



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS



Role, Capacity
and Effect



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St Antony's Series



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1

Introduction

Background

On 10 April 1998 Northern Ireland joined a long list of countries which had produced peace agreements in the 1990s. The architects of the Agreement included eight local political parties and the British and Irish governments. Significant architectural influence of the US administration under President Clinton, and to a slightly lesser extent, of the experiences of other peace processes which had reached agreement before Northern Ireland, was noted. The Agreement was the culmination of a prolonged peace process, which had followed an equally prolonged and protracted conflict.¹ The origins of this peace process dated back to at least the mid-1980s with the secret dialogue between John Hume, leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin. The tentative discussions between Hume and Adams converged with the more formal 'talks process' in the early 1990s.² This 'talks process' gathered further momentum after both the republican and loyalist ceasefires in 1994 and the elections to the multi-party talks process in 1996 and eventually resulted in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998.³

The story of the Northern Ireland peace process is not considered to be particularly unique since the 'decade of peace processes' of the 1990s bore witness to a multiplicity of ceasefires and political agreements spanning all continents.⁴ As a consequence, academic studies of such political conflicts and peace processes have flourished considerably.⁵ Many of the works have been comparative in nature. Some have made for more popular comparison than others. For example, most scholars of ethnic conflicts can recount various details of the peace processes in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa and how a multiplicity of

factors were married together to create 'settlements', however long their eventual life span.⁶ Given the difficulties with many peace initiatives, the more recent attention has focused on those conflicts which have proved to be seemingly intractable, and which have had difficulty in reaching a settlement or in sustaining the peace.⁷ This book seeks to further contextualize some of the current academic writing on peace processes by isolating and highlighting one of the key determining factors which can effect a societal transition from conflict to peace building. This factor is one of human agency. More specifically, it is political leadership.

It is argued, in normative terms, that many ethnic conflicts are triggered by 'bad leaders'.⁸ They are defined as 'self-obsessed leaders who will do anything to get and keep power'.⁹ By the same rationale then, those who help to trigger peace processes might be determined or presented as 'good leaders'. Not only could this be interpreted as an oversimplification in the extreme, but it is also arguable that the use of the terminology – 'bad' and 'good' leaders – lacks the academic precision that is needed to explain the role, capacity and effect of political leadership in conflicts and, more importantly, in peace processes. The basic rationale for this book takes the lack of academic precision, in respect of political leadership in peace processes, as one of its starting points.

Arguably, the role, capacity and effect of political leaders in peace processes risks being overlooked as both decidedly obvious and warranting little further explanation. We already know from real world experience that political leaders can act as the trigger to escalate violence, not only during conflicts but also during peace processes.¹⁰ Similarly, we also know that peace agreements are usually not made by the masses but by political elites. Consequently, the majority of attention which does focus on political leadership in peace processes tends to come from a rather 'unacademic' background. The most obvious example of this is through the mass media and, in particular, their political commentators.¹¹ There are, of course, potential problems with such a narrow approach, not least that there can exist an unhealthy focus on political leaders as both the epitomization of the conflict and its possible solutions. In the context of Northern Ireland, O'Connor has acknowledged that 'the personalities of those who lead have mattered more, perhaps, than they ought'.¹² There is a significant emphasis on reporting their behaviour, on understanding what motivates the leaders and/or what makes them tick, and where such personalities are located within the wider political context.¹³ All of this presents something of a conundrum. On one hand, there appears to exist a rather muted academic

interest in understanding the role, capacity and effect of political leadership during peace processes. On the other hand, there appears to exist an overly enthusiastic interest in the behaviours and motivations of political elites during peace processes by those in the media charged with reporting the day to day events of those processes. It is puzzling that there is such interest in some quarters and yet not in others. In a sense then, this book serves to redress the imbalance and reintroduce an element of 'scholarly enquiry' into this subject.

The arguments of this book

This book aims to analyse more systematically the phenomenon of political leadership during the peace process in Northern Ireland from 1994 to 1998 specifically, and to move towards a new framework of analysis for political leadership in peace processes more generally. It argues that the interpretations of political leadership in peace processes offered by both the political leadership literature and the peace and conflict studies literature, to date, are often inappropriate in the context of Northern Ireland. It contends that an alternative interpretation of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process is critical to the development of any future analysis of the Northern Ireland peace process, and also to the development of the analysis of peace processes more generally. It suggests that political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process was often necessarily contradictory in style and substance and argues that such contradictions and inconsistencies form the basis of the alternative interpretation that this book seeks ultimately to present. In the final analysis, this book asserts that political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process can best be described as 'chameleonic leadership' – an inconstant leadership which shifted according to the opinion of others and the climate in which it existed, just as a chameleon can change its colour to blend with its background.

