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## **Breaking patterns of conflict in Northern Ireland: new perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

Central to reaching peace and settlement in Northern Ireland was a sequence of British–Irish intergovernmental discussions and negotiations, dating from the beginning of the 1980s. British and Irish state cooperation and intervention has remained central to the stability of the settlement reached in 1998. The motives of state actors, however, have been unclear, and the role of the state in the political process has been the subject of some scholarly controversy. This paper looks at the types of evidence that can help to resolve such questions. It focuses on the value of elite interviews, arguing that they can constitute an important and irreplaceable body of evidence when used critically, but it also highlights the risks of excessive reliance on this type of source. It goes on to describe a major research project in University College Dublin whose aim was to record the experiences and interpretations of the actors who engaged in British–Irish negotiations over the last four decades. It discusses the resulting elite interviews and witness seminars and the methodological and ethical difficulties encountered. It describes how these were overcome, and outlines the conditions of confidentiality imposed.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, British–Irish negotiations, data sources, elite interviews, witness seminars, confidentiality

One recurring feature in efforts to break patterns of conflict and to install stable and durable peace settlements has been the role played by outside powers. External states may assist not just by underwriting security arrangements but also by forming part of a mechanism that is available to intervene at critical moments (Hartzell *et al.*, 2001: 191-193). Of course, such intervention need not be disinterested. Analysis of external intervention in ethnic conflicts in a range of African cases led two researchers to conclude that

Outside parties are most likely to intervene in ethnicized conflicts when their own national interests can be advanced. Selfless commitment to the international mediation of such conflicts, no matter how horrific they may be, remains a rare occurrence in contemporary international politics (Taras and Ganguly, 2010: 239).

The huge variety of geopolitical contexts within which ethnic conflicts run their course can see neighbouring states play a range of different roles. Here we consider the special (but by no means unique) case where the conflict is located in a region of one state over which a neighbouring state has had a territorial claim, itself part of the legacy of a quasi-colonial relationship: Northern Ireland. Much analysis of conflict and settlement in Northern Ireland has put the spotlight on actors – populations, paramilitaries, parties and prime ministers. Less attention has been paid to the level of the state: the British state, whose writ of course extends over Northern Ireland, but also the Irish state, which surrendered a strong formal but ineffective claim to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland for the reality of a significant voice in its political future.

This special issue focuses on the changes in state frameworks, laws and practices that accompanied, facilitated and encouraged the process of settlement leading to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and the later transformation of institutions and political relations in Northern Ireland and in these islands more generally. It explores the interrelations of different levels of state and institutional change. These range from the broadest concepts of sovereignty and ideology to the actual impact of large changes on particular institutions and laws. They also extend over elite political assumptions and strategies, and inter-state coordination practices. In this introductory article, we review the broad field that the special issue addresses, we indicate how it is tackled in the articles that follow, we discuss the data sources that are available to support this analysis, and we describe in greater detail the output of a major collection of oral material on which most of these articles draw.

### **Governments and conflict resolution**

Central to reaching peace and settlement in Northern Ireland was a set of British-Irish inter-governmental discussions and negotiations, dating from the beginning of the 1980s. By the mid-1990s the two governments, in close if informal contact with the parties in Northern Ireland, had devised the principles on which a settlement would be based (the Downing Street Declaration of 1993), and had provided a sketch of the institutional framework of the settlement (the Framework Documents of 1995). These formed the basis of multi-party negotiations convened in 1996 and joined by Sinn Féin in September 1997, after an IRA ceasefire the previous July.<sup>1</sup> The negotiation process was internationally chaired and government-led.

Negotiations proceeded through bilateral sessions – for example, between the Irish government and unionists on constitutional issues – with the governments moving between the parties. The minor parties, and sometimes even the major ones, often felt shoe-horned into an agreement drafted and redrafted by British and Irish civil servants (Todd, 2003: 10).

