

10 March 1988

Dr Anthony Tomei
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15 MAR 1988

Dear Mr Tomei

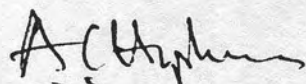
Please find enclosed a revised copy of our proposal "Analysing Political Relationships in Northern Ireland."

We have taken account of your comments at our meeting on 25 February, particularly in the section "Project Development", and we hope it is now clearer. If you have any comments or questions, please let us know.

As Clem McCartney explained to you today on the telephone, we have had a little difficulty in processing the revised proposal through the University system in time to meet your deadline of this week-end. The only outstanding requirement of the University is the approval of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research) who has been away.

The enclosed proposal is therefore a firm application for a grant from the Nuffield Foundation subject to the Pro-Vice Chancellor's approval. He will be back on Monday and should be able to deal with it quickly. In the unlikely event of any problems we will let you know.

Yours sincerely



A.C. HEPBURN (Dr.)
ACTING DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CONFLICT

ANALYSING POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This proposal describes a project to link academics with key actors in the Northern Ireland inter-communal conflict in a systematic and sustained way, in order to examine the roots of current thinking, and present and possible future positions. The project aims to facilitate conflict resolution initiatives through individual consultations and workshops involving the relevant parties.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

There have been a number of attempts to contribute to a resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland by, among others, government officials, church groups, and academics. Some of these had a measure of success, while others appear to have had a negative impact on the situation. Clearly, the level of conflict is still high, and the parties to the conflict have been able to maintain only limited and sporadic contact with each other. There are grounds for believing that now is an opportune time to make a fresh effort to facilitate communication and dialogue, and various efforts to that end are going on.

There has been no universally acceptable meeting ground through most of the 1980's. The Northern Ireland Assembly might have fulfilled this role, though some of the political parties did not attend, and, since its dissolution, even that option no longer exists.

Some of the parties to the conflict are showing signs of uncertainty about future directions. This may be related to the Anglo-Irish Agreement which has been in existence for two years. It has challenged the parties' basic assumptions both about long term goals and about political strategies and tactics. This is particularly apparent on the unionist side. The protests and reactions to the Agreement have had little effect, and now there is some re-thinking taking place, as evidenced by the "Common Sense" document of the Ulster Defence Association and the constitutional unionist parties' "Task Force" report. Concomitantly, there has been a breakdown in party discipline, and uncertainty about how best to handle the internal tensions. There also appear to be tensions within Sinn Fein, though this is less a consequence of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It is focused on uncertainty about the continued tenability of the combination of the "ballot box and bullet" strategy. Consequently, there is a role for external facilitators in helping the individual parties to re-assess their positions and priorities in the light of internal differences, as well as in contributing to inter-party communication.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is significant for another reason. Under its own terms it is due for review in November, 1988. This gives the parties an opportunity to influence future arrangements, but limits the time available for them to clarify their thinking and formulate their responses.

THE PROJECT AND THE UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

It is therefore an appropriate time to introduce a new initiative, and the University of Ulster is an appropriate location for such a project. The University, the Centre for the Study of Conflict (see Appendix 1), and the members of the project group are acceptable to the different parties, and individual members of the group have established links already with some of the main actors, both at community and leadership levels. Coming from an academic setting, there is no possibility that the project group would try to usurp the role of the parties, or try to impose its own solution. The project would have no power in that sense. There are other individuals and groups who have been making their own contribution to facilitating dialogue, and the project would wish to co-operate with them. But the unique contribution of this initiative is that it is the first systematic and sustained intervention by a multi-disciplinary group of locally-based academics using a rationale based on the problem-solving approach.

RATIONALE

The project is based on assumptions about conflict in general and the situation in Northern Ireland. It accepts that the positions adopted by the parties to the conflict are honest attempts to meet their concerns and perceived needs, and to resolve the situation. They must be respected as such, even though they may be unacceptable to the other parties or to outside observers for ethical or practical reasons. It recognises that the development of sectional thinking and the polarisation of the parties often results from processes in inter group relations which can inhibit examination of all aspects of the issues, and these blocks may be of greater significance than the substantive issues in dispute.

