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"Tactical use of armed struggle": the IRA's purpose in Irish Republican strategy, 1969–2005

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Between 1969 and 1997, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought against British rule in Northern Ireland. Some scholars suggest Republicans saw the IRA as vital to achieving Irish unification. They argue that the IRA only ended their campaign because the organisation faced a trajectory of decline by the 1990s. Others agree that the IRA was utilised by Republicans to achieve unity but conclude that the IRA faced a stalemate by the 1990s and accepted a political compromise. Using a range of sources, I argue Irish Republican leaders viewed the IRA always as a tactic to get its opponents to negotiate and provide concessions towards its objectives, most crucially securing the principle of all-Ireland self-determination in some form. The IRA's role in Republican strategy fluctuated in importance. Between 1969 and 1975, it was the main method used to try to get Republicans into talks and to try to achieve self-determination. After 1975, Republican leaders still believed the IRA was required to pressurise the British Government back into negotiations. But a political mandate was added to ensure their opponents would agree to and implement a political settlement inclusive of the principle of self-determination once IRA violence ceased. This "Armalite and Ballot Box" strategy lasted until 1997. I also demonstrate how recent archival releases show the IRA's weapons remained in the background until 2005 in case the British Government and Unionists delayed implementing reforms agreed in the peace deal. During the IRA's 1994 ceasefire, they discussed "TUAS". Some commentators believe it meant the "Tactical Use of Armed Struggle". This phrase best explains the IRA's role in Republican strategy from 1969 to 2005. This case study reveals a pragmatism behind the leadership of some non-state armed groups.

Keywords: Irish Republican Army (IRA); Northern Ireland conflict; tactical use of armed struggle; violence; nationalism

Introduction

In 1986, Gerry Adams, Sinn Féin leader (the Irish Republican Army's political wing), suggested: "armed struggle … is a tactic … one cannot … bomb an independent Ireland into existence". At the same time, Adams believed: "[w]ithout [the IRA] … Ireland would not even be an issue". For Adams, the IRA was "an agent of bringing about change". Other tactics were "equally" important to assist Republicans in achieving

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concessions towards their objectives (Adams 1986, 64). His quote exemplifies how from the perspective of Republican leaders, the IRA's purpose was always to pressurise the UK Government and other conflict participants to negotiate and grant concessions to Republicans.

This case study illustrates how the leadership of some non-state armed groups are more realistic about what political violence can achieve than their public rhetoric and actions may suggest. Achieving the principle of Irish self-determination was the cornerstone of the IRA's purpose. But Republican leaders displayed – to varying degrees when comparing the 1970s and beyond – flexibility in terms of the form it could take and when it might occur. There are implications for peacebuilding between states and armed groups that emerge from this study. The article offers a case study of arguably the most prominent use of political violence by a non-state left-wing nationalist group in Europe since the 1970s, why such methods were utilised and what was their end goal (ETA in the Basque Country may be considered a rival to this description. For ETA, see Whitfield 2014). Was the end goal and purpose of nationalist political violence (in this case the IRA's) to encourage a political settlement and compromise inclusive of some of their objectives, or purely to obtain their ultimate objectives in full? Also, I consider whether it is possible for states to detect and work with a willingness to reach a political settlement to a conflict involving left-wing armed separatist groups, in this case the IRA. Accepting the principle of a form of self-determination, permitting a democratic path to self-determination for separatist armed groups alongside introducing other political and security reforms emerge as key elements of a political compromise that can lead to non-state armed separatist groups ending their campaigns. Whilst the Northern Ireland conflict had unique causes, the situation involving the IRA demonstrates that presenting political pathways to debating constitutional disputes can assist peacebuilding. Alternatively, overlooking signs of flexibility from non-state separatist armed groups about how they could achieve their objectives can offer only prolonged conflict if that group can – and is willing to – persist. In summary, this article is an important case study showing that left-wing armed separatist groups, their leaders and their use of political violence can be more open to a political compromise and settlement than their public statements and image might suggest.

Various authors dispute the IRA's purpose in Republican strategy. They also disagree on whether the IRA progressed or not Republican objectives against its opponents: the UK state, pro-British Protestant Ulster Unionist politicians, Loyalist British Protestant paramilitaries, and constitutional Irish Nationalists represented by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Irish Government (for debates about the nature of the conflict see Bourke 2011, 2024; McBride 2023; Prince 2018; Ruane and Todd 1996). One perspective is that the IRA was pivotal alongside political methods to Republican strategy before 1998, even after Sinn Féin began contesting elections from the 1980s. These scholars argue that Republican leaders saw the IRA as key to eventually "sickening" the UK into withdrawal from Northern Ireland. They conclude, however, that significant infiltration of the IRA, Sinn Féin's political stagnation alongside other factors meant the IRA faced decline and "sued" for peace by 1998 (for examples of this view, see Frampton 2008, 2009, 16, 45–46, 79–93; Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 107–114, 128, 242–251; Edwards 2021; Hennessey 2009, 593–596; McIntyre 2008, 2013; Matchett 2016; Moloney 2007, 336, 574–582; Smith 1995, 214–225).[1] Frampton's recent reiteration of this argument accepts that Republicans were "always" trying to bring abouts "negotiation" and ceasefires. "But", he adds, "this was on the understanding that any resulting dialogue could deliver a British declaration of intent to withdraw", a "non-negotiable cornerstone of the IRA"s position" (cf. Frampton 2025, 825–826). The IRA, in his view, "abandoned" its demands for a British declaration of intent to withdraw and Irish

self-determination from the late 1980s following a trajectory of decline for its armed and political wings (cf. Frampton 2025, 835–845).

Others concur that the IRA was an important tactic for Republicans to achieve Irish unity. But these authors differ by concluding that there was an armed stalemate from the 1980s, prompting leading Republicans to rethink the IRA's purpose. A political compromise emerged. The IRA achieved some secondary objectives, such as Sinn Féin's inclusion in talks. These authors argue the IRA's primary aim was all-Ireland self-determination and unification, which remained unfulfilled (for examples of this view, see Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 213–214; Dixon 2012; Dixon 2019, 97–127; English 2012, 227–315, 2016, 92–147, 2024; Finn 2019, 86, 107, 140–142, 163–165, 188–198, 207–208; Mulholland 2007, 410–415; Murray and Tonge 2005, 173–174; O'Brien 1999, 159–322; O'Kane 2021, 10, 18, 22–30, 58–62, 103–104, 109; O'Leary 2019, 146–149, 217, 2005, 224–230, 236–246; Patterson 2007, 260, 314–316, 321–323, 349–350; Taylor 1998, 277–327; Whiting 2018, 5–8, 139). English, in particular, emphasises the "pragmatism" of the Republican movement. The IRA were willing to adapt to the political and security circumstances during different stages in the conflict to ensure that they achieved at least some concessions towards their ultimate ambition of Irish unity (English 2024). I concur. Where I slightly disagree with English is about the Republican leadership being inflexible on the application of self-determination. Whilst more unyielding than their successors in the 1990s – who accepted that the principle of northern consent and Irish self-determination could co-exist – the Republican leaders of the 1970s *were* willing to consider self-determination where the island of Ireland did not vote and operate as one unit. As a last resort, they considered an independent Northern Ireland in 1975 as a political compromise with Unionists *if* the British outlined their intention to withdraw from Northern Ireland (cf. English 2024, 82–83).

Elsewhere, Ó Dochartaigh explored back-channel negotiations between the British state and the IRA (Ó Dochartaigh 2021). Leahy evaluated British intelligence's impact on the IRA (Leahy 2025). They accept that the IRA was one of various equally important political tactics for Republicans utilised to achieve their aims. In their view, the Republican leadership aimed for IRA activity to persist alongside obtaining a political mandate to get Republicans into negotiations and achieving concessions. Whilst desiring Irish unification, Republican leaders knew that Northern Ireland's (largely British Protestant Unionist) majority alongside Westminster opposed unity. The IRA achieved its objective of a negotiated political settlement by 1998 (Leahy 2025; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 9, 16–20, 43–58, 117–273, 2015).[2] My article differs in various ways. First, Leahy suggested Republican leaders would compromise on demanding all-Ireland self-determination as one island from the 1980s (cf. Leahy 2025, 122–130, 199–228, 236–248). I outline how the evidence now supports and expands on Ó Dochartaigh's view that it was from 1971 (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 48–70, 191–192). Second, their books did not explore why the IRA stayed in reserve between its 1997 ceasefire and formal end to its campaign in 2005. They do not provide an overall sense of the IRA's changing or continuous purpose in Republican leadership strategy throughout its entire existence between 1969 and 2005. Leahy's recent research on IRA strategy during decommissioning provides answers on the period between 1994 and 2001 (Leahy 2025). However, he only focuses on IRA strategy during that decommissioning period, and not within the context of its entire campaign. Neither do these authors provide significant explanation and evidence about the IRA's role in Republican strategy. Their focus was on other significant themes.