How are we to understand the role of the two governments in the longer process that led from the outbreak of conflict through settlement to implementation? Were they honest brokers, mediators or actors in the conflict? The question became central to debate in the 1990s (Wright, 1987; Guelke, 1988; Whyte, 1990; McGarry and O’Leary, 1995; Ruane and Todd, 1996), just as the governments themselves were taking an active role in conflict resolution. Once settlement was achieved in 1998, academic attention moved on. The British and Irish states and their interrelations remained the subject of historical analysis (Cunningham, 2001; O’Kane, 2007; Smith, 2011; Aughey and Gormley Heenan 2011; Patterson, 2013) and of analysis that ranged much more widely than Northern Ireland itself (Arthur, 2000; Coakley *et al*, 2005; Cox *et al*, 2006;). The most lively debates, however, concerned other issues: analyses of the newly designed consociational institutions (McGarry and O’Leary, 2004; Taylor, 2009); monitoring of the workings of the devolved and cross-border institutions (Carmichael and Knox, 2007; Coakley and O’Dowd, 2007; Wilford, 2012); exploration of the political dramas and contests within unionism, nationalism and republicanism, and among the (ex)-paramilitaries (Shirlow *et al*, 2010; McAuley *et al*, 2011); and the multiple aspects of the peace and settlement processes (Hennessey, 2000; Wilford, 2001; Irwin, 2002; McKittrick *et al*, 2004; Tonge, 2005; Ashe, 2007; McEvoy *et al*, 2007; Smithey, 2011).

The states remained central to implementing and stabilising the 1998 Agreement. Intense disagreements between them occasionally erupted in public (for example, over the suspension of the Assembly in 2000) but more often were fought out in private in what one Irish official called a ‘guerilla war’.<sup>2</sup> After three years of political stasis, and the electoral victory of the once-extreme parties within the unionist and nationalist blocs (the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin), the governments brought the parties together in St Andrews in 2006 and subjected them to sustained, united, and ultimately successful pressure to come to agreement. Since 2007, the devolved institutions have been functioning, implementation has been declared complete, and the governments have taken a back-stage role. This nevertheless remains important in ‘persuading’ (or incentivising, or threatening) the parties and the executive to compromise on key issues, most recently on a long-awaited community relations policy.<sup>3</sup> Yet it has been the subject of little critical scholarly analysis.

This collection approaches the role of the governments in negotiations, of the states in conflict, and of the settlement process itself from a fresh perspective. It links new empirical re-

search with wider theoretical models. Intergovernmental agreements and disagreements, and state policies towards Northern Ireland, are worked out behind closed doors. Getting at the assumptions behind the agreements, or understanding the implications of public statements designed to mean different things to different parties, is far from simple. The authors here make use of the reflections of political and civil service elites as data sources. They do so not out of a naive view that elites have any privileged insight into causality, or indeed that they are willing or able to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about still-contentious events in which they played a part. Elite narratives often point us towards new facts, but need always to be corroborated. But they are invaluable in revealing not just facts but perspectives and modes of understanding. These differ over time, and Irish and British perspectives often conflict strongly. In sifting through these complex and often mutually contradictory reflections, scholars need conceptual toolkits that can synthesise the varying perspectives within a coherent framework of meaning.

Theoretical models are central in description and explanation of the key events in Northern Ireland, not because of the paucity of evidence but because of its often contradictory character and the highly politicised nature of many interpretations. It is here that the articles in this volume break important ground in interpretation and explanation. If they use interview material as supplementary or primary data sources, they are far from simple reports of elite narratives but rather analytical reflections on those narratives. The authors use different theoretical tool-kits – complex interdependence, the contact hypothesis, theories of sovereignty and federalism, models of structural change – to tease out important facets of change, continuity and causality. They do not simply apply theory, but adapt it, while sifting through the data, deploying the empirical research to clarify the general concepts, using the concepts to guide interpretation of the data, and coming to a reflective equilibrium between theory and data in an iterative process (Bates et al, 1998: 16). The resulting ‘analytic narratives’ are to be judged against the known facts, by their coherence and by measuring them against competing interpretations (Bates et al, 1998: 14-18).

The authors disagree, and not infrequently, on the interpretation of the evidence. How far has sovereignty shifted? How far was British-Irish cooperation driven by Northern Irish or broader state interests? How far did wider structural processes impinge upon specific mechanisms of peace making or institution building? The proper response to these disagreements is not to return to the archives but to open up the debates to scrutiny: to look at the limits of the theoretical concepts and models comparatively as well as within Northern Ireland. This is to depoliticise debates by focusing on causality rather than responsibility, and on typology rather than policy direction. It is by this means that the important scholarship on Northern Ireland

can make a cumulative contribution to comparative analysis, and that comparative analysis can assist in assessing debates on Northern Ireland. Of course, empirical research, in all its forms, must inform scholarly debate, but it never determines its outcome. It is precisely by using social scientific models in cross-temporal as well as cross-social comparisons that we open up debates on Northern Ireland to new currents of thought, and to wider perspectives.

