

10-19-2022

Managing the Atmosphere: Intelligence and Assessment in the Early Years of the Northern Ireland Peace Process—An Interview with Sir John Chilcot

Graham Spencer
University of Portsmouth, UK

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spencer, Graham (2022) "Managing the Atmosphere: Intelligence and Assessment in the Early Years of the Northern Ireland Peace Process—An Interview with Sir John Chilcot," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 34: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol34/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New England Journal of Public Policy* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Managing the Atmosphere: Intelligence and Assessment in the Early Years of the Northern Ireland Peace Process—An Interview with Sir John Chilcot

Graham Spencer

University of Portsmouth, UK

Abstract

Though the Northern Ireland peace process was shaped by the involvement of many actors and participants, it is also evident that certain figures were central to its development. One such figure was Sir John Chilcot, who, based in the Northern Ireland Office in the formative years of the peace process, provided a point of focus for communicating with and managing a range of individuals and groups with the overriding objective of ending conflict in Northern Ireland. This article is based on an extended interview with Chilcot about the challenges he faced in assessing intelligence across a range of sources and collating that intelligence in ways to best serve the strategic objective of achieving peace. As such, it provides important information about the British government's role in the early stages of the peace process, when sensitivities and risks were high, and it details the significance of building foundations that were consistent with key principles interpreted and applied through a pragmatic and imaginative assessment of intelligence.

Graham Spencer is Professor of Social and Political Conflict at the University of Portsmouth, UK, Distinguished Senior Research Fellow, Edward M. Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention, NUI, Maynooth Ireland, and Visiting Fellow, John McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Sir John Chilcot, who died in 2021, served as Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Office from 1990 until he retired from a career as a senior civil servant at the end of 1997. During that time Chilcot was centrally placed at the heart of the British government to assess intelligence about the possibility of a peace process emerging and came to be seen as “one of the architects” in that process¹ by building contacts, co-ordinating and filtering intelligence, ensuring that key principles for negotiations were consistently prioritized in dialogues, and helping to ensure that political development was exercised in a context of pragmatism while consistent with British strategic aims.² In keeping with a body of work that uses the long-form interview to expand on the role of experience and decision making within the Northern Ireland peace process,³ this article draws from two interviews conducted with Chilcot in 2018 that address diplomatic intentions during the early stages of the peace process and help establish how decision making evolved to bring combatant groups and constitutional parties into an environment of political exchange and possibility. Though the peace process was the work of many hands, Chilcot was nevertheless key to the formation of this new space and the necessary momentum for ending conflict in Northern Ireland. The interview here is an attempt to help further clarify that role and, in turn, provide detail about how the peace process in Northern Ireland was built, how it was sustained, and how it led to agreement.

The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Foundations and Strands

Where the start of the Northern Ireland peace process can be found seems to be more a matter of conjecture than objective and irrefutable fact. That there is scope for contention about its origins indicates how foundations and beginnings can offer varying emphases about where the impetus for change came from, as well as highlighting the difficulty of attributing such a process to a moment. As Zartman puts it when talking about formative stages, “First contacts and soundings frequently lie buried in the day-to-day exercise of diplomacy or in the conflict itself,” making it “difficult and often fruitless to try and locate the exact moment when such contacts began.”⁴ Less disputable, however, is that regardless of what aspects of activity are seen as more or less important in the initiation of a peace process, the growing expectation of possible peace matters most and, as we now know with regard to Northern Ireland, it came from a range of participants and actors. Importantly, momentum toward the Good Friday peace agreement of 1998 came about through layers and avenues of dialogue that derived, initially, from confidential small-group conversations about moral arguments for ending violence, and this engagement with the morality of conflict came before the structures of a formal negotiation process designed to end it. Since the inclination to prosecute or prevent violence depends on how one perceives the legitimacy or lack of legitimacy of that action, let us start by reflecting on how the ending of violence in Northern Ireland emerged from moral debate in relation to those two positions before then proceeding to look at how intimate conversations began to shape a new receptiveness to the possibility of peace.

In May 1987 Father Alec Reid, a Redemptorist priest from Clonard Monastery in West Belfast, sent Irish Taoiseach Charles Haughey a letter seeking to initiate contact and dialogue with republican leaders and the Irish government. On the basis of discussions that Reid had been involved in for two years (which suggests a conversation influenced by possible shifts in British and Irish relations that emerged from the New Ireland Forum discussions between constitutional nationalist parties across Ireland in 1984 and then led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985) with Sinn Fein’s Gerry Adams,⁵ Reid wrote about the need and opportunity to end IRA violence if there were an “alternative method” that supported aims for Irish unity through politics rather than armed struggle. The long letter that Reid sent was almost identical to one he had sent to Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume earlier seeking to encourage an engagement by nationalist politicians in Ireland on the possibilities of

an “alternative method” that would be enabled by “a common nationalist policy of aims and methods for resolving the conflict and establishing a just and lasting peace.”⁶ The main objective of the “alternative method” would therefore be the “creation of a powerful combined political force on the nationalist side to which the IRA [Irish Republican Army] would respond by ending their violent campaign and with which they would begin to cooperate once the first serious steps to set it up were taken.”⁷ The idea of a collective nationalist approach for dealing with the conflict, by focusing on the potential advantages of dialogue and better Anglo-Irish relations, had been explored and developed by nationalists (driven by the influence of John Hume) at the New Ireland Forum in 1984 but had excluded representations from those involved in republican violence and sought to actively prevent Sinn Fein from making gains within constitutional nationalism. As such, the forum was also envisaged as a mechanism for blocking republican advancement by bolstering and projecting a new voice of purpose and ambition within nationalist politics to the effect of eroding and halting any sense of legitimacy for those connected directly or indirectly with armed struggle.⁸ It also had potential for encouraging a new British initiative on Northern Ireland that the British alone were unlikely to deliver. The outcome of the forum had been to propose Irish collaboration with the British based on three models that offered latitude for negotiations and a new relationship: a unitary state, a federal/confederal state, and joint authority. Though these models were rejected by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the Anglo-Irish Agreement negotiations of 1985 (Thatcher preferred a security focus to the negotiations) an Irish government emphasis on reducing Sinn Fein’s electoral support and, by association, further isolating the IRA, proved of particular interest to her. Pressure applied by the United States under the Reagan administration, after Thatcher had publicly rejected the three models, further pushed her into accepting the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.⁹

The idea of building a more coherent and focused Irish nationalism that excluded Sinn Fein contrasted with Reid’s brief, which was to try to reverse that outcome by making an end to violence dependent on nationalists’ creating an environment for potential change that republicans could be part of and would find hard to resist. Reid’s argument in pushing for inclusion was therefore in contradiction to the preferred exclusion of republicans from a more progressive constitutional nationalism.

