1 Introduction

Political discourse and conflict resolution

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This book examines discourses from a wide range of actors in Northern Ireland's peace process – from heads of government to community workers, from former paramilitary prisoners to journalists. In doing so, we attempt to give a fair representation of the ways in which 'conflict' and 'peace' in Northern Ireland have been framed at various levels and stages – and the impact that overlap and divergence in such discourses has had. Notwithstanding this objective, I believe it necessary to introduce our work with a confession of omission; there is no chapter in this book dedicated to elaborating the perspectives of victims and narratives of victimhood. What we have scrutinised is the presentation of victims' experiences as packaged and presented in mainstream political discourses in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.[1] In doing so, we point up our claim that it is *political* discourses that prevail in a process of conflict resolution. Yet, although we have found this predominance of political discourses in a peace process to be true and (to a degree) necessary and even effective, this does not preclude us from acknowledging that it is neither adequate nor ideal.

In Northern Ireland, public wariness at airing the un-tempered views of people for whom the repercussions of conflict are a daily trauma has increased over the course of the peace process, despite the tireless work of organisations dedicated to redressing the marginalisation of victims. One such group was the Consultative Group on the Past, chaired by Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, which was established 'to find a way forward out of the shadows of the past' (2009: 14). Eames and Bradley describe being 'overwhelmed with the level of engagement' in this mission from across Northern Ireland – a fact that, they note, serves to highlight 'the depth of hurt and suspicion that still lingers in every part of our society'. Before turning to the task of outlining recommendations, Eames and Bradley (2009: 10) prefaced their Report with the entreaty: 'Debate and discussion are healthy for any society emerging from years of violence and conflict.'

In a scenario heavy-laden with irony, the public launch of this Report was a volatile affair. Although not as exclusive as many pivotal events in the peace process, ordinary people directly affected by the recommendations of the Group felt only able to made their points by standing outside the venue of the launch with placards, by heckling others at the event, or by standing in front of the stage

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set for the venerable speakers. The face-to-face confrontation of two individuals became the focus of the media mêlée: a woman and a man, a Protestant and a Catholic, an orphaned daughter and a bereaved brother. As their two worlds clashed under the glare of the media, it became clear that no one around them, in an apt microcosm of Northern Ireland society, knew how to respond to the articulation of such raw anger.

It is easier, more predictable, less raucous to put responsibility for voicing victimhood into the hands of lawyers, courageous community workers or carefully picked representatives than to let victims speak for themselves. The insight and candour forged by grief and tragedy cuts through the niceties and norms of political conflict management. What is more, the rippling implications of the vocal expression of anger and pain have no clear boundaries or endpoints. This sits uneasily with the need for order and progress in a peace process; more devastatingly, it implies that the goal of reaching a 'resolution' to conflict becomes less attainable the more we listen.

The place for political discourse in conflict resolution

In setting forth this thesis on the relationship between discourse, conflict and peace, we are seeking to uncover a realm of conflict resolution that is rarely critiqued yet familiar to all (media coverage of political statements, for example, constitute a staple in the rote of a peace process). We want to examine the choice of language used by various actors and its possible effects on transition from violent conflict. By identifying the vital dynamic of 'debating peace' in transition from conflict, we hope to counter the impression (as provocatively summated above) that peace can only be preserved at a cost to open and challenging public discussion.[2] The grounds for this analysis are set out here.

First, conflict resolution is not a goal or, indeed, a tightrope: establishing lasting patterns of peaceful interaction and 'normalised' channels of trust and legitimacy must ultimately be an inclusive and continually evolving process. We acknowledge that the concept itself is, somewhat ironically, a contested notion. In choosing to use this term, we do not seek to make any particular claims with regards to superior insights into processes of transition as compared with, say, those of 'conflict transformation'. Rather, we subscribe to the assessment of renowned experts that the field of conflict resolution is necessarily broad and usefully inclusive (Ramsbotham *et al*. 2005: 8–9). This is not to say that we do not use this term with great caution. We share a profound critical unease with the implied conviction that conflict *can* be definitively *resolved*.[3] Agree it; solve it; end it; peace. As is expounded with great clarity in the concluding chapter of this book by Little (Chapter 14), a rejection of this particular interpretation of conflict resolution arises not merely from scholarly semantics but from lived experience in countries labelled as 'post-Agreement' or 'post-conflict'. To borrow a cliché, what we wish to show is that it is not the destination but the journey that is important in the process of conflict resolution.

