



5-2010

Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: The Past, Present and Future

Stephen Ryan
University of Ulster, s.ryan@ulster.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs>



Part of the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ryan, Stephen (2010) "Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: The Past, Present and Future," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.46743/1082-7307/2010.1112

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs/vol17/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peace & Conflict Studies at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peace and Conflict Studies by an authorized editor of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: The Past, Present and Future

Abstract

This article explores the reasons for the slow progress being made in the Northern Ireland peace process. It examines complications that exist in dealing with the past, present, and future of the conflict between the two main communities whilst also arguing that it is hard to separate these time frames in practice. In terms of the present, some well known difficulties with the consociational approach are identified. Recent studies have also demonstrated a failure to address sectarianism at the grass-roots level and there has been a resurgence in activity by spoilers and rejectionists. When thinking about the future the two communities still have competing views about the final constitutional destiny of Northern Ireland and this inhibits the development of a sense of a shared future. Although there have been a plethora of initiatives for dealing with the past and for truth recovery, there does not appear to have been a satisfactory approach to this important dimension of peacebuilding. The article concludes by advocating two key strategies. The first is the development of initiatives based on the pursuit of superordinate goals. The second endorses Rorty's idea of sentimental education as a way of building greater solidarity.

Keywords: *conflict settlement, Northern Ireland peace process, peacebuilding, sectarianism, sentimental education, working peace system*

Author Bio(s)

Stephen Ryan is a Senior Lecturer in Peace Studies at the University of Ulster where he is the Course Director of the Postgraduate Diploma/M.A. in Peace and Conflict Studies. His most recent book is the *Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict* (2007). From 2006–2010 he was the Co-Chair of the International Peace Research Association's Commission on Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding. He is the University of Ulster local coordinator for a new Marie Curie International Training Site for Sustainable Peacebuilding. Email: s.ryan@ulster.ac.uk

**Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland:
The Past, Present and Future**

Stephen Ryan

Abstract

This article explores the reasons for the slow progress being made in the Northern Ireland peace process. It examines complications that exist in dealing with the past, present, and future of the conflict between the two main communities whilst also arguing that it is hard to separate these time frames in practice. In terms of the present, some well known difficulties with the consociational approach are identified. Recent studies have also demonstrated a failure to address sectarianism at the grass-roots level and there has been a resurgence in activity by spoilers and rejectionists. When thinking about the future the two communities still have competing views about the final constitutional destiny of Northern Ireland and this inhibits the development of a sense of a shared future. Although there have been a plethora of initiatives for dealing with the past and for truth recovery, there does not appear to have been a satisfactory approach to this important dimension of peacebuilding. The article concludes by advocating two key strategies. The first is the development of initiatives based on the pursuit of superordinate goals. The second endorses Rorty's idea of sentimental education as a way of building greater solidarity.

“Wars don’t simply end. And wars don’t end simply” (Enloe 2004: 193)

Introduction

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats might have been astute to state in the *Lake Isle of Innisfree* that peace “comes dropping slow,” but even he might have been dismayed by the dawdling pace at which Northern Ireland has moved away from violent conflict since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in April 1998. Of course, Yeats was writing about inner peace—to “live alone in the bee-loud glade”—rather than the much more difficult task of creating a peaceful and democratic multi-cultural society. Yet even if we factor in the complex nature of this undertaking, it seems that the various parties to the conflict have adopted what Nietzsche called the “gospel of the tortoise”: a mentality that creates “as little as possible in the longest time possible” (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 83). A striking example of this is that even though they had been partners in the executive since May 2007, the First Minister (from the Protestant DUP) and the Deputy First Minister (from the Catholic Sinn Fein) did not shake hands until January 2010—and even this took place in private (*Sunday Times* 17 January 2010).

Indeed, it would be reasonable to say that for the past eleven years Northern Ireland has been a society stuck in a transitional stage. Or to use the language of conflict research, it has achieved a conflict *settlement*, but not a *resolution* of conflict. The distinction between the two concepts was made clear by Burton (1988):

For our purposes here, conflict resolution means terminating conflict by methods that are analytical and that get to the roots of the problem. Conflict resolution, as

opposed to mere management or “settlement”, points to an outcome that, in the view of the parties involved, is a permanent solution to a problem (p. 2).

The slow progress is a little surprising because one would have thought, when compared with some other intractable conflicts, that Northern Ireland enjoys certain comparative advantages. Of course no intractable conflict is ever going to be resolved quickly or straightforwardly. Loizos, in an analysis of Cyprus, warns against the “attractive idiom of conflict resolution workshop...which assumes that everything, even political hostility, has its appropriate duration, after which it can transform” (2008, p. 183). The experience of violence is always going to haunt the present in a number of ways. It results in militarization, increased ethnocentrism and the sharpening of the boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, more residential segregation, the construction of the “enemy image,” economic and political underdevelopment, and a strong sense of victimhood (Ryan, 2007). But we should also note some aspects of the conflict in Northern Ireland that might have made it easier to move towards peace. There is, for example, no significant refugee issue to complicate the peace process as has been the case in the Israeli-Palestinian, Bosnian, and Cyprus conflicts. There was no wholesale destruction of infrastructure that had to be rebuilt. There are differences in wealth between the two communities, but they are nowhere near as large as those between black and white South Africans or Israelis and Palestinians. There is also an existing democratic culture and all that comes with this: a strong civil society, an independent media, the capacity to organise free and fair elections, and a commitment to human rights

