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Reconciliation, Ideology and Identity in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The idea of reconciliation is commonplace in political debates about conflict resolution and transformation in many varied situations around the world. While there is a critical literature on the idea of reconciliation (Schaap 2005, Mulaj 2008) there is also a tendency in both academic and popular accounts to imagine reconciliation as a positive process towards the accommodation of political difference (see Lederach 1997 for example). While accepting the transformative potential of reconciliation, this paper argues that there are two key issues at stake in understanding the political implications of reconciliation: firstly, the need for a specific and deeply contextual understanding of the meaning of reconciliation and, secondly, a requirement to unpack the ideological and linguistic presuppositions that reconciliation invokes within a specific context. The paper uses the example of Northern Ireland as a testing ground for these issues on the basis that it is a society that has been involved in conflict transformation processes in the last fifteen to twenty years and one where notions of reconciliation have been invoked as fundamental to future political and social relations. Following the argument above, the conclusions that are reached are inherently specific to Northern Ireland but I contend that some of the theoretical points may have a broader application albeit with differing outcomes depending on the nature of the conflict to which they are being applied.

The observation that reconciliation is a contested practice in various political situations from, for example, Australia to South Africa to East Timor is not particularly contentious. Moreover, the need to differentiate the variations in reconciliation discourses in these different environments should be fairly obvious. What I want to argue, however, is that in each of these specific contexts reconciliation is understood in different ways such that it is difficult to construct theories of reconciliation that can be applied without *generating* political conflict. Moreover, it should be recognised that, regardless of the intentions or disposition of particular political actors, the language of reconciliation tends to be regarded as politically – or more precisely, ideologically – loaded. While I would contend that this should not be regarded as inherently problematic, it puts the place of reconciliation as an inherently positive part of conflict resolution processes into some doubt. Indeed, in the example of Northern Ireland, the idea of reconciliation reflects and reinforces the very social and political divisions that it is supposed to transcend.

There is a multiplicity of views of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and each has a different political import. This paper seeks to explain this variation in political

interpretation and to shed light on reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland such that the general theoretical claims may have some application to other societies grappling with deep social division (albeit in contextually specific forms). In particular, the paper examines the intersection of discourses of reconciliation and identity-based politics with a view to outlining the ways in which the idea of reconciliation in Northern Ireland at least tends to be filtered through an ideological prism which casts the concept in a certain way that reflects the structural divisions of Northern Irish politics and society. In Northern Ireland then, reconciliation discourses are deeply bound up with conflictual identity claims based upon incommensurable interpretations of political difference. Put simply, reconciliation in Northern Ireland is regarded by many people as an ideological tool.

Theory and Method

The main objective in this paper is to analyse the variety of articulations of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and to investigate their political assumptions and implications. For this reason, discourse analytical techniques were used as the basis of the project to try to understand the different formations of reconciliation that are employed in Northern Ireland and the presuppositions that underpin them and provide impetus to the particular vision of reconciliation that is constructed. In particular, I have used post-structuralist interpretations of discourse analysis as these approaches are alive to the miscommunications that often appear in politics, the significance of the politics of language and, more specifically, the dislocation that often appears between the signifier and the signified.¹ Basically, post-structuralism provides a framework through which the language of reconciliation can be deconstructed and the various meanings that underpin different discursive constructions can be identified. It is an approach which accepts the view that there is no consensus on the meaning of reconciliation and sees the conflict around the meaning of such concepts as symptomatic of the ambiguity of political language. Thus, post-structuralism founds political analysis around the existence of assumptions and presuppositions in discourses and hence the undecidability of concepts given their inherently contested nature (Derrida 1993). Given this undecidable foundation for political ideas, post-structuralist forms of discourse analysis set out to identify assumptions in political arguments and their broader implications.

As part of the first stage of this project to identify different meanings of reconciliation in Northern Ireland I interviewed representatives of the main political parties in Northern Ireland.² This involved semi-structured interviews with party representatives of the four major parties in Northern Ireland – two from the nationalist side of the ethno-national divide (Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party) and two from the unionist perspective (the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party). Additionally, I interviewed representatives from the centre ground, non-aligned Alliance Party and the Progressive Unionist Party, a smaller unionist party with limited support but to act as a counter-balance to Sinn Fein insofar as both developed as the political wings of paramilitary organisations (i.e. Sinn Fein and the IRA, PUP and the UVF). While the aim of the research was not to provide a complete spectrum of reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland, it did set out to examine the dominant perspectives within party politics

in the realisation that there were likely to be other perspectives in civil society that had not been able or willing to make the transition into party political discourse.

