
The Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Solution to the Problems of an Ethnically Divided Society?

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The Northern Ireland conflict is often viewed as a religious war, with two opposing branches of the Christian faith fighting each other in a struggle that to outsiders seems to be an incomprehensible historical anachronism. Such a view is however a misunderstanding of the real nature of the dispute. While religion is an important element in the strife and the religious labels “Catholic” and “Protestant” are commonly used to describe the opposing groups, the key issue is that of ethnicity and national allegiance. The misunderstanding arose because the ethnic divide in Northern Ireland coincides with the religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. This is not a unique case by any means; a similar situation exists in places such as Bosnia, Lebanon, and the Punjab, where religious identity also provides the key social indicator of ethnicity.

The Ethnic Divide

The idea that the Ulster divide is ethnic, rather than simply religious, originated in the early 1970s, when it was suggested that “the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy in Northern Ireland, which assumes considerable homogeneity within the groups and sharp differences between the groups, can...be regarded as an ethnic dichotomy.”¹ This conceptualization was developed in a subsequent paper, which contended that “the conflict...can only be understood if it is viewed both in

ethnic group terms and also in national terms.”² Following Milton Gordon,³ they went on to define an ethnic group as

a group with a shared feeling of peoplehood...defined or set off by race, religion or national origin or some combination of these categories....In the Northern Ireland context...we may view the Catholics and Protestants as two ethnic groups. However, the Catholics form a national group (or part of one) in that they aspire to unity with the Irish Republic, while the Protestants, insofar as they wish to maintain the political separation of Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic, form another national group.⁴

This view has become “the most popular portrayal” of the nature of the dichotomy by academics writing on the province.⁵ It is a helpful portrayal in that it illuminates the true nature of the conflict and places it in a wider academic context of ethnic conflict, which should contribute to a better understanding and possible solution to the problem. Ethnicity in Northern Ireland is undoubtedly a complex concept, fluid over space and time, with a number of components including national identity, culture, and historical consciousness.⁶ Overall, religion is a key element, providing the most commonly used indicator of ethnicity in public discourse, academic research, and policymaking.

The origin of the ethnic divide can be found in the seventeenth century,

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when Britain tried to colonize and subdue Ireland in a process known as the Plantation. This introduced a substantial immigrant population into the island and provided the root cause for the centuries of conflict that have ensued. Today, the Catholic population in Northern Ireland is descended from the native Irish of that time,⁷ making up about 40 percent of the population. They largely espouse a nationalism that focuses on the unity of the island of Ireland, favoring the political reunification of the island and its continued independence from Britain.

The majority group in Northern Ireland, comprising over 50 percent of the population today,⁸ is predominantly descended from the English and Scots settlers. They favor the province’s continued union with the United Kingdom. There is thus a fundamental split between the two ethnic groups in terms of their national allegiance, which has caused recurring outbreaks of conflict since the time of the Plantation. The fact that the ethnic division is overlain by a religious divide is a chance product of history that has contributed significantly to the depth of the cleavage. Through time two virtually separate self-perpetuating social systems have developed, which today are mutually segregated from each other, often resi-

dentially, but especially in education and kinship.⁹

The period known as the Plantation is generally understood by historians to include the years up to 1641, but in fact the population movement of that time was only the start of a continuous, if variable, flow in the following decades.¹⁰ The basic objective of the policy was to achieve stability in areas, such as parts of west Ulster, which had previously been difficult to govern. From our perspective at the end of the twentieth century, it is doubtful if that objective was ever achieved. Indeed, the introduction of new and relatively numerous ethnic groups into Ulster and also other parts of Ireland only served to produce an unstable situation that erupted from time to time in violence. As a consequence, the Irish Question has been an ongoing problem for successive British governments.

The Partition of Ireland

Just over 100 years ago, a well-organized Irish nationalist party developed. It won eighty-five Irish seats in the 1885 election and brought the demand for limited autonomy, known as Home Rule, to the top of the British and Irish political agenda. Irish nationalism gave the Catholic clergy an important leadership role, and many Nationalists viewed the “nation” in terms of the Irish Catholic population. Home Rule was therefore seen by Unionists as a threat to their civil and religious liberties and was strongly opposed, particularly in Ulster, where Unionists were most numerous.

