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‘SUNNINGDALE FOR SLOW LEARNERS’? NEGOTIATING A CREDIBLE COMMITMENT TO PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

Seamus Mallon famously stated in 1998 that the Belfast Agreement was ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’. Both the Belfast Agreement and the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 adopted the principles of a Northern Ireland executive with an Irish dimension as the basic framework of a viable political solution to the Troubles. Despite these similarities, the Sunningdale agreement collapsed after only a few months, while the Belfast Agreement has normalised political interactions between the Catholic and Protestant communities. The agreements’ vastly differing outcomes have received considerable attention in the field of political science, with numerous academics offering normative theories for the failure of Sunningdale and the success of the Belfast Agreement. Many attribute the success of the 1990s peace process to the creation of consociational political institutions that fully recognised the national and cultural identities of both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. However, these normative approaches fail to account for the conciliation process that was required to incentivise the two communities to invest in the peace process. In contrast to these theories, this paper will adopt a positivist approach to analysing the outcomes of the Sunningdale and Belfast Agreements and will apply the game-theoretic concept of a ‘commitment problem’ to the Troubles. Using Dixit and Nalebuff’s theory of credible commitments, this paper will argue that the 1990s peace process transformed a one-shot game into a repeated game that credibly committed the Catholic and the Protestant communities to a shared political future in Northern Ireland.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of a ‘commitment problem’ encapsulates the inability of two rational actors to commit to a mutually beneficial outcome. Due to a lack of trust, both players in the game are incentivised to defect from the commitment. However, Dixit and Nalebuff emphasise that by adopting a range of strategic moves, both players can credibly commit to a mutually beneficial outcome. This paper will apply the concept of a commitment problem to the Troubles in Northern Ireland (‘the North’) and analyse the peace processes leading up to the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 and the Belfast Agreement of 1998. In effect, the Belfast Agreement reflected the culmination of a series of strategic moves that credibly committed the Catholics and Protestants to a shared political future for the North. In contrast, the Sunningdale peace process was a one-shot game that failed to overcome the mistrust between the two communities, leading to a sub-optimal outcome.

This paper will discuss the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland to demonstrate the underlying commitment problem between the Catholic and the Protestant communities. Using the history as a reference point, the two agreements will be analysed according to Dixit and Nalebuff’s theory on strategic moves and credible commitments. Finally, the applicability of this analysis to other ethnic and national conflicts will be explored.

II. THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Troubles in Northern Ireland spanned a thirty-year period between 1969 and 1998 where institutionalised political interaction was undermined by tit-for-tat paramilitary violence between the Catholic and Protestant communities. In essence, the Troubles was a conflict over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland that divided the two communities into distinct ethnic and historical traditions, claiming political allegiance to Ireland or to Great Britain (Doyle, 1999).

This definition reflects the internal and external dimensions of the conflict. Protestants generally identify as ‘British’ and have sought to protect their ethnic and national identity in the institutions of the Northern Irish state as well as by securing the union with Great Britain. This community viewed the constitutional claim of the Republic of Ireland to the region and the use of violence by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) as a fundamental threat to their ethnic security (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995). In a united Ireland, a state dominated by the edicts of the Catholic Church and anti-British sentiment, the Protestant community would be a minority ethnicity (Doyle, 1999; Ruane and Todd, 1999).

Catholics, in contrast, identify as Irish and viewed Northern Ireland as the last bastion of British colonialism (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, p. 312). The British government, in this interpretation, prevented the 'legitimate' reunification of the two regions since the passage of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, p. 312). Many Catholics also perceived the old Stormont regime and its majoritarian principles as economically, politically, and culturally oppressive, which disconnected the community from the institutions of the state (Ruane and Todd, 1999, p. 1; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995, p. 314). Thus, the Catholics would be able to secure their national identity through greater equality within Northern Ireland or, preferably, through a united Ireland.

