Explaining the Good Friday Agreement: A Learning Process

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement paved the way for significant institutional change in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Agreement provided for a power-sharing Assembly, elected by proportional representation within Northern Ireland, and also for a new cross-border committee, which at the very least would have strong coordination and implementation powers and, potentially, executive powers for certain functional areas of cooperation for the island of Ireland. Moreover, as part of the bargaining process which preceded the Agreement, the Irish government supported the amendment of Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution so that the Irish territorial claim to Northern Ireland would be altered.

In this article I argue that, despite the potential pitfalls in forging a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, progress will continue to be made because Anglo-Irish policy-making is rational and also shows the features of what Haas has defined as a learning process.¹

I suggest that British governmental policy towards Northern Ireland is neither irrational and inconsistent, nor simply a case of reactive crisis management. British policy is not ‘like a weather-vane to the relevant political pressures . . .’.² On the contrary, ‘amongst British policy-makers, the definition and understanding of the conflict has been transformed in the last eighteen years’.³ The meaning of policy learning is explored and the indicators of learning are applied to Anglo-Irish policy from 1972 to 1998. Thus, it is concluded that both British and Irish governments showed evidence of policy learning during this period.


³ Ibid., p. 675.
The learning process involved Irish and British institutional incorporation of new assumptions and value judgements, culminating in the Good Friday Agreement. Unlike many accounts of policy transfer, the Anglo-Irish case is less one of learning from other political systems and more a case of learning from the lessons of past policy failure, ‘from the experience of protracted war and conflict’. Thus, the Anglo-Irish learning process is a more symbiotic internal process which has occurred within a relatively insulated Anglo-Irish framework. For this reason, Haas’s account of learning appears to be particularly relevant to the case.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, the concept of political learning is explored, drawing from Haas, and the distinction between learning and adaptation is analysed. In the second section, comparisons and contrasts between key Anglo-Irish initiatives are represented by providing an overview of the negotiations and content of the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and the Good Friday Agreement. Finally, hypotheses about political learning are applied from section one to the case of Anglo-Irish policy-making. It is argued that both British and Irish policy-makers show evidence not simply of policy adaptation, but of a critical reassessment and re-evaluation of underlying assumptions — evidence of learning.

ADAPTATION AND LEARNING

For Haas, learning implies the dissemination of consensual knowledge which causes value change and a change in policy-making aims. Consensual knowledge refers to knowledge ‘sufficiently accepted to enter the decision-making process’. It may originate as an ideology, but it differs from ideology in that it ‘it is constantly challenged from within and without’ and ‘must constantly prove itself against rival formulas claiming to solve problems better’. The object of examination is not individuals, entire governments, or

6 E. Haas, When Knowledge Means Power, p. 20.
7 Ibid., p. 21.
blocs of governments, but clusters of bureaucratic units within governments and organisations’. For Haas, the question of whether learning occurs is best examined by specifying the interests and values held by actors and by showing how actors define interests and values in response to earlier disappointments. Thus:

Decision-making models that are supposed to draw on the lessons of history, that are predicated on the assumption that actors deliberately learn from prior mistakes, are badly flawed, because the lessons of history are rarely unambiguous . . . learning, under such circumstances, consists of recognising the desirability of a different process of decision-making, a process that copes a little ‘better’ with the ambiguity.

A core concern for Haas is the distinction between adaptation and learning (see Table 1). Two key attributes separate adaptation from learning, namely whether re-evaluation of fundamental assumptions appears, and which type of bargaining occurs.

For Haas, although both adaptation and learning constitute responses to the existence of bounded rationality, learning implies that basic beliefs are re-evaluated. Re-evaluation implies that new factors are considered in examining policy and new causes are believed to be valid in affecting behaviour. It is made possible by the existence of previously unavailable knowledge.

Adaptation resembles a muddling-through incremental style of policy-making. New tasks are added to old ones incrementally. By contrast, the main determinant of learning is the success of epistemic communities, ‘composed of professionals (usually recruited from several disciplines) who share a commitment to a common causal model and a common set of political values’. They re-examine prevailing beliefs about cause and effect and see more complex cause–effect chains. The ability of epistemic communities to transform policy-making is constrained by habit-driven actors who respond to situations ‘in a characteristic and repetitive fashion’. Thus, adaptation is more common than learning.

A second key difference between adaptation and learning is

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8 Ibid., p. 22.
9 As regards international organizations specifically, Haas argues that the task is to examine whether their internal processes cause learning.
10 E. Haas, When Knowledge Means Power.
11 Ibid., p. 36.
12 Ibid., p. 5.
13 Ibid., p. 41.
14 Ibid., p. 43.
bargaining style. Policy will reflect analytical decision-making and in bargaining an understanding of the causal relations between the aims of different groups will be evident. Moreover, institutionalization will occur, whereby decision-making routines are established to search for consensual knowledge, for example, think tanks and altered recruitment practices. Crisis management normally implies institutionalization and, thus for Haas, the occurrence of a crisis will act as a catalyst for learning because policy-makers will recognize that a problem’s recurrence or outbreak is brought on by ‘the insufficiency of institutional routines to avert it’. All told, learning will be characterized by the indicators in Table 2.