In protracted social conflicts the involvement of third parties is needed to counter these destructive processes. One example is the way that the parties distance themselves psychologically from the others by stereotyping and scapegoating. This can lead to the "dehumanising" of opponents or to the creation of a "devil image" that might become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another process has been called entrapment, and arises because people invest too much of their credibility in a particular course of action and therefore become locked into a confrontational posture. This can become a particular problem when communications are poor between leaders and the general membership of their interest group, so that the leaders fall back on familiar slogans which will be easily understood by their supporters.

Another inhibiting process is the strengthening of in-group solidarity, which is often intensified by the strong emotional feelings the conflict provokes. This leads to an atmosphere where it becomes difficult to resist pressures to conform unquestioningly and this, in turn, makes it difficult to propose in public more imaginative solutions to conflict situations.

A fourth feature of conflicts is the breakdown in communication between the parties. Partly this is a result of the factors already

discussed, so that people become committed to their own rhetoric and select information to reinforce their existing beliefs, and partly because of the lack of opportunity to communicate informally with opponents and to recognise the influence of the normal blocks which inhibit clear communication. Because of all these processes constructive dialogue between the parties becomes difficult, and very often will only be possible because of the involvement of third parties who can help to re-establish such dialogue and enable the sides to think about alternative solutions to their problems.

In the light of these constraints the task of the project is to create conditions and a framework within which parties can explore the issues and the perspectives of the parties, preferably in dialogue with each other.

PROCEDURES

The development of the project will combine analysis of the situation and discussions with key participants. The analytical aspect will help to identify significant interests and key participants, using a test of whether the group has the ability to sabotage any outcomes, and therefore has a de facto power of veto. It will also identify appropriate points of entry for examining the conflict. The interactive aspect will form the basis for the analysis of the situation, and will offer a procedure for reflecting back the experience of the project to participants.

At one level the project team will be reactive. The rationale of the project accepts that there is a plethora of solutions being offered, but the key process in resolving the conflict depends on the participants themselves identifying directions which are generally accepted as satisfying the needs of the parties. Therefore the work of the project is to allow that process to develop. But the project team will also be proactive in the sense that they will take the initiative to establish their contacts with the parties and will endeavour to maintain those contacts even when conditions seem inauspicious.

THE ROLE OF THE PROJECT TEAM

The key function of the team is to facilitate constructive dialogue. They listen and enable participants to explore their thinking about the situation. They seek to understand, but at the same time ask critical questions. They can facilitate communication between participants, and in face to face situations they can structure discussion. They are open with each group about their contacts with others, but they do not speak on behalf of the other group, though occasionally they may pass on simple messages. They are not intermediaries. They do not offer solutions, but assist participants themselves to identify acceptable proposals.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

These factors indicate that the project will be developmental, and one cannot describe precisely the operation of the project. At the same time the project will work within and test the orientations already described, and it is possible to identify phases of work which should follow a natural sequence.

Feasibility Study

This first phase, for which funding is being sought initially, would mainly concentrate on defining the parties which should be involved, and testing the feasibility of the proposal in terms of the willingness of interested people to participate, and their openness to participation by others. It will also begin to look at the issues around which communication could be established, though this work would mainly be done at a later stage. The main activity will be meeting with the parties, explaining the project to them and hearing their views. It is in the nature of this work that one cannot say what the precise outcomes of this process will be, but it is possible to give some indications of the kinds of factors which will be considered.

The main criterion for selection of parties will be the ability to exercise an effective veto over new initiatives, but there will also be an exploration with the different interests as to who they think should be included. Using this criterion, one can immediately identify OUP, DUP, SDLP, Sinn Fein as groups with this veto. It is less certain that the Workers' Party and Alliance Party meet this test. The former's electoral strength is miniscule but growing, while the latter has lost some support since the 1970s. They may, never the less, have a facilitating function, since they are the only significant biconfessional party.