Cultural differences are also not as severe as in other conflicts. The use of Irish in Northern Ireland has become less contentious since the Belfast Agreement and the language issue has never been as divisive as it is in Belgium or the Basque country. Both of the main communities use English as their primary means of communication. Most members of the two main communities also regard themselves as Christian. Of course, some might argue that it is the close similarities between the two main communities that might explain the depth of their mutual hostility. It was Sigmund Freud who referred to the “narcissism of minor difference” in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He wrote that “it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other” (Freud, 1985, p. 305). Freud thought this was a “relatively harmless satisfaction of the inclination to aggression” (p. 305) but Volkan believes it to be a more serious problem and notes that “people will kill to reinforce their ethnic or national group’s distinction from the enemy group, however minuscule that distinction may be” (1997, p. 109).

Finally, we should note that there has been significant external financial support for the peace process from the European Union (EU) and the U.S. (see, for example, Arthur, 2000; Buchanan, 2008; Byrne, Irvin, Fissuh and Cunningham, 2006; Byrne, 2009). The EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, usually called Peace I and Peace II, has delivered financial assistance for projects in the whole of Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Irish Republic. Peace II, for example, spent 425 million euro on areas such as economic renewal, social integration, development and regeneration, and cross border cooperation. The third stage of funding, Peace III, will spend another 333 million euros to carry forward key parts of the previous

rounds with a renewed emphasis on reconciliation. An additional £630 million has been committed to the International Fund for Ireland to “tackle the underlying causes of sectarianism and violence and to build reconciliation between people and within and between communities throughout the island of Ireland” (International Fund for Ireland, 2010). The Fund has received donations from the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the European Union.

This article will attempt an answer to the question why has the peace process in Northern Ireland been less than smooth despite the relatively advantageous starting point when compared to some other protracted intercommunal conflicts? In so doing, it will try to assess the peacebuilding process in Northern Ireland in terms of how, and to what extent, it has developed the capacity to deal with a divided past and present, and in all likelihood with a disputed future. It is not a comprehensive analysis by any means, but it seeks to identify some key issues that might throw some light on this topic.

Before we do this it is important to say two things. Firstly, we cannot understand any situation of protracted violent conflict in terms of simple, linear time. Several recent studies of violence and upheaval demonstrate this. For example, Das (2007) in an exploration of subjectivity and time asks what she calls the “haunting question”: is there “one duration or are there many?” (Das, 2007, p. 98). In exploring how the memory of traumatic past events is “folded” into social relationships she points to the need to grasp phenomenal time where events far apart in physical time can be imagined as simultaneous. Nordstrom (2000), in a chapter entitled “The Tomorrow of Violence,” notes that the impact of violence does not stop with “physical carnage” because it “reconfigures its victims and the social milieu that hosts them....It isn’t a passing

phenomenon that momentarily challenges a stable system, leaving a scar but no lasting effects....Violence becomes a determining fact in shaping reality as people *will* know it in the future” (p. 223).

Secondly, we are not arguing that there are no positive aspects to the Northern Ireland situation. Despite the slow progress there have always been those who have held up the Northern Ireland process as a positive example others could follow. Since the St. Andrews agreement the odd-couple power sharing arrangement between the DUP and Sinn Fein has delivered a period of stable government. But even when the peace process was stalled it was never paralysed and it never collapsed (Halliday, 2000, p. 287). The tortoise always kept moving forward. Indeed, the real achievements in Northern Ireland should not be under-estimated. There is the considerable accomplishment of a devolved power-sharing government. The main paramilitary organizations in both communities seem to have rejected violence. The British army has all but disappeared from the streets and many bases have been closed. The RUC has transformed into the Police Service of Northern Ireland, district policing partnerships have been introduced and a Police Ombudsman has been created. The parades issue, so contentious in the past, is now being managed in a peaceful way. However, the undoubted positive developments that flowed out of the Belfast Agreement should not blind us to some negative aspects and there are surely lessons to be learnt from looking at these as well.

The Trouble with Consociationalism

In March 2007 elections to the devolved Assembly at Stormont returned 36 DUP and 28 Sinn Fein MLAs confirming their status as the largest Unionist and Nationalist parties in the resurrected devolved government. Two years later, in May 2009, it could be claimed that Northern Ireland had experienced the longest spell of stable, pluralist, and democratic government in its history though we should note that the executive did not meet for four months during this period because of disagreements over the devolution of policing and justice powers. This has replaced the decommissioning issue as the factor most likely to disrupt the peace process, as recent events have demonstrated.

O’Leary (1999) has described the devolved administration as “consociation plus.” It undoubtedly makes use of some classical strategies proposed by the theory of consociational engineering devised by Lijphart (1977), but it also contains supranational elements. These are found in Strands 2 and 3 of the Belfast Agreement, which set up a North-South Ministerial Council, cross border implementation bodies, and a British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. Furthermore, it “was the first consociational settlement endorsed by a referendum that required concurrent majorities in jurisdictions in different states” (O’Leary 2001, p. 49).

