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# ‘The First Major Step in the Peace Process’? Exploring the Impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on Irish Republican Thinking

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**ABSTRACT** *This article supports interpretations of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 as a significant factor contributing to the development of the Northern Ireland peace process. However, it also emphasises a certain serendipity in the Agreement’s effect on northern nationalist, and more specifically republican, politics in the region. In particular, it stresses that a specific interpretation of the Agreement promoted by the Social Democratic and Labour Party inspired a dialogue with republicanism, encouraging an ongoing reappraisal within the latter about the nature of Britain’s role in Northern Ireland. This, the article argues, reinforced the movement towards a more political approach that republicans had begun in the 1980s, and encouraged their eventual embrace of a constitutional strategy in the 1990s. However, in advancing this argument, the article notes that such an outcome was far from the minds of the British and Irish officials who negotiated the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Agreement was intended to marginalise rather than accommodate republicans. Despite this, it provided an inadvertent incentive to draw militant republicanism into the democratic process in Northern Ireland.*

**Keywords:** Catholic alienation; republicanism; Anglo-Irish Agreement; peace process

## Introduction

Henry Patterson (2010: 94) rightly warns against the ‘temptations of teleology’ in relating the cessation of Provisional republican violence to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985. Though the accord proclaimed its foremost objective to be that of ‘achieving lasting peace and stability’ in Northern Ireland (UK, 1985: preamble), we cannot assume that the significant progress made towards that goal in the years

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thereafter was a direct consequence of the AIA. Indeed, as Patterson (2010: 94) suggests, the peace process ‘has produced the distorting mirror ... whereby the AIA is read in terms of the purpose assigned to it by subsequent developments and not in term of its specific causes and purposes at the time’. By looking at these causes and purposes, this article affirms Patterson’s essential argument – that the AIA was not designed with any mind to encourage republicans’ move towards a political strategy. However, it diverges from Patterson in suggesting that this was, nevertheless, one of the effects of the accord. The article shows that the AIA did affect republicans in ways that advanced their political engagement – even if this was not the intention of either the British government or the Irish government. It suggests that there is a relationship between the AIA and the ending of mainstream republican violence, but one characterised by a good deal of luck.

### Origins and Objectives of the Anglo-Irish Agreement

The origins of the AIA can be traced back to the series of summit meetings on the subject of Northern Ireland that were initiated by the British and Irish governments in 1980 (Shannon, 1986). Progress in these talks was quickly derailed by Dublin’s overplaying their significance, and then tensions engendered by the republican hunger strikes of 1980–1981. However, developments proceeding from the latter also provided the rationale for an eventual return to more productive negotiations between the two governments. Indeed, though the hunger strikers failed in their effort to gain recognition as political prisoners by the British government, their protest proved a significant turning point in the Northern Ireland conflict. Until then, the republican campaign against British rule over the region had been essentially military in character, with the violence of the IRA being its primary manifestation. During the hunger strikes, though, republicans found – much to their own surprise – that they had significant electoral support among Northern Ireland’s nationalist community. This was demonstrated spectacularly when the leader of the hunger strikers, Bobby Sands, was elected to the Westminster parliament in April 1981.

Following this success, republicans began to develop a formal electoral strategy. As a result, Sinn Féin emerged as the political counterpart to the IRA. However, at this point, republicans had no intention of abandoning or even downgrading their ‘armed struggle’. Instead, electoral republicanism was seen as compatible with, and even complementary to, armed republicanism. This was made clear at Sinn Féin’s annual party conference in October 1981, when Danny Morrison famously asked: ‘Who here really believes we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if, with a ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in the other, we take power in Ireland?’ (quoted in Bew & Gillespie, 1999: 160). Morrison’s exhortation led to the notion of the ‘ballot box and Armalite strategy’. With this, republicans believed that military and electoral approaches could be combined – one continuing to sap the will of the British state to remain in Northern Ireland,

the other mobilising popular support in both parts of Ireland in order to enhance republicans' claim to political legitimacy.

The rapid rise of Sinn Féin in the aftermath of the hunger strikes forced London and Dublin to overcome their earlier differences over the handling of the republican protest. Both governments now became concerned that Sinn Féin would begin to outpoll the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), thus becoming the leading voice of the nationalist community (FitzGerald, 1991: 462, 496–497; Thatcher, 1993: 395; Bew *et al.*, 2002: 202; O'Kane, 2007: 20–21; Goodall, 2010). The Irish government, and in particular the Taoiseach, Garrett FitzGerald, was most fearful of such an outcome: 'If the IRA were to become able to claim, credibly, that it enjoyed majority support within the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, it might be emboldened to raise the threshold of violence to the point of risking outright civil war in the North' (FitzGerald, 2005: 136). FitzGerald was also convinced that the astonishing growth of Sinn Féin resulted from the abject alienation of the nationalist minority from the Northern Ireland state – and particularly from its security and judicial practices. Accordingly, he was determined to reform such practices in a way that would counter nationalist alienation, reduce support for Sinn Féin, and restore the standing of the SDLP (FitzGerald, 1991: 463, 473–474).

