History, structure and action in the settlement of complex conflicts: the Northern Ireland case

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ABSTRACT. This article argues for an historical-structural approach to explaining settlement. It argues that how institutions function and how actors pursue their ends is in part determined by slow-moving structural relationships whose logic, trajectory and effects can only be identified historically. In complex conflicts where such relationships generate tendencies to conflict, settlement requires a breaking of the historical patterns. This article elaborates this model to account for the Northern Ireland case, situating the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in a series of settlement initiatives and arguing that what made the difference between relative success 1998 and earlier failures was real-world change in the historic role of the British state in the region. In the process it shows the factors that may destabilise settlement, and contributes to debates on the role of political agency and structural constraints in complex conflicts.

Keywords: history, structure, action, conflict, settlement, historical-structural model, Northern Ireland, British state, state-change

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Introduction

History is important in all conflicts, but in different ways and to different degrees. Sometimes early events produce tightly configured, deeply embedded structural patterns, interrelated in complex ways with symbolic systems, that are generative of conflict tendencies. In the ideal type case, the configuration has systemic properties, reproducing itself despite change in the elements and thus locking in tendencies to conflict. Northern Ireland is such a case. Sometimes the structural patterns are looser, conducive to conflict rather than generative of it, open to mobilisation on several different cleavages depending on elite action and choice of repertoire. So, for example, scholars of North India converge in emphasising the importance of elites in mobilising on the religio-communal division rather than on caste lines or on other
forms of distinction.¹ Sometimes the legacy of history is a political arena where institutions are weakly embedded and power relations unstable. In such cases, power-imbalances are the result as much as the cause of conflict, while strategy and interest far outweigh ‘identity’ or ‘values’ as motivation for conflict. This is the case of so-called ‘warlord’ conflicts or ‘new wars’ such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.² In each type of case, the preconditions of settlement differ.

Our interest in this article is in the first of these categories. In these cases, the key to settlement lies in the weakening of structural patterns that generate conflict and the breaking of systemic linkages that reproduce these patterns. This simple point carries important implications at once for method and for substantive explanation. It means that identification of the conflict-generating structural relations and the systemic basis of their reproduction is critical to explaining conflict and identifying paths to settlement. This is not to disregard the proximate causes of settlement success or failure – such as militants, mediators, negotiators, guarantors, spoilers, institutional design, disarmament, and confidence building measures (Crocker et al, 1996, Hartzell and Hoddie, 2007, Darby and MacGinty, 2008). But in complex conflicts like Northern Ireland, every possible synchronic factor and short term mechanism can be seen to play some role in conflict and in settlement. An historical-structural approach identifies which such factors are most important, how and when they operate, and how conflict-generating mechanisms may be weakened. In this way, it addresses the question of the relation of structure and action, showing how and when actors become important, and which types of action are most likely to have major effects in moving towards settlement. It also allows policy-relevant analysis: an identification of the stress-points in particular settlements, and an anticipation of and preparation for future crises.

This article first sets out a general historical-structural model for explaining settlement, and then shows how it may be operationalized. It continues by demonstrating its value in explaining why some settlement initiatives succeeded in Northern Ireland (1998 and 2006) while preceding initiatives failed, goes on to show the role of action in changing structural constraints, drawing on new data from the John Whyte Archive, and uses the analysis to assess the tensions in the settlement reached in 1998/2006 and the challenges they pose for the future.
History, structure and action in settlement processes

Developing the model

An historical-structural approach holds that tendencies to conflict are generated by long-lasting structural and geo-political relationships that typically stretch beyond the conflict zone itself. Change in these structures is the key to settlement success. Such models have a long tradition in social theory (see Adams, Clemens and Orloff, 2005). The importance of historically embedded structures is recognised in theories of ethno-national conflict and settlement. A focus on proximate causes of conflict and settlement, however, misses the longer-term processes whose slow change determines what synchronic factors are present and how they operate (Pierson, 2004, 14).

We argue that – at least for an important sub-set of cases – a diachronic analysis is necessary to show the causal processes at work and to intervene in them. This is quite compatible with a recognition of the importance of short term proximate causes and actor- and institution-oriented approaches. However it situates the importance of such factors in a wider relational field, with different socio-political levels intersecting, taking different importance in different conflicts, and permitting or precluding settlement (see Cordell and Wolff, 2010, 6-10, Jesse and Williams, 2011, 31-76). The general model is as follows:

As Figure 1 suggests, the different levels of analysis are interrelated but also irreducible one to another. For example, change at the structural level impacts on public and political expectations and categorisations. Change at the geo-political level not only does this, but also stimulates elite interest in state change. Meanwhile state-change is carried forward by elite action, often stimulated by events in the conflict zone, it takes place through a range of means including negotiation and institution-building and in turn impacts on socio-structural relations.

