

“It remains an open question whether power-sharing can operate with sufficient mutual trust when the main parties have diametrically opposed aspirations for the future of the region.”

Northern Ireland’s Twenty Years of Troubled Peace

DAVID MITCHELL

April 2018 will mark twenty years since representatives of Britain, Ireland, and various parties in Northern Ireland signed the Good Friday Agreement. The political and security reforms set out in the document, with a power-sharing assembly devolved from London at their core, were designed to bring stability to a region that had suffered thirty years of insurgency and intercommunal bloodshed known as the Troubles. The leaders of the opposing ethnopolitical blocs that entered into the agreement received the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize, and Northern Ireland, so long synonymous with urban violence and political unrest, was rebranded as a paragon of peacemaking. However, the twentieth anniversary inevitably prompts reflection on the legacy of the agreement, and on close inspection a contradictory picture emerges.

On the one hand, some key indicators are remarkably positive. Political violence is rare, tourist numbers are soaring, and central Belfast increasingly resembles a normal, prosperous European city. The international appetite for learning from Northern Ireland is still strong; a steady flow of visitors moves between the province and countries around the world, sharing experiences and expertise in conflict resolution.

On the other hand, the 1998 agreement now faces unprecedented threats. The power-sharing arrangement collapsed in early 2017 and had not yet been restored at the time of writing. That, combined with the prospect of collateral damage from Britain’s exit from the European Union and the ongoing failure to implement transitional justice

measures to deal with past violence, raises serious questions about the sustainability of the governance model set out in the agreement. It may also call into question Northern Ireland’s reputation as a model for peacemaking.

ROOTS OF DIVISION

British political involvement in Ireland dates back to 1169, but the origins of the modern conflict in Northern Ireland (also known as Ulster) are usually traced to the “Plantations” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a colonial project in which Protestant settlers from Scotland and England were sent to confiscated Irish lands. (That said, migration between Scotland and Ireland, which are separated by just twelve miles of sea, occurred for centuries before the Plantations, and continued afterward.) Religious differences led to entrenched social divisions, precluding intermarriage and assimilation. This encouraged mutual mistrust and stereotyping, and enforced a distinctive pattern of separation.

In the nineteenth century, Protestant-dominated Belfast became a world-leading industrial city. The region’s burgeoning economic productivity and prosperity cemented Ulster Protestants’ political attachment to Britain and its empire. They took this success as evidence of their own cultural advancement, ingenuity, and work ethic.

The emerging Irish push for autonomy from Britain—the “Home Rule” campaign that gathered strength in the late nineteenth century—met with virulent Protestant opposition. This period saw the divisions rooted in earlier centuries of settlement crystallize into two modern nationalist movements that were secular in aim but often religious in their expression and self-understanding. One was Protestant, “unionist,” and centered in the north of

DAVID MITCHELL is an assistant professor of conflict resolution and reconciliation at Trinity College Dublin’s Irish School of Ecumenics in Belfast.

the island; the other was Catholic, “nationalist,” and based in Dublin. As Irish republican separatism grew and unionists remained determined not to be taken out of the United Kingdom, the British partitioned Ireland in 1920. Six counties in the northeast became Northern Ireland, remaining in the UK with a devolved regional parliament in Belfast; the other twenty-six counties became the autonomous Irish Free State.

For London, partition was a tool of political expediency aimed at preventing civil war. To Irish republicans, it was a colonial carve-up that unnaturally disfigured the island so that Britain, aided by its settler-client allies, the unionists, could retain a foothold in the North. The Protestant unionists would have preferred to maintain Irish unity within the UK, but they acquiesced to the arrangement as the best guarantee of their economic security and what they saw as their Protestant way of life. For them, the border expressed a political, social, and economic division that already existed between North and South.

While partition temporarily quelled the hostilities, it seeded problems for the future. The location of the border created a new configuration of majorities and minorities: thousands of northern Protestants were “abandoned” in the southern state, while one-third of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland were Catholic and broadly Irish nationalist. The two new political entities fell into a cold war of suspicion, developing dichotomous religious and cultural identities. The unionists operated a de facto one-party state in the North; London, under the devolved arrangements, had little role in Northern Ireland affairs. Catholics were discriminated against in public employment, security policy, housing, and other areas.

