



## A COMMENTARY ON DIFFICULTIES WITHIN THE PEACE PROCESS

by

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### Preface

This paper does not address political differences among the participants to the Peace Process. For instance, it does not consider the detail of suspicions among the various parties about each other's motivation or lack of commitment. Rather, it deliberately assumes a universal commitment to the search for peace.

### Themes of the Peace Process

The Peace Process must operate in an holistic way, simultaneously addressing four main themes:

- The Talks Process: dialogue in pursuance of political agreement.
- Law and Order: policing, prisons and inter community stability.
- Social and Economic Progress: job creation, economic regeneration.
- The Work of Reconciliation: building respect and trust in relationships.

If any of these themes are 'neglected', the Peace Process will be imbalanced.

### Political Sub-Cultures

The Talks participants can be viewed as coming from different political sub-cultures:

- the traditional unionist and nationalist élites, who are used to interacting exclusively with each other in the formal arenas of politics and in previous peace initiatives.
- republican and loyalist representatives, who are used to exclusion from formal political processes and cross party interaction.



In addition, they are in varying degrees of 'cohabitation' with paramilitary forces and are attempting to make a transition from armed conflict to political engagement.

They are able to do this because the Talks Process was based on the principle of 'inclusion'. Some republicans and loyalists are sceptical about the credibility of inclusion as an operative principle in this process.

Similarly, some unionists have no faith in the validity of this principle; preferring to maintain the tradition of political life whereby 'constitutional' politicians engage with each other, to the exclusion of others.

### Positional Communication

Thus far the business of the Talks Process has been dominated by the articulation and exchange of respective positions. On the face of it various positions are irreconcilable. Parties have established their positions and have proceeded to 'dig in', adopting defensive postures. The consequent inertia has weakened people's faith in the process. The tedium of life in the trenches, with little action 'up top', has led to frustration and increased scepticism all round.

This can be remedied by the development of communication about 'needs' and 'interests' rather than the repetition of well known positions. There should also be efforts to identify 'commonalities' of need, however small.

In addition, the process would benefit if opposing participants had opportunities for 'human interaction', gaining greater sensitivity to each other, rather than being limited to a knowledge of each other's public persona.

### Building Confidence

Building and maintaining confidence is fundamental to the health of the Talks Process. Difficulties have grown because a common understanding of the concept of building confidence has not been established. Instead, confidence-building measures (CBMs) have been 'demand focused' and preoccupied with concessions within the gift of the two governments.

Since it was impossible for all sides to present identical shopping lists, it was inevitable that government responses would appear imbalanced. Since the CBMs were one of the few tangible signs of movement in the Talks Process, difficulties with them have exacerbated a lack of confidence in the overall process.

It would be useful for the Talks participants to revisit the concept of confidence building. Perhaps within the CBMs sub committee there could be an exploration of



why it is important to build confidence among the participants. In this respect, participants need to:

a) be given confidence by other participants (not just by the two governments)

and

b) impart confidence to the other participants.

If there is agreement on these fundamentals, there could be useful discussion about the range of modalities for building confidence and, further, consideration of technicalities which may need to be addressed if certain modalities are utilised.

### Prisons

The question of prisoner releases, escapes, the murder of Billy Wright and the confidence of prisoners, have clearly demonstrated the importance of prisoners in the overall scheme of the Peace Process. It has always been so: instability within the community leads to difficulties within the prisons. Difficulties within the prisons destabilises the community (and its processes).

It would be appropriate for the Talks participants to hold 'Prison Hearings' which would aim to air significant views of the place of prisoners within the longer term task of reconciliation in our society. This would enable conflicting views to be expressed and establish a wider context than the narrow preoccupation with prisoner transfers and releases. It would also facilitate a common exploration of the tradition of political violence within Northern Ireland and consideration of its tragic consequences and overall legacy.

Away from the formal Talks Process, there could be useful dialogue within the Maze prison itself.

These two factors would generate a healthier dynamic around the prisons issue and help stabilise an unstable situation.



### Summary of Recommendations

1. Take steps to enable the talks participants to consider the need to balance the (four) major themes of the Peace Process.
2. Encourage initiatives in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Irish Republic which enable wider society to address the Peace Process and, thereby, create a more supportive climate for the talks participants.
3. Encourage greater sensitivity to the various political sub-cultures within the Talks Process.
4. Establish the validity of 'Inclusion' as a fundamental principle of the Talks Process. ✓
5. Create opportunities for interaction between the participants which focus more on needs, interests and their 'humanity'.
6. Facilitate a common reappraisal of the concept of Building Confidence.
7. Hold Prison Hearings within the Talks Process.
8. Support dialogue within the Maze prison.