Margaret Thatcher was never convinced by FitzGerald's analysis. As one of her key advisors wryly recalled: 'She was allergic to the concept of "alienation", which I think she regarded as Marxist' (Goodhall, 2010: 15). Indeed, Thatcher was concerned less with the reasons that nationalists were voting for Sinn Féin and more with the means of defeating the IRA – the most direct way to resolve the Northern Ireland problem in her mind. She was thus eager for the Irish government to cooperate more closely with the British security and intelligence agencies as a means to suppress IRA activity (FitzGerald, 1991: 494; Thatcher, 1993: 384–385, 398; O'Kane, 2007: 56; Goodall, 2010). However, Thatcher could not completely ignore the rise of Sinn Féin – not least because it contradicted the position that she had articulated during the hunger strikes: that republicans were merely criminals, and had no political support. Sinn Féin's surging vote strongly suggested otherwise. It also caused problems for the British government in its presentation of the Northern Ireland problem abroad, particularly in the USA, where a significant lobby of republican sympathisers was eager to claim that the Sinn Féin vote demonstrated a political mandate for the IRA.

This combination of factors helped senior British officials to persuade Thatcher to revive the process of talks that the British and Irish governments had begun in the early 1980s, and eventually to sign the AIA in 1985 (FitzGerald, 1991: 527, 535; O'Kane, 2007: 56, 68, 85; Bew, 2010: 42). By giving Dublin a limited role in the governance of Northern Ireland, Thatcher believed this Agreement would compel the Irish government to provide the security cooperation she craved: 'If this meant making limited political concessions to the South, much as I disliked this kind of bargaining I had to contemplate it. But the results in terms of security must come through' (Thatcher, 1993: 385). By contrast, Dublin hoped to use its new role

under the AIA to influence *how* security and related problems were addressed in Northern Ireland. Still holding to the alienation thesis articulated by FitzGerald, the Irish government aimed to reform the way that Northern Ireland was administered and policed in order to lessen nationalist disaffection from the state. By doing so, Dublin hoped to address the conditions in which it believed political support for republicanism had taken root (FitzGerald, 1991: 473–474; O’Kane, 2007: 57–59; Lillis, 2010). Despite their different emphases, then, it can be argued that the two governments were as one in their ultimate objective in the AIA: the defeat of radical republicanism. What differed were the respective foci: while Thatcher remained more concerned with republicans’ military campaign through the IRA, the Irish negotiators – and indeed some of the British officials advising Thatcher – saw the need to counter its political expression, Sinn Féin.

### The Impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement

Both the British and Irish governments were disappointed with the immediate results of the AIA. Thatcher, especially, felt that the accord failed to deliver the level of security cooperation that she had expected: ‘We knew that terrorists went over the border to the Republic to plan their operations and to store their weapons. We got no satisfactory intelligence of their movements’ (Thatcher, 1993: 409–410). In particular, her government felt badly let down as regards the proposed extradition of IRA suspects from the Republic of Ireland to the UK. Indeed, Thatcher complained that the new provisions which the Dublin government introduced served to hinder this process in some respects (Thatcher, 1993: 407; O’Kane, 2007: 81–83; Bew, 2010: 47). As a result, it is not hard to understand why the signing of the AIA was one of the few acts from her time in office that Thatcher regretted (Bew, 2010: 42).

Similarly, the Irish government did not feel that the AIA produced the significant reform of Northern Ireland that it had hoped for. FitzGerald was especially disappointed that the accord did not bring many notable changes in the policing of the state, or its judicial practices. Of course, the huge opposition that the AIA provoked among the unionist community and the escalation of paramilitary violence in the late 1980s – developments that are discussed further below – naturally made it more difficult for the British government to remodel the security apparatus in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it was most unlikely to initiate any significant reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary at a time when London was so reliant on this force to maintain public order in the face of often violent unionist protests. Michael Lillis, one of the Irish officials most vocal on the need for change in policing arrangements, and the man who headed Dublin’s civil service presence in Northern Ireland in the immediate aftermath of the AIA, reluctantly acknowledged this point: ‘There was some progress on police reform in the early days of the Agreement, but events on the ground made it difficult to demand more at this point’ (Lillis, 2010).

The British government clearly failed, however, to pursue reform of other aspects of the security and judicial system in Northern Ireland where Irish officials thought change was feasible. This, in turn, made it more difficult for Dublin to offer the

kind of cross-border cooperation, including the extradition of republican suspects, that Thatcher had anticipated from the AIA. In particular, ongoing allegations that the British security forces were operating a 'shoot-to-kill' policy, or judicial controversies such as the rejected appeal of the 'Birmingham Six'<sup>1</sup> in 1988, created political risks for any Dublin government seen to be supporting a state system that, in the view of southern Irish voters as well as northern nationalists, remained biased in its operation. Unionist anger towards the AIA explains why London backed away from any radical change that might further inflame Protestant opinion. But FitzGerald felt that those reforms which the accord did produce had to be played down for the same reason. Accordingly, the Agreement did not produce such notable changes in the operation of the Northern Ireland state that the Irish government felt were necessary to tackle thoroughly nationalist alienation and so diminish support for Sinn Féin (FitzGerald, 1991: 575; O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 245–247; Lillis, 2010).