In developing this argument, Chapter 2 begins by introducing the phenomenon of political leadership through a critique of some of the more general interpretations of political leadership and the application of some of these interpretations to the context of Northern Ireland before moving to examine the Northern Ireland case study more specifically. It examines the case study in three distinct ways. First, Chapter 3 presents an analysis of some of the existing definitions and explanations of political leadership in Northern Ireland during the peace process. In doing so it asks whether the definitions of political leadership as given by interviewees, and/or the definitions of political leadership given

by those analysing their behaviour during the Northern Ireland peace process from the sidelines, are useful in helping to define, explain and classify political leadership during that period. Such definitions, while useful, appear to offer only a very limited and often contradictory understanding. Thus, this book seeks to understand political leadership better by breaking it down into three distinct constituent parts for further examination – the role of political leadership, the capacity or influence of political leadership, and the effect of political leadership.

By deconstructing political leadership in this way, a number of research objectives associated with each chapter can be highlighted. Chapter 4 seeks to understand the role of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process. This chapter raises the question of whether their role was primarily to protect their own constituents during the peace process, or whether the role of political leadership was to make 'peace' at all costs. Ultimately, it considers whether there could ever be a single role for political leaders in the peace process and surmises that multiple roles may well have been incompatible with one another, thus leading to possible contradictions and inconsistencies within them. Chapter 5 seeks to explain the sources of influence available to the political leadership, as a way of opening up a discussion on their potential to influence the shape and direction of the peace process. Ultimately, it considers whether the most potent sources of influence were more structural or personal in nature and whether alternative sources of influence existed to undermine any possible influence that a political leader might have held. In this respect, any undermining of influence might have necessitated political leaders acting in different ways at different points in the peace process in a way that was directly relational to their perceived influence at that particular time. The potential of personal influence feeds into Chapter 6, which seeks to identify the effect that political leaders might have had on each other during the peace process. In doing so, any specific interactions between political leaders during this time which could be inductive of their effect on other leaders in particular and on the peace process in general are examined. The chapter questions whether the various attempts to bring political leaders together outside of the formal parameters of the 'talks process' in Northern Ireland significantly enhanced the leaders' ability to learn from and to understand their political adversaries and, consequently, whether this affected the nature and direction of the peace process.¹⁴ It argues that leadership behaviour beyond the confines of Northern Ireland was often radically different to their behaviour within the 'talks

process' and is demonstrable of further contradictory and inconsistent leadership behaviour during the peace process.

Through the course of this book, those factors which served to both help and hinder the role, capacity and effect of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process will be highlighted. These, however, are considered in detail in Chapter 7. This chapter argues that much of the experience of the peace process left Northern Ireland's political leaders with confused roles, undermined capacity and negated effect and identifies those issues which were the most significant contributors to this. It asserts that as a consequence of confused roles, undermined capacity and negated effects the new interpretation of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process can best be described as 'chameleonic leadership' – an inconstant leadership which shifted according to the opinion of others and the climate in which it existed. Chapter 8 concludes that using both the deconstructed understanding of political leadership, its limitations, and the interpretation of political leadership as 'chameleonic leadership', we can move towards the development of a broader understanding of political leadership in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process in particular, and of political leadership in peace processes more generally though this chapter also suggests how the framework of analysis could be developed further.

In terms of the approach taken for this work, it is acknowledged that there are different theoretical perspectives which can help explain the phenomenon of political leadership. To strengthen the subsequent arguments made within this book, it is useful to draw on two or three particularly relevant theoretical approaches.¹⁵ Anything less than this could be perceived as little more than a 'reductionism approach'.¹⁶ Indeed, such has often been the case of explanations offered in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland. For example, many commentators hold Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), in some part responsible for the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland.¹⁷ The essence of the reductionist argument presented is that without Paisley the conflict in Northern Ireland might well have developed in an entirely different manner. However, as Blondel argues, 'there is no full and complete "reductionism" which could entirely explain interpersonal reactions in terms of habits, religious fear or economic forces'.¹⁸ Thus, while this book does have an agent-centred perspective, it also draws upon a combination of what Blondel determines as the three main branches of political thinking – the normative, behavioural and structural theories.¹⁹ Clearly, no one approach is better than the other but, instead, they offer different yet complementary ways of viewing the political leadership

phenomenon. In a sense, what each of these approaches seeks to uncover is how much importance should be attached to individual political leadership in the interpretation of political developments? In other words, does leadership make a difference and, if so, how much of a difference does it make? Edinger suggests that there are only two points of view in relation to the perceived significance of political leadership.²⁰ One is that political developments may only in the very last analysis be attributed to the leadership of a particular individual and the other assumes that individual leadership is a primary post-dictive or predictive causal factor in explaining political developments.²¹

In any study, it is necessary to state explicitly the initial core assumptions being made by the author. Given the area of this research, the obvious assumption is that political leadership matters, hence the agency oriented undertones.²² The assumption that individuals matter is also made. This assumption is in contrast to much of that which is written on international relations theory where the primary actor is always the state and not the person.²³ Explaining the degree of how much it matters in terms of its role, capacity and effect during the peace process in Northern Ireland is, in the final analysis, the essence of this book. The assumption that leadership matters is just one reason for undertaking this work. There are, of course, other reasons. The more in-depth rationale for this research has been broken down into its component parts for further elaboration.

