

THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

*Political Skills or Lying and Manipulation?
The Choreography of the Northern Ireland Peace Process*

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POLITICAL SKILLS OR LYING AND MANIPULATION? THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

‘How many times in the last five years have you been convinced that a series of events have really been carefully choreographed and planned and are not the spontaneous actions their authors claim them to be?’ (Ed Moloney ‘Cynicism a by product of peace’ *Sunday Tribune* 28/11/99)

ABSTRACT

The real war and propaganda war fought over Northern Ireland for thirty years polarised party and public opinion. In the late eighties a faction of leading republicans realised that the conflict with the British State had reached a stalemate. The problem remained how a united republican movement could be persuaded to enter into a peace process and accept a settlement that fell far short of its expectations which had been bid up in the propaganda war. The ‘pan-nationalist front’ (the Irish Government, the SDLP and the US Government) and the British Government attempted to smooth the path for this republican faction. The British in particular, were also concerned that these efforts should not alienate unionists with the result that only nationalists and republicans would end up at the negotiating table. This article describes the ‘political skills and choreography’ (or lies and deceptions) by which governments and parties attempted to wind down the real and propaganda war and bring unionists and nationalists to agreement. It concludes by raising questions about the morality and effectiveness of employing such political skills.

Alongside the 'real' or 'physical' struggle over Northern Ireland, an 'ideological' or 'propaganda war' has been fought between the competing parties to the conflict. The demonisation of 'enemies' in this struggle resulted in the emergence of a gap between the public rhetoric of governments and politicians and the underlying, sometimes privately acknowledged (often structural) 'realities' of the conflict. Along with the 'real' war, the 'propaganda war' polarised party and public opinion in Northern Ireland creating problems for would-be elite peace-makers wanting to find an accommodation between unionism and nationalism. By the late eighties a leading faction within the Sinn Fein leadership realised that the 'war' against the British had reached a stalemate. The pro-peace process parties and governments (British government, the Irish government, the SDLP and the Sinn Fein leadership) were united in trying to wind down the 'real war' and 'propaganda war' and choreograph an 'honourable' entry for the republican movement into democratic politics. This had to be achieved without alienating unionists, who were likely to be suspicious that a secret deal had been cut to sell the Union out.

Various 'political skills', including a kind of political theatre or choreography, was deployed in an attempt to manipulate the public presentation of the 'peace process' in order to maximise the support of diverse constituencies of public and party opinion. There was co-operation as these political elites attempted to wind down the propaganda war and take steps to educate their respective constituencies to the 'hard realities' of the conflict and prepare the way for agreement. Ideological developments in key parties led to the emergence of 'new republicanism', 'new unionism' and 'new loyalism' (although whether there was much substance to their novelty is open to question) which attempted to justify movement towards accommodation. At the same time there was also conflict between the parties and governments that were promoting the peace process. Each had its own interests to pursue and these could be satisfied without reaching a settlement with cross-community support.

This article is in three parts. The first part describes the role of the real and propaganda war in polarising party and public opinion in Northern Ireland. This indicates why the republican movement's entry and participation in the peace process had to be 'scripted'. A story was also 'scripted' for unionists to prevent their alienation. The second part describes the 'political skills' employed by those supporting the peace process and

illustrates them with examples. Finally, questions are raised about the morality and effectiveness of employing such 'political skills'.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOREOGRAPHY

IDEOLOGY AND THE 'PROPAGANDA WAR'

Modern political propaganda has been defined as 'the deliberate attempt to influence the opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values for a specific persuasive purpose, consciously designed to serve the interest of the propagandists and their political masters, either directly or indirectly' (Welch, 1999, p.26). The participants to the conflict in Northern Ireland have contesting ideologies and interpretations of history and political events which are used to fight a 'propaganda war' for the 'hearts and minds' of Irish, British and international opinion. The rhetoric of the 'propaganda war', while it usually bears some relationship to 'truth', can be contrasted with the 'realities' which underlie the conflict. Ideological positions may be adopted not because they are 'true' – and the limitations of the different positions are often painfully apparent (Whyte 1990, O'Malley 1983) - but because they are effective in mobilising public opinion in the 'propaganda war'. The 'propaganda war' saw participants demonising the enemy and employing maximalist rhetoric in order to mobilise support for the 'war effort', win external support and exhibit determination to win. This political rhetoric has adversely effected the ideological structures which constrain the politicians (and other agents). It opens up a gap between the high expectations of party and public opinion and the 'realities' of the conflict (which some political elites may privately be well aware of) that make it unlikely that these expectations will be delivered on. The difficulty comes for the political elites in attempting to bridge that ideological gap, wind down the propaganda war and 're-educate' their communities for the 'new realities' of the post-conflict era. While at the same time sustaining the 'propaganda war' to maximise leverage in negotiations.

The ideological and physical violence of the recent conflict created a polarisation amongst party and public opinion in Northern Ireland that has been difficult to bridge. The 'peace process' has been largely pursued by elites who, while they have attempted to bring their supporters to accommodation, have a limited ability to do this. The violence and 'propaganda war' has created an environment that constrains what it is possible for politicians to say and do while retaining their power. John Taylor, the veteran Ulster Unionist politician, argued:

“ ... in politics some sometimes the logical thing is not necessarily what the people will allow you to do. And in Northern Ireland such are the intense feelings and deep-seated fears that what an outside observer might consider logical is not the kind of thing you can deliver politically. And that we must always take into account.”
(John Taylor, Ulster Unionist MP, *Irish Times* 27/9/89)

POLARISATION AND STALEMATE

The effect of the 'propaganda war' and the 'real war' was to polarise public and party opinion in Northern Ireland. There is little evidence of any great decline in the polarisation of public opinion or that it was a driving force behind the 'peace process'. Nationalists and unionists were living increasingly segregated lives in which the opportunities to break down stereotypes and ideological hostility were correspondingly reduced (Boyle and Hadden 1994). The 'centre ground' of Northern Ireland politics had withered during 'the troubles' as had the vote of its main standard bearer, the Alliance Party. Those hoping for a centrist accommodation between the SDLP and the UUP were disappointed by the continuing nationalist trajectory of the SDLP which even after the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985 seemed to be emphasising more the Irish dimension rather than power-sharing within Northern Ireland. The SDLP-SF talks of 1988 confirmed the 'pan-nationalist' trajectory of the party's approach as did its lack of enthusiasm for the Brooke-Mayhew talks and John Hume's attempts to bring republicans into a 'peace process'. Similarly, Unionist opinion did not appear much more accommodating. Since 1974 the leadership of the principal unionist parties, the DUP and UUP, were dominated by those who had

opposed the 'first peace process' 1972-74. There were occasional indications of unionist moderation – particularly during the Mayhew Talks 1992 - but these were not put to the test. The overtures of the British government to the IRA (1989-94) heightened unionist fears of a sell-out. During the early nineties the loyalist paramilitaries were killing more people than the IRA. After the IRA ceasefire in 1994, the poor state of inter-communal relations was indicated by heightened tension during the marching season and confrontations at Drumcree and the strong electoral performance of hard-line parties.