There seem to be at least four problems we can identify with the current system of government. The first is the failure to confirm the final constitutional status of Northern Ireland. This will be examined in the next section. Secondly, there are well-known weaknesses with the consociational approach, including claims that it deepens cultural divisions, establishes complex arrangements that can easily be paralysed, and concentrates too much on the elite level of politics. Thirdly, linked to this, is the failure to

move beyond sectarianism at the grass-roots level. Fourthly, there is the inability to neutralise all rejectionists and “spoilers.”

The issue of whether consociationalism is a cause or a consequence of cultural divisions is still debated. The evidence from Northern Ireland would seem to suggest that it might result in greater polarization because the main beneficiaries in political terms to date have been the “hard-line” parties in both communities. This move away from the moderate ground, which was evident in the 2003 Assembly elections, has resulted in the Ulster Unionist Party being replaced by the Democratic Unionist Party as the main Protestant party and Sinn Fein has replaced the SDLP as the main Catholic party.

The claim that consociationalism can entrench communalism is a critique often associated with Horowitz (1985), who believes that in divided societies there is a need for structural approaches that provide incentives for inter-ethnic cooperation. In particular he explored how electoral systems either block or encourage such cooperation. Unlike consociationalism, the best types of electoral systems will reduce competition between ethnic groups by, *inter alia*, encouraging the majority to behave more moderately towards the minority and encouraging voluntary multi-ethnic coalitions. They can also avoid a rigid bifurcation by preserving fluidity. He accepts that the electoral system is just one component in what must be a larger framework, but he also argues that an electoral system can produce positive change in a relatively short time.

Critics also point to other weaknesses of consociationalism as a long-term device for resolving inter-communal conflicts. It can be rigid and unable to adapt to social changes, as was the case in Lebanon. This is something Horowitz has called the “frozen quota” problem (Horowitz, 1985, p. 586). Consociational arrangements set up

complicated forms of government that can be paralysed relatively easily if one of the groups decides to withdraw cooperation over issues such as how complex arrangements are to be implemented, as was the case in Cyprus between 1960–63. This has also been the experience in Northern Ireland since 1998. Finally, the approach has been criticised for being too elitist and this has led Byrne (2001) to call for a stronger integration of consociation ideas with civil society approaches.

Several commentators have noted that the progress made at the elite level in the late 1990s did not always transfer to the grassroots. This is a problem, because the Belfast Agreement was a political bargain made in the absence of “interethnic reconciliation” and this “creates serious problems for the success of consociation in the long term” (Kerr, 2005, p. 192). Certainly, a number of interface flashpoints remained between the residential estates of the two communities (Heatley, 2004). Furthermore, the number of “Peace Lines” in Belfast, which separate Catholic and Protestant residential areas, have not been drastically reduced since 1998. A recent study has found that whereas there were eighteen barriers in the early 1990s there were eighty-eight in 2008 and only five barriers had been removed during the entire Troubles (Community Relations Council 2008). Another report on segregation in six areas of Northern Ireland by the Institute for Conflict Research found that although there was a diversity of experiences there was a continuing legacy of the troubles and in some areas levels of sectarianism and segregation had increased (Hamilton and others, 2008). The report concludes:

In some areas there are greater levels of mixing, sharing and integrating, while in others the legacy of the past, of hostility, fear and mistrust dominate the wider

social environment. In most social environments the process of avoidance still appears to dominate interactions between members of the two main communities (p. 154).

Such findings seem to be confirmed by a 2009 report based on a consultation with 130 young men, which found that “very little seems to have changed in spite of the peace process” and that “many young men appear to be stuck inhabiting a ceasefire world” (Centre for Young Men’s Studies, 2009, p. 2). In addition these young men stated that the paramilitaries were still active in both communities and that “conflict and violence impacted on their lives on most days” (p. 2). *The Guardian* offers support for such a view, and reported on 2 June 2009 that for 2007–8 and 2008–9 just over 1,500 “sectarian incidents” a year were reported to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Another study has found that in the mixed area of the Waterside in Derry the segregation of Protestants and Catholic communities has increased (Shirlow and others, 2005). Finally, from a Loyalist perspective, Gary McMichael has noted the lack of consultation with grassroots within the UDA, commenting that:

Those of us in the negotiations had evolved and shifted in our attitudes....But those outside did not follow us and we weren’t able to bring them with us. They had not had the same opportunity to evolve as we had. A big reason for that was that we didn’t have the infrastructure (Quoted in Spencer, 2008, p. 183).

Or as another insider noted, the pro-Agreement Ulster Democratic Party failed because it “left the foot soldiers behind” (Spencer, 2008, p. 186). All of this suggests that the pro-Agreement elites might have been moving too fast and failed to bring their supporters with them (Dixon, 2001, p. 305).

