



written by Martin Mansergh

The Northern Irish Peace Process

Charles Haughey believed in the attainability of a united Ireland by a peaceful coming together of people and made a solution of the Northern Ireland problem his primary political priority.

Both his parents came from Swatragh, Co. Derry, and he claimed 52 northern first cousins. His first political involvement in the problem was as Minister of Justice in 1962, as the IRA border campaign was brought to an end. In the same year, he addressed a student audience in Queen's University Belfast about the protection of minorities both in the Republic and in a united Ireland. He played an active supporting role, following the Lemass-O'Neill exchange of visits in 1965, and as Minister for Agriculture entertained his Northern Ireland counterpart Harry West in his Dublin home.

When the civil rights protests reached their height in August 1969, Charles Haughey sought a pro-active role, but he was not a republican fundamentalist like Neil Blaney or Kevin Boland, nor did he make any public statements on the issue at variance with the leadership.



He was put in charge, as Minister for Finance, of the disbursement of funds for the relief of distress, at a time when there was a question mark over the effective protection of nationalist communities, particularly in Belfast and Derry.

He was dismissed in May 1970 over an alleged illegal importation of arms, but, along with others, was subsequently acquitted of the charge in the High Court. There is not the slightest evidence that he had anything to do with the establishment of the Provisional IRA, a charge that does not appear in any history of that organisation. The episode, nonetheless, left a legacy of distrust, which was a handicap to him in the quest for political progress.

Charles Haughey stayed with Fianna Fáil, and attracted the support of many of the more republican-minded members of the party. He was recalled to the Front Bench

and later to Cabinet. When he came to office as Taoiseach, he was sceptical of British Government efforts to revive devolution in Northern Ireland which he described as a failed political entity, and believed the two Governments should take a central role in the search for a solution. He had two summits with Mrs. Thatcher in 1980, from which emerged the Anglo-Irish framework, and a commitment to strengthen both East-West relations and North-South cooperation and to deal with 'the totality of relationships'. However, British mishandling of the IRA hunger-strikes as well as some ministerial exaggeration of the extent of the political breakthrough caused some strain in relations. The election of two hunger strikers to the Dáil contributed to loss of office in June 1981. During the brief period of Opposition, he opposed Dr. FitzGerald's constitutional crusade which he considered naive.

When he returned to office in March 1982, a new Northern Ireland Secretary James Prior was pressing ahead with an initiative on rolling devolution that was purely internal in scope and at variance with the spirit of the Anglo-Irish initiative. It was strongly objected to by the SDLP, who enlisted the support of the Irish Government. Charles Haughey's refusal to give full support to Mrs. Thatcher's attempt to recapture the Falkland Islands, through an intervention at the UN, brought about a deep rift in Anglo-Irish relations. Even in the worst days, however, he authorised close cross-border security co-operation.

In 1983, a New Ireland Forum consisting of the constitutional nationalist parties North and South was brought together to reformulate and modernise the aims of Irish nationalism and to construct a basis for negotiation. While contributing constructively to the exercise, Charles Haughey ensured that the nationalist position was not heavily diluted and that a unitary state remained the preferred option. While he initially opposed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, he worked it in good faith when he returned to government in 1987.

He engaged in some overtures to the Ulster Unionist leadership, and in 1991 the NI Secretary Peter Brooke, with whom he established a good rapport, began multi-party talks, which resumed in 1992. While the talks were not successful at the time, many of the threads, particularly in regard to institutions, were picked up and incorporated in the Good Friday Agreement. Charles Haughey himself would have been quite happy to contemplate a settlement with North-South institutions but no devolution. Charles Haughey was also centrally involved in the beginnings of the peace process. He first met the intermediary Fr. Alec Reid in August 1986. While a direct meeting with the leader of Sinn Féin along with John Hume did not prove feasible, he authorised a small party delegation to meet with Sinn Féin in 1988 to see if an alternative political strategy to the armed campaign was possible. Haughey's instincts were inclusionary rather than exclusionary, as first seen vis-a-vis Irish America. He always thought it better to try and enlist support behind the position of the Irish Government, rather than anathematise the Provisionals and their

sympathisers. Unlike FitzGerald or Hume, he supported the MacBride Principles on fair employment, which provided a powerful incentive for the introduction of effective NI legislation in the late 1980s.

While initial contacts, paralleling a public SDLP - SF dialogue, were not immediately fruitful, communication through Fr. Alec Reid was maintained. In the autumn of 1991, Charles Haughey initiated work on a draft Heads of Government declaration, brought to him by John Hume and sometimes referred to subsequently as Hume-Adams, but which developed following discussion and intergovernmental negotiation into the Downing Street Declaration, which was the catalyst for the 1994 ceasefires. As leader and Taoiseach, he repeatedly called for all-round negotiations, which did eventually take place in 1997 -98 and led to the Good Friday Agreement. Charles Haughey was also the moving force behind a major North-South infra-structural project, the restoration of the Ballinamore -Ballyconnell Canal, now known as the Shannon-Erne Waterway.

In conclusion, his two main achievements with regard to advancing a political solution to the Northern Ireland problem were in pioneering the Anglo-Irish framework in 1980, in establishing the network and identifying the type of formula that later led to peace.