THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

Adrian Guelke

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ABSTRACT

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The paper examines the impact of two major events in the international system on the peace process: the end of the Cold War and the attack on America on 11 September 2001. The thesis first advanced by Michael Cox that change in the international context of the conflict in Northern Ireland was a major influence in pressurising the republican movement to adopt its peace strategy in the early 1990s is analysed. Also examined are reasons why the thesis has proved so contentious and why more generally there remains considerable scepticism as to the capacity of external events to shape events in Ireland in any fundamental way. The question of the impact of September 11 is then addressed.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Adrian Guelke is Director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict at Queen's University, Belfast. His research interests include the politics of deeply divided societies, most particularly the cases of South Africa and Northern Ireland, comparison of deeply divided societies, political violence, terrorism. Selected publications include: *A farewell to arms? From "long war" to long peace in Northern Ireland* (co-editor; Manchester University Press, 2000); *South Africa in transition: the misunderstood miracle* (I.B. Tauris, 1999); *The police, public order and the state* (co-author; 2nd ed., Macmillan, 1996); *The age of terrorism and the international political system* (I.B. Tauris, 1995); *New perspectives on the Northern Ireland conflict* (editor; Avebury, 1994); *Northern Ireland: the international perspective* (Gill and Macmillan, 1988).

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INTRODUCTION

In my exploration of the impact of the international political system on the peace process in Northern Ireland, I am going to focus on two events that have been widely seen as significant watersheds in world politics. They are associated with two dates: 9 November 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, and 11 September 2001, when the United States mainland was attacked by Al Qaeda. The first is linked to the broader process of the end of the Cold War; the second to a commitment by the most powerful state in the world to "a war against international terrorism". Sufficient time has passed since the end of the Cold War to provide the basis for considered opinions to have developed on the implications for Ireland of the first of these. That is not true of "the war against international terrorism", so inevitably this part of the paper will necessarily be more speculative. Paradoxically it is also true to say that there has been less controversy over the impact of September 11, a reflection of the fact that settled opinion on its impact is harder to come by.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Let me start with the end of the Cold War. The person most closely associated with the argument that the end of the Cold War had a major impact on the Irish peace process is Professor Michael Cox of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He first put forward the argument in an article in the October 1997 issue of *International Affairs* (Cox, 1997). He repeated it in his Frank Wright Memorial Lecture of February 1998 and in the book he co-edited with myself and Fiona Stephen, *A Farewell to Arms?*, published in 2000, as well as in a number of other journal articles. However, his most succinct statement of his argument is to be found in an article in the December 1997/January 1998 issue of the magazine, *Fortnight*. I will quote the key passage:

> My thesis, simply stated, is that although the IRA ceasefire might have occurred without the end of the Cold War, the fact that the Cold War had drawn to a close made a ceasefire far more likely. Of course, the relationship between the end of the wider international conflict and the August 1994 announcement was never direct. What I am suggesting is that by altering completely the global framework within which the IRA campaign had hitherto been conducted, the end of the Cold War made it far more difficult for the organisation to legitimise a strategy which by the late 1980s had already reached a dead end. Moreover, with the end of the Cold War, a number of critical changes occurred in the structure of the international system. These not only challenged traditional republican thinking about the reasons for the British presence

in Ireland, but also presented its leaders with a unique opportunity which they felt could be exploited to their advantage. In particular, playing the "American card" to accelerate a peace process about which many on the British side had deep reservations. Finally, as an organisation with a radical agenda, it was almost inevitable that the end of the Cold War, and with it the collapse of the wider revolutionary project, would influence the republican movement. (Cox, 1997-98: 20)

Chatham House organised a lunchtime meeting on the peace process in Northern Ireland to coincide with the publication of Professor Cox's article entitled "Bringing in the 'international': the IRA ceasefire and the end of the Cold War". The meeting in late 1997 occurred shortly after a visit by Tony Blair to Northern Ireland, at which he shook hands with Gerry Adams for the first time. The prevailing mood of the meeting was not sympathetic either to the arguments that Professor Cox advanced on the international context of the peace process or to the peace process itself. There was widespread suspicion of the intentions of the republican movement. The principal line of argument of Professor Cox's critics was that the ceasefire was a ploy to extract concessions from the government and that, unlike the end of the Cold War, it was a reversible decision, as its breakdown between February 1996 and July 1997 had already demonstrated. A number of speakers argued that the paramilitary ceasefires amounted simply to a truce in a long-running and ultimately unsolvable conflict.