These narratives set the two communities in direct conflict with each other. The IRA adopted the colonial narrative to pose as freedom fighters and thereby legitimise their use of violence to force the British government to withdraw from the region and reunite Ireland (Tonge, 2008; Ruane and Todd, 1999, pp. 1-2). On the Protestant side, unionist paramilitary forces such as the Ulster Volunteer Forces (UVF) defined their use of violence as a defence mechanism against recalcitrant forces that denied the legitimacy of their 'British' state (Doyle, 1999). In March 1972, the British government suspended the old Stormont regime and assumed responsibility for the legislative affairs of Northern Ireland (Buckland, 1981, p. 157). In December 1973, the British and Irish governments signed the Sunningdale Agreement, establishing a power-sharing executive with proportional representation for both ethnic communities. The Irish government also provided a guarantee recognising the 'present constitutional status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom' in return for a Council of Ireland, which would forge economic and social ties between the North and South of Ireland (Buckland, 1981, p. 169). However, the Northern Ireland Executive established under Sunningdale lasted for only eight months due to rising opposition from the Protestant community and a crippling strike launched by the United Ulster Unionist Council.

Dubbed 'Sunningdale for slow learners' by Séamus Mallon, the Belfast Agreement adopted the basic provisions of the Sunningdale Agreement – a power-sharing executive with an Irish dimension (Ruane and Todd, 1999, p. 1). However, the peace process of the 1990s addressed an additional range of issues affecting both communities in Northern Ireland, particularly the police service, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, and the repeal of both the Government of Ireland Act (1920) and Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's constitution, which claimed a territorial right to Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2008).

Prior to the start of the peace process, however, both Catholics and Protestants started to reconsider the merits of a political settlement. Most crucially, the IRA began to realise that the British government would not withdraw from the region and the Catholic community was growing increasingly opposed to the violent methods used by the organisation (Ruane and Todd, 1999, p. 5). In this new context, a political

solution offered the IRA legitimacy for its aims and higher payoffs than the gridlocked campaign of violence.

The prospect of a united Catholic front posed a considerable challenge to the Protestant community (Doyle, 1999, p. 212). In addition, the traditional dominance of the Protestant majority had been “eroded by demographic changes and economic growth within the Catholic community” (Williams and Jesse, 2001, p. 572). Therefore, a political settlement offered the Protestants a method of securing their national identity in a rapidly changing Northern Ireland.

These changing incentives, however, serve to demonstrate the extent of the commitment problem between the Catholic and the Protestant communities. Neither player took the initiative to negotiate a mutually beneficial settlement because of the potential loss of their bargaining power in the peace process. In order to begin negotiations, neutral agents were required to bring the two players together. The following section will assess the strategic moves adopted throughout the peace process of the 1990s.

III. CREATING A CREDIBLE PEACE SETTLEMENT

The Troubles was a classic Prisoner’s Dilemma between two rational, egoistic actors: the Catholic and the Protestant communities. This model simplifies the diverse actors within the peace process under their national identities. Thus, the ‘Catholics’ encompass the IRA, nationalist political parties, and the Irish government, while the ‘Protestants’ reflect unionist paramilitary organisations and political parties, as well as the British government. This assumption is not intended to categorise all Catholics or Protestants as members of the IRA or the UVF, but rather to emphasise the salience of national identities in the negotiations. However, this assumption ignores moderate political opinion in Northern Ireland.

During the Troubles, the Catholics and Protestants could either negotiate with the other community or dominate the political stage by pursuing their preferred outcome. Although these actions are simplified accounts of the conflict in the North, they reflect the attempts to reach a mutually beneficial solution, such as the Sunningdale Agreement, that were undermined by either side defecting from the agreement to dominate the political stage.

Figure 1: The Troubles As A Prisoner's Dilemma

		Protestants	
		Negotiate	Dominate
Catholics	Negotiate	(2,2)	(-3, 10)
	Dominate	(10, -3)	(-1, -1)

Figure 1 demonstrates the payoffs for this simultaneous move game. The preferred individual outcome for the Catholics is [Dominate, Negotiate] and for the Protestants is [Negotiate, Dominate]. It is assumed that by entering into negotiations, one side concedes their preferred strategy and thus weakens their bargaining position. For the Catholics, this outcome would have enabled them to push for a united Ireland because the Protestant community had capitulated their efforts to secure the union with Great Britain and maintain majoritarian political institutions. In contrast, for the Protestants, the Catholics would have conceded their aims of a united Ireland and equality within Northern Ireland, enabling the Protestant community to remain in the United Kingdom and re-establish majoritarian political institutions that secured their dominance.

[Negotiate, Negotiate] is the second preferred outcome for both communities in which they both constrain their behaviour and reach a mutually beneficial settlement. In effect, this outcome would recognise the national identities of the Catholics and the Protestants and institutionalise legitimate political interactions between the two communities.