The connection between reconciliation discourses and ideology was a specific focus of the research that was carried out. Given the contested nature of reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland, the interviews sought to identify the extent to which ideology was a major factor in the construction of differing ideas of reconciliation. Certainly, there is a perception in Northern Irish politics that the idea of reconciliation is an ideological tool; more precisely, it is a means by which nationalists seek redress for the inequalities of unionist rule before 1972 and direct rule from Westminster thereafter. Therefore, not surprisingly, this political interpretation was expected to be prominent in the discourses articulated in the interviews. Put simply, the way in which reconciliation is interpreted in the different discourses of Northern Irish politics is closely related to the ideological stance of the interpreter. Thus, while the general idea of reconciliation often appears in positive terms in societies attempting to emerge from long periods of political conflict, the idea appears to have less cachet in Northern Irish politics. There may be many reasons for this but one is that, despite the relative success of the Northern Ireland peace process, neither side (if the conflict can be construed in such simplistic terms) has been willing to accept culpability for the wrongdoing that would be reconciled. This is particularly important because it potentially implicates the British government which has been striving to present itself as an impartial, honest broker between the competing parties over the last twenty years.

Before proceeding to examine reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland in more depth, it is worth expanding a little on the interpretation of ideology which underpins this paper. The work of Michael Freeden is particularly important in framing this interpretation.³ Freeden articulates a morphological understanding of ideology whereby ideologies are never treated as artefacts or established bodies of thought. Instead, Freeden construes ideologies as dynamic, constantly reconfiguring entities in which the bodies of knowledge established in the past interact with the reformulation of political ideas in the present and the shifting social context in which ideas are applied. From this perspective, ideologies are never static but are constantly being reinterpreted by their advocates and critics in a way that ensures their constant renewal for better or worse.

More recently, Freeden (2005) has developed these ideas to make some comments on the changing nature of political theory and ideology more generally. He argues that there are three central dimensions that ensure that, despite the best intentions of advocates of particular ideologies, the central tenets of any ideology are inevitably in a process of flux. These dimensions, based upon the nature of political theory, are ambiguity, indeterminacy and inconclusiveness. Taking the first of these dimensions in addressing the ideological nature of any political argument, Freeden contends that we need to recognize that ideological statements are ambiguous. Ideological arguments may be accidentally or purposefully ambiguous depending on the particular end of the interlocutor. Because ideologies mean different things to different people, it is very difficult to evade ambiguity as a constitutive factor in ideological formations. Similarly, political actors who attempt to enter processes of disambiguation of ideological argument

need to face up to the fact that their disambiguations are likely to be interpreted differently by various agents. Thus, while there is nothing wrong with attempts at ideological disambiguation, Freedden argues that ideologies are at least partially constituted by such theoretical differences which enable the continual process of working out precisely what an ideology stands for. By this account, the ambiguous nature of ideologies can be more or less disambiguated through iterative processes of political argumentation which means that it is always possible that less ambiguous conceptions of an ideology can be developed even if completely unambiguous conceptions are unlikely to be agreed upon.

The second dimension of the theoretical analysis of political ideologies that Freedden identifies is indeterminacy. By this term he indicates the fluid and changing nature of political ideas that entails ‘an inevitable and ineliminable contingency of meaning’ (Freedden 2005: 118). This reflects the point that certain elements of uncertainty and ambiguity might be eradicable but that the nature of political ideas is such that the terms that are used in processes of disambiguation are themselves highly contingent. Thus, while the possibility of disambiguation exists, the conflictual and dissensual dimension of political concepts means that the terrain upon which attempts to disambiguate take place is unstable and liable to change. This aspect of indeterminacy which is inherent to the contested nature of political concepts means that even if scenarios could be established that enabled a stable process of disambiguation to take place (which is unlikely), the complex and changing nature of political concepts, institutional architecture and environment is such that new dimensions of political disagreement would interject into a stabilized environment to unsettle and disrupt the established order (Little 2008a). This is where the third dimension of Freedden’s argument is pivotal: that is, the notion of inconclusiveness. Inconclusiveness refers to the ‘impossibility of reaching an end point in an argumentative chain or string’ (Freedden 2005) whereby processes of interpretation and reinterpretation are completed. Instead, Freedden suggests that definitive meanings can never be established that cannot be reconsidered and reformulated to meet the changing circumstances in which they evolve. This is an interpretation of ideology that is clearly highly contingent but it is also dynamic and suited to the shifting parameters of political debate and the inevitable changes in meaning of concepts and ideologies which they engender.

There were three main objectives in undertaking this research through the methodological and theoretical approach outlined above. Firstly, this research sets out to examine the dynamic nature of political ideologies in Northern Ireland through analysis of a variety of political discourses on the idea of reconciliation expounded by representatives of different political parties. While it was expected that there would be reflections of political ideology in the discourses articulated by party representatives, the research set out to examine the path dependent aspects of interpretations of reconciliation i.e. reflections of traditional frameworks of meaning and interpretation in a particular ideological tradition (Ruane and Todd 2007, Little 2008b) and the shifts that were taking place in the political ideologies of Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Secondly, it was intended that the outcomes of this research would enable the development of future studies comparing Northern Ireland reconciliation

discourses and processes with those in other conflict scenarios. And thirdly, the research was designed to figure out precisely what reconciliation might mean in the context of Northern Ireland.