Why political leadership?

Other than 'because it matters', what are the fundamental reasons which would encourage a study of political leadership? One reason for studying the subject is that it is inevitably tied to a number of global realities. The most obvious of these is that neither institutions nor the average citizen within a democratic country actually govern that country on a day to day basis, but political leaders do. Renshon points to three characteristics of modern society that further illustrate the importance of political leadership in this respect – decision centrality, the extension of public sphere responsibilities and the structural amplification of effects.²⁴ The decision centrality argument suggests that you simply cannot have a public vote or a referendum on every political issue. More often than not, political leaders choose to take decisions in the absence of any direct input from the electorate. The extension of leadership responsibilities is directly relational to their decision-making role. The structural amplification of the effect of leaders' decisions is evidenced in

the proliferation of government agencies and units charged with implementing the leaders' decisions, and means that the choices made by political leaders do not travel slowly throughout the bureaucracy and institutions of government.

Aside from these characteristics of contemporary society, another related reason for studying political leadership is, of course, that it represents the bare bones and/or the public face of contemporary politics. As Blondel says:

If one reduces politics to its bare bones, to what is most visible to most citizens, it is the national political leaders, both at home and abroad, that remain once everything else has been erased; they are the most universal, the most recognised, the most talked about elements of political life.²⁵

Indeed, reducing politics to its bare bones is a phenomenon which has become very common place in our contemporary political landscape. The war in Iraq, for example, has now been presented as a war against Saddam Hussein, as opposed to a war against weapons of mass destruction. As a result, such has been the focus on Saddam Hussein and his immediate family, that the general public would be less aware of the political structures that perpetuated Hussein's rule in Baghdad, or the ethnic cleavages between the Iraqi people. The Baath Party does not evoke the same degree of response or interest as the man himself. Equally, the public would be less well versed in the structures and ethos of Al-Qaeda than they would be in their knowledge of Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaeda movement. The media are not the only source culpable of dumbing down politics to equate with personalities. Indeed, it has been argued that politicians themselves have been keen to promote politics in overtly personal terms. This is a common argument articulated in respect of the position of Tony Blair, as leader of the Labour Party and current Prime Minister. Some suggest that Blair has attempted to reduce politics to its bare bones in the UK, by associating all of Labour's politics with Blair the leader.²⁶ For example, questions have been consistently raised as to whether the Blair style of leadership fits with a traditional British 'cabinet government' or is something more akin to the presidential style of the United States and, more importantly, whether this has been a conscious stylistic shift.²⁷

A third reason for studying political leadership is directly related to the second and that is the public interest in political leaders. There is a public fascination with political leadership, personality politics and

the personal elements of political affairs. Gaffney refers to this as ‘the obsession with “personality politics” by everyone’.²⁸ Our obsession with personality politics and leadership is arguably one of great paradox given both our need for great statesmen and women and, equally, our preponderance towards either reading the dirt or dishing the dirt on politicians. Regardless, it is clear that there is greater public interest in the person than the policy and thus presents validity for further study.

A fourth reason is actually the reverse of the third. While there may be a public fascination with political leadership, the same cannot always be said within academic quarters. Indeed, in the UK particularly, leadership has often been seen as something rather ‘superfluous’ to understanding British governance.²⁹ Reintroducing the concept of political leadership to academic debates on governance is a worthwhile rationale for its study.

A final reason for studying political leadership is directly relational to its perceived problem-solving orientation. According to Tucker, political leadership means the diagnosis of a problem, the prescription of solutions and the mobilization of support for needed action.³⁰ Nowhere is the problem-solving orientation of leadership more important than in the context of violent conflicts and the search for peaceful solutions. It is to this context that I now turn.

Why peace processes?

A peace process is a prolonged peace initiative which invariably involves all of the main protagonists. Beyond this, the different variables involved in any one peace process make the general definition of a peace process more difficult to discern.³¹ Adopting a rather critical approach in terms of the understanding of peace processes allows this book to connect with some normative issues. For example, a critical approach to the understanding of peace processes raises the question of whether or not a peace process is even necessarily a good thing. By extension then, it raises questions about the possible implications that this will have for analyses of leadership in peace processes. Arguably, many peace processes do not begin to address the root causes of the conflicts they seek to resolve.³² Furthermore, peace processes can also serve to entrench the conflict and the actors within that conflict by reinforcing the roles that actors played during the conflict. For example, paramilitaries may be called to the negotiating table once a ceasefire has been declared irrespective of their capacity to adequately represent their community at that table.³³ With such reasoning, it is arguable that a peace process is not necessarily