The uneasy equilibrium was shattered in the late 1960s. Inspired by protest movements in the United States and Europe, a new and ambitious generation of Catholics (and some Protestants) organized street marches to demand civil rights. These were interpreted by many Protestants as attempts to destroy Northern Ireland and met with repression by security forces and Protestant gangs. In the course of the spiraling unrest, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a semi-dormant militant nationalist group, was reactivated. It exploited the heady climate to begin an insurrection aimed at

ending British rule in the North and reuniting the island. Protestant paramilitaries emerged to fight the IRA.

In hopes of containing the emergency, the British took over direct political and security control of Northern Ireland in 1972. Repeated attempts to reestablish local control on a basis that both nationalists and unionists could accept ended in failure. Between 1969 and 1998, among a population of 1.5 million, 3,627 people were killed and tens of thousands were wounded, traumatized, and displaced.

CATALYSTS FOR COMPROMISE

For encouraging the peace process that began in the early 1990s, some credit has generally been given to milestones in peaceful conflict resolution at that time such as the end of apartheid in South Africa and the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords, as well as the end of the Cold War. However, two trends closer to home were most salient. One was intensified cooperation between the British

and Irish governments on efforts to reach a political solution in Northern Ireland. This partnership was institutionalized in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

Mutual membership in the European Union created new opportunities for contacts between politicians and civil servants from the two nations, and enhanced the standing of the Irish in relation to the British, rebalancing the asymmetry of the historic colonial relationship. The EU also offered a model of transnational relations and a fresh approach to sovereignty, identity, and borders that helped reframe how the states understood themselves and their territorial conflict. John Hume—the leader of the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labor Party in Northern Ireland and a key architect of the peace process—repeatedly invoked Europe as an inspirational example of what was possible in Ireland.

The other catalyst for the peace process was the realization by the parties to the conflict that indefinitely pursuing uncompromising ends was futile. The increasing success of the security forces in foiling IRA attacks showed republicans that continuing armed action would prolong the hardship of their community and likely yield few political rewards. So republicans—who became a major electoral force during the 1980s through their po-

Many have calculated that any ground given on the past only serves the other side's interests.

litical party Sinn Féin—were open to the offer of government-sponsored negotiations.

For their part, unionists were inclined to negotiate for two reasons. First, they disliked direct rule from London and they despised the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave Dublin a consultative role in Northern Irish affairs. The return of devolved government to Northern Ireland would remove both problems, but the British would only permit that to happen on the basis of cross-community power-sharing. Second, unionists feared that if they stonewalled, London might pursue policies they would find even less agreeable, such as joint British-Irish authority over Northern Ireland.

As the peace process took shape, contact between political actors facilitated by back-channel diplomacy and the work of civil society groups helped foster a sense of mutual purpose. On all sides, there was a desire to spare future generations what the Troubles generation lived through. Trust was more elusive, yet eventually the impulse toward cooperation came to fruition in the Good Friday Agreement.

BREAKTHROUGH

The centerpiece of the agreement was a power-sharing assembly in Northern Ireland. The accord set out a number of procedural safeguards to prevent any one group from dominating, including a requirement for elected assembly members to be designated as “unionist,” “nationalist” or “other.” An executive committee would be open to all parties of sufficient strength and ministerial posts would be allocated proportionally according to each party’s number of seats. The executive would be presided over by a first minister and deputy first minister who would jointly require cross-community support in the assembly.

Relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would be addressed primarily through a North-South Ministerial Council, comprising ministers from the assembly and the Irish government, who would set policies in a range of areas of mutual, mainly economic and cultural, interest. The council would be balanced by an east-west institution, the British-Irish Council, including ministers from the Irish government and various jurisdictions in the United Kingdom.

Regarding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, participants in the talks accepted the principle of consent, which held that the issue should be decided by the will of a majority within North-

ern Ireland. In effect, this meant continued British sovereignty over the territory, but allowed Irish nationalists to keep alive their hopes of Irish unity in the future. The agreement emphatically recognized the aspirations of unionists and nationalists as equally legitimate, but it also endorsed a third option by recognizing “the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both.” In this way, the agreement was an attempt to detach identity from territory and sovereignty—to defuse the zero-sum clash of identities at the heart of the conflict.

Agreeing on and implementing these provisions proved to be considerably more straightforward than aspects of the accords pertaining to the legacy of violence. A particularly contentious question was what to do with paramilitary weapons. The agreement sidestepped the issue, leaving it unclear whether paramilitary-linked parties such as Sinn Féin could join the new government before their armed wings destroyed weapons that had so recently been used to intimidate and kill.