In 1912, some 250,000 Ulster Unionists pledged themselves to use “all means necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.” The following year the armed Ulster Volunteer Force was set up and the possibility of organized armed resistance came closer. In order to avoid a civil war in Ireland, the idea of partition came under consideration.

Towards the end of the decade, a nationalist armed group emerged, the Irish Volunteers, later known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This development further exacerbated the situation in the north and served to increase the unity of Protestants against what they saw as an increased threat. The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 provided the basis for the partition of Ireland, but it went a step further in that it devolved government not just to Dublin (the capital of the new Free State) but also to Belfast, which was to be the home of a regional parliament for Northern Ireland. This regional government was given extensive powers, but taxation and ultimate sovereignty remained with the British parliament at Westminster.¹¹

The partition of Ireland was essentially ethnic, based on religious geography at a county level. The Unionists in the northeast of the island favored a nine-county Northern Ireland, coterminous with the historic province of Ulster. However, this would have left them in the minority in large parts of the new statelet

and the overall Catholic minority of 43.7 percent would have been too large for comfort.¹² Conversely, the Nationalists preferred a four-county solution, but this would have produced a new political unit that would have been too small to be economically or administratively viable. Thus the six-county solution adopted was a compromise between these positions.

Partition led to the signing of an Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. This established the Boundary Commission with the task of revising the boundary in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants. Nationalists envisaged that this would result in the transfer of substantial parts of the border counties of Northern Ireland, with strong Catholic majorities, to the Free State. This would produce a rump Northern Ireland that would not have sufficient economic viability to survive. In the fullness of time, or so they believed, this would bring about reunification.

However, the religious geography of Northern Ireland, both now and then, is a complex mosaic of different areas: Catholic, Protestant, and all varieties of mixing in between. Consequently, it proved impossible for the Boundary Commission to delimit a mutually exclusive boundary that would be in any way practical or viable. They therefore chose to recommend only very small realignments of the border with the transfer of fewer than 25,000 Catholics to the Free State. Before their report could be published, an accurate forecast of its contents was published in the press. This caused widespread political turmoil, the commission was dissolved and its report suppressed. In 1925, in return for financial considerations, the Irish government agreed with the British and Northern Ireland governments that the border should continue as originally defined in the 1920 Act.

The ethnic partitioning of Ireland in the 1920s was implemented as a means of resolving grave problems in the relationship between Britain and Ireland. It gave Home Rule to many of those who desired it and maintained the union with Britain for many who wanted that alternative together with devolved government. But in doing so it also created an unstable situation that would ultimately lead to 30 years of violence beginning in the late 1960s, from which we may be emerging only now.

A basic problem of partition was that Northern Ireland was overbounded, especially in some border areas, as the Boundary Commission had recognized. Partition also created a deep sense of injustice among Northern Nationalists, who felt isolated and abandoned being ruled by an apparently permanent Unionist majority. As a consequence they turned in on themselves, developing their own institutions and often abstaining from political participation. Even after the disappearance of significant IRA activity and the confirmation of the boundary in 1925, the ruling Unionists showed little sign of relaxing their approach to Catholics. The security forces were essentially partisan and Catholic employment in the civil service was at a low level. This was justified on the grounds of IRA threat and

the lack of Catholic support for the very existence of the state. Thus Catholic hostility to the state and its institutions reinforced Unionist prejudice and suspicion, which in turn led to increased Catholic antipathy. Ethnic partition had produced a system in which mistrust fed on mistrust, with ultimately disastrous consequences.

Unionist Rule

Politics in Northern Ireland since the 1920s have been defined by the ethnic divide, and elections—whether to the British parliament at Westminster, to the Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont, to local government, or latterly to the European parliament in Brussels—have effectively served as sectarian head counts. The issue of the union with Britain dominated elections and the numerical advantage of Protestants perpetuated their political supremacy. Catholics were unable to exercise political power, except in some local government areas, and this added to their sense of alienation.

