The Mediator as Coalition Builder: George Mitchell in Northern Ireland

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Abstract. In 1996, George Mitchell became the co-chairman of the All-Party Talks in a polarized Northern Ireland where the extremes had the dominant voice while the center was relatively mute politically. In analyzing Mitchell’s actions, we seek to break new ground in the study of mediation. First, we explicitly assess the context to identify key barriers and opportunities. Second, we move beyond general categories of mediator approach – such as communication, formulation, and manipulation – to match classes of mediator action to barriers. Finally, we place these discrete actions in service of a larger purpose by exploring the “mediator as coalition-builder.” Whether explicit or implicit, Mitchell’s overarching approach in the All-Party Peace Talks can be interpreted as a drive toward creating an outward rippling “coalition of the center against the extremes.” Mitchell’s effort to forge a coalition of the center led him to follow coordinated and multi-pronged process, issue and timing strategies, which are the main focus of this article. In principle, Mitchell might have sought to forge agreement via very different potential coalitional approaches: for example, seeking to bridge the extremes, seeking consensus among all parties, seeking to forge a dominant coalition on one side or the other that could have prevailed over its opponents, or seeking a sequential divide-and-conquer approach to isolate and overwhelm the opposition, etc. Yet for this particular context, the centrist coalitional approach led to significant progress.

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Introduction

In June 1996, the U.K. and Irish governments appointed former Senate Majority Leader, George Mitchell, to co-chair the All-Party Peace Talks

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in Northern Ireland. He was charged with mediating a comprehensive agreement to end the historic hostilities in the territory. Yet he confronted seemingly insurmountable barriers. He faced a room full of delegates who, in the midst of an endemic and bitter feud, absolutely refused to talk with each other. Many of the their self-identities were wrapped up in the conflict. Powerful historical, social, economic, and psychological factors resulted in deep-seated fears and feelings of victimization by people on all sides. Sustained violence had become a way of life. Extremist voices dominated the society and the debate. This broader polarization was reflected in a virtual chasm between negotiating positions over major issues. In order to succeed, Mitchell needed to find a way to bridge the chasm and bring the delegates together in a way that would allow them to communicate with each other and to forge an ultimate agreement. Consider an admiring journalistic account of his approach and results:

... there is no denying the price that Mitchell has paid since 1995 in the dreary corners of gray, damp Northern Ireland, watching the months and years of his life slide away – precious times with his new wife and young children sacrificed – as he struggled to help an endlessly tiresome, bickering crowd of hatemongers find their way to a truth so elemental that the rest of humanity had given up on them, with justification, as hopeless doils. Smiling and nodding, absorbing the venom, hearing out the thugs and bigots. Seizing the rare chance to make a point, seeing it discarded out of hand, swallowing his disappointment, and nodding and smiling. Smiling and nodding, waiting – fearing that each of the 30 years of Troubles it would take another of negotiating to somehow find an end.

But in the end, the old pol did it. He penetrated the mists of martyrdom, confronted the Irish Republican Army and Gerry Adams with political reality. Saw and nurtured a flame of political courage in the heart of David Trimble, the Ulster Unionist. Mitchell earned every accolade he got – the British knighthood, the presidential Medal of Freedom, the nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize – for no one who has not been there, save maybe the veterans of Selma and Birmingham, can appreciate the brute and stolid ignorance of those who can find cause to argue, even kill, over such trivialities as the path a schoolgirl takes each day to her classroom (Farrell 2002).

This is inspiring stuff, and not wrong. Yet, in accounting for these results, the above quote suggests that Mitchell needed little beyond patience and listening. In this exploratory effort, we seek to go further, to dissect Mitchell's experience in order to contribute to the development of theoretically grounded advice for effective action in multiparty conflicts beyond Northern Ireland.
Ideally, insights from this effort can inform both explanatory and prescriptive theories, especially the emerging methodology of "negotiation analysis" (Raiffa 1982; Lax and Sebenius 1986; Neale and Bazerman 1991).

Theoretical Approach

The negotiation-analytic approach involves a carefully structured enumeration of the parties, the full set of their interests, the no-agreement alternatives, the process of their interaction, and, in particular, the interaction between cooperative moves to create value jointly and competitive moves to claim it individually. Without presuming full game-theoretic rationality, barriers to and opportunities for negotiated agreement are typically assessed. The analysis is robust with respect to both a "fixed" or fully specified "game" as well as the conscious moves by the parties to change the game itself. While we will not go through a full-blown negotiation analysis in this article, our approach will be informed by the negotiation analytic perspective.

The mediation process has been the subject of a number of specifically negotiation-analytic accounts (e.g., Raiffa 1982; Lax and Sebenius 1986; Antrim and Sebenius 1991) as well as, more generally, a topic studied by scholars of conflict resolution (e.g., Kolb 1983; Touval and Zartman 1985; Bercovitch and Rubin 1992; Princen 1992; Zartman and Touval 1996). Sensibly, these accounts argue for an assessment of context, which we will provide, and characterize the kinds of approaches taken by mediators. For example, in a widely cited typology, Touval and Zartman (1985) categorize three broad classes of mediator action: communication and facilitation (getting the parties to hear and understand each other better); formulation (oriented toward structuring elements of the process); and manipulation or direction (aimed at the substantive elements of the dispute, both objective and perceptual). Bercovitch and Anagnoson et al. (1991) find that directive strategies generally tend to be the most successful even though facilitative approaches are employed most commonly. Later refining the analysis to control for dispute type, Bercovitch and Diehl (1997) concluded that the communication-facilitation approach tends to be most productive for so-called intractable conflicts, such as that in Northern Ireland. Many of Mitchell's actions are consistent with this finding, although, unsurprisingly, we will find significant actions by George Mitchell that fall into all three categories. Yet our analysis seeks to go well beyond matching mediator approach type to context and dispute type.

We seek to advance existing literature on mediation in at least three distinct areas. First, we will assess the context with an eye specifically toward determining the most significant barriers to (and opportunities for) agreement. The concept of "barriers," first systematically explored beyond by
Arrow et al. (1995) and elaborated on by analysts such as Sebenius (2000) as well as Rosegrant and Watkins (2001), suggests the areas on which a mediator might most profitably focus strategy and tactics. Second, instead of amassing a laundry list of actions, we carefully describe Mitchell’s choices in categories informed by standard negotiation-analytic accounts (e.g., process, issue-substance, timing), in order to match his actions to barriers and, thus, to sharpen the analysis.

Third, in multiparty situations, such as Northern Ireland, the signatories to an agreement can be understood to constitute a tacit coalition. As such, we will explore the concept of “mediator as coalition-builder.” Specifically, we seek to extend existing theory by framing Mitchell’s “barrier-surmounting” actions in larger coalitional terms. While Raiffa (1982) elaborated on the simple analytics of coalitions, Lax and Sebenius (1991) began to develop the concept in negotiation analytic rather than game-theoretic terms. Sebenius (1995) showed how diverse classes of strategies could overcome blocking coalitions in negotiations related to the oceans, ozone, and climate change. He later (1996) refined this analysis to take account of path dependence and sequencing in coalition building.

Beyond generally viewing Mitchell as a coalition-builder, we will argue that his approach usefully can be summarized and understood as seeking to create a “winning coalition of the center against the extremes.” Our approach involves three argumentative steps: 1) to characterize the situation facing Mitchell and his co-chairman as one in which the extremes predominated and the center was fragmented; 2) to carefully examine the strategic and tactical choices that Mitchell made in fostering a centrist coalition; and 3) to describe other “generic” coalition approaches and suggest conditions under which alternative approaches, as well as seeking a coalition of the center, may be appropriate.

While we intend this analytic orientation to illuminate mediation in general and to pave the way for actionable prescriptions, the case also underscores the importance of the background and characteristics of the specific individual playing the role. (For examples of different types of mediators, see Bercovitch and Rubin (1992).) Mitchell was experienced and qualified for his role as mediator in the Northern Ireland conflict. His fourteen years of service in the US Senate, including six as Majority Leader, were marked by unusually long legislative battles. In 1990, unable to muster the sixty votes necessary to terminate a filibuster on his bill to overhaul the Clean Air Act, Mitchell chose to individually negotiate the details of the bill. “The negotiations involved over fifty senators, hundreds of staffers, and dozens of administration officials. Rarely does a bill consume a month of active consideration on the Senate Floor” (Mitchell 1991: 73). But the bill passed. Later,
Mitchell engaged in even longer, though failed, negotiations over health care reform. Asked about his steadiness and patience, Mitchell remarked, “Sometimes in the heat of battle people lose sight of the ultimate objectives and tactics become ends in themselves. That is a mistake” (Romano 1990). His health care reform plan consumed 13 years while his actions on behalf of the Clean Air Act took nine years of effort. Political consultant and friend Bob Shrum stated, “George Mitchell understands that the immediate pursuit of the instant success often yields neither success nor satisfaction” (Clymer 1994). After explaining how the Senate moved at a snail’s pace, and how lawmakers can drone on endlessly about nothing, Mitchell tells audiences, “I didn’t realize, but in the mysterious ways in which the Lord works. I was being prepared for the Northern Ireland peace talks” (Berke 1998). As the case itself will soon make clear, Mitchell’s background not only suited him for the Northern Irish situation, it also guided his strategy and process choices, arguably even to recreate a “mini-U.S.-Senate-like” process.