This article suggests that for Republican leaders, the IRA's campaign was *always* a tactic towards fulfilling primary and secondary objectives, particularly the right to Irish

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self-determination. Republican leaders engaged in the "Tactical Use of Armed Struggle" throughout the conflict; a phrase allegedly used internally to maintain volunteers' support during the ceasefire from August 1994 (Mallie and McKittrick 1996, 381). Their aims included steps towards Irish unification by ensuring the principle of Irish self-determination in some form was granted and a political path to achieve it provided, increasing Sinn Féin's vote and preventing political settlements that left Northern Ireland as an exclusive British affair (English 2016, 92–147). The IRA's role in Republican strategy compared to other tactics fluctuated according to its success or failure in pressurising its opponents to negotiate and grant concessions (Ó Dochartaigh 2021). Republican leaders aimed to pressurise their political opponents including the British Government to negotiate a political settlement that achieved some Republican objectives. The IRA achieved self-determination certainly in part by 1998 with London formally as part of British policy accepting that self-determination was permitted alongside Northern Ireland's principle of consent (Leahy 2025, 122–130, 199–225; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 151–231, 259–260). The IRA's campaign had to end after 1997 because it hindered Sinn Féin's electoral potential and ability to obtain further concessions (English 2012, 227–315; Leahy 2025, 210–225; O'Leary 2019, 133–134). But the IRA remained in the background between August 1994 and February 1996, and again from July 1997 until it publicly declared its campaign over in 2005. Some writers suggest that after 1997 Republicans held onto their weapons primarily to try to squeeze further concessions from opponents (cf. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 153–158; Dixon 2008, 275, 292, 2019, 114–116, 175; Moloney 2007, 488–495, 509–518; O'Kane 2007, 86–94, 100–101). Recent archival releases disagree. The IRA was reluctant to decommission fully until London and Unionists made it clear that the British Army was ending its military operations, and other promised reforms would be implemented on policing and new political institutions (English 2012, 329–331; Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 161, 206–207, 214–216, 241–242, 249–250). The tactical use of the IRA in the decommissioning period switched primarily to being about warning that it could recommence its campaign.

The IRA's ultimate purpose had various consistencies in Republican leadership thinking over time: pressurise opponents to negotiate; get concessions towards Republican objectives, particularly the right to Irish self-determination; and remain in reserve thereafter until a peace agreement was implemented by their opponents. This argument supports Ó Dochartaigh and English in concluding that Irish Republicanism and IRA violence were not synonymous (English 2024, 84, 88; Ó Dochartaigh 2021). The Republican movement "was a very pragmatic organization, and one which would pursue what it believed it could achieve" within the political, military and other circumstances it operated within over time (English 2024, 88). Nevertheless, I highlight the differences in the approach of the Republican leadership of the early 1970s and those that led the movement by the 1990s. In the 1970s, whilst an armed stalemate and Unionist resistance to any form of unification convinced Republican leaders to explore self-determination via Northern Ireland becoming an independent state, the leadership insisted that a British declaration of intent to withdraw was required beforehand. By the 1990s, persistent IRA activity, Sinn Féin's sizeable minority of the northern nationalist vote (Leahy 2025) (but not the majority of Northern Ireland's vote), alongside the British Government understanding from extensive back-channel engagement with Republicans that they at the minimum sought self-determination coupled with the consent principle for Northern Ireland (Ó Dochartaigh 2021), saw Republicans accept that Northern Ireland could remain British in the meantime alongside Irish people being granted the principle of self-determination.

This article provides insight for why political violence was utilised by one of the world's most high-profile armed groups. It provides further ideas on creating peace with armed nationalist groups via various themes explored in the conclusion. These include: leaders of certain nationalist armed groups can privately be more accommodating of political compromises than they can publicly state; and armed groups with nationalist objectives potentially being persuaded to accept political compromises *provided* there is a democratic path available to pursue their constitutional objective.

Section one explains the IRA's ascendency between 1969 and 1975. Part two discusses why Republican leaders saw violence and political mandates as equally important between 1976 and 1997. The final section investigates why the IRA's spectre remained between their 1994 ceasefire and termination in 2005. A range of primary sources are cross-referenced including: interviews with Republicans; Irish alongside UK state and Republican archival material; memoirs by conflict participants; and events. Cross-checking these sources helps to establish differences in what Republican leaders claimed publicly they wanted the IRA to achieve, compared to privately what they accepted was realistic (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 11–14, 46–49).

A range of primary sources are cross-referenced including: interviews with Danny Morrison, Sinn Féin's former publicity director and a former leading Republican; Irish alongside UK state and Irish Republican archival material from Belfast's Linen Hall Library's Northern Ireland Conflict Political Collection, University College Dublin's Garret FitzGerald papers (a former Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) during the 1980s) and Galway University's Brendan Duddy Archives (an independent back-channel intermediary for the IRA during the conflict); memoirs by conflict participants; and events. Cross-checking these various sources and voices from Republican and non-Republican sources helps to establish differences in what Republican leaders claimed publicly they wanted the IRA to achieve, compared to privately what they accepted was realistic (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 11–14, 46–49; for the importance of cross-checking multiple sources and perspectives when researching what happened during the Northern Ireland conflict, see West et al. 2025). It allows us to cross reference Republican leaders' statements publicly and privately with the views of their opponents and intermediaries in the peace process to discover the IRA's purpose.

The IRA at the forefront, 1969–1975

During the early 1970s, Irish Republicans' focus was not only the IRA. They produced media publications, murals, held rallies and more (English 2012, 81–183; Mulholland 2007, 400–408). Nevertheless, before 1975, Republican leaders did view the IRA as *the* key tactic towards achieving steps towards Irish unity and ending discrimination against Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland (Leahy 2025, 17–28. 49–59, 108–117; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 43–150). Some volunteers including Gerry Bradley, former Belfast IRA member, believed: "we could drive the Brits [British forces] into the sea" (Bradley and Feeney 2009, 72). Most Republican leaders disagreed. They believed the IRA could encourage the UK Government and Unionists to talk. Negotiations thereafter could devise a political settlement meeting various Republican objectives, including the Irish right to self-determination (Frampton 2022, 157–158; Leahy 2025, 17–28, 49–59, 108–117; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 43–150).

In 1969, the British Government and IRA agreed: the devolved Protestant Unionist majority government in Belfast had engaged in widespread discrimination against Irish Catholics since partition (English 2012, 81–147). *Operation Banner,* the British Army's

post-conflict report, argued "[b]y the early 1960s discrimination had become institutionalised" against Irish Catholics (*Operation Banner* 2006, point 207). British troops entered in August 1969 following the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC – Northern Ireland's police before 2001), Loyalist British Protestants and predominately Irish Catholic protestors clashing during a Protestant Orange Order march in Derry city. Days of rioting ensued. "Free Derry" emerged, an Irish Catholic enclave in the working-class Bogside area that temporarily seeded from state control (for Derry and the conflict, see Ó Dochartaigh 2004).

Westminster maintained Protestant majority rule until March 1972. Northern Irish MPs represented a small proportion in Westminster and were elected from different parties to those dominant in British politics. The north offered little electoral gain for UK governments (Neumann 2003, 14–16, 96–97). Westminster also feared a two-front war with state forces caught in between British Protestants and Irish Catholics (Bennett 2023, 163–164, 263; Dixon 2001, 2017; Leahy 2025, 58, 114, 116–117; O'Kane 2017). The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), the new and most popular IRA faction, became British forces' main target. Defeating them was seen as the road to stability as they came from the minority Catholic population within Northern Ireland.

Many young IRA volunteers joined after 1969 to defend their communities from Loyalist and state aggression (Bosi 2012). Republicans believed that to ultimately protect their communities, eventual Irish unity was required (Moloney 2007, 74–84). But most northern Nationalists backed the reformist SDLP during the conflict. It was in areas most affected by intercommunal violence, British Army and RUC activities where the IRA gathered support. IRA heartlands included working-class Catholic areas in west Belfast, the Bogside in Derry city and Irish rural communities by the border, particularly in Fermanagh, Tyrone and south Armagh, majority Irish Nationalist areas since partition (Leahy 2025, 30–47; Leahy and Ó Dochartaigh 2018, 89–93).

High-profile indiscriminate British security operations further radicalised a sizeable minority of Irish Catholics (English 2024, 99–101; Frampton 2022, 144–145). In 1971, British forces introduced internment without trial for IRA suspects. Over 300 people were arrested. Almost half were released quickly due to mistaken identity (English 2012, 139–146; Williams 2023). On 30 January 1972, the civil rights movement marched against internment in Derry. According to Saville's inquiry in 2010, in response to a few rioters, the British Army killed fourteen unarmed civil rights marchers. IRA recruitment swelled (Saville 2010).

Republicans' perception of history was important. Physical force had worked before. The old IRA pressurised the UK into negotiating British disengagement from twenty-six southern Irish counties from 1921. Earlier, in 1912, British Protestant Loyalists threatened violence in the north via the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Their actions contributed to Westminster rejecting all Ireland government ruling over Unionists, eventually leading to partition (English 2016, 99; Frampton 2022, 142–144). Before 1974, Sinn Féin was outlawed in Northern Ireland as well (Leahy 2025, 54). Instead, the IRA engaged in defence and attack, sometimes discriminately, sometimes indiscriminately (whether intentionally or not) (English 2012, 120–133). Belfast experienced multiple IRA bombings by 1972 alongside Derry. IRA attacks on the security forces spread to the countryside (Leahy 2025, 29–48). But Republican leaders sought ceasefires and negotiations (Frampton 2025, 825–826; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 43–70). In July 1971, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, then Sinn Féin President and IRA Army Council (it's seven-person leadership) member, stated: "I cannot imagine the IRA driving the British Army into the sea, or anything

like that, but I think it would be possible to force the British authorities to the conference table" (White 2006, 168–169, 2017, 158).

