



## Back in Time: Franklin as Negotiator by Lady Reid

Senator George Mitchell has recently been in London receiving several public accolades, including the Benjamin Franklin Medal from the RSA, for his skills as a negotiator in the Northern Irish peace talks. Benjamin Franklin has, over two centuries, gathered similar prestige for his negotiating skills. What elements link these two people who were certainly at the centre of two extremely difficult negotiations?

The immediate similarities are two-fold – the elements within the conflicts and the nature of the individuals. Few of us have had the privilege of experiencing Senator Mitchell's negotiating skills but one gains an impression of a listening and absorbing person, fair, unbiased and patient. This could also be a description of Benjamin Franklin, who was a good listener, extremely patient although persevering and for many years unbiased in his arguments for the resolution of the disputes between Parliament, the Crown and thirteen very individual colonies.

But the background to their negotiations is very different. Most notable has to be Benjamin Franklin's status as agent of the Assembly of Pennsylvania and in later years of Massachusetts, New Jersey and of Georgia. He was their representative or lobbyist in the UK. But as a negotiator he was rarely empowered, since he was often without advice from his masters, mainly due to the length of time letters took to and from America and because of the delays and politics of the various assemblies. It was inevitable that Dr. Franklin often had to present his own views, at least in the English press and via the various pamphlets he and other agents wrote. He also had to deal with a group of agents representing other colonies with different views. Franklin was very skilled at consultation and forming a relatively cohesive colonial attitude. But all of this had to be managed before they were ever allowed in front of the King's ministers.

Franklin also had to contend with a personal status problem. He was generally regarded by the King's ministers as an ill-educated, 'mere colonial'. He gradually gained some respect but the changes of Government meant endless reworking of approach and he often suffered intolerable delays and insulting denigration. He was often more or less a message bearer, as contradictory politicise arrived on each packet boat. However, in time he became very skilled in using secretaries and minions of the ministers to gain access and acceptability.

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Most of his negotiating skills were used behind the main centre of power. Once he was within the decision making vortex the atmosphere was quite different.

There was little room for any negotiation as ministers and Parliament were used to making decisions and laws without any consultation. In these situations he needed a clear head and enormous patience. He was hauled before the Bar of the House of Commons to answer a barrage of questions concerning taxation and the Stamp Act. His answers were articulate and clear and did influence the decision to cancel the Act. Later, he was called before the Privy Council where he faced over an hour's haranguing by the Attorney General.

Franklin's attempts to represent the colonies and yet remain an unbiased negotiator foundered on these typical late 18<sup>th</sup> century political machinations. He became a determined Patriot of Independence and abandoned his role as conciliator. Benjamin Franklin may have failed but the outcome of the War of Independence triggered the greatness of both countries and thus hindsight awards him honour as a diplomat.