The Polarized Situation Facing George Mitchell

George Mitchell faced a monumental task in June 1996 when he agreed to co-chair the All-Party Talks. The talks would commence in the context of a long and bitter conflict between parties entrenched in their positions and unwilling to compromise. He inherited a situation in which the extremists dominated the dialogue and moderates were politically dormant. A description of the parties and the situation that would do justice to the important complexities and subtleties of the Northern Irish case is well beyond the scope of this article. However, a bare-bones guide follows to establish the nature of the polarization facing Mitchell and to provide a context in which to interpret his main choices as mediator.

Broad Terms of the Conflict

In broad relief, the troubles in Northern Ireland emerged because two groups of people – the nationalists and the unionists – wanted opposing political futures for the same territory. This territory, Northern Ireland, is also known as Ulster Province. The nationalists are overwhelmingly Catholic and the unionists are overwhelmingly Protestant. While religion is the most obvious difference between the two groups, the conflict is also about national identity and political determination. The unionists (mostly Protestant) generally want the province to remain part of the United Kingdom and in union with England. They form the majority in Ulster (about 60%). Extreme and uncompromising unionists are known as “loyalists,” though all unionists share
loyalty to the British monarch. Catholics (or nationalists) generally want the province to become part of Ireland. They form a minority in Ulster (about 40%). Extreme and uncompromising nationalists are known as “republicans,” a term used to describe both those who have a strong commitment to a united Ireland and those willing to use violence to achieve that goal. Over the years, people from both communities gradually developed a keen sense of grievance and strong feelings of victimization. The unionists feel that they are a threatened minority on the larger island of Ireland. The nationalists feel that they are a threatened minority within Ulster (McCartney 1999).

The modern conflict in Northern Ireland owes its heritage to a long history of British domination of Ireland. In the early 1600s, the British colonized the island and encouraged the direct resettlement of Protestants (called the Plantation of Ulster) in the north. Following an unsuccessful rebellion in 1798, the British Parliament constitutionally united Ireland with Britain and began direct rule. In 1922, after several centuries of British rule and years of conflict, Ireland gained its independence. But the island was partitioned. The 26 counties of the south and the west, largely Catholic, became the Irish Free State and eventually the Republic of Ireland. The six counties of the northern Ulster Province, mostly Protestant, remained part of the United Kingdom.

The government of the newly created Northern Ireland established itself as, in the words of a unionist leader, “A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people” (McCartney 1999). Throughout the ensuing decades, the minority Catholics in Northern Ireland, like African Americans in the United States, suffered widespread discrimination and disenfranchisement. Frustrations among Northern Ireland’s Catholics eventually led to what was euphemistically called the “Troubles.” Inspired in part by the civil rights movement in the United States, Catholics mounted civil rights protests in Northern Ireland in 1968. Although the demonstrations were initially peaceful in character, the police began to react violently, which greatly increased the tension between Catholics and Protestants.

Out of this environment emerged the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA), a radical group of Catholics committed to driving the British from Northern Ireland through a concerted campaign of terror. In response to the IRA, a number of radical Protestant groups sprang to life, merged into the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), and began revenge killings of Catholics. In 1972, at the height of the Troubles, London imposed direct rule in Northern Ireland through its military in support of the Northern Irish police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Riots in the streets occurred daily and were later replaced by a steady stream of nightly shootings. Over the next 25 years, more than three thousand people in Northern Ireland were killed in terrorist attacks launched by the IRA and opposing unionist paramilitary
groups. Economic deprivation of both Catholics and Protestants contributed to tensions in the province. Stunningly, in 1991, nearly 30% of the men in Northern Ireland had never held a job. Membership in paramilitary organizations on both sides provided some of these men with chances for pay, patriotism, and dignity.

Social and Psychological Barriers

Over the past four decades, most constitutional politicians and the public at large resisted the use of force by paramilitary groups but they disagreed on an acceptable way to govern Northern Ireland. Moderate nationalists hoped for some kind of power-sharing or co-operative arrangement of government between unionists and nationalists. Most unionists seemed unwilling to lose their majority power and felt that sharing it with nationalists would be a step towards reunification with the Republic of Ireland. The distrust and insecurity present created a “siege mentality” in both sides of the conflict (McCartney 1999). It silenced those politicians interested in accommodation. After working closely with the political parties in Northern Ireland, Clem McCartney observed:

The nature of this conflict has encouraged the fear in each community that it would be undermined from within by individuals and groups becoming more accommodating to the other side. ... There is a fear of assimilation of one community by the other because there are so few differences between them. In this context small differences become important and symbolic. Practices such as aggressive displays of flags and slogans and, especially among loyalists, parades and marches, became a way of giving both an uncompromising message to opponents and maintaining internal cohesion (McCartney 1999).

McCartney’s observations are consistent with the main conclusions of a vast literature bearing on the psychology of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The social fabric of Northern Ireland provided few natural sources for dialogue. Citizens frequently engaged in political action, but mostly through uncompromising groups. Trade unions, churches, and neighborhood associations were dominated by polarizing ideologues. “Both communities had only limited opportunities for developing a broader political understanding of the situation and street politics remained largely the reflection of traditional sectarian loyalties and identities” (McCartney 1999). The Orange Order, for example, permeated all sections of the Protestant community. This Order was a male Protestant Fraternity whose members pledged themselves to William of Orange, the Protestant leader who defeated the Catholic King, James the II,
in 1690 and ensured Protestant supremacy over Ireland. Its extreme members were accused of being “more English than the English.”

Shouted at a rally in 1973 was the chilling slogan, “To hell with the future, let’s get on with the past!” It underscored the acute and ever-present sense of historical grievance. Each side, Catholic and Protestant, pointed to times when it was victimized, disregarding those times when it was an aggressor. The drift towards violence by the Catholic civil rights movement tended to drive out members of Catholic civil society who called for peaceful coexistence. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the community became disillusioned with politics. Many who did not support the predominant system of sectarian politics were divided in their ideas for resolution. This division existed on both sides of the conflict along with deep feelings of justified reprisal, inexperience with compromise, and self-righteous claims of moral certainty.

“Social identity theory” suggests that both the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland have responded to deep unconscious forces that lead them to reach for a positive identity only through comparison to the negative identity of the “other” through a process of social categorization. Ed Cairns of the University of Ulster describes this process:

Social categorization is not merely a way of dividing the rest of the world into groups but also provides us with a way of defining our own place in society. This self-categorization leads to the development of what is referred to as social identity, whereby we place ourselves in certain social categories and exclude ourselves from others. Social identity theorists believe that this self categorization becomes an important part of self-concept and thus becomes one of the central social psychological constructs underlying the manifestation of intergroup behavior (see Cairns 1994).

As such, speaking of compromise or peace became anathema and equivalent to treason. Moderates were threatened, maimed, or killed for daring to abandon long sought-after goals. And each side thought of itself as vastly different from the other, despite a common language and history. McCartney (1999) observes:

In these circumstances, intransigent voices were dominant. Perhaps it was inevitable that violence would muffle the voices of those who support accommodation. Intransigent voices speak a simpler and more forceful message that is easier to understand than the more intricate and less obvious arguments in favor of co-operation and dialogue. It has always been difficult for civil society in Northern Ireland to open up a broader middle ground where a settlement might be more likely to be found.
There was little room for the middle ground, and violence only reinforced traditional attitudes, making it difficult to promote more inclusive politics. "For example, there has never been much support for class-based politics which could unite Protestants and Catholics" (McCartney 1999). Since the 1970s there were repeated attempts to broker a peace agreement. The main thrust of the efforts was to find arrangements for the constitutional parties to work together in such a way as to satisfy nationalist demands while limiting the scope for change enough to prevent unionist withdrawal. "It was hoped that these arrangements would marginalize the paramilitary groups whose campaign would become irrelevant as had happened in the past. All such attempts have failed and the paramilitary campaigns continued" (McCartney 1999).

Key Parties and Polarized Coalitional Alignments

The political leaders that rose to prominence expressed the frustrations of their polarized communities. Figure 1 displays the main parties to the conflict, arranged roughly in terms of their political position at the point when Mitchell began his efforts in Northern Ireland. A few players merit special mention for purposes of our analysis; although the text does not specifically discuss all parties identified in Figure 1 (e.g., the PUP, UVF, and UKUP). Nevertheless, the graphic indicates their political orientation and underscores the multiparty nature.²

Gerry Adams is the President of Sinn Féin, widely described as the "political wing of the IRA," and the most prominent spokesperson for the republican movement. More than anyone else, he fostered its political development. He has been the target of numerous violent loyalist attacks throughout his career, including a 1984 shooting in which he was wounded. He is alleged to have held senior positions in the IRA, although he has denied membership. His meeting with the Irish Prime Minister in the week following the IRA ceasefire of 1994 and his visit to the United States were seen as key steps in legitimating Sinn Féin's role in the peace process.

