

From Protagonist to Pragmatist: Political Leadership in Societies in Transition

Cathy Gormley-Heenan,
February 2001

Key Issues

Although the case studies of Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa present societies at different stages in their various transitions, there are a number of key issues which are common to all and which highlight the changing nature and challenges facing political leaders in such societies. Most of these were highlighted during research interviews with senior political leaders in the three regions. The research suggests that, unless dealt with adequately, these key issues may present potential pitfalls for transition processes.

- ***The use and abuse of political power:*** the use of political power and the sensitivities which surround the use of power is important. If a leader acts with an awareness of such sensitivities, and uses the new found political power to further the rights of all constituents, it suggests that the pragmatism of peace accords is upheld. If a leader fails to acknowledge the sensitivities of power and acts only in the interest of one or other community then it suggests that a change towards pragmatism may have occurred in principle only, and not in practice.
- ***Leading one's own party:*** a clear lesson that emerges from the case studies is that leadership skills are needed more within parties than between parties.² This is as important in the post-violent phase of the process as it is during the negotiations themselves. Finding a definitive balance between 'executive leadership' and 'collective leadership' continues to prove difficult.
- ***Delivering constituents:*** while leadership skills are important within the parties they are also a vital part of dealing with one's constituents. The concept of 'elastic-band leadership' perhaps explains this best. The leadership is expected to 'stretch' its constituents in the interests of peace, all the while remembering that if the elastic is stretched just a little too far there is always the danger of the elastic snapping. The subsequent dislocation between the leadership and constituents could have long term implications for the process, perhaps even leaving the leadership without a mandate.
- ***Relating to other party leaders:*** some leaders acknowledged that political leadership in societies in transition 'is like the poles of a wigwam – take one leader away and they all fall down'. Since leadership is dependent on others within the process, dealing with other party leaders appears to have been a necessary but difficult task. The fact that most relationship building opportunities and peer-learning sessions between leaders either stop or suffer from a lack of coherence immediately after an agreement has been reached, has added to such difficulties.
- ***Working with the civil service:*** the cultivation of relationships between the top echelons of the civil service and the political leadership is important. While the notion exists that the civil service will work under whatever political entity is agreed upon, there are fears within some political circles that the civil service does not want to relinquish the control which it has maintained over certain departments and areas.
- ***Imminent elections:*** leadership challenges, by-elections and votes of no-confidence are common in societies in transition. They have a tendency to promote political inter-group tensions and even the threat of an election can force the leadership to take a less conciliatory approach than sometimes expected.
- ***Realignment of party politics:*** while this particular issue holds little importance in the early stages of the transition from violence to politics, it can take on more validity as the process continues. Nearly all of the political parties studied have been formed with policies and ideals based on the conflict and not on more general social or economic issues. The leadership has to prepare itself for a possible realignment of party politics in the post violent phase of the process.
- ***Dealing with change:*** political change involves risks and leaders may be reticent to admit to changes in their own position lest it be interpreted as weakness among their core support. Leaders may also deny the changes undertaken by others. While change is a much less easily defined issue than some of the others, it is one of the most crucial.
- ***Process management:*** process management is a crucial element of any agreement made to ensure that the responsibilities, challenges, and relationships are not forgotten or damaged during crises. In reasoning why there have been transition difficulties, some have pointed to a lack of 'process management' at leadership level during crises.

Background to the Research

The contribution of political leaders is an obvious but little discussed phenomenon in societies in transition. As part of its programme of research into countries in transition, INCORE has addressed the issue of political leadership through the project '**From Protagonist to Pragmatist: Political leadership in Societies in Transition**'. From January 2000 to December 2000, INCORE, in the Protagonist to Pragmatist project (funded by the Central Community Relations Unit and the Community Relations Council), focused on the changing nature and challenges facing political leaders in societies in transition. The research was comparative in nature in the hope that lessons learned from other places can provide insights into the situation in Northern Ireland, and that the lessons learned from Northern Ireland may strike a chord elsewhere. Primary case studies focused on Northern Ireland, South Africa and Israel/Palestine with the specific research aims of

- (a) highlighting the role that political leaders play
- (b) how their roles change in societies in transition
- (c) analysing such adaptations, problems and perspectives for the future.