This volume focuses on the British and Irish states, the modes of cooperation between them, and their contribution, singly and jointly, to settlement in Northern Ireland and to ongoing processes of change. For a period, it seemed that the wider processes of British-Irish cooperation in the face of economic crisis would take precedence over Northern Irish affairs. Yet the winter of 2012-13 showed that the settlement process in Northern Ireland is far from complete. Diffuse discontent and a general sense of exclusion on the part of loyalists have been long simmering. Whether these can be absorbed and handled by the existing structure, or constitute a sign of a deeper failure to resolve rather than manage longer-term conflicts of interest and social divisions, is a question for another volume. It is, however, clear that in whatever way we conceptualise the states' roles, we should not assume that the narrative has ended.

### **Dimensions of conflict resolution**

Given this focus on the state, the special issue begins with a set of four articles that stand back from the relationship between the British and Irish states and consider its general features as these have developed in the last decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd look at the significance of long-term historical processes in defining the set of alternatives open to parties and populations in Northern Ireland, and in shaping the options of policy makers in the two states. From this perspective, the 1998 Good Friday agreement is not an innovation that lacks deep roots, but rather the culmination of earlier processes of structural change that led to an adjustment in the resources available to domestic actors within Northern Ireland, and in the options open to them. Structural change, in turn, was in part a product of a shift in the British stance, beginning with a formal accommodation with the Irish state on the Northern Ireland issue in the 1980s, and continuing to evolve thereafter. This change process altered the relative positions of the competing domestic actors within Northern Ireland, enabling them to come to a settlement in a context where the balance of resources between the two communities was becoming more even and the opportunities for further change more open.

The changing character of the broader relationship between the two states is addressed also by Paul Gillespie, who sees much of the momentum behind the peace process in Northern

Ireland as deriving from change at this level rather than from the domestic context of Northern Ireland. This is not deny the big part played by the Northern Ireland conflict in assisting a convergence between the two sovereign states; but redefining the relationship between the once-great imperial power and its former possession was in the interest of each. Joint membership of the European Union, and the levelling of status associated with participation in European institutions, helped in the normalisation of relations between the two states. But the sheer volume of mutual trade dependence and the intensity of interaction between the two jurisdictions – forming a pattern that Gillespie identifies as one of ‘complex interdependence’ – greatly accelerated this redefinition of the British-Irish relationship. Debate within the UK about the future position of Scotland, with its implications for the London-Belfast and Belfast-Dublin axes, underscores the complexity of relations across the Irish Sea.

The position of Scotland within the UK highlights the complex concept of sovereignty, the subject of Elizabeth Meehan’s article. Lacking a written constitution, or at least a codified one, the UK has relied on piece-meal, pragmatic responses to changing political demands, including ones with profound implications for the structure of the state. Paradoxically, the notion of parliament as sovereign can survive ambitious experiments in devolution. While in constitutional theory such experiments may be reversed, in conformity with expectations regarding the sovereignty of central state institutions, in political reality devolution is probably irreversible, rendering the notion of ‘sovereignty’ a complex and elusive one. This is particularly the case in relation to Northern Ireland, which successive UK governments have committed themselves to handing over to a ‘foreign’ jurisdiction, should a majority there so wish.

The changing British-Irish relationship goes well beyond international agreements and ad-hoc arrangements. To an increasing degree it has been evolving under the umbrella of a complex, new institutional structure, extending also to the component parts of the UK and to its dependencies. This umbrella, described by John Coakley, may be so slight as to be scarcely noticeable; but it possesses considerable capacity for growth. One strand, a bilateral British-Irish intergovernmental one, has been receding in importance as the new institutions in Northern Ireland have consolidated themselves. But the other two strands – an intergovernmental one linking the two sovereign states, three devolved jurisdictions and three crown dependencies, and a parallel interparliamentary one – appear to have acquired a momentum of their own.