John Hume, president and co-founder of the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP), was instrumental in developing the role of the Irish government as a protector of the interests of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. "In the late 1980s his analysis led him to believe that Sinn Féin should be brought into the political process. He developed secret contacts with Sinn Féin, which eventually led to what has come to be known as the Hume–Adams dialogue" (McCartney 1999). Those connections became public in 1993 and he was heavily criticized for giving credibility to Sinn Féin and threatening the electoral position of the SDLP.
David Trimble, President of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), came to politics with a staunch Unionist background. An attempt by the government to ban the highly provocative loyalist parade of Drumcree in 1995 resulted in a challenge to the security forces by the Orange Order. But Trimble negotiated for the parade to proceed. In tandem with his overall background, this performance made him attractive to hardline UUP members and he was elected its leader in November 1996. Under his leadership the UUP entered multiparty talks. He continued to participate in the talks following the entry of Sinn Féin in Fall 1997, despite strong opposition from within his own party. He is widely considered to have walked the “loneliest path in Northern Irish politics” when he signed the Belfast Agreement.

Ian Paisley, President and founder of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), an uncompromising unionist party, is an ordained Protestant minister. His fiery and expressive speeches dramatically articulated the loyalist cause. He, more than any other politician, attacked moderate unionists, such as Trimble, for “selling out” the cause of the Protestant majority. Throughout his political career, he mobilized the support of two diverse populations: respectable Protestant fundamentalists (mainly from rural areas and small towns) and aggressive militant loyalists (mainly from working class areas of Belfast).
When Mitchell entered the talks, there were, in effect, three coalitions, two of which are indicated in Figure 1. The circles in the diagram are roughly proportional to the groups’ electoral support. The first explicit coalition existed between the unionist parties and the British government. The second existed between the nationalist parties and the Irish government. A third, implicit, coalition linked the armed groups on both sides that believed in violence as a means to exert political power. Sometimes, this coalition of armed groups committed to the violent order of things became quite explicit. Consider the following account of an episode that took place shortly after the 1994 paramilitary cease-fire:

Ervine (Representative of the UVF, a Protestant paramilitary organization) stressed that . . . there would be no paramilitary disarmament until a political settlement was reached on which all sides could agree. To cement this agreement, Belfast IRA leaders met with UDA and UVF representatives in a south Belfast hotel three days before Christmas. An informal pact was made. The paramilitaries would present a united front on the release of their prisoners, disarmament, and the need for inclusive talks. They vowed to oppose any attempt to make disarmament – or decommissioning, as it came to be known – a precondition for the entry of their political representatives into negotiations (Holland 1999: 199).

And there were at least the rudiments of a bridging coalition, especially the Alliance Party, a small, cross-community party formed in 1970. It held moderate middle class support. In the 1997 general election, it polled eight percent of the vote, enough to achieve representation in the Forum and the talks. The Alliance Party favored a partnership government between the two communities and promoted strong North-South links. Despite its size, the party was invaluable in helping Mitchell form a working group upon which to build the coalition at the center. The members of the Alliance party remained consistent and participated in the talks despite the comings and goings of the unionist and nationalist parties.

Any eventual decision on the status of Northern Ireland would require at least the de facto consent of the majority of both Catholics and Protestants. Practically speaking, this meant approval by the two largest parties – the Catholic SDLP, led by Hume, and the Protestant UUP, led by Trimble. Without such agreement, extreme elements of one or the other side would simply return to violence, functioning in effect as a blocking entity. Of course, there could be no guarantee that a centrist deal would silence the extremes. Yet, Mitchell and his co-chairs had to hope that strong and wide-enough support for an agreement among both main Catholic and Protestant parties – which to date had never forged such an accord – could effectively margin-
alize and significantly silence the extremes, save for the hardest partisans. But this approach had to be, at best, a promising, untested bet; there could be no guarantee that even a large centrist coalition would not fall victim to entrenched violent forces on either or both sides. Yet this bet would be better than the status quo with its divided center and virtually guaranteed violent episodes.

**Positional Barriers**

Mirroring the deeper social, psychological, and political divides, the different sides remained committed to incompatible negotiating positions that effectively blocked any agreement. First, the issue of decommissioning posed the most significant positional barrier. The British government and Protestant parties required full decommissioning by the IRA as a pre-condition to allowing Sinn Féin to enter the talks. Sinn Féin claimed that talks would need to begin prior to decommissioning. Second, the two sides saw incompatible and seemingly mutually exclusive visions of the future. The Catholic parties demanded a political system that ensured cross-border – between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic – bodies with executive powers established by the two governments. The Protestant parties demanded continued sole rule by Britain or a strong Northern Ireland Assembly based on majority elections. Third, the Catholic demand for the release of political prisoners was an anathema to the Protestants. The Catholic parties desired the release of their “freedom fighters” who were then in British prisons. The Protestant parties resisted the release of what were to them “paramilitary terrorists” who had been captured and incarcerated. Finally, both governments held opposite positions on constitutional and institutional issues regarding Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland’s constitution had enshrined within it a territorial claim to Northern Ireland. Britain maintained an officially declared strategic interest in Ulster despite any consent of its people, minority or majority. Moreover it was, legally, the “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.”

These positional barriers intersected with political barriers that supported the status quo. One of the strongest forces blocking change was the persistent dependence of the British Conservative Party on the Ulster Unionists to hold onto its narrow parliamentary majority at home. For many years, particularly under the rule of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, the British Government was limited in its ability to reach out to Catholic parties. This prevented the government from neutrality and placed it squarely in the Protestant Camp. In November 1990, Margaret Thatcher resigned following an internal challenge within her party over her government’s European policy. “From a Catholic point of view she had been extremely antagonistic and was held responsible
for the deaths of republican hunger strikers in 1981. Because of her hardened attitudes and the possibility that she would have proclaimed any cease-fire to be a republican defeat, it had always been difficult to envisage a cease-fire while she was in office” (Mansergh 1999).

_Signs of Moderation_

Despite the polarization in politics and society, a convergence of forces brought hope to Mitchell as he began his efforts in June 1996 (McCartney 1999). First, questions about who represented the true interests of the Catholic and Protestant members of society began to emerge in the 1990s. “People were increasingly war-weary and tired of political and military stalemate. Growing elements of both communities seemed to signal a desire for peace over the status quo” (Mansergh 1999). In July 1994, following a difficult internal process, the IRA declared a cease-fire that marked a crucial achievement in this procession toward moderation.

Second, the common membership of Britain in Ireland in the European Union (EU) brought a desire from both governments, and other members of the EU, to resolve what was hitherto considered an ‘internal’ affair of the UK. Partly as a result of EU membership, Ireland’s economy prospered to the extent that it was known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ (McCartney 1999). From the mid-1990s, its economy had the fastest national growth within the EU. “It had been exceptionally successful at attracting inward investment and EU structural funds” (Wichert 1999: 220). This had a profound effect on the business community in Northern Ireland, which had suffered from the Troubles and wanted to see them brought to an end. With the economy in the south growing at an annual rate of 7%, the north was being left far behind for business and (heavily unemployed) labor.

Third, the examples of breakthroughs in seemingly intractable conflicts elsewhere in the world brought hope to both communities. “The mainly peaceful revolutions of 1989 in central and eastern Europe, the unification of Germany in 1990 and, after the release of Nelson Mandela in the same year, the beginning of a negotiated transition to majority rule in South Africa, suddenly transformed problems that had previously looked frozen into situations that could be solved politically” (Mansergh 1999). Even the problems in the Middle East seemed a long way toward solution with the signing of the Oslo Accords in May 1994.

Fourth, although there were often signs of strain, the early 1990s witnessed the development of a more active partnership between the British and Irish governments. Not long before Mitchell entered into Northern Ireland politics, Margaret Thatcher was replaced by John Major, a milder, more pragmatic Conservative. In 1991, the British Secretary of State, Peter Brook, declared
that Sinn Féin could not be defeated militarily and, if it ended its violent campaign, he would consider talking with its representatives. "A year later, Brooke declared that Britain had no ‘selfish strategic or economic interest’ in Northern Ireland and was prepared to accept a united Ireland by consent" (Mansergh 1999). The statement largely settled one of the main points of contention between the SDLP and Sinn Féin during the late 1980s. In redefining its interests, the British government made efforts to improve its relationships at the Ministerial and several working-bureaucratic levels with the Irish Government. As time progressed and the talks reached impasse in 1997, the governments of both Ireland and Britain changed regimes. In Britain, the Conservative government of John Major was replaced by the dynamic and active Labor leader, Tony Blair. In the Irish elections, Bertie Ahern’s Fianna Fail government triumphed over the more conservative incumbent party, Fine Gael. At the same time, US President Bill Clinton began to give an unprecedented high priority to peace in Ireland, including a willingness to act as ultimate guarantor.