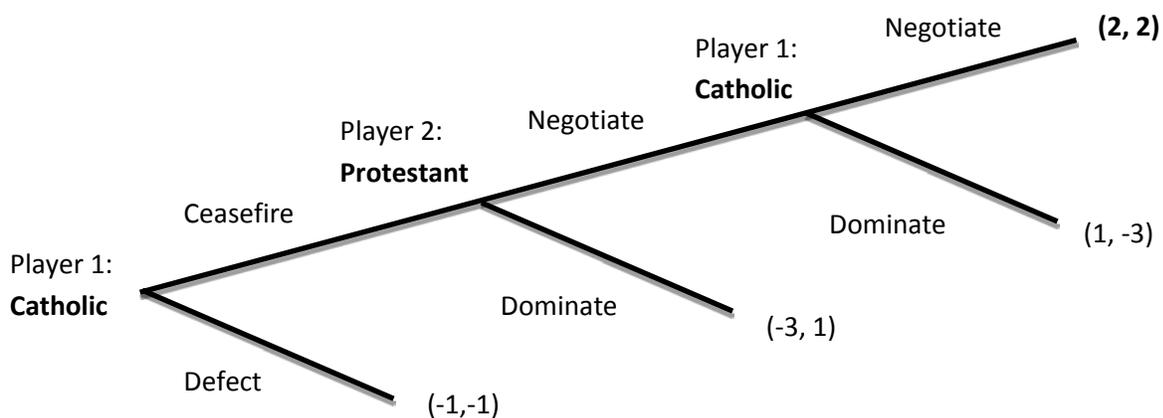
The third preferred outcome for Catholics and Protestants is [Dominate, Dominate]. This outcome is the Nash equilibrium of the game in which both players are incentivised to defect from the mutually beneficial outcome. Due to the incompatibility of the preferred strategies of the Catholics and the Protestants, this outcome manifested itself in protracted violence over the course of thirty years. To further emphasise the Troubles as a commitment problem, the negative payoffs in this situation reflect the loss of human life, the political instability, and the economic stagnation of Northern Ireland.

The least preferred outcome for the Catholics is [Negotiate, Dominate] and for the Protestants is [Dominate, Negotiate]. In both of these outcomes, one player weakens their bargaining position by negotiation, which is capitalised upon by their opponent. By implication, this scenario reflects an outcome in which one community surrenders their national identity to the other.

The Sunningdale Agreement attempted to resolve the commitment problem of the Troubles by forging a contract on the future of Northern Ireland between the Catholics and the Protestants. However, as Dixit and Nalebuff emphasise, ‘contracts alone cannot overcome the credibility problem’ (2008, p. 210). Within a few weeks of the conclusion of the 1973 peace process, Protestant opposition began to develop due to the perception that they had lost out in the negotiations – a perception that was enhanced by nationalist claim that the Council of Ireland was the first step towards ‘[manoeuvring] unionists into a united Ireland’ (Gillespie, 2007; Ruane and Todd, 1999, p. 8). The Northern Ireland Executive lasted only eight months. Thus, Sunningdale was a one-shot, simultaneous move game that failed overcome the lack of trust between the two communities and credibly commit the players to a peace agreement or [Negotiate, Negotiate].

The peace process of the 1990s transformed a one-shot, simultaneous move game into a sequential game where the order of play enhanced the credibility of the commitment made by the Catholics and the Protestants in the Belfast Agreement. As in the previous game, the two players are the Catholics and the Protestants. In this game, the sequential actions are modelled on the trajectory of historical events. Thus, the Catholics have two sets of actions. The first is to commit to an IRA ceasefire or defect from an IRA ceasefire. This action provided the impetus for starting legitimate negotiations between the two players, enabling the Catholics to present a united front vis-à-vis the Protestant community, while also increasing the credibility of the IRA’s commitment to the peace process. In response, the Protestants can commit to negotiations or dominate the political stage and, in turn, the Catholics can negotiate or dominate.