The issue of who should represent each political party is important. Each party will demand parity with the others, and sufficient individuals must be included to allow advocacy of the diversity of opinion within each group and to provide some mutual support. Currently the diversity of opinion within parties is most evident in the unionist groups. On the other hand, too many individuals would become unwieldy in any full conference or workshop. The project would hope to maintain contact with all strands of opinion within each party, but the core contact would be with 2, or at most 3 in each case. The status of participants would be the younger second line leadership. The party leaders are less easy to involve, and theoretical considerations would suggest that they have least room to manoeuvre within their group. In some cases it may prove impossible not to involve the leader of the party. This issue is likely to be less sensitive in relation to other types of groups which may be involved.

If one looks beyond the indigenous political parties four paramilitary groups need to be considered: the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA). Other paramilitary groups could be subsumed under one of the others. The UVF and INLA are shadowy groups, and, although they are capable of carrying out horrendous acts, their significance is always hard to judge. It can be assumed that the IRA position would be represented effectively by Sinn Fein.

The UDA may have a better claim for involvement for three reasons. It has an independent position; it has the paramilitary clout to inflict considerable damage on any developments; and their document "Common Sense" shows their interest in political developments. They have a

number of more "respectable" offshoots which could be invited to represent them: for example the Ulster Political Research Group, or perhaps the Ulster Democratic Loyalist Party.

Both the British and Irish governments are central and would need to be involved, probably through officials. In the past the Irish government might have been objected to as superfluous, but this is no longer the case since the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Government officials offer a bonus, because it is likely that this would be the simplest way to obtain input on the security forces without involving them directly, which could make numbers too unwieldy and would avoid objections to the presence of the army or police.

The other key issue is the acceptability of each party to the others. The most difficult is Sinn Fein, which might be objected to by different groups, though there may be less objection now than in the past. Nevertheless one can state categorically that the government will not cooperate if they are present. One approach which has been used before is the use of proxies.

Mobilisation Phase

The precise nature of this part of the project will be based on the work in the feasibility phase, and separate funding applications will be made at a later date. However one can give some indications of the kinds of activities and issues which will be relevant at this stage. Having established the viability of the project, the main work will be concerned with exploring with the parties what issues they consider important, and what issues they would be willing to discuss. Work will also begin on clarifying the basis and conditions on which participants are able to be involved, including the ground rules for discussion. It is possible to suggest some of the issues around which communication and interaction could be established, but it will only be through the work of this stage that specific issues will be identified as appropriate at this time.

Possible issues can be divided into two categories, those that have direct connection with the inter-community conflict and the politico-constitutional issues, and those which are shared concerns where the inter-community factors impinge only tangentially. Examples of the latter might be agricultural or tourist development. It is on issues like these that often one can see the three local members of the European Parliament presenting a united front. These issues are therefore less contentious, the local groups are interested and read to deal with them, and they seem to be attractive starting points leading into more problematic areas. However, they may be of limited value as experience has shown that the most productive dialogue takes place around topics which are rooted in the basic divisions and focus attention on those divisions.

The precise nature of these issues and the possibility of dealing with them changes from time to time. An obvious current issue is the immanent review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November, because all the parties have to decide what response to make. Issues of security and the roles of the army and police are a constant concern, and recent incidents have made them an even more immediate problem. Discrimination in employment practices has become a more prominent

issue in recent years due to pressure from various sources, and the recent proposals from the government may act as a catalyst to focus attention on the different options for handling the problem. Since the entry of Sinn Fein into district councils, the difficulties in the working of local government have become more obvious. There is no consistent attitude towards opposition parties across councils. All parties feel that they are excluded from power in some areas, even if they dominate in others, and so there may be some potential to explore ways to make local government more broadly based. It may be that work on any of these issues could lead to progress on inter-party relationships generally. The possibility of a devolved government is still described as a long term aim, but it is likely there is limited will to deal with this issue at present, with most groups concentrating on other strategies, and therefore it is not likely to be an initial focus for dialogue.

The project would explore these and other issues with interested parties, agreeing what topics were of immediate concern and how best they might be approached. Many parties have internal conflicts around these issues and there might well be a need for separate in-depth work with them before they reach the stage of being able to explore the topic with outside groups present. Underlying this approach would be a growing emphasis on and recognition of the nature of the basic inter-community issue. Within one year it is hoped that a stage might be reached where formal inter-group dialogue might begin through a series of problem solving workshops.

