Negotiated deradicalization in the Irish peace process
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Introduction
Conflicts between states frequently end with negotiated peace settlements. Intra-state conflicts, by contrast, are much more likely to end with the victory of one side and the total defeat or abandonment of the struggle by the other side. While states do not generally contest the sovereignty of opposing states, civil wars, rebellions and insurgencies present a challenge to state sovereignty within a state’s own territory. They are more difficult to resolve by agreement because parties do not have an uncontested home territory to retreat to. Nonetheless, large-scale datasets indicate that a significant proportion of intra-state conflicts do end with negotiated settlements - around one quarter of the total.

Signing up to a negotiated settlement is a process that necessarily involves the deradicalization of both the behaviour and ideology of challengers to state authority. Involving concessions and compromise by both incumbents and challengers, such settlements constitute a distinctive form of deradicalization. They present a sharp contrast to deradicalization processes that are driven primarily by the overwhelmingly superior coercive and infrastructural capacities of one side. This paper outlines the distinctive ways in which the process of negotiation itself provides a mechanism for deradicalization. Crucially however, it is a mechanism that generates a mutual deradicalization of both incumbents and challengers.

Deradicalization through negotiated settlements might be expected to generate distinctive outcomes. This paper traces the connections between the distinctive deradicalization processes that occur in negotiation and the outcomes associated with these processes. It does this by looking at an important case; secret back-channel negotiations between the IRA and the British government in the early 1990s that preceded public talks between the two parties and the eventual negotiation of an inclusive peace agreement. It focuses on one aspect of those negotiations, the development of limited co-operation at the intersection between the parties and outlines the mechanisms by which cooperation at the intersection helped to generate movement on both sides and the deradicalization of both behaviour and attitudes.

Back channel negotiation in the Irish Peace Process
The violent conflict that broke out in Northern Ireland in 1969 and that lasted until the mid 1990s claimed more than 3,500 lives (Dixon, 2001; Tonge, 2006). It was exceptional in the post war west European context and illustrated that long established
democratic institutions and norms are no guarantee against violent ethnonationalist conflict. Irish Republicans in the IRA and Sinn Féin, the political party with which it was associated, aimed to reunite Ireland as an independent sovereign republic by bringing an end to British sovereign control of Northern Ireland by violence. The unionist majority in Northern Ireland sought to remain within the United Kingdom and loyalist paramilitary groups used illegal violence to supplement state efforts to defeat the IRA. The conflict was ultimately ended through a negotiated settlement in 1998 that drew in armed militants from both republican and loyalist organizations (Hancock, 2008; MacGinty & Darby, 2002). The channel dealt with in this case study was a key component in this peace process, providing a means of communication between the British Government and the IRA between 1990 and 1993 and generating a secret IRA ceasefire offer that was a prelude to the eventual IRA ceasefire of 1994. As a peace settlement based on inclusion of the extremes through negotiation the Irish case has been repeatedly invoked in recent years as an argument for negotiation. It is important to note that negotiations between the British government and the IRA were nested in and structured by a range of other important political relationships and influenced by the actions and positions of other key actors, including unionist and moderate nationalist political parties, loyalist paramilitaries and the Irish government.

Back channel negotiation in the Irish case dates back to the early 1970s when Brendan Duddy, a Derry businessman with strong and extensive political connections, began to act as an intermediary between the President of Sinn Féin, the political party associated with the IRA, and Michael Oatley, a senior MI6 agent (Ó Dochartaigh, 2009; Taylor, 1998, 2001). In early 1975 this communication moved on to a new plane and British representatives began a series of officially sanctioned secret meetings with Republican representatives who were reporting directly to the IRA Army Council, the central decision making body of the IRA. Contact was reopened in 1980 for negotiations aimed at ending the Republican hunger strikes in which ten IRA and INLA prisoners subsequently died. It was revived again in 1990/91 and used for negotiations on the conditions for entry to talks. This culminated in 1993 in a secret IRA ceasefire offer to the British government (Mallie & McKittrick, 1996, 2001; Powell, 2008; Taylor, 1998, 2001). By the time the IRA eventually declared a ceasefire in 1994 and contact between Sinn Féin and the British government began to move into the open, both parties had three years of recent experience of contact and an intermittent negotiating relationship that stretched back over two decades. This provided an important base for the subsequent building of a negotiated peace.