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One of the few unimpeachable principles of conflict resolution is that it must incorporate all society, not just those with political influence or acumen. Indeed, the concept of conflict resolution is often conscientiously applied to processes outside the realm of political activity (see, for example, Arai 2009). However, it is our intention to highlight the relevance of the insights provided by theorists of conflict resolution to this 'politicised' sphere. We do not believe that this principle is incompatible with a focus on political discourse. On the contrary, we seek to show that, just as it can exacerbate conflict, so political discourse can play a crucial role in facilitating peace. We define political discourse broadly – not by its context or speaker but in terms of its use; language that performs the social function of defining collective identities, legitimate hegemony and motivating values which find expression in political associations and goals (see also Chilton 2004; Chilton and Schäffner 2002; Wodak 2009).

Our premise is that, in context of conflict and transition from conflict, such political utilisation of language is particularly prevalent and crucial. If politics is about bargaining, persuasion, communication and co-operation, it is one of the most important uses of discourse in the social world. These discursive features of political activity are especially fraught in a context of societal division. This is not least because a conflict situation confers even greater political weight on ideology and identity (both discursively constructed). For such reasons, political language plays a crucial role in the transition out of conflict (Schäffner and Wenden 1999).

We should pause to acknowledge here that silence is as necessary for peace as speech, and the importance of having opportunities to choose both must not be overlooked. A healthy process of conflict resolution, however, needs to ensure that silence is not imposed on some and, moreover, that the views of those most weakened or marginalised in the conflict are not expressed solely through those who dominate the public sphere. The shock of images from the launch of the Eames–Bradley Report was not a response to the views expressed so much as astonishment that it was victims themselves who were voicing them under the media glare. Such deep-rooted grievance has been commodified for political ends in the peace process; although the context and means of communication have changed, it is notable that the act of assimilating victimhood into political goals is not dissimilar to experience during the Troubles.

Political discourse: power and principle

The significance of discourse in socio-political terms relates to the fact that it may be used to *legitimise, accompany, disguise* or *substitute for* change in political values and activity. These various possibilities point directly to what is simultaneously the greatest strength and the greatest difficulty of discourse as a topic of study: its enigmatic relationship with practice and context. Indeed, according to Fairclough (2001), the term 'discourse' refers to each of three levels of the social world – language/text, practice/interaction and context – and, importantly, the connections between them.[4] It is precisely because of this acknowledged complexity that analysing discourses can provide some insight

into the processes involved in exacerbating conflict and facilitating peace. It is possible to identify two crucial dimensions to the role of discourse in relation to 'small "p" politics' that have been of particular relevance to the peace process in Northern Ireland. The use of language in relation to power and in shaping principles is essential to any process of conflict resolution.

Power: politics as discursive action

Put simply, 'the language of politics is the language of power' (de Landtsheer 1998: 3). Politics affects the way people think about, communicate regarding, and act in relation to social conditions and facts. For this reason, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) designate all social systems to be inherently political constructions. More particularly, as Howarth (1998: 275) claims, 'political practices serve to constitute (and undermine) discourses and the identities they form'. The relationship between the changing political world and the language used to describe and appraise it, or between conception and action, is close and crucial (Skinner 1989: 6). The changing relationships of power that characterise the transition from conflict to peace (or vice versa) are, to a degree, the manifestation of the discourses of political actors. I note in particular that the subject (speaker of the text, in this case usually a politician) seeks to manipulate the potential of the discursive text to *affect* the other two realms of practice and context as much as to reflect them.