The Ireland Act of 1949 provided Unionists with the assurance that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom except with the consent of its own parliament. This did not, however, incline Unionists to develop a more inclusive approach, and the IRA campaign of 1956–62 only served to reinforce this attitude. By the late 1960s, notwithstanding apparent improvements in community relations in some areas, the Catholic sense of grievance and alienation was such that the very legitimacy of the regime was being called into question. Several groups were born through campaigning for civil rights. In 1968, a series of civil rights marches led to confrontation with the police and rioting on the streets of Derry and Belfast. The response of the Unionist minister for home affairs was to view this as a republican revolt, and he attempted to put it down by police action. Prime Minister O'Neill tried to approach the matter more sensitively and persuaded his party to accept the principle of "one man, one vote" in local government elections. However, continued pressure from the civil rights movement and loyalist counter-attack undermined his position, and he lost control of his party in April 1969.

A steep downward spiral had now begun. The IRA entered the fray and British troops arrived in 1969 to help maintain order. By 1972, the loyalist Ulster Defence Association had formed, initially to protect Protestant areas from IRA attacks. Politics had moved into the streets, and Protestants also now threatened the legitimacy of the regime.

From Partition to 1969, the British parliament at Westminster had effectively disengaged from Northern Ireland, leaving the Unionists to control affairs as they chose. Now they became enmeshed in the problem. The deployment of troops was initially conceived as a temporary measure, but currently, while there

is little military involvement on the streets, there still is a (much reduced) garrison presence in the province. The cost of this thirty-year engagement has been immense, both in terms of lives and the cost to the British Exchequer. By 1972, the situation was such that the British government suspended the Stormont parliament and instituted direct rule from Westminster. Since then a series of British initiatives has sought to resolve the problem, but it was not until the present Belfast Agreement¹³ that substantive progress was made.

Double Minority and Double Majority

At the heart of the problem lies the fact that both ethnic groups perceive themselves as being a minority under threat and that they have mutually exclusive political objectives. One way of conceptualizing this is by means of a Double Minority model, which is helpful in that it draws attention to the complexity of the problem and to the importance of different political and territorial scales:

In Northern Ireland the Protestant/unionist community forms the majority, while the Roman Catholic/nationalist community is in the minority. However, at the scale of Ireland as a whole—to which Northern Ireland, although politically separate, is territorially bound—the Protestant/unionist group is a numerical minority while the Catholic/nationalist group is part of a larger majority Catholic population. At the United Kingdom level—to which Northern Ireland, although territorially separated, is politically bound—the Protestant/unionist community is again a minority with ultimate political power beyond its control.¹⁴

Indeed, it should be added that Nationalists have succeeded—to their advantage—in making the Irish problem an issue in American politics. As a consequence, the Unionist community is made to feel a minority at yet another scale, again with power beyond their control. The value of the Double Minority model is that it portrays both sides as minorities, both feeling under threat in some way.

Further insight is provided by Poole, who has pointed out that a society to which this model is applicable is also characterized by having a Double Majority, with both sides being majorities in certain contexts. Just as minority status

may generate conflict because of a sense of grievance, and because of apprehension about the future, it may be argued that violence is more likely to be encouraged by the confidence and sense of strength associated with majority status, together with the feeling of moral righteousness resulting from that perceived status....If both ethnic groups have a sense of strength and a sense of moral justification, as in a double majority situation like Northern Ireland, an eventual violent clash may be very hard to avoid.¹⁵

These models help to explain and illuminate the actions of the opposing ethnic groups in Northern Ireland. It can be recognized that both communities have legitimate aspirations and fears. Neither side has a monopoly on right, truth, or suffering. The difficulty is to produce a solution that recognizes these conflicting aspirations and assuages the fears. Indeed, not only are the aspirations conflicting but they are also mutually exclusive: If the Nationalist objective of a united Ireland precludes the Unionist objective of continued union with Britain, where can the common ground be found?

Furthermore, all political initiatives over the past thirty years have been set in a context of violence that, while principally located in Northern Ireland, has been directed against both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. This has served to undermine the cross-community support in Northern Ireland necessary for the success of such proposals. While violence remains real or threatened, political progress is difficult to achieve, and each new atrocity only serves to harden opinions.

Political Developments Under Direct Rule

In autumn 1972, the British government published a discussion paper that contained three significant elements. First, British sovereignty was guaranteed as long as it had majority support within the province. Second, a power-sharing executive could be set up, involving both communities in the government of Northern Ireland. Third, an “Irish dimension” would go some way to meeting Nationalist demands. Since that time, these three elements have been consistent themes in British policy, although at times the emphasis has changed.