The IRA's campaign was not envisaged as forcing immediate unification. It would struggle to achieve that because the Irish Government rejected imminent unity fearing civil war (for the Irish Government and the IRA, see Hanley 2018; Mulroe 2017; Ó Faoleán 2019; O'Kane 2010; Patterson 2013). Frank Morris, an IRA adjutant, told UK officials in February 1972 that IRA leaders wanted negotiations. Republican leaders' immediate concerns were ending internment, civil rights for northern Nationalists and ending Protestant majority rule. Morris said the IRA: "see no likely prospect of an outcome satisfactory to them on … [unification] but recognise … it could be used as a bargaining counter to extract greater concessions on other points" (National Archives UK (TNA UK), FCO 87/5, "Summary of Comments made by Frank Morris", 9 February 1972, 1–4). Republican leaders wanted a negotiated settlement. They hoped during peace talks to negotiate a British declaration of intent to withdraw "over a period" whilst they and Unionists "could sit round a conference table and examine the possibilities" (TNA UK, FCO 87/2, "Keith Kyle interview with Ruairí Ó Brádaigh", Dublin, March 1972, 1–4; English 2024, 83–84). The IRA's ceasefire between June to July 1972 which included private talks with UK officials highlighted their willingness to negotiate (Leahy 2025, 49–59; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 43–71). They demonstrated flexibility by talking despite their demand for prior Republican prisoner releases not being met.

At first, Republican leaders rejected electoral participation. They viewed Northern Ireland as a sectarian Unionist statelet, which ignored the majority mandate for an all-Ireland republic in Westminster's election in 1918 for an earlier incarnation of Sinn Féin. Republicans considered elections thereafter as illegitimate (English 2012, 13–147). But they had political plans (White 2017, 157–158). Mulholland points out the IRA's initial unification plan displayed "political logic". They wanted a federal state, Éire Nua (English 2024, 83; Mulholland 2007, 402–405). The north would be reconfigured into an Ulster Parliament, with three other parliaments for the ancient Irish provinces of Connacht, Leinster and Munster. Rather than just six-counties, the Ulster parliament would represent the ancient nine Ulster counties to correct what Republicans saw as a sectarian carve-up of Ulster into six counties that gave Protestants an artificial majority in the 1920s. The Ulster parliament would have an almost 50–50 Catholic-Protestant balance. Northern Protestants would maintain autonomy to alleviate their fears of domination by Catholics (English 2012, 120–128; Mulholland 2007, 402–405). Republicans wanted ceasefires to discuss these plans. Later, the IRA dropped their federal plans in the 1980s. The grassroots disliked this idea, believing it risked Unionists using the Ulster federal parliament majority they would have to recommence discrimination (Leahy 2025, 115).

The IRA campaign influenced the British to end Protestant majority rule in March 1972 (English 2016, 134–136). By June 1972, persistent conflict encouraged London to talk to Republicans. William Whitelaw, the UK's first Northern Ireland Secretary, flew Republican leaders to London (Leahy 2025, 25–27; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 58–71). Rather than the talks failing to produce peace because of hardline IRA demands (cf. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 39–41; Patterson 2007, 237–238; Smith 1995, 104–116), they stalled in part following the lack of pressure the IRA could apply once on ceasefire. Ó Dochartaigh explains how the IRA's campaign was one of many competing pressures on the British. Unionist resistance to political change alongside SDLP and Irish Government pressure for northern power-sharing were crucial. Unlike paramilitaries,

these groups had political mandates (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 67–71, 134–149, 271–273). Political avenues for Republicans remained blocked with Sinn Féin outlawed (Leahy 2025, 54–55; Mumford 2011, 637–638; Powell 2014, 25–26, 32–40, 114–125, 201–204, 252–256, 278). With Unionists representing Northern Ireland's majority in 1972, Westminster worried that conceding ground to IRA objectives could provoke civil war (Bennett 2023, 163–165, 180–189). Once IRA violence ceased, Republicans could not keep London focused on negotiations with them.

On 21 July 1972, the IRA returned with the indiscriminate Bloody Friday bombing in Belfast, killing nine people. In response, British troops cleared Republican barricades in the cities (Bennett 2023, 193). Mounting arrests of Republicans followed in Belfast (Leahy 2025, 82–91). In response, instead of operating in larger battalions, urban IRA units now contained a small number of volunteers in different cells to try to prevent mass arrests (Leahy 2025, 89–95, 125–130, 138, 154–155, 205). The small tight-knit rural IRA did not adopt cells as they were already difficult to infiltrate (Leahy 2025, 41–48). The Belfast IRA suffered setbacks. Multiple volunteers were interned partly due to infiltration. Elsewhere, the IRA persisted in Derry and its rural heartlands (Leahy 2025, 81–107). A new outlet in England saw IRA cells conduct multiple operations (McGladdery 2006, 75–76). The IRA's purpose remained to pressurise others to talk and obtain a political settlement achieving some Republican goals, particularly self-determination. But the British Conservative Government declined further talks before 1974, fearing they would prevent democratic parties agreeing a power-sharing settlement under negotiation (Leahy 2025, 63–66).

The power-sharing government between the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and SDLP collapsed in May 1974 following a Protestant Unionist strike (Bennett 2023, 247, 257-262). The UK Government turned to the IRA and Loyalist paramilitaries (Leahy 2025, 66–80; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 120–129). Recognising the IRA's willingness to negotiate, the British thought Republicans might compromise with Loyalists, some of whom supported independence for Northern Ireland as an alternative to Irish unity (Leahy 2025, 113–114; Mulholland 2007, 405–407; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 129–130; Patterson 2007, 245). With a political settlement and British disengagement rumoured, the IRA called ceasefires in 1975 (Leahy 2025, 108–117; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 117–130; cf. Aveyard 2016, 78–79, 110, 250–251; Bennett 2023, 263–270; Dixon 2008, 152–160). Shortly beforehand, Republican leaders publicly stated self-determination was pivotal, not immediate unification. Dáithí Ó Conaill, a leading Republican strategist, publicly said in November 1974:

> We ask the British Government to make a simple statement … that they are going to disengage … they will not put impediments in the way of all sectors of the Irish people … coming together to determine what form of Government should be obtained. (University College Dublin, Garret FitzGerald Papers, P215/87, Transcript of interview between Daithí Ó Conaill and Mary Holland, 17 November 1974, 1-18)

Republican leaders wanted London to accept a form of Irish self-determination where Westminster would not interfere with the decisions made about the island's constitutional and political future.

Republican leaders during talks with British intermediaries in 1975 even considered independence for Northern Ireland because it would at least remove British rule, permitting a form of self-determination. It was a recognition that while the IRA persisted, so too did their opponents (Leahy 2025, 108–117). They demonstrated pragmatism by

considering independence for a six-county Northern Ireland, acknowledging that Unionists were not interested (neither were the Irish Government nor the SDLP) in a federalised unified state. In October 1975, Brendan Duddy, an intermediary for IRA leaders, informed UK officials:

> the [leadership] does not want war … Would they work politically? Yes … Could the [IRA] work with the Loyalists? Yes. In a six County, Northern Irish state? Yes … But it would require a steady transition, as a '32 County … Rep[ublic] … Everything is compromsibale [*sic*] after the British Declaration of Intent … The [IRA] know … the British can't publish a Declaration … It's a myth … a hand across the table The University of Galway Library Archives (UGA), Brendan Duddy papers, Pol 35/63, Brendan Duddy Diary: 1975–1976, 27 October 1975).

The IRA accepted that unity could emerge gradually if the British said in private they would eventually withdraw (Leahy 2025, 108–117; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 117–150). This extract is quoted at length for a few reasons. It questions the view that leading Republicans "would not compromise" on how self-determination might occur (cf. Frampton 2025, 819). The "steady transition" supports Ó Conaill's preceding statement too. As a starting point for peace talks, Republican leaders in the 1970s wanted Britain to accept that it had no right to interfere in discussions between Irish people about their political future. By considering Northern Irish independence as a last resort, Republicans showed nuances in what they might accept in terms of self-determination. It was a partial acknowledgement of the consent principle for northerners and Unionists (cf. English 2024, 83–86).

But Duddy also demonstrates the more inflexible nature of Republican leaders' vision for what the IRA could achieve in 1975. His and Ó Conaill's quotes show that English is right: the Republican leadership of the 1970s "considered British withdrawal … or at least the UK's commitment to such disengagement … an essential and achievable part of a lasting end to the conflict" (English 2024, 83). In part, their insistence on British withdrawal emerged from the IRA being able to persist (Leahy 2025, 81–107, 111). Without a political mandate in 1975, there was no political pressure internally within Republicanism to increase electoral support by accepting concessions on British withdrawal – as Republicans later experienced by the 1990s (Leahy 2025, 247). Before 1975, Republican leaders could not envisage what they saw as the colonial British Government and its Unionists allies granting the principle of Irish self-determination whilst British rule remained.