Considering the same issue of reform – albeit writing with the benefit of hindsight and with access to a wide range of rich primary sources – Jennifer Todd argues that the accord did initiate a process of radical change in Northern Ireland. However, this did not deliver reform in the time frame, or quite the manner, that Irish officials appear to have expected. Using the concept of 'threshold change',<sup>2</sup> Todd argues persuasively that Dublin's role in the administration of Northern Ireland after 1985 helped to modify the views of British policymakers over a number of years, gradually sensitising them to the nationalist perspective, and slowly changing what was 'thinkable' in relation to the region (Todd, 2013). Thus, she explains, the issues of reform that the FitzGerald administration was pushing in the 1980s were only really becoming acceptable to British officials by the mid-1990s (Todd, 2013: 9).

Beyond the specific issue of reform, the AIA also had a positive impact on British–Irish relations – though again over a longer time frame than its architects might have imagined. Indeed, despite tensions over security controversies such as those mentioned above, in time the two governments were able to overcome the 'megaphone diplomacy' that characterised earlier disagreements over the situation in Northern Ireland. Thus, the AIA enhanced the process – initiated in 1980, but set back by the hunger strikes – of elite alignment between London and Dublin in relation to Northern Ireland. Through increased contact and dialogue in operating the institutions of the AIA, both sides recognised that their common interest in peace and stability in the region was advanced even further by keeping disagreements behind closed doors. Indeed, arguably the outworking of the AIA created the conditions of mutual trust and understanding that underpinned the two governments' joint stewardship of the peace process (O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 243; O'Kane, 2007: 69–97).

Turning to the impact of the AIA on unionism, as mentioned briefly above, the short-term results were overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, it is clear that the two governments, though anticipating unionist hostility to Dublin's new role, underestimated its likely depth (FitzGerald, 1991: 563–565; Thatcher, 1993: 403). Mass rallies of protest led over 100,000 on to the streets to voice their dissent towards what was termed the London–Dublin 'Diktat'. Unionist politicians resigned their Westminster seats in unison to create a 'mini-referendum' of by-elections, which allowed their

supporters to register their opposition at the ballot box,<sup>3</sup> while loyalist paramilitaries – relatively quiescent in the early 1980s – significantly increased their campaign of violence against the nationalist community. All of this made a mockery of the Agreement's stated aim of achieving 'lasting peace and stability'.

The unionist reaction to the AIA also appeared to dash an idea entertained by at least some of the key negotiators on either side (FitzGerald, 1991: 531; Goodall, 1995: 5, 9, 11; O'Kane, 2007: 60–62). Indeed, O'Leary and McGarry suggest that the Agreement contained a further and more far-sighted stratagem than those of enhancing security cooperation or countering Sinn Féin's growth. They argue that the AIA was purposely designed to push unionists towards acceptance of a devolved power-sharing settlement. For though the Agreement instituted a limited form of intergovernmental administration for Northern Ireland, it allowed Dublin's influence to lapse in areas where the two communities could agree to share power (UK, 1985, Articles 2b, 4c, 5c, 10b). O'Leary and McGarry suggest that this mechanism was intended to pressurise unionists to work with the nationalist minority as a means of reducing the Irish government's role in the region. Accordingly, they characterised the AIA as an attempt at 'coercive consociationalism' (O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 220). If this was the intention, it appeared initially to backfire spectacularly, as unionists angrily refused to enter into negotiations with either nationalists or the British government until the AIA was rescinded. Thus, the idea that the Agreement would encourage power sharing between the two communities seemed excessively optimistic in the years immediately after the deal was signed.

Despite this, unlike the first attempt to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict, the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973, the intergovernmental institutions of the AIA were not dependent on unionist participation. Moreover, as noted, through the workings of these institutions, Anglo-Irish cooperation over Northern Ireland – though not without its difficulties – steadily improved. As a result, unionist elites began to accept that the only way to check Dublin's influence was to negotiate with their nationalist counterparts and to agree new local structures of government through which the two could share power in Northern Ireland (O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 255). Tentative signs of such thinking were, interestingly, first evident in a loyalist document, *Common Sense*, published by the New Ulster Political Research Group in January 1987. This was followed by a similar contribution from the unionist political mainstream, *An End to Drift*, in July 1987. However, formal talks with the SDLP on the possibility of power sharing did not take place until the early 1990s. In this regard, it can be argued that the AIA did produce the 'coercive consociationalism' theorised by O'Leary and McGarry. But as with the reforms intended to address nationalist alienation, the AIA did not deliver in the time frame or the linear fashion that many of its framers might have imagined.

### The Anglo-Irish Agreement and Nationalist Politics

The primary focus of this article, however, is to explore the effect that the AIA had on nationalist politics in Northern Ireland – both the constitutional and the militant



republican variety, and the interaction of the two after 1985. The constitutional nationalists of the SDLP strongly endorsed the accord, but there was little surprise in this. Indeed, since the late 1970s, the SDLP had consistently argued the need for the British and Irish governments to adopt a cooperative approach on Northern Ireland as the only way towards political progress in the region (McLoughlin, 2010: 83–100). Also, through a process of private consultation with the Irish government, the leadership of the party had been indirectly involved in the negotiation of the AIA (FitzGerald, 1991: 499, 511, 536–537; Currie, 2004: 346–347, 353). By this means, the SDLP's ideas significantly shaped the terms of the 1985 accord (Bew & Patterson, 1987: 43; O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 238).