In the remainder of this article, the issue of whether or not the above indicators of learning are present in the case of Anglo-Irish policy-making towards Northern Ireland will be examined and it will be shown that there are strong indicators of learning existing in that policy-making process.

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Table 1

*Differences between Adaptation and Learning*

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<tr>
<th>Adaptation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Behaviour changes as actors add new activities without examining the implicit theories underlying their programmes — values are not questioned</td>
<td>Original values examined</td>
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<td>Emphasis is on altering means of action not ends — not the ultimate purpose</td>
<td>Purposes redefined</td>
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<td>New purposes are added to old ones without worrying about their coherence</td>
<td>New nested problem sets constructed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change is incremental</td>
<td>New purposes derived on the basis of consensual knowledge provided by epistemic communities</td>
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15 Ibid., p. 86.
The Sunningdale Agreement

Negotiations: The Main Issues. In the immediate aftermath of the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972, discussions began about a new constitutional arrangement for Northern Ireland. Proposals were made for a cross-border Council of Ireland and a power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly. Two main issues emerged as central to the Sunningdale negotiations:

1) Would the Council of Ireland have executive powers?
2) What role would it have in matters related to the RUC?

It was assumed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) that this Council would only be acceptable to unionists if it had consultative, as opposed to executive powers. Brian Faulkner, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, however, agreed in principle to consider a Council of Ireland with executive powers.

Both the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Irish government strongly emphasized the need for a Council of Ireland with executive powers. Moreover, the then British Prime

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Table 2

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<th>Indicators of Learning</th>
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<td>- Ideological compromise between two or more ideologies</td>
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<td>- Participation by qualified state representatives and non-governmental groups friendly to the dominant states</td>
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<td>- Epistemic communities are free agents and predominant</td>
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<td>- Regular monitoring, reporting and consultation</td>
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<td>- Executive heads build and manipulate dominant coalition by practising crisis management</td>
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<td>- Knowledge is consensual</td>
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<td>- There is reasoned ability to justify expanding and interconnected goals</td>
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<td>- Decision-making is analytic</td>
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<td>- Issues linkage veers towards substantive, rather than tactical</td>
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<td>- The bargaining style is shared by all participants</td>
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<td>- The problem tends to be defined as being made up of non-decomposable elements</td>
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<td>- Institutionalization occurs</td>
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<td>- Increased authority is evident</td>
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16 K. Bloomfield, Behind Stormont, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1986, p. 182.
17 Ibid.
Minister, Edward Heath, ‘threw his weight behind the SDLP and the Dublin government’,\(^{18}\) so that the proposed Council of Ireland would be consulted over the composition of a new police force in Northern Ireland. Agreement was finally reached between the participants on 10 December 1973.

**Content.** The Sunningdale Agreement provided for a two-tier Council of Ireland. The Council would consist of a Council of Ministers with seven Northern Irish and seven Irish members. The Council would have executive powers in such areas as security, agriculture, trade and industry, tourism and electricity and it was intended that it would foster cross-border cooperation in general. Apart from the Executive, there would be a Consultative Assembly with Dáil and Northern Irish parliamentary representation.

The Republic, for its part, pledged to strengthen its campaign against the IRA and to foster cross-border security cooperation. Thus, there was a linkage between UK willingness to establish cross-border institutions and Irish commitment to cross-border security cooperation. Moreover, in their joint communiqué after the conference, but in separate, parallel declarations, the Irish and British governments asserted the constitutional status of Northern Ireland:

The Irish government fully accepted and solemnly declared that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland desired a change in that status.

The British government:

Solemnly declared that it was, and would remain, their policy to support the wishes of the majority of the people of the United Kingdom. If in the future, the majority of the people of Northern Ireland should indicate a wish to become a part of a united Ireland the British government would support that wish.

These parallel declarations represented a new departure in British and Irish policy towards Northern Ireland, by implicitly accepting that the state to which Northern Ireland belonged would be determined by a ‘free and fair exercise in self-determination by all the people of Northern Ireland’\(^{19}\) and that ‘the rights, aspirations


and interests of both communities within it must be guaranteed and monitored by both states . . .’.20 Given the sensitivity of the Irish constitutional claim to Northern Ireland, Irish recognition of Northern Ireland’s status was of significance and was used by Faulkner in an attempt to persuade unionists to accept the agreement.21 In May 1974, in the midst of political and paramilitary pressure, electoral defeat and strike action, the Northern Irish power-sharing Executive, lacking an overall support base,22 resigned. The Sunningdale Agreement had failed.

Despite its failure, Sunningdale signified a landmark in Anglo-Irish initiatives. There were new components in the Agreement:

- UK acceptance of an Irish dimension to resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland
- UK acceptance of the right to self-determination
- Irish recognition of Northern Ireland’s constitutional status within the UK.

However, there were also divisions of opinion and the absence of Anglo-Irish policy change was evident. There was no provision for amending Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution. Moreover, the period of normalization which followed the collapse of Sunningdale highlighted the British emphasis on security arrangements as being the most appropriate method of containing the conflict, if not resolving it. Furthermore, Anglo-Irish cooperation was not sufficiently strong to withstand the effects of opposition to the Sunningdale Agreement.