It is accepted that political constitutions, laws and norms reflect dominant discourses, namely the language/ideology of those in society who hold the reins of structural power (see Foucault 1972; Bourdieu 1991). The greater the actor's power, or capacity to change the socio-political and structural environment, the more the actor's discourse is likely to affect the wider context for public interaction. Put differently, the power of an actor is related to the strength of the effect of a text of his/her words on individual or group behaviour and experience. This is most obvious when considering official discourses (i.e. the language used by actors as representatives of the government or state), as has been done by O'Donnell (Chapter 3) and Edwards (Chapter 4) in relation to the Irish and British governments during the Troubles and peace process, and O'Kane (Chapter 12) and McGovern (Chapter 13) when considering the retrospective presentation of the self-same Troubles and peace process abroad. By having the capacity to shape the rules governing the production and reception of discourse in the public sphere, such actors are able to manage the interpretation (and, in effect, the meaning) of political discourses (for analysis of this effect, see Haidar and Rodriguez 1999). Analyses of the discourses of political parties, community representatives and former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland contained in this book reveal the importance of the concept of power in discourse of a range of groups directly involved in conflict and its resolution.

Principle: discourse as political action

Discourse is 'socially constitutive' (Wodak *et al.* 1999: 8). It generates and produces social conditions, maintains, legitimates and reproduces them. On

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account of this, Ball *et al.* (1989: 2) have designated conceptual change to be 'a species of political innovation'. Because conceptual change attends any reconstitution of the political world, political change and conceptual change must be understood as one complex and interrelated process (Farr 1989: 30–32). Moreover, a key element of discourse theory is the notion that actors/agents and systems/structures in the social and political realm 'undergo constant historical and social change' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 6). Discourse is central to this process of change and, importantly, to the impression of stability through its role in bringing together concepts, interaction and context. There needs to be movement in all three realms for real change to take place. However, again, this depends on the power and influence of the speaker of the text and, crucially, its reporting in the public realm. The role of the media, particularly local printed media, in Northern Ireland is acknowledged throughout this book.

The closer a text appears to relate to/address individual citizens' experience of social conditions and their interpretation of them, the more influence it will have. This is because of the congruity (as noted above) between dynamics of interpretation and production. More broadly, there needs to be a certain consistency and logic in the relationship between text, practice and context as put forward by the speaker. This can be 'explained' through the ideology maintained by political parties (among other communal/elite actors) on behalf of particular groups. Schäffner and Wenden (1999: xx) claim that 'ideologies shape group and individual attitudes which, communicated in discourse and determining other social practices, can either facilitate or hinder the achievement of peace'. In their influential work on *Language and Peace*, Schäffner and Wenden (1999) work with a definition of 'peace' as the absence of structural violence. This is necessary because, they note, other forms of violence can continue through discriminatory practices, institutions and ideologies (Schäffner and Wenden 1999: xxii). We similarly acknowledge that discourse (in its three forms of text, practice and context) can perpetuate structural violence as well as direct violence. Furthermore, we are as interested in what might be termed the 'positive' as well as the 'negative' effects of political discourse in the transition from conflict. This is particularly evident regarding the role of discourse as a medium for upholding the ideology or principles of a particular group (see Leudar *et al.* 2004). Such principles help to affirm the historical integrity of their group, to rationalise the stance taken by group leaders in response to the present situation, and to imagine the ideal position of the group in the future.

Political discourse in Northern Ireland

In a situation of conflict or ineffectual democracy the lack of political engagement means that the ability of political discourse to effect change – or even representation – in political interaction and the political landscape is stymied.[5] In Northern Ireland, the lack of real political power held by local politicians together with lack of representation (and potential for holding power) in the UK parliament embedded inequality at the macro level for all in Northern Ireland for

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much of the duration of the Troubles. Even aside from this context, the powerful potential of political discourses to affect prospects for violence has long been recognised in Northern Ireland. It was evident during the conflict, as seen in the decision by the Irish government in 1971 and the British government in 1988 to impose broadcasting bans on Sinn Féin prior to the IRA ceasefire in 1994. And from the early 1990s onwards, in a period of political sensitivity surrounding cautious negotiations, top-level recognition of the power of political discourse was exemplified in the care taken by the two governments to issue joint statements on Northern Ireland.[6]