Like the Irish government, the SDLP had hoped that Dublin would obtain a greater influence in the administration of Northern Ireland than that which was eventually achieved in the AIA. Indeed, originally both had imagined that London would be willing to allow an arrangement approximating joint British–Irish authority over Northern Ireland. However, Thatcher's opposition to anything that might be considered a derogation of British sovereignty meant that the proposed role for Dublin was gradually diminished through the negotiation process. Nonetheless, the SDLP accepted the AIA as a step forward for nationalists. As one senior member reflected: 'the role of the Irish government, however tenuous, was a leg in the door [in Northern Ireland] ... And once the door was opened, it could never be shut again'.<sup>4</sup> Like the Irish government, the SDLP saw the AIA as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Both were anxious to maximise the reform of Northern Ireland through the Agreement, and both felt that an Irish voice in the administration of the region would greatly improve the position of nationalists. Accordingly, the leader of the SDLP, John Hume, described the AIA as 'the framework for a solution, not the solution' (quoted in O'Leary & McGarry, 1996: 220).

Republicans, on the other hand, had a very different reading of the AIA. They saw the Agreement as an imperialist stratagem, designed to stabilise British rule in Northern Ireland following the upheavals of the early 1980s (Sinn Féin, 1986). More specifically, republicans recognised the challenge that the accord posed to both the political and military wings of their movement. In political terms, they saw that the proposed reform of Northern Ireland was intended to address nationalist disaffection, and so erode Sinn Féin's support base. In military terms, republicans knew that the AIA would enhance security cooperation between London and Dublin, limiting the IRA's ability to prosecute its armed campaign. Thus, the AIA threatened to counter both elements of the 'ballot box and Armalite strategy'.

On reflection, it is clear that the AIA failed in this endeavour. Though the surge in support for Sinn Féin did end in the mid-1980s, this was not because of the AIA. Indeed, as shown by the figures in Table 1, Sinn Féin achieved its highest share of the vote in the Westminster election of June 1983, when the party leader, Gerry Adams, won the seat for West Belfast. After this, in the local government elections of May 1985, Sinn Féin experienced a fall in support – this some six months before the AIA was signed. In addition, these figures call into question the idea that the party was significantly eroding the SDLP's vote – a fear which, as noted,



**Table 1.** Electoral support for nationalist parties, 1975–1989

Election	SDLP	Sinn Féin	Other nationalists
1975 Convention	23.7	–	2.2
1977 Local Government	20.6	–	4.1
1979 Westminster	19.9	–	8.2
1981 Local Government	17.5	–	5.3
1982 Assembly	18.8	10.1	–
1983 Westminster	17.9	13.4	–
1985 Local Government	17.8	11.8	2.4
1987 Westminster	21.1	11.4	–
1989 Local Government	21.0	11.2	0.1

*Note:* Figures refer to votes as percentage of total valid poll in the respective elections.

*Source:* Mitchell (1999: 98).

provided the original impetus for the negotiation of the AIA (FitzGerald, 1991: 462, 496–497; Thatcher, 1993: 395, 401; O’Kane, 2007: 58–59, 68). Indeed, it is clear from the table that the SDLP’s support had been in a state of gradual decline since the mid-1970s, and that the emergence of Sinn Féin did not radically change this pattern. The reason for this is that Sinn Féin was mobilising a previously abstentionist constituency, and connecting with hard-line nationalist voters who had never, and would never, support the moderate SDLP. Thus, Sinn Féin was not so much stealing the SDLP’s support as bringing new and lapsed voters to the polls. This view is supported by the significant growth in the overall nationalist vote from 1981, which cannot be explained solely by the rise in Catholic population (O’Leary & McGarry, 1996: 192). Accordingly, after 1983 and the decline of any ‘protest vote’ for Sinn Féin, the party was able to maintain a core constituency representing around 11 per cent of the electorate. However, this was clearly the natural limit of Sinn Féin’s support for as long as it continued to defend the armed struggle. Thus it was the party’s association with the IRA, rather than the effects of the AIA, which saw Sinn Féin reach an electoral ceiling.

Similarly, on the security front, the AIA did little to stem IRA activity. In fact, the Agreement actually encouraged republicans to intensify their campaign of violence. Indeed, they were desperate to prevent the new political arrangements and the prospect of further reform from increasing nationalist confidence in the Northern Ireland state. Accordingly, in the aftermath of the AIA, the IRA widened its definition of ‘legitimate targets’ to include workers supplying or servicing British military and police installations (O’Leary & McGarry, 1996: 270). By this means, republicans hoped to maintain the cycle of violence in Northern Ireland, and so continue to destabilise the state. Also, in the late 1980s, the IRA was enjoying a wholly new military capacity; for even as the AIA was being brokered in 1985, Colonel Gaddafi was sending massive arms shipments from Libya to restock the republican arsenal

(Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 44–48; O’Leary & McGarry, 1996: 271). For this reason, too, the Agreement was destined to fail in its primary objective of defeating radical republicanism.