The failure of Sunningdale heralded a return to UK governmental emphasis on internal solutions to the conflict in Northern Ireland, implying a weakening of the Irish dimension and of Anglo-Irish cooperation. It was not until the 1980s that intergovernmental Anglo-Irish cooperation deepened.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) and Its Aftermath

Background. The intergovernmentalist approach was resumed when the Irish and British Prime Ministers, Charles Haughey and Margaret Thatcher, met in 1980 and agreed that they wished to develop new

20 Ibid.
and closer political cooperation between their governments. Intergovernmentalism continued when Garret FitzGerald came to power in the Republic of Ireland in 1981. In November 1981, both leaders agreed to establish an Anglo-Irish intergovernmental Council and to discuss the establishment of an Anglo-Irish parliamentary body, drawn from British and Irish parliaments, the European Parliament (EP) and any elected Northern Irish body. The process culminated in 1985, when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed by both governments. It contained significant innovations.

Negotiations. Three main issues predominated:
1) Cross-border cooperation — joint authority over Northern Ireland
2) Amendment of Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution to allow Irish recognition of the legitimacy of partition
3) Policing and security arrangements.

Underlying these issues was the question of sovereignty for both British and Irish governments. For FitzGerald, joint sovereignty would erode British and Irish sovereignty, but joint authority was merely an exercise of sovereignty to establish new institutions. The British government stated that the British were now open to ‘hitherto “unthinkable” issues from their point of view’. Geoffrey Howe, the then British Foreign Secretary, told Peter Barry, the then Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs, that ‘while joint sovereignty was not on, the British could contemplate joint authority, but would find “joint responsibility” preferable’. According to FitzGerald, this implied acceptance of his own distinction between joint sovereignty and joint authority. Thus, it appeared that a less absolutist notion of sovereignty was being considered by the British government.

Finally, the British government proposed three options: arrangements to give the Irish government authority over certain areas of activity within the ambit of an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference; regular meetings between Dublin and Belfast outside the IGC; and the establishment of a resident Irish presence in Belfast.

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
In return for these proposals, the British government requested that its Irish counterpart provide clarification of its position on Articles Two and Three of the Constitution. The amendment of these articles became central to the negotiations. However, unlike in the response to constitutional change in the 1970s, the Irish government expressed its willingness to consider such amendment. By the mid-1980s, a shift of position on both Irish and British sides was evident. The British government was prepared to consider the concept of joint authority and to review an absolutist notion of sovereignty. The Irish government was prepared to consider constitutional change.

The final package reflected the predominance of the above issues. However, despite British and Irish shifts in bargaining positions, the priority attached to other issue areas differed for both governments. The Irish government ‘primarily sought to reform Northern Ireland by advancing minority interests and aspirations, in the administration of justice’.\textsuperscript{28} British priorities centred on the extradition issue, improving security arrangements along the border\textsuperscript{29} and minimizing loss of British sovereignty. As with previous intergovernmental initiatives, there was a difference of opinion between both governments about the desirable size of the Irish dimension and the scope of cross-border institutions. The content of the AIA reflected these differences of opinion.

The Content of the AIA. The AIA did not provide for joint authority, but instead included strong institutional mechanisms to allow the Irish government to be consulted on matters of concern to nationalists in Northern Ireland. Thus, it reflected a compromise between those seeking a large Irish dimension and those seeking a constrained one.

The main provisions of the AIA were:
- The establishment of a secretariat in Maryfield, outside Belfast, comprising Irish and British civil servants
- The establishment of an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) which would meet regularly to discuss matters of concern to nationalists in Northern Ireland and to discuss Northern Irish issues generally
- Functional economic cross-border cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 248.
In contrast to the Sunningdale Agreement, the AIA contained a joint declaration by both the governments on Northern Ireland’s constitutional status. However, like the Sunningdale Agreement, it made no reference to amending Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution: ‘the British side considered that the price demanded by the Irish for this concession was too high’ and did not have confidence that the ‘amendment would be passed in an Irish referendum’.30

Overall, the AIA contained some key policy changes:
- Institutionalized ‘Irish dimension’ — formal recognition of Irish governmental role in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland
- Institutionalized Anglo-Irish cooperation.

However, there was also clear continuity in Anglo-Irish policy-making. There were no provisions for amending Articles Two and Three. There was strong Irish emphasis on reforms to improve the position of Catholics in Northern Ireland — where justice and policing were concerned — and also strong UK emphasis on security provisions to help resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The Aftermath of the Agreement. Despite initial unionist and extreme nationalist opposition to the AIA, there were signs of political movement. By 1993, it was evident that Anglo-Irish cooperation had increased. The new Irish government’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dick Spring, appeared willing to contemplate the prospect of constitutional change, if not immediately, then in the future. Thus, a unionist leader speculated tentatively, that ‘there may be bilateral contacts, but these haven’t developed yet’31. Optimism was confirmed when the IRA and the UDA announced a cessation of military violence in 1994. The peace process gained momentum when the British and Irish governments negotiated the Downing Street Declaration, marking another landmark in the Anglo-Irish relationship.