a good thing if it only deals with the manifestations of a conflict at the expense of the root causes of a conflict and also if it offers legitimacy to those holding weapons in the absence of any electoral mandate for them. Despite this, the benefits to be accrued from a potential peace process are often encouraging. A decline in conflict related deaths, an improved quality of life for those at the coal face of the conflict and an enhanced economic potential are the most obvious benefits to be accrued.³⁴ It is entirely plausible that political leaders involved in peace processes veer between perceiving the process to be a good thing on some occasions and to be a questionable practice on other occasions. By extension, this might explain any possible inconsistencies in their approach to the particular peace process with which they are involved. This is an obvious first reason for the study of political leadership in the context of peace processes.

The second reason is one of necessity, since the study of leadership has traditionally looked at leadership in conflict rather than the resolution of conflict. For example, Hamburg, Alexander and Ballentine note:

large scale conflict between groups – like conflict between states – requires the deliberate mobilization efforts of determined political leaders. Without such leadership, members of ethnic, communal or religious groups who find themselves in adverse circumstances – for example, profound socio-economic inequality, political oppression and even deep intergroup animosity – do not spontaneously resort to warfare to retain redress. They tend instead to seek out non-violent means for improving their condition and resolving disputes, yet incendiary leaders can readily subvert such efforts and mobilize their followers for violence and hate.³⁵

Much less has been said in relation to a leader's potential in terms of his or her contribution to the resolution of conflict. In fact, political leadership in peace processes is a subject that appears to have been ignored by general peace and conflict research. For those countries which have been subjected to extended periods of conflict stemming from the divisions within their societies, there exists a substantial body of literature. Much of the literature and research undertaken to date has focused on the nature of these divisions, a comparative analysis with other regions and the frameworks which exist to transform divided societies into 'liberal democracies'.³⁶ Issues such as policing, political violence/civil disobedience, and state control strategies have held the foreground in the recent past. The issue of political leadership and the transcendence of such

leadership is not so often discussed.³⁷ At most, this notion of political leadership is referred to in scant detail, as just one of the many variables at play when deciphering why conflicts escalate, de-escalate and transform.³⁸ The dearth of literature relating to political leadership in the context of peace processes is another obvious rationale for the study.

Thirdly, in the areas where political leadership is examined more generally, there seems to be little within the general literature that is applicable to divided societies, despite the fact that the concept of political leadership itself is seen as universal. Many assumptions are made in the existing literature about the type of context in which political leadership operates. For example, Burns' seminal work on leadership in the 1970s argued that: 'conflict between and within parties is considered normal, predictable, and assuaged by time honored understandings about good winners and good losers, majority rule, "to the victor belongs the spoils" and so on'.³⁹ In functional liberal democracies this might well be considered to be the case. However, it could be argued that the 'time honored understanding' that Burns refers to is not so well understood nor accepted in ethnically and violently divided societies. In fact, part of the problem is often that there are few common understandings at all. Furthermore, the concept of good winners and good losers only emanates from societies where the competition/election procedures are considered fair, and where the administrative system is not contested. Majority rule has long been a major source of contention in many divided societies, with arguments made for 'mutual consensus' and the protection of minority groupings. Ultimately then, Burns' understanding of what is normal and acceptable about conflict and leadership within and among parties may be inappropriate to divided societies. The study of political leadership in the context of a peace process challenges some of the existing assumptions that are made in relation to political leadership and amounts to a third reason for a study which looks at political leadership in a rather specific context. In another example, the study of leadership in peace processes serves to contest the notion that political leadership is a wholly positive phenomenon. Kellerman has highlighted the implicit assumption assumed by many leadership scholars 'that to lead is to do right'.⁴⁰ It could be argued that the subject has not been broached because the implications of the relationship between leadership and conflict are difficult for some scholars to acknowledge. Yet it is clear that many divided societies are prone to leaders sometimes dubbed 'ethnic entrepreneurs', 'warlords' or 'power wielders', or, in other words, leaders whose motivations may not be so altruistic in both the conflict and in any subsequent peace process.

Fourthly, political leadership in the context of peace processes can raise some interesting anomalies which warrant further analysis. As an example of this, which relates to the previously articulated notion of leadership as a positive force, is that peace processes can highlight the interesting phenomenon of the political prisoner turned political leader.⁴¹ This is not a normal convention in the majority of societies and appears to be something specific to divided societies. However, political prisoners have contributed to the emergence of new forms of leadership in societies where conflict is often related to the struggle for national independence, secession, self-determination or greater political accommodation. The transition of individual political prisoners to political leaders is an important one because it raises questions about what sort of dynamic, if any, exists between this band of leadership and the more conventional band of leadership during a peace process.