Discourses of reconciliation in Northern Ireland

It is not surprising that notions such as reconciliation can generate polarized responses in conflictual societies such as Northern Ireland. Indeed, it would be reasonable to expect that societies with deep divisions which help to structure social and political discourses would see those structural schisms reflected in the discussion of contentious notions such as reconciliation. It was not unexpected then that the interviews carried out with the representatives of Northern Ireland's political parties generated a multiplicity of responses on the idea of reconciliation but, as we shall see, it is worth reflecting on the diversity of the articulations of reconciliation and the animosity that the idea encouraged amongst some respondents which suggested that it would fuel political unrest rather than resolve it. This last point suggests that the discussion of reconciliation in Northern Ireland needs to be framed in terms of conflict transformation as a concept such as this which is deemed to be politically loaded is unlikely to be able to 'resolve' conflict.

In the process of interviewing representatives of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, it became clear that there was very little common ground between them. Not only did they address the idea of reconciliation from perspectives that reflected their location within the ethno-national political divide, but it was equally apparent that considerable differences existed within the main categories that are established according to the idea of Northern Ireland as divided between two ethno-national groupings (Little 2004, 2008b). So, in general, discourses of reconciliation were not regarded as the territory upon which new common ground could be established and instead they tended to be filtered through ideological prisms as well as the political pressures that faced particular political parties. In its simplest terms, reconciliation tended to be viewed by unionists/loyalists as part of a nationalist/republican agenda that threatened the fragile peace accord of the 1990s whereas nationalists/republicans tended to argue in favour of reconciliation but only on the grounds that it was substantive and involved the recognition of wrongdoing across the political spectrum (including government agencies) rather than merely focusing on the actions of paramilitary organisations. Indeed, as we shall see, the separation of government from paramilitary organisations was a bugbear for republicans in particular.

Unionist perspectives

The main unionist parties were critical of notions of reconciliation but in different ways that reflect the ideological division within unionism in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party which was the governing party in Northern Ireland from its inception until 1972 has traditionally been the dominant actor both in unionist politics generally and specifically in the relationship between unionists in Northern Ireland and politicians in the rest of the United Kingdom. Many unionists were relatively comfortable with direct rule from Westminster after 1972 but the peace process of the 1990s with a promise of a return of devolved power to Northern offered both threats and opportunities. Under the

leadership of David Trimble in the 1990s the UUP decided to engage in the peace process and with their former enemies in the republican movement. The UUP supported the Good Friday Agreement and Trimble became First Minister when the power-sharing executive or grand coalition was eventually formed (Wilford 2001). Since that time, however, as unionist voters have become more skeptical about - if not totally opposed to - the provisions of the Agreement, the electoral fortunes of the UUP have suffered dramatically (Patterson 2004). The upshot of this radical decline in the electoral fortunes of the UUP has led to a reconfiguration of the Northern Irish political landscape. The UUP is no longer the dominant party and cannot rely on a particularly influential position vis-a-vis the British government.

In this context the UUP is wary of going further down the path of accommodating the demands of nationalists because their electorate appears to be drifting towards their main Unionist opponent, the more radical and rejectionist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The UUP has suffered to some extent from its preparedness to enter into negotiations with republicans and to make the leap into the unknown of forming a grand governing coalition with its sworn enemies. Not surprisingly then, notions of reconciliation which are deemed to be areas where republicans have made the running are treated with some caution amongst the UUP. This is consistent with the Burkean conservative dimension of Ulster Unionist politics whereby the party has traditionally adopted a rather pragmatic and piecemeal approach to issues in Northern Irish politics and has been skeptical of attempts to frame a big political idea such as reconciliation as the driving force of change. The nervousness that the UUP feels about notions of reconciliation is accompanied by a feeling of contentment about peace itself insofar as their primary objective in the peace process was to bring about the end of armed conflict (Interview 1).

That said however, some notion of reconciliation is at work in UUP thinking although it tends to be couched in the more familiar unionist language of remembrance particularly for those who lost their lives fighting for Britain in the 20th Century (particularly the first World War) and more recently civilians and members of the security forces who were killed during the 'Troubles' (Fay, Morrissey and Smyth 1999). This notion of remembrance focuses on those who were either fighting for the forces of legitimacy and democracy on the one hand or those deemed to be innocent victims of the strife in Northern Ireland. While these victims of conflict both within Northern Ireland and beyond undoubtedly need to be remembered and recognized in any notion of reconciliation, there is a marked reluctance from the UUP to engage with the idea of reconciliation in Northern Ireland that accepts any blame or responsibility for wrongdoing in the formation of Northern Ireland or the more recent 'Troubles'. Remembrance is a comfortable and traditional discourse for the UUP to inhabit and there was and is little evidence of a willingness to move beyond those traditional parameters which reinforce the role of unionists in the protection of the British state whether within Northern Ireland or in broader conflicts.