The need for a Declaration to reconcile Sinn Féin’s demand for Irish self-determination with unionist demands for the status quo, was central to Anglo-Irish discussions from 1991.32 After laborious efforts and intense negotiations between the Irish government, the

British government, the SDLP and Sinn Féin (SF), the Joint Declaration was announced in May 1993. The British government stated that it had ‘no selfish, strategic, political or economic interest in Northern Ireland’.

British and Irish governments, as well as the nationalist parties, sought to establish all-party talks to secure the ceasefires. Such talks would examine the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In particular, the establishment of cross-border institutions for Northern Ireland appeared to be high on the Anglo-Irish agenda. The Joint Framework Document of 1996 placed significant emphasis on this issue.

The ‘New Framework for Agreement’, or Joint Framework Document (JFD) of 22 February 1995, included a commitment to establish joint cross-border institutions, possibly with executive powers over specific functional areas of activity. The issues of whether sovereignty would be eroded by the JFD and its cross-border provisions, and whether Irish constitutional change would be provided for, received particular attention. Immediately after publication of the JFD, John Major, the British Prime Minister, emphasized that cross-border proposals did not imply joint sovereignty.33

As regards Irish constitutional change, Dick Spring stated that in the course of the JFD negotiations the British government ‘sought a willingness to remove the constitutional claim’.34 However, Spring said that the negotiators reached a stage where ‘some indicative formulation’ was shown, but no agreement was reached. Again, it appeared that the necessity of putting any proposed amendment of Articles Two and Three to an Irish referendum and the decision on the correct timing of such a referendum appeared to have prevented the negotiators from stating a date for a referendum on the amendment of Articles Two and Three:

In fairness to the British, they always recognise that it is a matter for the Irish government and the Irish people... the only way in which a referendum would be put to the people on constitutional changes lay at the end of negotiations and in the context of a settlement.35

Thus, unlike the negotiations which preceded the Sunningdale Agreement and to an extent the AIA, Irish constitutional amend-

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
ment was obviously on the bargaining table in the 1990s and was referred to quite openly by Irish political leaders. The linkage of Articles Two and Three to the establishment of cross-border institutions was implicitly accepted by Anglo-Irish policy-makers.

**The Good Friday Agreement, 1998**

*Negotiations.* Progress was hampered in the years following the Joint Framework Document by the weakness of the Major-led Conservative government and by internal wrangling between the main parties in the prelude to all-party talks. Moreover, the IRA ceasefire was broken in February 1996, when a bomb exploded at Canary Wharf in London. Tony Blair’s victorious election opened the door to such progress: ‘a new atmosphere of cautious trust’ developed between Republicans and the Labour government,\(^{36}\) culminating in the second IRA ceasefire in August 1997 and the subsequent inclusion of Sinn Féin in the all-party talks.

Gradually three key issues emerged as being central to reaching a final agreement:

1) The role of proposed North/South councils and agencies: would they have executive powers?
2) The establishment of a Northern Ireland Assembly: would this be contingent on a North–South council with executive powers?\(^{37}\)
3) The issue of whether the IRA and Republican groups would be obliged to decommission before Sinn Féin could take part in any new constitutional structures became increasingly significant towards the end of the negotiations. Unionists feared that the Agreement did not guarantee that Sinn Féin would not gain ministerial position unless decommissioning occurred.\(^{38}\)

Disagreement existed over the possible role and functions of North/South structures. Moreover, there was division over whether the proposed Council would be part of a greater East–West cross-border Council of the British Isles, or an independent institution. A further cause of division was whether British and Irish governments would take over the work of the Council if a decision on a certain issue could not reached, or if the Council totally failed to operate,\(^{39}\) and also over whether the North/South council would

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\(^{36}\) *Irish Times*, 13 April 1998.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
be accountable to a Northern Ireland institution, or to the Irish parliament, the Oireachtas, and a Northern Irish institution.

In particular, decommissioning became a key unionist concern. The UUP sought a commitment that the IRA would decommission its arms before SF participated in the proposed Assembly. A letter from Tony Blair to David Trimble, assuring the latter that decommissioning schemes ought to come into effect in June, apparently contributed to the final deal.40 On 10 April, the Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations was announced by the chairman, US Senator George Mitchell, amid intense media presence, inviting all parties to ‘substitute an epic of peace for an epic of war’.41 As the next section shows, the actual content of the Agreement reflected the lines of division which had emerged during the negotiation period. But the Agreement also drew from the 1995 Joint Framework Document and it illustrated the existence of policy-learning in Anglo-Irish policy-making.

Content of the Good Friday Agreement. As with previous Anglo-Irish initiatives, the content of the Good Friday Agreement reflected the significance of key issues in the negotiation process. The Agreement covers the three strands identified in the 1980s by the SDLP as being central to resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland: relations within Northern Ireland; relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and relations between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the UK.

Under Strand One, a power-sharing Executive with devolved powers over specified areas was to be formed, following Assembly elections by PR-STV. Key decisions would be taken either by parallel consent — a majority of all members and of unionist and nationalist blocs within the Assembly, or by a weighted majority (60 per cent of all members present, including at least 40 per cent of nationalists and of unionists).