The agreement permitted the release of paramilitary prisoners, again without any precondition of disarmament. In response to nationalist demands, it also established a process to reform the police force. The measures that were later implemented included affirmative action in recruitment to increase the number of Catholic police officers, changes to the name and symbols of the force to make them less British and more neutral, and demilitarization of the police given the declining threat of violence. These reforms offended many unionists who rejected the notion that the Royal Ulster Constabulary had been anything other than an impartial bulwark against terrorist anarchy during the Troubles.

Moderate Irish nationalists and the British and Irish governments hailed the agreement as a historic compromise that could bring an end to Protestant-Catholic and British-Irish antagonism. Most republicans somewhat equivocally accepted the agreement, arguing that it allowed them to continue to pursue their goal of a united Ireland. But a minority of republicans viewed it as a defeat and a betrayal, and continued a low-level campaign of violence.

Unionists split almost evenly. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leadership supported the agreement, primarily because it maintained British sovereignty. But a conservative faction opposed the pact along with the hard-line Democratic Unionist

Party (DUP), rejecting what they saw as its political and moral compromises.

SPIKING THE GUNS

Given all these points of contention, successful implementation of the agreement was far from certain. And implementation was indeed tumultuous, dogged by political crises, an electoral shift to the extremes, and street unrest.

The issue of paramilitary weapons was the greatest stumbling block, delaying the start of stable power-sharing for nine years. Getting rid of weapons took on a moral and symbolic resonance out of proportion to its practical significance—after all, even if weapons were destroyed, paramilitaries could always acquire more. But a standoff ensued between unionists, who insisted on IRA decommissioning as necessary and tangible evidence of republicans' commitment to peace, and Sinn Féin, which was determined to avoid the appearance of republican surrender and still wanted proof that the unionists were genuinely committed to partnership and equality with Catholics.

The UUP did enter the power-sharing government with Sinn Féin, the SDLP, and the DUP for periods between 1999 and 2002, on the condition of IRA decommissioning. (“No guns, no government” was the unionist mantra). But that government eventually collapsed, and the unionist electorate's frustration with the lack of progress on the arms issue led to the victory of the right-wing DUP over the UUP in elections in 2003.

Eventually, due to pressure from the US and Irish governments and republicans' own calculation of what was required for their political and electoral advancement, the IRA decommissioned its weapons in 2005. This process was facilitated by an independent international body set up to oversee the weapons' destruction. To enhance credibility, the disarmament was also witnessed by two respected independent clerical observers, Rev. Harold Good, a Methodist minister, and Father Alec Reid, a Roman Catholic priest.

The landmark move paved the way for the resumption of power-sharing, this time between the former extreme parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin. On May 8, 2007, the public witnessed the previously unthinkable: Ian Paisley, the fundamentalist Protestant minister and DUP leader, taking office as first minister, and Martin McGuinness, former IRA commander, becoming deputy first minister. There was an atmosphere of good humor, sincerity, and hope. Thus began an extraordinary political

partnership, and by all accounts a genuine friendship, between the erstwhile enemies—a kind of relationship that has not been evident between any of Paisley and McGuinness's successors.

SYMBOL CLASHES

While decommissioning was resolved, controversy over cultural and symbolic expression continues. That issue proved too difficult to resolve in the talks, so the Good Friday agreement merely made a vague call for “sensitivity” in the display of flags and emblems associated with unionism and nationalism.

Among numerous disputes over the public display of symbols, by far the most intense one centered on a December 2012 decision by the Belfast City Council to reduce the number of days the British flag flew from City Hall. This set off weeks of riots and street protests by unionists. For them, the decision was indicative of unionist decline and a republican culture war waged against all expressions of Britishness and unionism in Northern Ireland. Such fears drew attention to the ongoing malaise of working-class Protestant communities, blighted by unemployment and educational underachievement, and disillusioned with the peace process and the unionist political class.

The flag dispute hinged on the question of whether Northern Ireland was a purely British part of the United Kingdom, or whether the diversity of national aspirations within the region (regardless of the reality of full British sovereignty) should be recognized. This question was also at the heart of the collapse of power-sharing in 2017.

