



## ‘If at first you don’t succeed then try, try, try... again – political negotiations in Northern Ireland 1969-2017’

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Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2017 is the date at which the latest round of formal talks about the political future of Northern Ireland (NI) are due to end. Whilst the focus of attention undoubtedly currently rests on whether these will succeed or fail, it is also important to bear in mind that this is a situation that has been faced many times before. The following piece is not an attempt to provide a detailed summary of the various negotiations that have occurred, but to place them into an historical context.

Initially the search for a political solution post 1969 emerged out of talks between the Westminster and Stormont governments in August 1969. This is often referred to as the ‘Downing Street Declaration’. It suggested that progress could be made within the existing constitutional arrangements and that the ongoing difficulties remained an internal matter which was solely the responsibility of the United Kingdom (UK) authorities. This remained the position through a series of discussions between the local political parties in NI and the Westminster government following the suspension of the Stormont parliament in March 1972.

In October 1972 the British

government published ‘The Future of Northern Ireland: A Paper for Discussion’. This document outlined plans for a way forward based on three guiding principles: a reassertion of NI’s constitutional position within the UK; a move away from the Westminster model of governance for NI; and some sort of north-south dimension to improve relations between the two parts of the island of Ireland.

Over the next year or so discussions involving the governments in London, Dublin and representatives from a number of the NI political parties culminated with the Sunningdale Conference in December 1973. Out of these it was agreed to establish a power-sharing executive to administer Northern Ireland, whilst a ‘Council of Ireland’ was proposed to formalise relations between the administrations in Belfast and Dublin.

This initiative was to be short-lived and collapsed by May 1974. The majority of unionist opinion had rejected it on the grounds that it threatened NI’s constitutional position within the UK. As for Irish republicans, who were then engaged in an armed campaign to end the partition of Ireland, ‘Sunningdale’ was dismissed as being incapable of achieving such a goal. Over the next

decade or so, numerous efforts by the British government to engage in discussions with local NI politicians to end the political stalemate failed to make any progress. In essence, unionists viewed with suspicion any proposal which bore any resemblance to that which they had rejected back in 1974. Whilst for nationalist opinion across the island of Ireland, anything which did not encompass those fundamental elements agreed at Sunningdale, would ultimately fail to end the ongoing conflict within NI.

In the face of this, the British government decided by the mid-1980s that a new approach was required. After lengthy and detailed negotiations with its Irish counterpart, the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) was signed in 1985. Its significance lay in the decision to concede the right of the Irish authorities to be consulted on the internal governance of NI. Unionists were outraged at the move, and while some nationalists welcomed the development, it failed to convince others that it could secure their objective of a united Ireland.

Whilst both governments continued to reaffirm their commitment to the AIA they also made clear that they were prepared to consider any new settlement that might ultimately supplant it.

The condition imposed by the British and Irish governments was that any replacement for the AIA would have to secure the consent of the majority of people within NI. This proved a difficult challenge to achieve and consequently a fresh round of formal negotiations in 1991 and 1992 failed. But successful moves by the middle of the decade to encourage the various paramilitary groupings in NI to call a ceasefire and to become involved in future talks seemed to suggest that progress could be made. At times, as has so often been the case in NI, this appeared impossible with all-party discussions dragging on throughout 1996 and 1997.

Eventually a deal was finally reached in April 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). In essence the GFA was based on a three stranded approach which set out agreed structures that would

allow for: the internal governance of NI; improved relations between Belfast and Dublin; and connect the authorities in Dublin with their counterparts in London as well as the newly established devolved administrations across the UK. Just over six weeks later at the end of May 1998, the outcome of referenda in both parts of Ireland showed that the GFA received the backing of the majority of the electorate.

However, the former United States Senator George Mitchell, who had chaired the negotiations that had produced the GFA, was soon to issue a note of caution. He indicated whilst these talks had been extremely difficult a bigger challenge remained ahead – namely, the full implementation of the GFA. This prediction soon proved to be correct. Over the next ten years or so a series of crises effectively blocked

the political progress envisaged under the GFA. Eventually in 2007, a breakthrough was seemingly made with the restoration of devolved government in NI.

But once again that proved to be a false dawn with further bouts of instability. Thus since 1998, whilst some of the participants and events have changed, the overall picture has taken on a familiar tone – with negotiations and deadlines being set to encourage politicians to reach a consensus as to the way ahead. In essence all these have indicated is the fragility of relations between the various political players as well as the instability of the political institutions in NI. What lies beyond 29<sup>th</sup> June is all speculation, but perhaps historians in the future will look at the date as another milestone as further developments evolve.

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## Notes

Dr Brendan Lynn is currently deputy director on the Conflict Archive on the INternet (CAIN) website: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/>.

The CAIN website provides an extensive range of information and source material on the conflict and politics of Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present day. The site is used by a worldwide audience and has received over 21 million hits.

Further resources and information relating to the content of this feature can be found at:

- <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/chron.htm>
- <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/polit.htm>
- <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/peace.htm>