An official assumption in Northern Ireland, as in most peace processes, has been that political dialogue needs to *replace* violence as the expression of dissent and difference. This view is articulated by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain (2008), in his assessment of Northern Ireland as 'a model for conflict resolution worldwide'. He claims that key actors need 'to prevent violence filling the vacuum left by the absence of political engagement'. Such political engagement, he argues, centres on 'inclusive dialogue at every level, wherever there is a negotiable objective'. Conflict resolution, he concludes, therefore requires 'the taking of risks to sustain that dialogue and to underpin political progress'. Although Hain is referring here to secret negotiations as much as to public statements, the principle that the communication of political views as an alternative to conflict is integral, he suggests, to the approach taken to the Northern Ireland peace process by the British and Irish governments and top-level third parties.

The thrust of our analysis differs somewhat to Hain's assumptions; we posit that communication is as much a part of conflict as a peace process – that political discourses which shaped prospects for agreement did not *begin* with secret negotiations or multi-party talks. Hain's speech, as an example of political discourse (more closely analysed by O'Kane in Chapter 12), also serves to remind us that the very act of officially identifying 'a peace process' centres on a change on perception as to the legitimacy (no matter how tenuous) of speakers, means and channels of communication around conflict issues. Research presented in this book shows that a change in perception among key powerful players accompanied a change in discourses of legitimisation of other actors or events (most clearly illustrated in McGovern's (Chapter 13) critique of the discourses of 'new terrorism'). In relation to this, we want to go a long way beyond the traditional interpretation of the role of dialogue in Northern Ireland's peace process, which focuses in particular on the incorporation of Sinn Féin into mainstream politics.

We deliberately place this book outside scholarly (some might say, circular) debate around the effects of the consociational nature of the 1998 Agreement in Northern Ireland (see Taylor 2006; O'Flynn 2003). The matter of whether the structures of the devolved political system have served to reinforce such bi-communal discourses and, indeed, make a 'transcendent' discourse less likely or possible is a question the editors do not presume to answer on behalf of the individual authors. Instead, we all share the objective of reaching a better understanding of the nature of these discourses by detailed analysis. In order to gain a

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fairly broad picture of the nature of this environment as a peace process has developed, the studies contained in this book concentrate less on the linguistic (de)construction of particular texts than on the core concepts that have been important to particular political and cultural groupings in this process. Within Northern Ireland, the 1998 and 2006 Agreements have been carefully presented so as not to imply radical change to the ideologies and goals of the parties concerned.[7] The key to their success has been being able to place moves made as tactical or as pragmatic: always in line with the interests of one's own group. This has been achieved in no small part through changes in the use and interpretation of political and cultural discourses, as examined herein.

Synopsis

Analysis of political discourse in this book is intended to offer an insight into ways in which political actors and core community leaders from across Northern Ireland society managed and legitimated the transition from conflict to peaceful agreement. The necessary point for starting this analysis is with the matter of how an aggressive state policy (of internment) was legitimated by some and used to legitimate anti-state violence by others. Rosland's (Chapter 2) analysis of unionist and nationalist discourses around the issue of internment in the early 1970s exemplified fundamental differences in communities' conception of issues of legitimacy and power over the ensuing 25 years. Indeed, some of these discursive themes and concepts are evident in the 'discourse worlds' of the main parties at the time of the 1998 Agreement. Filardo-Llamas (Chapter 5) analyses the press releases from these parties in response to the signing of the Agreement and notes similarities, differences and ambiguities among them which are not confined to either side of a unionist/nationalist divide. She thus concludes that nuance and ambiguity were essential to enabling the embedding of the 'new dispensation'.