In 1973, an attempt was made to devolve power back to the province and a power-sharing executive was set up. This collapsed in May 1974, after a loyalist-led general strike brought chaos to the province. The main cause of Unionist objection to these arrangements was the proposals for an institutional Irish dimension, in the form of a Council of Ireland, to deal with matters of common interest between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Following the collapse of this initiative, direct rule of Northern Ireland by Westminster—the “default position”—was resumed. In 1981, Republican prisoners launched a hunger strike demanding, *inter alia*, that they be given political status. By this time tensions in the province were high and the strike was called off after the deaths of ten hunger strikers. Provisional Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, abandoned their policy of electoral abstention and instead adopted a twin-track, “armalite and ballot box” strategy. This built on the strong Nationalist support for the hunger strike, a situation on which Sinn Féin politically capitalized. At least initially, it served to make the prospects for negotiated solution more difficult, since the British government and Unionists refused

to enter into discussions with the representatives of a terrorist organization. Yet these representatives had increasing electoral support.

However, the British and Irish governments began to work more closely together starting in the early 1980s. The British needed Irish security cooperation, while the Irish, under threat from the growing electoral support for Sinn

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Féin, needed to demonstrate that constitutional nationalism could produce tangible results. This mutual self-interest led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, which established an

Anglo-Irish secretariat on the outskirts of Belfast, thus implementing the “Irish dimension” that had been the stumbling block in 1974. The agreement also brought the concession by the Irish government that Northern Ireland should remain British as long as the majority so desired. While meeting some of the demands of Unionists and Nationalists, it also caused some anger in both quarters. Unionists were particularly angered that the agreement had been implemented without their prior consultation. The agreement served to bring the two sovereign governments closer together, but it did little to help the immediate situation within Northern Ireland.

The Peace Process

In the early 1990s, after a previous inconclusive effort, talks resumed between the leaders of the two main nationalist parties, Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin and John Hume of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Their objective was to build on the opportunities afforded by the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Hume sought to persuade Adams that IRA violence was counter-productive, an obstacle in the way of Irish unity.

The British and Irish prime ministers launched the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993, in which they recognized a set of six principles for political progress. This further emphasized the joint approach to the developing problem. The declaration underlined the principle of consent and, most significantly, indicated that a renunciation of violence by those presently supporting it would lead to a dialogue with the government (once it had been established that the commitment to democratic means was genuine).

The early 1990s also brought a growing realization that neither side could

win the conflict through military means. The prospect of entering into negotiations was becoming more attractive to Nationalists and, in August 1994, the IRA declared “a complete cessation of military activities,” which was followed by a loyalist cease-fire. The two governments were enabled to make further steps forward and, in February 1995, they published a set of proposals known as the Framework Documents. The first document contained the British government’s ideas on devolving power to Northern Ireland, on a fair and equitable basis. These proposals had been developed in discussion with local parties. The second document represented an understanding between the British and Irish governments as to how relations on the island of Ireland and between Britain and Ireland could be developed to their mutual advantage. The stated intention of the documents was “a balanced accommodation” between the positions of the two main traditions on the basis of consent.

While these documents were widely approved outside Northern Ireland, within the province the response was varied. Nonetheless, political momentum was developing; the 1994 cease-fires created a more favorable context for political progress, and the Framework Documents provided a basis for further discussions between the main parties. There was considerable opposition among Unionists to entering into discussion with Sinn Féin while the IRA maintained its substantial armory of weapons, but nonetheless discussions did take place. These culminated in the signing of the Belfast Agreement on Good Friday, April 10, 1998,¹⁶ a major milestone in what has come to be known as the Peace Process. The agreement was wide ranging and it was subsequently approved by separate referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and by the British parliament.

The Belfast Agreement

The agreement incorporated the three elements that first emerged in 1972 and sought to address the “totality of relationships” within the islands of Great Britain and Ireland. It attempted to address the aspirations and fears of all parties, trying to give as much as possible to everyone. It is doubtful if any individual or party is totally happy with the outcome, but both Unionists and Nationalists have identified areas of the agreement that they see as meeting their particular concerns. Equally, there are those in both camps who are opposed to the agreement, who see it as a surrender of their historical position.