When Professor Cox presented his arguments in Belfast in February 1998 to an audience that included a number of specialists in the field of Irish politics, the case he presented also encountered considerable scepticism. But the basis of the criticisms was less hostility to the peace process than the conviction that it was a product of dynamics internal to Northern Ireland. In particular, for a number of Cox's Belfast critics, it was the military defeat of the Provisionals' campaign of violence in Northern Ireland that provided the key to explaining the ceasefires. However, since Cox was always careful not to dismiss the role that internal factors had played in bringing about an end to the troubles, it was difficult to fathom why the Cox thesis highlighting external factors should have provoked quite so much opposition. In his review of *A Farewell to Arms?*, Jonathan Tonge recounts another occasion on which a critic "demanded that the author be 'more parsimonious' with his variables" (Tonge 2001). Tonge himself faults Cox for the omission of important internal factors and a suspect chronology. Tonge continues:

> Arguably the biggest shift from fundamentalist to pragmatic republicanism (at least before entry to Stormont in 1998) came with the decision of Sinn Féin to recognise the "partitionist" Dail Eireann in 1986, at a time when few were predicting the end of the Cold War, but internal republican critics (e.g. Ruairi O'Bradaigh) forecast later entry to Stormont. Similarly, the willingness to engage in dialogue with the SDLP in 1988, again pre-collapse of the Berlin Wall, was indicative of the republican movement seeking an exit strategy from a war it could not win. Add the fact that republicans were suffering more losses than loyalists by the early 1990s and the internal thesis appears more convincing. (Tonge 2001: 263)

I would not disagree with the proposition that there was a shift in republican thinking in the late 1980s, not least as a by-product of the Anglo-Irish agreement of No-

vember 1985. However, I would dispute the notion that it was more significant than the change that occurred in the 1990s. In particular, the change in outlook between *A Scenario for Peace*, published in 1987 and *Towards a lasting peace in Ireland*, published in 1992 is very striking (Munck, 1995: 165-6).

Furthermore, anyone tracing the sequence of events that led to the first Provisional IRA ceasefire in 1994 can hardly avoid the significance of Peter Brooke's statement in November 1990 that 'the British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland'. That is underlined both by the fact that it formed a crucial element in the Hume-Adams talks of 1993 and by its restatement in the Joint Declaration between the British and Irish governments in December 1993. There was a strong connection between Brooke's statement and the end of the Cold War. Indeed, he had been prevented from issuing the statement earlier because of the British Prime Minister's concern at the interpretation that the Soviet Union might have placed on such a statement. In addition, it is questionable whether the Republican movement would have been persuaded that it was a true statement of Britain's strategic position before the major change in the global situation. If Cox is guilty of anything in his treatment of the strategic issue it is of understating the role that this played in the process by dwelling on the initially muted response of the Republican movement to Brooke's speech. But Cox is surely correct in emphasising the role that the end of the Cold War played in opening the way to American intervention. Cox put the point this way in an article in *Politics* in 1998:

> Though Clinton later rebuilt his bridges with the British government, there is little doubting the fact that because of his intervention on Ireland, damage was done to a relationship once considered (by some at least) to be special. There is little doubt either that what he did would not have been done during the Cold War when the United States was locked into an intimate security partnership with the United Kingdom. (Cox, 1998: 63)

This may be considered an indirect effect of the impact of the end of the Cold War, though scarcely less important for that. Another example of the indirect effect of the end of the Cold War is to be found in its role in encouraging peace processes in other conflicts which had an important place in republican eyes in legitimising armed struggle in situations of the denial of the right to self-determination. These included South Africa and Israel-Palestine. In the case of South Africa, the coming down of the Berlin Wall exercised a powerful influence on President de Klerk's decision to lift the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party and to release Nelson Mandela from imprisonment in February 1990. Similarly, the freeing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from Cold War alignments helped to clear the path to negotiations. Both South Africa's transition to democracy and the Oslo peace process in the Middle East, in turn, encouraged the republican movement to validate longstanding comparisons of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the ANC by adopting its own peace strategy. South Africa's importance for the republican movement did not end with the 1994 ceasefire. The South African example continued to be an important reference point for Sinn Féin not just during the negotiations

leading to the Belfast agreement but during the implementation of the agreement. Indeed, the South African connection remains important to Sinn Féin.