Finally, regardless of whether one is persuaded by the theoretical arguments of pluralism or elitism in general terms, it is abundantly clear that many peace processes are elite driven, with a relatively small number of people responsible for making decisions on the style and substance of peace negotiations. Collectively, the rationale presented here for the study of political leadership in the context of a peace process reinforces one of the arguments of this book that the political leadership literature and the peace and conflict studies literature often offer interpretations of political leadership that are lacking. Some do not engage at all with the concept of political leadership in peace processes preferring to remain focused on political leadership in war and conflict; others ignore the cultural specificities of divided societies and assume that the context in which political leaders operate is more universal; and those which have tentatively mentioned political leadership in the context of peace processes often ignore the very different leadership variables at play. That said, the study of political leadership in peace processes, in general, runs the risk of becoming immediately bogged down in the multiplicity of variables that exist within each individual context. Instead, it seems more appropriate to begin the study by focusing on a singular peace process in a particular region. The case study chosen for further examination is the Northern Ireland peace process from 1994 to 1998.

Why Northern Ireland?

Northern Ireland provides an interesting case study for the examination of political leadership in the specific context of a peace process.

Or does it? Some might ask why study Northern Ireland again? This is certainly a reasonable question by those who have argued that Northern Ireland is one of the most over-researched countries in the world.⁴² However, despite the proliferation of academic works on the conflict in Northern Ireland, it has been argued that the research undertaken (at least until 1990) still fell short of a comprehensive understanding of the situation.⁴³ Moreover, academic disagreement continues to persist over the background, nature and long-term solutions to the 'conflict'. McGarry and O'Leary describe this as 'a "meta-conflict", a conflict about what the conflict is about'.⁴⁴ With the onset of the peace process in the 1990s, the nature of the research shifted slightly from the roots of the conflict towards the examination of possible settlements. But the reason for this study in particular is, firstly, that while political leadership might have been mentioned in the context of all other things, it did not appear to be singled out for individual attention during this period. Consequently, the comments made are less revealing than those which might have come from a more in-depth examination of political leadership. For example, Fred Halliday noted in his examination of the Northern Ireland peace process in the broader, comparative context of the 1990s decade of peace processes that:

when it comes to internal conditions, the central issue remains the intentions of the main military and political players. Peace does not come, as many in the rush of 'civil society' expectations of the early 1990s may have hoped, through the replacement of the nasty people by nice people: would that it did. Protest, denunciation, scorn may play a role, but this is not enough to sway the 'hard' men and women, duros and duras. It comes through a decision by the nasty people that it is, at that particular moment, more advantageous to pursue peace than to pursue war.⁴⁵

Arguably, discussing political players as 'nasty' or 'nice', while wholly understandable in one sense, sets up a dichotomy of political leadership which does not necessarily contribute to a more robust understanding of these actors during the peace process. Indeed, defining political leaders as either nasty or nice, and equating 'nasty people' with the pursuance of war fails to acknowledge the complex nature of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process, and their role, capacity and effect therein. Essentially then, the lack of attention towards an in-depth understanding of political leadership during the peace process provides the first and most obvious reason for concentrating on Northern Ireland.

The second reason for studying Northern Ireland is to reflect on the limited number of existing analyses which have looked at the issue of political elites in relation to the continuance, or otherwise, of conflict in Northern Ireland. For example, in 1995, McGarry and O'Leary looked at political leadership as one of the background conditions which were necessary for any likely settlement.⁴⁶ They argued, at that time, that there was an absence of the necessary elite motivations in Northern Ireland to move beyond conflict towards peace. For example, they claimed that the desire to avoid war had not been sufficiently intense and the desire to hold political office had also been insufficient; there was, moreover, the absence of sufficient elite predominance otherwise known as the ability to lead followers in directions which they might not necessarily wish to go; and finally there was the absence of intra-segmental stability which meant that the different political elites suffered intra-community fragmentation and consequently felt less secure about possible compromises, at that time.⁴⁷ Clearly, there was some sort of shift in elite motivations between 1995 and the eventual agreement in 1998, and ascertaining the possible reasoning behind such shifts is important.⁴⁸

A further rationale for the study of political leadership in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process is that many of the key actors involved in the conflict were the same key actors involved in the peace process. While many of these actors engaged in a reassessment of their positions, policies and preferences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this did not necessitate a change of leadership in Northern Ireland which makes for a rather interesting phenomenon. Contrary to some conflict resolution theory, which argues that leadership change is necessary for the transformation of a conflict, political leadership in Northern Ireland remained mostly consistent during this reassessment period. Of the four largest parties at the time of the negotiation process, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the SDLP, the DUP and Sinn Féin, the leadership of the latter three had remained unchanged for almost two decades. The fact that many of the key players remained the same and yet the political situation dramatically changed is highly significant. Indeed, it raises the question of what allowed for the political changes to take place, if it had not been a significant change of leadership within the main parties. In other words, how exactly did a society with many of the same political leaders in place from the 1970s and 1980s come to make a peaceful agreement in the 1990s? How did these 'political protagonists' become the 'political pragmatists' of the 1990s? And how was this related to their role, capacity and effect during the peace process?