Finally, moderate leaders from both communities began to show courage in their dealings with their own hardliners. A longstanding barrier to talks had been the refusal by each side even to speak with political parties perceived to be closely linked to paramilitaries. "This prevented Sinn Féin, which represented many Catholics and was believed to be tied to the IRA, from dialogue with unionist parties. Gerry Adams had begun a careful process in the early eighties, seeking to transform the Sinn Féin into a legitimate political party. He moved the party towards a moderate position and purged hardliners" (McCartney 1999). In fact, Hume and Adams had already begun a series of clandestine meetings. This seeming transformation of Adams and Sinn Féin had culminated in a visa granted for him to enter the US in 1994. President Bill Clinton was heavily criticized for this decision, but it helped to legitimate Sinn Féin and bring a large portion of the Catholic population into the political process. Likewise, Trimble began to distance himself from Paisley and the hardline unionists.

Yet, division remained and it would take a remarkable third-party effort to marshal these potentially positive forces. McCartney (1999) observed:

For the people living in Northern Ireland the situation has proved so intractable because of a vivid awareness of past attitudes and behavior and the fear that these will be replicated in the future. Their concerns about the past and the future in turn govern and limit their present conduct and reconfirm the belief that opponents have learnt nothing from the past: they have not and will not change. It is important to appreciate these perceptions and relationships in order to understand the processes, mechanisms and proposals, which were needed to allow the parties to negotiate the Belfast Agreement in April 1998.
Actions to Foster a Coalition of the Center

Mitchell was appointed co-chair of the All-Party Talks in June 1996 along with former Finnish Prime Minister, Harri Holkeri, and former Chief of the Canadian Defense Forces, General John de Chastelain. The co-chairmen and the polarized collection of delegates faced tough issues. These included the future relationship with the U.K., the structure of a proposed Northern Ireland Assembly, powers of cross-border entities, release of political prisoners, rights to parade and protest, and the character of the Ulster police force. The most divisive and immediate barrier was the decommissioning of weapons. The British government and Protestant parties made prior decommissioning an absolute precondition for negotiations. But it was bitterly opposed by the nationalists. Furthermore, Mitchell and his co-chairmen faced immense procedural barriers. The process for the negotiations to begin had not been defined or accepted. No agenda, decision rules, or rules of order had been established. They would have to create these procedures before they could even begin to discuss substantive issues. In addition, Mitchell and his colleagues had no formal powers to sanction or reward delegates. They controlled no resources or tangible means of influence. Nor could they credibly threaten to impose meaningful deadlines on the proceedings. In June 1996, Mitchell told a reporter, “I had no real power. All I had was the power of persuasion” (Germond and Witcover 1998).

To summarize the barriers, Mitchell and his co-chairs faced a polarized situation in which the extremes had voice and the center was effectively silenced. Deep-seated social and psychological divisions underpinned this fundamental barrier. In turn, this polarization gave rise to incompatible positions on virtually all issues, including even a willingness to engage in direct dialogue. No accepted process existed and Mitchell lacked traditional levers of influence such as financial or military resources. Despite the hopeful signs enumerated above, these obstacles were formidable.

Mitchell’s approach to surmounting these barriers had three major components that we will analyze in sequence: a process strategy, an issues strategy, and a timing strategy. Taken together, they nurtured a coalition of the center by giving its members experience in dealing not only with each other but also, ideally, with the kinds of issues that would inevitably arise over time if the All-Party Talks were successful.

Process Strategy

Mitchell and his co-chairs made a remarkable number of distinctive and consequential process choices, which we will discuss in some detail. Perhaps his most important judgment was the initial focus for the All-Party Talks.
A Relentless Focus on Negotiating Procedure Over Substance. Mitchell might have chosen early on to press the delegates to bridge their differences on the substantive issues associated with political arrangements, decommissioning, parades, policing, prisoners, and so on. He might have set up working groups on each of these issues to generate background information, create options, and set the stage for resolution. Interestingly, he did not take this path; instead, throughout most of the talks, Mitchell steered the discussions almost exclusively through issues of procedure rather than through issues of substance. It took three months, from June to August 1996, to establish the “ground rules” for discussing “procedures.” It then took over a year of negotiation, from September 1996 to October 1997, to establish procedures and a vague agenda with a range of possibilities scoped out. It then took another five months, from October 1997 to March 1998, to develop an outline of items for agreement and preliminary issue statements. Finally, Mitchell shepherded explicit “substantive” negotiations toward resolution in a mere two weeks.

The focus on procedure allowed Mitchell to gain legitimacy and authority over the negotiations. “The talks got off to an acrimonious and inauspicious start... unionist parties were resentful that the British and Irish governments had published a set of ground rules for the All-Party Talks on 16 April and had appointed the three independent chairs without consulting [key parties].” (McCartney 1999) In response to this procedural fait accompli, Reverend Ian Paisley of the DUP, in particular, refused to allow Mitchell to be seated. Mitchell recalled a remarkable scene:

Shortly after midnight on Tuesday night, Mayhew told us that we were “going in.” It sounded uncomfortably as though we were embarking on a military invasion of foreign territory. At 12:32 AM on Wednesday morning we entered the meeting room. It was a bizarre scene. On the side closest to the door through which we entered were seats reserved for the chairmen and governments. I noticed that a British official was sitting in my chair. He waited until I was almost on top of him before he got up. He quickly explained to me that he had “protected” my seat from Paisley’s... people. ... When I entered the room and walked toward my seat my attention was drawn to the DUP section by a noisy commotion. There, Dr. Paisley was standing and yelling in a loud voice, “No. No. No.” He repeated it over and over again until I was in my seat. Before I could say or do anything, Paisley launched a blistering attack on the governments for “imposing” me as chairman. He then led his delegates in a walkout. They were immediately followed by the UKUP people (Mitchell 1999b: 49–50).
Mitchell and his colleagues made a consequential decision: they agreed that they would not impose the Anglo-Irish procedural rules on the talks' participants. With the return of the loyalists, the two governments accepted that the participants in the All-Party Talks would negotiate and agree on rules of procedure for the negotiations themselves (McCartney 1999).

Given highly polarized positions on the issues in the context of deeply hostile and suspicious relationships, an early substantive focus — let alone a blind imposition of the Anglo-Irish rules — would likely have pushed the partisan negotiators yet further apart. Mitchell’s relatively “safe” focus on process prevented standstill during preliminary negotiation over substantive issues, which were simply too toxic to allow productive discussion. His strategy allowed ample time for the parties to vent their anger at the process rather than at each other or by further clutching their divergent positions on the issues. It also gave the parties an opportunity to listen to each other and develop a semblance of a working relationship and some “success” prior to facing tough issue trade-offs. It bought Mitchell time to solidify his authority and develop new options. In short, Mitchell’s patient and seemingly endless focus on process laid the groundwork for a centrist coalition to emerge on substance.

**Legitimacy of Representation and Principled Inclusion.** Mitchell pursued a process strategy that stressed and modeled the principles of “inclusion,” “legitimacy,” and “consent.” In many ways — and yet in line with these principles — he took steps that first expanded and then reduced the number of parties involved in the talks to those players that were, at least arguably, capable of functioning in a relatively centrist coalition.

First, the forum election to the All-Party Talks was designed to ensure the involvement of up to ten parties, including those with even marginal electoral support (McCartney 1999). (The road to these “forum elections” leads through a clever set of moves on the decommissioning issue, which is worth tracing.) Prior to being appointed to the All-Party Talks, Mitchell, Holkeri, and de Chastelain served as chairmen for the newly created *International Body on Decommissioning of Weapons*, established to study the problem and the process of decommissioning. After six weeks of meetings with dozens of party leaders and government officials, Mitchell and the others realized that “prior” decommissioning was not going to work. In its place, the commission recommended, “parallel” decommissioning and a process of principled negotiations. At the urging of a mid-level British bureaucrat, the commission included a reference to the possibility of an election of delegates to a Debate Forum from which each party would nominate representatives to attend future All-Party Talks. The mechanism provided a means for the British government
to back out of its demand for "prior" decommissioning. In a speech to the House of Commons a few weeks later, Prime Minister Major suggested that negotiations could go forward “by securing a democratic mandate for all-party negotiations through elections specifically for that purpose” (Mitchell 1999b: 40). The mechanism provided the reassurance that the unionists needed, found a means to open all-party talks, and deflected attention away from Britain's eventual abandonment of prior decommissioning.