The sense that the elites have not done enough to energise the grass roots is reinforced by the fate of the Civic Forum. This consultative body was included in the Belfast Agreement as a result of work by the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition. It had 60 members representing different sectors of society including 18 from the voluntary sector, 7 from business and the trade unions, 5 from the churches and 2 from victims groups. It first met in October 2000 but could not sit when the Assembly was suspended and is now the subject of a review by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

Given the difficulties that remain at the grass-roots level one would have expected priority would be given to strategies to help address this problem. Yet this has not been the case. The OFMDFM was meant to produce a draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI strategy) before the end of October 2008, but there is still no sign of a final document, though the DUP and Sinn Fein have produced separate drafts. This failure to agree to what, in essence, would be a community relation’s strategy has frustrated many working in this area.

The final issue that has affected the trajectory of the peace process is the “spoiler” and rejectionist problem. The term spoiler was introduced by Stedman (1997), though there are some who point out that it has a negative connotation and might be used to delegitimize those who have genuine grievance towards a peace agreement. However, as

the term has become widely used it is retained for the purposes of this analysis. Stedman defined spoilers in a way that only included those willing to use violence to bring down a peace process. Therefore we have to distinguish them from rejectionists, who may also have strong feelings against an agreement, but who restrict themselves to political means.

After a period when the process here was relatively untroubled by spoilers, they have now returned to complicate the peace process. Today they are restricted to the Republican community, and are made up of three main groups: the Real IRA (RIRA), the Continuity IRA and Oglaiigh na hEireann. They have emerged as a more serious threat in the past year, leading the outgoing Chief Constable, Hugh Orde, to state in March 2009 that the threat from such groups was at a “critical level” (McDonald, 2009a). A month later, two senior pro-Agreement republicans are reported to have told the Irish Government that the IRA had “lost control of Ardoyne” in Belfast (McDonald, 2009b). In 2009, the rejectionist groups killed two soldiers and a policeman (and tried to kill several others), took over the village of Meigh and tried to blow up the Policing Board Headquarters in Belfast. It therefore came as no surprise when the International Monitoring Commission noted that armed attacks committed by rejectionist Republican groups was at its highest level for six years (*The Guardian* editorial, 31 December 2009).

Stedman (1997) argues that some spoilers can be managed, and the strategy depends on their goals. However, it would be wise to note a comment by Nietzsche (2008):

One can divide those who are intent on overthrowing society into the ones who want to gain something for themselves and the ones who want to gain it for their

children and grandchildren. The latter are the more dangerous; for they have faith and the good conscience of selflessness. The others can be diverted: the ruling society is still rich and clever enough for that. Danger begins when goals become impersonal (p. 92).

As several writers have noted, there were many features of the Belfast Agreement that did not appeal to Unionists (see, for example, Aughey, 2001; Farrington, 2008; McGarry and O’Leary, 2004; Murray, 2000; Spencer, 2008; Tonge, 2004). In the immediate post-Agreement stage it was the opposition to it from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and from certain elements within the loyalist community that appeared to put the agreement most at risk. Today, the most significant opposition to the Belfast–St. Andrews peace process comes from the new Unionist group called the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). The former DUP European MEP Jim Allister who performed above most observers’ expectations in the 2009 European Elections leads this. Allister has been scathing about the current peace process, calling the Executive a “wretched, useless government” and a “miserable, failing government.” Sniping from the margins, Allister (2009) is likely to exploit the recent deal on policing and justice by an administration he characterises as “terrorists in government, spongers in parliament” by claiming that the DUP is appeasing Sinn Fein and will not collapse the Assembly because it fears an electoral contest with the TUV.

The threat to the peace process presented by the TUV is the same as the one that the DUP presented in the immediate post-Agreement era, though, of course it would be

wrong at present to place the former in the same category as the latter when it comes to popular support. Nonetheless, as O’Leary (2001) points out:

Where any bloc is divided over the merits of such a settlement, and where its leaders respond more to the threat of being outflanked than they do to the imperative of making the new (tacit) cross-ethnic coalition work, it may prove impossible to implement the agreement (p. 79).

There is also one major shock on the horizon that threatens to make the general political environment less benign. The Executive’s *Building a Better Future: Draft Programme for Government 2008–11*, aims to make Northern Ireland a “peaceful, fair and prosperous society.” The linking of peace and prosperity is now going to be put to the test. Since 1998, Northern Ireland has experienced an economic boom that has produced a tide that has raised all boats. Many began to feel wealthier even if a lot of this was based on unearned credit, inflated house prices and a strong pound when measured against the euro. This, of course, has now changed. The banking crisis has forced the British and Irish governments as well as Stormont to plan for big cuts in public spending, and the Northern Ireland economy is very dependent on the public sector. The big question is how will a rise in unemployment and increased economic insecurity impact on intercommunal relations? This is a disputed area, and disagreements still exist about the relationship between the state of the economy and violence. The worry is that Gellner (1997), one of most important theorists of nationalism, might have been correct when he claimed that individuals who “are affluent and, above all, who believe themselves to be in

a situation which will fairly soon improve and continue to do so are much less likely to be tempted into violent conduct” (p. 106). The implication is that if the situation is reversed, and the economy starts to decline along with peoples’ expectation, then violence might become more attractive again.