SCRIPTING THE PEACE PROCESS: THE REPUBLICAN STORY

The British had long accepted that there could be no purely military victory over the IRA. There is evidence that by the mid to late eighties the IRA had fought itself into a political and military stalemate with the British state (Bean 1995, Smith 1995 p.196, Patterson 1997). The confrontation between the British state and unionism over the Anglo-Irish Agreement could not be easily reconciled with a republican ideology that considered the unionists to be the puppets of British imperialism. Publicly republicans attacked the AIA, privately there is evidence that leading figures welcomed it. A reassessment by republicans of both British interests and Ulster unionism was a logical, if belated, development (Mallie and McKittrick 1997 p.33/4). Sinn Fein's vote appeared to have hit its ceiling by the late eighties, with IRA violence inhibiting any further gains through the ballot box.

While a faction of the Sinn Fein *leadership* may have been convinced of the need for a new unarmed struggle there was resistance from the middle and lower ranks and South Armagh and Tyrone (O'Brien, 1993, p.204-8). In April 1992 the Northern Ireland Minister, Richard Needham argued 'I believe the IRA (Sinn Fein) now know that they cannot win but they do not know how to lose. They are frightened of schism which has confronted them before. Frightened that if some lay down their arms others will not. Then all will have been in vain' (Needham 1998 p.322). This struggle between the SF leadership and grassroots republicanism, explains the slow and contradictory shifts in SF rhetoric during this period as the Adams leadership strained to sell a new strategy to the wider movement without appearing to sell out traditional

republicanism. There was likely to be a transition period during which the leadership would have to espouse the old, violent 'politics of illusion' while they gradually attempted to shift the wider republican movement towards the unarmed struggle. Rhetorical shifts were accompanied by an escalation of IRA violence and the reassertion of fundamentalist positions. According to the British Prime Minister: 'The IRA leadership had their own perverted logic. For them, an offer of peace needed to be accompanied by violence to show their volunteers that they were not surrendering' (Major 1999 p.433).

The British government had evidence that a faction within Sinn Fein was beginning to look for a way out of violence (Major 1999 p.436). To maximise the ability of the Sinn Fein leadership to commit a united republican movement to an unarmed strategy the British would need to offer them an 'honourable' way out of the conflict. The former Northern Ireland Minister, Richard Needham, reflected, '... Adams needed a way out which would keep his organisation armed and intact while avoiding division and internal civil war. He had to show his followers that in some way the fight had been worthwhile and he had to prise his men and women out of the prisons' (Needham 1998, p.126). For the Sinn Fein leadership it was important that they presented their entry into a political process from a position of strength rather than weakness. The Sinn Fein leadership needed a script, or story, that demonstrated to republican activists and supporters that the pan-nationalist front and 'unarmed struggle' was a more effective means of pursuing Irish unity than 'armed struggle'. This script claimed that the British government, through high-profile speeches, had changed its policy towards Northern Ireland – rather than any change of heart by the republican movement - and in response to this the republican movement was reassessing its position.

In response to political developments within Sinn Fein Peter Brooke, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1989-92), through speeches and secret contacts attempted to investigate the possibility of ending the stalemate and bringing the republican movement into the political process. He reaffirmed the government's belief that it was 'difficult to envisage' the military defeat of the IRA, suggested the possibility of holding talks with the republican movement and claimed that they would be 'flexible' and imaginative if the IRA stopped its violence. Brooke famously declared that it was

unionist opposition, not the British, that prevented Irish unity: 'The British Government has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, our role is to help, enable and encourage.'

The apparent victories achieved by 'pan-nationalism' over the British Government during the 'peace process' indicated the influence which republicans could achieve through the political process. The Irish government might publicly take a more hardline republican stance than it privately favoured in order to show the republican movement that it was part of a wider 'pan-nationalist' movement which would champion its cause, use its influence to achieve some republican goals and not leave the movement isolated (the same applied to the SDLP). The US President demonstrated the power of 'pan-nationalism' to the republican grass roots through high-profile confrontations with the British government in which the President came out on top. The involvement of 'fellow liberation movements', such as the PLO and ANC, in peace processes were used to lend legitimacy to the Sinn Fein leadership's unarmed strategy. Rumours about secret deals between the British and republicans over British withdrawal and declarations of the inevitability of Irish unity helped the Sinn Fein leadership sell its ceasefire.

With the benefit of hindsight it is possible to see the republican movement's shifting ideological position – a 'new republicanism'? - as paving the way and preparing a sceptical republican movement for an IRA ceasefire and the 'peace process'. The problem for observers was that while there may have been some developments in republican thinking and in the 'peace' rhetoric of Sinn Fein rhetoric, the brutal reality of the IRA's continuing violence over-shadowed this and seemed a better indication of the republican movement's intentions. The contradictions of the 'ballot box and armalite strategy' generated debate within republicanism in the late 80s and early 90s Sinn Fein began to distance itself from the IRA. There was an increased emphasis on the role of non-armed forms of political struggle which Sinn Fein had been drawn into after it began to contest elections in 1981. Sinn Fein's document *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* (1992) recognised both Northern Ireland's economic dependence on Britain and the possibility of a Protestant backlash following British withdrawal. Gerry Adams indicated a sympathy for joint authority, which implied a continuing role for the British state in Northern Ireland (Patterson 1997 p.240).

SCRIPTING THE PEACE PROCESS: THE UNIONIST STORY

The entry of Sinn Fein into a 'peace process' had to be achieved without arousing unionist suspicions that the British were selling the Union out, which could result in a loyalist backlash. The British government has attempted to bring sufficient unionist and republican elites simultaneously to the negotiating table in order to achieve a stable, *balanced* settlement. This was highly problematic in a context where public and party opinion had been fed on the maximalist rhetoric of twenty-five years of the 'propaganda war' and where expectations had been bid up to an 'unrealistic' degree by most of the parties involved. The problems of bringing unionist and nationalist political elites to the negotiating table and delivering their constituencies to a deal were apparent during the negotiation and failure of power-sharing in 1973-74. Then the Sunningdale Agreement was 'over-balanced' against unionism and Brian Faulkner was unable to maintain the support of the UUP or its supporters, a recurrent problem among unionist politicians (Dixon 2001, Dixon 1997b). During this second 'peace process' (1994-?) the SF leadership experienced difficulties delivering the republican movement (and to a lesser extent the republican electorate) while the UUP leadership had problems with both its party and electorate. As in the first 'peace process' the British government was trying to find a formula which would satisfy or at least placate very different, polarised constituencies in attempting to build agreement on the centre ground of Northern Irish politics.