THE PEACE PROCESS: OTHER EXPLANATIONS

However, in spite of these different elements to the argument that the end of the Cold War had a significant impact on Northern Ireland during the 1990s, resistance to the Cox thesis remains considerable. Why? Let me suggest a number of reasons. Firstly, there is what can be identified as a fundamentalist "internalist" interpretation of events in Ireland. This asserts that the peculiarities of Ireland's history provide the essential key to explaining political developments on this island. Churchill's description of Ireland after the First World War captures the spirit of this position:

> The mode and thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world, but as the deluge subsides and the waters fall we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that have been unaltered by the cataclysm that has swept the world. (Churchill, 1941: 319)

In his wide-ranging survey of the literature on the Northern Ireland conflict published in 1990, John Whyte argued that the major change that had occurred in the literature during the course of the troubles was the growth of the dominance of internal-conflict interpretations of the violence. Prior to 1968 and in the first years of the troubles, Whyte argued, there was a predominance of literature that blamed either British imperialism or the Republic of Ireland's irredentism for the conflict. However, by the 1980s there was a wide consensus among academic analysts that communal antagonism inside Northern Ireland was the root of the problem. Perhaps one reason why the Cox thesis attracted so much flack was that it was seen as a challenge to that consensus.

Secondly, some of the more naïve of Cox's critics assumed that in asserting the importance of the end of the Cold War for Northern Ireland, he was suggesting that the Soviet Union had played a significant role in the conflict before 1994. The fact that his *Fortnight* article was illustrated by a photograph of a person wearing a black beret and balaclava with the caption: "Built by Russians; fired by the Provies" did not help. However, Cox was not arguing for a revisionist view that the Soviet Union had backed the Provisionals and that they had been left high and dry as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Thirdly, critics who accepted that Cox was not advancing a crass interpretation of the conflict as driven by Soviet intervention nonetheless argued that the way he formulated his thesis understated the differences between the Irish case and other regional conflicts which had been directly affected by the end of the Cold War because of Soviet involvement. In particular, it was arguable that the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union for the ANC and the PLO were qualitatively differ-

ent from those for an organisation that had derived much of its material support from sympathisers in the other superpower.

A controversial dimension of Cox's argument was his seeming identification of the Provisionals as "being part of a broader international movement whose goal was the liberation of humanity from the oppressive grip of imperialism" (Cox, 1997: 682). However, a careful reading of Cox underlines very clearly that he is speaking about how the Provisionals saw themselves and is not endorsing their anti-imperialist pretensions. His point rather is that how the Provisionals saw themselves inevitably had a critical impact on the strategy they pursued. To put the point another way, the continuance of its campaign of violence did not simply hinge on whether the Provisional IRA possessed the physical means to sustain the long war, as it quite evidently did.

Whatever about Provisional perceptions of themselves, it may be argued that, in fact, the conflict in Northern Ireland did not remotely resemble the struggles of either the Palestinians or black South Africans. Indeed, it could persuasively be argued that the conflict in Northern Ireland bore a much closer resemblance to the ethnic conflict that engulfed the Balkans in the 1990s. From this perspective, the Provisionals' anti-imperialism was merely ideological gloss that served to overlay a more primordial basis for the conflict. A depressing implication of this line of argument is that, far from being rendered obsolete by the end of the Cold War, there is every prospect that in due course the conflict will gain a fresh lease of life from its similarity to other identity-driven conflicts elsewhere in the world. However, whether the Provisional IRA will be the main vehicle for the Catholic combatants in such a re-ignited conflict is another matter.

A final reason why I believe that the Cox thesis encountered so much resistance in Belfast was its uncomfortable implications compared to the alternative explanation that the Provisional IRA had been impelled by the situation within Northern Ireland to declare its ceasefires. A *bon mot* common at the time was that "The Republicans have lost but are too smart to admit it and the Unionists have won but are too dim to recognise the fact". Cox put forward his thesis before the Belfast agreement. Its terms seemed to bolster the case for the critics. How else, other than by their defeat, could the republicans' acceptance of the revival of Stormont or their acquiescence in the principle of consent be explained? Dissident republicans eagerly declared that the republican movement under Adams's leadership had achieved none of its objectives and argued the case for characterising the outcome as abject defeat. This part of their message, if nothing else, found a receptive audience. However, the passage of time has changed the initial view of the agreement as constituting the political death-knell for republicanism.