Though the AIA did not achieve its stated aim, with the benefit of hindsight it can be argued that the accord inspired subtle shifts within republicanism. However, in order to appreciate these, it is first necessary to consider the traditional republican interpretation of the Northern Ireland problem. Republicans viewed the Northern Ireland conflict as both a legacy of British imperialism and a continuation of London’s efforts to defend ongoing economic and strategic interests in the region. Historically, republicans argued, Britain had always held economic interests in Ireland, and partition served to protect these interests. It allowed the British government to maintain control of the major industrial sites in the north-east of the island, and in doing so to exercise an indirect influence on economic activity across Ireland. Similarly, republicans felt that the UK government had geopolitical interests in Ireland. In a Cold War context, and with a long-standing Irish policy of neutrality keeping the Republic outside NATO, Britain needed to maintain a military presence on the island. This, republicans argued, gave legitimacy to their armed struggle, for history showed that Britain would not be moved by anything less. Thus, as suggested by the emphasis in Danny Morrison’s famous ‘ballot box and Armalite’ speech, electoral republicanism would *augment* rather than replace their armed campaign. Ultimately, partition could only be ended by physically forcing a British withdrawal.

The SDLP had always rejected this interpretation, arguing that the unity of Ireland could only be achieved by peaceful means. However, following the AIA, the SDLP leader, John Hume, began a more focused and persistent campaign to challenge the republican reading of the Northern Ireland problem, and the violence resulting from this (see McLoughlin, 2010: 137–147). Hume’s arguments centred on Article 1c of the Agreement, in which the British government promised to legislate for Irish reunification in the event of majority support in Northern Ireland. Similar statements had been made in previous agreements and declarations, but what was new in the AIA was that London also explicitly committed to legislate for a united Ireland if such assent was achieved (UK, 1985: Article 1c). Hume drew particular attention to this commitment, presenting it as, in essence, a declaration of British neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland: ‘This is a clear statement by the British government that it has no interest of its own, either strategic or otherwise, in remaining in Ireland. It is a declaration that Irish unity is a matter for Irish people, for those who want it to persuade those who don’t’ (*Irish Times*, 13 September 1986).

Unsurprisingly, republicans rejected this reading of the AIA. By cooperating with London in the administration of Northern Ireland, they argued that the Dublin government had accepted and legitimised British rule over the region. Thus, rather than opening the way towards Irish reunification as the SDLP believed, Gerry Adams declared that the Agreement ‘copper-fastens partition’ (quoted in O’Leary & McGarry, 1996: 220). However, despite this public denunciation of the accord, behind closed doors the AIA had instigated some debate among republicans (Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 33–36; Murray & Tonge, 2005: 148–152; Bean,

2007: 71–72). Most notable was an internal discussion paper, written by Mitchel McLaughlin, a figure close to Adams in the Sinn Féin leadership, which suggested that the Agreement did represent progress even from a republican perspective: ‘There is a negative counter-insurgency dimension to it, but in fact as a result of it the British government has changed its position irrevocably. They have actually indicated, in terms of historical perspective, that they can be moved along’ (quoted in Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 36). Reflecting on this debate in subsequent years, even the architect of the republicans’ ‘ballot box and Armalite’ strategy, Danny Morrison, suggested that Sinn Féin ‘saw that the Agreement was a concession, although we were not going to trumpet that. It was a concession because it was a move slightly away from unionists towards nationalists’ (quoted in Mallie & McKittrick, 2001: 78).

From this it seems that some republicans were more interested in Hume’s interpretation of the AIA than was suggested by their public comments. This helps explain the political feelers that the Sinn Féin leadership began to put out to the SDLP in the aftermath of the Agreement, and which eventually led to formal talks between the two parties in 1988.

### Intra-nationalist Dialogue

‘There is a direct connection between the AIA and the seven months of talks between Sinn Féin and the SDLP in 1988’, suggests Patterson. However, he also notes that such an outcome was ‘contrary to the desires of all those who had framed the AIA’ (Patterson, 2010: 107). Indeed, as argued above, the British and Irish governments had hoped that the Agreement would marginalise republicanism, and perhaps encourage unionists to accept a power-sharing settlement. But three years on from the AIA, unionists would still not enter into any negotiations towards this end. At the same time, as noted above, though the AIA may have helped to halt Sinn Féin, the accord did not reverse its gains. It was clear that the party was not, as Dublin in particular had feared, about to displace the SDLP. But by continuing to win approximately a third of the nationalist vote, Sinn Féin’s support base gave it the potential to undermine any agreement that the more moderate party might negotiate. This undoubtedly influenced thinking within the latter. Previously the SDLP had focused its efforts on achieving power sharing with unionists, but now the party leadership was beginning to realise the need to involve republicans in any political settlement that was to prove durable. This explains why the SDLP was prepared to endure the criticism that came its way – from unionists, the British media and British ministers – for the extended dialogue in which it engaged Sinn Féin for much of 1988.