But Reid’s emphasis was wider than political. His point of persuasion and motivation was religious and, more specifically, used Pope John Paul II’s visit to Drogheda in Ireland in September 1979 as a basis for context. The religious reference would frame Reid’s letter not only with a sense of moral purpose but with national, and collective, resonance. Reid was right to point out that the Pope’s address had made clear the need for politicians to bring about change, since, as the Pope put it, “Violence thrives best where there is a political vacuum and a refusal of political movement” and when “politicians do not decide and act for just change, then the field is left open to the men of violence.” The wider and more containing emphasis of John Paul II’s speech, however, was damning of violence and those who sought to use it: “Do not believe in violence; do not support violence”; “I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and return to the ways of peace” because “violence only delays the day of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice” and “further violence in Ireland will only drag down to ruin the land you claim to love and the values you claim to cherish.” The Pope pleaded for his audience to “not listen to voices which speak the language of hatred, revenge, retaliation.” He added: “Do not follow any leaders who train you in the ways of inflicting death”; “do not think that courage and strength are proved by killing and destruction.” On condemning violence the Pope was emphatic: “Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the fabric of society.”¹⁰

The speech, believed to have been written by Dr. Cathal Daly, who was then Bishop of Down and Connor and who went on to engage indirectly with Sinn Fein's Gerry Adams on the need to end violence, sharpened thinking on this problem, with Reid supported by Primate Cardinal Tomas O Fiaich in seeking to develop a possible path of republican nonviolence.¹¹ Reid, who had been in contact with Adams since 1982,¹² also facilitated meetings between O Fiaich and Adams so a more detailed sense of republican strategy and the potential for movement could be ascertained.¹³ Reid had met Charles Haughey at his home in August 1986, where he sought to convince the Taoiseach that Sinn Fein and the IRA were different entities and that the political road being sought by Sinn Fein would need to be bolstered if IRA violence were to be ended. On that basis, he also argued that Haughey should meet Adams to explore the chance of developing a broad nationalist front (a proposal that Haughey declined).¹⁴ In October 1986, in response to Haughey's refusal to contemplate what was proposed, Reid passed his confidential text on the "alternative method" to the historian and writer Tim Pat Coogan, who, in operating as a credible go-between, was tasked with forwarding the text to Haughey directly.¹⁵

Though apprehensive (the situation made notably worse by the Enniskillen bombing carried out by the IRA on Remembrance Sunday in 1987 that resulted in the death of ten Protestants and a police officer), Haughey arranged for his adviser on Northern Ireland, Martin Mansergh, along with two colleagues, Dermot Ahern and Richie Healey, to meet with Sinn Fein representatives (not surprisingly) at a Catholic monastery in Dundalk to establish what their thinking amounted to.¹⁶ Interestingly, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and John Hume had begun a dialogue with Sinn Fein in 1988 at a time that paralleled the Irish official dialogues, with both coming to a close later that same year.¹⁷ Hume, however (and to a lesser extent Mansergh), continued to maintain contact with Adams, and the result of those dialogues was a formulation of points that would be used to influence the Downing Street Declaration released by the British and Irish governments in December 1993.

A lesser-known shift during this period was that Sinn Fein was preparing to isolate the most militant of its supporters in the United States and, more particularly, fund-raising groups such as Noraid (who at that point were largely opposed to ending violence short of a united Ireland). Noraid's militancy was seen by senior figures in Sinn Fein as detrimental to its long-term strategic aim of widening appeal as a human rights force among Irish nationalist and republican sympathizers in the United States. In effect, Sinn Fein leaders had decided that those who were opposed to its political intentions in the United States should no longer be of influence to the new image of Irish republicanism that was coming. The narrative of moderation that Sinn Fein saw as central to its political acceptance in the United States meant that the armed struggle and those who had come to represent it had to be replaced by a progressive face that symbolized the new and emerging political reality.¹⁸

But, the 1993 Declaration released by the two governments that set out the principles, points of reference, and parameters for a negotiation process had been preceded by other messages and communications that signaled a readiness from Sinn Fein-IRA and the British and Irish governments to move toward political negotiations. Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Brooke made a statement after one hundred days in office in November 1989 at an interview with journalists in response to a question about whether the situation between the IRA and the British government was like a "Mexican stand-off." In that briefing Brooke said, "There has to be a possibility that at some stage debate might start within the terrorist community. Now, if that were to occur, then you would move toward a point, if in fact the terrorists were to decide that the moment had come when they wished to withdraw from their activities, then I think the government would need to be imaginative in those circumstances as to how that process should be managed."¹⁹ The anger this statement prompted among Unionists further favored the Sinn Fein leadership's argument that there was a possibility for exploration here that should be

probed and examined and was said by Adams to have sparked “some partial debate” among republicans.

But the crucial message from Brooke was to follow a year later in November 1990 when he stated that the British “had no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland” in response to what he considered were ill-founded assumptions within the republican community about Britain’s presence in Northern Ireland being driven by colonial interests. That the comments taken from a speech in Brooke’s constituency were delivered to Adams and McGuinness two weeks before its release also demonstrated that the British were keen to give Sinn Fein time to prepare a response and that they were serious about engaging.²⁰

Brooke’s comments were an echo of a similar comment made by his predecessor Tom King at a speech delivered to the Northern Ireland Institute of Directors late in 1988 when King also spoke of the British having no strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland,²¹ and even though the comment is believed to have come from Hume (as with Brooke), who was in dialogue with Adams, the time was clearly not deemed conducive enough for the republican leadership to offer a mutually favorable response.

Brooke also knew that discussions had been under way among senior figures in the republican movement and so did not make the comment in blind hope that it might just hook some interest.²² Brooke knew of a back channel and was able to use the “voluntary” nature of that channel (as Brooke saw it) to help deny that there was direct contact with the IRA while enabling a process of intelligence gathering where Brooke and his senior team worked “to sift through what was coming back and apply meaning to it.”²³

The back channel that Brooke referred to involved the MI6 officer Michael Oatley, who had contacts with republican leaders from the early 1970s (after the British government held an unsuccessful face-to-face meeting with leaders of the IRA in London in 1972)²⁴ who were helping to bring about an IRA ceasefire in 1975. Oatley worked to end the hunger strikes in 1981 and developed conditions for a negotiations process between the IRA and the British government from 1991 on. There is now much literature that details the significance of Oatley’s interaction and involvement as part of “the link” with the Derry businessman Brendan Duddy, along with the later work of Duddy and Robert McLaren (who succeeded Oatley and was given the code name “Fred” by others in the link). McLaren also went under the name Colin Ferguson and, unsurprisingly, was referred to by senior British officials as “the man with three names”²⁵ after Oatley’s departure in 1992.²⁶ There also remain differences and questions about how messages in the link were interpreted, elaborated, emphasized, and used to influence the path of dialogue,²⁷ with some officials claiming that “Fred” misrepresented the British position in order to make the prospect of negotiations more enticing for republicans and how this moved both the British government and the IRA closer to each other as a result. The most obvious example is a comment that was presented by “Fred” to the British in February 1993 as coming from Martin McGuinness: “The conflict is over but we need your advice on how to bring it to a close.”²⁸ Political anger about this message at one level unsettled the course of exchanges and did little to help trust but, at another level, made public the seriousness of an approach to end the conflict in Northern Ireland. When revelations about British engagement with republicans both directly and indirectly that had been going on intermittently for some twenty years were made public in November 1993,²⁹ some members of the British establishment reacted with hostility against what they saw as disregard for an immutable policy of not talking to terrorists. But, at another level, the hostility was tempered by the inevitable advantage this engagement would give republicans and so anger soon moved to expectations that a formal talks and negotiation process was likely.