The structural conditions of conflict have recently been emphasised in comparative research on ‘horizontal’ inequalities (Stewart, 2008), state-centred ethnic exclusion (Cederman et al, 2010, Wimmer, 2013, 1-36), and the multiple levels and roles of transnational linkages (variously Keating, 2001, Gleditsch, 2007). In this article, we argue that a structural approach needs to be supplemented by an historical perspective. This is because the important ‘structural’ factors are continuous rather than dichotomous variables: inequality or exclusion or instability vary in degree along multi-dimensional spectra (see Baker et al, 2004, 21-56). How far they are tolerated or seen as reasons to mobilise varies widely with political, cultural,
normative and even psychological factors (Baker et al, 2004, 57-72, 212-246; Son Hing, 2012). Inequality and exclusion of already politicised ethnic groups is highly correlated with conflict (Cederman et al, 2010). But how much movement on the spectra of inequality to equality, exclusion to inclusion, instability to stability, is enough to open the way to settlement? From an historical-structural perspective, the answer is clear: when it signals a change in the deep-set historical structures that have reproduced conflict over time. Only when we grasp the nature of these historically-embedded structures can we identify the changes that are likely to make a difference to conflicting parties and populations.

An historical-structural perspective leads to quite radical reframing of conventional actor-oriented explanations of settlement. In complex conflicts, where long-lasting configurations of power and power alliances, symbolic linkages and systems of varying spatial extensiveness take a tightly-patterned form and generate conflict tendencies, politicised actors are typically aware of these patterns and highly sensitive to the longer-term significance of events and actions (Ruane and Todd, 2004). Of course each party interprets history according to their cultural concepts and ideological narratives, and their interpretation of causality is different from that of the social scientist: but the same broad patterns of coercion, exclusion, rebellion, growth or decline are recognised. As these change, so do the expectations and strategic calculations of the situationally-rational political actors.

In such cases, small and difficult-to-achieve shifts in a nodal point in the conflict-generating configuration may – as in a threshold effect – produce very large change in the conflict region (see Lustick, 93, 37-46). Such nodal points may be powerful states, where the conflict configurations are anchored in institutional, constitutional and territorial structures or they may be whole regional systems. Change at such points opens the way for actors in the conflict-region to consider different strategies, including settlement. Of course settlement is not inevitable – it depends on negotiation and mediation, good institutional design, careful guarantees of security, etc. The actor- and institution-oriented factors are crucially important, necessary conditions for settlement. But they are not sufficient conditions. Moreover their existence and functioning depends on the historical-structural changes: what counts for a militant as a good reason for settlement varies as the embedded structural patterns are reproduced or are broken.

**Assessing the model**

As outlined above, the historical-structural model involves three sets of claims. First, that historically developing structural patterns generate conflict tendencies, and breaking these patterns opens the way to lasting settlement. Second, that the process of breaking these patterns is likely to include focussed action at nodal points. And third, that the mechanisms by
which the historical patterns – and change in them – affect political choice in the conflict region are mechanisms of situated rationality, involving recognition of newly opening opportunities that incentivise strategy change.

To assess the model involves identifying the structural patterns that generate conflict tendencies in a particular case, showing how and when they change, and showing how this is related to successful settlement. In the literature, settlement success is assessed in radically different time frames – ending civil wars in a 5 year frame (Stedman and Rothchild, 2002), or implementing peace accords (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2007), or undermining social, structural and communal divisions (Lederach, 1997). Moreover as Darby & MacGinty (2008, 1-3) point out, making peace is a sequential process and no single mark of ‘success’ is appropriate across all cases. However relative failure or success is identifiable within any particular case, placing successive initiatives on a scale which runs from outright failure (increasing the intensity of violence) to reaching and implementing agreements to the diffusion of division. This is our approach in the case study that follows. It permits a comparison of the relative success of settlement initiatives and an assessment of the worth of the historical-structural explanation of this.

A full assessment of the historical-structural approach, testing its usefulness relative to other approaches, assessing its assumptions, demonstrating its explanatory power and showing its range of applicability, requires a series of historically-informed empirical case studies. In this article we take only one case study, Northern Ireland, in order to show how the approach can be operationalised, how it explains why superficially similar settlement initiatives met radically different outcomes, and how it leads to policy-relevant assessments of the conditions of settlement stability.

The Northern Ireland conflict: an historical-structural model of settlement

The extensive literature on the Northern Ireland conflict shows conclusively that a multiplicity of factors and processes at different socio-spatial levels impacted upon conflict and on settlement (Whyte, 1991; Cox, 2006). Almost every mechanism associated with settlement in the literature can be found in this case (see, for example, White, 2013). But the presence of multiple factors does not mean they are all equally important. The challenge is to identify the key factors and how they connect. This is what the historical-structural model does.

Patterns of conflict

The Irish case is one where there are historically embedded patterns of conflict. A deeply divisive, crisis-ridden but also stubbornly persistent system of structural and geo-political rela-
tionships was early established and then reproduced itself over time. It involved relations of dominance and inequality between two ethno-religiously distinct populations, underwritten by the English/British state which depended on the locally dominant population to maintain stable governance and administration.

Crucially the historical system remained while the parts changed. The English state’s interest in colonisation and explicit support for the Protestant interest from the 16th to the 18th century became in the nineteenth century a British interest in imperial power, state security and regime maintenance, and in the twentieth a set of embedded institutional habits of governance and official understandings with their own inertia, which reproduced Protestant dominance as an unintended consequence of normal state practices. Conflictual interests were continually regenerated from the structures of state and economy, themselves underpinned by wider British state structures and British governmental action and inaction, and symbolically framed in terms of the religio-cultural oppositions typical of modern Europe, institutionalised in the British-Irish archipelago.

This system of relationships was overcome in independent Ireland in 1921, but was reconstituted in Northern Ireland where it survived until directly challenged after 1968. As is well known, that challenge took a political (Social Democratic and Labour Party, later Sinn Féin) and a violent (Provisional IRA) form. We are concerned with the sequence of settlement initiatives from this time.