Nuance and ambiguity have also been crucial features of official discourses attached to Northern Ireland's peace process. O'Donnell (Chapter 3) traces the process by which the parties of government in the Republic of Ireland came to articulate a common discourse which balanced the ideal of Irish reunification with the pragmatic acceptance of Northern Ireland's inclusion within the United Kingdom. At the same time, Edwards (Chapter 4) shows that critical changes in the discourse of the New Labour Party were necessary preconditions for the British government's role in the peace process. He highlights at the micro level the importance of Tony Blair's persuasive discourse within the party as well as to the British public and, indeed, Northern Ireland politicians. The continuation of trends for subtle changes to official discourses even after an agreement has been signed is examined in two other chapters. O'Kane (Chapter 12) dissects Northern Ireland's 'model' for conflict resolution as put forward by members of the British government around the time (not coincidentally) that devolved power-sharing was restored under the Executive leadership of the DUP and Sinn Féin (in May 2007). His critique is based on a point-by-point comparison of this

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'model' to the historical record of events in Northern Ireland. O'Kane's conclusion that Northern Ireland's 'model' had more to do with the requirements of present British government policy than accurate recollections of its past fits well with McGovern's analysis of official discourses on 'new terrorism'. McGovern (Chapter 13) reveals that the presentation of the 'unprecedented' level of threat from terrorism in the post-9/11 era in British government discourses not only bear a close resemblance to their presentation of the threat posed by the IRA during the Troubles but also have the effect of painting an almost nostalgic image of IRA terrorism of the past. He argues that it is not the nature of terrorism itself that is in question here but rather the contingent, changeable nature of official discourses around it.

The significance of change and continuity in political discourse is particularly evident in relation to that of the political parties and cultural representatives in Northern Ireland. McLoughlin (Chapter 6) makes a strong case for considering the discourse of SDLP leader John Hume something akin to a 'Q gospel' when it came to the development of the language of agreement in Northern Ireland, from influencing the conceptualisation of the 'Northern Ireland problem' by Irish and British governments to prompting substantive change in hardline republican discourse. That notwithstanding, Shirlow, Tonge and McAuley's (Chapter 9) analysis of the discourses of former republican paramilitary prisoners concludes that their subscription to the peace process was premised on the confident belief that it in no way compromised the meaning of fundamental republican ideals or their commitment to the same. In the case of loyalist discourses, Rankin and Ganiel (Chapter 7) trace significant alterations in (or at least cautious use of) language by the DUP in relation to the peace process and paramilitary violence that accompanied the party's move from anti-Agreement protestor to heading the devolved Northern Ireland Executive. Political discourses in unionism have always been tempered by an awareness that power and pragmatism are not sufficient grounds for altering core principles according to many loyal supporters. McAuley and Tonge's (Chapter 8) analysis of discourses of members of the Orange Order at a time when the DUP took the UUP's place as the dominant voice of unionism in Northern Ireland reveals that consistency, tradition and heritage remain as important as ever in defining the outlook of this cultural institution.

What about discourses that are not associated with one 'side' or the other? Komarova (Chapter 10) raises two incisive points with regards to discourses of peace-building in Northern Ireland. First, she shows that the language of a 'shared future' or of 'cohesion', 'integration' or 'good relations' has become an important area of common ground in Northern Ireland, but that discourses on these topics are still essentially shaped by competing claims and divergent identities. Second, Komarova's study makes a very strong case for the importance of the local and spatial dimensions of practices, which shape interaction, communication and identity; she argues that the impact of discourses on either side or across the communal divide is heavily conditioned by the local environment of the speaker and audience. In relation to the issue of spatial environment,

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McEldowney, Anderson and Shuttleworth (Chapter 11) critique what they term the 'dubious discourses' around censuses in Northern Ireland and show the flawed (or even missing) evidence for the claims of 'growing apartheid' or shifting majority that dominate media coverage around the publication of census results in Northern Ireland. As with the subjects scrutinised in all the other chapters in this book, McEldowney *et al.* argue that the significance of such discourses is not in their connection to 'reality' (which is often tenuous) but in the effects they (are intended to) have on the audience. In the vast majority of cases for political discourses within Northern Ireland, the audience is evidently expected to come from within a clearly demarcated community, with a clear set of values, identity and political goals that are still quite distinct from the 'other'. It is in recognition of this fact that Little (Chapter 14) makes his case for a narrative approach to understanding processes by which conflict and peace are debated. He concludes that a useful model of conflict resolution must recognise the need for a polity to be complex, unsettled, even conflictual.