While the British Government attempted to play its part in encouraging republicans into a peace process it was constrained in its ability to do this by the need to prevent the alienation of unionism and to keep an eye on British domestic opinion. When the secret back-channel contacts were revealed in November 1993 Sinn Fein and the British Government presented contrasting accounts of the contacts. The British were embarrassed by John Major's recent statement that it would 'turn my stomach' to talk with Sinn Fein. The revelations that this was what the Government had been doing created considerable concern among unionists.

The public revelation of contacts came in the wake of some of the worst violence in Northern Ireland since the early seventies and was likely to further aggravate unionist fears and escalate loyalist violence. ‘... What concerned the RUC was the possible reaction of the North’s loyalist paramilitaries if they thought a deal was being done between the British Government and the IRA. All hell could break loose.’ (Holland and Phoenix 1997 p.8) Mayhew also expressed concern that revelations of British-republican contacts would boost the more ‘hardline’ DUP at the cost of its more accommodating UUP rival (Mallie and McKittrick 1997 p.250). According to opinion polls Protestants opposed talks with republicans (Irish Political Studies 1994 p.221).

Against this backdrop, the story that the British Government told unionists was intended to reassure unionism and limit loyalist violence. The story was that the unionists had won and the IRA had lost, with the British Government merely managing the IRA surrender. It was a story that would also help to pacify domestic British public opinion. The British account of the secret contacts suggested firstly, that the contacts were only short-lived and dated back to the beginning of 1993. Secondly, that they were initiated by Sinn Fein which declared that the war was over and wanted to know how to bring it to an end. Thirdly, that these contacts were cold and clinical. The British account of the contacts contained 22 errors and was subsequently withdrawn.

The Sinn Fein version of the contacts is usually accepted as the more accurate version of events, although the SF leadership did need to produce a story which reassured its’ hardliners (Mallie and McKittrick 1997 p.244, Seldon 1997 p.415, Major also casts doubt on Mayhew’s account 1999 p.442).. The British account is misleading in several key respects. Firstly, the back-channel contacts dated back to 1990. Secondly, they were initiated by the British Government which was trying to investigate ideological developments within the republican movement (Brooke, Guardian, Mallie and McKittrick). Thirdly, Sinn Fein’s version of the contacts indicate that there was surprising warmth in some of the contacts. Fourthly, there is a suggestion from the British government representative that European integration made Irish unity inevitable.

THE CO-OPERATION OF ENEMIES

If the pro-peace process parties and leaders were sincere about arriving at an historic accommodation which had significant cross-community support then former enemies had a common interest in helping each other. ‘Concessions’ or restraint by republicans could help unionist leaders deliver their supporters and, vice versa, unionists could come to the aid of republicans. They have not publicly declared this for fear of embarrassing those political elites with their hard-line supporters. The British Government privately recognised its interest in helping Adams, but to have publicly declared this would have embarrassed the Sinn Fein leader and been counter-productive. The British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Patrick Mayhew, made this point months after the IRA ceasefire. He told what he thought was a private meeting of students that Gerry Adams’ ability to control the ‘hard men’ in the republican movement was vital to maintaining the IRA ceasefire and that it “would be a disadvantage to everybody” if he was replaced. “To some extent we have got to help Mr Adams carry with him the people who are reluctant to see a ceasefire, who believe they might be betrayed by the British government. If the hard men say, “What did Gerry Adams do? We have called a ceasefire but got nothing sufficient in return,” then Mr Adams will take a long walk on a short plank and be replaced by someone much harder’ (*Irish Times* 9/1/95). Whether or not it is true, there is a rationale behind accounts that claim that the British security forces saved Gerry Adams’ life after an assassination attempt in 1984. If Adams and his faction represented the more politically-oriented wing of the republican movement, then the British state had an interest in keeping him alive and seeing him thrive against his more militaristic rivals (Sharrock and Devenport, 1997, p.227). The British government would also have an interest in preserving the position of its hardline opponents such as Ian Paisley, particularly if it was felt his downfall would lead to an even more hardline replacement (Thatcher, 1993, p.403).

Choreography has become more publicly explicit in the latter part of the ‘peace process’, particularly since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement 1998. The signing of the GFA publicly committed both the leaderships of the UUP and SF to a deal on which the credibility of both depended. The propaganda war continues between the pro-Agreement parties, but at a lower level. Symbolic steps have been

taken and personal relationships between the party leaders appear improved (*Sunday Times*, 5 December 1999). By November 1999 the pro-Agreement parties and governments were conducting their negotiations with considerable restraint, in private with no leaking and spinning (*Belfast Telegraph*, 1 November 1999). Adams argued that in peace-making, rather than conventional politics, you had to put yourself in the shoes of your opponents and resisting the temptation to hype and exaggerate and go for short-term advantage (*An Phoblacht*, 18 November 1999). The run up to devolution in December 1999 was a carefully choreographed series of co-ordinated statements and initiatives during which unionists and republicans exerted restraint in the propaganda war. A journalist commented on the 'strange new world' of politics in Northern Ireland where 'any departure from the agreed hymn sheet is viewed with disproportionate suspicion' and described the 'brilliantly devised dance routine' which led to devolution. Reportedly the UUP leader had found Sinn Fein's bottom line and Sinn Fein had recognised the genuine difficulties which faced Trimble (*The Guardian* 17 November 1999). By February 2000 the leader and deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party publicly recognised the genuine difficulties which were facing the Sinn Fein leadership's attempt to bring about some decommissioning (Trimble *Sunday Tribune* 20 February 2000; and Taylor *Guardian* 18 February 2000, *Guardian editorial* 18 February 2000). Martin McGuinness took the 'propaganda war' between the pro-Agreement parties down a notch. He appealed for unionists and nationalists to begin to trust each other. Having lambasted unionists for 'not wanting a Catholic about the place' he now argued that nationalists and republicans had to take 'the first step towards trusting that unionists are changing and that they no longer want to dominate and discriminate against us' (*Observer* 4 June 2000).