The sequence and outcome of settlement initiatives after 1968
Table 1 shows the sequence of settlement initiatives, and summarises the actors involved in each, the provisions of each, and their relative success or failure. The table shows that all of the proposed initiatives involved some form of power-sharing and that of 1973-4 and all the initiatives after 1985 an Irish dimension of some kind. In particular the two most far-reaching initiatives – the 1973 ‘Sunningdale’ experiment and the 1998 ‘Good Friday’ Agreement (GFA) – had a similar stress on consociational government and an institutionalised Irish dimension. This was echoed also in the St Andrews Agreement of 2006. The institutional similarities were sufficiently strong that Seamus Mallon of the SDLP dubbed the GFA ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’. Of course there were institutional differences between the three agreements. In particular, the GFA was more finely tuned, more egalitarian and more veto-proof than the Sunningdale one (see McGarry and O’Leary, 2004, 19-61; 260-93 ). But this was because it had to be – by 1998 the parties would take nothing on trust.

[Table 1 about here]
This invites a question of comparative significance: if the basic shape of settlement was clear in the early years of conflict, when the parties were more moderate than later, why did it take so long for a settlement to be agreed and implemented? The conventional explanations are actor-oriented – government miscalculations; government refusal to confront the unionist veto; spoiling tactics by republicans and by loyalists; nationalist over-ambition; unionist recalcitrance, commitment problems. For many commentators the GFA and the Sunningdale initiatives are essentially the same, and all that changed in the period between 1973 and 1998 was that the warring parties finally came to terms with reality and gave up their earlier aims (Moloney, 2002, xv-xvi) We argue, on the contrary, that ‘reality’ was itself radically changed, in such a way that the parties had a new interest in coming to terms with it in order to achieve their (now modified) aims. To understand the nature of that change we need an approach that is both structural and historical.

 Actors and structures
Sir Kenneth Bloomfield (2007, 234, 40-49) – a senior Northern Ireland civil servant from the 1960s to the 1990s – turns the ‘actor’ explanation of Sunningdale’s failure and the GFA’s success on its head by noting that the political parties in Northern Ireland in 1973 were significantly more moderate than in 1998. The political parties had moderate programmes: the SDLP in 1973 was committed to unity only by consent, and was willing at least temporarily to shelve its goal of condominium and policing reform in order to participate in government (Farrar, 2010, 68-88 ; McLoughlin, 2010, 50-59 ); republicanism had no electoral mandate; Faulkner’s unionists were willing to accept power-sharing and a (powerless) Council of Ireland. The mass unionist public, despite a hardening of attitudes in 1969-70 (see Walker, 2002, 171-184) remained willing to contemplate a power sharing arrangement and only a small minority showed any appetite for taking on the state (Kerr, 2006, 68-70 ). There was, most important of all, substantive mutual trust and goodwill between the politicians in the new executive (Farrar, 2010, 105 ; Bloomfield, 1994, 205-7). On the republican side, violence was ongoing by the IRA but was supported – even passively – only by a small minority of nationalists and Catholics.

By 1998, these relatively positive conditions no longer existed. The political parties were more extreme: the SDLP remained committed to unity by consent, but on all other issues it had moved to a more egalitarian and assertive stance; Sinn Féin now had a strong electoral mandate and was negotiating on the basis of an equality, reform and demilitarisation agenda; Trimble’s UUP in 1998 did not so much accept power sharing and an Irish dimension but were forced into it as the only way to lessen the involvement of the Irish government in place since 1985; they accepted difficult changes (prisoner releases and policing reform) because
they had no choice, the British would go ahead with them anyway (Godson, 2004, 289, 837 ). In 1998 mutual trust and goodwill between unionists and republicans was absent, and the relations between the leaders of the UUP and SDLP were not good. The IRA was on ceasefire, but violence continued, carried out by dissident republicans, and included one bombing in Omagh in 1998 that caused more deaths than any single incident in the 1970s.

Yet in 1974, loyalist paramilitaries and trades unionists succeeded in bringing down Sunningdale. Why did Sunningdale fail and the GFA survive? Of course actor-explanations are correct that the proximate cause of Sunningdale’s failure was unionist response and loyalist mobilisation. In 1974, the unionist public quickly lost faith in power-sharing: only 19% of the population supported the pro-power-sharing, pro-Union parties (including Alliance and Northern Ireland Labour party) in the February 1974 Westminster election. Loyalist mobilisation and intimidation occurred in the May 1974 Ulster Workers Council Strike, and after several days without British intervention, Unionist support for the strike began to grow (Kerr, 2006, 51-3, 58-70 ). But unionist resistance to the GFA was also strong. In 1998, the entire Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) together with a series of drop-outs from Trimble’s Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) were anti-Agreement, and by early 2000 they made up a majority of unionists in the Assembly. By 2003 Protestant support for the Agreement had declined to 28% (see figure 2). If this was stronger than support for Sunningdale, it was not by much.

To explain why loyalists and unionist dissidents succeeded in bringing down agreement in 1974 and failed after 1998 we must move beyond political actors to social and geo-political structure. In large part the difference between the outcomes of the two initiatives was a product of the changing structurally defined balance of resources within Northern Ireland. Table 2 shows that changing balance, and while the measures are not fully comparable, the trend is clear.