The profound changes that have been taking place in British perspectives were matched by a far-reaching rethinking of political positions on the part of Irish nationalists. This is considered in two articles. Susan McDermott analyses the challenge faced by Irish governments as they moved from the traditional irredentist position to one accepting Northern Ireland’s right

to self-determination. Initially, Irish governments were confronted by a paramilitary threat directed not just against Northern Ireland but also against the Republic, while finding themselves excluded from any significant voice in the management of events in Northern Ireland that had big implications for the South. This was to change, however, from 1973 onwards, as UK governments were forced to acknowledge that developments in Northern Ireland were not exclusively a domestic matter. The Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 represented the high point in the assertion of Irish government influence over Northern Ireland, and was to be followed by a reorientation of Irish government strategy, with efforts also to bring militants into the political process.

But changing public and elite opinion in the Republic represented only one aspect of the redefinition of the nationalist tradition. The other, analysed by Peter McLoughlin, was the changing image of northern nationalism, and especially of the republican tradition, in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. For mainstream nationalism, represented by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the talks process that began in the 1990s was to lead to the installation of the kinds of institutions for which it had been calling since the early 1970s. But ensuring the stability of such institutions, and procuring agreement on them in the first place, meant engaging with militant republicans, and persuading them of the merits of political as opposed to paramilitary methods. Much of the history of the period leading up to the cease-fires of 1994 was marked by the efforts of the SDLP, but also of the British and Irish governments, to persuade Sinn Féin and the IRA to embark on a political path.

Finally, two articles look at aspects of the British-Irish relationship that seem at first sight to have no more than indirect implications for political relations. The first, explored by Gareth Ivory, is the legal regulation of trans-frontier television in the two parts of the island of Ireland. Most viewers in the northern part of the Republic have for long been able to receive television signals from Northern Ireland, and have thus been exposed to news reporting, cultural programming and political debate from there. But reciprocal reception of southern stations in Northern Ireland was much less extensive. Vigorous efforts by Irish governments to promote the availability of southern Irish television north of the border enjoyed only imperfect success. But technical developments, including the advent of digital terrestrial TV and increased availability of cable and satellite television, together with increased political willingness on the part of the UK authorities to accept this, finally removed physical barriers to cross-border reception, ushering in more profound all-island patterns of reception and viewing.

The second set of developments that have indirect implications for political relationships is that of cross-border trade and investment. Katy Hayward and Eoin Magennis analyse the manner in which this economic relationship has changed over the past four decades. On the



one hand, there has been a tendency for the Republic of Ireland to achieve great diversity in its export and import markets, while, proportionally, Northern Ireland continues to engage in a considerable volume of trade with the South. The border has had a big impact on economic relationships between the two jurisdictions, and has been targeted by external bodies such as the EU and the International Fund for Ireland, which have consciously sought to break down barriers by promoting more cross-border trade and investment, and have done so with some success. But much of the improvement in cross-border economic relationships, itself likely to contribute to the peace-building process, was conducted for normal commercial and business reasons, not specifically as a contribution to peace, or with political objectives in mind.

This new collection of essays adds to the literature, discussed above, on the two states' involvement in efforts to resolve the Northern Ireland problem and to ensure the stability of the settlement, filling gaps in the literature and updating earlier studies. Its broad focus is on slow-moving changes with big impact in Northern Ireland: changes to British state practices of territorial management, to notions of sovereignty, to Irish state strategies and to intergovernmental cooperation; to the institutions and linkages slowly brought into being in conjunction with these changes, from British-Irish institutions to North-South linkages in business or broadcasting; and in the ways these are understood in Northern Ireland itself, and in the big changes in republican political strategy. The articles are distinctive, too, in drawing on new data sources which reveal British and Irish elite perspectives on these issues – the matter to which we now turn.

### **Data sources**

As it has been observed, 'methods are no more than ways of acquiring data' (Della Porta and Keating, 2008: 28). In studying the role of the state, where so much happens in secret, a range of data sources is necessary. These vary from government archives to constitutional and legal documentation, from elite interviews to parliamentary questions and debates, from confidential briefing statements to private contemporaneous notes made by officials, and from autobiographies to historical accounts. Each, used properly, has its benefits and its limits. Archives – documented, written official records – tell us what officials chose to minute, and what elites chose to circulate in writing. Parliamentary answers and debates tell us how cabinet ministers chose to describe and legitimate ongoing activity. Formalised rules of institutions tell us what those institutions were supposed to achieve and how they were supposed to function. Elite interviews and narratives can tell us how individual actors functioned in practice, what politicians thought important or peripheral in debates, and how observers saw

contemporary events. Witness seminars, where a small group of elite respondents who participated in major historical episodes spend an extended period (often, a full day) engaged in discussion with a number of academic observers, allow intensive questioning and confrontation of viewpoints.

