the issue of decommissioning, that the initiative lay with the IRA to take steps to resuscitate the Good Friday Agreement.

There is probably little doubt then that South Africans have played a productive role. There is in the words of one South African academic working in Belfast however, a certain 'element of romanticism' identifiable in the relations between Sinn Fein and the ANC. 'What the emphasis by the republican sources on the ANC's role in the IRA initiative underlines is the awe in which the ANC is held among republicans. That, in turn, is a reflection of the validation comparison between South Africa and Northern Ireland provides to the Republicans that they have been engaged in a noble anti-colonial cause analogous to the ANC's struggle for democracy'. The comparison fits neatly with the choice of a negotiated settlement by Republicans, but some key differences between Northern Ireland and South Africa suggest that a different outcome may result—one well worth bearing in mind in future when South Africans engage in peace making efforts in Northern Ireland.

So while it is clear that there are important links between the two conflicts, personified by Ramaphosa and others, it is equally apparent that the contexts in which the two conflicts, and their subsequent peace

arrangements, have taken place are different. There are four key differences worth exploring:

First, in the case of Northern Ireland, two prominent 'external' players, the British and Irish governments have been key determinants in the management of the peace process. This is not a simple case of, as in South Africa, the parties coming together to negotiate peace, urged on by outsiders. In this case the outsiders are themselves players in the process. The most sobering recent example of this has been the debate around and the eventual passing of legislation on the future of policing in Northern Ireland by the House of Commons. Both prominent Northern Ireland parties who have seats in the Commons, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party, were distinctly uncomfortable with the Bill's provisions, yet it was passed any way, given that the UUP and SDLP make up a tiny proportion of the overall number of seats in the House.

Second, in South Africa the minority (white) and majority (black) communities clearly understood the boundaries of the other. In the case of Northern Ireland, who is a 'minority' and who is the 'majority' community are disputes which underpin the whole nature of the conflict. While Protestants may be technically a majority in the north, they are a minority in the Republic of Ireland as a whole. And while Catholics may be a minority in Northern Ireland, they are a majority in Ireland itself.

Third, there has been no clear 'victor' in the conflict in Northern Ireland, unlike arguably in South Africa. This ensures that continued negotiations around (and disputes over) the Agreement often seem able to undercut the fragile peace deal itself. Partly this is the result of the minority/majority conundrum outlined above.

One outcome of this stalemate is that it is not always obvious to the supporters of both sides to the conflict why they should be at the negotiating table in the first place. To secure their participation, the peace agreement often seems deliberately ambiguous, allowing parties to interpret it to their own benefit to placate their supporters. While this may have been of some advantage when deals were being struck, 'fudged' wording leading both players to claim a victory, it has made implementation of the agreement considerably more difficult. Indeed, one of the greatest dangers of the peace agreement in Northern Ireland is that it is interpreted by opposing players to mean different things—for Nationalists it is a step in the road to a united Ireland, to Unionists it signifies a

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secure connection to Britain and the recognition of the boundaries and reality of 'Northern Ireland' itself.

Fourth, by the nature of some of the factors outlined above, peace in Northern Ireland has entailed recognising the divisions which drove (and were generated by) the conflict. Thus, the new Northern Ireland Assembly is essentially a bipolar one – it has a legally instated division with a majority required on both sides of the House for a motion to be passed or a decision made. That would have been the equivalent in South Africa to ensuring a guarantee of minority rights. In sum, the nature of the post-settlement arrangements in South Africa have been an attempt to overcome (although it can be argued how successful this was) differences of race and identity, while in Northern Ireland the route to peace entailed the explicit identification of (and legislating for) the society's divisions.

The factors outlined above encapsulate one of the most powerful criticisms of the Good Friday Agreement. *That is, that, unlike the constitutional arrangements for the new South Africa, it recognised (arguably through force of necessity) the divisions that drove, and were worsened by, the conflict, instead of attempting to overcome them. This makes the peace settlement in Northern Ireland quantifiably different from that forged in Kempton Park for South Africa.*

Thus, the analogy with South Africa may then be less useful than it seems. Indeed, it could be destructive. It appears to be an unwritten article of faith (if taxi drivers, local political activists and policemen are to be believed) that given a higher birth rate Catholics in Northern Ireland are likely to be in the majority at some time in the future. Indeed, the Belfast Agreement recognised that Northern Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom and that while a united Ireland could be created in the future, it could be achieved only with the majority of people in both the North and South assenting to it. In other words, it would

require the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

In the past there appears to be little disagreement among demographers on the fact that the Catholic population is growing. An exhaustive study of demographic trends in Northern Ireland, published in 1989, concluded that 'the attainment of a Catholic majority in Northern Ireland through demographic means seems an unlikely event.' This is based on the fact that the fertility of the Catholic community is rapidly falling towards Protestant levels, and that in the society as a whole (as is the case elsewhere in the world) attitudes to family planning have converged.

It is essential to recognise then that the institutions created under the Good Friday Agreement are likely to dominate the politics of Northern Ireland for some time to come. If that is the case the Northern Ireland Assembly is unlikely to be a simple stepping stone to a united Ireland, however appropriate this may be.

That suggests that without a clear inevitability of a Republican majority in the longer term, both sides of the conflict may find it difficult to keep splinter groups, who may be a source of violence, in their respective folds. Since each side has promised—explicitly or implicitly—different things, some of which may not materialise, the prospects for a return to complete peace and normality in the society will remain a challenge.

That does not mean however that this will not occur. The regionalisation of politics through the European Union, and given the comparative positions of such regions as German speaking South Tyrol in northern Italy, may hold out opportunities for Northern Ireland. But even that is dependent on the consent (and thereby compromise by both parties) as well as peace, allowing (with all the other pre-conditions required) a sustained period of economic growth which benefits the majority of those who live in Northern Ireland. All the above factors make South Africa a different proposition altogether.