Table 2 shows the disadvantage experienced by Catholics in Northern Ireland in 1971. Sunningdale was a form of political power sharing superimposed on an imbalanced social structure, where unionists and loyalists had a radical advantage in extra-political power resources – not least in the trades unions, civil service and police – and the expectation that they could use these resources to resist change. By 1998 this advantage was already being eroded. This affected popular and political expectations. The increasing nationalist share of the vote signifies not simply or even primarily demographic change, but also the sense among na-
nationalist voters that it had become worthwhile to participate politically, that it could make a difference.

The reason for Sunningdale's failure and the GFA's (and later St Andrew's) success was not simply structural change within Northern Ireland, but also change in the form of British governance there. In 1974, there was no attempt by the British – the only actors with the power to do so – either to mollify or to incentivise popular unionism to accept Sunningdale. On the contrary, Heath's decision to call an election in February 1974 gave free rein to anti-power-sharers (now in control of the Ulster Unionist Party) to organise and mobilise. Wilson's and Rees' failure to stop the UWC strike in the initial days encouraged normally law-abiding middle-unionists to support it. Nor are these isolated misjudgements. No British Prime Minister until 1985 was willing to confront mass unionist protest, or to govern without the support of the locally-dominant community (Rees, 1985, 90; Callaghan, 1973, 78-9). No Prime Minister from the 1960s until the 1990s consistently prioritised Northern Ireland over ‘domestic’ (Great British) imperatives, nor did any until the 1990s attempt to restructure Northern Ireland in order to change popular attitudes there. These were not simply contingent features of government action or inaction, they were settled ‘habits of statecraft’, relying on what Jim Bulpitt (1983, 3, 77) called ‘the official mind’, and forming what might be seen as an institutionally embedded ‘policy paradigm’ (Hall,1993 ). They functioned to insulate politics in Westminster from conflict in Northern Ireland, and at the same time to reinforce the Protestant advantage in Northern Ireland. This is continuous with the long-term pattern of relations that characterised the British role in Ireland and it was driven by the same state interests – in security, stability and order – and relied on the same entrenched state practice of administering territories through the dominant local community. Only after 1985, and in large part as an unintended by-product of the British-Irish institutional coordination, did this begin to change. Once it did, then the game changed for unionists and loyalists: they could no longer veto policies they disliked, they had to negotiate and participate in shared institutions in order to amend the policies. One-time unionist ‘spoilers’ became leaders of settlement: David Trimble led the UUP into the GFA in 1998; Ian Paisley led the DUP into the St Andrews Agreement in 2006.

Beyond synchronicity: structures and history

Table 2 shows that changing social structure within Northern Ireland was relevant to settlement, but does not itself explain it. The ‘equalisation’ process made political inclusion newly meaningful to republicans and removed the loyalist veto on political change. But it had a different temporality to the settlement process. Equalisation began slowly, was given a boost by the Anglo Irish Agreement of 1985, speeded up with the Fair Employment Act of 1989, began to touch the cultural sphere in the 1990s, but was only generalised to security, justice, and
public culture, in the 2000s (Ruane and Todd, 2012). Moreover the nationalist interest in
equalisation changed over time: economic inequality became politicised in the mid 1980s
and the broader ‘equality agenda’ only became core to republican strategy in the late 1990s
when the process of equalisation was already well underway. In 1969 the civil rights march-
ers and in 1973 the SDLP and its supporters would have been satisfied with significantly less
than was achieved in 1998 and after. Conversely, republicans had no intention of settling
simply for parity in employment, which was the main achievement in the 1990s, and even
that incomplete. The equalisation process is relevant to settlement, but not in a direct and
unilinear causal relationship.

Ruane and Todd (1996, 146-8, 175-7, 200-203) have argued that (in)equality was important
to people in Northern Ireland not simply because of its material implications nor simply for the
political and cultural influence it brought or denied. It was important also for its wider strategic
and symbolic meanings, what it said about rights and values, whether or not one’s experi-
ence was recognised, what it meant for one’s wider projects and often also for its impact on
self-esteem. What changed the party strategies in Northern Ireland was not simply reform
towards greater equality in Northern Ireland, but what this change showed about the wider
pattern of relationships and the British role in sustaining it, and the opportunities being
opened for the future. It was change in the historically embedded system of relations that
made the equalisation process so important. By the 1990s, change was evident at every
level:

(i) Change in the balance of social structural power in Northern Ireland, as is shown in the
continued relative Catholic improvement on socio-economic and demographic indica-
tors (see Table Two).

(ii) Change in the balance of coercive power: the survival capacity of the IRA is evidence
of new coercive capacity on the Catholic side. In 1973 it was reasonable to assume
that republicans could be marginalised in any new settlement. By the 1990s – even af-
fer ceasefire and problems of military organisation – it was clear that republicans were
a force that would remain important, if not decisive, in Northern Ireland

(iii) Change in the balance of geo-political power in Northern Ireland. From 1985, and in-
creasing in intensity through the 1990s, there was a clear re-positioning of government
policy and – even more important – of state institutions in their relation to Northern Ire-
land. This was a shift not simply to a much more even-handed position but to actively
intervening to create a more equal society and doing so against organised unionist op-
position. This was a clear breach in historical pattern. 10
Change in geo-political relations in the archipelago. The British Irish relationship begun in 1985 had changed the logic of British policy making in Northern Ireland and opened a range of transnational political linkages and opportunities short of Irish unity. It provided a new logic and legitimacy to British policy making, drawing on looser concepts of sovereignty suitable for a global age and a flexible and open sense of territoriality on the island.