Although there are a number of components, the agreement was conceived as a total package. Giving assent to it means approving not just those sections that are palatable to a particular party, but also those that are in themselves unpalatable. At the outset, the controversial Anglo-Irish Agreement was replaced by a new British-Irish Agreement. The British government repealed the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 and accepted that Northern Ireland was an

integral part of the United Kingdom until a majority of its inhabitants wished this status to cease. The Irish government undertook to amend the Constitution of Ireland by removing its claim on the territory of Northern Ireland and redefining Irish unity in terms of people rather than territory.

The agreement provides for a variety of democratic institutions that fall into what are known as three strands. The first strand deals with institutions within Northern Ireland and provides for a 108-member assembly elected by proportional representation, with power devolved to it by Westminster. Executive authority within this assembly is discharged by a first and deputy first minister and ten ministers heading departments, allocated with reference to the number of seats each party has in the Assembly—a return to power sharing. Members of the Assembly must designate their identity as Nationalist, Unionist, or other and key decisions must be taken on a cross-community basis.

Strand two deals with relationships between Northern Ireland and the Irish government. It provides for a North/South Ministerial Council, bringing together those with ministerial responsibilities from both parts of the island to cooperate on matters of mutual interest. The decisions of this council are to be by mutual agreement.

The third strand deals with the “totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands.” It provides for a British-Irish Council comprised of members of the British and Irish governments and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It also provides for the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which will promote bilateral cooperation.

In addition, the Belfast Agreement provided safeguards on human rights, the decommissioning of terrorist weapons, the normalization of security within Northern Ireland, a review of policing and the criminal justice system, and a program of accelerated release of terrorist prisoners.

Approval of the agreement by referenda in May 1998 was followed by elections to the Assembly. While pro-agreement parties have the majority within the new body, a substantial number of Unionist members are opposed to it. This has acted to some extent as a brake on progress. While headway was made on the implementation of most aspects of the agreement, a major impasse developed on the issues of setting up the executive and the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. The Ulster Unionist Party, the largest party in the Assembly and the main Unionist party, refused to set up the executive, which would include Sinn Féin, until the IRA weapons were decommissioned—“No guns, no government.” Sinn Féin insisted that this was not part of the agreement and should not be a precondition.

The British secretary of state, who had substantial powers in Northern Ireland under direct rule, initiated a review of the Agreement in autumn 1999, chaired by American Senator George Mitchell, who had earned the respect of all parties by his chairing of the talks that culminated in the Belfast Agreement. This

review process was protracted and focused on lengthy meetings between representatives of the Ulster Unionists, Sinn Féin, and the senator. Eventually a basis for agreement was found, which provided a series of carefully choreographed moves and statements. This enabled movement to take place with neither side appearing to lose face. It also managed to create an apparently better understanding between the two sides and a marked moderation of the language in their public statements.

While Sinn Féin members were able to accept the proposed way forward, the Ulster Unionists had to obtain the approval of their ruling council, which was achieved despite strong opposition. This cleared the way for rapid movement and major political developments took place in December 1999, implementing most of the provisions of the Belfast Agreement. At the time of this writing in December 1999, the Northern Ireland executive had been established with a Unionist first minister and a Nationalist deputy first minister, and included five Unionist and five Nationalist ministers, two of whom were from Sinn Féin. The first budget has been announced and the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council have met.

Prospects

What are the prospects for this Peace Process to actually succeed? Given the history of conflict in Ireland and the extremely rapid developments that have taken place in recent weeks, to make any sort of unequivocal judgment, which will not appear in print for some months, is to leave oneself a hostage to fortune. Nevertheless, there are some observations that can be made with some certainty, both positive and negative.

On the positive side, the recent political developments have been underwritten by the consent of a clear majority of voters in both parts of Ireland and by the British government. International support is also very strong, particularly from the American president and European countries. This clearly expressed democratic endorsement of the agreement provides a powerful impetus toward its eventual success. While the process has encountered major obstacles at times, it has acquired a momentum, which at present is strong. Power has been devolved to local politicians: Unionists are experiencing this again for the first time in twenty-seven years, while for Nationalists it is a totally new experience. With this have come the trappings of power: substantial salaries, ministerial cars, media attention, and much else. It is hard to see that local politicians would wish to lose all of this, and so it acts as an additional incentive for them to make the agreement work.