The Future and the Problem of Contradictory Optimism

Geoffrey Blainey (1988), in his stimulating analysis of the causes of war, once noted that they are always the product of contradictory optimism—since each side starts a war believing it can win, but all sides cannot be correct in this assessment. Now peace is characterized by the move away from zero-sum, win-lose thinking to a positive sum, win-win mentality, but it is not at all clear that this has happened in Northern Ireland. Indeed, what we have here, if we adapt Blainey’s observation, is a peace process based on contradictory optimism. On the one hand Unionists were informed that the Belfast Agreement would make the link with the UK stronger whilst Republicans were told that this was an important first step on the road to a united Ireland. Indeed, O’Leary (2001) argues that the main reason that the pro-Agreement Unionists were willing to do a deal with republicans was to protect their position with regards to the constitutional status quo because “only by being generous now could they reconcile nationalists to the Union” (p. 73). This is not the way most nationalists viewed it. They have a different view on the legitimacy of the partition of the island of Ireland that draws on one of the most powerful political discourses of the twentieth century—that of conquest, colonization, expropriation of land, resistance, and claims to self-determination

When the DUP agreed to enter a power-sharing arrangement with Sinn Fein after the St Andrews Agreement, its leader, the Rev. Ian Paisley also claimed this made the Union with Britain stronger. In a “devolution consultation” the party leader called on Unionists to support the agreement and claimed:

If you want to *save the Union* and have a devolved democratic government then the changes which the DUP fought for and obtained in this new Agreement, to safeguard your *British* and democratic rights, must be made [emphasis added] (DUP, 2006, p. 1).

To support this interpretation the DUP pointed out that Sinn Fein would now have to support the police and the criminal justice system, that “all North/Southern is fully accountable to Northern Ireland’s elected representatives,” that power-sharing will only take place after an end to IRA paramilitary activity is proven, and that “no significant decisions can be taken without Unionist approval” (p. 3). Needless to say, Sinn Fein continues to adhere to an all-Ireland strategy and remain committed to Irish unity.

So when it comes to answering the “sovereignty question” we have mutually incompatible objectives within the terms of reference established by the sovereign state system—Northern Ireland couldn’t be both British and Irish in a constitutional sense. But does this matter? Clearly, if all sides are at ease with this ambiguity about the direction they are heading in constitutional terms then this may not be a significant drawback. If individuals and communities can be British or Irish in a cultural sense then maybe the “territorial destiny” of the province is less important.

However, there are at least two problems with this slightly schizophrenic situation. The first is that if there is no general consensus about the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland, then how can everyone work for a shared future that has yet to be defined and would probably not be supported by both communities if it could be explicitly stated? In this way, Northern Ireland is different from, for example, South Africa where there is now a general agreement as to what this entity is as a single sovereign state. So the vast majority of South Africans were able to work together for a new South Africa clear about what this was to be in a constitutional sense. This is not the case in Northern Ireland, where the two dominant parties still have radically different visions about the ultimate direction they are taking.

This is why it is hard to accept the idea that what Northern Ireland needs is a “shared future” that can be agreed through rational inter-communal dialogue. Instead, what the society should be working towards is a *modus vivendi*, which Gray identifies as “liberal toleration adapted to the historical fact of pluralism” (2009, p. 25). It is an approach that “has no truck with the notion of an ideal regime” and “aims to find terms on which different ways of life can live well together” (p. 25). The end is “not any supreme good— even peace.” Rather it is “reconciling conflicting goods” (Gray, 2009, p. 44).

The second problem that arises out of the absence of an agreed final destination for Northern Ireland concerns the willingness to accept an agreement that leaves this issue unresolved. Lack of clarity might be acceptable at some stages of a peace process, especially when communities are weary of violence. But living with the “creative

ambiguity” enshrined in the Belfast Agreement depends on a strong sense of security and contentment with the status quo that might not always be present.

The Past Is Not Another Country

Dealing with the legacy of the past is often considered to be a vital part of the transformation of society from violence to peace. Yet there are those who point out the inadequate way that this has been addressed in Northern Ireland. The observation by Peatling (2004) that “dimensions of bereavement, forgiveness, trauma and remorse, remain among the thorniest and most poorly addressed issues in the peace process” (p. 42) remains relevant today. In fact, there have been a number of diverse approaches that indicate uncertainty and maybe fundamental divisions as to how best to approach this issue. These have been detailed by Albert (2009), who offers a comprehensive description of initiatives since 1998. Indeed the British government began addressing this topic even before the Belfast Agreement was signed with two important innovations. The first was the creation of the Victims Commissioner, Sir Derek Bloomfield, in October 1997 (see Smyth, 2000). In the same year the Blair government set up a judicial inquiry into the shooting dead of fourteen civil rights protestors in Derry in January 1971.