The British legalised Sinn Féin in May 1974 to encourage Republicans' politicisation. Republicans considered standing in elections but eventually dismissed the idea (Leahy 2025, 108–117). The IRA still believed that the 1920s independence campaign in the south and recent history showed "only … a … bitter campaign" made Britain consider political settlements progressing towards unification (UGLA, Brendan Duddy papers, Pol 35/20, *Freedom Struggle* (1973), 7–8). Their hesitant attitude towards democratic politics had some logic by 1975. In May 1974, Unionists' general strike ended the democratically elected power-sharing government. John Hume, later SDLP leader, believed it was: "one of the most squalid examples of [British] government irresponsibility … extreme unionism or loyalism was encouraged … it could henceforth resist … any British policy for Northern Ireland which involved conceding power to the [Catholics]" (Hume 1996, 36–39). Hume recognised how power-sharing's collapse demonstrated that violence and strikes influenced British policy. Republicans agreed (Taylor 1998, 160–167).

The UK Government eventually found it too difficult to create a political settlement with paramilitaries in 1975, who lacked democratic mandates compared to the Irish Government, SDLP and Unionists (Leahy 2025, 110–116; White 2017, 121–137). In the 1970s, the IRA got Republicans as far as private talks. Once violence ceased, Republicans declined in importance to Westminster. The IRA proved insufficient to obtain a negotiated settlement (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 146–149, 151–152).

"The Armalite and ballot-box" strategy, 1976–1994

In 1977, the IRA publicly declared its persistent "Long War". Some authors argue it still envisaged eventually sapping Westminster's will to remain (cf. examples including Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 74–75; Dixon 2008, 217; Moloney 2007, 169–171; Smith 1995, 145–168). For Frampton "the IRA's shift to a 'long war' strategy … brought a change in means, but not ends … The ultimate goal remained … to 'sicken' the British into accepting … to withdraw" (cf. Frampton 2025, 826).

Available evidence now suggests the IRA's "Long War" had greater complexity. Ó Dochartaigh's and Leahy's earlier work began explaining how it represented a "bargaining" strategy (Leahy 2025, 122–130; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 151–157). It focused on IRA persistence, not escalation – something Republican leaders accepted before 1975 (Leahy 2025, 126–130; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 151–152). Republican leaders hoped the IRA would eventually pressure the British and others to return to talks alongside conceding the right to Irish self-determination at the minimum. IRA public statements about imminent unification were primarily to warn opponents that a willingness to negotiate was not a sign of weakness (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 152–153).

The main difference in strategy was how to demonstrate political support. In 1977, the new leadership outlined in their "Long War" speech: "isolation … around the armed struggle is dangerous and has produced a reformist notion that 'Ulster' [Northern Ireland] is the issue, without the mobilisation of the working class in the [Republic of Ireland]" (Adams 2001, 264–267). Republicans had to acquire political support across the island to put additional pressure on their opponents to provide a peace settlement permitting Irish self-determination. At first, doubts remained about elections being able to advance their cause, and so Republicans tried to create a rival underground state (Moloney 2007, 151–152). The trouble was that most northern Nationalists backed the SDLP whom engaged with the British system (Moloney 2007, 151–152; Taylor 1998, 200–201). Instead, Republican leaders pushed for Sinn Féin to engage in elections (Murray and Tonge 2005, 116–117). Electoral participation was accelerated by the hunger-strikes. After 1975, the British state criminalised paramilitary prisoners. Fearing losing political status, IRA prisoners eventually engaged in hunger-strikes by 1980. Bobby Sands led a further hunger strike in 1981. During the strike, he stood as an abstentionist candidate in a Westminster by-election for Fermanagh-South Tyrone. He won the seat. The British did not immediately end criminalisation and Sands died. Hunger strikers were also elected in abstention to the Irish parliament (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 165–187).

Thereafter, Adams was elected as west Belfast's abstentionist MP in 1983 (Taylor 1998, 281–297). Ó Dochartaigh summarises how Sinn Féin's mandate strengthened Republican leaders' "bargaining position … in pursuit of an inclusive settlement that would deliver political gains" (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 151–155, 191, 201-203). Danny Morrison, former Sinn Féin director of publicity, labelled the new approach the "Armalite and Ballot Box strategy" at Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis (annual conference) in 1981. Morrison

asked the audience: "Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand, we take power in Ireland?" (*An Phoblacht, "*Interview with Danny Morrison", 14 December 2006). Whilst the speech tried to convince Republicans to support Sinn Féin's participation in elections, crucially it did not state unification was the unnegotiable outcome of this strategy. During an interview, Morrison explained Republican leadership thinking behind the Long War:

> The IRA from … 1977 onwards said publicly that this was going to be a Long War … the Brits were thinking that they were going to squeeze the IRA … Whereas the IRA was able to say that we did not say we were going to win in 1978 for example. They said that they were fighting until you come to the negotiating table (Interview with Danny Morrison, Belfast, 20 January 2014).

The endgame for Republican leaders remained negotiations. Of course, they wanted unification but accepted that it may not emerge immediately from a political settlement (Leahy 2025, 126–130; Ó Dochartaigh, 151-155, 191-210).

Other Republican and non-Republican sources agree that the leadership did seek a political compromise achieving some Republican objectives, particularly Irish self-determination. Duddy informed British intermediaries that IRA leaders wanted peace in 1976 and "will accept a slow evolving period … [Unionists] are the majority and will remain so" for now (UGLA, Brendan Duddy papers, Pol 35/132, Brendan Duddy Diary 1976, 1 February 1976). In September 1977, Roy Mason, British Northern Ireland Secretary, wrote to James Callaghan, British Prime Minister, about an intelligence report about Republican leaders' intentions:

> The victory they envisage is that [London] … *will accept a … ceasefire … and agree to negotiations* … The concessions demanded … remain … withdrawal of the British troops … political status for … prisoners … and a free hand … in carving out some kind of independent Ulster in collaboration with … Protestant para-militaries.

An intelligence assessment attached stated: "We regard this as an extremely important report which adds convincing substance to previous intelligence" (TNA UK, Prime Minister's Office (PREM), PREM 16/1342, "Letter from Roy Mason to Prime Minister on Provisional IRA Intentions", 3 February 1977, 1-5, italics mine). The IRA wanted ceasefires, negotiations and a political settlement offering concessions including the principle of Irish self-determination (which independence for the north partially permitted). Unification could occur later.

The new Republican leadership after 1975 still sought a political settlement and Irish self-determination. Leading Republican Martin McGuinness in December 1983 asked the UK Government to learn "the lesson of Irish history which demonstrated Britain's readiness to negotiate with republicanism as in 1920-21, and again in '72, '75 and '76'" (Leahy 2025, 128). Later, in 1985, McGuinness told Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis: "The only talks that will ever had [*sic*] any relevance and hope for Ireland will be talks that involve the Republican Movement … with two items on the agenda … the disengagement of Britain from our country and self-determination for the Irish people" (Northern Ireland Political Collection (NIPC), The Linen Hall, Belfast, P8307, Martin McGuinness, Ard Fheis speech, 1985). Self-determination was crucial. Two years later in 1987, Republican leaders in *A Scenario for Peace*: *"*reiterates the Irish people's right to national self-determination" was pivotal to peace. On the one hand, it appeared uncompromising by suggesting:

"The island of Ireland, throughout history, has been universally regarded as one unit" and should remain so. Crucially, however, the document recognised "[w]hat has been in contest is the right of the Irish people, as a whole, to self-determination" and how to "exercise that right" (NIPC, P1774, Sinn Féin, "A Scenario for Peace: A Discussion Paper'", 1987, 1-2). Whilst desiring all-Ireland self-determination as one unit to undo British partition, Republicans conceded that there was a debate with which they had to engage about how that right could be exercised (as a single or multiple units). There were signs of "pragmatism" about what had to be negotiated to make a political settlement possible (English 2024, 84–88). '

Adams publicly called for peace talks in in 1991, saying: "we will have to come to an arrangement which won't necessarily fulfil the republican objectives" (UGLA, Brendan Duddy Papers, Pol 35/234, *Irish Times,* "Compromise is Needed to End the Conflict, says Adams", 14 November 1991). By 1992, in *Towards a Lasting Peace*, Republican leaders argued: "Irish history has taught us that … a genuine and sustainable peace process must be set in the context of democracy and self-determination." (NIPC, P4926, Sinn Féin, "Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland" (Belfast, 1992), 1-2). Once more, Republican leaders qualified that wish by stating that "an alternative" to conflict to achieve such aims "would be welcome across the island" and by themselves (NIPC, P4926, Sinn Féin, "Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland" (Belfast 1992), 9). As they knew Unionists and the British Government insisted on northern consent, this statement appeared to accept a compromise was needed on how self-determination could function. On 14 August 1993, Republican leaders informed UK officials privately that they were: "committed to securing … a genuine peace process … equality, justice and political stability … we are prepared to be … reasonable and flexible" (UGLA, Brendan Duddy Papers, Pol 35/306, Sinn Féin message to the British Government, 14 August 1993). Brendan O'Brien, former RTÉ reporter, and Father Alec Reid (a go between with the UK Government for Republican leaders) confirm Republican leaders from at least the early 1980s wanted a negotiated settlement inclusive of Irish self-determination (Leahy 2025, 127; Moloney 2007, 219–286). In 2001, Father Reid recalled that from the early 1980s Republican leaders indicated in private discussions with him "they would certainly consider" a negotiated and democratic alternative to conflict to work towards Irish unity. They would "be very positive" about "inclusive dialogue" with others (Leahy 2025, 127).

