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The Troubles in Northern Ireland:

Conflict resolution and the problem with being 'reasonable'

by Imogen Baxter and Robert Crowcroft

Recent events have brought a stark warning that, when it comes to peacemaking and the resolution of conflicts, pinning hopes on goodwill, or asking people to be 'reasonable', is just not enough. The morass between Israel and the Palestinian territories, in Afghanistan, or in Iraq, illustrate that every week. Now we have had another reminder, much closer to home, from an old foe. There have been multiple incidents related to dissident Republican terrorist groups. Indeed, there has been a significant surge in dissident activity throughout this year, including widespread rioting in Catholic areas of Belfast in July. On 14 August, a bomb detonated in a wheelie bin in Lurgan, injuring three children. Beforehand warnings were given of a bomb being placed near a school; the suspicion is that the device exploded prematurely, it being intended to kill the police officers searching in response to the school threat. That night, police officers investigating warnings of other devices were attacked by petrol bombs and missiles. On 16 August, Patrick Mercer MP expressed the view that Oglaigh na hEireann, a splinter group from the Continuity IRA, aim to renew attacks on British targets. When faced with this kind of situation, it is all too easy to simply cross our fingers and hope for the best. It is similarly tempting to shout 'Oh, come on!' at the television screen. But hoping for 'reasonableness' as a means of resolving conflict is inadequate, and Northern Ireland illustrates this point well; perhaps too well.

One of the worst fallacies in contemporary public life is the plea that if only people were more 'reasonable', problems could be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. The academic Professor Mary Kaldor, in a major book on modern war, actually contends that 'No solution is workable based on the political goals of the warring parties … Once the values of inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect are established, the territorial solutions will easily follow.' The unstated assumption in this view of the world is that if we approach a problem in a spirit of conciliation and willingness to see the other side's point of view, a successful compromise can be found. But this underrates the sheer difficulty of reconciling conflicting interests; of bridging gaps; and locating solutions. Look at the ongoing border tensions involving Venezuela, the Columbian government, and the FARC rebels. Clearly, human reason can only take us so far. The blunt truth is that people will disagree over really important things, and are sometimes willing to fight, and kill, each other. In its implications this is tragic, and saying it often provokes hostility. But realising its essential truth should be part of debate in a mature democracy. It is comforting to think that if we were only more reasonable everything would be alright. Unfortunately it isn't true.

The war in Northern Ireland lasted for decades, and therefore provides the most powerful example from recent British history of the bankruptcy of this train of thought and asking people to be 'reasonable'. In Ulster, the problem was that both communities – Protestants supporting the Union and Catholics favouring its destruction – felt themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be under

siege. That made it justifiable for them to protect themselves. The crux of the issue lies in whether an action – say a bombing, a shooting, or a protest march – was recognised as being 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable' by a *specific group*. What is deemed 'reasonable' is not objective and universal but, in fact, only a matter of personal opinion. Indeed, due to the sectarian animosities in the province, *all* action taken during the Troubles was portrayed as being necessary (and believed to be so by a very large number of people) – and therefore perfectly reasonable in a war of self-defence. In so far as the conflict polarized public opinion – evident in the continuous highly sectarian voting patterns – it is obvious that the definition of what is 'reasonable' depends entirely on where you stand, and will rarely be accepted by all those concerned. This pattern can be detected elsewhere, with depressing frequency. Recall the legal debate about new Israeli settlements for an illustration of the impossibility of looking to old-fashioned human reason as a way of solving problems. In 1993, it was seen as perfectly 'reasonable' in the eyes of the Tutsis to slaughter 100,000 Hutus in Burundi. And, the following year, to the Hutus it seemed a good idea to massacre between 600,000 and one million Rwandan Tutsis in an orgy of revenge. And appeals to reason did not stop the Wars of the Yugoslavian succession; only NATO did that.

Part of the problem with this approach to peacemaking is the assumption that 'reasonableness' equates to 'moderation'. That is understandable enough. But it is also false. It is, for example, 'reasonable' for a Catholic to be a Nationalist; and equally 'reasonable' for Protestants to view Catholics as a subversive minority. Protestants threatened by a vicious insurgency deemed roughhousing from the RUC to be a sensible means of keeping down the enemy. Soldiers under constant threat of death were not inclined to pussyfoot around with those who shelter terrorists. And innocent Catholics in fear of Loyalist murder gangs thought of the IRA as resistance fighters. rather than cold-blooded butchers. In an ethnically stratified society, extreme action can seem reasonable if carried out in the cause of self-defence. The purpose lurking behind both politics and violence during the Troubles was not the attainment of civility, but to protect a community against its enemies. It was, like all war, about power: who is on top, and who is not. What is 'reasonable' would thus be better (and sadly) likened to what proves 'necessary' to win.