Furthermore, the Provisional IRA has issued a statement endorsing Sinn Féin's leadership in the Peace Process and has appointed an interlocutor to work with the International Commission on Decommissioning.

Virtually all the pieces of the jigsaw are now in place. Both sides can point to substantial gains from their perspective. Unionists welcome the removal of the Irish Republic's territorial claim on Northern Ireland and the acceptance by all sides of the principle of consent. They welcome Sinn Féin's participation in the new arrangements as an acceptance of partition and a recognition of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Nationalists for their part now have real power in the devolved administration and they also have an institutionalized Irish dimension. Furthermore, they have had many of their concerns addressed regarding issues of equality.

However, there are also negative aspects. One major piece of the jigsaw is still missing—the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. Unionists believe that the appointment of an interlocutor by the IRA represents progress on this issue. Some loyalist paramilitary groups have also appointed interlocutors, but as of yet there has been no actual decommissioning, apart from the handing in of a small amount of weaponry by a loyalist group some months ago. The decommissioning of IRA weaponry is fundamental to the eventual success of the process, since the IRA is by far the most significant terrorist group. If it occurs, then it will be followed by loyalist weaponry, indicating a major endorsement of the democratic process and an abandonment of the armed struggle.

However, if decommissioning does not occur within a very short time period, it will have serious consequences. The Ulster Unionist Council will review the situation in February 2000, and if substantive progress has not been made on this issue, it will withdraw from the executive. The Unionist leadership has taken Sinn Féin at their word, and if decommissioning does not occur, it will seriously undermine the position of First Minister David Trimble and his allies within the party. For Sinn Féin, a failure of the IRA to decommission would also have serious consequences. Blame for the failure of the Peace Process would lie at their door and their reputation would suffer a severe international setback, particularly in the United States. Their good faith would be brought into question, which would make it very difficult for them to engage seriously in any future political discussion. Therefore, if decommissioning does not take place, the political fallout will be severe for both the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin.

It also needs to be recognized that there are those who are opposed to the agreement and its implementation. Several of the smaller Unionist parties are against it and there are opponents within Trimble's Ulster Unionists. It would be wrong to dismiss these opponents as mere political dinosaurs, who are backward looking and resistant to change. The Troubles of the past thirty years have inflicted deep scars in Ulster society. Many of the provisions of the agreement are offensive to many people: the release of terrorist prisoners, reform of the police, and the inclusion of Sinn Féin in government before decommissioning are particularly abhorrent. The appointment of Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness, former

chief of the IRA in Derry, as minister of education has led to much public concern and to widespread walkouts by school children. Those Unionists who oppose the agreement have principled objections to it. Should the agreement fail, this would be seen as a vindication of their position and will lead to a hardening of attitudes.

On the Nationalist side, the agreement is opposed by several armed groups who see any form of negotiated settlement with Britain as capitulation—an abandonment of long-held principles. They refuse to accept anything short of Irish reunification and are committed to a continuation of the armed struggle. They still pose a real terrorist threat and any major atrocity at this stage has the potential to seriously destabilize the process.

A further problem is that contentious issues, such as Orange marches, produce inflammatory situations on the streets of Ulster that destabilize the situation, giving opportunity to those seeking to destroy the process. Opponents of the agreement on both sides are thus working to make it fail through both democratic and non-democratic means.

Finally, it should be noted that even if the agreement should fail, the political landscape in Ireland has changed substantially and irrevocably. While the Northern Ireland Assembly may collapse and alternative arrangements may have to be found, some of the changes brought about by the agreement will continue. In particular, the changed relationship between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, involving the change to the Irish Constitution and the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act, will continue. The events of recent years have brought both countries into a much closer and more positive relationship, which seems set continue due to both its mutual benefits and the development of closer links between European countries in general. And come what may, the reforms that have been initiated in Northern Ireland over the past thirty years will continue.

So will the Peace Process provide the solution to the problems of this ethnically divided society? While the final outcome is still unclear, on balance there are grounds for optimism. There is no doubt that the Peace Process has come a long way, and while it has still some way to go, it is moving in the right direction, notwithstanding the obstacles that still have to be overcome. The one certainty in Northern Ireland at present is that we live in interesting times. (W)

Notes

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