There are authors who suggest Sinn Féin's electoral stagnation and the IRA's stagnation – if not decline – at the hands of British intelligence pressurised the IRA into peace (for examples, cf. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 107–14, 128, 242-251; Edwards 2021; Frampton 2025, 2008, 2009, 16, 45-46, 79-93; Hennessey 2009, 593–596; McIntyre 2008, 2013; Moloney 2007, 336, 574-582). Leahy's detailed work specifically on the intelligence conflict convincingly suggests otherwise (Leahy 2025, 138–248). He demonstrates how despite setbacks for the IRA in the intelligence war and via infiltration, the Republican leaders' aim of IRA persistence across their multiple regional units to pressurise their opponents to negotiate succeeded for multiple reasons. Many other authors agree that the IRA was not pressurised into peace by military means; although their arguments differ as they do not provide a dedicated exploration of the outcomes of the intelligence conflict. And other than O'Leary and Ó Dochartaigh, they do not explicitly argue that the IRA aimed to persist to achieve a negotiated political settlement (see examples including Dixon 2012; English 2012, 227–315, 2016, 92–147, 2024, 84–105; Finn 2019, 86, 107, 140-142, 163-165, 188-198, 207-208; Mulholland 2007, 410–415; Murray and Tonge 2005, 173–174; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 195–211; O'Kane 2021, 10,

18, 22-30, 58-62, 103-109; O'Leary 2019, 146–149, 217; Taylor 1998, 277–327; Whiting 2018, 5–8, 139).

An armed and political stalemate saw *all* sides accept peace talks by the 1990s. Politically, by the 1990s, Sinn Féin consistently polled approximately 35% of the northern Nationalist vote. This vote alongside IRA persistence helps explain why the SDLP and Irish Government talked to Republicans from 1987. This point is crucial because it provided the genesis of the peace process and explains *why* Republicans' opponents began to engage with them about a political settlement and vice-versa. As Republican leaders had always sought negotiations *and* a political solution to the conflict that achieved some of their objectives (including Irish self-determination in some guise), they were ready to engage with their opponents (cf. Frampton 2025). Without Republicans, peace was unlikely to emerge (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 209–213; Leahy 2025, 200–205; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 201–205; O'Donnell 2007, 59–203). The pan-nationalist talks saw the SDLP and Irish Government press the British and Unionists to include Sinn Féin in talks. Any negotiations attempting to leave out Republicans would fail (Leahy 2025, 200–210; O'Donnell 2007, 59–203; cf. opposing views including O'Kane 2021, 20–22, 35-36). Pan-nationalist pressure, IRA activity alongside Sinn Féin's northern vote helped Republicans reach the negotiating table (Leahy 2025, 199–210; O'Brien 1999, 297; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 201–210; O'Donnell 2007, 59–203; cf. opposing views including Moloney 2007, 426, 465; O'Kane 2021, 5–6, 20-22). These were the "terms" and ends that best account for why the IRA engaged in peace talks and called ceasefires during the 1990s (cf. Frampton 2025, 845): the opportunity to create a multi-party settlement inclusive of Republicanism and the principle of Irish self-determination.

Nevertheless, the IRA unintentionally hindered Sinn Féin (Leahy 2025, 210–224). In the north, the SDLP maintained a majority of Irish Nationalist votes before 1998. The IRA's campaign obtained little electoral support in the Republic, where British rule and militarism were absent (O'Brien 1999, 106; O'Leary 2019, 106, 133-134). The inability to outpoll other Irish Nationalist parties mattered not because Republicans thereafter had to now accept IRA ceasefires and a political compromise; Republican leaders accepted the need for both in the 1970s. It mattered because Republicans knew their political mandate at that time meant they would have to make more compromises than desired. That is why the Republican ambition to achieve a British declaration of intent to withdraw *prior* to a political settlement was downplayed in the 1990s (English 2024, 84–88). Adams saw now a "political" stalemate alongside the military one that Republican leaders had recognised since the 1970s (Adams 2003, 38). Making peace made Sinn Féin more popular in the north too. They became the largest Nationalist party on Belfast city council by 1993 (Leahy 2025, 156) and rapidly overtook the SDLP in the early 2000s once the IRA's campaign ended (English 2012, 307).

Pan-nationalist talks and politics also benefitted Republicans. The UK Government had to include Republicans in any peace negotiations as Dublin and the SDLP insisted (Leahy 2025, 204–207, 222; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 190–207, 213-217; O'Donnell 2007, 52, 58, 72-73, 102). More importantly, the Irish and British Governments announced the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993. Alongside reiterating Northern Ireland could only unite with the south if most northerners agreed, Irish self-determination was formally recognised. The British Government reworked their Government of Ireland Act 1920, which Republicans despised for partitioning the island without consent. Now, London agreed with Nationalists: the end of partition was an all-Ireland discussion. In the future, the decision to remove the northern border would be made in separate but concurrent referendums north and south. Republicans' campaign contributed to their opponents

formally accepting that the principle and a form of Irish self-determination must be permitted and could occur in the future (Leahy 2025, 222; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 259–261; O'Donnell 2007, 106–117; O'Leary 2005; Murray and Tonge 2005, 178–179; Patterson 2007, 325–326). The British principle of consent for Northern Ireland's majority (at that time Unionists) was now matched by the right of the Irish people north and south to self-determination in future separate but concurrent north and south referendums (cf. Frampton 2025, 832–833).

Of course, Republicans ultimately aspired to an all-Ireland singular vote on unity. But their political position by 1998 and the in-built Unionist northern majority since partition (until recently) meant that they agreed to accept separate but concurrent self-determination votes. Trust had also increased between Republicans and the British by the 1990s following extensive back-channel diplomacy (Ó Dochartaigh 2021). Republicans could now envisage Westminster granting the principle of self-determination whilst Northern Ireland in the meantime remained under British rule. The Downing Street Declaration was therefore seen by Republican leaders as moving in a positive direction towards their goals. Albert Reynolds, former Taoiseach, recalls Adams admitting at Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis in 1994 "For the … Declaration to address the issue of Irish national self-determination was a significant departure for the British Government" (Reynolds 2010, 388). Adams agreed, adding: "I told the Ard Fheis … the … Declaration marked a stage in the slow … process of England's disengagement from … Ireland". Whilst saying it was "a small step", Adams recognised that Republicans had managed to get London and others to formally accept that partition was a north and south discussion, exclusive of British Government direct influence in future referendums (Adams 2003, 214–215). Unionists likewise felt that combining a form of Irish self-determination with Northern Irish consent marked a British Government concession to Republicanism. Doctor and Reverend Ian Paisley, the radical Ulster British Protestant Democratic Unionist Party leader, somewhat unsurprisingly commented in early 1994 that the Declaration "had the aim of betraying the Ulster [Protestant] people … appeasing the Republican enemy" because it:

> represents a significant dilution in the constitutional guarantee hitherto given by the British Government that there would be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of its [then Unionist] people.

Paisley added to him it meant that "The Irish Republic, in effect, achieves an equal say" over Northern Ireland's future (CAIN 1994). Even the moderate Ulster Unionist Party and its leader James Molyneaux shortly after the Declaration asked the British Government to clarify whether it still meant as John Major the British Prime Minister had previously said in November 1993: "The future constitutional position of … Northern Ireland is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland … and for no one else to determine" (House of Commons 1993).

English is right to suggest "For republicans, it was important that the UK during the peace process acknowledged the right of the Irish people to decide their future unhindered". Nonetheless, he points out that "this recognition changed little in practice, allied as it now firmly was to the Northern consent principle". Reginald Maudling, British Home Secretary in the early 1970s, is noted by English as publicly saying Westminster would accept the north and south joining if they wanted (English 2024, 84, 91). Nonetheless, this important point overlooks that no other attempted peace settlements or British–Irish political agreements – including the Sunningdale Agreement (1973-

1974) and the British and Irish Government's Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) – had explicitly accepted the principle of all-Ireland self-determination in some form existing alongside the Northern Irish consent principle. In 1995, Sinn Féin gave a positive perspective on "the Downing Street Declaration" because it "marked a further stage in the development of the peace process" by accepting the "Irish people as a whole have the right to national self-determination". They accepted a compromise on *how* self-determination could occur because "the exercise of national self-determination is a matter for agreement between the people of Ireland", who had divided perspectives (NIPC, P8278, Sinn Féin, "Create Peace Unite Ireland", 25–26 February 1995, Ard Fheis booklet, 3). As English argues, Republicans in the 1990s had proven themselves pragmatic to overcome the stalemate of the conflict. They accepted a compromise on their aim to obtain a British withdrawal and a single all-Ireland self-determination vote (English 2024, 84–91).

How crucial the inclusion of the Irish self-determination principle was to balance out northern consent for the Republican leadership's decision to end the IRA campaign was not just commented on by Republicans. Father Gerry Reynolds had contact with Republican leaders. In 1996, he revealed to British officials privately that the Downing Street Declaration and political settlements thereafter confirming Irish self-determination were pivotal:

> The IRA's military objective was: 1. The need for the recognition of the right of the Irish people to self determination. *This was achieved by the Downing Street Declaration;* 2. The establishment of the process by which that right would be recognised. This means the setting of a date/deadline for all-party talks … *The IRA is not interested in specific political outcomes so long as the future would not be dictated by ... a foreign power, the British Government … the outcome of the talks process could be other than a straightforward united Ireland* (TNA UK, Home Office/Northern Ireland Office (CJ), CJ 4/12381, Note of a Conversation with Father Gerry Reynolds, no precise date (1996)[3], 1–3 (italics mine); for more on the Catholic Church and the conflict, see Scull 2021).