We claim that political discourse can perform a unique and crucial role as an instrument of conflict resolution in relation to three processes: (i) the construction of a framework within which negotiations can take place, (ii) the facilitation of agreement between moderate and extreme positions, and (iii) the forging of common ground. Each of these will be considered in turn, looking at the particular role of political discourse with regard to the process, examples from Northern Ireland and lessons that can be taken for wider analysis of political discourse and conflict resolution.

I Framing negotiations

Political discourse can affect the construction of a (conceptual) framework within which negotiations can take place in three main ways. First, political discourse on *power* can be used to justify a new course of action by the party concerned that is considered necessary preparation for the negotiations to follow. In this sense, justification by political actors for the use of the power and responsibility that their supporters have given them is tested frequently and over a long period of time to ascertain the trustworthiness of the leaders at the negotiating table. For similar reasons, when political actors step into the realm of preparing for negotiations with the 'other', discourses of *principle* are needed to reassure their supporters of their integrity. This integrity would mean that they uphold principles founded on the essential nature and shared ideology of the group in question. Related to this, political discourse on what the actors see as opportunities for progress must make consistency with both past achievements and future ideals apparent.

Experience in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, given the role of the grand questions of national identity and state legitimacy in exacerbating the conflict, the conceptual framework for

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negotiations involved the discourses on *power* that centred on the reconfiguration of arrangements for constitutional and territorial representation in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. As O'Donnell (Chapter 3) describes, by the early 1990s consensus existed among Irish political parties regarding discourses of *principle*, namely that the goal of Irish reunification was unimpeachable as a political ideal but almost inconceivable as a political goal. This contrasted with the rather fluid interpretations in British politics regarding principles for addressing the 'Northern Ireland question'. As Edwards (Chapter 4) depicts in relation to the New Labour Party alone, there was little intra-party let alone inter-party consensus on the principles for negotiating the future of Northern Ireland. One thing that both British and Irish mainstream parties do have in common (as noted by McLoughlin, Chapter 6) is that they were heavily influenced by the principles for negotiation espoused by John Hume as SDLP leader. Whilst the chapters here by O'Donnell and Edwards illustrate the role of official discourse in influencing the ideological – and strategic – positioning of parties prior to negotiations, McLoughlin's chapter serves as a reminder that this process of discursive influence in framing negotiations is not merely a top-down one. SDLP principles facilitated a shared concern to uphold 'unity by consent', a 'three stranded approach', and 'agreed Ireland', amongst other things (McLoughlin, Chapter 6).

The key to the success of these principles in the peace process in Northern Ireland is that they were ambiguous enough to allow those who subscribed to them to appear to be maintaining the integrity of their long-held principles and to be drawing a line of continuity between past and future. In the case of nationalist/republican parties (south as well as north of the border), these terms were used in effect as synonyms for well-established ideals of a united Ireland, etc. In the case of unionist and British parties, these terms represented a flexibility of ideology within Irish nationalism and an acceptance of an integral 'British' dimension to the future of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP's engagement with external actors and the imprint of its ideology on the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 gave it an authority and influence in relation to framing the peace process. Nonetheless, as McLoughlin (Chapter 6) and Filardo-Llamas (Chapter 5) reiterate, this did not automatically translate into electoral success or political power. The focus on bi-communal or ethno-national identity in political activity and institutions established after the 1998 Agreement meant that the SDLP in effect drew itself out of the circle within which political bargaining would take place. The SDLP's discourses for post-Agreement Northern Ireland did not correspond with the resulting political construct. This indicates that progress after the framework for negotiations has been set does not necessarily correspond with a group's contribution to that framework.