Figure 2: The Peace Process of the 1990s



Backward induction demonstrates that the equilibrium path leads to the sub-game perfect Nash equilibrium [Negotiate, Negotiate]. In stage three, the Catholics commit to negotiating because it provides

a higher payoff in the form of a negotiated settlement that protects their national identity. Therefore, dominating is no longer a credible strategy because the Catholic community would incur substantial reputational costs if they reverted to political violence as a means of holding out on the less favourable aspects of the agreement. This action also reflects the reality that the Catholics would benefit substantially from greater access to political power and institutional ties with the Republic of Ireland. In stage two, the Protestant community recognises that negotiating is the optimal strategy for the Catholics and thus commit to negotiate. This outcome provides the Protestants with a higher payoff than dominating the political stage by removing the territorial claim to Northern Ireland in the Republic's constitution as well as securing closer ties with Great Britain. Dominating would incur substantial reputational costs for the Protestant community and thus is not a credible strategy. Therefore, the Catholic community commits to a ceasefire in the first stage.

Drawing out the negotiations into a dynamic game broke the overall commitment problem into smaller commitments, which served to provide information on the actions of both players and hence build up their reputations (Dixit and Nalebuff, 2008, p. 218). In addition, the presence of a 'contract-enforcing institution' in the form of the Mitchell Commission, chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell, served to bolster the credibility of the peace process by enabling the two communities to begin negotiations without weakening their respective bargaining positions (Dixit and Nalebuff, 2008, p. 208). The Commission was instrumental in providing a neutral approach to the negotiations. Both communities were required to agree to the 'Mitchel Principles' before joining the negotiations, which committed the Catholics and Protestants to respecting the rule of law and the national identity of the other community, thereby increasing the reputational costs of defecting from the agreement (Bric and Coakley, 2004, p. 158).

The Commission further broke down the overall commitment problem into smaller commitments by addressing a range of issues separately from the negotiations on the institutional design of Northern Ireland's political institutions. In particular, the Commission focused on the obstacle of the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and transformed the political question of when to decommission into a discussion on the specific mechanics of disposing of paramilitary weapons (Cox et al., 2006, p. 156) The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) was created to focus specifically on monitoring decommissioning and maintaining negotiations between the two parties (Bric and Coakley, 2004, pp. 159-160). The reform of the police service was also addressed separately to the institutional design negotiations by the Patten Commission (Cox et al., 2006, p. 170). By adopting this piecemeal approach, the peace process of the 1990s enhanced the credibility of the overall agreement and committed both Catholics and Protestants to adhering to the provisions of the Belfast Agreement. As

shown by the smaller payoffs in **Figure 2**, dominating the political stage was no longer credible or beneficial for either community.

IV. RELEVANCE FOR OTHER CONFLICTS

The purpose of this paper extends beyond the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Around the world, numerous conflicts have been fought in ‘contested states’ – states where one ethnic or national community denies the fundamental political legitimacy of the state and all its institutions and symbols (Doyle, 1999, p. 201). During the Troubles, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) became a focal point of dispute between the two communities. For the Protestants, the RUC was the rightful protector of law and order against intransigent elements in the state. For the Catholics, the RUC was an illegitimate instrument of British oppression. Thus, the police service was powerless against a community that rejected its authority and, by implication, the state’s legitimacy. This example alludes to the difficulty of reaching a solution whereby both communities, particularly the alienated community (in this case the Catholic community in Northern Ireland), become invested in establishing institutions in a formerly contested state.

Wars between states have been the main focus for many political scientists and thus, conflicts of this nature are rarely addressed (Doyle, 1999, p. 201). However, in inter-state wars the legitimacy of a state is not questioned. In essence, conflicts in contested states are driven by their own dynamic, guided by profoundly complex issues and problems that must be addressed in order to end the violence. As the numerous failed settlements to the Troubles demonstrate, creating a lawful political entity from a contested state requires significant flexibility, determination, and commitment.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on two attempts to address the commitment problem between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. While both the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 and the Belfast Agreement of 1998 were founded on the principles of a power-sharing executive with an Irish dimension, the settlement reached at Sunningdale collapsed after eight months, returning to the sub-optimal outcome of paramilitary violence between the two communities. In contrast, the peace process of the 1990s addressed the most salient political issues affecting Northern Ireland and adopted a range of strategic moves that credibly committed both Catholics and Protestants to upholding the mutually beneficial Belfast Agreement. The Troubles in Northern Ireland is one example of a myriad of conflicts in contested

states. Many of these conflicts have continued unabated and failed to credibly commit the distinct parties into committing to negotiations and achieving a mutually beneficial agreement.

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