The answer may, in some ways, relate to the fourth reason for choosing Northern Ireland to study. While overt efforts were made in Northern Ireland at 'institution building' and at finding an acceptable mechanism of governance, more covert operations had gotten underway to afford the political leaders the space with which to explore possible transitional issues and 'were concerned with building up a culture of trust among politicians'.⁴⁹ Arthur argues that the point of a series of track two exercises with political leaders from Northern Ireland was that:

the participants shared a concern that something needed to be done and that at the very least they should explore each others' options. Track two presented the best opportunities to do so. The absence of the media, the physical location, the neutral back-up support, all were as far removed as possible from the rawness of the Northern Ireland's political arena.⁵⁰

The net gain of the series of peer learning initiatives that Arthur studied was, at best, that some politicians had learnt to trust one another and, at the very least, that some politicians had the measure of their adversaries in the bilateral and multilateral talks of the ensuing peace process. This engagement with leaders at a personal level outside of the confines of structured negotiations has not been examined in much detail and may have been a contributing factor to some of the positions taken at the negotiating table. It is critical, then, that this is re-examined in detail here.

A fifth reason for studying Northern Ireland in this particular context is, of course, that research on leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process has the potential to allow for 'borrowing' by other countries, should anything worth borrowing emerge. There is some evidence of this already with the borrowing of public figureheads from one peace process as an indication of what might be missing in another. Indeed, as Adrian Guelke noted: 'the most common metaphor that the South African transition inspired in Northern Ireland was the notion that what the province needed was a unionist de Klerk'.⁵¹ The unionist de Klerk analogy was made by both republican and nationalist politicians, not least by Martin McGuinness and John Hume.⁵² The 'unionist de Klerk' analogy was also referred to within the unionist tradition, although for entirely different reasons. During the peace process these unionists claimed that Trimble was selling unionism out, just as de Klerk sold out the White South Africans.⁵³

Finally, and more practically, Northern Ireland also provides a relatively discreet time period for study (1994–98), a more accessible peace

process than others and the potential to fill a niche in the literature, given that political leadership is a topic that has been largely unexplored in the Northern Ireland context. Overall, the reasoning behind the study of political leadership in peace processes, in the specific case study of Northern Ireland, is demonstrably complex. There are a multitude of valid reasons for undertaking such a study. The rationale presented here gives an overview of the potential added value of a research study of this kind and confirms that a new interpretation of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process will be a worthwhile contribution.

A note on methodology

The research for this book first began in 1999. At that time, the political context in Northern Ireland was in something of a state of flux. Although the Agreement had been signed in April 1998 and had been endorsed by the public in a referendum in May 1998, only very limited political progress had been made beyond that point. Elections to the newly created Northern Ireland Assembly had been held in June 1998 though the establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive was delayed by arguments over whether the IRA should decommission its weapons in advance of Sinn Féin being allowed to take their seats on the Executive. By the time the research began in 1999, the Assembly was still not fully functional and George Mitchell, the Chairperson of the multi-party talks process in Northern Ireland, had been recalled to Northern Ireland to conduct a review of the Agreement. Following this, power was eventually devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 30 November 1999 on the understanding that decommissioning would begin to take place once the Assembly was fully functional. However by February 2000 the Independent International Decommissioning Commission, under John de Chastelain, reported that little progress had been made in terms of decommissioning. The consequence of this was the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and its associated institutions by the then British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, in February 2000. This period of suspension between February and May 2000 coincided with the majority of the interviews that were conducted with political leaders as part of the research.

In designing the research, some of the key terms needed to be teased out further and explained. Principally, these were leadership, political leadership and peace processes.⁵⁴ The main interest of the research was *political* leadership though the author was fully cognisant of the role

that other leaders play in divided societies and in societies in transition, whether they were cultural, religious, community-based or business leaders, not least because such leaders can often have 'a moderating effect on unwise political leaders'.⁵⁵ While it could be argued that many of those other leaders mentioned above might act *politically* they are often seen to be nonconstituted leaders.⁵⁶ Nonconstituted leaders, by definition, lack the power that political science sees as intricately linked to politics. In the context of the Northern Ireland peace process this was evidenced in the fact that there was no formal space created at the negotiating table for leaders other than party political leaders. For this reason the nonconstituted leaders were omitted from the parameters of this research. Instead, political leadership was taken to mean political party leadership.