The secrecy of the British back-channel process and the importance of Oatley’s February 1991 meeting with Martin McGuinness to convince him that an opportunity for a new energy and impetus was available on the British side for bringing Sinn Fein into political dialogue

once violence had stopped, though pivotal, should be seen in the context of other avenues of contact that converged to make the case for Sinn Fein's engagement in an official talks process more compelling. When Albert Reynolds became Taoiseach in February 1992, he also became involved in back-channel process with republican contacts from Derry, such as Noel Gallagher, who confirmed to Reynolds that he had seen the words about the conflict's being over and needing advice to bring it to a close written by "Fred" at a hotel in London.³⁰ Gallagher was later to attest that meetings with Reynolds and McGuinness took place in his home well before the IRA ceasefire of August 1994,³¹ though this statement needs to be considered against comments by McGuinness that suggest he did not meet Reynolds until well after the IRA ceasefire.³² Gallagher was also reported as saying that British contacts with the IRA (as revealed in 1993) were not as intermittent as some believed and that there had been communication with the British more or less every eighteen months and sometimes more often since 1972,³³ though no detail about who these contacts were, or what the content was about, has yet to be made available.

In an effort to move unionist intransigence that had been in place since the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the British under Secretary of State Peter Brooke set out from 1989 to 1992 to facilitate a talks process among constitutional parties in Northern Ireland that sought to develop three sets of relations that had been prioritized by John Hume as vital for bringing about a more constructive attempt to address divisions and the basis of conflict in Northern Ireland. Envisaged as three strands (to deal with institutional arrangements within Northern Ireland, relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and relations between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom) and based on engagement between the Alliance Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland along with representatives from the Irish government and taking place in interim periods between the formal meetings of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference established under the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Brooke talks provided a foundation for negotiation that was continued by Brooke's successor Patrick Mayhew, who took over as secretary of state in 1992.³⁴ Brooke devised the talks process as "something around which people could unite" where "nobody would be asked to conclude anything until they were looking at the total package and a comprehensive picture, presumably with trade-offs in various directions."³⁵ Using the Anglo-Irish Agreement to "advance cooperation"³⁶ and to see that agreement not as static but as "evolving,"³⁷ Brooke also viewed North-South relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as an integral component for changing unionist perceptions about Dublin and using joint interests in trade to help address other cross-border concerns.³⁸ For Brooke, this was part of an overall picture where the emphasis was directed at efforts that would help "reduce differentials" and "increase the sense of involvement and ownership in society by everybody,"³⁹ but the main thrust of the talks, as Brooke expressed it, was "to provide a democratic framework within Northern Ireland that underpins the resolve of the whole of society that terrorists should not win."⁴⁰ In using this process to try to address what unionists saw as the detrimental impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement with a greater say for the Irish government in Northern Ireland affairs, Brooke, in a statement to the House of Commons in March 1991, made it clear that the British and Irish governments had agreed "that they would be prepared to consider a new and broadly-based [Anglo-Irish] agreement arrived at through direct discussion and negotiation between all of the parties concerned." The interval between the meetings of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference would be used "for intensive discussions" based on the three strands "to give adequate expression to the totality of relationships" that prevailed. Initially the talks would focus on institutional arrangements in Northern Ireland before progressing to the other two strands. Reflecting the collective emphasis, Brooke continued to stress that "nothing will be finally agreed in any strand until

everything is agreed in the talks as a whole.”⁴¹ Suspended for the British election of 1992, Brooke was then moved aside and replaced by Mayhew, with the underlying procedures and principles of the Brooke-Mayhew talks (that ran from April 1991 to November 1992) drawn from themes and realities that would become the basis for negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The three-stranded arrangement would thereby provide the context by which parties could work together to reflect the “totality of relationships” seen as vital for ending the conflict.

At this stage, Sinn Fein was not part of the negotiating process, and not until the IRA ceasefire of August 1994 was Sinn Fein brought into direct contact with British government officials before then joining formal negotiations.⁴² Entry to those negotiations came about after intense exchanges between the British and Irish governments produced a declaration to enable movement in December 1993. Known as the Downing Street Declaration, the text set out the parameters and key principles for a formal negotiations process that had emerged as a response to proposals derived from the Hume-Adams dialogues but also from the loyalist paramilitary organizations, who had engaged with senior clergy figures to ensure that their own fears about a process were being taken into account.⁴³ That Taoiseach Albert Reynolds dedicated time to meeting not just clergy figures representing loyalist concerns but leaders from paramilitary groupings themselves demonstrated how the efforts of Reynolds to give the peace process momentum were based strongly on inclusive pragmatism.⁴⁴

Early negotiations did not progress as expected for republicans, and their involvement was suspended when the IRA ended its ceasefire in February 1996 by planting a bomb in Canary Wharf, London. Republicans had decided it was unlikely that things would move until the British election of 1997, and on this they were right. Tony Blair who, with a huge majority, succeeded John Major, then pushed hard on the peace process and, along with Bertie Ahern, with the help of U.S. President Bill Clinton, and under the patient stewardship of Senator George Mitchell, who chaired the negotiations, announced that a peace agreement had been reached on April 10, 1998. Though there would be many ups and downs to follow as the realities of implementing the agreement came into play the successful decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and agreement on policing and justice meant that by 2010 the infrastructure of peace had been established. Still more disputes about issues such as dealing with the legacy of the conflict would follow and the Executive in Northern Ireland would be suspended for three years from 2017 until 2020 because of disagreements over power sharing and a scandal about renewable energy policy. Taking these antagonisms into account, however, the overall sense is that the peace process has been successful and made a return to violence unlikely. The emphasis on building relationships through a formal negotiations process had come to prove that, if such a process is applied with energy and inclusively, violent conflicts can be ended. But that ending relied on foundations that grew from intense diplomatic efforts and adherence to a strategy that had peace at its core.

Diplomacy and Strategy

The political settlement to end the conflict in Northern Ireland that was reached in 1998 emerged from intense engagement by the British and Irish governments with a range of political parties and players in Northern Ireland that began at least a decade before (the DUP decided not to take part, and Sinn Fein’s role, if necessary, was not as central to the success of the negotiations as was the SDLP’s).⁴⁵ Though British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern deserve credit for getting agreement finalized, this achievement took hold from the work of their immediate predecessors, John Major on the British side⁴⁶ and Albert Reynolds on the Irish side,⁴⁷ and the seeds of those roots go back further still. Tony Blair’s reflections on his role and lessons learned during his time as Prime Minister (1997–

2007) in dealing with Northern Ireland highlight the difficulties in managing a peace process and reveal an intensity of purpose that, though assisted by Blair's huge parliamentary majority (compared with Major's, which was slim), reflects the motivation of a shared dynamic (his relationship with Ahern was positive) and an urgency to use that dynamic as leverage toward agreement.⁴⁸ Ahern's commitment to agreement (Ahern was Taoiseach from 1997 to 2008) was also essential for its success and points toward the importance of positive intergovernmental relations in such an undertaking.⁴⁹

The cultivation of seeds, roots, and outcomes necessarily relies on talking and listening (dialogue) for growth, but political agreement also depends on effective diplomacy that seeks to bridge differences in relation to negotiation goals—a process rarely direct or predictable. In the case of Northern Ireland, the peace process experienced both breakdowns and breakthroughs with the former evidence of a fracture in dialogue and the latter resulting from productive collaborations because of that dynamic. But central for progression toward formal negotiations was informal interaction between the players that prioritized listening and private conversation as a basis for trust⁵⁰ and facilitated further movement because of that development (constituting what Zartman calls the “diplomatic phase” in a negotiation process).⁵¹