Under Strand Two, a North–South Ministerial Council would be established to develop ‘consultation, cooperation and action within the island of Ireland, including thorough implementation on an all-island and cross-border basis — on matters of mutual interest within the competence of Administrations, North and South’. Initially six areas were listed for North–South Council action. The Council would

40 Ibid.
comprise Northern Ireland’s First and Deputy-First Minister, the Irish Taoiseach and relevant Irish and Northern Irish ministers. The Council would take decisions by agreement on policies and action at an all-island and cross-border level. The North/South Council and implementation bodies were to be brought into existence by British–Irish legislation in the attempt to ‘split the difference’ between nationalists desiring the Council to be subject to Westminster and Oireachtas legislation and unionists wanting legislative underpinning from the new Assembly and the Dáil. 42

Under Strand Three, a British–Irish Council (BIC) would be established, comprising representatives of the British and Irish governments and devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and if appropriate, from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The BIC would meet at summit level twice a year and in sectoral formats regularly, represented by the appropriate minister. Members would operate in accordance with whatever procedures for democratic authority and accountability were in force in their respective elected institutions. The BIC would operate by consensus. Elected institutions would be encouraged to develop inter-parliamentary links. There would also be a new British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference which would subsume both the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council and the Intergovernmental Conference established under the AIA.

There were separate sections on constitutional issues, whereby the legitimacy of whatever choice was made by the majority of the people in Northern Ireland on Northern Ireland’s constitutional status and of Northern Ireland’s status in the UK would be recognized. However, if a majority wished to be part of a united Ireland, there would be a binding obligation on the part of Irish and British governments to introduce legislation to support that wish. The government of Northern Ireland would be obliged to legislate impartially on behalf of all the people.

Finally, both governments agreed to introduce legislative changes to support the Agreement. As regards British legislation, Northern Ireland was deemed to be part of the UK and would not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. If majority opinion changed, then legislation would be

introduced to amend Northern Ireland’s constitutional status. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act would be repealed — to underpin the establishment of new North/South institutions and East/West institutions.

With respect to the Republic, Articles Two and Three were to be amended, subject to referendum, to confer Irish birthright on every person born on the island of Ireland. However, a united Ireland would occur only with the consent of a majority in both jurisdictions (Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland). Under the amended Article Three, the will of the Irish nation would be to unite all people who share Irish territory, in all the diversity of their traditions and identities and recognizing that a united Ireland would only occur peacefully with the consent of a majority of people in both jurisdictions.


On decommissioning, the intentions of all parties to work in good faith with the Independent Commission on Decommissioning was affirmed and it was reiterated that the decommissioning issue was an indispensable part of the process of negotiation. The decommissioning schemes were to come into force by the end of June 1998.

As regards security, policing and justice, the British government affirmed that it would make progress towards reducing the number of armed forces deployed in Northern Ireland, removing security installations and lifting emergency powers. An independent Commission to consider future policing arrangements would be established with the aim of creating a police force with cross-community support. The British government remained ready in principle, with the broad support of the political parties and after consultation with the British government, to devolve responsibility for policing and justice issues. There would also be a review of the criminal justice system.

If any of the institutions established by the Agreement fell into difficulty, they would be reviewed by British and Irish governments
in consultation with the parties in the Assembly. Each government would then be responsible for action in its own jurisdiction.

The Agreement, then, was innovative in many ways. In the remainder of this article the differences and similarities between the Good Friday Agreement and previous Anglo-Irish initiatives are discussed and the question of whether muddling through, adaptation, or learning best describes Anglo-Irish policy-making is addressed.

ANGLO-IRISH POLICY: KEY SHIFTS

The above overview of key Anglo-Irish initiatives highlights fundamental shifts in Anglo-Irish policy and indicates the existence of policy-learning. Table 3 provides a summary of the main shifts in each Anglo-Irish initiative since 1972. Overall, a holistic approach is evident in the Good Friday Agreement, involving wide-ranging policy initiatives. This comprehensive review reflects a deeper understanding of how the various policy areas have interacted with each other to aggravate the conflict in Northern Ireland and how the resolution of the conflict necessitates a multi-faceted policy approach, i.e., substantive issue linkage occurs. Against this background, learning occurred in two main ways. First, original values were re-examined and, secondly, purposes were redefined.

Original Values. Table 3 highlights the existence of a fundamental re-evaluation of core principles, in particular the re-evaluation of sovereignty. The inclusion of far-reaching constitutional reform reflects underlying change in British and Irish perceptions of sovereignty. Sovereignty has operated as a potential constraint on the establishment of cross-border institutions, particularly for the British government in the period of Direct Rule. For the British government, the establishment of joint authority was problematic because of its possible implications for parliamentary sovereignty. For the Irish government, the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland was a frequent topic of negotiation in the formulation of Anglo-Irish policy, and unwillingness to provide for its amendment or inability to do so, because of public opinion, prevented its inclusion until 1998. However, during the 1980s a gradual alteration in British and Irish approaches to constitutional questions was evident. This alteration became more obvious in the 1990s.
Devolution was fully accepted in the Good Friday Agreement and also in general British policy towards Wales and Scotland. This acceptance of devolution specifically for Northern Ireland developed during both the Thatcher and Major-led Conservative governments and gradually gathered momentum.