How far down a party organization one can go in terms of making a distinction between the political leaders and the rank and file of a party also requires further elucidation in order to more fully clarify the boundaries of the research. For the purposes of this research it was decided that the concept of political leadership should be used to classify those people engaged in a political capacity at the top level of their respective political parties in Northern Ireland. The concept was not necessarily taken to mean merely the individual political party leaders in isolation, nor did it mean only those political actors who held electoral office. Instead, the concept was more inclusive than exclusive in its classification and focused on those who had the capacity to effect influential change both within their own parties and beyond their parties during the peace process. It was felt that for the purposes of an exploratory investigation any broader conceptualization of political leadership ran the risk of becoming bogged down in a maze of variables, dimensions and linkages that might 'obscure more than it reveals about the essence of political leadership'.⁵⁷ Therefore, beyond this classification no definition of political leadership is offered here. Whilst aware that almost everyone may have their own sense of who leaders are and what they do, honing that into a set of 'off-the-shelf' features is a perplexing task. The characteristics of leadership are often ambiguous, malleable, contingent upon circumstance and potentially employable for multiple intents. While it is true that political leadership is a universal phenomenon, it is also a relative concept and what may be deemed to be overtly political in one context may not be seen as political in another.

A qualitative methodology was employed for this research which primarily involved in-depth interviews with some of Northern Ireland's political elites. One of the primary reasons for using the concept of

political leadership more inclusively than exclusively was to afford added protection of anonymity for those interviewed for the research. If the political party leader (in the singular) were the only person interviewed for the purposes of the research then it would have been more difficult to maintain anonymity. Another consideration was that, it afforded the author greater likelihood of gaining access to elites if the net were cast beyond a handful of individuals. Devine argues that a qualitative approach is best when the 'aim of the research is to employ people's subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those subjective experiences'.⁵⁸ In the case of this research, the aim of the interviews was to ascertain political leaders' perceptions of their role, capacity and effect during the peace process. In-depth interviewing allowed the political leaders to talk freely and offer their own personal interpretations of leadership.

Using a qualitative approach represented something of a marked departure from the usual methodologies employed in more general leadership studies, which tend to use qualitative research in the exploratory phases of researching a topic and then use quantitative analysis to refine and validate the hypotheses which might have been generated from qualitative research.⁵⁹ However, as Conger argues, the qualitative method offers a number of distinct advantages over quantitative methods, including a greater opportunity to explore the leadership phenomenon in significant depth and to do so longitudinally, the ability to detect unexpected phenomena during the research, the ability to investigate processes more effectively, a greater likelihood of sensitivity to contextual factors and a more robust approach for investigating the more symbolic dimensions of leadership.⁶⁰ The downside of a qualitative approach and, in particular, the potential problems with elite interviewing as a principal methodology were taken into consideration. For example, elite interviewees tend to provide a very subjective account of an event or an issue, thus the reliability of the interviewee can sometimes be questionable.⁶¹ Furthermore, elites are, by definition, less accessible and thus interview samples tend to be a lot smaller and run the risk of being unrepresentative.⁶² These issues notwithstanding, it still seemed clear that the qualitative approach offered more scope for research into a relatively untapped area in Northern Ireland's political analysis.

Whilst in-depth interviews were one of the primary sources of data collection, the actual interview format was somewhat informal, with topics raised for discussion rather than a number of specific questions asked. Keeping the interviews informal was a conscious decision taken

to allow the interviewees the opportunity to talk about political leadership using their own terminology rather than being guided by the existing terminology in the leadership literature, which the author felt might prove to be more problematic than helpful. Additionally, the use of a semi-structured interview was useful as a sidestep to the potential problem of elites wanting to control the interview and refusing to answer specific questions. Whilst mindful of the degree of confidentiality offered to the interviewees, it is permissible to say that each of these players were either senior members of their various parties negotiating teams, and/or were actual party leaders, and/or were current or subsequent Ministers within the Northern Ireland Executive.

The interview material was supplemented by other political interviews, given by political leaders in Northern Ireland to the broadcast and print media. Transcripts of political interviews given on television programmes such as *On the Record* were utilized to this effect, though consideration was taken of the many problems of political interviews whereby 'journalists regard politicians as deliberately evasive or obfuscatory, while politicians see journalists as too eager to set someone up for a fall rather than act as a conduit for political discussion'.⁶³ In addition, life histories in the form of biographies and autobiographies of key players during the period of the peace process were examined as well.

In organizing and analysing all of the data collected, a grounded theory approach was used.⁶⁴ Critical to such an approach is that: 'one does not begin with a theory, and then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge'.⁶⁵ Additionally, because of the risk that elite interviewees might, at worst, try to rewrite history in their own favour or, at best, present radically different interpretations of events and issues, a process of triangulation was used whereby the data collected from interviews was cross-referenced with other published first-hand accounts and documentary sources from the peace process and also with published secondary source materials.⁶⁶ A manual analysis of all data was then undertaken using the above materials and was supplemented by grey materials, such as conference papers, reports and proceedings and election manifestos from the 1994 to 1998 period. Some peer-debriefing took place which involved exposing the author's preliminary analysis and tentative conclusions to peers on a continuous basis which assisted in further analysis of the study. This took the form of conference papers presented at various conferences after the interview period in 2000. Papers were delivered at the International Leadership Academy/United Nations University Post-Conflict Peace-Building Conference in Amman,

Jordan in November 2000; the Ethnic Studies Network Conference at INCORE in July 2001; the Social Policy Association Annual Conference at Queens University, Belfast in August 2001; and at the Political Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference at the University of Ulster in October 2002.