Reynolds encapsulates Republican leadership thinking on the IRA's strategic purpose since the 1970s. Even if divided between north and south when voting on unity, Republican leaders recognised that the Declaration in 1993 meant that neither Westminster nor Unionists alone could determine the island's constitutional future anymore. Sinn Féin could try to bring about Irish unification politically, north and south. The IRA had secured the right to Irish self-determination in some form (O'Donnell 2007, 106–117; O'Leary 2019, 152–153, 2005, 243–245; cf. alternative views including Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 220–222). By 1998, this principle of all-Ireland self-determination separately but concurrently in the future was part of the Good Friday Agreement. What other concessions were achieved thereafter would be determined by democratic mandates (English 2012, 298–299; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 259–266). The IRA's guns could fall silent.

The IRA's spectre during the peace process, 1994–2005

If the IRA's campaign was a tactic to achieve a negotiated political settlement (achieved in 1998), why did they not formally announce their campaign over until 2005? Only in 2005 did General de Chastelain, retired Canadian Army General and head of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), confirm "[t]he decommissioning of the arms of the IRA is now … accomplished" (*The Guardian* 2005).

After leading IRA personnel accepted a political compromise by 1997, some authors suggest these leaders faced little internal opposition. A minority of Republicans left to form the Real IRA who would continue armed methods (for more on dissenting Republicans, see McGlinchey 2019a, 2021, 2023). For some authors, IRA weapons and their decommissioning was "manipulated" and the risk of splits exploited after 1998 by Republican leaders to extract more concessions whilst maintaining grassroots support for a peace process. IRA activities including alleged bank robberies eventually saw opponents pressurise decommissioning (cf. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 153–158; Dixon 2008, 275, 292, 2019, 114–116, 175; Moloney 2007, 488–489, 493-495, 509, 516-518; O'Kane 2007, 86–94, 100-101[4]).

Available evidence now casts doubt on this perspective. Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister, remembers the SDLP complaining: "'If we had weapons you'd treat us more seriously' … Their real problem was … they would never go into government with Unionists unless Sinn Fein were at the table" (Blair 2010, 170). Sinn Féin electorally outperformed the SDLP from the early 2000s too (for explanations, see McGlinchey 2019b; Murray and Tonge 2005, 261–262). Sinn Féin's mandate and the pan-nationalist desire to include Republicans in talks primarily ensured they were not left behind in the peace process, rather than IRA weapons. Neither does it appear that Sinn Féin gained significant concessions from retaining weapons. Republican leaders' consistent short-term demands after the IRA's 1994 ceasefire included demilitarisation, the principle of Irish self-determination being included in a formal peace deal, the end of the RUC and release of paramilitary prisoners. These were *not* requests they added later in exchange for decommissioning (Leahy 2025; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 191–194; O'Leary 2019, 161, 206-207, 214-216, 221-222, 241-242, 248-249).

The risks of splits were not fictional. Since the 1920s, whenever one IRA faction opted for a political solution, a sizeable minority broke away to continue armed activities (Augusteijn 2003). In 1986, for instance, the IRA supported taking seats in the Irish Parliament. Previous leaders Ó Conaill and Ó Brádaigh alongside a minority of others left to form the Continuity IRA (White 2017, 222–239). Later, the Real IRA formed, opposing the Good Friday Agreement for sustaining partition (Moloney 2007, 441–454, 477-479, 505–515, 573). Only hindsight makes the fear of splits after 1998 appear misguided, a foresight leading Republicans did not have (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 233, 240; Cochrane 2013, 145, 206-208; Finn 2019, 211–215; Leahy 2025; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 272–274; O'Kane 2021, 114–115, 151-152). Blair agrees that in private talks Adams and McGuinness "throughout" the early years of peace "feared a split" (Blair 2010, 197).

English presents four key factors to explain incremental decommissioning between 1995 and 2005:

> First, the … destruction of weapons risked giving the appearance … of … defeat … Second, decommissioning was a demand … made by the IRA's enemies … Third … schism … might result. Fourth, amid ongoing sporadic loyalist violence, some felt that weapons were required for possible defence of Catholic areas.

Recent archival releases suggest these four factors were important. His other two factors – Republicans using decommissioning to "extract maximum concessions" and to divide Unionism – are less convincing (English 2012, 326, 333-335; see also O'Kane 2021, 122–145). Crucially, English mentions perhaps the most influential factor that archival evidence points towards: "IRA decommissioning was part of a wider fulfilment of

everyone's … obligations under the Good Friday Agreement … there remained a persistent republican sense that the British were not implementing their part of the 1998 deal" (English 2012, 329–331). Republican leaders saw police reform, new political institutions and "demilitarization" as pivotal (English 2012, 329–331; Leahy 2025). The Republican leadership's approach to decommissioning was significantly influenced by whether these reforms emerged or not (Cochrane 2013, 145, 206-208; English 2012, 326–331; Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 146–147, 161, 206-207, 214-216, 241-242, 249-250).

Republican leaders kept the IRA as an insurance policy until 2005. Once their campaign ceased, they worried the UK Government and Unionists would not produce concessions. If so, splits could occur. The IRA remained a spectre until 2005, tactically waiting this time in the background to warn others to implement agreed reforms (English 2012, 386; Leahy 2025; O'Kane 2021, 41–42, 65-67, 77-80, 108-109, 136-137, 151; Powell 2014, 273). When proposing a political settlement in 1993, Republican leaders told British officials about their "caution" before calling a ceasefire arose from "the far from satisfactory experiences in 1972, 1975" (Sinn Féin 1993, 31-32). They viewed previous unsuccessful talks following ceasefires as a British trick to undermine the IRA (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 214–215; Moloney 2007, 141–148). The IRA would not formally end its campaign until a political settlement and concessions were implemented (Leahy 2025; Powell 2014, 273). Promised reforms from the Good Friday Agreement they requested related to police reform and British military disengagement (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 237; Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 214–215). Between 1998 and 2002, Blair argues "the IRA were going to … wait to see if the Unionists delivered their side of the bargain … until then the IRA would hold the use of force in reserve" (Cf. Blair 2010, 189; see also Dixon 2019, 5). This statement overlooks how the IRA expected the British Government, their main enemy who partitioned Ireland, to deliver "demilitarisation", the removal of British troops and military installations as promised in 1998 too (Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 146–147, 161, 206-207, 214-216, 241-242, 249-250).

To show commitment to peace talks, the IRA called a prolonged ceasefire in August 1994. Their accompanying statement did not demand immediate Irish reunification. They declared a "complete cessation" to create a "just and lasting settlement" (CAIN 1994). Yet, by December 1994, the UK Cabinet wanted "substantial progress" on the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons prior to talks (TNA UK, Cabinet Office (CAB), CAB 128/110, Cabinet Meeting at 10 Downing Street, 8 December 1994, 1). This precondition in part reflected Unionist fears that the IRA could pressurise opponents by holding onto weapons (TNA UK, CJ 4/12192, Meeting with UUP Delegation, 3 November 1994, 6-7). More influential was John Major's Conservative Government in London facing a dwindling majority. He relied on UUP MPs in some votes. Bertie Ahern, Irish Taoiseach from 1997, believed: "Major's government was becoming increasingly dependent on … Unionist MPs … it was no coincidence that the British government's position shifted to require the decommissioning of weapons as a precondition for Sinn Féin's participation in all party talks" (Ahern and Aldous 2010, 176; see also J. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 133; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 248–249, 271-273; O'Kane 2021, 62–63, 2007, 91–92; O'Leary 2019, 162). Major's dwindling majority also relied on anti-Republican Conservative Party backbenchers, further fuelling decommissioning demands (Cochrane 2013, 142–143; O'Leary 2019, 173–174).

Paramilitaries were expected to handover some weapons before multi-party talks (English 2012, 288–289). The IRA refused. The IRA (alongside many aforementioned authors) did not believe they were defeated. In the Republican mindset, nobody should

therefore forgo weapons before others. The root causes of the conflict first needed resolving, including equality for all, power-sharing alongside cross-border institutions, demilitarisation with British troop withdrawal and security infrastructures dismantled, police reform and paramilitary prisoner releases. Once these were resolved, guns could disappear (English 2012, 326). In Republican eyes, to suggest otherwise was a war by other means (English 2012, 288–289). Loyalists and Republicans believed the weapons protected their communities. Removing them prior to a political settlement was too risky (English 2012, 326, 333; Leahy 2025).

In May 1995, McGuiness reiterated to British officials "the Government was looking for victory and the public humiliation of the IRA" by insisting on decommissioning before talks. McGuinness believed: "people always find ways to kill each other, what we had to do was to remove the reasons for them to do so" (TNA UK, CJ 4/11698, Exploratory Dialogue: 7th Meeting, 25 May 1995, 1-9). Loyalist British Protestant paramilitaries agreed. David Ervine, a leading Loyalist negotiator, said to UK officials in December 1994: "the resolution of the arms problem was some way down the road; what had to come first was good Government … the building of trust between the two communities" (TNA UK, CJ 4/11583, First meeting of Loyalist Exploratory Dialogue on 15 December 1994 at Stormont, 21 December 1994, p.7). As 1996 commenced, McGuinness explained how the leadership supported the new "twin track" approach outlined by US Senator George Mitchell, a leading international figure during the peace talks (English 2012, 109, 289-292, 318). Decommissioning and political agreements could work in tandem. Sinn Féin agreed "lasting peace" required "the removal forever of the gun". McGuinness wanted "demilitarisation" including "the establishment of acceptable law and order forces … withdrawal of British troops", alongside the "release of all political prisoners". Once agreed, "disarmament" could happen (TNA UK, CJ 4/12380, Sinn Fein Press Release "Building a Permanent Peace in Ireland", 10 January 1996, 1-2). There was no immediate response from the British. On 9 February 1996, the IRA had had enough. It broke its ceasefire with the London Docklands bomb (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 263–266).