II Facilitating agreement

Once the groundwork for negotiations has been laid, political discourse can play a vital role in enabling agreement to be reached between moderate parties, moderates and hardliners, or between extreme ideological positions. Political

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discourse on *power* at such a time is of particular interest, because real power is at stake according to the discursive line followed by participants in the negotiations. The priority of political actors as negotiators, is to balance the requirements of power with the possibility of holding it. Discourses of *principle* are also under particular pressure when it comes to facilitating agreement; 'agreement' by definition means agreed terms but it need not always require consensus on the meaning of those terms.

Experience in Northern Ireland

Engagement in negotiations in Northern Ireland has required the acceptance of the norms of participation. Political discourses on power within parties that have held a seat at the negotiating table have centred on the assumption of their essential equality with the other players. This has been more difficult for some parties to accept than others. The findings presented here by Rankin and Ganiel (Chapter 7), Filardo-Llamas (Chapter 5) and McAuley and Tonge (Chapter 8) indicate that unionist parties have struggled to articulate discourses during the process of making peace agreements that allow them to accept the equal bargaining position of Sinn Féin in particular. Regarding the actual substance of these negotiations, as noted above, it is difficult to find accommodation – or democratic peace – between parties distinguished primarily by ethno-national principles. Shirlow *et al.* (Chapter 9) recount the effects of a tactical change in republican party discourse among hardline supporters of republican principles; their support of Sinn Féin has been conditional on being able to identify an ideological continuity between party tactics and political principles. Discourses of all parties in relation to an agreement intended to formalise a peace process must be seen to enable (internal and contextual) change to occur. Yet, in the case of Northern Ireland, the most successful parties in electoral terms have been the slowest to change but have ultimately come the furthest in both discourse and practice.

III Forging common ground

The stability of any common ground revealed through a peace agreement may be determined to a large degree by the discourses of those sharing power. The very fact that new actors are holding *power* has huge significance. If political discourse has 'consequence', is a co-operative or a competitive discourse more likely? Aside from the particularities of the context, the nature of political discourse chosen by parties at this stage depends in part on their assessment of whether progress towards their goals is best achieved through co-operation or competition with one's political opponents. This is not least because, judging by what has been outlined above, the common ground that has been forged is less likely to have been constructed from shared principles than through the acceptance of (the existence of) *different principles*. The construction of some shared political space as a result of an agreement can mean that political competition is more direct and, according to the particular terms of the political agreement, this

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competition could either be directed most severely at opponents within each community or at those representing the 'other' community. Either way, parties from a 'hardline' tradition may be the ones most comfortable with using the type of political language and (media-aware) tactics necessary in a forum of direct political competition.

Experience in Northern Ireland

The outstanding question in Northern Ireland is whether those now sharing power (the DUP and Sinn Féin) should be forced to confront the legacy of their historical polarising discourses, or are they the ones best placed to redress it? As several chapters in this book show (Rosland [2], Rankin and Ganiel [7], Shirlow *et al.* [9], McAuley and Tonge [8], Komarova [10]), the moral discourses of parties (including that used in the past) makes forging of common ground not only difficult but controversial. Taken together, they provide evidence from Northern Ireland that some (particularly hardline) actors have the ability to blend conciliatory public discourses with oppositional private discourses in order to make political progress. Sinn Féin, for example, had already become adept at the use of emotionally driven cultural factors in political activity prior to the 1998 Agreement (Shirlow and McGovern 1998). Such skills have proven useful in the party's competitiveness for support from within nationalism and against unionism in new forums for political engagement in Northern Ireland. Moderate parties, such as the UUP, are not as practised or as comfortable with discourses of otherness and defence that the new forum of direct political competition (including within own communal group) appears to have required (Hogan 2007). Two of the parties that have benefited the least in electoral terms since the successive suspension (between 2000 and 2007) of the institutions established by the 1998 Agreement are the SDLP and the centre-ground Alliance Party; it is perhaps no coincidence that these have been the main parties to engage directly and meaningfully in discourses of a 'shared identity' in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's peace process, it might be concluded, has so far not entailed the creation of a shared discourse, but rather the emergence of elements of commonality. Nevertheless, it is clear that, as themes of common interest and opinion become incorporated into public political discourses in Northern Ireland (albeit often painted in clashing party colours), they are taken further away from the realm of discourse that sought to legitimise the use of violence for political ends.