WORKSHOP PHASE

This phase will not be described in detail here. It will use insights and methods from the experience of different approaches to conflict resolution in many situations, and it will develop a methodology appropriate to the needs of the local situation. At the same time the interaction will be based on the rationale already described and in the problem solving workshop approach developed by John Burton and his colleagues (see ~~D.S.~~ Azar, E. & Burton, J.: International Conflict Resolution: Theory & Practice, Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986). This phase will be based around a series of formal workshops, the outcome of each determining the purpose and form of the next. Between each workshop there will be on-going contact with the participants, unravelling the outcomes and implications of the last meeting and planning the next stage. The workshops will be exploratory, non-decision making sessions, so that the participants feel free to examine alternative proposals without commitment. There will be no possibility of a group being committed to specific action by its representative. However, it is hoped that the workshops may lead into official decision making processes, and the project staff would help to facilitate this transition.

CONSOLIDATION PHASE

This phase could take very different forms, depending on the achievement of the project. If substantial progress has been made, the whole process of resolving the conflict could pass into normal, official, decision making procedures, and the project would assist in this process and ensure that peripheral issues did not remain to undermine this process. If real progress towards agreed new approaches was limited, but the participants felt that they had

achieved a better basis for communication, then the project would be concerned to build on this development as a basis for future dialogue.

If the process had made little progress, then it would be necessary to explore with the participants the reasons for this, in order to identify alternatives and to ensure that the experience did not leave participants unwilling to attempt other ways to deal with the issues of inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland. The other important task in this phase is the preparation of a final report on the project.

STRUCTURE

It is important that the project is as broadly based as possible. The situation is complex, with many dimensions and requires a multi-disciplinary approach. The approaches adopted by the project are also multi-dimensional and require a combination of theoretical and practice perspectives. Because the project will be developmental and reactive in nature, the team needs to recognise the possibility of becoming immersed in day-to-day activities, and losing the wider perspective. All these factors mean that the project must be structured carefully to maintain a constructive balance between the different elements.

The project group, which will determine the overall direction of the project, represents different disciplines and the different campuses of the University. A number of external experts have agreed to be identified with the project, and they will be able to contribute to the project their experience of working in other conflict situations. Background information on personnel associated with the project is given in Appendix 2. 3 or 4 members of the project group will be responsible for the day to day working of the project and they will require teaching relief. As the momentum of the project develops, a research officer will be appointed to work full time with them on the project. They will produce a short bi-monthly report for the full project group to indicate the issues arising.

The Centre for the Study of Conflict will administer the project and funding will be channelled through the Centre.

EVALUATION

Evaluation raises problems because of the need for confidentiality and the sensitivity of much of the material. It would be necessary to re-assure participants in the conflict as to what records would be kept, and what information would not be kept. At the same time the project is testing out important processes and there will be lessons to be learnt from the experience.

There are 3 aspects of the project which it should be possible to evaluate, and they are listed here in order of increasing difficulty:

- An assessment of the approaches and methods of the project
- A survey of participants' views of the contribution of the project
- An analysis of changing political attitudes

FUNDING

This application is for a small seeding grant to set up the project and establish its viability and acceptability. The initial phase will

last until June 1988, and the main project is expected to be ready to commerce in September 1988. One of the initial tasks will be to obtain long term funding, future budgetary headings are indicated, but detailed costings are not included.

Seeding grant: To setting up the project, identification of parties to the dispute, and establishing the credibility and acceptability of the project:

	£
Teaching relief (1 member of staff for 6 months)	480
Part-time research officer	1000
Travel and subsistence	1000
Hospitality	200
Administration	200
Total	2880

Main project - Budget headings

Teaching relief (2 staff part-time for 3 years)
Research officer salary (3 years)
Workshops/conferences
Travel and subsistence
External consultants
Hospitality
Administration

Dr. P. Arthur, Senior Lecturer in Politics
Dr. A.C. Hepburn, Acting Director, Centre for the Study of Conflict
Mr. C. McCartney, Research Officer, Centre for the Study of Conflict
Dr. S. Ryan, Lecturer in Peace Studies, Dept. of History