The Forum election was held in March and was designed to admit all ten relevant parties, regardless of size, and to exclude those parties whose paramilitaries had not committed to a cease-fire. The Forum to which the delegates were elected had little power (by design, to appease nationalists) though it satisfied a major concern of unionists that there be a center for debate. Its real purpose was as a means for legitimate electors to be nominated for the All-Party Talks (Mitchell 1999b: 44). It also ensured that disparate voices in civil society would be heard. Monica McWilliams, co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, and Kate Fearon, political advisor to the Coalition, analyzed the result of the election:

The question of our entitlement to participate in that process had been carefully constructed. To begin with, and in contrast to past attempts to cut a historic deal, the process had gone beyond the traditional elite parties for participants. Holding elections to determine entitlement to attend the talks had ensured a process that was grounded in inclusion. Not all participants, however, had been keen to include other parties despite their democratic mandates, but it was not until all interests were represented around the table that things had begun to move (McWilliams and Fearon 1999).

Second, the precondition to participate in talks required that parties adhere to the “Mitchell Principles,” essential commitments to democracy, dialogue, and non-violence. The violations of these principles were the very means by which extremist parties would later be excluded from the talks. While banal at one level, discussion of adherence to these principles consistently provided procedural common ground, and, more importantly, a set of criteria that would later bind members of a coalition of the center and distinguish them from their more extreme counterparts.

Third, Mitchell embraced the unusual rule of “sufficient consensus” in the procedural debates during the summer of 1996. This rule was intended to guarantee that any measures adopted by the parties at the talks would have genuinely broad support. According to the rule of sufficient consensus, any proposal had to meet four tests:
• Support from parties representing a majority of the voting population;
• Support from parties representing a majority of both the Catholic and the Protestant communities;
• Support from a majority of the parties present at the talks; and
• Support from both governments.

The use of "sufficient consensus" gave effective veto power to the two largest parties (SDLP and UUP) and to the two governments. In so doing it promoted a sense of power over the proceedings by each party and allowed each of them a less risky context in which to talk. It essentially ensured that the outcome of the talks could not reflect a one-sided victory. As such, any result would need the support of a centrist coalition. It was a mechanism that sacrificed efficiency for consent. Mitchell wrote at the time, "I thought it was tough to pass anything in the Senate, but compared to this, that was easy" (Mitchell 1999b: 66).

The actual manner by which Mitchell allowed the sufficient consensus rule to be adopted is instructive. Despite weeks of debate over procedures, it appeared that the delegates were not going to agree on a set of rules before the August recess in 1996. Finally, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) delegate Peter Robinson proposed that the participants vote on the proposed rules in sections and as a complete package; this would include using the "sufficient consensus" approach to adopt the very proposal for "sufficient consensus" voting. This strategy allowed a minority party, like the DUP, to vote against sections of the rules that it disliked while also ensuring that the whole package of rules actually passed. A party could effectively cast a negative vote on every section and still vote for passage of the entire package. The party could then be perceived as voting against the proposals nine out of ten times. This mechanism enabled smaller parties to save face with their constituencies and still allowed the talks to go forward (Mitchell 1999b: 63). Mitchell accepted the Robinson proposal and the rules were adopted on July 29, 1996.

During the discussions about rules and procedures, Mitchell was reluctant to convene any meetings or pursue business without consensus from all delegates. This made it impossible even to discuss issues on the basis of 'taking note without voting' and to circulate potential 'draft ideas for discussion.' But Mitchell pursued patient effectiveness and principled inclusion over immediate efficiency. "No time constraints were imposed on contributions in plenary meetings and many arguments were long-winded and repetitive" (Durkan 1999). Durkan wrote, "Extending the sufficient consensus requirement to even relatively mundane matters of procedural management sometimes served to compound the sense of gridlock and heighten the frustration throughout" (Durkan 1999). Many questioned his tactics. But McWilliams witnessed, "Over time, the independent chairmen slowly took
on the management and facilitation role, always gaining the consent of the participants to do so’ (McWilliams and Fearon 1999). This both solidified his authority and strengthened the trust and commitment of the parties at the center.

"Variable Geometry." To strengthen his process strategy, Mitchell used “variable geometry” with respect both to the format of the talks and participation in them. This variable geometric approach provided a means for making progress in stalled discussions toward a bridging, centrist coalition.

First, he varied the “format geometry” to change the size and format of meetings, alternating from plenary, to smaller group, to bilateral. In July 1996, this enabled Mitchell to respond effectively to outside violence without jeopardizing the larger talks. Until that point, the plenary meetings included more than seventy people in a large room. There was not one negotiating table but, rather, a chamber with a large square of tables, two rows of seats and multiple microphones. The atmosphere was more conducive to attack than to discussion. When external events (violence, the incendiary “parade” and “marching” season) threatened to fatally set back the All-Party Talks, Mitchell cancelled the upcoming plenary sessions. Instead, he substituted a series of small meetings where limited subsets of the parties met and discussed the agenda and the rules of procedure.

The three chairmen tried to forge a consensus on rules by shuttling between parties and brokering their own compromise draft on disputed points. “For several weeks, they sought proposals from parties, provided comparative tables to guide discussion and used bilateral meetings to ease things forward” (Durkan 1999). The independent chairmen outlined a path forward that they hoped to raise before the group for a vote. Overall compromise did not emerge easily but this variable format approach made it possible for the parties to remain in the talks in the midst of sectarian violence during the summer marching season.

Second, while not always under his direct control, Mitchell took advantage of the talks’ variable “participant geometry.” By exploiting the implications of the forum elections and the Mitchell principles described above, the dynamic inclusion and exclusion of parties could occur – with those players most vital to a centrist coalition consistently returning to the negotiations. During the talks, the numbers and identities of the parties changed numerous times. In some cases, the parties walked out on their own volition; for example, in June 1996, two hard-line unionist parties, the DUP and UKUP left after Mitchell was seated as co-chair. They later returned.

While Mitchell and his co-chairs retained significant influence over participation, the two sponsoring governments, the British and Irish, formally
maintained the powers of inclusion and exclusion to the All-Party Talks. This was useful to Mitchell as he could be seen as impartial. In June 1996, the two governments barred Sinn Féin from talks over continued IRA violence. As a result, the talks were dominated by unionist rhetoric.

On July 20, 1997, the IRA announced a cease-fire. In the following days, the delegates considered thirty-seven proposals designed to include Sinn Féin in the talks and at the same time retain the participation of unionist parties. The unionist parties voted against all these proposals. But, since the IRA held its fire and Sinn Féin indicated its adherence to the Mitchell Principles, it was eligible to enter the talks. The DUP and UKUP stormed out for the last time. Though the UUP voted against the proposals, Trimble remained committed to the talks. Mitchell realized that the walkout of the hard-line unionist parties opened the way for other unionists to participate more fully. As he later wrote:

The decision by Paisley and McCartney to quit the talks was predictable... Yet, if their objective was, as they repeatedly insisted, to end this process, then their walkout was a fateful error. Reaching agreement without their presence was extremely difficult; it would have been impossible with them in the room. [They had] made life miserable for Trimble and the UUP. Their absence freed the UUP from daily attacks at the negotiating table, and gave the party room to negotiate that it might not otherwise have had (Mitchell 1999b: 110).

On September 9, 1997, a Sinn Féin delegation led by Gerry Adams joined the All-Party Talks and affirmed the party's commitment to the Mitchell principles. A new stage of inclusiveness had begun, yet none of the unionist parties were in the room. Trimble and his delegation stayed away on that day. The governments had proposed a compromise to bring about substantive negotiations. An independent commission was established to verify decommissioning while a separate committee drafted a time schedule and procedures to launch substantive negotiations. Trimble wanted to see a specific timetable detailing when arms would be handed over. The governments could do nothing more than reaffirm their commitment to decommissioning and set up the mechanisms to achieve it. Ultimately, these measures proved sufficient to bring core unionists back and set the stage for an ultimate coalition of the center. (This variable geometry of participation continued with subsequent walkouts, exclusions, and selective re-admittance.)

In short, variable geometry of format and participation distinguished these talks from the situation in which one mediator negotiates with a consistent format and a constant set of negotiators. These talks were not like those in which "real" negotiations are carried out secretly with a core group who announce a de facto, take-it-or-leave-it agreement to broader groups and
constituencies. Mitchell took advantage of opportunities both at and away from the table to devise a process that helped him create the winning centrist coalition. He designed mechanisms that allowed tensions to be reduced and parties to move closer to the center. Mark Durkin (1999), then a senior member of the SDLP team stated, "(These) mechanisms were not new in themselves but (Mitchell) was able to use them in innovative ways to overcome obstacles when the talks became bogged down."

*Process Initiatives to Bring Multilevel Pressure for a Center Coalition.* At all costs, however threadbare, Mitchell kept the negotiations alive and at least nominally hopeful. In particular, he provided a constant media facade of "progress" in the All-Party Talks. For the parties, this arguably increased constituency pressures and the costs of being a spoiler. His concerted campaign sent signals to the media as well as outside groups to expect success. It helped fight against the implicit coalition of extremes outside the talks. In the spring of 1998, as extremist parties mounted their attacks in the media, he signaled hope and progress for the coalition at the center. However modestly, this further isolated those in Northern Irish society who argued against the process. When the extremist parties turned to increased violence, he framed such violent acts not as signs of failure in the negotiations, but rather as signals of the violent fringes' desperation that a real accord was increasingly likely. At a press conference in February 1998, he stated:

> I think it is becoming increasingly obvious that as the prospect of a successful conclusion of these negotiations improved, those who do not want to see a successful conclusion have taken more drastic and extreme measures. I am concerned that violence from those groups opposed to the peace process may escalate as the negotiations move to the end game (Mitchell 1999b: 142).