The initial cause of the 2017 breakdown—unusually for Northern Ireland—was not a political conflict but a financial scandal. Sinn Féin left the government in protest over the DUP's handling of a renewable-energy incentive program. However, McGuinness, suffering from an illness that months later would prove to be terminal, made clear in his resignation letter that there were other reasons why his party could not continue in a political relationship with the DUP. He cited, in particular, the DUP's blocking legislation to protect and promote the Irish language.

While few people speak Irish as their everyday language, it has immense symbolic value as a marker of national identity. For some Northern Catholics, state-supported uses of the language (on road signs and in public administration, for example) would be a meaningful indicator of equal treatment in a region that has been traditionally

hostile to Irish culture. Unionists oppose an Irish Language Act for several reasons; above all, they believe (not incorrectly) that Sinn Féin views it as a means to reduce the British character of Northern Ireland and ultimately hasten Irish unity.

At the time of writing the standoff was unresolved. In the absence of an executive, senior civil servants are effectively in charge of government departments. This is an unsustainable limbo; without a political solution, powers may have to be returned to London.

UNSETTLED HISTORY

A further post–Good Friday Agreement challenge has been how to deal with the past—in other words, how to address the legacy of countless acts of violence during the Troubles for which no one has been brought to justice. Should the state continue to investigate cases and seek prosecutions? Or should a curtain be drawn on the past and people just move on? How should victims be cared for? Might the category of victim include some who were also perpetrators?

A measure of consensus was reached on these issues in the Stormont House Agreement of 2014. The parties came up with a package of mechanisms that would allow for sharing information on Troubles-related deaths with victims' families, prosecutions where possible, and creation of an oral history archive. But none of these measures has been implemented.

Ultimately, “dealing with the past” is shorthand for addressing the fact that the conflict ended without agreement on why it started. The Good Friday Agreement did not (and could not) apportion blame, nor did it provide an account of the causes of the conflict on which both sides agreed. Since 1998, each has sought vindication in how the agreement is implemented.

Part of this contest is rooted in one of the core provisions of the agreement—the principle of consent. Since this principle allows for the prospect of a united Ireland in the future if that is what a majority wants, many in Northern Ireland have calculated that dealing with the past really means dealing with the future, and that any ground given on the past only serves the other side's interests. As republicans see it, exposing the state's role in violently repressing the Catholic community supports their arguments that Northern Ireland has always been an unjust and artificial construct.

From the opposing perspective, exposing the sectarianism of the IRA bolsters unionists' arguments that Sinn Féin denies the legitimacy of their presence in Ireland.

In this kind of zero-sum approach, each side's victories in disputes over the past boost morale in the present and enhance the odds for achieving its desired future. It remains an open question whether power-sharing can operate with sufficient mutual trust when the main parties have diametrically opposed aspirations for the future of the region.

THE BREXIT THREAT

The rancor over Britain's impending exit from the EU has complicated this already challenging situation. During the 2016 UK referendum campaign, “remainers” seeking to keep Britain in the EU stressed the potential threat that an exit would pose for Northern Ireland's stability. The two British prime ministers who were most involved in the peace process, Tony Blair and his predecessor John

Major, campaigned together to highlight this issue, as did local parties in Northern Ireland. The threat they warned of was not that violence would break out again. It was that the stability of the fledgling and hard-won modes of governance in

Northern Ireland would be undermined.

A central purpose of the Good Friday Agreement was to enhance Catholics' sense of being at ease in Northern Ireland, and this was to be achieved in part through closer North-South relations. The most tangible and psychologically powerful manifestation of this rapprochement was the removal of all security infrastructure at the border, rendering invisible what was technically an international boundary. With Britain leaving the EU, this most porous of borders will become, for the first time, an EU frontier. That raises the possibility of a hard border that would disrupt the free movement of people and goods—and redraw a dividing line in the minds of the people of the island.

All sides have been emphatic that they wish to avoid the return of a hard border. In December 2017, Britain and the EU, with the support of the Irish government and the Northern Ireland parties, reached an agreement in principle that whatever the ultimate outcome of the Brexit talks, a border would not be reintroduced in Ireland, and the Good Friday Agreement would be protected. This

*Republicanism has stayed
firmly on its path away
from violence.*

calmed fears, but whether and how those promises would be implemented remained dependent on the outcome of subsequent negotiations. It is also unlikely that this deal will end debate about Brexit's impact on the very existence of Britain as currently constituted.