This feeds into a broader unionist concern that nationalist driven processes of reconciliation would seek to recognize and remember all victims of the 'Troubles' in such a way as to create moral equivalence between them. This is dangerous for the UUP

because it provides participants in the ‘Troubles’ with an authentic status as victims: ‘unionism just can’t go there; once you legitimise everyone, you feel you are being dragged into legitimising something you just can’t legitimise’ (Interview 1). For Ulster Unionists then, a position where IRA volunteers who died are regarded as morally equivalent to civilians or policemen or part-time soldiers is not tenable. The problem here is that a reading of victimhood based on moral equivalence during the ‘Troubles’ erodes the identity and self-understanding of unionism. Where some notion of moral equivalence clearly informs republican arguments, there is a completely different narrative in the unionist reading of the history of Northern Ireland. For the Ulster Unionists the existence of these separate narratives precludes the kind of shared discourse that reconciliation might require.

While the UUP clearly struggles to accept the kinds of implications that reconciliation might have for Northern Irish politics, it does see itself as the more progressive wing of unionism in Northern Ireland. The major difference that the UUP sees with the DUP is that the former is less willing to tolerate sectarianism and that it recognizes that there needs to be some form of reconciliation even if that is undefined (Interview 1). On this account, there may well be aspects of a variety of political processes that contain elements of reconciliation. In the interview their representative discussed the ways in which political processes of deliberation and legislating with people over shared problems in everyday politics brings a form of reconciliation in itself. This, then, is not about grappling with the major issues of the past but establishing a *modus vivendi* that enables collaboration in tackling contemporary issues and problems. For the UUP this is more important than a sanitized understanding of reconciliation whereby certain issues around religion and politics become inappropriate topics for discussion (such as in many workplaces). Instead, reconciliation is only a meaningful process if it tackles divisive issues head on and avoids mealy mouthed compromises. The UUP suggests that working together on contemporary political issues helps to create spaces where the wrongdoing of the past may eventually be tackled but Northern Ireland is clearly not at such a juncture now.

The ideological understanding of the UUP then is that it is a less sectarian party than its main opponent within unionism, the DUP. To some extent this perception was reinforced by the representative with the DUP but the interview also demonstrated an open and explicit rejection of the idea of reconciliation that may also have underpinned the agenda of the UUP. Therefore, in analyzing the discourses established within unionism, we must bear in mind the possibility that we are interpreting a difference of style and strategy rather than a fundamental ideological schism. The movement of prominent (but rejectionist) UUP members like Jeffrey Donaldson to the DUP in recent years may also be a signal that the variation between the parties is not fundamentally ideological. Certainly, while the DUP contains many rejectionist members, it is equally clear that this perspective is also at work within the UUP. So, perhaps, in this particular area at least, the DUP can be differentiated from the UUP on the basis of its willingness to be transparent in its rejection of power-sharing initiatives (or, in the light of events in the last year, only prepared to engage in them for strategic reasons). The UUP, on the other hand,

would argue that its leadership at least has recognised the inherent value of power-sharing rather than treating it as a tactical option of last resort.

The DUP (particularly in the shape of its figurehead and erstwhile leader Ian Paisley) has been explicit about their fears concerning the peace process in general and, more particularly, the Good Friday Agreement and its outcomes. Not surprisingly then, the idea of reconciliation rings alarm bells with members of the DUP who tend to regard reconciliation as a nationalist agenda designed to blame unionists for the 'Troubles'. Like the UUP, the representative of the DUP had no truck with a process that might lead to the view that all of the losses during the 'Troubles' were morally equivalent. The obverse of this argument is, of course, that republicans were to blame for thirty years of unrest and political violence. What became clear, however, during the course of the interview was that the DUP envisaged reconciliation as a process that would involve political developments towards an accommodation of the demands and understandings of both sides of the ethno-national divide in Northern Irish society. Reconciliation was therefore not rejected out of hand but set within a more ambitious context that saw reconciliation as an outcome of the process rather than an ingredient within it. This is a fundamental issue in general understandings of reconciliation and what it might contribute to processes of either conflict transformation or resolution.

The temporal dimension of reconciliation is particularly important to unionists because they perceive the process of reconciliation that was part of the 1990s peace process to have been precipitate. Thus, the DUP interviewee in particular emphasized the fact that discourses of reconciliation began long before political violence had ended and, indeed, the reconciliation agenda was perceived to be driven by paramilitary organizations that were still operational at that time (Interview 6). This has generated considerable suspicion of the idea within unionism generally and the DUP in particular. Indeed, the representative of the DUP suggested that at the outset of the peace process, the party had not really comprehended the concept and were more embroiled in fears of nationalist advancement. This politics of fear has been a central element in unionist responses to the rise of Sinn Fein in particular and has periodically left unionist parties on the back foot when various initiatives were taking place (Aughey 2005, Bew 2000). This fear is still pervasive and is given sustenance by events such as the claim of an IRA code of honour that prevented the current Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness from providing full evidence to the Saville Enquiry into Bloody Sunday in 2003.