Post-agreement initiatives in this area include: the 20 recommendations in the Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner in May 1998; the creation of a Minister for Victims in June 1998; the creation of a Victims Liaison Unit in 1998 (later incorporated into the Victims Unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister); the numerous actions set out in the 2002 Executive strategy for victims entitled

Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve; the appointment of Bertha McDougall as the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors between 2005 and 2007; the 36 recommendations of her 2007 Report called Support for Victims and Survivors: Addressing the Human Legacy; the creation of four Victims Commissioners in 2008 (after a failure to agree on the name of a single Commissioner); and the creation of a Consultative Group on the Past in June 2007 that produced a controversial report in early 2009. This became the basis of a public consultation on 94 questions devised by the Northern Ireland Office in response to the report's recommendations. In addition, Albert points to a number of other initiatives. These include official bodies such as the Historical Enquiries Team that is re-investigating deaths between 1968 and 1998 and numerous non-governmental groups engaged in archiving, storytelling or the creation of museums (Albert, 2009, pp. 132–137).

The difficult issues that exist in trying to “neutralize history” in Northern Ireland is illustrated by the public reception of the recommendations contained within the recent report of the Consultative Group on the Past, usually referred to as the Eames-Bradley report after the co-Chairs (available at www.cgpnri.org). This made 31 recommendations in six areas: the creation of a legacy commission with a fixed lifetime of five years, remembering, victims and survivors, societal issues (addressing wider sectarianism and reintegrating former paramilitaries with criminal convictions), processes of justice and information recovery, and the legacy of the past and reconciliation. However, when the report was made public on 28 January 2009 all attention was directed at one proposal—that one of payment of £12,000 should be made for everyone who died as a result of “the Troubles,” irrespective of the cause of death. This was the idea that all victims of

violence should receive a “recognition payment” and it raised objections that “terrorists” killed by the security forces did not deserve the same level of sympathy as innocent victims murdered by paramilitaries.

Here we might be witnessing the phenomenon that Mack termed “egoism of victimization” (1990), which exists when one traumatised group lacks the capacity to empathize with the suffering of other groups. There are at least two responses to this phenomenon. The first is to argue that it is wrong to deny or underestimate the validity of other people’s feelings. So Das (2007) writes that “to deny someone else’s claim that she is in pain is not an intellectual failure, it is a spiritual failure—the future between us is at stake” (p. 90). The second response is to point out that it is extremely difficult to draw a clear line between victims and victimizers because of the way that one reinforces the other. Victimizers often feel themselves to be the victims and are caught up in the victim-revenge dynamic.

The British government’s response to Eames-Bradley was to initiate yet another round of consultations with the people of Northern Ireland about the 31 recommendations. To encourage a strong response a website was created that produced an “Response Aid Document” and detailed guidance notes for its completion (available at healingthroughremembering.info). However, given that there are at least 60 victims and survivor groups in Northern Ireland and the strong passions that the issue of remembering the past still evokes, it is unlikely that any consultation will find the consensus that has eluded the communities until now.

A Way Forward?

Maybe the best way to think of the Northern Ireland peace process is not as a single process at all, but as a series of interlinked issues. This is a point made by Jarman (2008) who argues that the nature of the peace process—no clear victor, no agreement about what to do next, and no real conciliation between the communities—meant that the post-agreement transition phase “progressed along a number of interlinked but distinctive paths.” These paths, the author claims, were “rarely synchronized” (p. 134). Or, as Darby (2001) put it, the conflict is “a tangle of interrelated questions” (2001, p. 15).

The complex nature of the process makes it hard to evaluate in a decisive manner. It is a place where citizens have liberty and there is much more equality between the communities than in the past, but it is one that still seems to lack a degree of fraternity across the intercommunal divide. Although the communities have moved towards the extremes in electoral terms, the majority would like to live in mixed neighbourhoods, be employed in mixed workplaces and send their children to integrated schools. The majority live in segregated estates but also believe relations will be better in five years time (Albert, 2009, pp. 174–183).

In a very useful audit of the peacebuilding elements after 1998, Albert, using a transformation framework, argues that there have been positive transformations of the context (end of Cold War, deepening of EU integration), structures (new institutions), relationships (reduced social injustice), issues (e.g. in the area of language), actors (changing attitudes within Sinn Fein and the DUP), and rules and norms (a stronger human rights framework) (Albert, 2009). However, as she also notes, Northern Ireland remains a highly segregated society where, if anything, the “two communities seem to be

drifting further apart” (Albert, 2009, p. 351). To this we should note that the spoiler problem has not disappeared, and the assumption that the peace process will be linked to generalised increase in wealth is no longer tenable though it is not clear what impact this will have. A major concern is that the lack of sustained and meaningful inter-communal discourse and the preference for segregated living has produced not a multicultural society, but is closer to one that Sen (2006) has termed “plural monoculturalism,” which refers to “two traditions co-existing side by side, without the twain meeting.”

Yet there are also hints of what Galtung has called “transcending possibilities,” based on the potential of the “moderate majority” (2004), which, he believes, makes up perhaps 85 percent of the population of Ulster. So one of the conclusions of the report on segregation mentioned earlier claims:

The legacy of the Troubles and recent experiences of violence remain factors in how people act as social beings, but people are not solely constrained by their past and there is some evidence of positive change and greater levels of mixing in some aspects of social life in many areas across the north (Hamilton and others, 2008, p. 154).