One reason has been the perception of Unionists, whether pro-agreement or anti-agreement, that republicans have gained most from the way the agreement has been implemented and, in particular, that the republican movement has been able to drag further concessions from the British government. However, the strongest reason for the change in perspective has been Sinn Féin's electoral successes. In both the Westminster general election and the local elections of June 2001, Sinn

Féin overtook the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in terms of votes, though the SDLP won more seats in the local elections thanks to second and lower preferences. Sinn Féin's breakthrough overshadowed the contest on the Unionist side where the Ulster Unionist Party lost further ground to the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). As Feargal Cochrane put it in his report of the Westminster poll, "The overall story of the election results in Northern Ireland was the radicalisation of the electorate and the squeezing of the centre ground" (Cochrane, 2001:185). The key battleground of the election was the constituency of West Tyrone, which the SDLP characterised as its Stalingrad, "a battle which would either reassert its premier position within nationalism, or provide further momentum to the electoral rise of SF" (Cochrane, 2001: 182). The SDLP lost. This further polarisation of the electorate, a process that can be traced back to the 1996 elections to the Northern Ireland Forum, has obvious implications for the next Assembly elections in 2003. However, as the very survival of the agreement to that date seemed in doubt in the summer of 2001, this did not form the main focus of attention at the time. Similarly, the individual battles within unionism and nationalism took some of the attention away from the fact that overall the nationalist side had emerged with two extra seats compared to 1997, underscoring the shift in the composition of the electorate in sectarian terms. Almost as remarkable as the rise of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland has been its growing popularity in the Republic of Ireland, at least as measured in opinion polls, which in Northern Ireland have tended to understate the vote Sinn Féin actually secured in elections.

For anti-agreement unionists all of this was simply evidence that the agreement represented a mechanism for the appeasement of militant nationalism that was growing in strength from the process of the agreement's implementation. Even pro-agreement commentators were ready to acknowledge that the results of the peace process went beyond what those who had embarked on it had envisaged. Thus, in February this year Garret FitzGerald wrote the following:

> The compromises into which both the Irish and British governments were drawn by this process have, of course, been far beyond anything democratic politicians in either State had ever envisaged when it began. It is not surprising that not just Northern unionists, but many others, have found all that ensued enormously distasteful.

> It is only when one thinks of the alternative – of the hundreds of lives that would have been lost if the IRA had continued its campaign, in which so many innocent civilians as well as members of the security forces had already lost their lives – that one is led, grudgingly and reluctantly, to concede that this murky process has ultimately been justified. (Fitzgerald 2002)

SEPTEMBER 11 AND DECOMMISSIONING

By this time, a measure of respite for pro-agreement unionists had been provided by the IRA's first act of decommissioning of weapons on 23 October 2001. International events loomed large in the explanation of this development that was widely perceived at the time as having saved the Belfast agreement from imminent collapse. This brings me to consideration of the impact of September 11 on the Irish

peace process. Even before the IRA's act of decommissioning, a former leader of Fine Gael, John Bruton, suggested that what had happened on September 11 had profound implications for Ireland and the peace process. His article in the *Financial Times,* 3 October 2001, contains a number of points of interest, not least his retrospective endorsement of one of the main elements of the Cox thesis, though it should be said that he does not identify the argument with any particular author. What might be called the Bruton thesis is worth quoting at some length:

> The terrorist attacks on the US and America's worldwide war against terrorism have dramatically changed the dynamics of the search for a solution to the Northern Ireland impasse.
>
> From the mid-19th century onwards, Irish Americans agitated strongly for US support for the goals of Irish nationalism but got relatively little governmental response as long as the US needed Britain as a close military ally.
>
> The lack of US government support in the 1919-1921 period was one of the reasons why Michael Collins, the Irish nationalist leader, accepted a treaty in 1921 that appeared to some to be only a modest advance on home rule. The treaty also accepted partition in a way that the 1914 Home Rule Act had not done.
>
> But the collapse of the Warsaw pact in 1989 meant that Britain became temporarily less critical to the US as a military ally.
>
> This meant that the US administration of President Bill Clinton felt strategically freer in the 1990s to take up the Irish cause and did so with enthusiasm and great effect. This American involvement helped secure the Downing Street declaration and build a coalition of support for some nationalist goals.
>
> The attack on the World Trade Center has now changed all that again. President George W Bush's war on terrorism means that the British alliance is again important to the US.
>
> This will not reduce the US administration's interest in Irish affairs, but it will mean that it may be more attentive to British views and to the views of all those who are hostile to IRA and loyalist terrorism. (Bruton 2001)