CO-OPERATION AND CONFLICT

While there has been co-operation and choreography among the pro-peace process parties and governments there has also been conflict as each attempts to win as much as possible. Gerry Adams described the 'peace process' as 'war through negotiations'. The interests of the British clashed with those of the 'pan-nationalist front' (Irish Government, SDLP, Sinn Fein and the US Government) over how far the British should go to facilitate Sinn Fein's path into negotiations. The 'pan-nationalist front' was pushing for the strongest

possible deal from the 'peace process' for themselves and their supporters. This would enhance their own prestige in the eyes of their voters and supporters and make the 'peace process' easier to sell to the republican grass roots. The British government, with its eye on unionist reactions to the 'peace process', did not want to provoke a loyalist backlash by making too many 'concessions' to Sinn Fein. They favoured what they saw as a more 'balanced' approach to the process. This would improve the chances of unionists being able to negotiate with republicans and any subsequent agreement having cross-community support. The outraged reaction of unionism to the Anglo Irish Agreement 1985 had alerted the British once again of the dangers of pushing unionists 'too far' which threatened to involve them in a war on two fronts, against both the IRA and loyalist paramilitaries. The incentive for the British was not so much to deliver to the unionist population (unionism has little support in Britain) but to produce an accommodation which would enhance the prestige of the government by finally bringing the conflict to a close.

There may have also been some ambivalence amongst the pro-peace process parties. The 'peace process' may also have been pursued by parties making 'concessions' as a way of driving their opponents out of the process. A party makes a 'concession' in the hope that the opponent will not be able to reciprocate and will collapse the 'peace process' (yet this could also be a more 'marketable' way of moving the 'peace process along, see below). The party that has made the 'concession' thereby occupies the moral high ground and wins the 'propaganda war', it can then expect their agenda to be advanced as a reward for their flexibility. George Mitchell remarked at the number of leaks from Dublin and London during the peace process: 'I was surprised at the extent to which both governments and all the political parties actively leaked to the press in an effort to influence news coverage and therefore public opinion' (Mitchell 28/8/99). However, since the signing of the 'Good Friday Agreement' in 1998 there has been a more explicit recognition by former enemies of their common interest in co-operating and developing the process.

THE ARTS OF POLITICS

IMPERIAL CHOREOGRAPHY

The problems facing the British Government in managing change in Northern Ireland were also apparent in its retreat from Empire. In his discussion of Malaya, Kenya and British Guiana in *Colonial Wars and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* Frank Furedi's argues that 'radical nationalists' were susceptible to influence from the 'grassroots' which made it difficult for them to cut deals with the British colonial power. The British attempted 'to restore order' which was in effect 'about curbing or deactivating mass politics' (Furedi 1994 p.189). '...By the middle of the emergencies, it was clear to imperial officials that they could do little to influence popular aspirations for change. The response to this insight was to fight a rearguard action and attempt to shape the manner in which change could be achieved by constructing an environment which restrained mass participation and created a political framework that was insulated from popular pressure. Thus, whatever their starting point, gradually the emergencies became a kind of controlled experiment in change.' (Furedi 1994 p.189)

British imperial officials attempted to establish political structures which distanced nationalist politicians from mass pressure. The British became adept at detaching and strengthening moderates from anti-colonial movements and isolating the extremists, who tended to be more popular and plebeian (Furedi 1994 p.240). British administrators could not influence the masses directly but could do so by influencing their political leaders. However, those moderate nationalists who wished to 'collaborate' with the British faced the difficulty of doing so while at the same time retaining credibility and popularity with the masses (Furedi 1994 p.250, p.247). Nationalist, anti-colonial leaders had to be responsive to their own activists and the masses or face being outflanked by rival elites while at the same time leading the nationalist movement towards what appeared to be a realistic settlement. 'Experts in Whitehall looked upon anti-colonial leaders as never totally reliable because under mass pressure they could go beyond the permissible. In a sense, even the most co-operative leader was to some extent a prisoner of the masses. The more astute colonial administrators understood that leaders had to keep their activists in check and that

quite often they had to take radical steps to retain their credibility. Through the activists, mass pressure could be exerted on leaders, thereby ensuring that relations with the colonial authorities would be tense.’ (Furedi 1994 p.250) Extreme activists would put pressure on anti-colonial leaders and so ‘... London was sensitive to the need of anti-colonial leaders to retain a radical public image’ (Furedi 1994 p.255). Furedi suggests there is some, limited evidence (of what I call choreography). The British would manufacture martyrs out of their nationalist ‘collaborators’/moderates, by arresting them, in order to bolster their image among the masses (Furedi 1994 p.251). The Sinn Fein leadership too needed to maintain its radical image if it was to deliver a united republican movement to a settlement. They were aware of Britain’s colonial record, according to Brendan Hughes, former leader of the IRA in Belfast: “... What we hammered into each other time after time in jail was that a central part of Brit counter insurgency strategy was to mould leaderships whom they could deal with” (*Fourthwrite*, Issue No.1 Spring 2000).

NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE ARTS OF POLITICS

The key problem of the ‘peace process’ was to bridge the ideological gap between unionists and republicans – whose expectations bid up through the ‘propaganda war’ – and bring sufficient, cross-community elites, parties and voters to an agreement that would be sustainable. How did the Sinn Fein leadership sell an agreement that fell so far short of its goal of Irish unity and might include a regional assembly? How did the Ulster Unionists sell an agreement that was likely to include power-sharing, some kind of Irish dimension and a place for ‘terrorists’ in government? As a ‘senior British source’ explained:

“ If we were to offer the parties an outline that was at once acceptable to them all, we would have found the Holy Grail that has eluded the island of Ireland for 300 years.

It is the job of the British Government to push the Unionists to a line beyond which they will not go; it is the job of the Irish Government to pull the Republicans to a line beyond which they will not come.’ What was left in the middle, the limits of

potential agreement, would be left for discussion between the parties...” (*The Observer* 5 February 1995)

There are a number of techniques presented below by which the pro-peace process parties and governments have attempted to manage the public presentation of the ‘peace process’ and manipulate public and party opinion behind it. But these should be treated with a certain amount of caution. There is a ‘hall of mirrors’ problem in attempting to go beyond the ‘propaganda war’ to distinguish between the rhetoric of propaganda and ‘reality’. It is difficult to discern rhetoric from reality, play-acting from sincerity and spin from ‘truth’. There are further problems regarding what is ‘truth’ and whose ‘reality’ we are talking about. As an official at the Northern Ireland Office was reported to have said: ‘You have to remember... in these negotiations no one says anything necessarily because they believe what they are saying, but because they know someone else on their side expects them to say it.’ (*The Observer* 5/4/98) Some politicians do not acknowledge any difference between their private and public faces, for some this may be sincere while others want to avoid the charge of being ‘two-faced’. Some politicians may privately acknowledge ‘realities’ which they cannot express publicly for fear of jeopardising public or party support, or because such admissions might provoke an adverse reaction including violence. Off-the-record briefings and the disclosure of private documents can help the observer get beyond the surface appearances of the process and look at the underlying dynamics.

Nine ‘political skills’ have been identified, some of which overlap.