The overall result is an analysis of political leadership unconstrained by either a strict chronological approach or a unionist/nationalist tradition approach because through using the grounded methodological approach, it became clear that neither approach emerged from the research as necessarily important. In other words, no attempt has been made to ascertain types and styles of leadership that could be described as inherently unionist or nationalist. Nor has any attempt been made to chart shifts in behaviour on a month to month basis by various political leaders. Rather, the focus has been on political leadership in Northern Ireland in its generic form during the entire period of the peace process. This is critically important in terms of the progression of the overall argument which contends that an alternative interpretation of political leadership during the Northern Ireland peace process is critical to the development of any future analyses of the Northern Ireland peace process, and also to the development of the analyses of peace processes more generally. Focusing on a unionist/nationalist leadership dichotomy would be likely to result in a perpetuation of the academic argument that the conflict and its resolution was about two distinct ethnic groups. The research presented here seeks to offer an alternative analysis.

Conclusions: the potential contribution

It is argued that research projects should satisfy two main criteria in order to determine their likely value to the academic community. The first is that the research should pose a question that is deemed to be important in the real world. The second is that the research should have the potential to make a contribution to scholarly literature by increasing our ability to construct some scientific explanations of some aspect of the world.⁶⁷ This contribution can be made in many ways. It can take the form of challenging existing hypotheses, it can show that theories designed for some purpose in one literature can be applied in another literature, or it can also argue that an important topic has been overlooked in the literature and then proceed to contribute a systematic study to the area.⁶⁸ Marsh and Stoker add to this that: 'a characteristic of

good political science, in our opinion, is that it should have the capacity to reach out to other disciplines'.⁶⁹

Clearly, the subject of political leadership is one which is highly significant in the real world. Nowhere is this more true than in the context of violent and divided societies. The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict argues that bold leadership is essential as part of the tools and strategies used in the prevention of conflict but laments that we know far more about the role of leaders in stimulating ethnic and communal conflict than we do about the role of leaders in diminishing it.⁷⁰ The question(s) posed by this book asks what was the role, capacity and effect of political leadership during the peace process in Northern Ireland and how (if at all) can we use what we know about the role, capacity and effect of political leadership in one specific, violent context, to help build a more general understanding of these issues in the context of other peace processes?

Given that the research must also contribute to the scholarly literature on the subject, the contribution seems best suited to the rationale which suggests that political leadership in peace processes is an important topic which has been overlooked in both the political leadership literature in general and in the peace and conflict studies literature in particular.

To sum up this introduction, consider the simple analogy of baking a cake. The ingredients are relatively simple – a combination of some flour, eggs, sugar, butter and milk. Deciding how much or how little of each ingredient to use is rather more difficult. Most people will use a cook book to assure themselves that they have all of their ingredients mixed in exactly the 'right' quantity and therefore will produce a perfect result. However, ingredients mixed in slightly different quantities do not necessarily mean that the 'mix' isn't quite right but it does mean that the outcome will be slightly different. More sugar will simply make the cake sweeter. Less eggs and the cake may not rise. In the absence of flour, there would be no cake at all. The point is that the same ingredients mixed in different quantities will affect the overall outcome. In the context of political leadership and peace processes, baking a cake can be equated with building and sustaining a peace process. Political leadership is just one ingredient within that process. The question is which ingredient does political leadership represent? Is it akin to flour – without which there would be no cake? Without political leadership would there be no process? Or is it similar to sugar – to sweeten what can often be a bitter process? We know that as an ingredient in a peace process political leadership is important. That is not enough. We need to have a clearer

understanding of the role, capacity and effect of political leadership during the peace process in Northern Ireland in order to convincingly interpret the significance of the leadership ingredient. This book seeks to provide that clarity while remaining conscious that within such clarity may lie many contradictions and inconsistencies.

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Examining the phenomenon of political leadership in the particular context of the Northern Ireland peace process, Cathy Gormley-Heenan argues that much of the literature on political leadership in general has made little meaningful connection with the issues of peace, conflict and divided societies. In this critical interpretation of the Northern Ireland peace processes, she shows how the 'leadership lens' offers insights not offered by conventional analyses of peacemaking processes. She suggests that political leadership was often necessarily contradictory in style and substance, and argues that such political leadership can best be described as 'chameleonic leadership' – an inconsistent leadership which shifts according to the opinion of others and the climate in which it exists.

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