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1 MI6, the United Kingdom’s Secret Intelligence Service, is part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and is responsible for international intelligence operations (Dorrill, 2002). MI5, the ‘Security Service’ is responsible for domestic intelligence operations (Andrew, 2010). Both agencies were active in Northern Ireland because the conflict there had both an international and domestic character but by the mid to late 1970s MI5 had become the dominant agency there.

2 Irish National Liberation Army, a relatively small Marxist Republican armed group that was particularly active during the 1980s.
settlement in which the British Government and Sinn Féin ultimately built a close cooperative relationship (Mowlam, 2002; Powell, 2008).

**Methodology**

Back channel negotiation is a particularly difficult subject to investigate. Not only are crucial data deliberately withheld and concealed by participants on all sides, during and after negotiations; they also actively seek to shape the narratives and the available data on the subject for decades afterwards. Thirty five years on, key official British government records on the 1975 negotiations remain closed while references to this channel have been removed from multiple files in the UK national archives.

Nonetheless, the struggles to shape understandings of these channels can become far less charged and intense with the passage of time and it is easier to admit to a history of secret contact and exchange when there is broad consensus that the outcome justifies the means. The passage of time has also ensured that a wide range of official British government records on these contacts have become available under the thirty year rule over the past few years, along with other primary sources. As a consequence, the Irish experience of secret negotiation is much more susceptible to research than many other recent equivalents. It is important to remember however that the record remains fractured and that some key elements remain concealed. Given the fractured character of the available data and the relatively small number of cases of back channel negotiation for which detailed information is available, a case study combining critical analysis with historical methodologies provides an appropriate approach to developing our understanding of this kind of communication (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

Primary sources are central to the methodology. The most important new source is the papers of Brendan Duddy, the intermediary. The channel’s existence was publicly revealed in 1993 and its operation was described in a series of books published in the late 1990s (Taylor, 1998, 2001). The identity of the intermediary remained secret for several more years however. He received widespread publicity with a 2008 BBC documentary ‘The Secret Peacemaker’, that examined his role. The Brendan Duddy papers, deposited at the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2009, include personal diaries kept during intense periods of negotiation, documents exchanged between the British Government and the IRA, and a variety of other primary documents.3 This article draws on the diary of contact kept by Duddy throughout 1975 and for much of 1976 and on the diary kept for several months in 1993 when communication was at its most intense. Both diaries were coded to disguise the identities of individuals and to obscure the topic of discussion. They provide a unique insight into these negotiations from the perspective of an individual who operated at the intersection of the two sides. This data source is triangulated with primary sources from both the Republican movement and the British government.

Republicans also kept a written record of their 1975 negotiations with the British government, splitting the typing work between three individuals so that none of them would build up a complete picture of the talks (personal interview with Rúairí Ó

3 POL35, The Brendan Duddy Papers at the Archives, James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway.
Brádaigh). In relation to negotiations surrounding the Hunger Strikes of 1980 and 1981, Sinn Féin released a limited record of their contacts with the British government, while the British government has recently released selected documentation on this period of negotiation in response to a Freedom of Information request (Beresford, 1987; Clarke, 2009). In addition, Sinn Féin and the British Government both published extensive records of their communications between 1990 and 1993 which, although differing in detail, agree almost entirely with each other (1993; McKittrick & McCrystal, 1993; Sinn Féin, 1994). Thus, despite the gaps in our knowledge, extensive primary sources generated by the British government, the Republicans and the intermediary can be checked against each other to build a useful picture of these negotiations.

These sources are supplemented by extensive semi structured interviews with the intermediary conducted and recorded on several occasions in 2009. In addition, it draws on interviews with key participants on both the Republican and British government side in this back channel. Finally, a number of those involved in this channel have spoken about their involvement or written autobiographies in which they deal with it and these provide an additional primary data source (Major, 1999; Rees, 1985; Taylor, 1998, 2001).

All of these accounts and records and interviews must be analysed as interpretations seeking to shape perceptions rather than as transparent evidence, as accounts situated in a particular time and political context which shapes and limits the accounts that participants provide. The struggle to shape interpretations of this contact may not be as intense as it was, but it remains a site of struggle.