Rather than inter-communal talks that some of the AIA’s framers had imagined, the accord thus stimulated an intra-communal dialogue. Indeed, the Sinn Féin–SDLP talks were largely based upon the two parties’ rival interpretations of the Agreement. As noted, Hume and his colleagues saw the AIA as a statement of British neutrality *vis-à-vis* the future of Northern Ireland. Accordingly, they used their discussions with republicans to restate and refine this argument. Thus, the SDLP opened the talks by

stating that: 'Britain is now saying that she has no interest of her own in being here and that her only interest is to see agreement among the people who share the island of Ireland' (Hume, 1988: 4). For the SDLP, therefore, it was not the British government that represented the primary obstacle to Irish reunification. Rather, it was unionists' resistance to that end. The key to achieving a united Ireland, then, was to persuade unionists to consent to it. Moreover, if this consent was achieved, then the British government was legally bound by the terms of the AIA to accept this outcome: 'the present British government has made clear in an internationally-binding agreement that if such agreement on the exercise of self-determination took the form of Irish unity that they would in fact endorse it' (Hume, 1988: 4).

Sinn Féin responded to these arguments by restating a colonial interpretation of the Northern Ireland problem. The party stubbornly held to the view that the British government still had a self-interest in the region, the pursuit of which it cited as the principal cause of the conflict:

[G]iven the lengths to which Britain goes to remain here ... one can only conclude that it believes it is in its interests to maintain the Union, to finance the Union, to let its soldiers die for the Union ... Britain's actions totally contradict SDLP claims that Britain is somehow neutral since the signing of the Treaty [the AIA]. (Sinn Féin, 1988: 3)

Accordingly, the IRA's campaign of violence was defended as both a legitimate response and the only reasonable means to end the British presence in Northern Ireland (Sinn Féin, 1988: 7–10). Thus, Sinn Féin explicitly rejected the SDLP's neutrality thesis: 'Britain's continuing involvement in Ireland is based on strategic, economic and political interests' (Sinn Féin, 1988: 12).

Despite the lengthy duration of the talks, the two parties progressed little beyond this basic disagreement. The discussions ended with the SDLP acknowledging that it had failed to convince republicans that the AIA demonstrated a fundamental change in the British position on Northern Ireland: 'Our most significant difference [with Sinn Féin] ... is the degree to which we believe that British policy towards Ireland is *now* neutral and agnostic ... We accept that to date Sinn Féin remain unconvinced of our belief' (SDLP, 1988: 7, emphasis in original). However, the SDLP also accepted an implicit challenge which it felt Sinn Féin was making – to provide greater evidence of its claim of British neutrality *vis-à-vis* Northern Ireland. The SDLP did so on the understanding that, if its thesis was proved correct, republicans in turn would face a challenge:

if our belief [in British neutrality] is correct, then the IRA's stated justification for their campaign is removed ... The question is, if our belief is correct, do Sinn Féin accept that the consequences for the IRA campaign are as we state and would they ask the IRA to cease its campaign. If so, then it would be our responsibility in the SDLP to demonstrate to Sinn Féin that our belief was correct. (SDLP, 1988: 5)

The SDLP leader in particular felt this responsibility (Hume, 1996: 115). Accordingly, he turned to the British government, hoping it would endorse the arguments that his party had presented to Sinn Féin.

Peter Brooke's appointment as Northern Ireland Secretary in July 1989 proved vital in this endeavour. He was receptive to suggestions from Hume that, despite their public protestations, republicans were beginning to consider more critically the role of the British government in Northern Ireland, but needed encouragement in this (Routledge, 1998: 233). British intelligence sources appeared to support Hume's interpretation, which may explain the decision made by Brooke at this time to open a private line of communication with the republican movement. The same channel had been used before by the British government, during talks with republicans at the time of the 1974–1975 IRA ceasefire, and again in efforts to end the hunger strikes in the early 1980s. However, it had been in abeyance since then, suggesting that Brooke allowed it to be reactivated in order to see whether the claims Hume was making had any credence (Mallie & McKittrick, 2001: 153).

Even more notable, though, was the famous speech that Brooke made on 9 November 1990 – a speech that directly addressed the kind of issues which the SDLP had been debating with Sinn Féin, and which was clearly aimed at republicans. Indeed, it later transpired that a text of the speech had been sent in advance to Sinn Féin via the back channel that Brooke had recently reopened (Adams, 2003: 97). Most striking in this address were the Northern Ireland Secretary's comments on the AIA, where specific terms from the SDLP's dialogue with Sinn Féin were clearly evident: 'Article 1 of the Agreement – registered at the United Nations as a binding international treaty – acknowledges that the status of Northern Ireland can only be determined by the people of Northern Ireland themselves' (*Irish Times*, 10 November 1990). In emphasising this, Brooke made clear that the British government had no opposition to the aim of Irish reunification – if achieved by peaceful, consensual means:

[I]ndeed the government has made clear on several occasions, notably in the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that if, in the future, a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, it would introduce and support in parliament legislation to give effect to that wish. (*Irish Times*, 10 November 1990)

Brooke was, therefore, quite explicitly confirming the SDLP's interpretation of the AIA, and its understanding of the British government's position on Northern Ireland as a result of the 1985 accord. However, this was demonstrated in even more dramatic terms in the conclusion of Brooke's speech: 'The British government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' (*Irish Times*, 10 November 1990). Comparing this claim with the language in which Sinn Féin rejected the SDLP's neutrality thesis two years earlier, there is an unusual familiarity. It seemed that someone was telling Brooke what the republican movement needed to

hear directly from the British government (Routledge, 1998: 234; Mallie & McKittrick, 2001: 83; 1996: 108).