1. Political Choreography

There was an attempt to manage public and party perceptions by choreographing politics. Public conflicts were staged to reassure divergent constituencies that their interests were being protected in the ‘peace process’. The British Government had a dual role firstly, to facilitate the ‘honourable’ entry of a united, undefeated republican movement into the ‘peace process’. Secondly, to defend the Union and reassure unionists that their interests were being protected.

There is some evidence of an attempt by the British Government and Sinn Fein to choreograph the Provisionals' ceasefire and its entry into a 'peace process' during the 'back channel contacts'. The use of intermediaries allowed both sides to blame these for 'misunderstandings' and to distance themselves from hostile interpretations of their actions (Observer 5/12/93). The British in particular prepared themselves for the public revelation of the back-channel contacts. According to McLaughlin and Miller, 'It was important for them to maintain an attitude of "business as usual" and to prepare the ground for a potential settlement. ... Both sides tailored their overtures for public and private consumption and exchanged advance copies of keynote speeches. This public limbering-up was accompanied by other behind-the-scenes exchanges' (McLaughlin and Miller, 1996, p.125/6). In 1975 the British had offered the IRA advice on media issues (O'Brien 1993 p.171). In 1993 again the British Government offered Sinn Fein advice on how best to manage public opinion and criticise the British Government. Sinn Fein should emphasise that the British Government was foot-dragging on the peace process:

'... Sinn Fein should comment in as major a way as possible on the PLO/Rabin deal; that Sinn Fein should be saying 'If they can come to an agreement in Israel, why not here? We are standing at the altar why won't you come and join us'.

It also said that a full frontal publicity offensive from Sinn Fein is expected, pointing out that various contingencies and defensive positions are already in place.' (Sinn Fein 1993 p.41)

Choreography is also apparent in the British and Irish Governments' reaction to the Hume-Adams initiative. The British Government was interested in the Hume-Adams initiative but it could not bring the unionists into negotiations if it was seen to be on republican terms. Major would suffer politically with both unionist and domestic British public opinion by being seen to be condoning a document co-authored by a leading figure in a terrorist organisation. For this reason, Hume was advised to *say* that the Hume-Adams document would not be sent to London. An adviser to Dick Spring recounted that the publicity drawn by Hume to his initiative necessitated taking Adams' 'fingerprints' off the joint declaration in order to keep that process alive (Mallie and McKittrick 1997 p.189, p.192, p.210, p.211, Duignan 1995 p.99). Privately, Major stressed to Reynolds that although Hume-Adams was still 'alive' he

‘just couldn’t publicly wear it’ (Duignan 1995 p.106). A British-Irish joint declaration would have ‘to be seen to be utterly divorced from the Hume-Adams dialogue.’ Major’s biographer explained ‘Anger in the Loyalist community, too, made it even more imperative for him to distance himself from any suggestion of being influenced by the Hume-Adams initiative’ (Seldon 1997 p.421, Mallie and McKittrick 1997 p.226, p.227, Major 1999 p.449/50). Major and Reynolds [the Irish Taoiseach, or Prime Minister] reasoned, “Hume-Adams was being declared dead, in order to keep it alive, in the same way as Adams carried the [Shankhill] bomber’s coffin, because otherwise he couldn’t deliver the IRA” (Duignan 1995 p.106).

Choreography is dramatically apparent in the way that the two governments attempted to champion their ‘respective sides’ in Northern Ireland. While privately there is evidence that the governments understood each other’s difficulties in pursuing the ‘peace process’ they publicly attacked each other in order to reassure important constituencies that they were fighting their corner. The Irish government’s role was to champion ‘pan-nationalist’ interests and in particular to reassure grassroots republicans that their interests were being defended and pursued through the unarmed struggle. They therefore publicly attacked the British Government over decommissioning to maintain the image of a united pan-nationalist front. Whereas privately they acknowledged the British Government’s genuine problems (Mallie and McKittrick 1997).

The US government played its part in the pan-nationalist front. US influence was believed to have won Adams his first visa to the US in 1994 and forced the British to drop their exclusion of SF from an investment conference in Belfast. In 1995 Adams wanted to visit the US again and this time to raise funds for Sinn Fein. The British again publicly opposed such a move and wanted the US government to use its leverage with Sinn Fein to make progress on the decommissioning of IRA weapons before all-party talks could take place. In private, however, Mayhew told US officials that he wanted SF to ‘seriously discuss decommissioning’ rather than the handover of weapons before entering talks. Nancy Soderberg, Deputy National Security Adviser, described “a complete disconnect” between what Mayhew asked of the US government in private and his stronger public statements for decommissioning later the same day when he announced ‘Washington 3’ (O’Clery 1996 p.191).

Patrick Mayhew's behaviour in not emphasising to the US the importance of an arms handover could be interpreted as a complete blunder. Or else the British government, perhaps convinced of the moderation of the unionist electorate compared to their political elites, may have believed that in spite of the publication of the 'nationalist tinted' Framework Documents in February 1995 they had room to push unionists further by taking steps to water down the conditions necessary to bring Sinn Fein into talks. Again privately, the British government may not have been too distressed at the decision by the US president to lift the ban on Adams and allow him to raise funds in the US. This decision would bolster the credibility of Sinn Fein's unarmed strategy by demonstrating its strong US support. The British government's publication of the Framework Documents and its weakening of the decommissioning conditions in Washington 3 resulted in rising unionist and Conservative backbench dissent. In view of this, John Major needed to reassure unionism by playing his role as 'champion of the Union'. The British Prime Minister made a public show of his fury at Clinton's decision over the Adams visa and refused to take the US President's telephone calls for five days (O'Clery 1996 p.195, Irish Times 15/3/95). Later, Clinton praised Major for taking "brave risks" in making peace "within the context in which he must operate" (Daily Telegraph 18/4/95). According to a source close to Clinton, by April '...the President had developed a genuine respect for Major and figured he was trying to do the right thing and understood why Major might need to make a gesture by not taking a phone call' (O'Clery 1996 p.219). Such high-profile defeats for the British government demonstrated to republicans the influence they could have through 'unarmed struggle'. It may also have publicly demonstrated to unionists that the British government was fighting its corner (this may be comparable to Clinton's intervention in May 2000).

2. Smoke screen

The 'peace process' could be advanced by the pro-peace process parties using a smoke screen of hostile rhetoric to disguise a marginally more accommodating stance. Republican and unionist political elites attempted to appease their hardliners by justifying a moderate move as an act of aggression. The Sinn Fein leadership won the

support, or acquiescence, of the republican movement in the peace process by presenting it as 'unarmed struggle' that was more likely to achieve republican goals than the 'armed struggle'. As John Major observed, the IRA coupled their offer of peace with violence in order to demonstrate to their supporters that there was no question of surrender (Major, 1999, p.433). Republicans could also justify a more accommodating position on the grounds that the unionists would be unable to reciprocate and nationalism would win the day. In January 2000, Adams, fearing the defection of republicans to dissident groups, attempted to sell decommissioning as an 'aggressive political act' (*The Observer* 23 January 2000; 9 January 2000). Similarly, David Trimble presented his entry into all party negotiations with Sinn Fein in September 1997 as an aggressive act. The UUP, unlike the DUP, would go into battle with republicans and defend the Union. Trimble entered the talks flanked by the political representatives of the loyalist paramilitary parties.