The presence of international guarantors, in particular US President Bill Clinton, willing to underwrite the principles of agreement, and stand against British policy if necessary. (Dumbrell, 2000, 214-222). By the same token, the new international order gave incentives for repositioning in Northern Ireland, both to the British state to facilitate the remaking of a British global role in alliance with the US, and to the republicans, who saw the world order changing. (Cox, 2006, 427-442; Ruane and Todd, 2007).

The equalisation process in Northern Ireland was important both in itself, and as a product and a sign of changing patterns at wider levels. While (i) and (ii) gave Catholics and nationalists a political leverage they never had in the past and institutionalised key mechanisms for delivering equality this was only the overt sign of more transformative change at level (iii), underpinned in turn by change at level (iv) and guaranteed at level (v). Levels (iii) and (iv) were nodal points in the structural relations which generated conflict – in the British state’s positioning with respect to the parties and communities in Northern Ireland and in Ireland. The British state remains the sovereign power in part of Ireland but this is because a local majority wills it so despite the fact it has been actively dismantling their inherited privileges and opening a path towards different possible futures. This is a real change in a long-term historical pattern, a continuation of the changes achieved after 1921 and evident again after 1969. It meant that nationalists and republicans could enter a settlement secure in the knowledge that they had made real progress. It meant that if unionists were now obliged to negotiate an agreement to prevent further slippage in their position, they could also hope to delay such slippage for another generation at least and perhaps forever (Aughey, 2001).

Crucially, the GFA did not put these changes in place; rather it confirmed and consolidated them. The changing historical-structural relations delivered the GFA, much more than vice versa. As those changes were confirmed, not least by a steadying of British purpose and a determined British-Irish joint strategy, the DUP and Sinn Féin stabilised the settlement by agreeing at St Andrews to enter government.

As part of this process, important shifts in symbolic structures occurred in both states – in British concepts of sovereignty, in Irish constitutional imperatives and through an increasing if uneven convergence in the language of British and Irish states in Northern Ireland. In turn,
this was symbolised in the provisions of the GFA that gave the people of Northern Ireland the right to be and to be recognised as British, or Irish, or both. But symbolic structures were changed much less than power structures. The Irish state changed its aims, but not its understanding of nationality or its habits of governance, or its majoritarian practical ethos. In short, the state-level understandings that reproduced a cultural lock-in in Northern Ireland remained strong (Ruane, 2012).

**Changing structures: the role of elite action**

Once change in the British role was clear, the parties in Northern Ireland changed their strategies, modified their aims, the drama of negotiation and implementation came into play, and particular choices and courageous leadership made a difference to the outcome. Success of settlement was not predetermined, but it was made possible by the change in the power balance within Northern Ireland and in the role of the British state in sustaining this. This changed configuration explains the role of the many proximate factors leading to settlement in 1998 – it explains why spoilers did not succeed in 1998, despite their success in the past; it shows why republicans strategically recalculated, and why unionists decided to negotiate and come to agreement; it makes sense of the long term strategy of the Irish state and the complex changing policies of the British; it explains why republican commitment problems which were once rooted in principled mistrust of the British were reduced to practical issues which eventually were managed. Indeed once we bring in cultural as well as structural patterns, considerable nuance in explanation is possible.

But how did the change in the historical pattern occur? A multiplicity of factors were involved. For example, the process of economic equalisation was a product as much of deindustrialisation and temporary US pressure as of changing British perspectives (Ruane and Todd, 2012). But the nodal point of change was in the British state and this is also of key comparative interest, in showing how elite actors nudged forward structural changes and how small changes in this powerful institutional arena had major effects on settlement. In the remainder of this section we outline what the John Whyte Archive reveals about the intentions and actions of the British elite, and the extent to which they were aware of the historical significance of their actions.¹² We focus on the 70 interviews and four witness seminars with members of the British and Irish political elite. We summarise the data below.

Almost all the British and Irish elite believed that important changes in Northern Ireland were produced through British-Irish cooperation, while disagreeing about causality and sequence. In short, they believed that their action was important.
Almost all the Irish elite, although from very different political, institutional and temperamentald standpoints, pointed to the process of change in British Irish relations from the distance and mutual criticism of most of the 1970s to the cooperative problem-solving of the 2000s. They point out too that this change occurred sequentially: it began in the negotiations towards the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 but only at the highest levels – Cabinet Secretaries, Prime Ministers; it only slowly percolated down to lower levels. Even after 1998, constructive cooperation occurred only where clear agreements had been reached; significant British-Irish disagreement continued in areas of security, policing and justice well into the 2000s.13

- Almost all the Irish elite pointed to 1985 as a threshold-point, in two respects. It was the first time that the British withstood mass unionist protest. It was also the first time that nationalist perspectives and concepts found a place in the British policy debate. The Irish respondents were disappointed that they did not result in policy change.14 However, 1985 was intended by the Irish side to change the logic of British decision-making (Lillis, 2010) and, albeit in unintended ways, it did (Todd, 2011).