**Building a foundation for cooperation**

The cooperative contact that generated an IRA ceasefire offer in 1993 was made possible because it was built on a long term, if intermittent negotiating relationship. The experience of repeated contact provided information to both sides about the opposing party that increased the predictability of interaction. Increased predictability in turn provided the basis for the building of a very limited degree of trust. Cooperative relationships were established on the basis of a gradually increasing certainty about the intentions and patterns of behaviour of opponents. A striking continuity in personnel and the related development of strong and deep personal relationships in which there were high degrees of mutual trust, were crucial to this increasing predictability.

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4 POL 28, The Rúairí Ó Brádaigh Papers at the Archives, James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Continuity, personnel and personal relationships

Continuity of personnel is a defining characteristic of this channel and must be considered a key element in facilitating the development of a cooperative relationship. The same individual acted as intermediary at the nexus of this communication over a period of twenty years. The fact that both sides accepted the same individual in this role in repeated engagements ensured that a key infrastructural element for the renewal of contact at key moments was in place. The position of the intermediary as a primary official channel of communication between the British government and the IRA had been gradually established in the course of 1973 and 1974. Brendan Duddy was a businessman from Derry who had deeply-rooted and extensive connections across the political and religious divides in the city. His connections to senior Republicans in the city dated back to personal friendships and dense social connections forged in the 1950s and 1960s. He had been active in the civil rights movement in the city in the late 1960s and as violence escalated in the early 1970s he sought out a way to make a significant contribution to ending the conflict. Duddy believed that a negotiated agreement between the British government and the IRA was the only way to end the conflict and that such an agreement was attainable (personal interviews with Brendan Duddy). Crucial to the acceptance of Duddy as an intermediary were the strong personal relationships that he had developed with two key figures. On the one hand he had a strong relationship of trust and cooperation with the local chief of police in Derry who was at the reformist edge of the security forces and was opposed to key repressive measures taken by the state. This police chief in turn enjoyed close contacts with senior British intelligence agents (Ó Dochartaigh, 2005). Duddy also developed a strong relationship with Rúairí Ó Brádaigh, President of Sinn Féin, that began when they met in the US in 1972 (personal interview with Rúairí Ó Brádaigh). Ó Brádaigh was a key advocate within the Republican movement for the strengthening of the movement’s political dimension. Once Duddy’s role as a primary authorised intermediary had been established, contact could be established quickly on subsequent occasions.

Continuity of personnel also permitted the development of long term relationships. As noted in the literature, communication in negotiation is enhanced through the building of personal relationships (Friedman, 1994). In the case of the Oslo process Putnam and Carcasson (1997: 266) argue that the development of ‘…interpersonal relationships not only enhanced trust between opponents, but these efforts made it possible to build a foundation of mutuality on which both sides could stand, even when the negotiators rotated’. Pruitt (2000) similarly stresses the importance of ‘friendly interpersonal relations’ and the development of a ‘solidarity of purpose’ in the Oslo process.

Such relationships were also crucial in the Irish case. The initial development of this channel was built on strong personal relationships that stretched back over many years, as was the case in the Oslo process (Waage, 2004). When contact was renewed in 1980 and 1990 after long intervals it involved individuals on both sides who had been involved in previous rounds of contact (personal interviews with Brendan Duddy). Personality and personal compatibility were also consciously deployed in order to make this channel work. Thus, when a British agent was appointed to this channel in 1991 to replace Michael Oatley, whose personal relationship with the intermediary went back almost twenty years, he was an individual who got on extremely well with the intermediary. Duddy explains: ‘at this level they choose a
person that would be compatible with my personality…they knew me with a thousand telephone calls’ (personal interview). The higher levels of trust required in secret contact may well intensify the need for strong personal relationships if contact is to be sustained. Back channels gain an added intensity by binding individuals together through their shared secrets. Negotiators on both sides are very susceptible to criticism from those on their own side because of the strong opposition to the very act of ‘talking to the enemy’.