Like the UUP, the DUP are skeptical of the construction of a shared narrative of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. This is not to say that such narratives are necessarily precluded but that they could only emerge over a long period of time of peaceful coexistence. Indeed, in recognizing that there is a 'spectrum of victimhood' (Interview 6), the DUP representative explicitly stated that not only is reconciliation a distant prospect, but that even official processes of remembrance should be restricted to 'innocent victims', civilians and members of the security forces who died through no fault of their own. There was little recognition then that decisions about who fits into these categories is rather subjective and that the inclusion of some of those deemed 'innocent' by the DUP was unlikely to be reciprocated on the other side of the ethno-national divide. This

reflects one of the central problems of reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland, namely, that the two ethno-national blocs are, at least partially, defined in terms of not being the other. Reconciliation processes which seek to challenge these narrative constructions of ethno-national identities are then likely to face strong opposition.

While opposed to nationalist driven processes of reconciliation, like the UUP, the DUP was keen to point out that reconciliatory processes may be under way even if they are not distinctively labeled as part of a reconciliation process. For the DUP, the decision to enter government with Sinn Fein was deeply symbolic and represented a seismic shift in the party's attitude towards republicans. Thus, while recognizing that this process did not amount to reconciliation or the forging of a shared narrative, the DUP representative suggested that an important process of building trust was under way which might provide a basis for more definitive reconciliation activities in the future (Interview 6). At its simplest, the DUP believes that not enough time has elapsed since the 'Troubles' for people to be in a position to reconcile. Perhaps, for the time being, an objective of 'disagreeing in a more mannerly fashion' (Interview 6) might be the best that can be achieved. Thus, for the DUP there needed to be more explicit recognition of the lack of foundations for a reconciliation process and the fact that different people would want to see different things emerge out of such a process.

Nationalist perspectives

To some extent, unionists are accurate in interpreting reconciliation as part of a nationalist agenda. This should not be surprising as nationalist actors have been the primary advocates of reconciliation processes, are likely to couch their struggle in the light of other conflicts such as South Africa⁴ where reconciliation has been more prominent, and tend to argue for more thorough processes of reconciliation than have occurred in Northern Ireland thus far. Where unionists have been able to construct remembrance processes as a way of establishing a separation between deaths and victims who should legitimately be remembered and those who were in one way or another viewed as illegitimate participants in the 'Troubles', nationalists tend to want to establish the moral equivalence of all victims. Moderate nationalists tend to view reconciliation as a means of establishing a common foundation recognizing that everyone suffered and that Northern Irish society needs to move on from its historical disagreements. More radical nationalists want to see a more stringent interpretation of reconciliation that, not only reflects the culpability of the British state in some of the events that took place during the 'Troubles' but also, and more specifically, identifies collusion between the British state and loyalist paramilitaries.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party is the most significant moderate nationalist party in Northern Ireland⁵. Its founders were active in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement in the 1960s and it has been deeply involved in most of the peace initiatives during the 'Troubles' such as the Sunningdale Agreement (1973) and the power-sharing executive in 1974. Not surprisingly then, the SDLP was a pivotal actor in the 1990s peace process and was a firm supporter of the Good Friday Agreement (Farren 2000). Thus, the party tends to see itself as moderate and prepared to enter into cross-community conflict

transformation processes. This includes notions of reconciliation involving parties on all sides and the two governments recognizing their culpability for the political scenario in Northern Ireland that gave rise to thirty years of violence and bloodshed.

To some extent, the SDLP likes to see itself as an honest broker between the competing interests in Northern Ireland. It tends to highlight the wrongdoings of others but also its willingness to act in good faith to condemn violence to history. The party therefore fervently supports reconciliation; indeed as its vision statement makes clear, the SDLP sees reconciliation as fundamental to its objectives:

The SDLP's vision is a reconciled people living in a united, prosperous and just new Ireland.

As the party of civil rights, the SDLP is working for an Ireland free from poverty, prejudice and injustice; a vibrant country of energy, enterprise and endeavour, where economic prosperity delivers better public services and greater opportunities for all.

The SDLP wants to build an Ireland where conflict, violence and sectarianism become footnotes to our past; where reconciliation, equality and inclusion are chapter headings in the new story we will write together. We will build a better Ireland where we truly cherish all the children of the nation equally.