- The British elite, without exception, emphasised that the changes made after 1985 were a matter of British choice and decision, while acknowledging the helpfulness – on occasion – of Irish and US advice: as one senior official put it, ‘I think one of the things the Irish officials did for us was they were kind of our unpaid consultants on nationalist sensibility’.15

- The British elite agreed that the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 did not significantly change policy. Even those issues discussed at great length in the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council (AIIGC) for example policing and collusion, would – say the British respondents – have been dealt with by the same form of inquiries even had the AIIGC not existed.16 In effect, the senior politicians are clear that the AIIGC never became a decision making body. However the AIA had other impact. Some emphasised that it opened up policy choices that until then had been kept off the agenda: ‘It put some things on the table clearly.’.17 Some emphasised the unintended consequences of the AIA, the way seemingly interminable meetings allowed British and Irish ministers time to assess each other, and later to form cooperative partnerships.18 Even those who believed that it antagonised unionists without winning republicans and delayed settlement noted that other ways would have had to be found to gain close British-Irish cooperation.19

- Change was most evident in the language and concepts used, particularly on the British side. The officials who made the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1983-5 saw it as an im-
important historical shift in British-Irish relations (see Goodall, 2010). In contrast, the offici-
als involved in British-Irish and peace negotiations in the 1990s did not concern
themselves with history, they took the changes and the new involvement of the Irish
government in strategic discussion and planning, for granted. Other practical reform
and planning issues, which were sidelined in the 1970s and 1980s became in the
1990s a key aspect of strategy: ‘What we were trying to do was, I think, two things.
One was to manage the dimensions of the conflict downwards. A lot of that was ..the ...
way that you handled security issues but also .... very important things were done
about underlying social and economic issues. Trying to make it a smaller and less
heated conflict. Then trying to find a political settlement to which you could attract the
main players.’ In both respects, the principles which the Irish were trying to introduce
in the 1980s became normalised in British state practice in the 1990s.

- Did the state change? British elites were nuanced on this question, even within the one
interview. Politicians and officials of the 1990s and 2000s spoke of a new degree of at-
tention to Northern Ireland, new levels of flexibility in negotiations, and made clear that
the concerns of the 1970s and early 1980s (for example, read-over from Northern Ire-
land to the rest of the UK) were unimportant in the 1990s and 2000s. They emphasised
the time and thought that Prime Ministers Major and Blair, put into the process.21 When
asked explicitly, officials emphasised continuity, pointing out for example that a reform
programme had been ongoing since the 1970s.

- Politicians pointed to the innovations. Some contrasted the mood of the 1970s and
1980s – that nothing could be done – with the sense in the 1990s that more radical
change and settlement might be found.22 By the 2000s, politicians emphasised their
sense that they were actually changing things for the better, making a new social struc-
ture.23 ‘Some were forthright:’ I hope that others will learn from the story of Northern Ire-
land that you need to get in fast and get in serious and try and fix things before they’re
really broken’.24

These changes came about only through intensive diplomatic and policy-related meetings,
negotiations and document-drafting. Was there an historical game-plan? The Irish had one
earlier than the British, but by the 1980s senior officials were nudging structures and institu-
tions to change the historical configuration, and by the 1990s politicians and officials had the
aim of settlement and a rough sense of the steps to be taken. This was sometimes phrased
in terms of building ‘trust’ – the Northern Ireland politicians, it was said ‘sniffed at every
document as if it had a cobra about to rise out of the middle and strike them’.25 At the same
time, the practical steps were clearly and sequentially defined. Only a few had a long sense
of history, and they were often among the most senior, and not even all of them. But historical change may come about as an unintended effect of other actions. The process of British state change was a complex one, where periods of focused effort – in 1983-5, 191-5, 98-9, 2004-7 – were followed by periods when unintended incremental processes of change occurred, when nationalist issues came onto the policy agenda, nationalist concepts were imported into official understandings, and the policy arena changed in form, becoming open to flexible political strategies (Todd, 2013). The shifts were subtle, and occurred not in the state as a whole, but in state-practices, understandings, and policy-paradigms towards Northern Ireland. Was this change enough to redirect the historical pattern, to change the impact of the British presence in Northern Ireland? The unionist parties judged so as early as 1985 (Todd, 2011b). Nationalists were slower to decide, and republicans slowest of all. But in the end most judged that they did. We concur. Are the changes reversible? Yes of course, but it is unclear why any British government would wish to bear the international, British-Irish and internal Northern Irish cost of reversing them.

Predictions of the model

If a historical structural model explains the past, it is also of value in understanding the present and devising policy for the future. The explanatory model sketched above allows us to see the stress-lines of the 1998 agreement (and of its revision in 2006 at St Andrews) showing the tendencies towards stability and instability. Given that some (but not all) important structural patterns of conflict were breached, and that symbolic patterns remain only mildly ameliorated, we may expect:

- No gradual move to reconciliation. The dualist cultural logic of the geo-political configuration makes this highly unlikely

- Relative political stability. The dominant parties in each bloc – the DUP and Sinn Féin – have an interest in maintaining peaceful cooperation. Otherwise they lose out to their own extremes. However this party-political interest is balanced with their interest in maintaining support within their traditional communally-defined constituency. Together this leads to a politics of competitive communalism and division of resources. Intermittently, the tensions to which it gives rise cannot be managed by the parties themselves, and require British and Irish governmental interventions.