This continuity in personnel, and in particular the central role of a single individual as intermediary, gave the channel high levels of validity, a crucial element in determining whether it would be used for cooperative communication. One of the most difficult issues in back channel communication is establishing the legitimacy of a channel; that is, establishing that your interlocuters have the authority to ‘speak for and exert influence over’ the principals on their side (Putnam & Carcasson, 1997: 253). The use of this channel for a series of reciprocal gestures in the course of 1973 and 1974 established the legitimacy of this channel. These gestures included the release of hostages by the IRA and British statements promising to transfer IRA prisoners to Northern Ireland from British jails (Taylor, 1998).

The experience of establishing the legitimacy of this channel in the early 1970s meant that there was not the same need for extensive preliminary probing and testing when time came to renew contact in 1980 and again in 1990. The way in which contact was re-established in 1990 provides a further illustration of the high level of legitimacy attached to this channel. The British Government and the IRA were making minor public gestures and statements in 1989 and early 1990 indicating their possible flexibility if negotiations began. At that point Martin McGuinness, in charge of republican relations with the British, and reputed to be a senior IRA leader, suggested in a public speech that the British should reopen contact through this channel:

If ‘…they do not want to do it publicly… we are saying they should tell us privately. They have a means for doing that. They have had it for twenty years. The British government can contact us within an hour’

(undated newspaper clipping by George Jackson in Duddy papers, 8/218)

Sir John Chilcot, the top civil servant at the Northern Ireland Office at the time, recalled this statement immediately when asked about it twenty years later. He characterised it as ‘a confirmation that dialogue was possible from their side’ (personal interview). The statement gave the seal of approval of the Republican leadership to this channel, reinforcing its legitimacy from the British point of view.

Information and trust

In a situation of armed conflict where one side publicly rejects the legitimacy of the other, the conditions for establishing a relationship of even limited trust are very difficult. Without contact you can’t have a series of interactions and interchanges that build up predictability and confidence in the relationship. Negotiation is crucial not only for the substance of agreements made but by reducing uncertainties that can only be reduced through contact. Both sides need to establish not only the legitimacy of the channel, but also that the principals on the other side have authority, that they have the capability to deliver on the commitments they make. In the early 1970s British officials rejected contact with the IRA leadership on the basis that ‘…there was not
any one man or group in the IRA who were both willing and able to deliver an
effective and lasting ceasefire’ (quoted in Ó Dochartaigh, 2009: 62). By testing their
authority on minor issues, such as securing the release of hostages or detainees or the
transfer of prisoners, they can establish whether they enjoy this authority. The series
of exchanges in 1973 and 1974 in relation to prisoners and hostages, established for
both sides that the other party had the authority to deliver on commitments given.

This process also established that opponents would generally follow through on the
commitments they gave, even if it wasn’t always to the satisfaction of the other side.
That is, they did not directly lie and deceive, as a general rule. For Rúairí Ó Brádaigh
it was important that the British government be able to believe what the IRA was
saying to them:

Dúirt sé uair amháin liom gur thuig na Sasanaigh, maidir linne, rud ar bith gur
aontaigh muid leis go raibh sasta go gcómhlíonadh muid sin agus rud eile,
nach raibheamar ag déanamh bréag leo

[The intermediary] said to me once that the English understood about us that
we would implement anything that we had agreed to and another thing, that
we were not lying to them

(personal interview)

Ó Brádaigh delivered proof at one meeting with the British that an IRA denial of
responsibility for the killing of a policeman during the ceasefire was correct. His
intention was to demonstrate to the British representatives that ‘we are not liars’
(personal interview).

The dialogue on policy that took place through this channel was a further source of
information that could reduce uncertainty through the development of a broader
mutual understanding. When the parties made public statements the other side always
had to interpret them in the light of the varied potential audiences they were addressed
to. As noted in the literature (Walton & McKersie, 1991) the public posturing that
parties often engage in in front of various audiences can severely distort
communication. As Duddy puts it ‘you halved everything you read in the media or
you took it as the exact opposite’ (personal interview). Tacit communication and
secret communication provide two related methods of overcoming this problem
(Schelling, 1980; Walton & McKersie, 1991). Back channel communication had the
advantage that parties knew that there was no external audience shaping the message.
This information had a clarity that derived from the fact that it was conveyed
privately and directly from the leadership of one party to the leadership of the other,
via the intermediary or in face to face talks, as in 1975.

