

## **Northern Ireland - Peace Process**

General Information

Historical Background

The Search for a Political Settlement: 1980s and 1990's

Multi-Party Talks 1996

Good Friday Agreement 1998

Rebuilding Confidence & Restoring Momentum

Restoration of the Institutions - 8 May 2007

All-Island Partnership & Co-operation

British-Irish Relations & the Peace Process

International Support for the Peace Process

Representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, British & European Parliaments and Local Government

Population

The consolidation of peace in Northern Ireland and the promotion of partnership and cooperation between both traditions on the island of Ireland is a key policy priority for the Irish Government.

This work involves sustained contact with the Northern Ireland Executive, the British Government, with the political parties, with all sections of society in Northern Ireland and with a range of international partners. These collective efforts, which are still ongoing, have transformed the social, political and economic landscape of Northern Ireland, particularly in the years since the Good Friday Agreement (see below) was signed in 1998.

Northern Ireland is now a far more peaceful, prosperous and stable society than when the first steps towards peace were taken in the 1980s and 1990s. Many advances have been made in delivering progress in areas such as equality, human rights, policing and community relations. In recognition of the potential for North/South synergies, all-island co-operation has intensified. East/West relations have also been enhanced.

Restoration of the power-sharing institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement on 8 May 2007 represented a critical step forward, not only in creating effective government for Northern Ireland, but in seeking to build a common future for all its people.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The existing political division in Ireland dates from the passing of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 by the British Government. The Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in 1921 and after centuries of British rule, 26 of the 32 counties

of Ireland gained independence. The remaining 6 counties formed Northern Ireland, which continued to be governed within the United Kingdom. However, while the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster continued to exercise sovereignty, power on a variety of matters was devolved to a local Parliament and Government established initially in Belfast City Hall in 1921 and later moved to the parliament building in Stormont in 1932.

From 1921 to 1972, although Northern Ireland elected members to the Westminster parliament, the devolved Government in Belfast operated with virtual autonomy from London on local matters. Power remained exclusively in the hands of the Unionist party which drew its support from the majority community in the area which favored union with Britain. Nationalists had in practice no role in government and they suffered discrimination at local level in many areas, including voting rights, housing and employment.

In 1969 non-violent campaigners for civil rights met with a hostile and repressive response from the Stormont authorities, ushering in a period of sustained political crisis. This gave rise to civil unrest and the revival of violent activity by paramilitary organizations representing elements within both communities.

In a deteriorating security situation the local Northern Ireland Parliament and Government were prorogued in 1972 and the British Government assumed direct responsibility for all aspects of the government of Northern Ireland. With the exception of one brief period in 1974 when a local executive was established on a power-sharing basis under the Sunningdale Agreement, Northern Ireland was until December 1999 governed under a system of direct rule under the authority of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who is a member of the British Cabinet.

### **The search for a political settlement: 1980s and 1990s**

From the early 1980s onwards, the British and Irish Governments began to cooperate more closely in an effort to achieve a widely acceptable and durable political settlement of the Northern Ireland problem. This effort involved both the successive establishment of a number of structures and mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation, and a growing convergence on the fundamental constitutional and other principles which should underpin a settlement.

In November 1985, the Irish and British Governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Agreement enabled the Irish Government to put forward views and proposals on many aspects of Northern Ireland affairs, and through its structures the two Governments intensified their work to find a solution to the Northern Ireland problem.

In 1991/92, the two Governments convened round-table talks involving the main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland (the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Social Democratic and Labour