Eventually, the subtle use of the media helped mutually support the emergent center coalition and replace false progress with a real agreement.

In tandem with the brave public face Mitchell presented of the often-bleak talks, he acted to constitute an informal secretariat that played a key role with the national "patrons" of the unionists and republicans. The membership and affiliations of this informal group cut across the spectrum of interests of the parties involved in the talks. Throughout the long procedural discussions, Mitchell and this staff developed close relationships with the civil servants in the Irish and British Governments. The long hours of work created a group of professionals dedicated to one another and clear about the interests and constraints of their respective governments or parties. This body fulfilled an important "process" and "substantive analysis" function for Mitchell and his
co-chairs. It informally assisted in joint problem solving and joint understanding of the decisions that each party would ultimately have to make. “This informal staff would assist in drafting the new proposals, debate the merits of new structures for agreements, and prepare discussion papers for the negotiation group,” wrote Mitchell (1999: 78).

This dynamic developed in the course of the procedural talks and proved effective during the early substantive talks. Each of the governments acted as “confessors” to the main political parties – the British to the UUP, and the Irish to the SDLP. In practice, the members of this informal secretariat would participate in an exploratory meeting with Mitchell, agree on steps, and then convince their governments and the parties. This process broke down only when the two Prime Ministers attempted to negotiate the North-South relationships in London in April 1998, beyond the reach of the civil servants in Belfast. This move threatened the role of the informal secretariat and thrust its members into positional postures in defense of their governments. It almost imperiled the talks until the Prime Ministers came to Belfast and essentially capitulated to the secretariat.

* * *

After the fact, Mitchell and his co-chairs can be seen to have made a remarkable number of consequential process choices that addressed the barriers they faced: underlying polarization; deeply incompatible positions on issues; and lack of process. These barrier-surmounting actions included endorsement of “forum elections,” the “Mitchell Principles,” an overt focus on procedure rather than substance for the bulk of the talks, an embrace of the “sufficient consensus” rule, opportunistic use of variable format and participant geometry, as well as positive media framing, a cross-cutting informal secretariat, and engagement of “patron” government links in support of a moderate deal. Taken together, these process choices enhanced the prospects of a coalition of the center.

A Supporting Issue Strategy

Apart from his lengthy focus on procedure and multi-faceted process strategy, Mitchell pursued an issue strategy that had two major elements – he carefully decoupled the difficult issue of decommissioning from the negotiations and separated the major issues into three strands, which were later combined into a package. Each of these sets of actions both responded to the barrier of incompatible positions on issues, taken one at a time; collectively, Mitchell’s issue-related actions fostered a centrist coalition.
Decommissioning. Mitchell faced a Protestant-dominated Northern Ireland that was constitutionally part of the United Kingdom. Both the U.K. and the Unionist parties had long insisted on decommissioning weapons as an absolute precondition for any talks; Margaret Thatcher, in particular, had been unyielding. Yet without active participation of a broad swath of the Catholic Republicans, a coalition of the center would be impossible. Thus, Mitchell needed to keep the unionists in the talks by giving them enough reassurance on this core issue, while somewhat relaxing the conditions to gain entry into the talks of a broader group of Republicans, specifically Sinn Féin.

Mitchell addressed this balancing act by artfully and progressively decoupling and isolating the decommissioning issue from the other questions. This process began before he was even seated as co-chairman of the talks when he and the other co-chairmen of the body on decommissioning recommended “parallel decommissioning” and the “forum elections.” By suggesting parallel decommissioning in the context of a larger package, the Mitchell team provided British Prime Minister John Major a means to back away from his strong stance on decommissioning and begin the All-Party Talks. By July 1997, when it became apparent that the issue was still a stumbling block, Mitchell proposed that discussions of decommissioning be moved from the All-Party Talks to an International Commission on Decommissioning. In August 1997, he created a Liaison Subcommittee on Decommissioning between the All-Party Talks and the new Commission. This assured the unionists that the issue was still very much alive but not an impediment to further talks. Finally, on the day of agreement, a private “side letter” from British Prime Minister Tony Blair assured unionists of Britain’s commitment to decommissioning. Each step in this progression managed to hold at least the relatively centrist unionists as part of the process while broadening republican participation and ultimate commitment. Together, this provided the elements for more of a centrist coalition.

Three Strands. Facing opposition and incompatible positions on each of the major issues, Mitchell followed an earlier suggestion of John Hume to break them into “Three Strands,” which could be negotiated separately and later repackaged. Strand 1 dealt with “internal” relations within Northern Ireland, including the establishment of an “Assembly,” and its decision-making procedures. Protestants generally wanted a strong Assembly with broad powers while Catholics demanded “parallel consent” and power-sharing measures. Strand 2 dealt with “north-south” relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and involved the creation of joint north-south institutions (e.g. the Council). Issues such as their size and number, their relation to the Assembly, and the source of their powers were discussed. In general,
Protestant negotiators wanted the Council to have limited powers and to be subservient to the Assembly while Catholics wanted the Council to be preeminent. Less contentious, the issues in Strand 3 concerned “east-west” relations, between the governments of Ireland and Britain – particularly their relations to Northern Ireland.

The parties’ maintained strongly opposing positions on these issues when discussed individually. Yet by discussing the different Strands separately, gauging relative intensity of interest, and refining options on each, an overall package could be created that, taken as a whole, was arguably better than the no-deal alternative. In broad brush, the unionists wanted an Assembly; the republicans wanted north-south institutions. The unionists feared that the nationalists would use the institutions to sabotage the Assembly and insisted that the institutions be subordinate to the Assembly. The nationalists believed the reverse and wanted the institutions to be created directly by the British and Irish parliaments. The final agreement intertwined the Protestant desire for a strong Assembly with the Catholic desire for strong cross-border bodies. More specifically, while treating the difficult substantive issues – of decommissioning, prisoners, and parades – in side letters of promise and (vague) guarantees, it:

- Established the Assembly with constitutional powers (Protestant provision) and “parallel consent” power-sharing arrangements (Catholic provision).
- Declared an absolute commitment to establish a North/South Ministerial Council and to create “implementation bodies” to carry out the Council’s decisions (Catholic provision).
- Created a “transition phase” during which the ministerial council, the New Northern Ireland Assembly, and a new British/Irish Council would simultaneously and “cooperatively” begin to function (Catholic provision) An expansion of the arrangement would have to be approved by the Assembly (Protestant provision).
- Included a “mutual destruction” provision in which the Assembly and the institutions became “mutually inter-dependent, stipulating that one cannot function without the other” (mutual provision); and
- Changed the Irish Constitution (Protestant provision) and British constitutional law (Catholic provision) to enshrine the concept of “self-determination.”

Separate, lengthy discussion of the three Strands allowed the parties to argue for the issues that mattered to them and, at the same time, gain some understanding of the approach being taken by others. Prior to that, the more extreme parties may have prevented the group from sharing anything beyond aggressive, entrenched, incompatible positions. However, once the issues
were discussed more fully and the composition of the talks excluded the more extreme elements, the governments were able to create the "Heads of Agreement" which was adopted by sufficient consensus of the centrist coalition in January 1998. The result was an ultimate package, described above and supported by a coalition of the center, which appeared beneficial to all and could be sold to constituencies as victories.

In sum, Mitchell’s artful and progressive decoupling of the decommissioning issue walked a tightrope that ultimately kept the unionist center in the talks while greatly broadening republican participation. For the coalition that remained, the Three Strands were woven together in a package that supported an interdependent center.

**Timing Strategy**

To bring these process and issue strategies to fruition required an apparently contradictory timing strategy. Mitchell, in effect, committed both to an almost infinitely patient approach followed by a powerfully engineered and daring deadline. The deadline tactic served its traditional action-forcing function. Furthermore, it was created in a manner that was directly responsive to Mitchell’s lack of formal powers, an ongoing and significant barrier.

“As Long as It Takes.” While Mitchell initially estimated that his work in Northern Ireland would last no more than six months, the reality quickly asserted itself. Mitchell rapidly came to perceive the depth of the divide even between the more moderate representatives of the different sides. And, a chasm clearly separated the more extreme elements. Partisan perceptions and exquisite sensitivity to slights were rampant given centuries of agonizing history and thirty years of the most recent “Troubles.” One of the delegates warned Mitchell in 1996, “Senator, if you’re to be of any use here you must understand that we in Northern Ireland would drive 100 miles out of our way to receive an insult” (Mitchell 1999a).