Bruton was not alone in arguing that September 11 had implications for the IRA. Jim Cusack, the security editor of *The Irish Times*, explained the IRA's re-engagement with the de Chastelain commission announced on 20 September with reference to events in America.

> Republican sources pointed out that where pressure from previous US administrations and the British and Irish governments had failed completely to budge the IRA on decommissioning, the events in New York and Washington on September 11th created a new dispensation.
>
> One source pointed out that the real threat the IRA has been able to hold over its opponents is that it will return to war and attack commercial and financial targets in London… The source said there was 'no way' the IRA could countenance carrying out such an act against the US's closest ally ever again. (Cusack 2001)

The fact that the first act of IRA decommissioning then followed on 23 October could be seen as vindicating Bruton's thesis of a fundamental change in the context of the peace process. Commentators across the political spectrum highlighted the role that external events had played in bringing about decommissioning. As well as highlighting the role of September 11, they also underlined the impact on Sinn Féin's relations with the Bush Administration of the arrest in Colombia on 11 August of three members of the republican movement. For example, Kevin Brown and John Murray Brown wrote in the *Financial Times*:

> Decommissioning is happening now because President George W.Bush's admini-stration has proved significantly less sympathetic to Sinn Féin than the Clinton ad-ministration; IRA envoys were caught visiting terrorists in Columbia; and Osama bin Laden's terrorists killed thousands in New York and Washington. (Brown and Brown, 2001)

The unionist commentator, Steven King, took much the same line, while putting the decision to decommission into the context of the peace process as a whole:

> In the early 1990s, the movement came to realise that their war of attrition was failing to bring about British disengagement and that while there was still some life left in it, decided to cash it in for some political advantage. In an analogous way, the move-ment has now decided that the political cost of retaining weapons was outweighing the leverage they brought. (King, 2001)

From a position far more sympathetic to Sinn Féin, the editor of the *Irish Voice*, Niall O'Dowd, accepted that "events such as the Colombia arrests and the World Trade Centre bombings of September 11th certainly accelerated the process". At the same time, he argued that "they were not decisive by themselves" (O'Dowd, 2001).

If O'Dowd is correct in his surmise, it was perhaps fortunate for Sinn Féin that events conspired to "hurry" the IRA into decommissioning, since it would certainly have taxed all the ingenuity of the two governments to have sustained the agree-ment much longer than they did. Decommissioning was clearly in the interests of Sinn Féin as a political party last October, as would be a further act of decommis-sioning now. Exploiting the issue for further gain has not been the only factor that has held up decommissioning; there seems to be considerable evidence that inter-nal dissent within the republican movement has been a major factor in delaying the process, to the evident frustration at times of the Sinn Féin leadership.

THE PEACE PROCESS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

But what of the Bruton thesis? The cowardly, if perhaps most reasonable, answer would be to say that it is too early to tell whether September 11 has brought about as large a change in the world order as his thesis suggests. However, as of April 2002, a number of his assumptions appear contestable. In particular, whatever in-fluence the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, might have gained in Washington through his demonstration of solidarity over September 11 did not stop the Bush

Administration's damaging decision to bar steel imports. It also needs to be offset by the damage done to British interests in the Arab world. Furthermore, by going out on a limb over Iraq, Blair even seems to have done some damage to his own previously unassailable position of leadership within the Labour Party. More fundamentally, President Bush's "war against international terrorism" has not reversed assumptions about the nature and causes of political violence in quite the way that might have been supposed. Given the terrible events of September 11, it was understandable that President Bush should have sought to place America's response in a wider normative framework. However, in practice, the main focus of American action was on uprooting Al Qaeda in its camps in Afghanistan to remove the immediate threat to its security and citizenry. And most importantly, there has not been a return to the absolutist attitudes associated with the use of the term terrorism in the 1980s.