Jonathan Powell, chief negotiator in Northern Ireland for Blair, explains how Republicans felt they needed "to give the British government a … shock" (Powell 2008, 85). The IRA's campaign returned to demonstrate decommissioning would not happen prior to political talks and some concessions (Leahy 2025). Father Reynolds believed the IRA: "were fighting for only the Irish people to be included in all party talks". The IRA, he said, "feared their own group splintering which they believed was … intentionally encouraged by the British" (TNA UK, CJ 4/12381, Note of a Conversation with Father Gerry Reynolds, no precise date (1996), 1-3). Adams argued "change" was needed in "three main areas" to facilitate a ceasefire, peace agreement and decommissioning: "political and constitutional change … and demilitarisation". Adams was adamant: "republicans want peace" (TNA UK, CJ 4/12381, Sinn Fein press release, 15 February 1996). The themes that Republicans wanted addressed in the short-term remained the same since 1994: new political institutions, prisoner releases, police reforms and "demilitarisation" (Leahy 2025). Unionist resistance and the Conservative Government's arithmetic in Westminster prevented Republicans' overtures from being accepted (Murray and Tonge 2005, 190–192; O'Kane 2021, 66–76; cf. alternative explanations including J. Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 137; P. Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 229, 232).

Republicans saw an opportunity to re-energise peace efforts in spring 1997. The UK Labour Party won a substantial majority in the UK General Election. Adams reiterated to Tony Blair the new Prime Minister that Republican leaders were "totally committed to democratic and peaceful methods … and … a negotiated settlement". He wanted

"inclusive dialogue" to commence (TNA UK, PREM 49/108, Gerry Adams letter to Tony Blair, 2 May 1997). Things were looking promising for Republicans. Blair met a UUP delegation on 12 May 1997 and "suggested that it would better if Sinn Fein were in the talks". The UUP "disagreed". Blair replied that Dublin and SDLP insistence on Republicans being given a chance to ceasefire and join talks meant leaving them out currently was not feasible (TNA UK, PREM 49/108, John Holmes, Call by UUP, 12 May 1997, 2-5). Provided the IRA called a ceasefire and supported Senator Mitchell's principles of non-violence, they would be included in talks (O'Leary 2019, 168–170). Unionists' political influence in London diminished (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 271–273).

An IRA ceasefire followed in July 1997 (CAIN 1997). Their ceasefire statement did not say the IRA and its weapons would immediately disappear. The IRA continued to remain in reserve until 2005. Leading Republicans continued to fear UK Government and Unionist duplicity where political institutions, police reform and demilitarisation would stall (Leahy 2025). They maintained the same line they had repeated since 1994. Decommissioning depended on the other reforms being implemented. David Brooker, a British official, recognised: "Sinn Fein will look for assurances that the Government is committed to early positive action on prisoners, police reform, demilitarisation … to demonstrate to its supporters that dialogue with the Government produces results" (TNA UK, PREM 49/109, David Brooker, Sinn Fein: Meetings with Officials, 16 May 1997, 4-8). Republican leaders needed these changes to prove to themselves and their supporters that peace was here to stay.

As promised, Republican leaders accepted interim settlements before Irish unity by signing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. In return they obtained concessions such as: power-sharing between Nationalists and Unionists alongside cross-community voting mechanisms to prevent discriminatory legislation; a north–south Irish ministerial council, recognising northern Nationalists' Irish identity; paramilitary prisoner releases within two years; and RUC reforms via Lord Patten's policing review in 1999 (CAIN 1998; English 2012, 297–317). But Republican leaders had to see these reforms enacted. Otherwise, IRA weapons would not be relinquished (Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 206–216, 221-222, 241-248). The Irish Government understood that this was the position of the Republican leaders. On 29 May 1998, Irish officials "underlined the urgency of concrete and visible steps being taken" to demilitarise to British officials. They recognised Republicans saw *linkage between decommissioning and demilitarisation* (The Irish National Archives (INA), Department of Justice 2021/108/9, Meeting on Security Strategy Statement, 28 May 1998, 1–2 (italics mine)). Irish officials were more in tune historically with the Republican mindset (INA, Just 2021/108/9, Security: A Return to Normality, 2 December 1998, 7-10). Nevertheless, British officials had lingering suspicions about the IRA after Republicans broke their previous ceasefire. The decommissioning stand-off continued. In March 1999, General de Chastelain informed UK Secretary of State Mo Mowlam: "McGuinness was sticking to the position that decommissioning could not happen ahead of the formation of the Executive" (TNA UK, PREM 49/923, Nick Perry, Meeting with Decommissioning Commission, 9 March 1999, 1-4). Functioning government was required alongside British troop withdrawals and policing changes. These were all aims which Republican leaders had expressed since the August 1994 cessation (Leahy 2025).

Irish and UK archives are not yet fully accessible up to 2005, leaving potential gaps in our understanding. Yet events and currently available sources suggest the IRA only finished decommissioning and formally ended its campaign by 2005 once convinced an agreement on getting political institutions functioning again was forthcoming (power-

sharing collapsed between October 2002 and May 2007), policing reforms occurred, and British security infrastructure and troops were being removed (English 2012, 330–331; Leahy 2025). In the meantime, the IRA hinted that it could return if needed. Intelligence reports suggested the IRA was still training (English 2012, 389–391). In February 2000, the IRA claimed Unionists and the British Government had failed "to advance the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement" (CAIN 2000a). In April 2000, McGuinness gave Powell "a list of military installations they wanted taken down" in republican heartlands (Powell 2008, 177). Republican protests in south Armagh occurred, demanding British watchtowers were removed (Leahy 2025, 170–171). In December 2000, the IRA stalled decommissioning exactly because they insisted the British "take all the necessary steps to demilitarise the situation" (CAIN 2000b). Powell acknowledges demilitarisation was important and more was needed. In 2003, Powell was still working on progressing demilitarisation via a detailed roadmap for it so that "Republicans would have something to show their supporters straight away" and continue supporting peace (Powell 2008, 218).

In October 2001, the IRA started decommissioning. But they added that London had to keep delivering reforms (CAIN 2001a). 9/11 saw the US Government pressure the IRA to decommission (Moloney 2007, 489–91; O'Leary 2019, 238–239). Undoubtedly, these events partly explain why the IRA commenced decommissioning in autumn 2001 (Bew, Gibbon, and Patterson 2015, 244–245; Dixon 2019, 269–273). Nevertheless, the IRA had already told the IICD before 9/11 it would begin decommissioning. These events merely increased the pace (English 2012, 333–336; Leahy 2025; O'Kane 2021, 134–135).

It seems no coincidence that the IRA commenced decommissioning shortly after the Weston Park Agreement in August 2001 (Leahy 2025). It saw the British and Irish governments pledge to resolve policing reforms, functioning political institutions and "normalisation" with British troop and security infrastructure being removed – exactly what Republican leaders had sought since 1994. The UK Government promised it "will progressively … secure as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements" (Northern Ireland Office and Irish Department of Foreign Affairs 2001). The IRA believed it could start decommissioning. They remained cautious, stipulating "Progress [on decommissioning] will be directly influenced by the attitude of other parties … especially, the British government", who they felt was in the driving seat to cajole Unionists into advancing peace. If reforms in the aforementioned areas were implemented, weapons would be decommissioned (CAIN 2001b). What gradually followed were multiple acts of decommissioning verified by the IICD (O'Leary 2019, 238). In July 2005, the IRA's campaign was formally ended (CAIN 2005). The following month, the UK military announced it would remove final security installations and end its military campaign by 2007 (Patterson 2007, 357). Republicans and the British state were publicly "demilitarising" together to show shared sincerity towards peace.

Certainly, the IRA faced additional public pressure to finish decommissioning after 2003. The hardline DUP became the majority Protestant Unionist party electorally in the north. The DUP demanded that the IRA decommission and Republicans formally support the new police service before sharing power with Sinn Féin. Rather than solely succumbing to DUP pressure (cf. Tonge et al. 2014, 43–61), Republicans felt circumstances permitted formally ending their campaign in 2005. The DUP – who had rejected the Good Friday Agreement – now accepted Republicans participating in power-sharing government, cross-border institutions alongside 50–50 police recruitment from Nationalist and Unionist communities for the new Police Service of

Northern Ireland. The DUP were equally under pressure too. No power-sharing instead meant the Irish and UK governments discussing the DUP's feared outcome: greater Irish Government influence in Northern Irish political affairs (Dixon 2008, 309; O'Kane 2021, 157–166, 171-174; O'Leary 2019, 218, 248-249; Powell 2008, 271–272; Tonge et al. 2014, 47–48).