The use of smoke screens may have been useful in the short-term but was not a tactic that contributed to the winding down of the 'propaganda war' and the re-education of various constituencies of the necessity of compromise.

3. Salami slicing

Under cover of a 'smoke screen' parties and governments could salami slice their position towards the centre ground. The smoke screen would reassure hardliners that there was no betrayal of traditional ideology, while a slightly more accommodating position would also be articulated (for the British Government see Dixon 2001, for republicans see Moloney *Sunday Tribune* 7/11/99). Britain's position on decommissioning was a classic example of salami slicing. There had been a demand for decommissioning before the ceasefire. When the IRA announced its' ceasefire the British Government called on the IRA to make it 'permanent'. When they did not do so, the British made a working assumption. The initial demand was for decommissioning before any Sinn Fein contact with British Government officials. Then before meetings with British ministers. A call was made for the decommissioning of offensive weapons, such as semtex. The demand shifted to decommissioning at the start of all-party talks. Then, after the Mitchell Report, for

decommissioning while all-party talks were in progress. Or at the conclusion of all-party talks. After the signing of the Good Friday Agreement the demand shifted to decommissioning before the establishment of the Executive, then simultaneously with the establishment of the Executive and then decommissioning was expected within weeks of the establishment of devolution. David Trimble adopted a hardline position on decommissioning but, like the British Government, has salami-sliced his position over the years also. This was probably partly out of recognition of the genuine difficulties the Sinn Fein leadership had in achieving accommodation.

By September 1999, George Mitchell was arguing for the participants in the peace process to take 'baby steps', rather than giant leaps, which each side can take in a carefully choreographed sequence. As Jonathan Freedland reported, 'The idea is for each side to make a move which is sufficiently modest not to inflame its own hardliners - and for that move to be instantly rewarded with a response from the other side. ... On it could go, step by step, with no single moment when the process was clearly over. The war in Northern Ireland would not end with a bang, but a series of small fizzles...' (*The Guardian*, 10 September 1999). He praised Trimble, '... For the unionist leader now talks to the man he once reviled as a blood enemy. He does not talk through the chair, but to Gerry Adams' face. Inch by inch, and with a minimum of statesman-like oratory, Trimble has moved his community to the point where a deal is possible' (*The Guardian*, 10 September 1999).

4. Hard Cop/Soft Cop

Another tactic used to appease polarised constituencies was to use a hard cop/ soft cop routine. This was achieved by dividing responsibility for policy presentation within a government or party between two politicians who would present different faces to different audiences. For example, while Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam became perceived as overly sympathetic to nationalism. Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped in to act as the unionists' champion. For nationalists Mowlam was the soft cop to Blair's hard cop, for nationalists Blair was the soft cop to Mowlam's hard cop. The Irish Government also used a similar device. Initially in the Fianna Fail/Labour Coalition, Taoiseach Albert Reynolds spoke to the nationalist/republican

audience while the Labour leader Dick Spring attempted to reassure unionism. When John ‘unionist’ Bruton became Taoiseach in the Rainbow Coalition his reputation meant that he could more easily play the role of reassuring unionism and Dick Spring switched to a more nationalist stance to reassure nationalism/republicanism. In Northern Ireland there were suspicions that this device was being used by the UUP (Trimble ‘soft cop’ to Taylor’s ‘hard cop’) and Sinn Fein (Adams ‘soft cop’ to Pat Doherty’s ‘hard cop’, previously Adams/McGuinness or Adams/Kelly).

5. Kite flying

Political tactics were also deployed to soften up public and party opinion for ideological movement. A significant figure would be encouraged by the leadership to make a speech or write an article arguing for a more moderate stance. The leadership would then be able to see what the reaction of the party or relevant constituency is and be able to decide whether it would be safe for the leadership to support such a move. If public or party opinion was quiescent then this might suggest that the way was clear for the party leadership to follow.

6. Timing

Political proposals and events have been timed to maximise the support of peace process supporters. Crucial votes or the devolution of power are preceded by carefully choreographed moves to maximise public support. The announcement of unpopular proposals or difficult compromises is delayed until after such votes or elections.

7. Zig-Zagging

The British Government zig-zags from a policy favourable to nationalists to one favourable to unionists in an attempt to appease both unionists and nationalists. In January 1998, when the unionists were struggling in the peace process, the British Government produced the ‘Heads of Agreement’ document which was able to

reassure unionists about the direction of the negotiations. The surrounding publicity and the outrage of nationalists and republicans helps to sustain pro-peace process unionism. Several weeks later clarification of the document was provided which reassured nationalists.

8. 'Creative ambiguity'

The ambiguity of the key documents of the 'peace process' – the Downing Street Declaration, the Framework Documents, the Good Friday Agreement itself - which could be interpreted in various ways to suit the receiving audience. The 'Good Friday Agreement' 1998 is interpreted by pro-agreement unionists as strengthening the Union and by republicans as a step on the road to a united Ireland. Government officials have acknowledged that there have been points when 'ambiguity was the only way to keep the boat afloat' (*Daily Telegraph* 8/5/00). Discussing the ambiguity of British-IRA contacts in the mid-seventies a former MI6 officer explained: "Well I think that was the nature of our dialogue, and I think the ambiguity was recognised by both sides, so that each side could make what it wanted from it" (*Sunday Times* 12/5/00). More recently, David Trimble argued that if unionists had insisted on a legalistic approach to decommissioning then there would have been no agreement (*Belfast Telegraph*, 24 April 2000). Given the polarisation of republicans and unionists in Northern Ireland and the difficulty of managing support for the Agreement, there needed to be a certain amount of ambiguity to give the various parties and governments the 'wiggle room' to shift the political ground to underpin the support of Trimble or Adams.

The republican movement's TUAS document is a classic. Originally this was interpreted to mean 'Totally UnArmed Strategy' in order to reassure the British and Irish governments and international opinion that the IRA's ceasefire was permanent. It later emerged that the document was actually called the 'Tactical Use of the unArmed Strategy'. Ed Moloney has since suggested that the latter use of the term was to pacify the republican faithful while the former was for external consumption: 'The ability of each constituency to accept the explanation given to them and their

conviction that it was really the other that was being misled gave the peace process its real momentum' (*Sunday Tribune* 30/1/00).

