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## Talks are the only way to solve the crisis in Catalonia

'Experience shows both sides are more likely to agree if a third party is involved' Jonathan Powell

The encouraging thing about the dispute in Catalonia, at least until Sunday, was that it was non-violent. Unlike the three-decade long war with Eta in the Basque country, not a drop of blood had been spilled despite the high emotions on both sides.

Now blood has been spilled and the situation is in danger of spiralling out of control. Both sides are poised to take irreversible steps.

The separatist Catalan government has said it will make a unilateral declaration of independence within days. The Spanish government will not recognise it, plunging the two sides deeper into confrontation. Conservative politicians in Madrid are urging the government to invoke Article 155 of the constitution, which would suspend the devolved administration in Barcelona and impose direct rule from the centre. This is unlikely to be accepted quietly by many in Catalonia.

It is urgent to find a way out for both sides. Before either takes a step everyone in Europe will later regret, they should take a deep breath, calm down and agree to negotiate. I have worked in many countries facing similar conflicts based on deeply rooted historical grievances. The only non-violent way to resolve them in the end is by talking. All too often governments and oppositions try everything else before they return to this obvious point.

The objective must be to avoid Catalonia settling into a protracted armed conflict of the sort we saw in Northern Ireland. That, too, might possibly have been averted before it started if there had been an inclusive and patient negotiation, something that almost happened in Sunningdale in 1973.

Catalonia is not Northern Ireland, of course, but the two sides often tip into such conflicts without intending to do so. Before it is too late the Spanish and Catalan governments should learn the lessons from similar confrontations elsewhere.

What appears to be stopping them from sitting down is, in part, the preconditions set by both sides. The Spanish government insists that it will never discuss independence and the Catalan side says it will not negotiate unless independence is on the table.

Setting such preconditions is almost always a mistake, just as the insistence on prior decommissioning of IRA weapons was in Northern Ireland. They just become a way of preventing negotiations ever happening.

It is perfectly possible to sit down with nothing ruled off the table, but with no commitment by either side that it will ever agree to what the other side is demanding. When such negotiations begin they often go in surprising directions. The British side did not insist on excluding a united Ireland from the Northern Ireland negotiations. But in the end Sinn Féin accepted power sharing, cross-border bodies and other guarantees instead, while maintaining their own desire to get rid of the border one day.

Governments find it very hard to accept third-party mediation in such conflicts. The British rejected the idea consistently for decades in Northern Ireland. But in the end John Major's government accepted former US senator George Mitchell as chair of the talks, and he made an agreement possible.

Experience round the world shows that the two sides are far more likely to reach an agreement if there is a third party. It makes it easier to decide on prosaic issues such as where and when meetings should take place. The presence of a third party also makes it possible to have compromise proposals put forward on substance that are not automatically rejected because they come from one side or the other. You wouldn't play a game of football without a referee, after all. Particularly when trust has become as fractured as it has in Catalonia, it is not wise to embark on a negotiation without someone neutral to facilitate it.

It may be that the Spanish government hopes and believes that the separatist sentiments in Catalonia will fade away over time. That does not seem likely after Sunday. Immobilism is not a safe policy in these circumstances. There clearly has to be a new relationship between Spain and Catalonia based on consent on both sides and this can only come about by talking.

At its root, this is a political problem and it can only be resolved by political means. I hope that both sides realise the only way to get there is through a structured and serious negotiation before it is too late. The alternative could all too easily be the sort of long running, and often bloody, conflicts over self determination we have seen all too often — from Burma to South Sudan.

The writer is director of Inter Mediate and former chief government negotiator in Northern Ireland

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