For these parties to develop even a semblance of a working relationship and begin to bridge the enormous gulf between their positions required an extraordinarily patient approach (which, of course, was consistent with Mitchell’s lengthy focus on procedure over substance). In September 1999, Mitchell returned to Belfast when the implementation of the Accords had reached an impasse. He met with the key players and joked,

You know why I love opera? When I go home and put on ‘La Boheme,’ I know Rodolfo’s going to sing the same words every time, and it gets me prepared to come back to Belfast, because the one thing I know is that I’m going to have to sit here and listen to you guys saying the same thing over and over again, every time (Wahrhaftig 2000).
In part, by focusing discussions for so long on the relatively less toxic procedural issues and mediating the interactions, Mitchell began to foster communication and at least a rudimentary understanding by the parties of each others' interests. While any genuine accommodation would almost certainly require this kind of time, Mitchell's own prior experience in the U.S. Senate, both as Senator and Majority Leader, was marked by patience and extraordinary persistence literally over years trying to advocate the adoption of environmental and healthcare legislation. Both by temperament and background, Mitchell was well-suited to a process, that by nature, would take a very long time if any kind of workable coalition of the center could form.

The first element of his timing approach – "as long as it takes" – was inherently process-focused. This contrasted sharply with substance-focused alternative possibilities that could have attempted simply to "get the deal done." Given the painful history and polarized psychology, it is hard to imagine the latter approach working unless its intent was the equivalent of divorce rather than the mutual accommodation sought by Mitchell and the host governments.

*Constructing a Credible Deadline.* While Mitchell's patience was legendary, it was not infinite. After twenty months of negotiations, and realizing that the end of the debate forum's legal term (which made the All-Party Talks possible) was looming in June 1998, Mitchell felt that he had to bring the process to closure. Looking forward to the expiration of the formal electoral mandate as well as the advent of the violence-prone and divisive summer "parades and marching" season, Mitchell worked backwards to a specific day, Easter Sunday, that would permit a deal and national referendum to occur in advance of these events. Sharing his logic with the host governments and parties, Mitchell negotiated an agreement on a nominal schedule for closure. Yet, given his inability to impose sanctions or offer tangible rewards, there was a very high probability that the underlying polarization, constituency pressures, and inertia would conspire to render the "deadline" meaningless.

Over the long course of the negotiations, however, Mitchell had consciously built enormous personal credibility with the parties. This created a sense of obligation to him personally that he deployed very purposefully around the ultimate deadline. Mitchell made a visible and costly commitment to success. By the deadline, he had persevered despite the widely publicized events of his new wife's miscarriage and the death of his beloved brother. Furthermore, he had demonstrated a scrupulous commitment to an evenhanded approach and patient impartiality over time. For example, in early 1996, he acted against the unionists and Britain with his initial stand on decommissioning. Later, in July 1996, he accepted the DUP proposal.
for sufficient consensus, which cut against nationalists. He supported the expulsion of extremists from both sides and then supported their re-inclusion based on principled criteria. In short, he had painstakingly built-up credibility, respect, and a sense of obligation that he used for making the deadline real. In effect, he required the parties to make an all-or-nothing bet that, if this failed, that was “it.” He made it clear that he was the last real chance for them before falling back into the abyss. At one point, Mitchell portrayed himself as ‘Humpty Dumpty,’ asserting, “I can only jump once” (Durkan 1999).

His timing strategy, then, had two elements that contributed to the creation of a coalition of the center. First, his willingness to continue the process “as long as it takes,” rather than driving prematurely for a deal, opened channels between the parties to construct the basis of a working relationship. Second, recognizing that stalemate could persist indefinitely yet he had no tangible resources to force a conclusion, he invested in credibility and deployed it in one final gesture.

* * *

Combining broader signs of moderation and hope with these multi-pronged choices on process, substance, and timing, Mitchell and his co-chairs helped engender a coalition of the center. Relative to the polarization evident in Figure 1, consider the situation illustrated in Figure 2, which was obtained after overwhelming ratification of the April 1998 accords. However tenuous, a new situation clearly existed.

Crafting a “Coalition of the Center” versus Alternative Coalition Approaches

We have sought to demonstrate that George Mitchell fostered an “outward-rippling coalition of the center against the extremes.” Process, issue, and timing choices underpinned his approach to reverse a situation in which the extremes either had gained or were feared to be gaining the dominant voice. In our view, this conceptualization may be a useful heuristic to guide action. In two other prominent peacemaking episodes, an arguably similar coalitional dynamic was at work. First, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk can be understood as seeking an arrangement between moderate elements of the white National Party and the African National Congress (ANC), outflanking and marginalizing in the process relatively extreme parties on both ends of the spectrum. And, prior to the Oslo agreements in the Middle East, Yitzhak Rabin faced a hard challenge from the Likud party on his right, while Yasser Arafat risked being outflanked by younger, more extreme elements of Hamas
and Islamic Jihad. In these cases, like that of Northern Ireland, then-relatively centrist parties feared an accelerating downward spiral as the effective political voice shifted to the extremes. Successful or not, their agreements were designed to forge a longer-term, interdependent existence between two sides.

There is nothing inevitable, however, about this coalitional dynamic. Consider four other generic strategies: full consensus, asymmetric dominance, bridging the extremes, and more complex sequencing.

**Full Consensus**

For multiparty negotiation processes, especially those conducted in international organizations such as the United Nations, full consensus is frequently the nominal goal. The obvious advantage of full support in the event of a deal is often offset by the equally obvious disadvantage of being hostage to the most reluctant party. Deadlocks or least-common-denominator agreements are the obvious risks (Sebenius 1991, 1995). In a case like that of Northern Ireland, “sufficient consensus” offered many of the advantages of full consensus without the virtual certainty of deadlock given the intransigence of extreme groups.
Asymmetric Dominance

An assessment of a given dispute situation may suggest that one party will almost certainly prevail in a military, legal, or economic conflict, for example. Recognizing this apparent inevitability, a negotiator or third party may seek to encourage an outcome that essentially represents victory for the likely dominant party or parties, but without incurring the costs to all sides of the conflict. For example, after the U.S. and NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo and into Serbia, the “agreement” with Milosovic that terminated that conflict essentially ratified the Serbian loss without inducing or permitting further fighting.

Bridging the Extremes

Rather than consensus, victory, or seeking to build “out” from the center, an alternative dynamic assesses the parties that by themselves may block any deal. Then, an extremes-bridging strategy seeks to craft a deal among the potential blockers, subsequently bringing in moderates. The case can be made that any deal among moderates early on could actually be an impediment to agreement among the essential parties. A prominent example of this approach can be found in trade negotiations.

Using the phrase, “pyramidal” negotiation, Gil Winham described a common coalitional choice in which the major players, who could each block an agreement, separately strike a deal and only then carefully add other parties to the agreement. In the context of the subsidy and countervailing duties issues in the GATT’s Tokyo Round, the U.S. and the EC had powerful disagreements. As a result, these key players first worked on solutions “mainly on the basis of a direct Washington-Brussels exchange” (Winham 1986). Winham described the rationale behind this process of pyramidal coalition-building atop the Washington-Brussels base:

If the goal is a negotiated agreement, and if each of the two majors has the capacity to prevent that agreement, then the early flow of decision-making probably should occur between the majors at the expense of other nations at the negotiation. Furthermore the incipient agreement would probably be presented to the other nations not in one step, but gradually, in a manner that slowly sought adherents to an evolving accord. This process in fact occurred, and what seems from hindsight a matter of logic was indeed pursued with deliberate care by the US and EC negotiators (1986: 184). As actually realized, the sequencing actions went as follows:

Nations were invited to join the informal US/EC discussions on subsidy/ countervail on the basis of their preferential contribution to the potential
agreement. In most cases, a nation's trading position was the determining factor, but in some cases personal negotiating skills were also important. In the first dimension, Japan was included, while the second brought in Canada, whose ambassador, Rodney Grey, had long experience in trade negotiation. ... The Nordic countries were added for reasons of trading interests with the Europeans, and for balance in the informal subsidy/countervail group. Later, when the developing countries were added, the invitation went first to the major nations such as Brazil, Mexico, and India. In this manner, the negotiation developed in a pyramidal pattern ... adding new delegations to the process, and accommodating, insofar as possible, the new concerns brought by the additional players (Winham 1986: 175).

As the coalition grew, it tended to worsen the no-agreement alternatives of the as-yet left-out parties. The logic that dictated the approach began with a separate accord among potential blocking parties, and then brought in new adherents according to a tradeoff between (a) the extent of changes they required to join the evolving accord (the smaller the better) and (b) their importance among the so-far left-out parties (the greater the better).