The precepts that there should never in any circumstances be negotiations with terrorists; that any association with terrorists in any shape or form provided justifiable grounds for exclusion from the body politic; that once a terrorist always a terrorist; and that the suppression of terrorism justified extraordinary measures by the state, have not been revived. Part of the reason for that was recognition at an early stage of the dangers that absolutist attitudes over the issue of terrorism posed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. And this does not seem to be simply a matter of elite circumspection. Thus, the attempt in December 2001 of the then Sri Lankan government to portray the opposition as soft on terrorism because of its support for negotiations with the Tamil Tigers failed to save the ruling party from defeat in the parliamentary elections. The Indian government also found the issue of terrorism of little assistance as a rallying cry in state elections. And, most obviously of all, Sharon's attempts to establish moral and political equivalence between Yasser Arafat and Osama bin Laden has secured relatively little international support and, even within Israel, support for this approach has been far from universal. This is notwithstanding the temptation for Israelis to go down this path in the wake of the breakdown of negotiations in 2000 that most Israelis blame on the Palestinian leadership.

Of course, it is by no means impossible that attitudes within the Western world towards political violence will harden along the lines sketched in Bruton's article. Indeed, were there to be further atrocities on the scale of September 11, there would clearly be a very strong reaction within the countries affected. The possibility that the "war against international terrorism" might cause difficulty for governments engaged in peace processes because of the compromises such processes require, also cannot be discounted. Indeed, there was already a measure of conflict before September 11 in public attitudes of general support for political settlements on the one hand and the demand of "no impunity" on the other hand, given that negotiated political settlements generally entail amnesties of some kind. The contrast between Blair's attitude towards the activities of Al Qaeda and that towards political violence in Northern Ireland has not gone unnoticed, as Bruton emphasises in his article.

Cartoonists, in particular, have poked fun at the inconsistency in the British government's approach.[1]

However, it is obviously going to take a lot more than barbed comments in newspapers (or, for that matter, the complaints of unionists) to bring about a fundamental change in the British government's policy towards Northern Ireland. The government has every political interest in maintaining a rosy view of what the Belfast agreement has achieved and to play down the difficulties. Internationally, the Belfast agreement still tends to be seen as a valuable model for the settlement of seemingly intractable ethnic conflicts. However, within Northern Ireland, much of the optimism with which liberal opinion greeted the achievement of the accord has dissipated. Among the reasons are electoral polarisation; an intensification of segregation; the continuation of lethal political violence, albeit at lower levels than before the ceasefires; increases in "punishment beatings" by paramilitary organisations; and ongoing inter-communal conflict in areas such as North Belfast.[2] Furthermore, while the outcome of the 1998 Assembly elections appeared to have delivered the basis for the creation of a workable alliance of the centre between the UUP and the SDLP, the political agenda has instead been determined by the conflict between Unionism and the republican movement. In the process the SDLP has been sidelined, along with the rest of liberal opinion.

In short, the Belfast agreement has not produced the political accommodation that many hoped for and saw as the *raison d'être* of the deal. What then is its purpose or role? Of course, answering this question presents no problems for republicans. They have always seen the agreement not as an end-in-itself but as transitional to a united Ireland. Although the figures have not yet been officially released, the 2001 census has already generated a flurry of speculation of a further, dramatic weakening of the position of Protestants, with one commentator claiming that it had produced a mood in the Protestant community of "back to the boats in Larne" (McIlheny, quoted in MacKay, 2002). Trimble's call for a border poll to coincide with the next Assembly election in 2003 was a response, in part, to such fears. Such a border poll would serve two main purposes: providing reassurance to Protestants that a united Ireland was not an imminent possibility and maximising the UUP's vote by ensuring a high turn-out in the Assembly poll. Perhaps also in Trimble's mind was creating a context for dealing with the likelihood of Sinn Féin's emerging from the election as the larger nationalist party.

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[1] See, for example the cartoon of two bearded fighters in a cave, in which one is saying to the other: "Hang on and they'll give you an office in Westminster", *Private Eye*, No.1046, 25 January - 7 February 2002: 6.