Conclusions

Although experience in Northern Ireland would counsel the wise to refrain from making any stark claim regarding the 'success' of the peace process, evidence from there would suggest that there are certain lessons to be learnt regarding the role of political discourse in the complex dynamics of conflict resolution. First, in relation to *power*: analysis of the connection between discourse and political activity/change indicates the necessity of providing a forum in which

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political discourse has the possibility of effecting real change. The negative effects of suspension of the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland for most of the first decade after the 1998 Agreement reiterates the negative effects of having to channel most top-level political communication through high-level, third-party, civil service or media actors. Ideally, the conditions of local democratic representation will provide a forum for the peaceful articulation of ideological principles and, crucially, the practical application of political responsibility. What we have seen in Northern Ireland is that active (and conceptual) input into the architecture of a peace agreement is ultimately not as important as being seen to be ready to lead in the post-agreement context. Both qualities depend on the use of political discourse and the marriage of 'power' and 'principle' therein.

On the issue of *principle*, Northern Ireland witnessed rapid polarisation among parties when the touchpaper of identity was lit by key political actors in order to prove (to their own community) the seriousness of their demands. Such demands centred on policy issues that brought together the most sensitive points of principle with the need for pragmatic accommodation (such as policing or decommissioning). These issues were only agreed upon at the negotiating table through what might be termed a 'fudging' of specifics and grew in significance in the post-agreement context. It is with such controversies – and ambiguities – in mind that Aughey (2002) has termed the 1998 Agreement a 'paradoxical reality'. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that, as Little (Chapter 14) argues, it is possible, even desirable, to have conflictual discourses in a post-agreement political arena.

We conclude that transition from conflict requires the space and opportunity for actors from across society to 'debate peace'. Grievances are real, prejudices are deep and co-operation is fraught with difficulties; whereas before these were reasons for defeatism, acknowledgement of these facts now serves to increase the popular will for peace in Northern Ireland. It is without doubt that political discourses from all quarters have a vital part to play in transforming issues from causes of conflict into reasons for peace.

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Notes

1 The 'Agreement' referred to throughout this book is actually two documents, eight years apart: that between the political parties in April 1998 in the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement (which was opposed by the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP]) and the most significant amendment to it since, in October 2006, the St Andrews Agreement (which centred on agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP).

2 Gilligan's (2003) powerful critique of the limited mores of political debate in post-Agreement Northern Ireland is another example of the restrictions imposed on 'acceptable' discourses in an attempt to 'preserve the peace'.

3 See, for example, the definition of conflict resolution outlined by Wallensteen (2002: 8): 'a situation where the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's continued existence as parties and cease all violent action against each other. This means, of course, that conflict resolution necessarily comes after conflict.'

4 First, the text of political discourse (be it presented in a speech, interview or newspaper report) embodies processes of production and interpretation of ideas as well as influencing the interaction that shapes these processes. Second, what is termed here 'interaction' reflects as well as affects wider conditions for the production and interpretation of ideas.
5 O'Neill's (2003, after Habermas) argument for a forum for the free use of communicative reason in order to confer legitimacy on a post-conflict political arrangement relates to this point.
6 Such as the Downing Street Declaration made by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds on 15 December 1993. Available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm (accessed March 2010).
7 It should be noted that the electoral fortunes of political parties changed quite dramatically in the ten years after the 1998 Agreement. This may be summarised by the growing dominance of the 'hardline' parties of the DUP and Sinn Féin (from winning 20 and 18 seats respectively in the 1998 election to the Northern Ireland Assembly, to 36 and 28 seats in 2007) and the weakening position of the 'moderate' parties of the UUP and SDLP (from 28 and 24 Assembly seats respectively in 1998, to 18 and 16 in 2007).

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