The implications for peacemaking in conflicts outside Northern Ireland are obvious; those involved in public policy and Parliament need to absorb them. Despite the successful devolution of government, it has proven simply impossible to reconcile the warring sides in Northern Ireland – for instance, there are many more 'peace walls' dividing communities in 2010 than there were before the Good Friday Agreement. Rather than reconciliation, peace was only achieved when the strategic demands of Republicanism gave way to those of the Unionist position from the late 1980s onwards (in other words, a solution based on old-fashioned political objectives).

Now, one factor that *can* engender constructive behaviour from politicians engaged in peacemaking is being entrusted with power, and the sense of responsibility it brings. A politician's incentives to behave in a 'reasonable' fashion are increased by the hard realities of holding office. Consequently, politicians who are in opposition to government – and thus able to act without being required to shoulder responsibility for failure – are less likely to conduct themselves 'reasonably', and more likely to posture for advantage. We see this in contemporary Iraq. And it was demonstrated by virtually all politicians throughout the Troubles, who freely advocated the merits of extremism when in opposition and then moderation when in government.

A memorable example is Terence O'Neill, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland between 1963 and 1969, who, compelled to compromise with the Nationalists, was denounced in 1966 by the Reverend Ian Paisley as a 'traitor'. Decades later Paisley himself, when confronted with the responsibilities of being leader of Northern Ireland's largest party, entered into a power-sharing agreement with the most extreme variety of Nationalism: Sinn Fein. Another example is offered by the destruction of David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionists at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, who wrecked his career and party in attempting to be 'moderate' when he endorsed Senator George Mitchell as chairman of the all-party talks, instead of joining Paisley in opposing it. This act of moderation shows Trimble's recognition of his personal duty to keep the peace process moving. Mitchell later admitted that had Trimble joined the opposition, the process would have surely ended there. And this same pattern of behaviour can be witnessed in innumerable conflicts across the globe.

Despite this, it is possible – indeed plausible – that even those in power have greater incentives to appear less, not more, moderate when engaged in peacemaking. There are significant opportunities and risks to politicians in such conditions: to destroy opponents, be destroyed oneself, or gain credibility. In 2000 Yasser Arafat rejected a peace settlement that threatened to undermine the whole rationale for the PLO: resistance, resistance, resistance. It is an illustration of the cold realities of this type of war that, arguably, much of the violence in Northern Ireland stemmed from deliberate political encouragement to *perpetuate* the conflict. This was achieved through the use of fiery rhetoric to incite the masses, the purpose being to better politicians' leverage when the negotiation of a settlement on acceptable terms finally became plausible. Thus, the peacemaking in the province saw most politicians tailor their rhetoric to suit circumstances. Whilst this is not particularly unusual in politics, the reactions that it garnered from the public were the key – and, again, carry much wider implications for thinking about peacemaking. Certainly the difficulties of, say, forging agreement between factions in Iraq after the recent election can be seen in a new light. In Northern Ireland, what politicians said and the gestures they made carried unusual weight, repeatedly proving sufficient to incite the public by exploiting historical hatred and suspicion. The purpose was to polarize the situation, and consequently increase their personal leverage. Paisley's rhetoric and manoeuvre are so demonstrative of this that he was likened to the Grand Old Duke of York: 'He'll huff and puff to bring about a situation and then he'll come back from the edge'. His ability to incite Unionists only increased his influence and authority, because it made the Unionist public *themselves* appear to be extremists; the unspoken implication was that any compromise peace would require more concessions from Republicans than Unionists in order to appease the latter. Paisley is unusually cunning, but the phenomenon is a common one.

What quickly became the norm in Ulster, then, was that extremism was not only 'reasonable', but was positively encouraged by everyone concerned as it was 'necessary' in order to manufacture a more favourable final settlement. This was fully justifiable to a community that believed its rights were being ignored. Contrary to what we all wish, there is often no such thing as a 'moderate centre ground'. There certainly wasn't in Northern Ireland. This means that appeals to rationality and reasonableness will not get us very far. The objectives of the participants in these wars – politicians, paramilitaries, and communities alike – are to defend their own interests. If anything, it is perhaps more 'unreasonable' for us to expect otherwise.

Where that leaves peacemakers is a difficult question to answer.

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