- No gradual convergence in political aims and identities (for example to a common Northern Ireland loyalty) because the new competitive communalism generates diverse interpretations of the status of Northern Ireland and its future.
In turn, this creates political vulnerability:

- To shifts in the policy of British and Irish states. Any shift in the British state position that might reverse the changes to date or cast in doubt the permanence of the state-reorientation would undermine the legitimacy of the republican position and give dissidents new impetus. Equally a reversal of the Irish state’s aspiration to unity by majority consent – either a return to a territorial claim or a rejection of unity – would be destabilising.

- To shifts in the balance of power, in particular demographic shifts. A nationalist electoral majority could lead some unionists to reconsider their interest in political cooperation, particularly if it opened the way to unity with an unchanged Irish state. In such circumstances, the re-emergence of loyalist violence is highly likely.

The imperative is to bypass these dangers. First, the institutionalisation of British and Irish cooperation, particularly on issues on the North, is urgent and appears not to have been prioritised after the GFA institutions were set up (see Coakley this volume). The hope of institutionalising a new cross-border and even post-sovereigntist order that will be very difficult to uproot has only partially been realised. Second, the single most effective way to undermine the lock-in of cultural division in Northern Ireland is by tackling symbolic opposition at the level of the states. Here the Irish state is a nodal point for change, since religio-national divisions parallel to those in Northern Ireland, if now weaker and more compartmentalised, have persisted there.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the point of an historical-structural approach is to build the basis for more informed comparison. We have argued that for each case-study it is crucial to identify the wider structural patterns – involving states, regions and international powers – that historically have underlain conflict. It is here that action, even if producing only small shifts in institutional patterns and trajectories, may have large effects on popular and political attitudes in the conflict region, removing the structural constraints on reaching a stable settlement. An historical-structural approach does not replace but complements analysis of actors and accords, situating the drama of conflict and negotiation within a structural context and showing how those structural constraints may themselves be changed. The real lessons from the Northern Ireland settlement lie less in its proximate causes than in the ways that focussed elite action – not always conscious of its own significance – pushed forward change in the historically-embedded patterns of conflict.
References


Colley, L. (1992), Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837, Yale.


Todd, J. (2013) Thresholds of state change: changing British state institutions and practices in Northern Ireland after Direct Rule. Political Studies, online publication July


Figure 1. Levels of analysis

Accord(s)
- Negotiations
- Provisions - institutional framework, legal provisions,
- Time frames
- Guarantors

Conflicting Actors: paramilitaries,
police, politicians, parties,
populations,
- Individual actors, governments, parties,
- Populations and their choices (in action, in voting, in passive support, in mass -refugee-movements)
- Armed groups
- Mediators, international organisations.

Wider Geo-political structures
- Synchronous: Boundaries and their permeability; regional transnational linkages of states, populations, economies; involvement of major global powers
- Diachronic: changes over time, longer term trends of change

Structural conditions and structural processes:
state, economy, social cleavages
- Synchronous: demographic composition, balance of ethnic & religious forces, centrifugal vs centripetal tendencies, stability of current ethnic balance (or imbalance), role of state in underpinning or constituting inequalities...
- Diachronic: structural changes over time and longer term trends of change.
Figure 2. Public attitudes to the GFA

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt); 1998 from Irish Times/RTE exit poll; 1999 figures from Nations and Regions monitoring report Nov 2002
Table 1. Settlement initiatives in Northern Ireland, 1968-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Political Actors</th>
<th>Institutional provisions</th>
<th>Success/failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stormont reform 1969-72</td>
<td>Moderate majorsities in main parties, violent extremes.</td>
<td>Offer of minimal and marginal inclusion of Catholics in Cabinet</td>
<td>Offer too little for Civil Rights and nationalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunningdale 1973-4</td>
<td>Moderate leaders in main political parties; increasing strength of loyalist</td>
<td>Voluntary power-sharing coalition of middle ground; Cross border institutions, unspecified remit, mutual veto</td>
<td>Lasts four months but brought down by loyalist strikers backed by anti-powersharing unionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convention, 1975</td>
<td>Party leadership stances harden. Violence continues</td>
<td>Voluntary coalition</td>
<td>Gains no cross-party agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference 1980</td>
<td>Hardened party stances, violence continues</td>
<td>Voluntary coalition</td>
<td>Gains no cross-party agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rolling devolution 1982-5</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Voluntary coalition, iterative agenda</td>
<td>Gains no cross-party agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIA 1985</td>
<td>Irish and British states. Violence continues</td>
<td>Irish role in policy making, structural change and incentives for devolution</td>
<td>Withstands unionist protest. Does not lead to agreement among parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke Mayhew talks 1991-2</td>
<td>Unionists opening to power sharing and Irish dimension, nationalist demands</td>
<td>Voluntary coalition of middle ground, Irish dimension Equalisation proceeds</td>
<td>Significant for agenda and length of negotiations but does not reach agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks, NIF 1996-7</td>
<td>All parties except Sinn Féin</td>
<td>Coalition of all participants, Irish dimension, equalisation</td>
<td>No serious engagement by SDLP while Sinn Féin excluded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFA 1998</td>
<td>Talks include republicans, SDLP, UUP, and small parties. The DUP refuse to</td>
<td>Power sharing devolution, Irish dimension and structural changes. British Irish</td>
<td>Reaches agreement, crises of implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participate. All main parties take harder line than in 1973. No trust.</td>
<td>enforcement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Andrews 2006 (see chapter 8)</td>
<td>DUP and SF now main parties. Dissident republicans and TUV remain as</td>
<td>Slight changes in institutions, devolution of policing, British-Irish enforcement</td>
<td>Agreement allows (relatively) stable implementation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Relative position of Catholics in Northern Ireland, 1971-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1971</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/Protestant demographic ratio</td>
<td>37/63</td>
<td>43/56</td>
<td>45/48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist % of overall vote</td>
<td>22.7 (1969 Stormont)</td>
<td>36.9 (Forum election, 1996)</td>
<td>42.1 (2010 Assembly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic % of managerial employment</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30.5% 1990</td>
<td>44.2 (2010 monitoring report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment differential Catholic/Protestant</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.5 (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic % of those with degree qualification or higher</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46.2 (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic % of police</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8 (1998)</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic % of top civil service positions</td>
<td>7% (1980) of top 121 posts (Asst Secretary +)</td>
<td>14% of top 550 positions (1987) (Senior Principal +)</td>
<td>35.5 of top 300 (SOC1) (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief (% of C respondents) that Catholics are discriminated against or treated unfairly</td>
<td>74 (1968)</td>
<td>38 (1998)</td>
<td>13 (2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX ONE