As Tim Dalton, former Secretary General of the Department of Justice and Equality in the Irish government (1993–2004) and centrally involved in the peace process, put it on the importance of informal meetings: “They afforded us the opportunity of raising issues and floating ideas that could not be raised as easily in more formal settings. They also provided an opportunity for getting to know the people we were dealing with, enabled us to talk about important matters other than peace-making and generally get a sense of what motivated people” enabling the Irish to better assess “what was the most that might be offered, or at least that might be accepted by the other side.”⁵²

Dalton's comment also points to the value of diplomacy, since such action provides the means by which “relations are adjusted and managed”⁵³ and helps shape “the ordered conduct of relations between one group of human beings and another group alien to themselves.”⁵⁴ To quote Burns, “Diplomatic engagement is not a favour to an adversary, but a means of reconnaissance and communication. It is a way to better understand trends, assess motivations, convey determination, and avoid inadvertent collisions.”⁵⁵ Most of all, such activity is “a human enterprise, rooted in interactions between people” and understanding how outlooks that do not complement each other may provide the means for movement and growth.⁵⁶ Interestingly, diplomatic engagement requires perceptual change by the participants about who their opponents are and so a dispersion of tensions where possible. As Liddell-Hart writes in a discussion of strategic aims, it also requires a focus where “the concentration of strength against weakness depends on the dispersion of your opponent's strength, which in turn is produced by a distribution of your own that gives the appearance of, and partial effect of dispersion.” For Liddell-Hart, “true concentration is the fruit of calculated dispersion”⁵⁷ and this means keeping “alternative objectives” in play in order to open the “opportunity of gaining an objective.”⁵⁸ Though such an emphasis tends to view strategy in terms of winning a war, it nevertheless brings to the fore important considerations for ending war, too, and particularly so because of the importance of pragmatism, deescalating resistance, and creating space for desired goals. That said, this concentration also depends on other features that relate to how intelligence is gathered and acted upon that require addressing the fragmentary and often-flawed nature of reasoning that is made more likely when one is not able to imagine the interests or predicaments of the other. Central to the engagement with others in this context, therefore, is how we seek to understand our own shortcomings and limitations and how we question the influence of vested interests, trust, and self-delusion as acting forces within the meditative process.⁵⁹ In

political negotiation this means seeking to open doors that were previously closed and changing the dynamic from “us” and “them” to “both” or “all.” It means, as Bachelard reminds us, transforming the dialectic space so exclusive interests can be seen in relation to inclusive interests.⁶⁰

In the early stages of political negotiation in Northern Ireland, much was exploratory but all was conversational, with participants using this interaction to “feel” positions as much as “understand” them.⁶¹ Key to this shift was the creation of new ideas that had the potential to meet participant needs and move those participants away from entrenched positions toward a consideration of alternatives.⁶² Doing so involved a degree of ambiguity to create space for thinking about how alternatives could be presented as strengths rather than weaknesses,⁶³ as well as compartmentalizing different areas of discussion so progress was not made dependent on progression in all areas simultaneously.⁶⁴ All of which is dependent on pragmatic and principled political leadership⁶⁵ and on understanding the phases that effective negotiation move through, such as “achieving a common definition of the problem; producing a shared commitment to a negotiated settlement; and arranging agreed procedures, formats, and terms of reference for the formal negotiations themselves.”⁶⁶ But the chance of these phases being productively developed also depends on other factors such as trust and respect being tentatively established and understood in advance of formal negotiations and using both to advance intersecting concerns (peace) rather than focussing on intransigent positions of self-interest (conflict).⁶⁷

For senior figures like Chilcot, who was a point of focus for intelligence assessment and decision making, the art of calculation and diplomacy meant understanding how lines of activity, expectation, and resistance might be brought together (or kept apart) in ways that served the design intentions of intergovernmental negotiations in Northern Ireland. This also meant interpreting shifts and moves in the context of a new inclusive strategy that such negotiations reinforced. Because of his centrality in that process, Chilcot provides us with an integral understanding of the British role in trying to end the conflict in Northern Ireland. We now turn to his involvement in that process.

An Interview with Sir John Chilcot

GS: Can you identify where you consider the peace process to have started?

JC: I think the significant time was the late 1980s and particularly around 1988. Signals were coming in, and Tom King, who was not usually seen as an architect of anything, was quite encouraging to informal and indirect overtures. By that I mean getting and exchanging messages with all sorts of intermediaries and channels, with a view that under certain conditions there might be room for talking, although with no definition of that. I would put the start of the process around that time, although the main seed, for me, came from Peter Brooke’s statement that the British government had “no selfish strategic or economic interest” in Northern Ireland in 1990.

GS: There was the Derry “link” with Michael Oatley and Brendan Duddy, Father Alec Reid, Irish Americans, the Hume-Adams dialogues, and Noel Gallagher in contact with Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, all trying to influence the course of events during the early 1990s. How did you view and seek to make sense of those lines?

JC: I spent a limited amount of my time trying to bring together such lines of dialogue along with all sorts of well-meaning people, such as community workers and clergymen, and trying to simplify those contacts to the point where there was sufficient confidence between republicans and the British government so that I could also limit the credibility of alternative or oppositional channels. Much of this informal contact doesn’t really operate as a series of

individual links in a chain but as a whole series of parallel things going on. On the British side, certainly from 1989 to 1990, the aim was to establish a clear but unambiguous chain of communication. I did understand the good motivation of some of those involved in trying, as it were, to signal to one side what the other side might be willing to look at, or accommodate, or talk about, without any collateral for saying it, and at times this was a problem in that expectations were created that were unhelpful. That raised some confusion about where dialogue started; that is, was it through middle-way agencies or between the two main bodies of interest? That said, I think there were unofficial players whose longstanding relationship, particularly with those like McGuinness and Adams, was of continuing value.

GS: When the statement “The conflict is over we need your help to bring it to a close” came in what was going on?

JC: Well, the first thing was to start a formal process of assessment. Is it believable? What’s the validation? What’s the source and does it fit with other things you know? Then what advice do you give in terms of response, if any? It was clearly not straightforward and it was tricky to handle both in terms of our politics but also in not allowing false hope to be built on a shaky foundation. On the other hand, it was important not to ignore or reject what appeared to be a real message and trying to interpret that. It came to me late in the evening when I was trying to evaluate what might happen on the other side of the link and the chain more generally. If we had leant too heavily or publicly on it that would and, indeed later did, create real trouble. We had to try and establish if it was thoroughly authentic all the way from start to finish and whether this could stand any blowback from Sinn Fein–IRA, or whether they would deny it. Well, here was a certain amount of denial but it wasn’t absolute outright rejection of any sort of discussion of that kind ever happening. We were not expecting it then because of the slow evolution of indirect dialogue going on all the time, but, also, because of that, it did not come as a shattering surprise either. Indeed, far from it, because John Hume and I saw each other very regularly and he was briefing me on his dialogue with Adams. So there was a sense that something significant might happen, but it was more about when and what rather than if.

GS: How do you respond to something like that?