But each of these approaches to data collection is also limited in its usefulness. The early literature on elite interviewing (for example, Dexter, 1970) has been supplemented by a growing body of literature on this particular methodology (for example, Moyser and Wagstaffe, 1987; Arksey and Knight, 1999; Rice, 2010; and Bryson and McConville, 2014) that converges in its practical implications for the researcher. One consideration that the researcher needs to bear in mind is the fact that elites do not always know, recall, remember accurately or wish to reveal information about the past, and they do not have privileged insight into causal processes. They may not have (or be willing to reveal) insight into their own past motivations, and they may forget or conceal the manner in which institutions functioned in practice, and how decisions were actually made. However, interviews and witness seminars remain among the best sources for accessing the conceptual frameworks and perspectives of elites, permitting in-depth questioning, and allowing comparisons over time and between respondents. They also give us one of the very few available windows into the practical functioning of state institutions. Of course, they need to be used alongside other sources, and they need to be checked both against each other and against independently sourced data. With these provisos, they are of irreplaceable value.

A central data source for most of the articles in this volume is the John Whyte Archive created by the Institute for British Irish Studies at University College Dublin. This is a collection of taped and transcribed elite interviews and witness seminars dealing with the process of British-Irish and Northern Irish negotiations from 1973. The archive was developed in two phases. The first, in 1999-2001, recorded the recollections, perceptions and insights of key participants in the talks process that led ultimately to the Good Friday Agreement (see Todd, 2003).<sup>4</sup> The second is a much more extensive collection of interviews and witness seminars, primarily with British and Irish politicians and officials who had participated in British-Irish negotiations, conducted between 2006 and 2011. This is discussed further in the next section.

Two models in particular influenced the shape of these data collection initiatives. The first was the Presidential Oral History project at the Miller Center, University of Virginia, where long interviews are used to 'debrief' the principal figures involved in each President's administration since President Carter ([millercenter.org/oralhistory/index](http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/index)). The second was the set of witness seminars conducted at the Institute of Contemporary British History, now at Kings College London, addressing a wide range of major developments in the contemporary period

(see [www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/ich/witness/index.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/ich/witness/index.aspx), and Rose, 2000: xiv-xv). We relied on methods and procedures employed in these projects, adapting them to the Northern Ireland context and to the continuing sensitivity and confidentiality of much of the information sought and collected.

The collection described here is distinctive in its focus on the negotiations that reshaped the British-Irish relationship and underlay the Northern Ireland peace process, as reflected in interviews with key politicians, civil servants and others involved in the negotiations. It thus complements other important initiatives, such as *The Peace Process: Layers of Meaning* at Queen Mary, University of London, which has not just recorded interviews with a wide range of participants in the conflict and the peace process but also collected interviews conducted by others (see [www.peaceprocesshistory.org](http://www.peaceprocesshistory.org)). It is also different from the important Brendan Duddy Archive, housed in the National University of Ireland, Galway, where Duddy's notes of his discussions with republicans are collected (see [www.library.nuigalway.ie/aboutourcollections/archives/](http://www.library.nuigalway.ie/aboutourcollections/archives/)). Also, from the start we decided not to focus on security matters, making the John Whyte Archive quite different from the *Oral History Archive on the Troubles in Northern Ireland* developed in Boston College (Moloney, 2010).

Of course, apart from the oral archive that forms a core component of the research on which the articles in this volume are based, authors have, in varying degrees, made extensive use of other forms of data. This includes not just written archival material, but also interviews with key informants or shorter exchanges with politicians, officials and others, whether oral or written. This material has added greatly to the rich and original quality of the data on which these articles rest.

### **The 'Breaking Patterns of Conflict' project**

The interview and other oral material on which we draw so heavily in this volume was collected as the second phase of the John Whyte oral archive. This formed a central part of a project entitled *Breaking Patterns of Conflict: The Irish State, the British Dimension and the Northern Ireland Conflict*, funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (see [www.ucd.ie/ibis/research/previousresearch/bps/](http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/research/previousresearch/bps/)). This project focussed on British-Irish negotiations and on the senior politicians and officials who conducted them. We asked those individuals who had participated in negotiations of major historic significance, and who had typically also been responsible for implementing the decisions taken, about what their role had been on a day to day level – how events had unfolded, and how they had understood the process. This was particularly important in respect of the Irish civil service,

where there is no tradition of the publication of memoirs. Our objective was to create a historical resource, which would in the short term serve as background, unattributable information for the researchers involved, but which will in the longer term be opened to researchers.