Party (SDLP), and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI)). While some common ground was identified, overall agreement could not be reached. On 15 December 1993, the then Taoiseach, Mr Albert Reynolds TD, and the British Prime Minister, Mr John Major, issued a Joint Declaration which outlined a charter for peace and reconciliation in Ireland. It set out the basic principles necessary to underpin the political process and established the principles of self-determination and consent in relation to the Constitutional status of Northern Ireland. The Declaration also sought to offer those associated with paramilitary violence a route into the political process provided they established a commitment to exclusively peaceful means and the democratic process. On 31 August 1994, the IRA announced a "complete cessation of military operations". This announcement was followed on 13 October 1994 by a similar statement from the Combined Loyalist Military Command. Following the ceasefires, the two Governments engaged in direct political dialogue with Sinn Féin and the two loyalist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP). Following the ceasefires and the publication in February 1995 of A New Framework for Agreement (known as the Framework Document), in which the Governments set out their shared understanding of the possible outcome of comprehensive negotiations, intensive efforts were made to secure a way forward into comprehensive and inclusive talks. The question of the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons acted as a block on progress and, in December 1995, the two Governments established an International Body, under the chairmanship of United States Senator George Mitchell, to provide an independent assessment of the issue. In its report of 24 January 1996 the International Body recommended that all parties participating in negotiations should commit themselves to six principles of democracy and non-violence, including the total and verifiable decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons. When on 9 February 1996 the IRA cease-fire broke-down, both Governments vowed to continue the search for political agreement and expressed the hope that a restoration of the cease-fire would allow for the resumption of political dialogue with Sinn Féin.

### **Multi-Party Talks 1996**

Multi-party talks involving the two Governments and Northern Ireland political parties (the UUP, DUP, SDLP, Alliance Party, PUP, UDP, United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP), Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and Labour, but excluding Sinn Féin, in the absence of an IRA cease-fire) finally began on 10 June 1996.

The talks were chaired by Senator Mitchell, assisted by former Finnish Prime Minister Mr. Harri Holkeri and retired Canadian General John de Chastelain. For the first year, after the adoption of rules of procedure in July 1996, they made

little progress, as the decommissioning issue continued to dominate. On 20 July 1997, the IRA announced a resumption of its cease-fire, opening the way for the entry of Sinn Fein to the talks on 9 September. Two of the unionist parties, the DUP and the UKUP, then left the talks. However, the largest unionist party, the UUP, continued to participate.

Substantive negotiations eventually began on 24 September 1997. As the talks progressed the independent chairmen worked with the two Governments and the parties to identify areas of broad agreement and isolate areas of remaining difficulty. In the final and intensive negotiations the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern TD, and the British Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Blair led their Governments' delegations.

### **Good Friday Agreement 1998**

On Friday, 10 April 1998 a comprehensive political agreement was approved at a plenary session of the talks. The two Governments signed a new British-Irish Agreement immediately thereafter committing them to give effect to the provisions of this multi-party agreement, in particular those relating to constitutional change and the creation of new institutions.

The Good Friday Agreement was explicitly recognized by participants in the multi-party negotiations as a historic opportunity for a new beginning for relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. It commits the participants to the "achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."

The Agreement provided for the establishment of new political institutions, reflecting the three strands of relationships involved:

A legislative Assembly and Executive within Northern Ireland to exercise partnership government based on equality

North/South Ministerial Council and all-island implementation bodies to develop co-operation and action within the island of Ireland

a British-Irish Council to promote mutually beneficial East/West relationships and as a forum for cooperation between the various sovereign and devolved administrations in Britain and Ireland.

It also included measures to uphold the protection of human rights and equality and to deal with the consequences of conflict. In addition, it mapped the way forward with major new initiatives in the crucial areas of policing and justice. In regard to security issues, the Agreement included a commitment by all parties to work with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) to achieve the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. For its part, the British Government committed itself to achieving, as early as possible, a return to normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement also dealt with the special constitutional position of Northern Ireland, outlining an agreed position, based on the principles of self-determination and consent.

In the referenda held on 22 May 1998, the people of Ireland, both North and South, overwhelmingly endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. In Northern Ireland, 71.1 per cent of the people voted to approve the Agreement. In the Republic, 94.4 per cent of the people voted to allow the Government become party to the Agreement. The combined Yes vote in both parts of Ireland was 85 per cent. This was the first occasion since 1918 on which all the people in Ireland had voted together to decide their political future.