JC: As quickly as you can and with proper prudence. It wasn’t a half-an-hour job of ringing Number Ten, but neither was it taking a month to put it through a formal intelligence assessment that would have destroyed any potential it had in it. It was something on a much shorter timescale, but I’m talking not hours. I think my not purely cerebral reaction was that this represented quite a substantial step on a well-trodden path and you could see your way forward on that path. But such a moment potentially had to be handled with the care it deserved. It did not influence the ultimate strategy or the objective, but there was some tactical handling required. Suddenly things got a bit brighter because the door was an inch further ajar. The central problem was how much weight do you put on it? You have got to acknowledge there is risk if it is valid. Validation is at least as important as collection in intelligence work, and, on the whole, you don’t want your collector of intelligence to be the person who validates it because they have a vested interest.

GS: To what extent does the government really know what it’s doing in a situation like this?

JC: It’s the age old argument about the grand strategy and tactical maneuvering. We had a lot of discussion about the contrast between principles and pragmatic tactics, but I think we were coming back to a certain issue. Not just in terms of language but within political boundaries and within the limits that they set. To give one example, until 28 November 1993, when the *Observer* published an article about the British being in dialogue with republicans, we thought

that the boundaries in Westminster were actually narrower and more confined than they turned out to be. Do I need to develop that?

GS: If you would.

JC: There were angels dancing on the head of the Prime Minister, demanding no negotiation, but that doesn't exclude talking, when they amount to the same thing in reality. But, on the Monday after the 28 November *Observer* article, it was pretty clear from the Commons that they had to hear a statement. That sort of fine nuance, which you had to attach a lot of importance to in the run-up, was not seen as quite as significant then, however, and it became apparent that the boundaries were wider and looser than we had thought. It could be the same moment of recognition you have when running up against a potential block in the road. You decide to stop and pause for a while, or you slightly divert your track. They probably amount to the same thing, which is that this is part of the track that you have to handle. The interests of different groups or parties and governments do not proceed in a uniform timescale. For example, there was the annual Ard Fheis of Sinn Fein, which was clearly a sensitive time for them, and that's one of hundreds of timing factors which are different on any side and had to be taken into account.

GS: Do you have more problems the more people you have involved in intelligence gathering or making decisions at the highest levels?

JC: You look, if you can find them, for multiple sources and then look for corroboration or contradiction, but these are very complicated chains of multiple sources, primary sources, and secondary sources. In Iraq you had a small number of very reliable long-term sources, but they were essentially apolitical and not right at the heart of the center of Saddam's regime, so when it came to asking them questions about weapons of mass destruction, it was quite outside their sphere of knowledge or experience. On one or two occasions we tried to get closer through intermediaries that turned out to be unreliable, so you have a reliable source but an unreliable sub-source to also make sense of.

GS: Were there moments in Northern Ireland where intelligence turned out to be wrong?

JC: No so much wrong but it's very difficult to get army, or RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] intelligence sources, or political intelligence that is particularly valid and useful in the context of a political process because they have different focuses, angles of approach, and interests. In the case of the RUC, this was life-saving, and for the army it was beating the enemy and protecting themselves, none of which really converged on what was happening on the other side of the hill in the peace process.

GS: The inevitability of vested interest is important here then?

JC: Indeed it is, including one's own. That is why I think we've traditionally, despite reverses on the way, held on to the Joint Intelligence Committee assessment of staff separation from the intelligence agencies themselves. The agencies do the collection and offer some interpretation and they certainly are responsible for validation but not for assessment and reporting into the political leadership. That is an assessment problem for the staff, quite different people.

GS: Can you be burdened by too much information?

JC: It depends who you are. If you are the army, movement is everything. That is how an infantry protects itself, by constant forward movement. If you are a politician in office faced with a dilemma, there must be a temptation to freeze if you are faced with uncertainty or contradictory advice from different quarters.

GS: What do you think intelligence is?

JC: I'm very conscious that there is a flow, not an archetype, with many components adding up to the points along the way. There was a pressure to get on with it which was partly about the leadership within the IRA and how long they could go on exerting this very necessary authority over republicans. So we had to get it done in their time.

GS: But, how do you get leverage in a situation like this?

JC: You don't need to retreat to a lower level of discussion or analysis. I think by the beginning of the nineties we had a winning stalemate over republican terrorism. They couldn't get any further. You may recall John Hume was immensely helpful, and had a report of who were the victims the previous year. They were almost all Catholics and nationalists because the British Army had got on top of the situation along with parts of the reformed RUC.

GS: How does strategy work in the early stages?

JC: Well, you do what you can do. Guard all your points of entry, your sources, and calculate everything within that. It was also a very closed circle. I keep coming back to November 28th when the *Observer* released a story about us talking with republicans. John Major instructed me to go and talk to four members of the Cabinet and tell them what was going on: Ken Clarke in the Treasury, Michael Howard in the Home Office, Douglas Hurd in the Foreign Office, and Malcolm Rifkind who was Defence Secretary. Each of them reacted differently because at least three of them were not au fait with what had been going on. Douglas Hurd didn't particularly get involved as foreign secretary. Ken Clarke said I don't know anything about this, but I don't care, so fine, go ahead. Michael Howard said the opposite, and Malcolm Rifkind, who did know because of the military involvement, was quite relaxed about it. But there was never a sort of thrust coming from the top of government, saying this may mean the end of everything; it wasn't like that at all. It was more about how do we re-engage in a way that doesn't create too much of a fuss. So, for me, there is political analysis from one's own side and then any external sources you could get hold of, intelligence information, and then trying to manage all of that. And then you accumulate political intelligence, which you get by talking to and seeing a lot of people. Little of it was formally structured but it was very much held within Number Ten and the Northern Ireland Office.

GS: What about the British government talking with Dublin? What was happening there at that time?

JC: There was a distinction between the dialogue that was going on between Dublin and Sinn Fein, on the one hand, and our dialogue with constitutional nationalism and Sinn Fein-IRA. Now you can't single out one of those strands—it wasn't two strands but more like four or five—and say there was a dominant part even though clearly it was actually the internal strand in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party, and Sinn Fein that became the culmination of the process. There's always a dynamic going on but there are so many moving parts, contributions and events taking place by the minute, the hour, the day, or the month, that to single out one as being of most significance is just overestimating it.

GS: Did the Irish respond to Peter Brooke's "no selfish strategic or economic interest" comment?

JC: Not that I recall at the time. The phrase, the term, "post the fall of the Wall," was actually first brought into play inside the British system by Tom King, but Margaret Thatcher, who was still Prime Minister, said you can't say that. I don't know why but when Peter Brooke cleared that speech with Number Ten objection was not raised. I've got a theory, even though I have no evidence to base the theory on, which is that because Peter Brooke had been economic secretary for the Exchequer and in economic policy terms was very close to Margaret Thatcher. She trusted him and I think some of that trust carried over into his handling of the Irish question.

There was in circulation, within the closed nature of the Taoiseach's circle leading up to the Whitbread speech, that this should be something for Dublin and republicans to take notice of given what it signified. You couldn't say this was a signal for republicans on what we were about to say in public and that they would just come round because of that. It was more about atmosphere and what degree of grey there was in the sky.

GS: Can you give me an example of how managing the atmosphere worked elsewhere?