The IRA were accused of stealing millions from the Northern Bank in December 2004 and were allegedly involved in killing Robert McCartney in a Belfast bar in January 2005. Both events saw opponents pressurise the IRA to finish decommissioning (Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 160–164; Dixon 2008, 306–309; Moloney 2007, 536–548; O'Kane 2021, 160–164; Powell 2008, 266–267). Yet the IRA was likely to complete the decommissioning it begun in 2001. They had opted for the political path. Other authors accurately suggest these events just sped up the final act (English 2012, 333–334, 390-391; O'Leary 2019, 242–248; O'Kane 2021, 160–166; 173). O'Leary makes an important point on why Republicans were heading towards finishing decommissioning anyway. The UK Government's Police (Northern Ireland) Act in 2003 promised police reforms would be fully implemented alongside demilitarisation advanced with plans outlined by the end of 2005 (O'Leary 2019, 249–250). The UK Government could now be held accountable if demilitarisation and police reforms in full did not occur. Once the police reformed, the DUP accepted power-sharing with cross-border institutions, the British state publicly accepted demilitarisation and commenced that process, and Republicans could politically work towards unification, the IRA could depart (O'Leary 2019, 221–222, 241-242, 251-253).

Conclusion

The 1970s taught Republicans that persistent armed actions could achieve talks with the UK Government. The trouble was that once guns were silenced, Westminster could ignore Republican demands. There was no Republican political mandate to pressurise concessions or to get their voice heard alongside other parties. From the late 1970s onwards, Republican leaders focused on persistent IRA activity combined with a political mandate. Both were seen as potentially encouraging their opponents to return to talks and agree a negotiated political settlement. The IRA fulfilled its role in getting Republicans back into talks by 1997 (Leahy 2025, 1991, 138-225; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 151–155, 191-262). The difference compared with the 1970s was the armed stalemate *and* political results for Sinn Féin saw the Republican leadership accept a compromise on self-determination in the 1990s (greater than contemplated via Northern Ireland independence in 1975), British withdrawal and Unionist consent.

Despite the peace agreement in 1998, Republican leaders remained unconvinced that Unionists and the UK Government would provide the concessions promised. As a result, the IRA initially kept its weapons, remaining ready if needed to return to conflict whilst Republican leaders made it clear that they wanted peace to succeed (English 2012, 326–331; Leahy 2025; O'Leary 2019, 146–147, 161, 206-207, 214-216, 241-242, 249-250). Eventually, the message got through. Agreements on demilitarisation alongside guaranteed entrance to power-sharing government with Unionists if the IRA disarmed and backed the new police service enabled the IRA to leave the scene.

There are implications from this case study for research internationally on non-state armed nationalist groups and potential peace processes involving such organisations; with the caveat that every situation has differences (Bew, Frampton, and Gurruchaga 2009, 1–16, 239-259; Powell 2008, 321). First, leaders of non-state nationalist armed

groups can be more accommodating in private than their public rhetoric and actions suggest. Ó Dochartaigh states "IRA violence" was "so shocking … that it was often difficult for people to hear what they were saying. This failure to hear … has hindered understanding of the IRA's efforts to end the conflict" (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 48–49). The form a settlement might take was disagreed on between leading Republicans in the 1970s and the leadership thereafter (McGlinchey 2019a). But Republican leaders *always* sought a political compromise and peace, provided their opponents fully implemented concessions and demilitarised. Northern Ireland shows that violence or the threat of it by states and non-state actors does not automatically mean a political compromise is unachievable (Leahy 2025, 199–248; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 1–2, 9; Powell 2008).

Second, hardline rhetoric from nationalist armed groups such as the IRA about fighting until their ultimate goals are obtained is sometimes utilised for means other than showing ideological commitment. IRA leaders talked peace alongside IRA persistence in part to prevent London rejecting talks with the IRA by believing that a Republican willingness to negotiate was a sign of weakness. IRA volunteers needed motivating too. Openly saying that the conflict was about achieving an unspecified political compromise was unlikely to entice recruits. Private back-channel negotiations with armed nationalist groups can tease out whether the leaders may accept political compromises (Leahy 2025, 126; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 46, 152-153; Powell 2008, 313).

The third theme is about the persistence of private dialogue between a nationalist armed actor and a democratic government. Powell accurately suggests that it can take years of dialogue that should not increase nor decrease according to conflict events to demonstrate to an armed group that a political compromise is possible (Powell 2014, 2, 30-32, 78, 94-102, 178-126, 252-255, 272-278, 347-363). But Ó Dochartaigh crucially observes that this theme works both ways. Persistent dialogue with armed nationalist groups can persuade a government that some of or all an armed group's leaders would accept a negotiated settlement (Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 194–209, 266-267).

Four, Powell *et al.* are right to suggest peace settlements will only succeed if they attempt to include all armed actors that have at least a sizeable minority of an electoral mandate. My work alongside others suggests Republicans visibly fulfilled this criteria by the 1980s with Sinn Féin polling approximately 35% of the northern Nationalist vote. Leaving groups out of political settlements with that level of support – as previously tried in Northern Ireland – can fail because these groups have the armed capacity and a sizeable minority of the electorate needed to wreck peace settlements excluding them (Leahy 2025, 199–225, 247; Ó Dochartaigh 2021, 202–210; Powell 2014, 94–104, 172-181, 214-216, 252-256). Having said that, ETA in the Basque country, FARC and Protestant Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland pose an interesting caveat for further research. Due to state intimidation, or political wings being outlawed, or in the Loyalist case their political wings receiving little support, they did not always demonstrate electorally substantial support. But their inclusion in peace was essential because their armed wings clearly demonstrated as Powell says sizeable community support via persistent armed campaigns (Powell 2014, 13, 32-33).

Theme five is that governments involved in trying to persuade nationalist groups to end armed conflict must present a political avenue forward. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin were outlawed until 1974, meaning the IRA had to be in the ascendency of Republican strategy (Leahy 2025, 49–59; Powell 2014, 25–26, 32-40, 75-78, 94-104, 172-181, 201-226, 252-256, 272-278, 312, 347-349, 363).

Sixth – and this point is crucial in this case study – alongside a democratic path being available for armed nationalist groups to transition towards, any political settlement

including armed groups that seek self-determination *must* facilitate that prospect in the future. For the IRA, an important factor influencing their leaders to fight was Westminster's Government of Ireland Act 1920 that partitioned the island without consent. By removing it and permitting the principle of Irish self-determination in some form, London signalled it was serious about allowing a vote on Irish unification in the future, if a majority in the north and south of Ireland wanted it. Constitutional referendums in the present or future (depending on opinion polling numbers for and against at the time) for separatist nationalist groups' aspirations form an important part of any attempts to end a conflict (Powell 2008, 321). Bourke is accurate that the conflict in Northern Ireland was principally about competing visions of *what* (the island or north and south) constituted "a democratic state" (Bourke 2024, 489).[5] Finding a compromise between all groups on how to permit a form of self-determination that *all* conflict participants can accept is important.

The seventh theme is about decommissioning. Powell argues:

> Armed groups always worry that once they have given up their arms, their main negotiating leverage, the government side will fail to deliver on the promises they have made … there needs to be some guarantee built into the agreement that fundamental change will not only happen but will also not be reversed by subsequent governments (Powell 2014, 273).

In the Irish context, Powell's own government did not publicly pledge to implement promises agreed in the 1998 such as demilitarisation until the early 2000s. If groups such as the IRA have engaged with a peace process, are on ceasefire and pledge to decommission, there in little point in demanding "guns before talks" (Leahy 2025). This tactic just pushed the IRA back to violence between 1996 and 1997.

The final theme is about impartiality of states and state forces. Various scholars accurately describe how in the 1970s, the British Government and Army primarily sought to fight Irish Republicans compared to Protestant Loyalist paramilitaries. The reason was that Protestants were the majority population of the north's population. London feared if pushed too far with reforms, Unionists could rebel and create civil war (Bennett 2023, 163–164, 263; 70-71, 146-147, 194-195; Leahy 2025, 58, 114, 116-117). This approach overlooked how Republican leaders were willing to make some political compromises involving Unionists and Loyalists in the 1970s (Leahy 2025, 108–117), perpetuating conflict.

Notes

1. Moloney agrees that significant infiltration by British intelligence helped push the IRA towards peace. But his book also argues that manipulation by senior leading Republicans meant the IRA and Sinn Féin had various strategies ongoing from the 1980s. The official strategy focused on an IRA victory through a war of attrition. But he claims Gerry Adams and his supporters had a secret strategy of reaching a partitionist democratic settlement. (Cf. Moloney 2007, 219–585).
2. Frampton agrees that the IRA sought a political settlement from the early 1970s, but hoped negotiations would achieve unity. (Frampton 2022, 157–158).
3. This file appears to be from 1996 and certainly no later than 1997 (when the IRA returned to a cessation) because it refers to the recent breakdown of the IRA ceasefire in February 1996.
4. O'Kane's view has changed by 2021. (See O'Kane 2021, 114–115, 151-152).
5. A combination of Bourke's and McBride's ideas are convincing. The conflict was about historic ethno-nationalist identities and each group's historical collective identity (McBride 2023) – although I would add the British and Irish states into that mix too whose identities had differences to Unionists and Republicans – alongside how in the contemporary period these identities influenced each group's sense of what a democracy on the island of Ireland should look like.

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An interview quote by Danny Morrison is used. They have consented to this in writing previously (2014 and 2018) when parts of their interview including that quote were used in my previous work, and by email on 4/2/24 to an interview quote being used for this article too. This interview took place in 2014 when I was completing my PhD at King's College London. Ethical approval code: **SSHL/11/12-7.**

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