At the very outset, researchers in projects of this kind face the challenge of negotiating access to politicians and officials, especially as many of the individuals we wished to interview had held high office (see Dexter, 1970: 28-36). Participation by senior Irish officials was opened up after the late Dermot Nally (former Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach, and of immense help in the project) was told by the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, to participate because 'this is history'. Shortly thereafter, British officials and politicians also began to participate. We travelled to London to interview the latter, and occasionally to mainland Europe to interview diplomats. We are greatly indebted to these respondents, who so graciously put considerable time aside for us. In almost all cases, we believe that the respondents saw the value of this initiative both as a research project, and as a means of eventually putting on the record their perceptions of an important historical process in which they had played a role.

Of course, coverage of so large a field can never be comprehensive, given the necessarily limited financial and personnel resources available. In addition, some important figures were too ill, or too busy, to be interviewed. Yet, we managed to generate a more extensive data set than exists elsewhere, to our knowledge. It comprises interviews with over 90 officials and politicians (from Britain, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the USA) involved in negotiations from 1973 to 2010. In addition, we conducted six day-long witness seminars, bringing together between four and eight respondents who had participated in major set-piece British-Irish negotiations or (in the case of the last two seminars) business linkages and peace-related activity. The participants discussed the processes that were involved, and the manner in which they understood them, with a number of academic questioners. These witness seminars involved the participation of a further 40 respondents.<sup>5</sup> Our respondents included over 30 members of the British state elite, over 40 members of the Irish state elite, key members of the economic elite in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, and many others, including Northern Irish political figures and civil society actors, and politicians, diplomats and advisors from the United States. Those interviewed included four former prime ministers (three Irish and one British), many senior cabinet ministers (including four secretaries of state for Northern Ireland), UK cabinet secretaries and senior officials in the Northern Ireland Office and the Foreign Office, and their Irish counterparts in the departments of the Taoiseach, Foreign Affairs and Justice.

The interviews and witness seminars were conducted by five interviewers between 2005 and 2011, funded by the Research Council.<sup>6</sup> Before each interview, the interviewers did extensive background research on the individual, reading autobiographies, if any, and acquainting themselves with their career paths. This is sometimes said to be necessary to create a level of 'symmetry' between interviewer and respondent (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 122-125). In our case, the issue was not symmetry, but rather the capacity to engage the respondents in informed reflective discussion – and sometimes intellectual discussion of the events in which they had participated (Rice, 2010: 74). Occasionally the respondent quizzed the interviewer on his or her 'credentials' and politics; we made it clear that we were researchers, not involved in the political aspects of the process. Where the matter arose, we were clear (and honest) in our view that the British-Irish process had made a very positive impact on resolving the conflict, and that we wanted to understand it better.

The interviews focussed on the part that the individuals had played in the processes of negotiation: we asked them about what they had done, and how they had thought about it and understood it at the time and later, as is normal in such interviews (Dexter, 1970: 115-6). This was not investigative reporting: if the respondents were determined not to tell us something, we moved to another topic. Interviews were semi-structured, with questions covering the main periods when the respondent worked on British-Irish relations and probing specific issues known to be contentious. Questions were decided in team discussion prior to the interview, with interviewer discretion in following leads in the interview itself. We did not try fully to define the issues or questions (Dexter, 1970: 5-6), but rather let the respondents themselves – as the experts – correct us where necessary and define what they saw as the most important parts of the process of negotiation, policy-making or implementation. We followed their discussions, with our questions focussing on meaning and understanding as much as on facts. Some interviews ran into several hours. Occasionally it was clear that the one or two hours allowed were insufficient to cover the process, and respondent and interviewer agreed to meet again in a few weeks to continue the discussion. The interviews were taped, by agreement.