The SDLP wants this generation and those that will follow to live in an Ireland that stands tall in the world as a champion of global justice, environmental protection and sustainable development; an Ireland that stands out as a beacon of hope for peace, democracy, human rights and respect for diversity.

www.sdlp.ie/about_vision.php

Accessed on 12 May 2008

While the commitment of the SDLP to reconciliation is clear, there is little in this statement and other party documents to suggest that the party recognizes that all actors had a role – either witting or unwitting – in the nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The failure to recognize that this is the case leads to a perception of the SDLP as somewhat sanctimonious in the way in which it deals with these issues in relation to other parties especially those that were open combatants. A participant in the reconciliation organization, *Healing Through Remembering*, recounts a member of the SDLP referring to their party as ‘the only party with nothing to hide’ (Interview 5). While the SDLP may not have had the same kind of direct role in the conflict as some other parties and organizations, that is not to say that it should not play a strong role in reconciliation processes as an actor that needs to reconcile with others. The conflict in Northern Ireland was not just about obvious acts of physical violence but also operated on the level of the symbolic with a wide range of articulations and discourses of sectarianism, mistrust and animosity. This broader understanding of the conflict was something that the SDLP was as bound up with as any other political actor and undermines its claims to be acting as an honest broker in reconciliation debates.

Not surprisingly, Provisional Sinn Fein provide a more radical and developed understanding of reconciliation than the more conciliatory agenda of the SDLP. In some respects, we might guess that is because they do not have a lot to lose given the common perception in Northern Ireland that the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) – part of the military wing of republicanism – was at least partially, if not fundamentally, to blame for the ‘Troubles’. Moreover, on a general level, republicans are willing to accept their role in the conflict although, as became clear during the Bloody Sunday inquiry, that did not necessarily extend to explaining specific instances of operational activities. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that republicans are well aware of the way in which many people, if not most, see them as largely culpable anyway so any process of reconciliation is welcome as it is likely to distribute responsibility more widely than is currently the case. Specifically, reconciliation processes might place a greater onus on the British government to accept its responsibility for Northern Ireland (from its inception through the 1920 Government of Ireland Act) and highlight the wrongdoings of the state in a manner akin to the usual allocation of blame to republicans.

In the interview with a representative of Sinn Fein some new issues were raised that had not appeared in the discourses of the other parties. Thus, for example, the representative sought to place reconciliation in a ‘broader, deeper’ context whereby reconciliation could only be viewed as national reconciliation in the 32 counties of Ireland rather than within Northern Ireland alone. Moreover, rather than merely criticizing reconciliation on the basis of its origins in the ethno-national division of Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein challenged the concept on the basis that it was interpreted as a ‘woolly, middle class concept’ whereby important political processes were reduced to the idea of shaking hands and moving on (Interview 5). While Sinn Fein was aware that many unionists saw reconciliation as a ‘republican Trojan horse’, it was concerned with outreach to unionists as a means of breaking down the walls that impeded trust and mutual understanding. Thus, even within republicanism, there was an awareness that the term ‘reconciliation’ was potentially divisive and possibly harmful to processes that might be seen as reconciliatory.

In further discussion of reconciliation discourses with Sinn Fein, it became clear that there was one over-arching item that dominated their agenda and that was the issue of collusion during the ‘Troubles’ between elements of the British state and loyalist paramilitaries. The representative claimed that the British state had ‘sponsored, controlled, directed, armed, trained and used unionist paramilitaries to reinforce the conflict’ (Interview 5). Thus, for Sinn Fein, the British government which has accepted no culpability for the events of the ‘Troubles’ was implicated – whether directly or indirectly – in the activities of loyalist paramilitaries who had killed 1100 people most of whom were innocent Catholic civilians. Seventeen years after the dubious murder of the lawyer Pat Finucane in North Belfast, the British government was still denying direct links to loyalist paramilitaries (despite evidence to the contrary) and had thereby lost trust and credibility in both communities. For Sinn Fein, the only possible way of addressing this was an international investigation.⁶

What became clear in discussing the issue of reconciliation with the representative of Sinn Fein was not only a critical stance towards reconciliation debates as they had emerged in Northern Ireland (perhaps the only thing that all parties did agree on), but also the willingness to accept alternative readings of the ‘Troubles’. Republicans then did not want to construct a ‘hierarchy of victimhood’ where some victims were seen as more authentic and legitimate than others. Indeed, the Sinn Fein representative argued that all the pressure groups on victimhood in Northern Ireland were legitimate even those that were fervently anti-republican such as Families Acting for Innocent Relatives⁷ which did construct a hierarchy of victimhood (Interview 5). Thus, in explaining the lessons of the peace process in respect to reconciliation, the representative of Sinn Fein explained that while ‘it is a long, difficult, torturous road with lots of obstacles, pitfalls and near collapses ...’ (Interview 5), the clear lesson was that political actors needed to talk to their enemies regardless of how difficult that process was.

As with unionism, the interviews demonstrated that the division in Northern Irish politics was not just along ethno-national lines (although that certainly exists), but also between the main representatives in each of the ethno-national categories. This is not surprising but it makes the situation more complex than a simple schism between Protestant, British, unionists on one side and Catholic, Irish, nationalists on the other. In the analysis of nationalist discourses of reconciliation, it became clear that other ideological elements were part of the division and the two most prominent of these were issues around social class and the willingness to accept culpability for the events of the ‘Troubles’. To explicate these further divisions, I turned to two further minority parties to examine whether their interpretations of reconciliation helped to shed further light on the problem.