By 1985, although sovereignty was still a sensitive issue for British policy-makers, the British government accepted an Irish dimension to resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland and also accepted a distinction between joint authority, a North/South Council and joint sovereignty. The culmination of this change was in 1998, when ‘the Union, as it stands in British Constitutional terms, will be changed, changed utterly’ because ‘the Union now depends on the consent of the people of Northern Ireland as implemented and determined under the 1998 Act’.

The creation of the North/South Council and of the BIC also had potentially profound implications for concepts of sovereignty and for the unitary state model that typified both Irish and British states. The BIC represents ‘a shift away from the tendency towards ‘oneness’ and cultural homogeneity in traditional nationalism, and a repudiation, on a theoretical level at least, of outdated assertions

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44 G. Kennedy, Irish Times, 18 April 1998.
of sovereignty’.

Moreover, the ‘the Belfast Agreement... establishes a new constitutional settlement, both among the nations which form the United Kingdom and also between those nations and the other nation in these islands, the Irish nation’. Thus, it represents ‘a major innovation to previous ideas about an east–west dimension’.

Overall, the Good Friday Agreement is ‘confederalising and federalising’. It is confederalizing because ‘sovereign jurisdictions voluntarily delegate powers and functions to bodies that can exercise power across all jurisdictions’. It is also ‘subtly’ federalizing, where federalism implies that there are at least two separate tiers of government over the same territory, and when neither tier can unilaterally alter the constitutional capacities of the other.

Whereas at the outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland, both Irish and British governments were firmly wedded to traditional concepts of sovereignty, by 1998 there was acceptance of such concepts as sharing sovereignty, either between states, or between different levels of government within the one state. This re-examination of the sovereignty principle also represented a redefinition of the purpose of policy-making towards Northern Ireland.

Purposes Redefined. Resolving the conflict was and is the prime motivation of policy-makers. However, the means favoured by each government to achieve this purpose became at times an end in themselves. For Irish governments there was sensitivity to a nationalist constituency. Fianna Fáil was particularly constrained by its nationalist supporters. For traditional nationalists the ultimate purpose was to remove the British presence and only then would violence cease.
Similarly, for British policy-makers, the means to end violence in the early days of the conflict was through strengthening security measures. However, the use of security measures to eradicate terrorism also became a desired policy goal, rather than simply a means to an end. Thus, while the overriding concern of both British and Irish governments was to end the conflict, there was only limited consensus on the means of doing so and periodically it was clear that these means became confused with ends.

In contrast, by 1998 there was a greater Anglo-Irish consensus on resolving the conflict through the creation of new institutions and through constitutional reform. The immediate purpose of Anglo-Irish policy-makers was to achieve those aims in the negotiations which preceded the Good Friday Agreement. The above Anglo-Irish consensus signifies the existence of consensual knowledge — ‘knowledge sufficiently accepted to enter the decision-making process’ (see above).

Thus, in two core ways, Haas’s account of policy-learning illuminates Anglo-Irish policy. A gradual re-examination of values underlying policy and of the purposes of policy emerged, incorporating a deeper consensus between policy-makers about key values and key purposes.

The gradual nature of changes is reflected by our examination of the three key Anglo-Irish Agreements from 1972 to 1998, where continuity and change were both evident in each Anglo-Irish initiative. However, this gradual process should not be confused with incrementalism in a narrow sense. For Haas, adaptation was also a gradual process, but it was more ad hoc, entailing the addition of new aims to old aims and the retention of fundamental values, not necessarily shared by all policy-makers. What is striking about comparisons between each of the three Anglo-Irish agreements is the consistency with which each agreement built on policy change evident in a previous agreement, culminating in substantial policy shifts for both governments. Thus, official British recognition of an Irish dimension grew and was legitimated gradually after 1972. Irish recognition of the need to alter internally and constitutionally also strengthened. Not only were these value-shifts evident, but they were successfully welded into the bargaining framework, reflecting an analytical understanding of the Anglo-Irish bargaining relationship and of Northern Irish politics. In short, the above overview of Anglo-Irish policy outcomes indicates fundamental
policy changes, consistently deepening over 25 years. Rather than ‘muddling through’, the sense of direction evident indicates the existence of advancement in Anglo-Irish policy, increasing the chances of successful outcomes. Thus, as Table 4 illustrates, in terms of values and of purposes, learning occurred. Similarly, most of the indicators of learning presented by Haas are evident in the Anglo-Irish case (see Table 5).