9. Power and 'Necessary Fictions'

The pro-peace process parties and governments, along with their sympathisers in the press and among commentators, represent a powerful force behind the Good Friday Agreement. Legal barriers to the peace process have been swept aside before this coalition as 'necessary fictions' are justified to get around political obstacles. In August 1999, Seamus Mallon resigned as Deputy First Minister. This threatened to derail the peace process as when devolution was triggered in December 1999 there was insufficient unionist support to re-elect Trimble and Mallon. So it was later claimed that Mallon had not in fact resigned. Some have cast doubt on whether the Irish Government's recognition of the IRA's right to retain control of its arms is in breach of the Irish constitution (Grove 2000, p.28). [Henry McDonald article on peace process and media] In July/August 1999 the Labour Government urged the Ulster Unionists to take a leap of faith into an Executive with Sinn Fein on the basis that there had been a 'seismic shift' in republican thinking on decommissioning and this would occur 'within weeks' of the operation of the Executive. There was little evidence of this shift at the time or subsequently when SF were put to the test. Blair's claim also caused concern among the republican grassroots who wondered whether the leadership had betrayed them. According to *The Times*' Michael Grove, 'Even Government supporters were reduced in private to describing its interpretation as a necessary fiction' (Grove 2000, p.25).

IS DECEPTION JUSTIFIABLE?

LYING AND MANIPULATION: PURISTS

Are the 'arts of politics' described above simply unjustifiable lies and deception? A *purist position* would argue the 'common sense' view that it is never justified to tell a lie whether in private or public life. Democracy is violated by secrecy and deception, politicians cannot be held accountable to the people for the power they wield and may not be pursuing the general interest. Furthermore, definitions of the general or public interest conflict. 'Such lies are told when governments regard the electorate as frightened, irrational, volatile or ignorant of political realities and so unwilling or unable to support policies which are in the public interest' (Cliffe et al 2000 p.28). Concealment, deceit, secrecy and manipulation 'contradict the basic principles of democratic society based on accountability, participation, consent and representation' (Cliffe et al 2000 p.35). Lies can be counterproductive, 'Even when they are genuinely employed as a tactic to further a good end, they may rebound and have detrimental effects once they are discovered and brought to light. They may cause further lies to be necessary and lead to retaliation by opponents. Equally damaging is the cynicism, disrespect and distrust of politicians once deceptions are uncovered' (Cliffe et al 2000 p.38). Lies are unnecessary, sincerity and honesty with the party and electorate stands a better chance of winning popular support for ideological and political change. The purists oppose 'creative ambiguity' and political skills described above and favour certainty, legal precision and a more honest, straightforward politics.

Both unionist and republican critics have claimed the purist mantle and criticised the pro-peace process politicians for their 'manipulation', 'ambiguities' and 'deceit' in the way they have promoted the peace process. Robert McCartney, of the UK Unionist Party, criticised the 'ends justifies the means' arguments of pro-Agreement unionism: "I did it for peace, they will say. You can get away with anything for peace – murder, mutilation, intimidation, bending the rules. It is all right as long as you do it for peace" (*Irish Times* 30/11/99). Ian Paisley has attacked Trimble for not telling the whole truth about the Good Friday Agreement and for refusing to take a legalistic position on it. His failure 'to secure certainty on decommissioning now masquerades as strategy' (*Newsletter* May 2000). There is substance to this unionist critique of the 'peace process'. The British government lied over its contacts with Sinn Fein. But even so Ian Paisley was humiliated and thrown out of No.10 Downing Street in September 1994 after refusing to take John Major's word that the Union had not been

sold out. The British Government also attempted to deceive unionists over the origins of the 'Downing Street Declaration', and failed to deliver on its reassurances to unionism on decommissioning. Tony Blair and the new Labour Government deliberately deceived unionists during the referendum campaign. Leading figures in the UUP have retreated on their promises to unionists over decommissioning in order to find agreement with nationalists and republicans.

Dissident republicans are similarly critical of the Sinn Fein leadership for using its power to manipulate and deceive the republican movement. A former IRA prisoner, Anthony McIntyre, who now edits *Fourthwrite: The Journal of the Irish Republican Writers Group*, calls on the Sinn Fein leadership to admit that they lost the war and could have got what was offered in the 'Good Friday Agreement' at Sunningdale in 1973 (McIntyre 2000). Other contributors to *Fourthwrite* criticised the dishonest way the Sinn Fein leadership has operated. A former leading member of the IRA, Brendan Hughes, lamented: "In 1969 we had a naïve enthusiasm about what we wanted. Now in 1999 we have no enthusiasm. And it is not because people are war weary – they are politics weary. The same old lies regurgitated week in week out. With the war politics had some substance. Now it has none. The political process has created a class of professional liars and unfortunately it contains many republicans. ...” (*Fourthwrite*, Issue No.1 Spring 2000) Ciara Ni Tuama criticised the process by which the Sinn Fein leadership had garnered support for the 'peace process' using the last 5 years to wean people off their memories of loss and of living with armed struggle. '... It has been a process of inoculation, conducted through a choreographed ballet of leaks and denials. Sinn Fein has always been famous for its doublespeak; it used to be the British and Unionists who complained loudly about their deftness with words. ... Few Republicans thought the day would come when it would be Republicans themselves at the receiving end of that doublespeak...' (*Fourthwrite*, Issue No.1 Spring 2000). Tommy McKearney, a former member of the IRA and Hunger Striker, argued that the IRA's statement of 6th May 2000 which '...completely and verifiably put IRA arms beyond use...' signalled the winding up of the IRA to external opinion but 'This is not what the organisation will tell its members of course. Provo staff officers will now tour the country, meeting the troops and explaining to them what the statement means or more accurately perhaps, what they want them to believe that it means. ... It may be some time before the reality of the situation dawns on the Provos' ever trusting,

ever credulous membership' ('The Provos are going out of business' *Sunday Tribune* 14/5/00).

IN DEFENCE OF LYING: REALISTS

Realists defend the 'political skills' which have been deployed by politicians in the peace process on the grounds that 'the ends justify the means' and deception is an essential weapon in the politician's armoury. The realist position is favoured by elitists who would argue that policy should not be influenced by the prejudices of public opinion anyway. It reflects better the practice of pro-peace process politicians during and in the run up to the process and appears to have met with some success.