Finally, negotiations contributed to the building of trust by providing information
about the reliability of the opposing party in relation to procedures for contact. Both
sides learned that the other side would not take advantage of meetings to kill, arrest or
kidnap representatives. This does not mean that they could relax completely. British
representatives at the 1975 talks were always accompanied by an armed agent while
the intermediary believed that there was always a ‘third man’ present to ensure
security during meetings in public locations with the British representative in 1981
(personal interview with Brendan Duddy). After a few initial meetings at Duddy’s
home in 1991, the British representative requested that they meet in a safer venue,
explaining that if he was kidnapped, ‘I have so much knowledge I’m a danger to my
government’ (personal interview with Brendan Duddy). Both sides learned that
contact was valuable enough to the other side that it was highly likely that it would
not be exploited for immediate advantage. As Duddy puts it:

> Continously the British had to trust me even though they had their own third
or fourth or fifth man. I had to equally trust them. In turn there was a code of
trust within the IRA if I [was] meeting in a Belfast hotel or… wherever it was.
Never was I asked where or how…so there was all that trust but that trust also
had to have boundary walls of guardianship.

(Personal interview)

Those ‘walls of guardianship’ maintained a distinct separation between interaction
between the parties aimed at a negotiated settlement on the one hand and the violent
interaction between parties aimed at securing military advantage that sometimes took
place in parallel. Thus, in this restricted realm of the practicalities of contact, the
British government and the IRA developed relatively high levels of mutual trust.

The experience of contact also established that the other side would maintain the
secrecy and confidentiality of this channel, to a certain limited degree. Thus, neither
side, as a rule, leaked information about negotiations through this channel. The
Republicans maintained secrecy about the 1975 talks for many years afterwards.
Information about the 1990-93 talks was leaked when they broke down but
confidentiality was maintained for the three years when the channel was active.
Duddy recalls that Martin McGuinness rejected suggestions in May 1993 that the
Republicans should let the Irish Government and moderate nationalists know about
these contacts primarily because of McGuinness’s:

> …total distaste of breaking the secrecy position they had kept for years. He
repeated again and again that he had great difficulty with leaking any
correspondence or reveal meeting with Fred [British representative]

(Brendan Duddy papers, POL35 9/264)

This trust was extremely limited and coexisted with deep distrust of the long term
intentions of the other side. Nonetheless it provided an important building block for
the development of a negotiating relationship, and an important component in this
communication infrastructure.

When the British government was deciding whether to intensify the secret contact
with republicans after receiving a message in 1993 indicating that the IRA sought to
end the conflict, they had to ask themselves:

> Was this a trap? Was this a way of trying to draw us into direct contact with
the IRA which they would then publicise and use it to try and embarrass the
Government.

Interview with Lord Butler of Brockwell (cited in O’Kane, 2004)

The limited and uneasy trust that had been established during previous interactions
over the years provided an important foundation for taking the decision to intensify
contact at that point.
Increased information, reduced uncertainty and the consequential increase in levels of (limited) trust are one of the most significant advantages of back channel communication in a situation where parties can’t openly engage. It provides a means of building a relationship through interchange that provides information that is essential for the building of trust.

**Together in the middle: solidarity and cooperation at the intersection**

Crucial to the progress of these negotiations was the building of strong if always ambiguous cooperative relationships between those working at the intersection, based partly on the development of shared understandings through dialogue. As a ‘joint decision making’ process (Zartman, 1977) negotiation is an inherently cooperative process. One of the most important benefits of back channel negotiation is to create a joint project of secrecy which requires ongoing cooperation. Walton and McKersie (1991: 230) note that “an awareness of a common experience or fate…produces positive feelings between participants” and back channel communication creates a particularly intense common experience. It particularly conducive to the development of a sense of joint mission, solidarity and cooperation at the intersection between the two sides.