As can be seen, a number of indicators of learning are evident in the Anglo-Irish case. In 1985, consultation was institutionalized. Executive leadership was paramount in reaching agreement between

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<tr>
<td>Behaviour changes as actors add new activities without examining the implicit theories underlying their programmes — values are not questioned</td>
<td>Original values examined: re-evaluation of perceptions of sovereignty, e.g., establishment of the BIC, Joint Council, amendment of Articles Two and Three of the Irish Constitution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis is on altering means of action not ends — not the ultimate purpose</td>
<td>Purposes redefined: Pre-1980s; security issues prioritized by British government, traditional nationalist currents more dominant in Republic of Ireland — Articles Two and Three maintained — intermediate purposes not shared by both governments. By 1990s: intergovernmental consensus on need for Anglo-Irish framework — commitment to this as a purpose in itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New purposes are added to old ones without worry about their coherence</td>
<td>New nested problem sets constructed By 1980s and 1990s: awareness of interconnections between various issues — Articles Two and Three and cross-border institutions, security and justice reform and nationalist concessions — understanding of complex cause–effect chains leading to comprehensive policy review. Overall, a more holistic approach adopted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change is incremental</td>
<td>New purposes devised on the basis of consensual knowledge provided by epistemic communities</td>
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all the parties in Northern Ireland, aided by US executive leadership and Senator Mitchell. Similarly, as predicted by Haas’s indicators of learning, decision-making is analytic. It is habit-driven, but rests on a conception of complex cause–effect chains. The key issues on the bargaining table were all substantively linked. Amending Articles Two and Three would reassure unionists that no Irish government would set out to destroy the Union without their consent. In return, establishing joint institutions would reassure nationalists that there was now a strong ‘Irish dimension’ and that it could form the basis of a united Ireland at a later date. Thus, linkage was not merely tactical.

Table 5

Indicators of Learning: the Anglo-Irish Case

- Ideological compromise between two or more ideologies: Irish nationalism and British unionism, compromise on both sides on absolutist conceptions of sovereignty
- Participation by qualified state representatives and non-governmental groups friendly to the dominant states: Northern Irish political parties and community groups
- Epistemic communities are free agents and predominant
- Regular monitoring, reporting and consultation: IGC, civil service monitoring
- Executive heads build and manipulate dominant coalition by practising crisis management: prime ministerial meetings and all-party talks
- Knowledge is consensual: Anglo-Irish commitment to intergovernmental framework and three strands approach
- There is reasoned ability to justify expanding and interconnected goals: Amendment of Articles Two and Three, joint institutions, the BIC, protection of human rights, internal Northern Irish reform
- Decision-making is analytic: understanding of complex cause–effect chains — as above
- Issues linkage veers towards substantive, rather than tactical: as above
- The bargaining style is shared by all participants: substantive issue linkage accepted by both governments
- The problem tends to be defined as being made up of non-decomposable elements: the three strands approach reflects this belief — internal Northern Irish situation — internal reform, UK–Irish relationship and Irish/Northern Irish relationship all integral to resolving the conflict
- Institutionalization occurs: the IGC, the Secretariat at Maryfield, monitors
- Increased authority is evident: decision-making centres on prime ministers of both states, with US presidential intervention periodically
Moreover, British and Irish bargaining styles were similar in that both accepted substantive issue linkage and shared a commitment to the overall outcome of the bargain. Both made decisions analytically. Both appeared to perceive the problem to be soluble as inseparable elements — or ‘decomposable’. The three strands approach reflected this belief.

Overall, there is strong evidence of learning in Anglo-Irish policy-making. Nearly all of the definitions and indicators of learning presented in Tables 1 and 2 are present in the Anglo-Irish case (see Tables 3 and 4). The extent of gradual Anglo-Irish policy change and the depth of that change since 1972 imply that Anglo-Irish policy reflected more than incremental ‘muddling through’ for that period. Institutionalized practices, increased monitoring and communication all contributed to the learning process.

There are other possible explanations for the successful completion of the Agreement and its subsequent acceptance by the main Northern Irish parties, and by Irish and Northern Irish electorates. The influence of the SDLP on Irish and British governments has been emphasized as a factor in explaining Anglo-Irish policy towards Northern Ireland. The influence of the Clinton-led US administration and the bargaining skills of Senator George Mitchell are other factors used to explain the successful negotiation of the Agreement. However, underlying the influence of these factors is the ability of policy-makers to accept outside influences and incorporate them into policies.

The ability of policy-makers to take on board these influences and to respond to them is a necessary factor in allowing policy change to occur, yet it has been given ‘little credence ... as an independent variable’ in political science’. The ability to learn is in itself an explanation for resultant Anglo-Irish policy shifts. Thus, regardless of the apparent fragility of the Good Friday Agreement, the existence of learning implies that despite intermittent failures in policy-making, despite the problems of bounded rationality, progress in resolving conflict in Northern Ireland has been made and will continue to be made.

By summer 2001, the optimism of the immediate aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement had given way to a more sombre evaluation and the argument that an Anglo-Irish learning process had reaped a peace dividend in Northern Ireland appeared fragile. However, despite appearances, the underlying logic of Northern Irish and Anglo-Irish politics remains constant and does not contradict the above conclusions.