The data set used in this article comprises interviews with over 80 officials and politicians (from Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the USA) involved in British Irish negotiations from 1973-2010, with an additional six day-long witness seminars - where between 4 and 8 respondents who had participated in major set-piece British-Irish negotiations discussed their understandings and the processes that were involved with a number of academic questioners. These witness seminars involved the participation of another 40 respondents. The interviews and witness seminars were conducted by 5 interviewers (including the author) between 2005 and 2011, funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Our respondents included over thirty members of the British state elite, over forty members of the Irish state elite, and included four ex-prime ministers (three Irish and one British), many senior cabinet ministers including four secretaries of state for Northern Ireland, Cabinet Secretaries and senior officials in the Northern Ireland Office, Foreign Office, Departments of the Taoiseach, Foreign Affairs and Justice.

Interviews were semi-structured: interview questions covered the main periods when the respondent worked on Anglo-Irish relations and probed specific issues known to be contentious. Questions were decided in team discussion prior to the interview, with interviewer discretion to follow leads in the interview. Interviews and witness seminars are transcribed (except in the very few cases where the respondent wished for the tapes rather than a transcription to be lodged in the archive) and most have been corrected by the respondents. They are deposited in the John Whyte Archive at University College Dublin and are still under embargo. Phrases italicised in quotation should therefore be seen as close paraphrases (put in quotations to capture accurately the tone of response) and are not attributed. The transcripts - beginning with the witness seminars - will progressively be opened to researchers.
Notes

Acknowledgements. IRCHSS. Patterns of Conflict Resolution. Breaking Patterns of Conflict. Lorenzo Bosi, John Coakley

1. From very different perspectives, for example, Kakar, 1996; Brass, 1998.


4. Brown (1996 22-3) pointed out that much more had been written on the structural than on the proximate causes of conflict, but since then much of the quantitative literature has focussed on the proximate causes. The same is the case for studies of settlement, see for example Hartzell and Hoddie, 2007.

5. The point is well made by McGarry and O’Leary, 1995, although we do not fully agree with their conclusion.

6. This has been argued by Ruane and Todd, jointly and individually, on whose work we build. See Ruane and Todd, 1996, 16-48; 2007, Ruane, 2012, Todd, 2013. For the nineteenth century patterns, see Wright, 1996, in particular, 1-22.

7. On the wider religio-symbolic systems that underpin Northern Ireland divisions and are institutionalised there, see Colley, 1992, Hutchinson, 2005, 37, 108-12, Wright, 1987, 22-27.

8. The many factually interesting commentaries by journalists and participants tend to focus on these factors.

9. Brian Feeney commented that ‘the SDLP wasn’t going to sign up to working an administration in Northern Ireland unless it wasn’t Northern Ireland’, Irish News, 22.08.0 meaning that all the old cultural resonances and political assumptions associated with unionist control in Northern Ireland had to change.

10. The only and last equivalent attempt at reform against Protestant opposition was the Conservative strategy of ‘killing Home Rule with kindness’ in the late nineteenth century

11. Change also occurred at other levels, and the complex interrelations between European integration, British interests, and Irish strategies are discussed elsewhere in this volume.

12. See Appendix 1.


15. Interview, 21.09.10.

16. Interview, 18.06.2009

17. Interview, 7.05.2010

18. Interview, 18.06.2009

19. Interview, 21.09.2010

20. Interview, 25.07.2011. Some individuals from the late 1980s shared this view (interview 7.,07.2010) but it only became dominant in government in the 1990s.


22. Interview, 29.09.2010

23. Interviews, 1.10.08; 01.07.2011

24. Interview, 12.01.2011

25. Interview, 29.09.2010

26. Margaret Thatcher saw the AIA as primarily an agreement to increase security cooperation with the Irish. Tony Blair, despite his famous non-sound-bite ‘I feel the hand of history on my shoulders’ (of which some of the British respondents were highly critical), was said by his close aide Jonathan Powell (2008, 94 ) to have been non-ideological, a pragmatist untouched by ‘the prejudices of the past’.

27. With some reservations. Of Ruane’s (1999) different readings of the Agreement, the most positive has not materialised.