### **The Good Friday Agreement – Template for Peace**

The Good Friday Agreement acts as the template for cooperation between the British and Irish Governments in relation to Northern Ireland. Both Governments are committed in all circumstances to ensure that it is implemented to the maximum possible extent for the benefit of all communities.

Since 1998, full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has been the Government's priority. Much progress has been made in delivering on commitments made across such important areas as human rights, equality, community relations, including the establishment of Human Rights Commissions in both parts of the island, and the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland. In the area of policing, new accountability structures have included the establishment of the office of the Police Ombudsman; the Policing Board and the District Policing Partnerships. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) came into being in November 2001, replacing the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Progress in relation to security issues has also been steady. Following the IRA statement of July 2005, committing itself to exclusively peaceful means, the British Government initiated its planned security normalisation programme which had been agreed with the Government as part of the Joint Declaration of April 2003. In the context of a continuing enabling environment, this committed the British Government to a number of measures, including the removal of army watchtowers, the vacation and closure of all but 14 army bases and the reduction in troop levels from over 13,000 to 5,000. These normalisation measures were completed on 31 July 2007.

Elections to the first Northern Ireland Assembly took place on 25 June 1998, with power first devolved to the new Assembly and Executive on 2 December 1999. However, disagreements between the parties, principally over the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, led to the operation of the Assembly being interrupted on a number of occasions over the next two years. On 14 October 2002, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr. John Reid, made an order suspending the Executive and Assembly, following allegations of intelligence gathering in Stormont.

### **Rebuilding confidence and Restoring Momentum**

In an effort to restore momentum towards full implementation of the Agreement, the Governments published a Joint Declaration on 1 May 2003, which identified areas where progress could be made. However, a period of intensive negotiations between the parties and the two Governments did not resolve all outstanding difficulties at that time. Subsequent Assembly elections, held in November 2003, resulted in the DUP and Sinn Féin becoming the largest parties on the unionist and nationalist side respectively.

A year of further intense negotiations brought all sides close to agreement, but on 8 December 2004, the Governments announced that, while almost all outstanding issues had been agreed with the parties, differences over the process to be used to verify the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons remained unresolved.

In 2005 and 2006 the context for political engagement improved greatly. The announcement on 28 July 2005 that the IRA had ended its armed campaign and the confirmation by the Independent Decommissioning Body in September 2005 that IRA decommissioning had been completed led to intensified political contacts between the Governments and the parties and renewed efforts to find a way forward.

In 2006, those efforts culminated in Scotland in the publication of the St Andrews Agreement on 13 October, following talks hosted by the Irish and British Governments with the political parties.

Underpinning the Good Friday Agreement, the St. Andrews Agreement set out a clear way forward for all parties to commit to the full operation of stable power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, and to full support for policing and the criminal justice institutions. Major progress in that regard was made in the early months of 2007, with all-party support for policing and the criminal justice institutions secured in January and Assembly elections in March resulting in a clear popular mandate for power-sharing.

### **Restoration of the Institutions – 8 May 2007**

These developments allowed restoration of the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement – in suspension since 2002 – to take place on 8 May 2007. On that day, Dr Ian Paisley, DUP Leader, and Mr. Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin were appointed as First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. Peter Robinson subsequently replaced Dr. Ian Paisley as First Minister and leader of the DUP in June 2008.

With restoration of the devolved institutions, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) could once again meet and the North/South Implementation Bodies function fully. The fifth Plenary meeting of the NSMC took place in

Armagh on 17 July 2007. The Northern Ireland delegation, led by the First Minister, Dr Ian Paisley and the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, and the Irish Government delegation, led by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, acknowledged the significance of the occasion, the first meeting of the Plenary since 2002. They welcomed the opportunity to meet in the NSMC to consult on and promote mutually beneficial co-operation on a range of issues and to take a number of decisions on the Council's work. Since that time, Ministers have continued to review key developments in the NSMC through ongoing sectoral meetings, where they have the opportunity to engage in broad discussion on a range of issues of common interest and concern, including child protection, tourism, road safety and infrastructure. The first Plenary meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) following restoration took place in Belfast on 16 July 2007.