The elite supporters of the peace process justify their 'political skills' as being in the 'true interest' of the people of Northern Ireland. Telling the 'truth' is not possible because it is unlikely to meet with a positive response from a population which is so strongly rooted to conflicting ideologies. Deception and manipulation is justified on the grounds that it promises peace and a lasting settlement sometimes politicians need to get their hands dirty (Cliffe et al 2000). Only a week before the secret contacts between the British Government and the IRA were made public, John Major had told the House of Commons that, "[If he thinks] we should sit down and talk with Mr Adams and the Provisional IRA, I can say only that that would turn my stomach. We will not do it." After his defeat at the 1997 British general election Major justified his economy with the truth, "When I was certain that someone was genuinely seeking peace I'd have spoken to Beelzebub, if it would have delivered peace, because that was my objective."

Realist criticise the purist position on several grounds:

These advocates of purist positions are less than pure themselves. They take pride in the consistency of their position over time and their stand on 'principle'. The DUP have, for example, been creatively ambiguous about its' attitude towards the loyalists paramilitaries. The party has failed to decisively clamp down on the perception that their rhetoric and actions give encouragement to loyalist paramilitaries. Leading

members of the DUP have also shown an awareness of the public/private split, being prepared to say things off the record that they would not say on the record. They are tactically adept and do present different faces to different audiences. Republican dissidents – of the now non-violent or violent variety – are also less than pure. While now affronted by the ‘lies and deceptions’ of the Adams leadership, this was not the case when the Sinn Fein/IRA leadership were deploying their ‘political skills’ in pursuit of an aim with which they sympathised. The republican movement throughout its recent period of ‘armed struggle’ has justified its use of lies and deception (not to mention violence) on the classic realist grounds that the ends justify the means.

Those who engage in lies and deception but deceive themselves that they are lying are more morally dangerous. Arendt argued that the cold-blooded liar at least knows the difference between truth and lies and does not dissolve the distinction while lying (Bradshaw, 2000, p.89). The more successful liar ‘... the more likely it is that he will end by believing his own lies’ (Arendt, 1973, p.32). Her famous book ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil’ maintained,

‘... that possibly the greatest evils in the modern world are committed not out of deliberate contravention of truth and morality, but in ignorance of any standards of truth and morality. ... If there is no intimation of truth that is beyond the flux of politics, which can be appealed to as a final arbiter of right and wrong, then there is no capacity for punishment or forgiveness; indeed, there is nothing by which to measure transgressions.’ (Bradshaw, 2000, p.94/95)

Of Eichmann, Arendt argued, ‘... Here was a man who was truly thoughtless, one who was incapable of making the sorts of distinctions necessary to even understand what purposes a mask served’ (Gorham, 2000, p.82)

Purists adopt an agency-oriented approach that ignores the structural constraints operating on politicians and explain the considerable incentives for their use of lies and deception. This allows cheap points to be scored against politicians but does little to illuminate the structures which effect the conduct of politics and how they can be changed. Hannah Arendt argued against the purist position, ‘... Deception and

manipulation is so intrinsically a part of politics for her that she does not regard engagement in them as immoral, provided that there is an apprehension of truth that lies at the base of our actions' (Bradshaw 2000, p.94).

'... political action which requires the engagement with others and their particularities, requires a kind of practical and circumstantial judgement that cannot be derived directly from moral imperatives. Part of the glory of human action, for her, is the risk that is entailed in engaging with others. Promises are made and sometimes have to be broken. Bonds are forged on the basis of common projects, and sometimes our loyalties to those with whom we act outweigh our prior commitments to principles.' (Quoted in Bradshaw 2000, p.88)

The purist position can be criticised for its failure to recognise that many of the skills and deceptions employed by politicians in public life are also evident in people's private lives. There is evidence that individuals also 'deceive' by presenting different faces to different audiences. The work of symbolic interactionists draws attention to the individual's performance in every day life. Erving Goffman show's how the person's performance of a role is circumscribed by the role, the place and the audience (May, 1996, Chapter 3). According to the psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, 'The Healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks': '... We are made of soft plastic, and moulded by social circumstances. But we should not conclude that all of our relationships are fake: subjects in our studies generally believed in the masks they wore. Once donned, mask becomes reality' (Gergen, 1996, p.138). Particularly in situations where there is an uneven distribution of power, hierarchy and lack of autonomy people are less likely to be truthful. There are considerable incentives to tell people what they want to hear to avoid conflict or discrimination.

The purist position does not make a distinction between 'political skills' and some could be more acceptable than others. In a negotiating situation is it possible to tell the truth? Do politicians have a sometimes contradictory duty to represent but also lead their supporters and voters? Are there not occasions – for example over government plans on the economy – when secrecy and deception are necessary? Do

politicians have to be completely honest about their private life? Is there not a grey area between public and private morality?

CONCLUSION: POLITICS AND TRUTH, CLOSING THE GAP?

The choreography of the peace process may reflect a trend among politicians to emphasise the importance of ‘appearance’ over ‘reality’. As McNair puts it, ‘...politics has become not only a persuasive but a performance art, in which considerations of style, presentation and marketing are equal to, if not greater in importance than, content and substance’ (McNair 1995, p. 189). This elitist, realist approach to domestic public opinion has characterised British policy towards Northern Ireland. The problem remains, however, that little attempt has been made to persuade activists and electorate to support the peace process on the basis of a ‘realistic’ understanding of the balance of political forces and a sense of the politically possible. For some the goal of a settlement justified the means to achieve it. However, it is precisely this lack of democracy, accountability and openness which has contributed to the kind of political environment - of distrust and resentment - in which these measures are now argued to necessitate. The result is that the GFA is balanced precariously on still seething reservoirs of hatred between unionists and nationalists.

You don’t have to adopt an elitist and radical realist perspective to argue that *in some contexts* lying and deception can be justified. The purist position, while normatively far more preferable, does seem to underestimate the problems of political persuasion and perhaps overestimate the possibilities, within the current context, for an informed, open and democratic debate. Given the polarised ideological environment of Northern Ireland in the late eighties and early nineties, it is not surprising that political elites fear that a sudden about turn on key ideological issues would be difficult to sell to party and public opinion and could result in their removal from positions of influence. There are considerable problems in changing the world from how it is to how it ought to be. Real constraints do operate on agents that restrict their ability to be truthful. But this does not mean to say that these constraints must simply be accepted and attempts can’t or shouldn’t be made to alter them so that the gap between political spin and ‘truth/reality’ can be reduced and democratic accountability enhanced. The point also

occurs at which lying becomes counterproductive because the public is no longer able to make the distinction between truth and lies. As Arendt argued, ‘... truth that can be relied on disappears entirely from public life, and with it the chief stabilising factor in the ever-changing affairs of men’ (Arendt, 1973, p.12). In March 2000, the leader of the Irish Opposition, John Bruton, argued that the time had come to tell the truth in the peace process. There was a time, he argued ‘for postponement of difficulties and for ambiguities. There is also a point when the truth has to be told. I believe that we are at such a point now.’

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