Though Brooke's speech clearly interested the republican leadership, it was obvious that something more substantial would be required if the rank and file of the movement was to be convinced that it had a genuine alternative to armed struggle (Mallie & McKittrick, 2001: 103; Adams, 2003: 98). This led Hume and Adams to renew their discussions on a one-to-one basis. The aim of their dialogue was to find agreement on a form of words – acceptable to the British and Irish governments, but also to republicans – which would then be included in a joint London–Dublin declaration regarding the terms on which Sinn Féin could enter into all-party talks. Central to this declaration would be a statement of British interests in the region, which would confirm that London presented no obstacle to the reunification of Ireland, and would accept such an outcome if achieved by purely peaceful methods. The implicit intention here was to show republicans that they could advance their goals by political means, and thus that the IRA should call a ceasefire (Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 118–123).

Though understandably unnerving unionists, and provoking fierce criticism in sections of the media, the talks between Hume and Adams won significant support across nationalist Ireland. This eventually encouraged the British and Irish governments to respond with the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993. To avoid unionist opposition, this was presented as if it was the work of the two governments alone. However, the phraseology of the Declaration undoubtedly drew on the terms of the Hume–Adams dialogue (Bew *et al.*, 1997: 205–206). Most notably, and most importantly, it repeated the statement made by Brooke three years earlier, thus providing formal confirmation – from the highest level of the British government – that London had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland' (UK, 1993: para. 4). Also to avoid unionist opposition – and still mindful of the reaction to the AIA – John Major had shown drafts of the Declaration to the Ulster Unionist Party leader, James Molyneux. He was unhappy with this formulation regarding British interests, but unable to persuade the prime minister to remove it (O'Kane, 2004: 88). This shows the importance of this declaration of disinterest. It confirmed the position argued by the SDLP since the AIA – that London was essentially neutral on the future of Northern Ireland, and so did not represent any obstacle to Irish reunification.

This is not to suggest that the Downing Street Declaration was the sole reason that the IRA called a ceasefire the following year. However, it was a crucial step towards that end. Moreover, the Declaration can be seen as the culmination of a process that began with the AIA. That Agreement provided the premise for the SDLP–Sinn Féin talks of 1988, and the debate there over Britain's role in Northern Ireland. This, in turn, led to the famous Brooke speech, and the Hume–Adams dialogue, both of which fed – in respect of intention, momentum and even lexicon – into the Downing Street Declaration. However, there is a great irony in all of this. As argued above, the original impetus for the AIA was the rise of Sinn Féin. The accord was designed with the intent of countering republicans' electoral mobilisation,



but instead served to encourage their development of an increasingly political approach to the achievement of their goals. This approach, initially conceived of as the ‘ballot box and Armalite strategy’, was stimulated by the AIA – or at least by the intra-nationalist debate and reappraisal that the Agreement helped to create – in such a way that the ballot box eventually gained an ascendancy over the Armalite, thus allowing for the peace process to begin in earnest.

## Conclusion

When history is written, that agreement [the AIA], particularly Article 1c, will be seen as the first major step in the current peace process. (John Hume, *Irish Times*, 13 April 1994)

The AIA clearly contributed to the development of the Northern Ireland peace process. However, it did so in ways that were not intended by the architects of the accord. Though it brought the British and Irish governments closer together in their views on Northern Ireland, the real fruits of this convergence did not become apparent until both Thatcher and FitzGerald had left office. Indeed, it was Major and Reynolds, and then Blair and Ahern, who really benefited from the increasing alignment of British and Irish elite attitudes to the problem, providing a firm basis for their effective co-management of the peace process. Similarly, though some of those who negotiated the AIA had hoped that Dublin’s involvement in Northern Ireland would encourage a more pragmatic unionism, they did not anticipate the depth of hostility that it would provoke among the Protestant community (FitzGerald, 1991: 531, 564–565; Thatcher, 1993: 402, 403; Goodall, 1995: 5, 9, 11; O’Leary & McGarry, 1996: 234–235, 238). As a result of this, it was some years before unionist leaders were prepared to sit down and negotiate with their nationalist counterparts. However, by this stage, the evolution in unionist attitudes had been overtaken by more radical shifts within the broad nationalist community. These changes can also be related to the AIA, but they were wholly unintended. Indeed, the effect that the Agreement had on nationalist, or specifically republican, politics clearly contradicted the aims of those who framed the accord.