The minor parties

While this stage of the research was not exhaustive, some interesting points and shared (conflictual) discourses came out of interviews with parties that, while small, represented significant differences from the organization of Northern Irish politics into two ethno-national blocs. The parties concerned could hardly be more different: the Alliance Party which is the primary party of the centre ground in Northern Ireland and the Progressive Unionist Party which represented working class Protestants and had emerged as the political wing of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). While the responses of these interviewees were fundamentally at odds with one another, in different ways they helped to undermine the notion of Northern Irish politics as a conflict between two monolithic ethno-national blocs.

During the ‘Troubles’ the Alliance Party provided the voice of the middle ground of Northern Irish politics. Overtly steering away from sectarianism and definition along ethno-national lines, the Alliance has sought to plot a course between the demands of the two ethno-national blocs. Ultimately, the Alliance has tended to support the union with Great Britain on the grounds of stability and majority will in Northern Ireland but has signaled a clear willingness to countenance alternative constitutional arrangements. Like the Ulster Unionists, the representative of the Alliance voiced support for reconciliatory processes but was wary that they might impede political progress by sidetracking political

debates into areas that might open up conflict rather than reduce it (Interview 4). Generally then, the Alliance was interested in the practicalities of reconciliation but was less concerned with working out the high principles that might underpin the process.

Unlike the other parties in Northern Ireland, the Alliance is primarily focused on transforming Northern Ireland into a more orthodox liberal democratic society and polity. This has engendered some suspicion among Alliance Party circles that a process of reconciliation might reinforce perceptions of Northern Ireland as polarized between two monolithic blocs whereas it would prefer a shift towards a modern pluralist, multicultural society. In Alliance discourse then, Northern Ireland should be encouraging new forms of sharing rather than the reconciliation of older divisions (Interview 4). This reflects a skepticism about the religious undertones of the term 'reconciliation' when, the Alliance argues, Northern Ireland should be moving towards a more secular self-understanding. In the same vein the idea of facilitating tolerance in Northern Ireland which has been a primary objective of many actors during the peace process should be relinquished in favour of a more thorough notion of respect.⁸

The overarching theme of the interview with the Alliance representative was that it may be too difficult to achieve reconciliation or a shared narrative on the events of the past in Northern Ireland. The terminology of reconciliation is too loaded and it inspires fear and defensiveness among unionists worried that they will be outsmarted by nationalists. Rather than getting hung up on the past however, the Alliance is much more interested in the question of how political actors in Northern Ireland move forward together in the future (Interview 4). Certainly the transgressions of the past need to be dealt with eventually but the Alliance thinks there are more pressing issues and that opening up the sins of history may stymie the practical problems that face us now. Like the unionist parties then, the Alliance favoured understated processes of reconciliation that involved changing minds by working together on ordinary policy processes rather than an overt reconciliation agenda. This would facilitate a process of liberal individualism that was not as focused on issues of group identity that had held back Northern Irish politics.

While the agenda of the Alliance Party is distinct from the dominant ethno-national schism that pervades Northern Irish politics, its liberal individualist approach is not easy to reconcile with the practical political issues on the ground. In light of the lack of proximity of this liberal mindset, it is interesting to note that a different alternative reading of reconciliation in Northern Ireland came from a party that is rather distinct from the middle ground analysis of the Alliance, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP). The interview with the representative of the PUP also moved debate beyond the dominant ethno-national paradigm. By focusing on the class inequalities of Northern Irish society, the PUP argued that reconciliation could only be a meaningful process if it involved investment in infrastructure, education, community services, health and public transport to make reconciliation a meaningful idea across the social divisions of Northern Ireland. The argument here was that the peace dividend that emerged from Northern Ireland in the late 1990s had undoubtedly improved the aggregative condition of Northern Irish society but that the fruits of the dividend were distributed extremely unevenly.

The PUP representative presented a simultaneously pragmatic yet ambitious depiction of reconciliation (Interview 3). Like many other interviewees he recognised the absence of an overarching morality in Northern Ireland that might possibly give rise to a shared narrative under the rubric of reconciliation. Like Sinn Fein, the PUP interviewee suggested that the debate around victimhood and attempts to construct a hierarchy or taxonomy of victimhood were problematic. What mattered was that people *were* victims regardless of how others viewed that status. On this basis, it was not the answer to ask people to abandon their long-held self-understanding or the foundations of their identity as some reconciliation advocates suggested. Instead, we needed to move beyond victimhood as the primary qualification for reconciliation and focus more explicitly on human rights and equality.