Rather than start the process with this most difficult U.S.-EC base on which to build a higher and higher pyramid of adherents, one might imagine an alternative approach with the principal antagonists recruiting their natural allies into two opposing, polarized, and mutually exclusive blocs. Bringing on board lesser (and easier) players earlier, while adding to the supportive coalition of each adversary, might require concessions to the new members that would also make eventual reconciliation of the two blocs much more difficult. The effects of bootstrapping to get allies on board first in cases like these would likely bequeath a final negotiation that would be both far more costly and risky than a pyramidal approach.

More Complex Coalitional Sequencing

As the history of classical balance of power diplomacy attests, coalitional strategies can become extremely complex (see Gulick 1955). Secrecy, divide-and-conquer tactics, elaborate bootstrapping, and the like can lead to a winning coalition. Examples include Richard Holbrooke's approach to the Dayton Accords (Watkins and Rosegrant 2001), negotiations over bank capital adequacy leading to the Basle Accords, and so on.14
A Coalition of the Center Versus Alternatives

To our knowledge, a full, theoretically-grounded taxonomy of coalitional approaches does not now exist and the examples we have provided are but a step in that direction. Relative to the examples we have provided, however, Mitchell’s approach appears most suited even at the risk of assuming post facto inevitability. Surely the goal of full consensus was unattainable given the consistent spoilers on both sides that would have held out against a deal. Protestant dominance had long been a fact in Northern Ireland and had engendered the Catholic reaction; thus a negotiating strategy aimed at victory by one side would have founndered on the violent reaction of the other. The idea of bridging the extremes may have seemed the only option until one reviews the extraordinary difficulty even of bridging the more moderate factions. Finally, one can imagine a sequential strategy of bringing various factions on board as conceivably succeeding. Yet Mitchell and his co-chairs seemed intent not only on a deal, but on creating the basis for the parties to deal with the range of substantive issues which would arise under the new institutions. Much of the lengthy procedural focus, in retrospect at least, appears to have been aimed at modeling more productive interaction. Tactically manipulating players to agree would likely have worked against this larger objective. Quickly comparing the choice of forging a coalition of the center against leading other options, then, suggests its analytical wisdom.

Conclusion

Drawing on William Butler Yeats’ painfully apt words from his 1921 poem, The Second Coming, Mitchell and his co-chairs had faced a situation where “things fall apart; the center cannot hold,” and in which “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Yet those involved in the All-Party Talks found the mechanisms, for a while at least, to give the best real conviction and renewed voice. After nearly two years of long negotiations, George Mitchell centrally contributed to forging a comprehensive peace agreement for the people of Northern Ireland on Good Friday, 1998. In a resounding measure of support and hope, some 70% of the voters soon ratified it. While subsequent twists and turns of events leave the ultimate success of this situation unclear, most observers credit this effort with substantial progress.

While many external factors worked in his favor, Mitchell played a key strategic role in creating a winning coalition that ultimately drove the process toward agreement in the face of potent barriers: deep psychological divisions leading to political polarization and incompatible positions on issues, the
absence of an accepted negotiating process, and virtual lack of formal influence tools such as financial or military resources. Mitchell surmounted these barriers with an approach that, in effect, created an outward-rippling ‘coalition at the center’ against the extremes. This coalitional strategy was neither preordained nor simple. His strategic and tactical decisions – coordinating choices in process design, timing, and issue management – can be interpreted as contributing to the creation of this coalition. By focusing first on process over substance, by allowing all-inclusive discussions in an open forum, by carefully decoupling the decommissioning issue from the talks, by allowing certain parties to exclude themselves, by then breaking issues into the three strands and reassembling them into a collectively acceptable package, and by creating the final deadline when the moment was ripe, Mitchell created, sustained, and gave voice to a “coalition of the center” that was previously voiceless in Northern Ireland.

Though we have consciously stressed and highlighted Mitchell’s role, his influence obviously depended greatly on the actions of others and on broader events. Not his sole agency, but a confluence of factors led to the Good Friday Accords. We can never know whether they would have come about absent a range of moderating influences detailed above, absent remarkable leaders like Hume and Trimble, absent parliamentary and electoral shifts in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, or absent other contributing factors. Yet it is at least instructive to focus on individual action, without the fantasy of omnipotence, to help develop prescriptive theory that is actionable by individuals.

In this case, we have sought to break new ground in the study of mediation. First, we explicitly assessed the context to identify key barriers and opportunities. Second, we moved beyond general categories of mediator approach – such as communication, formulation, and manipulation – to match classes of mediator action to barriers. Finally, we placed these discrete actions in service of a larger purpose by exploring the “mediator as coalition-builder.” While certainly significant in itself, the case of Northern Ireland offers an illustrative example of a type of coalition and coalition-building process. A more systematic approach to determine the conditions under which such an approach is most promising – as distinct from a number of conceptually different alternatives from full consensus to asymmetric dominance, to a bridging of the extremes, to more complex coalitional dynamics – stands as an intriguing research agenda in the realm of mediation and multiparty conflict resolution.
Notes

1. We would like to thank Professors Hannah Riley and Michael Watkins as well as participants in seminars at Harvard Business School and Harvard's Program on Negotiation for useful insights. Two reviewers also made useful comments that led to significant improvements in its exposition. This article is closely based on our documented case study, "To hell with the future, let's get on with the Past: George Mitchell in Northern Ireland" (Sebenius and Curran 2001), which can be obtained through www.hbsp.harvard.edu. We wrote the case following the Program on Negotiation's selection of Senator Mitchell for the 2001 Great Negotiator Award and his visit to Harvard in connection with the award. Sources in that case study are incorporated by reference in the current article.

2. For recent surveys, see (Sebenius 1992 (January); 2001; forthcoming) For a practitioner-oriented survey, see (Sebenius 2000).

3. See also the discussion by Bercovitch and Rubin (1992 14–21).

4. The following sources provide good summaries of the conflict, history, and peace process in (Northern Ireland Conflict undated web source) and (Accord undated web source).

5. There is ample evidence in a number of sources for the economic forces that contributed to the violent conflict Mitchell faced. In 1985, Catholic male unemployment stood at 35.5%. Protestant male unemployment stood at 14.2%. By 1991, those numbers had fallen to 21.3% and 9.6% respectively. See Murphy Armstrong (1994). Also, according to the research of Steve Bruce, "Loyalist paramilitary violence decreased between Mondays and Fridays prior to 1985. When they had jobs, they had to restrict their killings to weekends" (1993: 18–19). The incidents increased during the week after 1991, corresponding to increasing Protestant unemployment.

6. There are a variety of good works on the psychological roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Much of the best work has been directed by Dr. Ed Cairns of the University of Ulster and President of the Peace Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association (See http://www.apa.org/about/division/div48.html). Publications of the division include: Peace and Conflict: The Journal of Peace Psychology edited by Dr. Richard V. Wagner and Peace Psychology Newsletter, edited by Dr. Daniel J. Christie. A particularly relevant article from this journal is (Stringer and Cornish et al. 2000). Cairns provides an excellent examination of the subject in: (Cairns 1994). See also, Cornish, L., Stringer, M. and Finlay, C. (1991). For concise books on the subject, see (Fields 1981) and (Ward 1987). See also (Hogg and Abrams 1988). A good analysis of the use of historical myths in the shaping of identities can be found in (Hughes 1994). A good review of the psychology of Irish nationalism is O. (MacDonagh 1983). For a study of popular unionism and its psychological roots see (Bruce 1989) (Coogan 1996) examines how psychology influenced peace efforts over the past three decades (Wright 1987) compares the social psychology and culture of the people of Northern Ireland to the people in other conflicts (McCann 1980) provides an autobiographical yet politically analytical account of personal perceptions of roots of the conflict.

7. Shouted from a crowd in Armagh, Northern Ireland in 1973 during a time of bloodshed. It came after a religious leader appealed for peace and asked for the people in the crowd to think of the future. It was widely reported in the papers at the time.

8. This section draws heavily from the "Profiles" section of (McCartney (ed.) 1999).

9. See historical economic figures in "In a Nutshell, the Republic of Ireland" at <http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/~bj333/ireland.html>.

10. Each party had to accept these six principles, initially proposed by the International Body on Decommissioning, before entering into the all-party talks. They were seen as a
commitment to non-violence. "We recommend that the parties to such negotiations affirm their total and absolute commitment to: 1. Democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues; 2. The total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations; 3. Agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission; 4. Renounce for themselves, and to oppose any efforts by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations; 5. Agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with they may disagree; and, 6. Urge that 'punishment' killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions."

11. The term, "variable geometry" was coined by Mark Durkan, a member of the Social Democratic and Labor Party and a senior member of the SDLP team in the All-Party talks. He used it to refer to "the concept of flexibility in the shape and size of meetings" (See Durkan 1999).

12. For an extensive guide to dealing with multiparty processes, see (Susskind, McKearnan et al. 1999).

13. The following example is adapted from (Sebenius 1996).

14. An analysis of the coalitional process leading to the Basle Accords as well as many other such strategies can be found in (Sebenius 1996).

References


In a Nutshell, the Republic of Ireland, http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/~bj333/ireland.html.