[2] See, for example, Henderson, Mark (4 January 2002) "Belfast more divided in 'peace' than strife", *The Times*, and Brown, Paul (4 January 2002) "Belfast more segregated since process began", *The Irish Times*, reporting on Peter Shirlow's research. See also Tanney, Paul (4 January 2002) "2001 figures show 'punishment beatings' at highest level", *The Irish Times*.

CONCLUSION

Inevitably, much of this part of the paper has been very speculative. Any number of developments could change the picture I have presented. For example, might the continuing and past activities of the Provisional IRA cause such embarrassment to Sinn Féin as to prick its bubble in the South, if not the North? (But it should be said in parenthesis that hitherto unionist demands for Sinn Féin's exclusion from government following Provisional IRA misdeeds have aided rather than hurt Sinn Féin politically.) Might the bedding down of the institutions established under the Belfast agreement restore confidence in the accord? These are possibilities, though they could scarcely be described as probabilities. At the time of the Belfast agreement, there was a wide range of opinion as to its meaning. One line of argument was that it was a remarkably innovative and sophisticated construction, the special features of which recognised the multiple layers of identity in Northern Irish society. According to this view, the designers of the accord, by taking advantage of the growth of soft sovereignty, had succeeded in transforming what had once been a zero-sum clash of national identities into a dispensation that was capable of accommodating the different elements of Northern Irish society. From this perspective, both the weakening of the nation-state as a result of European integration and the loosening of the rigid interpretation of the principle of self-determination that prevailed before the end of the Cold War facilitated such a transformation of the problem.

The Cox thesis and, more especially, the Bruton thesis are more compatible with what might be termed a *Realpolitik* view of the agreement. This is that the agreement was a messy compromise that simply reflected the balance of forces among the parties at the time, a balance determined both by internal and external factors. On this view, the agreement was primarily a product of the republican movement's abandonment of the long war and the UUP opting for devolution over direct rule. If the agreement bore the hallmark of the ideas of the SDLP more than those of any other party, this is more an accidental reflection of the outcome of the bargaining process than an acceptance of the values that underpinned the SDLP's approach to the conflict. In this context, Meron Benvenisti's gloomy view of the Middle East peace process at the outset that at its best it was less a means to resolve differences amicably than the continuation of the conflict by other means has obvious resonance for the peace process in Northern Ireland (Benvenisti, 1990: 130). Another comparison that springs to mind is the contrast in the interpretation of South Africa's 1993 constitution at the time of the country's transition to democracy in 1994, with how it was seen after the final constitution came into effect in 1997. The contrast was between being seen as the embodiment of a historic compromise and the more modest achievement of easing the path to majority rule.

However, a case can be made that the Belfast agreement ought to prove far more durable than South Africa's interim constitution. The Belfast agreement states that whatever choice the people of Northern Ireland make as between remaining part of the United Kingdom and a united Ireland, the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction should be exercised in accordance with a wide range of principles including respect for "the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities" (quoted in Cox, Guelke and Stephen, 2000: 303). An implication of this section of

the agreement would seem to be that the institutions established to accommodate the identities of the people of Northern Ireland ought to remain in place, even if there were to be a transfer of sovereignty from London to Dublin. It might also be argued that confidence that this really would be the case might actually reduce the likelihood of such a transfer of sovereignty taking place. In theory, this is all very well. In practice, the Belfast agreement has seemed far too fragile throughout its existence for it to have begun to look like a final settlement of the Irish question. Whether it is able to achieve such a status depends in large part on the attitudes taken towards the agreement across the political spectrum both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

It is not of course impossible that external political developments will impinge further on the process of Irish peace-making. Somewhat paradoxically, September 11 served to underscore American hegemony rather than American vulnerability (Kennedy, 2002). If that implies the capacity for a still larger American role in Irish affairs, it remains difficult to predict how the Bush Administration might choose to use such influence or whether international or domestic considerations will have priority in its approach. Bruton's argument that it will be determined by a conception of terrorism that disempowers the republican movement seems to me wishful thinking on his part. One reason not to expect such a radical change in America's approach to world affairs is that September 11 has not altered other aspects of the post-Cold War era, such as the confusion over the interpretation of self-determination, the challenge of ethno-nationalism or the problem of failed states. In fact, it seems a reasonable surmise that preoccupation with these issues will tend to limit the role of international factors in the Irish peace process in the medium term.

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