There are, of course, many ideas as to how to reinforce this positive trend. However, here we can focus on two strategies. The first relates to in-groups and out-groups. It appears that the nation-state/sovereignty/territorial mentality associated with what International Relations specialists call the Westphalian system seems incapable of

resolving (as opposed to settling) the Northern Ireland conflict.¹ This is because it seems to encourage zero-sum thinking—Northern Ireland is *either* British or Irish, and it is hard to imagine oneself as *both* British *and* Irish. How to we move away from such thinking? One course might be to stress the way that cooperation over the fulfilment of material and non-material needs can change attitudes and behaviour.

Here we can mention Mitrany's functionalist idea of a *Working Peace System* (Mitrany, 1943). Written during the Second World War it proposed the erosion of the destructive European nation-state state system through the creation of supranational bodies dedicated to fulfilling material needs in key areas—an idea that is today found in the European Commission. There are echoes of this thinking in Burton's (1982) idea that true resolution requires a paradigm shift to human needs thinking, though his wish to portray these needs as objective and universal has provoked opposition. Nonetheless his idea that protracted social conflicts, such as that found in Northern Ireland, can find win-win outcomes by moving from the realm of power politics or legal approaches to basic needs fulfilment has a lot to commend it. He claims:

The fact that universal human needs include non-material goals that are in infinite supply, opens up means of resolving apparent zero-sum conflicts of interest, including problems of change by positive-sum outcomes and, therefore, without violence or coercion (p. 132).

¹ My thanks to Toshio Kadokura for this point.

Also of interest here is Sherif's (1967) concept of superordinate goals. Sherif and his co-experimenters were trying to answer the question how can two groups "with hostile attitudes and negative images of the other and each desiring to keep the members of the detested out-group at a safe distance, be brought into cooperative interaction and friendly intercourse"? (pp. 5–6). As a result of his experiments he concluded that the best method for improved relations was the pursuit of what he called superordinate goals—which are "compelling for the groups involved, but cannot be achieved by a single group through its own efforts and resources" (pp. 5–6) Superordinate goals can be found in everything from the pursuit of greater European unity, to actions to protect the environment, to joint sporting teams or music groups. Several interesting examples exist in Northern Ireland, but there is room for many more initiatives around this strategy.

There is some evidence, therefore, that hostile groups working together in the pursuit of mutually advantageous goals, whether this is at the micro or the macro level, can reduce hostile feelings and create new imagined communities. For those who believe that such ideas are unrealistic, it might be valuable to reflect on research for the 2007 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* that found that an increasing number of people in the Province are choosing to describe themselves as "Northern Irish" or "equally Irish and British"—a hopeful sign that the British-Irish dualism can be transcended. As the report notes, "an increasing number of people are moving away from the traditional labels" (*University of Ulster News*, December 2, 2008).

The second interesting strategy draws on the work of Richard Rorty (1989, 1999) and, in particular, his idea of sentimental education. This is not the place to investigate his ideas in depth, but, in essence, what Rorty is calling for is greater inter-subjective

understanding through the arts. He believes that when faced with cruel behaviour we need to move from “rigorous rationality” to “flexible sentimentality.” It has been argued elsewhere that the marrying of Rorty’s idea of sentimental education with Boulding’s idea of “learning sites” offers some interesting avenues that could be taken to address the deconstruction of negative attitudes, especially if such initiatives could be incorporated within major agents of cultural reproduction in Northern Ireland (Ryan, 2007). These would include the media (incorporating the insights of peace journalism), the Arts, education, and the family. Linked to this is Sen’s idea that children should live “examined lives” when they grow up in multicultural settings, and should be encouraged to explore cultural freedom rather than faith-based separatism (Sen, 2006).

Without the development of significant actions to address the dangers posed by an intolerant plural monoculturalism in a society where the communities retain a win-lose mentality about the present, have failed to neutralise the hurts of the past and have incompatible visions of the future we cannot guarantee the peace process will continue to move forward. This should be a cause for concern because, as someone once pointed out, no one ever forgets where he or she buries the hatchet.

References

Albert, C. *The Peacebuilding Elements of the Belfast Agreement and the Transformation of the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009.

Allister, J. Speech to TUV Annual Conference.

www.cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/tuv/ja071109.htm. (Accessed January 24, 2010).

Arthur, P. *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem*.

Belfast: Blackstaff, 2000.

Aughey, A. "A Question of Degree? The Union, Unionism and the Belfast Agreement."

In R. Hanna (ed.), *The Union: Essays on Ireland and the British Connection*.

Newtownards: Colourpoint, 2001.

Blainey, G. *The Causes of War*, 3rd edition. New York: Free Press, 1988.

Buchanan, S. "Cost of Conflict, Price of Peace: Assessing Conflict Transformation

through Social and Economic Development—Northern Ireland and the Border

Counties as a Case Study." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. University of Ulster, 2008.

Burton, J. W. *Dear Survivors....* London: Frances Pinter, 1982.

Burton, J. W. "Conflict Resolution as a Political System." Working Paper No. 1,

Reprinted August, 1993.

Byrne, S. "Consociational and Civic Society Approaches to Peace-building in Northern

Ireland." *Journal of Peace Research*, 2001, 38 (2), 327–352.

Byrne, S. *Economic Assistance and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Cranbury, NJ:

Associates University Presses, 2009.