A total of 25 interviews were conducted with senior political leaders in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories and these form the primary empirical data of the study. These were supplemented by many other informal discussions, monitoring of the media over the time period, and desk based research. An opening conference was held April 2000, in Parliament Buildings at Stormont in Northern Ireland, to highlight some of the issues that the project would focus on. Guest speakers from Israel and South Africa provided an international perspective. A second conference was held in November 2000 in conjunction with the UNU's International Leadership Academy in Amman, Jordan to explore the issues further at international level.²

Why Leadership?

While the main interest of the research was *political* leadership, INCORE is fully cognisant of the important role other leaders play in divided societies and societies in transition, whether they are cultural, religious, community or business leaders. However, political leadership is especially important not least because,

- 1) many political processes and peace processes are

essentially elite driven, with a relatively small number of people responsible for making final decisions and implementing policy,³

- 2) many violent societies are prone to political leaders who are willing to manipulate a delicate situation, who do not necessarily behave in an altruistic fashion and who actively canvass against a peaceful settlement of conflict if such a settlement collides with their own interests,
- 3) political leadership is an important variable since it is one on which many other variables are dependent in the transformation of a conflict. For example, structural and issue transformations in a conflict can really only occur when promoted by the leadership of conflictual positions.

Based upon this rationale, the research has sought to examine how political leadership has been directly relational to the conflict, the peace processes and the transitions in the three case studies.

Case Studies

Northern Ireland:

In an overview of the peace process thus far, the question is whether the pragmatic attitudes, behaviours and actions espoused by the political leadership in Northern Ireland through the Agreement will become reflected in more permanent pragmatic principles. To date, the research results shows some contradictions. The 'spirit' of the Agreement with pragmatism at its core has, in many cases, been replaced by court cases, judicial reviews, and legal wranglings. This is more than just the nature of adversarial politics at work and does not reflect a concretisation of pragmatic principles among the leadership. On the other hand, a sense of pragmatism has continued to prevail in committees and on the Assembly Executive with individuals consistently seen as working across party lines rather than to their party agendas. This contradiction is only to be expected since the public persona rarely reflects the private in politics.

An analysis of political leadership in Northern Ireland shows that its main success during the peace process has been the 1998 Agreement. It has had numerous failings since then. A failure to manage expectations among constituents has contributed to the continuing unease with certain issues in the Agreement. A failure to recognise and acknowledge the changes that have taken place, both internally and on the part of others, has accentuated the problem of trust among the key players. Dealing with constituents and dealing with other party leaders are two key dimensions of

leadership in this society as it transcends from violence to politics. Attention will need to be given to this to ensure that previous failings are not repeated.

Israel/Palestine:

A number of conclusions have been made about the relationship between political leadership and the stalling peace process in the region. Firstly, the views of the political leaders have not always corresponded with the views of the constituency when making agreements. Indeed, while the leaders were ready for agreement, constituents were not. The result has been that political leaders have found it increasingly difficult to mobilise support for the continuing process. Secondly, the political leadership has failed in conveying to its own constituency the significance of the concessions made by the other side to date. Rather, each side has minimised the significance of the concessions made by the other. Thirdly, failing to understand the constituency and failing to convey the concessions made has played into the hands of anti-peace elites who have then manipulated the constituents for their own purposes.⁴

An analysis of the role of leadership in Israel/Palestine thus far suggests that the main success has been that the peace process has been on a continuum since Oslo, despite many setbacks. The pace of the process has been very varied but the process itself has always continued albeit with changes in leadership on the Israeli side, and internal dissent on the Palestinian side. The key transformation has been that both sides did, in fact, recognise each other as legitimate partners for peace, and despite current tensions continue to work on the basis of that recognition. A failure to manage views of constituents has continued to hamper the process, and it will be a reworking of this vital issue

which may hold the key to a successful implementation of the agreements made in the future.