The intense divisions that they had to deal with on their own side of the fence provided much of the impetus for a sense of shared enterprise. In the 1970s and again in the 1990s there was strong opposition by key MI5 figures to these contacts (Dorril, 2002; Rimington, 2002) and British agents involved in direct negotiation repeatedly found themselves applying pressure for further engagement by their own side. Similarly on the Republican side, key members of the IRA army council in the 1970s were strongly opposed to continuing these negotiations. Walton and McKersie (1991: 281-2) emphasize that organizations are often internally divided and argue that “…the negotiation process itself may offer one element of the organization an opportunity to induce another element to adopt the first’s point of view”. Cooperation between negotiators in back channel negotiation, and their tendency to act as advocates for contact and compromise against internal opponents has sometimes been identified in the literature as a drawback to this kind of communication, as a form of ‘groupthink’. But, as Putnam and Carcasson note, ‘groupthink might be a necessary danger in a back channel process’ (1997: 274) and it might be more accurate to characterise it as both inevitable and valuable. Walton and McKersie (1991: 298-9) argue that it is almost inevitable that “…the negotiator comes into conflict with his own organization because he cannot, or prefers not to, ignore the demands and expectations of his opponent”. The development of solidarity at the intersection, the potential for which is intensified by the shared project of secrecy, is arguably one of the greatest benefits of this form of communication.

In the Irish case, representatives at the intersection repeatedly, if intermittently, aligned themselves with the intermediary, and to a degree with their opposite numbers as being involved in a joint project against the recalcitrant and obstructive forces on either side. This joint action served to push the process forward on both sides.

One example from Duddy’s diary of the 1975 talks (Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 4/62) provides a hint of the intensity of these internal struggles, and the
extent to which they generated a sense of solidarity between those operating at the negotiating intersection:

Mon. 24/2/75

[at a lunch meeting in Belfast]…Pippa [wife of Michael Oatley] told me of the struggles Michael had to get the B[ritish] to agree to my suggestions for peace. She was very tired.

Both needed rest.

In an entry several weeks later Duddy describes another British representative expressing frustration with the recalcitrance of his own side. At this point the IRA ceasefire was in danger but the British government had begun to show signs that it was backing away from this initiative.

Mon. 31/3/75 (Easter Monday)

R [British representative] phoned very depressed. No progress and not likely to get any. I said War and he said Yes. He roundly condemns the whole British position. Said it was madness and that he was simply ‘Blue in the face.’ No one would listen.

(Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 4/62)

Such expressions of frustration might of course be manufactured to deceive, but it seems plausible that this was genuine. The structural position of this negotiator, charged with maintaining an IRA ceasefire but unable to secure the movement from his own side that was necessary to achieve this, placed him in a position where some of the most intense struggles were necessarily fought out with those on his own side. This contributed to a sense of joint purpose with his opposite number at this intersection.

This frustration in 1975 is echoed almost exactly by the comments of a British representative recorded in Duddy’s 1993 diary. In this case, the two British representatives involved in the contact were seeking permission from their superiors to meet directly with Republican leaders in order to secure an IRA ceasefire.

As always, the information is coded. Fred is the MI5 agent, Robert McLarnon, who acted as the British representative in these contacts. James is his superior, John Deverell, the Director and Controller of Intelligence Northern Ireland. They were pressing in this case to be allowed to meet two republican representatives face to face in order to maintain progress towards an IRA ceasefire. According to this account, they were facing opposition from Q, a senior British civil servant who feared the consequences for his superior, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew.

30/4/93

According to Fred, James got extremely angry as Q dug in to protect the Chairman … Fred rang at 9:00pm from James' house, saying that they were both disgusted and expressed regret and a great deal of anger both with the
Chairman, M, and their colleague Q but the final result was that they would not travel.

(Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 9/264)

On both of these occasions British representatives took positions that aligned them with the intermediary and against dominant opinion on their own side, if we take these accounts as accurate. In this latter case, after a series of intense contacts with the intermediary, the British representative went ahead and attended this meeting despite being refused official permission to do so. This was subsequently the subject of intense controversy.

It is difficult to assess precisely the direct effect and importance of the arguments made by British and Republican negotiators to those on their own side for movement that would keep the process going. Nonetheless it is clear that they regularly made such arguments and that during all of these periods of negotiation both sides moved their positions significantly in the direction urged by negotiators. This happened despite intense internal opposition.