JC: I can I take you to a quite different area in time. I was Roy Jenkins' junior private secretary in the sixties, and much later I was responsible for criminal justice policy at the Home Office when he became home secretary in the mid-seventies before becoming president to the European Commission. The prison population was already starting to swell and there was a lot of pressure, and not only on the Conservative side, in Westminster to crack down on crime. I was asked to write a statement which I did and I put in it, cheekily perhaps, a prison population of more than forty thousand in the United Kingdom would be intolerable. I thought Roy would strike out "intolerable," he didn't, he said, it. Now that was right at the boundary of what you might get away with but it shifted the debate towards the bounds of what might or might not be acceptable.

GS: One hears the expression "red lines" a lot when it comes to negotiations these days. What were those "red lines" for you when it came to the early stages of the peace process?

JC: The essential precondition was an acceptance by nationalism, whether Dublin or in Northern Ireland, that was willing to accept the consent of the majority in the North and that, in that admittedly artificial constituency, this would be respected. That was the mechanism to be used in the hope of achieving ultimately the long-term strategic objective. Inclusivity in a structural, institutional, and constitutional sense was the desired effect. But it is important to say that this was not meteorology, more like managing the atmosphere in which you can move on pretty rocky ground. Atmosphere creation, although absolutely essential, is more than just context. It's about mutual senses being developed on either side and not being rejected or diminished too much.

GS: At the time of the IRA ceasefire the British objected to the absence of the word "permanent" from the statement, which was far less of a concern for the Irish government. What are your thoughts on that?

JC: Well, for them it had all sorts of resonance relating to Sinn Fein's search for legitimacy and there was very much the view that although we needed to understand it, that need did not bother them very much. I don't recall it being a genuine stumbling block, however—the presence or absence of the word permanent in any statement that we could agree on. One also had to draw a distinction between process and desired outcomes. The process rather than the presence, or absence, of permanent in any statement at that time was the most important thing. I think I coined a phrase about it which was that such an issue should be seen as a "coiled snake" at the heart of the peace process. Whether it was a venomous snake was another matter, but we got round it with a good deal of mutual ingenuity on all sides. I was also struck by the similarity, the conformity, between the official cultures in Dublin compared to the differences in London and how that compared with the spoken word and the written word. In London you have to reduce the thing to the final legal text, but on the Irish side it was much more a matter of feeling sufficiently convinced that dialogue was possible. This is ultimately the Anglo-Saxon common law culture coming to the fore after many centuries of much development on the British side, and Irish law, which is very centrally based on trust and authority vested in the leader. It's a really different thing. Having said that, we worked certainly from '71 until after the break from the late eighties to deal across the entire range of communities' feelings,

interests, attitudes, and factions in Northern Ireland. But from Dublin it looked much more like getting Sinn Fein and therefore, the IRA, out of a commitment to violence or the use of violence as a major tool. I think Sinn Fein–IRA in the North was seen as a potentially existentialist threat to Dublin and to the Republic of Ireland as well as its constitution, whereas for us it wasn't like that. We saw it as ostensibly an awful, bloody, and sad terrorist threat caused by a very intractable group. The Irish perspective, and not least the Department of Foreign Affairs position, would be to see the task as being to deal with Sinn Fein and the British task to deal with the unionists and loyalists. It did not seem that way from 1967.

GS: Did you think in 1972 that the fact that the IRA met Willie Whitelaw meant it was likely to happen again?

JC: No, because the old guard at the head of the Provisional IRA were quite quickly in the middle 1970s swept away by Adams, McGuinness, and others. That suggested a series of waves of learning, redirection of effort, acceptance of compromise. One of the side notes that interested me at the time, and still does, was how the republican movement felt about the Irish constitutional claim in Articles Two and Three that stems from [Éamon] de Valera, who was himself Fianna Fail and not cloaked in the mantle of legitimacy which Sinn Fein had from the first Dail. Presumably because of that it didn't matter to them as much.

GS: Plus, if you are using the principle of consent, there is no need to hold on to that because the majority decide.

JC: Yes. As with John Hume's significance in all this, which was to invent and carry through the double referendum North and South to exemplify and enact the consent principle. That gave room for maneuver for the republican movement which it had not hitherto had.

GS: Were you looking closely at what Hume was saying because he was clearly the big influence on Adams?

JC: Oh yes, no doubt and, of course, Adams took his clothes with strong encouragement. In my own dialogue with John Hume, I did not need to push him from behind since we were shoving in the same direction.

GS: How hard is it to remain pragmatic when others are resistant to pragmatism?

JC: As long as Margaret Thatcher remained Prime Minister, particularly with the deaths of Airey Nieve and Ian Gow in her psyche, and despite the Anglo-Irish Agreement, she had very powerful emotional and political constraints around her. We have spoken before about why she was able to repose more trust in Tom King than perhaps in others and in Peter Brooke probably because of his economic Thatcherism, but not seeing his political stance on Ireland. When you get to John Major and Tony Blair, you do not have to do the domestic conviction business very much. There was a settled and accepted policy at all levels from Cabinet down through the system.

GS: How pragmatic was John Major?

JC: I think he was a better negotiator of a weak hand than Tony Blair was of a strong one.

GS: What makes you say that?

JC: John Major went to convince his senior colleagues about the necessity for dialogue, if not negotiation, before the first ceasefire. Tony Blair never really had to do that. He just said this is my policy and that was that. There was no challenge. If I was writing a short monograph about John Major and Ireland I think I would conclude that his support for constitutional all-party talks, minus Sinn Fein–IRA, under Peter Brooke was not too difficult politically. What was very difficult for him, certainly up to 1992, was to declare that we were in dialogue with

the republican movement. Not negotiation, but in dialogue. When we got to an unexpected majority in 1992, although it was slender, it was also apparent that he was much stronger with the House of Commons. In the aftermath of the [Eamonn] Mallie article,⁶⁸ almost to a man and woman, there was strong support for the policy that enabled Major to be much stronger on this brief for the remaining time he had in office.

GS: But if he had revealed that himself he would have been much weaker?

JC: Very interesting and a key point I agree with that. He couldn't have stood up in the House of Commons and made a statement.

GS: This is about forced timing?

JC: Yes, and I can say we did not appreciate Eamonn Mallie, who wrote the 28 November article, after it. But you are right in your analysis that as it turned out better that it should have come out that way than by any kind of any formal shift in the government's stated position.

GS: F. W. de Klerk has spoken about how in negotiation you need to become an advocate for your adversary. Do you agree?

JC: I think what he meant was not that you have to make the reverse case against yourself but you must put yourself in the mind of the other and see how you can help that mind in the direction you wish it to go. That may well be a slight expansion of de Klerk's comment, but you need to understand what is driving your adversary, or to use another word, your interlocutor. Your energy must be directed in controlling yourself and in your actions and reactions to the elocution.

GS: Is much of this about timing?

JC: Yes, and I think if you look though the later stages of the Irish question in the late 1980s, the master of timing was Peter Brooke, who knew exactly when to call a bit of a halt. Equally John Hume, who, as you know, pulled out of the first round of all-party, i.e., all-constitutional party talks because he sensed that moment that they might go forward too far and leave Sinn Fein outside and that it would then be harder to bring Sinn Fein in at a later stage. So he said stop them and he did.

GS: To what extent was the length of time needed to develop certain phases discussed? John Major spoke of a "decontamination period" for Sinn Fein, for example?