Northern nationalists—a majority of whom have been content with the post-1998 dispensation in Northern Ireland and overwhelmingly support the EU—may begin to see a united Ireland not merely as a long-term or emotional aspiration but as a real and immediate goal. Even some moderate unionists may find what they regard as a progressive and internationalist Republic of Ireland preferable to an insular and nationalist United Kingdom. Sinn Féin, naturally, wishes to test all this in a referendum on Irish unity. It is beyond ironic that what is potentially the greatest impetus toward a united Ireland since 1998—Brexit's impact on opinion in Ireland—had little to do with Sinn Féin or any Irish separatist group and a lot do with anti-EU English nationalists.

Brexit conceivably could lead to pro-EU Scotland's departure from the United Kingdom, a development that would render even more precarious Northern Ireland's place in the Union. (Scottish voters narrowly rejected independence in a 2014 referendum.) The only main Northern Ireland party to enthusiastically support Brexit is the DUP, which shares an ideological kinship with the right wing of the British Conservative Party. The strong potential for Brexit to energize Irish and Scottish nationalism to the detriment of British unity makes the DUP's stance self-defeating.

In June 2017, after Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservatives lost their parliamentary majority, the DUP agreed to provide the necessary votes to prop up her government in London. This alliance flies in the face of the recent understanding that London should act as a neutral honest broker in Northern Ireland. It adds to a sense that British-Irish politics has entered disorienting new waters and the peace process is adrift.

SEGREGATED COMMUNITIES

As Brexit preoccupies London and Dublin, and politics in Belfast has ground to a halt, the reality of a divided society persists on the streets and in the countryside of Northern Ireland. Segregation is most tangibly represented by the “peace

walls”—physical barriers between Protestant and Catholic areas. Their purpose is to prevent attacks on houses but their effect is to prevent contact between the communities. Sporadic street rioting occurs, often connected to parades by the Orange Order, a Protestant politico-cultural organization.

Northern Ireland has a system of de facto segregated education: most pupils attend schools that are predominantly Protestant or Catholic. Over 90 percent of public housing is overwhelming either Protestant or Catholic. Most people live, go to school, play sports, worship, and socialize in single-identity settings.

The conflict has left another dangerous legacy in the enduring power of paramilitary groups, which still hold a mafia-style grip on many impoverished urban areas. They engage in organized crime and mete out their informal brand of justice with brutal beatings and shootings. Meanwhile, dissident republicans who opposed the peace process carry on a campaign of violence directed mainly at police and prison officers.

Other social divides are increasingly visible. Racially motivated hate crimes are common. Same-sex marriage and abortion (in most cases) both remain outlawed, unlike in Great Britain, but are hotly contested as campaigners push for

liberalization. Patriarchal structures and culture—expressed and sharpened through the violent conflict—persist. While women now lead both the DUP and Sinn Féin, they remain underrepresented in most sectors of society.

AN IMPERFECT PEACE

Despite the myriad challenges, there are reasons to be optimistic about Northern Ireland. The key pillars of the 1998 accord—the principle of consent, power-sharing, and North-South institutions—are more widely accepted now than twenty years ago. Catholic exclusion is over. Most importantly, republicanism has stayed firmly on its path away from violence, and this has helped reconcile the vast majority of unionists to the need for cooperation with former enemies. Before Brexit, Britain and Ireland were enjoying their closest relations ever, consolidated by hugely symbolic and successful visits to Ireland by members of the British royal family, including Queen Elizabeth II.

Yet Northern Ireland remains socially divided and politically unstable. Some critics attribute this

*Northern Ireland remains
socially divided and
politically unstable.*

to the consociational nature of the Good Friday Agreement, which forces opposing ethnic blocs to share power without sharing a vision for the region, and arguably consolidates sectarian division. The survival of a nearly functioning power-sharing government for the ten years from 2007 to 2017 was nothing short of miraculous. Many causes of division, including the fear and prejudice that still fill hearts and minds, will unavoidably take generations to overcome.

People in Northern Ireland tend to be well aware of the imperfections of the peace. But observers

from around the world continue to be drawn to the region as a rare instance proving that seemingly intractable conflicts can be settled, however slow, halting, and messy that process might be. The challenges that Northern Ireland faces in 2018 are considerable, yet greater obstacles were surmounted at earlier stages in the peace process. With sufficient will and imagination on the part of its people and political leadership, Northern Ireland can continue on the path set out in the 1998 agreement: toward stability, interdependence, and reconciliation. ■