The witness seminars took a parallel form. Considerable prior research was undertaken, and a schedule for the day was drawn up, to ensure coverage of all aspects of the topic in question. The first four witness seminars addressed defining moments in the British-Irish relationship: the Sunningdale Agreement (1973), the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), the Downing Street Declaration (1993), and the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (1998 and later). The two remaining witness seminars covered business links between the Republic and Northern Ireland. Very great care was taken in taping, so that small tape recorders were

placed in several parts of the table. Outline notes were made to help with the eventual transcription. An academic chair was designated, and was usually changed for morning and afternoon sessions to keep discussion moving, and to ensure that important issues were not ignored: it was neither easy nor indeed always appropriate to impose 'order' on talkative and engaged senior politicians and civil servants. Discussion continued over coffee and lunch. This could not be recorded, but important issues raised in informal discussion during breaks were brought up again in the afternoon session by the academic questioners.

The proceedings of the witness seminars and the content of the interviews were transcribed, except in the very few cases where the respondent wanted the tapes rather than a transcription to be lodged in the archive. Following correction and editing of the transcripts, respondents approved a final version, sometimes making quite extensive additions and changes.<sup>7</sup> Interviewees imposed embargos of varying length on the transcripts and tapes, and agreed that, in the interim, the information contained there could be used as background information by the research team.

Until the various embargos expire, then, the interviews and witness seminars are used only in accordance with a form of the 'Chatham House rule'.<sup>8</sup> When this material is used in the articles that follow, then, phrases quoted should be seen as close paraphrases (put in quotation marks to capture accurately the tone of response), and are not attributed. The only interviews which are attributed in the articles that follow were either conducted by the author of the article, who was given permission to use them, or, in the case of interviews that form part of this archive, where the author got written permission from the respondent to attribute the quotation.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The articles in this special issue will show, then, the value of the oral archive described above for our understanding of the negotiation process that transformed the relationship between the British and Irish states. At the very least, the interviews and witness seminars give us clarity about the everyday processes involved in negotiation and implementation processes, and the informal interactions that made a difference to the outcomes. As a whole, they do more: they show competing and changing perspectives on events, they highlight differences in the Irish and British perspectives, and they challenge us to come to terms with the multiple perspectives on continuity and change expressed differentially from British and Irish perspectives.

The essays in this volume, then, shed further light on the remarkable change in the British-Irish relationship that took place around the turn of the century. The 'historic compromise' represented by the Good Friday Agreement was made possible by a long-term shift in British and Irish state priorities. This is not to argue that the two governments, in the words of Taras and Ganguly cited above, were motivated by 'selfless commitment' to the pursuit of peace. As in all such contexts, the sovereign governments had their own preoccupations and interests. As the articles assembled here show, however, and as the oral archive data illustrates, sufficient convergence of interest had occurred by the end of the twentieth century for each side to favour the radical new initiatives that, at least so far, have substantially brought an end to one of Europe's most bitter geopolitical disputes.

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## Notes

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1. The original IRA ceasefire of 31 August 1994 came to an end on 9 February 1996, but was renewed on 20 July 1997.
2. Interview with Irish official 19 September 2008; see description of this source later.
3. The long awaited *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* document (2010) was withdrawn after criticism (available at [www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/csi-consultation](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/csi-consultation)). A new strategy, *Together: Building a United Community*, was published only in May 2013; available [www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community)).
4. This initiative was made possible by generous financial assistance from the John Whyte Trust Fund and the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.
5. We do not include here over 70 other interviews, mainly with Northern Irish respondents who were involved in the 1997-98 negotiations, that formed the first phase of the archive. These were collected earlier, and since they have not been used for this volume and have been described elsewhere (Todd, 2003), we do not further discuss them here.
6. Interviewers were Christopher Farrington, Susan McDermott, Michael Anderson, Robert Mauro and Jennifer Todd, with John Coakley (in the early phase) and Joseph Ruane (at the end) conducting some.
7. The versions were as follows: (A) the original transcription from the tape; (B) a lightly edited version of A, correcting mistakes in transcription; (C) a further edited version of B, making minor textual changes and, in the few cases that they might exist, editing out gratuitously insulting comments or references to third parties; and (D) version C, but corrected by the respondents, who sometimes made quite extensive additions and changes.
8. The Chatham House rule, designed to facilitate openness and free exchange of ideas, provides that 'participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed'; see [www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouserule](http://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouserule).
9. In such cases, the full date of the interview is not given, to prevent cross-checking with other articles prior to the lifting of the embargo on the interviews.