Reasons for Pessimism. In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, two key issues dominated nationalist and unionist politics: whether the IRA would decommission verifiably to satisfy unionist demands and whether reform of the RUC would occur in line with the recommendations of the UK-commissioned Patten Report to satisfy nationalist demands. For unionist parties, reform of the RUC was of high sensitivity and was linked to their insistence that ‘verifiable’ decommissioning would occur. For Sinn Féin any further decommissioning initiatives were contingent on the full implementation of the Patten Report recommendations. This ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy appeared to produce a stalemate in Northern Irish politics, heightening a more pessimistic evaluation of the likelihood of lasting peace. Moreover, the gains made by both Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party in the 2001 General Election, by implying an increase in extremist preferences among the Northern Irish electorate, appeared to cast doubt on the stability of the new institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement.

On 1 August 2001, British and Irish governments presented a ten-page document of proposals relating particularly to decommissioning and RUC reform. Decommissioning was stated as being indispensable to political resolution in Northern Ireland and had to be verifiable by the Decommissioning Body. RUC reform was to be fully implemented in line with the Patten Report. Demilitarization was to occur and an amnesty for paramilitaries on the run was to be granted. The UUP and DUP expressed their objections to what they perceived to be concession-making to the IRA in the absence of decommissioning. Sinn Féin gave a cautious welcome to the proposals, but expressed disappointment at the absence of more detailed proposals on RUC reform.

Following the announcement of the package, the Decommissioning Body issued a statement that IRA representatives had ‘proposed
a method for putting IRA arms completely and verifiably beyond use’. In response, the UUP argued that the IRA statement failed to state precisely how and where it would decommission. The IRA in turn withdrew its offer, precipitating a suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly and creating an apparent crisis in Northern Irish politics.

A possible implication of this bargaining impasse was that the problem in Northern Ireland was essentially an internal one and that intergovernmental policy-making, even if it showed evidence of learning, could not resolve it. However, analysis of the situation does not contradict the validity of the conclusion that Anglo-Irish learning has occurred and that progress in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland will continue to be made.

Anglo-Irish Learning and Progress in Northern Ireland. The 2001 Anglo-Irish proposals are consistent with the definitions of learning highlighted by Tables 1, 4 and 5 (see above). The redefinition of purpose, examination of original values, creation of new nested problems and of new purposes, which occurred gradually from 1972 to 1998, was not altered in 2001 and the Anglo-Irish proposals reflected this process. Thus, there was no change in the ideological compromise between unionism and nationalism — no return to absolutist notions of sovereignty. Participation in policy formulation remained unchanged. The role of monitoring, reporting and consultation, particularly the Decommissioning Body’s role, was equally high. Executive leadership was very apparent in the negotiations which preceded the 2001 proposals, with both Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern playing a high-profile role. Thus, increased authority has not gone into reverse. Anglo-Irish commitment to the intergovernmental framework did not falter; hence, knowledge remained consensual. Analytic decision-making also remained, encompassing issue linkage of RUC reform and decommissioning. The perception that the problem comprises decomposable elements also dominated Anglo-Irish policy. The focus on internal (RUC) reform does not undermine the significance of the Anglo-Irish and Irish-Republic—Northern Ireland relationships. Anglo-Irish policy has initiated this reform. The role of intergovernmentalism and of the Decommissioning Body implies that Anglo-Irish institutionalization has not diminished, despite the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

If these indicators of learning still exist, then the underlying argument that decision-making is rational and analytical, not incremental, is upheld, despite the apparent crisis in Northern Irish politics in 2001. The argument is not that that policy will always be successful or that the process and outcomes of decision-making are smooth. The overview of Anglo-Irish initiatives from 1973 to 1998 illustrates how frequently obstacles to peace arise. However, the overview also showed that throughout the period as a whole there is evidence of progress. The 2001 ‘crisis’ should be viewed in this longer-run context.

Moreover, an analysis of the immediate causes of the 2001 impasse highlights the existence of a bargaining ‘game’. Thus, for Sinn Féin and the IRA the question is how many concessions can be won from Anglo-Irish policy-makers. It is questionable to what extent Sinn Féin perceives a gain from the collapse of the institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin’s electoral success in the UK general election, the willingness of Irish and British governments to negotiate with its leaders and Sinn Féin’s closer relationship with US politicians are all apparent benefits to date of participating in constitutional politics and maintaining a ceasefire. Moreover, the Northern Ireland Assembly afforded institutional power to Sinn Féin members. A return to Direct Rule would increase fears of losing this power.

For unionist parties, there is a similar cost-benefit analysis to be calculated. How much influence will be retained if the institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement collapse? The establishment of Joint Authority, for example, would appear to enshrine a deeper Irish role in Northern Irish policy-making. Therefore, the Northern Ireland Assembly provides incentives to each political party and, while it may not be the perfect solution for any party, it represents a satisficing outcome for all.

It is possible that the current ‘crisis’ is an attempt to maximize concessions in a bargaining game, but does not signify the collapse of the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, regardless of the fate of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the underlying approach to Anglo-Irish policy-making will not alter — information gathering, institutionalization, substantive issue-linkage will continue to influence how decisions are made and their content. Analysis of past mistakes in policy-making will be incorporated into future Anglo-Irish initiatives. Thus, the argument that Anglo-Irish policy learning has
occurred and that progress in conflict resolution has occurred and will continue to occur is still upheld, despite the apparent grounds for scepticism in 2001.