### **All-Island Partnership & Co-operation**

The Irish Government is committed to promoting partnership and deepening economic, social and cultural relations between both parts of the island of Ireland. The then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and the DUP's Dr. Ian Paisley underlined the commitment to building relations on the island in a spirit of friendship and mutual understanding at a significant meeting at Farmleigh House in Dublin on 4 April 2007, and through ongoing engagement since restoration took place on 8 May 2007.

In recognition of the synergies that can be gained through all-island co-operation across the economy, infrastructure and spatial planning, the border region and improved co-operation on cross-border public services such as health and education, particular focus has been placed in recent years on developing co-operation in these areas. In October 2006, a Comprehensive Study on the All-Island Economy was launched, which sets out the economic rationale for North/South collaboration, as well as concrete proposals for economic initiatives.

All-island co-operation is also a horizontal theme of the Government's National Development Plan for the period 2007-2013. It sets out, for the first time, proposals for Irish Government investment in North/South projects and initiatives for mutual benefit. These include joint investment in new strategic projects to benefit North and South; and the opening up of access to existing development funds on an all-island basis, and/or the introduction of new, agreed joint funding measures. Key measures undertaken to date include a major roads investment programme, the restoration of the Ulster Canal from Clones to Lough Erne and the introduction of a single electricity market for the island.

### **British-Irish Relations and the Peace Process**

Over the last thirty years, the context in which the Irish Government's objectives in relation to the peace process in Northern Ireland are pursued has been transformed. The British-Irish relationship is multi-faceted, influenced by

historical connections, geographical proximity and strong economic links. There is a vast network of individual connections between the two islands. Many Irish-born people live and work in Britain. The British-Irish relationship is evolving towards an enhanced degree of understanding and a greater recognition of shared interest at almost every level, as reflected in the historic address of the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, to the Joint Houses of Parliament in Westminster on 15 May 2007.

### **International Support for the Peace Process**

The peace process in Northern Ireland has always benefited from the widespread support of the international community, including our EU partners, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others. The focus of international support has included both political support for the evolving peace process and practical assistance in the areas of economic regeneration and cross-community reconciliation, including through the International Fund for Ireland and the EU's Programmes for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the six border counties of the Republic. The Irish Government has committed to engage productively with the international community in sharing its experiences of the peace process and to work with others where this would prove helpful.

### **Representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, British and European Parliaments and Local Government**

Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive exercises authority over broad areas of social and economic policy. The Northern Ireland Assembly comprises 108 members across 18 constituencies, elected by proportional representation on the basis of the single transferable vote.

The composition of the power-sharing Executive is determined by the results of the Assembly elections, the most recent of which were held on 7 March 2007 under the terms of the St Andrews Agreement. The number of seats won by each party was as follows (n = nationalist, u = unionist, o = other):

DUP	u	36
Sinn Fein	n	28
SDLP	n	16
Alliance	o	7
Green	o	1
PUP	u	1
UKUP	u	0
OTH	o	1

The election results above resulted in 4 Ministerial posts in the Executive for the DUP, 3 for Sinn Féin, 2 for the UUP, and one for the SDLP.

In addition, Northern Ireland returns 18 members to the United Kingdom parliament at Westminster. Following the 2005 Westminster elections, party representation is nine DUP, one UUP, five Sinn Féin and three SDLP. Northern Ireland also elects three Members of the European Parliament.

Reform of Local Government in Northern Ireland is currently under consideration by the Northern Ireland Executive, as part of an overall Review of Public Administration. On 31 March 2008, the Minister for the Environment, Arlene Foster, outlined changes that will reduce the number of councils from 26 to 11 by 2011. The new councils will have increased responsibilities, including aspects of planning, rural development, urban regeneration and community development.

### **Population**

The 2006 mid-year population estimate for Northern Ireland was 1,742,000. This estimate is based on the most recent (2001) census, when the population of Northern Ireland was recorded at 1,685,267.

**The above information is from the [EmbassyofIreland.org](http://EmbassyofIreland.org) site**