JC: Inside the process that is about judging your own support and then the position of your adversary. Outside the process it's a pure political judgement about how far and how soon you carry public opinion or interested segments of opinion and that would include, obviously, on our side, the intelligence community, the RUC, the army, and to some degree their political representatives. You don't look to government support in carrying out your basic policing duties, but, when it comes to strategic policy, that is different. If you have got a reasonably solid and consistent party agreement then I don't think it is necessarily fragile at all and I think that pertained certainly from the early 1990s through the process.

GS: What difference does it make coming from an "anything is possible" kind of background? How does such thinking become a tool here?

JC: There was a meeting I was at in Dublin and Albert Reynolds was Taoiseach. It was a pretty fierce meeting with his green colleagues. John Major went along but the meeting was at risk of becoming extremely fractious with voices raised on both sides. I slipped John Major a note saying, "For God's sake get Albert and yourself away from these people," which he did and ten minutes later they came out smiling having reached an agreement, much to the surprise of some of Albert's people.

GS: Which indicates that if you have too many people in the room you have problems, does it not?

JC: That is true but what is also true, and what this showed, is that John Major and Albert Reynolds had quite a lot in common temperamentally, with perhaps similar life experiences which enabled them to resolve something that with a larger number of people on either side in the room would have been much, much harder.

GS: In this process and situation do you think that listening is more important than talking?

JC: In principle I would agree, but there are times when you do need to just keep talking and hold your position on the playing field without necessarily looking for a result from that. You are just keeping it going. I used to find Martin Mansergh interesting as an interlocutor, for whom everyone had a high respect, and who was determined to have his say, often at some length, but then you had to balance the occasion by providing your own appeal, if without any expectation that that would produce a result in either direction.

GS: What did you make of Canary Wharf, when the IRA ended its ceasefire in February 1996?

JC: We knew they were going to try something and when it happened we knew what they meant by it. But it didn't signal resumption of the armed struggle full-time and we knew that. I think they probably wanted to give us a nudge at this point for their own reasons.

GS: Was there any pressure to allow Sinn Fein back into the process after Canary Wharf?

JC: There was no particular pressure to enable Sinn Fein to maneuver themselves back mainly because there was a strong conviction on the British side, and I think on the Irish side too, that this was seen as a tactical breach of the ceasefire partly to do with managing the republican base. Of course, there had been quite a narrow majority of support for the first ceasefire. There was a vote at the Ard Fheis and that was part our reasoning. The other part was after the article by Eamonn Mallie about communications between the British and republicans when it became clear that the House of Commons was behind the policy, because we were then able to tolerate a breach of the ceasefire without changing the whole nature of the objective. Without going into detail, we had a pretty good reason to believe it was a tactical move and not a complete breakdown.

GS: What was the logic of the tactical maneuver and what were the benefits of that for Sinn Fein?

JC: Partly to up the pressure on the British government to move faster into the peace process and the negotiations and very significantly to avoid a split in the republican movement itself which, as we know, did happen if not to the extent where the movement was destroyed.

GS: Did you know what the internal problems for republicans were?

JC: We were always thinking not just about Adams and McGuinness but their succession. That when Adams, McGuinness and Kelly stepped down, or died, who would then become the authoritative successors? As it happened the dissidents were not sufficiently strong enough to present a threat to the successor generation, so there did not seem to be a serious threat to them. When Adams made a declaration quite late on, between the ceasefires, and Martin said it was alright, that was important because McGuinness' authority was untainted with regards to his motivation or position. On his own, Adams would have found it much harder to carry the movement.

GS: When republicans broke into Castlereagh police station in 2002 and stole a number of files did you see that as a tactical maneuver?

JC: Oh no, I think that was a very low-level penetration attempt with a sleeper. I don't think the timing and the discovery had anything to do with what was happening at that moment in the peace process. I have been reflecting about Sinn Fein-IRA's decision not to make any use of what they pinched and remember this had information about informants and sources. The question is why? I believe it was for fear of destroying morale in the movement by the revelation that they had been penetrated. Also, it did not provide the complete picture by any means, so they may have been worrying that there were people they could not identify from that haul of sensitive material and there might be others involved who were very close to the leadership, which, of course, there were.

GS: What difference did America make?

JC: I think their very existence throughout was important mainly on the Dublin side and for the republican movement and to the constitutional nationalists up to a point. They were an external guarantor with a great potential weight. They were also, of course, an irritant or perhaps even worse when it came to funding the IRA. What did strike me as a necessary addition was the absolutely unswerving unity between the FBI and the British system, with intelligence and policing notably in step. That was certainly not politically interrupted on the American side.

GS: What did you learn from that experience in terms of how conflict resolution works? Are there themes you would offer to others?

JC: I would be very reluctant to do that because time and circumstances can be so different it can be hard to find common themes or approaches. It's the degree to which you are able imaginatively and emotionally to place yourself in your interlocutor's mind and heart and understand that. Not to share it or change sides, but to help you mold the process. Molding is something that grows with mutual understanding and acceptance and again, as an illustration, Peter Brooke's speech to the canning industry was an attempt to reinforce a realization on the other side that they could place more trust and have less concern about a strategic objective on the part of the British government which would block their aims.

GS: Why was that speech delivered there?

JC: Because the occasion was on offer and the timing was right. It wasn't so much the occasion itself but the timing.

GS: But it could have been lost?

JC: Tom King said almost the same words and it sank like a stone, so we had to roll the pitch with the intended audience and choose the moment.

Conclusion

The interview comments from Chilcot bring to light a range of circumstances that he, along with others,⁶⁹ sought to manage during the formative stages of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Chilcot reveals the importance of caution in assessing intelligence and indicates the complex process of examining that intelligence not just in terms of actual and potential meaning but as counter or contradictory information too. Decision making derives, in this instance, not just from the collection of information but through a collation and comparison process where each individual piece of information is read against and in relation to other forms. For Chilcot, this was a matter of balancing the specificity of intelligence against the wider context of political intent and so assessing the value of information in terms of whether it was a help or a hindrance to the broader political objective of peace. He identifies how different groups have different interests that their own intelligence assessments tend to support, and how that intelligence is therefore used more as a reinforcement of organizational interests

than serving broader political goals. Importantly, too, and a further indication of the emphasis on both principle and pragmatism, Chilcot points toward the need to understand where the boundaries of acceptability (and so unacceptability) lay in dialogue since it is at the edges of what is permissible or expected that much engagement is focused as all sides seek to interrogate possibilities for movement and space outside the priority of opposing interests. The interview emphasizes the need to enable room for maneuver and indicates how the value of pragmatism comes into play not just as a creative force but as a very deliberate means by which to make it harder for others to remain intransigent or dismissive toward possible openings (also consistent with Liddell-Hart's stress on keeping alternatives in play to generate space for opportunities and to disperse antagonistic readings of motivation that obstruct movement). Shaping interaction in this way is also necessary for building constructive relations and minimizing accusations of bad faith (though this did arise at times, most notably with British criticism of the IRA ceasefire statement in 1994 and stipulation of the decommissioning of weapons as a precondition for talks in 1995 that hindered progress and dogged the process for another decade).⁷⁰

Overall, Chilcot's comments point to the difficulty of managing various and often competing communicative channels as well as influencing these disparate lines of contact by recognizing their initial value in the inevitable asymmetrical dynamics that prevailed. The real challenge, as Chilcot admits, is in how expectations are molded to serve convergent ends in a climate of unequal and divergent interests. And, that, it would seem, is not just a matter of political priorities but shaping the art of the possible. It is also a matter, as Zartman reminds us, of finding space where perceptions about the "necessity of violence" come to be conceptualized in relation to the "advisability of compromise."⁷¹ The conditions that are better suited to productive negotiation are recognition of the need to shift away from the divisive power of asymmetrical relations toward a new context that prioritizes notions of equality.⁷² Inevitably, too, this means moving simplistic perceptions on conflict toward a receptiveness about the complex nature of negotiations and reorienting the conflictive relationships that have endured between insurgents and governments in the process.⁷³ Chilcot's role was one of actively managing a context that would allow for changing dynamics and enable a rethinking of constraints. His involvement, consistent with effective mediation, was to help persuade "the parties to change their perceptions of the value of current situations and future outcomes—that is, to see a stalemate and reach a turning point."⁷⁴ And this, as the interview comments show, would require balancing and reorienting positions toward a new mutual recognition of the need to end conflict rather than continue it.