A further issue that particularly differentiated the PUP approach from the Alliance was the explicit argument for tolerance as the immediate objective in Northern Ireland. Where the Alliance focused on more ambitious characterizations of respect, the PUP, perhaps reflecting the constituency it represents, suggests that in the first instance at least tolerance is as much as can be expected.⁹ However, this advocacy of tolerance was not constructed in a negative light. Instead, the interviewee from the PUP suggested that Northern Ireland was finally in a place to think about tolerating difference. The parameters of political debate were now more or less agreed and some kind of ‘conflictual consensus’ was emerging. This reinforced the view of reconciliation as a ‘way of life’ rather than an institutional process – reconciliation takes us to ‘a rubicon and then another rubicon and then another rubicon ... it’s a process of life so there’s no end to it’ (Interview 3). While broader notions of respect might emanate at a later stage of this development, Northern Ireland was currently only able to think in terms of tolerance at this point in time as far as the PUP was concerned.

Conclusion

In the analysis of reconciliation discourses in Northern Ireland we can see that there is very little agreement concerning the precise nature of reconciliation and what it entails politically. What is evident is the way in which reconciliation is used as an ideological tool by different actors to shore up their perspective. This makes it difficult to view reconciliation as a positive process in Northern Irish politics. Instead, the concept is used across the political spectrum as a way of framing and reinforcing the established political parameters. Reconciliation is used to buttress identity claims and forms of self-definition and the definition of others. What became clear in the analysis of Northern Irish discourses on reconciliation is the way in which opposing forces come together to reify the existing political order. Or, more philosophically, we see evidence of the Deleuzian concept of ‘disjunctive synthesis’ – ‘the co-dependence of radically exclusive positions’ (Žižek 2004).

What this suggests in Northern Ireland and elsewhere is that reconciliation is not the light at the end of the tunnel of ethno-national division. Instead, reconciliation discourses are part and parcel of the framing of Northern Irish politics such that they not only emanate from established senses of identity but also reinforce them. Thus, depending on one’s

perspective, reconciliation is actually part of the ideological armory that characterizes political interaction in Northern Ireland. Thus, while reconciliation is undoubtedly a part of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, it is misguided to view reconciliation as a panacea to problems of political conflict and competing identities. In the context of Northern Ireland the terminology of reconciliation is very heavily loaded and its reputation as a Trojan horse for nationalist claims against wrongdoing perpetrated by unionists and the British state cannot be ignored. Of course, these issues need to be addressed but the interviews conducted with the main political parties in Northern Ireland suggest that reconciliation might not be the most appropriate vehicle for this process.

Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is usually understood within the established ideological parameters of the conflict. The evidence presented here suggests that reconciliation in Northern Ireland reflects Freedden's view that ideological discourses are often ambiguous, indeterminate and inconclusive. This problem is exacerbated by the intersection between ideology and group identity whereby political ideas overlap with the defining characteristics of political identities. This is a scenario which has enabled a 'zero sum game' mentality to flourish in Northern Ireland whereby any perceived gain by one community is inevitably construed as a loss to the other. Notions of reconciliation are played out within this framework and it is thereby not surprising that they have had a limited role in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland and have few supporters in terms of driving the peace process in the future.

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Interviews:

Interview 1 with a representative of the Ulster Unionist Party, 5 December 2006.

Interview 2 with a representative of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, 6 December 2006.

Interview 3 with a representative of the Progressive Unionist Party, 8 December 2006.

Interview 4 with a representative of the Alliance Party, 8 December 2006.

Interview 5 with a representative of Sinn Fein, 11 December 2006.

Interview 6 with a representative of the Democratic Unionist Party, 11 December 2006.

Notes

¹ In particular, post-structuralism enables a critically reflective form of interpretation. For discussion of and critical reflection on interpretivism, see Bevir and Rhodes (2003), Hay (2002) and, from a post-structuralist perspective, Finlayson (2004).

² Interviews were conducted in December 2006. A second stage of the process will focus more on civil society organisations and pressure groups (including victims' groups, women's groups, anti-racist organisations, gay and lesbian activists, groups supporting the rehabilitation of offenders, etc.).

³ See also Connolly (2006).

⁴ I did ask interviewees about the relationship between Northern Ireland and other reconciliation processes such as those in South Africa. While there is no space to discuss this issue in detail here, the general theme of the responses was that nationalists/republicans drew inspiration from the initiative - if not the outcomes - of the South African process. Unionists, on the other hand, maintained that there was no comparison with South Africa on the grounds that there was no moral ambiguity around the fact that apartheid was wrong whereas the Northern Ireland situation was more messy (Interview 1). Others pointed out that processes could not be transplanted from one complex situation to another and that the conflict in Northern Ireland was too raw and recent to go down the truth and reconciliation pathway (Interview 6).

⁵ Unfortunately the representative of the SDLP that I interviewed was not able to provide the kind of detailed responses that the research required.

⁶ For more information the Finucane case, see www.serve.com/pfc/

⁷ For more information on FAIR, see www.victims.org.uk

⁸ See Middleton (2004) for further discussion of how respect differs from toleration.

⁹ For a critical discussion of the downside of tolerance, see Brown (2006).