Byrne, S., Irvin, C., Fissuh, E., and Cunningham, C. "People's Perceptions of the Role of

Economic Assistance in Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland." *Peace and*

Conflict Studies, 2006, 13 (2), 121–146.

- Centre for Young Men's Studies. *Stuck in the Middle*. Coleraine: University of Ulster, 2009.
- Community Relations Council. *Towards Sustainable Security: Interface Barriers and the Legacy of Segregation in Belfast*. Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2008.
- Darby, J. *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2001.
- Das, V. *Life and Words*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Dixon, P. *Northern Ireland: The Politics of War and Peace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- DUP. *Your Verdict—What Is It to Be?* DUP: Belfast, 2006.
- Enloe, C. *The Curious Feminist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Farrington, C. "Loyalists and Unionists: Explaining the Internal Dynamics of an Ethnic Group." In A. Edwards and S. Bloomer (eds.), *Transforming the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008.
- Freud, S. "Civilization and its Discontents." In *The Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilization, Society and Religion*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Galtung, J., and others. *Transcend and Transform*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.
- Gellner, E. *Nationalism*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997.
- Gray, J. "Modus Vivendi." In *John Gray Gray's Anatomy: John Gray's Selected Writings*. London: Allen Lane, 2009.
- Halliday, F. "Peace Processes in the Late Twentieth Century." In M. Cox, A. Guelke, and F. Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Hamilton, J., Hansson, U., Bell, J., and Toucas, S. *Segregated Lives: Social Division, Sectarianism and Everyday Life in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Centre for Conflict Research, 2008.

Heatley, C. *Interface: Flashpoints in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Lagan Press, 2004.

Horowitz, D. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

The Guardian. "Hate Crimes Unsolved as Loyalist Mob Victim Buried," June 2, 2009.

International Fund for Ireland. www.internationalfundforireland.com. Accessed February, 2, 2010.

Jarman, N. "Ordering Transition." In A. Edwards and S. Bloomer (eds.), *Transforming the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008.

Kerr, M. *Imposing Power-Sharing: Conflict and Coexistence in Northern Ireland and Lebanon*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005.

Lijphart, A. *Democracy in Plural Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Loizos, P. *Iron in the Soul: Displacement, Livelihood and Health in Cyprus*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008.

Macdonald, H. "Threat from Dissident Republicans in Ulster "Highest for Seven Years." *The Guardian*, March 6, 2009a, p. 6.

Macdonald, H. "We've Lost Control of Ardoyne, IRA Warns." *Observer*, April 5, 2009b, p. 18.

Mack, J. E. "The Psychodynamics of Victimization among National Groups in Conflict." In V. Volkan, D. Julius, and J. Montville (eds.), *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships: Volume I, Concepts and Theories*. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1990.

- McGarry, J., and O'Leary, B. "Stabilising Northern Ireland's Agreement." *Political Quarterly*, 2004, 75 (3), 213–225.
- Mitrany, D. *A Working Peace System*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs and Oxford University Press, 1943.
- Murray, D. *Protestant Perceptions of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*. Limerick: Centre for Peace and Development Studies, University of Limerick, 2000.
- Nietzsche, F. "Human All Too Human." In F. Cameron and D. Dombowsky (eds.), *Political Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008.
- Nordstrom, C. "The Tomorrow of Violence." In N. L. Whitehead (ed.), *Violence*. Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2004.
- Northern Ireland Executive. *Building a Better Future: Draft Programme for Government 2008–2011*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Executive, 2008.
- O'Leary, B. "The 1998 British-Irish Agreement: Consociation Plus." *Scottish Affairs* 26, 14–35.
- O'Leary, B. "The Character of the 1998 Agreement: Results and Prospects." In R. Wilford (ed.), *Aspects of the Belfast Agreement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Peatling, G. K. *The Failure of the Northern Ireland Peace Process*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004.
- Rorty, R. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Rorty, R. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999.

- Ryan, S. *The Transformation of Violent Intercommunal Conflict*. Basingstoke: Ashgate, 2007.
- Sen, A. "The Uses and Abuses of Multiculturalism: Chili and Liberty." *The New Republic*, February 27, 2006. www.pierretristam.com/Bobst/library/wf-58.htm. Accessed February 3, 2010.
- Sherif, M. *Group Conflict and Cooperation: Their Social Psychology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.
- Shirlow, P., Robinson, G., Graham, B., Southern, N., and McMullan, A. *Population Change and Social Inclusion Study Derry/Londonderry*. Derry/Londonderry: St. Columb's Park House, 2005.
- Smyth, M. "The human consequences of armed conflict." In M. Cox, A. Guelke, and F. Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Spencer, G. *The State of Loyalism in Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008.
- Stedman, S. "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes." *International Security*, 1997, 22 (2), 5–53.
- Sunday Times*. "Rivals Shake for the First Time." January 17, 2010, p. 4.
- Tonge, J. *The New Northern Ireland Politics?* Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004.
- University of Ulster News*. "More People Describing Themselves as 'Northern Irish.'" December 2, 2008. news.ulster.ac.uk/releases/2008/4158.html. Accessed January 23, 2010.
- Volkan, V. *Blood Lines*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.