Notes

¹ Peter Taylor, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 34.

² Graham Spencer, ed., *The British and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 79–100.

³ Graham Spencer, "Managing a Peace Process: an interview with Jonathan Powell," *Irish Political Studies* 24, no. 3 (2010), 437–455; Spencer, *British and Peace*; Graham Spencer, "Leading a Peace Process: An Interview with Bertie Ahern," *Irish Political Studies* 32, no. 4 (2017): 588–601; Graham Spencer, *Inside Accounts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), vols. 1 and 2.

⁴ I. William Zartman, *The Practical Negotiator* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 42.

⁵ Gerry Adams, *Hope and History* (Dingle/Co. Kerry: Brandon, 2003), 26–48.

⁶ Martin McKeever, *One Man, One God* (Dublin: Redemptorist Communications, 2017), 112–129.

⁷ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin, 2007), 619.

⁸ Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), 463.

- ⁹ Alistair McAlpine, *Once a Jolly Bagman* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 272; Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher*, vol. 2, *Everything She Wants* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 223–325; David Goodall, *The Making of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985* (Dublin: National University of Ireland, 2021), 3, 31, 137, 194.
- ¹⁰ Holy Mass in Drogheda, *Homily of His Holiness John Paul II*, September 29, 1979, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790929_irlanda-dublino-drogheda.html.
- ¹¹ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles* (London: Hutchinson, 1995), 326.
- ¹² Frank Millar, “Ireland: The Peace Process,” in *Blair’s Britain*, ed. Anthony Seldon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 511.
- ¹³ Stephen Kelly, *A Failed Political Entity* (Newbridge/Co. Kildare, 2016), 326.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 332.
- ¹⁶ Spencer, *Inside Accounts*, 1:156–162.
- ¹⁷ Graham Spencer, *From Armed Struggle to Political Struggle* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 131–138.
- ¹⁸ Ted Smyth, “Irish American Organizations and the Northern Ireland Conflict in the 1980s: Heightened Political Agency and Ethnic Vitality,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 39, no. 3 (2020): 36–61.
- ¹⁹ David Bloomfield, *Political Dialogue in Northern Ireland: The Brooke Initiative, 1989–92* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 16; Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *The Fight for Peace* (London: William Heinemann, 1996), 99.
- ²⁰ Spencer, *From Armed Conflict to Political Conflict*, 142.
- ²¹ Tom King, *A King among Ministers* (London: Unicorn, 2020), 132.
- ²² Mallie and McKittrick, *Fight for Peace*, 102.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁴ Willie Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (London: Aurum Press, 1989), 99–122.
- ²⁵ Niall O’Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 226–230.
- ²⁶ O’Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*; Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), 73–107; Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), 59–89; Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014), 78–82; Peter Taylor, *Talking to Terrorists* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 1–48.
- ²⁷ Eamonn O’Kane, “Talking to the Enemy? The Role of the Back-Channel in the Development of the Northern Ireland Peace Process,” *Contemporary British History* 29, no. 3 (2015): 401–420.
- ²⁸ Owen Bennett-Jones, “What Fred Did,” *London Review of Books* 37, no. 2 (January 22, 2015), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n02/owen-bennett-jones/what-fred-did>.
- ²⁹ “Setting the Record Straight,” Sinn Fein, January 5, 1994, <https://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/15216>.
- ³⁰ Albert Reynolds, *Albert Reynolds: My Autobiography* (London: Transworld, 2009), 302.
- ³¹ Conor Lenihan, *Albert Reynolds* (Newbridge/Co. Kildare: Merrion Press, 2021), 156–157.
- ³² Reynolds, *Autobiography*, 429.
- ³³ Lenihan, *Reynolds*, 157.
- ³⁴ Bloomfield, *Political Dialogue in Northern Ireland*; David Bloomfield, *Developing Dialogue in Northern Ireland: the Mayhew Talks, 1992* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
- ³⁵ Frank Millar, *Northern Ireland: A Triumph of Politics* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 69.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ⁴¹ Bloomfield, *Developing*, 1–2.
- ⁴² Spencer, *British and Peace*.
- ⁴³ Henry Sinnerton, *David Ervine*, (Dingle/Co. Derry: Brandon, 2002).142–168; Graham Spencer, *The State of Loyalism in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 74–111.
- ⁴⁴ Reynolds, *Autobiography*, 288–315.
- ⁴⁵ Thomas Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2000); Powell, *Great Hatred*; Millar, *Northern Ireland*; Spencer, *British and Peace*; Spencer, *Inside Accounts*, vols. 1 and 2.
- ⁴⁶ John Major, *John Major: The Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 431–494.
- ⁴⁷ Sean Duignan, *One Spin on the Merry-Go-Round* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1996); Reynolds, *Autobiography*.

- ⁴⁸ Powell, *Great Hatred*, 152–199.
- ⁴⁹ Bertie Ahern, *Bertie Ahern: The Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), 190–301.
- ⁵⁰ Spencer, *Inside Accounts*, 2:243–244.
- ⁵¹ Zartman, *Practical Negotiator*, 42–86.
- ⁵² Tim Dalton, “Two Inspectors Call . . . and Other Events,” in *Brokering the Good Friday Agreement: the untold story*, ed. Mary E. Daly (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2019), 172–173.
- ⁵³ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 15.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁵⁵ William J. Burns, *The Back Channel* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2021), 10.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁵⁷ Basil H. Liddell-Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 347.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 348.
- ⁵⁹ David Omand, *How Spies Think* (London: Viking, 2020).
- ⁶⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 211–231.
- ⁶¹ Powell, *Great Hatred*, 16.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18, 108.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁶⁵ Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 179.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 201, 205.
- ⁶⁸ Mallie reported in the *London Observer* in November 1993 that the British had been in dialogue with the IRA.
- ⁶⁹ Spencer, *British and Peace*; Graham Spencer, *Inside Accounts*, vols. 1 and 2.
- ⁷⁰ Spencer, *From Armed Struggle to Political Struggle*, 189–194; Bill Jeffrey, “Why Was the Good Friday Agreement So Hard to Implement?: Lessons from ‘Groundhog Day,’ 1998–2002,” in Spencer, *British and Peace*, 229–251.
- ⁷¹ I. William Zartman, “Dynamics and Constraints in Negotiations in Internal Conflicts,” in *Elusive Peace*, ed. I William Zartman (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), 5.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.