The original motivation for the negotiation of the AIA was to marginalise radical republicanism. However, as suggested in the above quotation from Hume, the commitment made by the British government in Article 1c of the accord actually encouraged the interest of more politically-minded republicans. Michael Lillis, the Irish official who provided perhaps the essential intellectual rationale for the AIA (FitzGerald, 1991: 473; Lillis, 2010), also engaged in a private dialogue with Adams during the early days of the peace process. Like Hume’s, Lillis’s talks with Adams led him to believe that Article 1c of the AIA had a serious impact on republican thinking: ‘It led to a process of reflection within Sinn Féin which was beginning to take seriously the proposition that the British did not have a fundamental and immovable desire to hang on to Northern Ireland’ (cited in Murray, 1998: 169–170). However, it was Hume’s continual emphasis on and presentation of this article as a statement of British



neutrality that encouraged this reflection. Though republicans contested Hume's interpretation, his reading of the AIA provided the basis for the first serious dialogue of the peace process, the SDLP–Sinn Féin talks of 1988. The response of the British government to this dialogue was also crucial, but again contrary to the aims of those who negotiated the AIA. Indeed, Thatcher had strongly opposed the idea that British sovereignty over Northern Ireland would be diluted by the Agreement, and thus it is most unlikely that she intended it to act as a statement of neutrality on the region. However, five years on, when Brooke saw that such an interpretation had instigated a debate within republicanism, he went some considerable way towards endorsing it. This created further interest from republicans, and thus generated the political momentum that led ultimately to the Downing Street Declaration. With this, the two governments overturned the strategy that had informed all previous political initiatives on Northern Ireland, up to and including the AIA (O'Kane, 2004: 78). Now, rather than marginalising the extremes, republicans – and indeed loyalist paramilitary representatives<sup>5</sup> – were invited into the political mainstream on the condition that they committed to exclusively peaceful means. However, the rationale for this appeal was based on perceived changes in republican thinking – changes that were strongly encouraged by the debate over British interests in Northern Ireland that was initiated by the AIA.

In other ways, too, the AIA may have encouraged a rethink within republicanism. Even the unionist reaction to the Agreement, and London's firm response to this, challenged republican views of unionists as willing collaborators in a project of British imperialism, or a population which the metropolis could easily manipulate to serve its own interests (Mallie & McKittrick, 1996: 33–34; 2001: 78). Also, despite denouncing Dublin's involvement in the administration of Northern Ireland, more astute republicans could see the AIA as an advance for Irish nationalism (Mallie & McKittrick, 2001: 78; English, 2003: 242–243). However, it was the SDLP's interpretation of the Agreement, the debate which this inspired, and most importantly the responses made by the British government that proved crucial to the accord's impact on republican thinking.

Of course, such developments must be seen in a much broader context. Indeed, some authors have traced the politicisation of republicanism as far back as the 1970s, where imprisoned activists began to reflect more deeply on the strategy of their movement (Maloney, 2002: 149–152; English, 2003: 188–225; Murray & Tonge, 2005: 101–106). The hunger strikes, and the related – though largely unexpected – emergence of Sinn Féin as a serious electoral force, further encouraged this process. But arguably the single most important factor in steering republicans towards a political approach was the realisation among senior activists that, though the IRA would not be defeated, neither could it force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland (English, 2003: 307). By the late 1980s, many republican leaders had recognised this reality, and the need to find an alternative way forward. Thus, the AIA, the SDLP's presentation of this as a statement of British neutrality, and the fact that Sinn Féin was prepared even to engage this notion, must be seen as

part of wider debate among republicans in the 1980s as regards the value of their armed campaign.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that the arguments which the SDLP made about the AIA, and British ministers' willingness to endorse those arguments, aided republicans' shift towards a purely political approach. Indeed, even if leading members of the movement were looking for a way out of the armed struggle by the late 1980s, they had to convince the republican rank and file of the need for a change in strategy. In order to do so, republican leaders needed to show that the British government had also altered its position, that London was no longer an obstacle to the reunification of Ireland, and that there was, therefore, a peaceful means towards this end. The AIA, by inspiring a public debate over British interests in Northern Ireland, proved crucial to this. In doing so, Hume is right to suggest that the accord should be seen as the first major step in the Northern Ireland peace process. However, it should also be remembered that the idea of engaging republicans in a political process was far from the minds of those who negotiated the Agreement, suggesting there was a certain serendipity in their actions.

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### Notes

1. Six men wrongly convicted of the 1974 pub bombings in the city.
2. See Todd (2013) for a full explanation of this concept and its application to the AIA.
3. To a degree, this initiative backfired, as the combined number of votes cast for unionist candidates fell considerably short of the 500,000 target that had been publically proclaimed, and one seat was lost to the SDLP's Seamus Mallon (Shannon, 1986: 868).
4. Seán Farren, interview with author, February 2009.
5. The Downing Street Declaration was primarily aimed at republicans, but challenged all parties using violence to renounce such means in order to gain a place in political talks. With the understanding that loyalist violence was essentially a reaction to the threat of Irish republicanism, it was assumed that a ceasefire from the IRA would evoke the same from loyalists. This assumption proved correct, as loyalist paramilitaries also announced a cessation of their campaign in October 1994, just six weeks after the IRA ceasefire.

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