South Africa:

The initial pragmatic attitudes, behaviours and actions espoused by the political leadership in South Africa does seem to have become reflected in more permanence. Some have argued that the transition from Mandela to Mbeki has been difficult and has changed the political dynamic in South Africa. Others have complained that the new government has been very quick to take on the bad habits of the old. In rationalising such despondence, one could argue that the 'transition' itself is essentially over and South Africa, as a state, is now facing the cold and hard realities of adversarial politics rather than a much hoped for 'rainbow coalition'.

In a final analysis of political leadership in South Africa, a change in leadership was one of the main catalysts for reform. Had P.W Botha not fallen ill in 1989 and been succeeded by de Klerk, the apartheid system may have continued for at least another decade. The main success of political leadership has been with the cultivation of relationships between some key players which led to the new constitutional arrangements.

What the future of political leadership in South Africa will be remains unknown. The existing opposition parties pose no real threat to the ANC's control of government nor are they likely to in the near future. The opposition's only option is to become masters of policy issues and mobilise people around such issues. However, it is certain that a fragmented opposition is a major weakness for South Africa's new situation.

Some Conclusions

- The key issues which the political leadership faces in the settlement phase, whether individually or collectively, have the potential to derail the process.
- An awareness of these issues and the potential problems which the leadership may face as the society moves from violence to politics may diminish the potential for derailment.
- Thus far, leaders have tended to conduct a strategy of fire-fighting, dealing with problems as they arise, rather than engaging in any type of preventative strategy.
- There is a need for further research into how political power, party leadership, constituents, other party leaders, the civil service, elections, possible party realignment and the acknowledgement of change may impact on peace processes and settlements.

Key Recommendations

While it is 'political' with a small 'p' to focus on the success of a process and agreement, procedures and protocol also need to be put in place to help leaders cope with possible set backs, suspensions, and failures. The key issues mentioned in this research summary need to be taken into further consideration at the initial stages of any future peace processes. Consequently, practical policy recommendations relating to the key issues are suggested:

- **Political Power:** *maintaining a sense of balance when dealing with political power is necessary to preserve the process. An 'Implementation Committee' could be established as part of future agreements to examine whether the implementation of disputed issues is in accordance with the initial agreement. The establishment of such a committee could circumvent recourse to legal avenues.*
- **Leading the Party:** *while trying to encourage opinion, argument, debate and discussion throughout the party, it is still important for the leadership to maintain control through some degree of 'executive leadership'.*
- **Delivering Constituents:** *the dislocation of leadership-constituent relations could be prevented through the active endorsement (where possible) of an open and transparent public consultative process prior to and following formal negotiations to ensure that constituents are aware of the problem issues and concessions that may have to be made.*
- **Relating to other Party Leaders:** *crisis management protocol and the continuation if not acceleration of relationship building opportunities between leaders is vital in the post violent phase.*
- **Civil Service:** *a specific programme of transition could be developed to promote a joint understanding of the civil service and its roles and structures for the political players, and vice-versa.*
- **Imminent Elections:** *the possible destabilising influence of 'electoral politics' at critical junctures in a peace process should be recognised. With this in mind, by-elections and other local elections could, perhaps, be circumvented by a prior agreed policy of co-option or delay for a determined period of time following the initial agreement.*

Notes

* A full Research Report will be available from INCORE in March 2001.

² John Darby & Roger MacGinty eds., *The Management of Peace Processes* (London: Macmillan, 2000) p. 97

³ The papers from both conferences are available on our research web pages at www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/research/ongoing/ptp/index.html

⁴ Darby & MacGinty eds., p.252

⁵ Tamar Herman, in Darby & MacGinty eds., pp.107-149

Further Information:

For further information about the project, please contact:

Cathy Gormley-Heenan
INCORE

Aberfoyle House

Northland Road

Derry/Londonderry

BT48 7JA

Tel: (0)28 71 375505 Fax: (0)28 71 375510

Email: cgormley@incore.ulst.ac.uk



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY



CRU