This sense of common purpose in a struggle against internal opponents was also reflected in reference to internal divisions within the IRA. By spring 1975 there was intense pressure within the IRA to end their ceasefire. The intermediary sent a message to the British urging them to make concessions that would strengthen the position of IRA leaders seeking to maintain the ceasefire. In this case, Billy McKee, Commander of the Belfast IRA:

Sun 1/6/75

Message to British Sunday morning 1st June. Be generous, give McKee a chance. Consider his position, he needs help... He isn’t a miracle worker... Pull out some marine commandos. Release his buddy from Purdysburn. Release 19 internees on Tuesday, give the names to McKee... We’re all in this together.

(Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 4/62)

In this case Duddy’s appeal was not successful.

The invoking of the contact as a kind of joint enterprise in which they were united – albeit in a very limited way against those on their own side was evident again during the 1981 hunger strikes

Once again, the message is coded. The management in this case is the British government while the shop stewards are the republican leadership.

4:00 am 11th July 1981

A section of the management still believes that the shop stewards are the best long-term hope but this section of management has lost ground. If face is to be
saved for this section of management, they would need assistance. Only the shop stewards can do this.

(Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 6/166)

In this case the British representative is appealing to the republican leadership to cooperate against internal opponents on the British side. Although this appeal did not generate a positive response, internal divisions pushed together those operating at the intersection, increasing a limited sense of common purpose that was intensified by the shared project of maintaining secrecy. On a few occasions this sense of common purpose led to direct cooperation to keep the process going.

Thus in 1993 the IRA offered a ceasefire to facilitate talks but the British did not respond positively. The British representative, Robert McLarnon, sent a message in May to the intermediary, Duddy, that went as follows

...We are appalled at the present mess. We are trying to think of questions that you could put that will give you all the assurance of our goodwill and good intentions that you need. Suggest you ask, for instance, for clear answer on timing, which only Chairman can answer.

(Duddy papers, NUI Galway, POL 35 9/279)

The ‘Chairman’ here refers again to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. ‘Timing’ refers to the issue of how long would have to elapse after the declaration of a ceasefire before the British were prepared to have face-to-face talks with Sinn Féin. In this case, the British representative was suggesting that the IRA send a message that would help him to generate further action on the British side, essentially asking for assistance from those on the other side of the negotiating divide in his internal struggle. Walton and McKersie (1991: 248) note that ‘private meetings enable a negotiator to differentiate himself from the actions or ideas of his organization with a minimum of risk of negative sanctions from his own group. These private encounters increase the flexibility of Party in giving aid and assistance or otherwise associating himself with something Opponent likes...’.

This example provides a clear illustration of this flexibility and shows the extent to which this point of contact had generated active cooperation that united those at the interface and pitted them, albeit to a very limited extent, against others on their own side. It confirms Walton and McKersie’s (1991: 299) observation that in many negotiation situations “…the opponent becomes an ally of sorts”. This was just one of several occasions on which those at the intersection worked together to generate action and to move the process forward.

Analysis

A key advantage of back channel negotiation is to facilitate the development of a cooperative relationship driven by a shared project of maintaining secrecy and bypassing spoilers. This takes on an intensified significance in situations where one party denies the legitimacy of the other. Exchange of information through participation in this shared project contributes to increased predictability. In this case, initial back channel contact confirmed for both sides that the opposing side had both authority and credibility and was capable of delivering on commitments. It confirmed that the opposing side would respect the secrecy of the channel, within limits, and not
attempt to abuse it as an occasion for kidnap or arrest. This development of trust in very limited realms provided a basis for cooperative action at the intersection between the two sides.

Back channel negotiation creates a shared project that is distinctive to this form of negotiation; the maintenance of secrecy as both parties work together to conceal the very existence of contact from close colleagues and supporters as well as internal opponents of contact. All negotiations create pressures for the emergence of a cooperative dynamic at the intersection to one degree or another. But the shared project of secrecy and the exclusion of internal opponents from the process creates distinctively strong co-operative dynamics at the intersection between parties to back channel negotiation. This is especially striking when it occurs in situations where one party denies the legitimacy of the other. Back channel negotiation provides a unique opportunity for violently opposed parties to work on a shared project and much of its value lies in the fact that it provides a way to build mutual trust and a shared experience of cooperation. It is important to emphasize however that this trust and cooperation was always tentative and that this channel was also marked by repeated and acrimonious failures and breakdowns. It is significant that robust structures for communication and negotiation were established despite the immensely powerful structural pressures against this.

In the course of this contact those operating at the intersection developed a cooperative relationship and a limited sense of involvement in a joint enterprise that helped to move both parties forward significantly. It was through this channel that the British government and the IRA negotiated their way to a secret IRA ceasefire offer in 1993, a major development even if that offer was not subsequently secured and pinned down through this channel. Although this channel collapsed in public acrimony in late 1993 it had established the foundations for much that came afterwards. The argument within the IRA for a ceasefire to facilitate talks had been won. The argument within the British state for an attempt to achieve a negotiated settlement and to enter talks with Republican representatives had been significantly advanced. This was no trivial achievement at a time when powerful forces in the British state continued to oppose contact.

**Conclusion**

Secret negotiation requires ongoing cooperation and coordination and creates a greater mutual dependence than front-channel contact. This joint project contributes to the building of trust and predictability in limited domains of activity and the reduction of uncertainty. It constitutes an intensive shared experience that can facilitate the development of strong personal relationships of trust at the intersection between the parties, although it is by no means inevitable that strong personal relationships will develop.

The development of increased mutual understanding at the intersection, combined with the practical experience of a shared project of secrecy promotes a shift to a more integrative approach at the intersection between parties. The involvement of an intermediary whose primary interest is in a settlement can play a crucial role in these processes. Negotiators in a situation where legitimacy is contested can much more readily develop a sense of joint purpose with an intermediary than with a negotiator representing the ‘illegitimate’ party. The sense of joint purpose shared by the intermediary with representatives of both parties creates a sense of shared purpose
that spans the divide between parties. The phenomena of co-operation between negotiators and their related role as advocates of change in intra-party negotiations are well recognised in the literature. Walton and McKersie (1991: 286), for example, argue that “…on balance … the negotiator acts as a subduing influence; and certainly during the crucial stages when an agreement is being hammered out, his part is usually that of moderating the views of his own organization”. These phenomena are intensified in back channel negotiation through secrecy and this intensification can accelerate progress and provides part of the explanation for how backchannel communication can produce early breakthrough agreements.

By building mutual trust in limited domains of activity and building increased understanding of the constraints within which the other party operates, one of the most important ways in which back channel negotiation facilitates agreement is by changing attitudes towards the legitimacy of the other party thus facilitating a shift to an integrative approach to bargaining. This happens first at the intersection between negotiators as they begin to conceive the intermediary and their opposite numbers as partners in a joint enterprise. Through the involvement of negotiators and intermediaries in intra-party negotiations it subsequently produces further pressures for key decision-makers in both parties to begin to think of the other party as a legitimate political actor.

One of the key advantages of negotiation is to create the conditions under which a sense of joint enterprise can develop at the intersection between parties. Those at the intersection become to a certain limited degree a third party, a party promoting a more integrative approach, a party all the more influential because it is internal to both sides. It creates the conditions for a distinctive and particularly intense form of negotiator solidarity and co-operation, all the more remarkable when the parties involved are locked in struggles over legitimacy. This co-operation at the intersection in turn contributes to the building of a broader sense of joint enterprise and a shift in positions on both sides. Ultimately the British Government and Provisional Sinn Féin built a strong public relationship of active cooperation in which the Provisionals became strong advocates of public order, civic policing and the stabilization of the Northern Ireland state while the British resiled from strategies of exclusion and demonization of the Provisionals. This can be seen as the outcome of a long slow process in which the development of limited levels of trust and a limited sense of joint enterprise facilitated the shift to integrative bargaining and eventually to active and determined cooperation that brought a deep shift in both attitudes and behaviour. It indicates that negotiated deradicalization can produce an outcome in which radicalized opponents of the state become an active force for stability in a process in which the state itself is also deradicalized and demilitarized.
References


**Biography**

Niall Ó Dochartaigh, b. 1966 PhD (Queen’s University, Belfast, 1994); Research Officer, INCORE (1994-97); Lecturer in Political Science and Sociology, NUI Galway (1997-); current main interest: conflict and territoriality. Most recent books: Civil Rights to Armalites (2nd edn, Palgrave 2005) Internet Research Skills (Sage 2007).