



Ten Key Points

Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

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Why a Peace Monitoring Report?

Fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement how do we assess the health of the Northern Ireland peace process? There are conflicting messages. On the one hand, the past year has seen some signal achievements of the kind that has made it seem a uniquely successful case study in conflict resolution – none more extraordinary than the handshake between Martin McGuinness and the Queen in June 2012. This was an event so rich in symbolism that it seemed to signal the end, not just of decades, but centuries of enmity. In November 2012 David Cameron announced that Fermanagh would play host to the next G8 summit, and in January 2013 the European Union held a special conference to celebrate the successes of three successive peace programmes. All of these unorchestrated, but nonetheless harmonious, statements of confidence are evidence of a broad consensus that the 1998 accord has fulfilled its promise and that Northern Ireland is now a stable and peaceful society.

Unfortunately they do not tell the whole story. Two people were killed in Northern Ireland in 2012 by dissident republicans – evidence that within a society routinely described as post-conflict there are still those for whom the conflict is not over. The flags dispute that began in December 2012 is evidence of a deep alienation within a section of the unionist community from the peace settlement that has emerged.

These two trends, the positive and the negative, run alongside each other in ways that can be difficult to understand. How do we know which is the stronger? Is Northern Ireland on a steady journey out of violence or is there a momentum now pulling it backwards? The Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report was set up by the Community Relations Council to provide, year on year, a dispassionate analysis of the dynamics within the society. It has been assisted in this enterprise by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This summary paper provides an overview of the ten main points to emerge from the 2013 report. The full document is available on request from the Community Relations Council.

Ten key points

1. The underlying momentum of the peace process was strong in 2012

Up until the first week of December, the year 2012 had been one of the most peaceful for 40 years. The official figures for reported crime show that the lowest crime levels since 1998/99, the period from which comparable data is available. A similar fall-off can be seen in the Northern Ireland Crime Survey. The 2011-12 figures show that 11.2 per cent of all households and their adult occupants were victims of at least one NICS category of crime— again the lowest rate since the survey began operating continuously in 2005. This is almost half the 21.3% figure in England and Wales. Sectarian crime had dropped to below one per cent of all crime, and hate crime generally was down. People in Northern Ireland had become more confident about their own security, and the peace process had experienced some of its most signal achievements – none more remarkable than the handshake between Queen Elizabeth and Martin McGuinness in June, which had seemed to put the final seal on the success of the 1998 Agreement. All of the available data combined to give David Cameron the confidence at the end of November to announce that the next G8 summit would be held in Fermanagh. On 3 December the decision by Belfast City Council to restrict the flying of the union flag to certain designated days was followed by widespread street disturbance. The flags dispute has presented a major challenge for the peace process, but it does not of itself negate the positive developments that have taken place in other parts of the society throughout the year.

2. Northern Ireland is now a society made up of minorities

The release of the key statistics from the 2011 census showed that religious and political identities had undergone a transformation since 2001, and that religious background and national identity are no longer so closely aligned. For the first time the census included a question on national identity, and in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement respondents were given the option of identifying with more than one. It was an option that only a small proportion (9%) chose to take; the majority chose a single identity. The census returns show there is no longer a majority population in terms of national identity. While 48% of the population is from a Protestant background that does not automatically confer on them a British identity; just under 40% of the population chose that self-description. While those from a Catholic background make up 45% of the population only 25% of the population feel themselves to have an Irish identity. This means that no single national identity is shared by a majority of the population; instead, in terms of national identity, Northern Ireland is now home to a number of minority populations, of different sizes. There is now an important new category, Northern Irish,

which accounts for 21% of the population. This figure aligns with other evidence from attitude surveys suggesting that there is a sizeable section of the population which makes devolution its first choice, over either an all-Ireland political framework or an exclusively UK one. The evidence from opinion polls shows the percentage favouring a united Ireland to be consistently under 20%.

3. There is increasing ease with difference

Northern Ireland is now, irreversibly, a heterogeneous society and is showing itself more at ease with difference. The census records that 1.8% of the population are classified as 'ethnic', and another 2% are migrants from the A8 countries. The number of foreign nationals now living in Northern Ireland has risen to 11% of the population. There is evidence of increased integration, and of recent migrants choosing to settle and raise their children in Northern Ireland. The school census for 2012/13 shows that 2.6% of all pupils are from newcomer communities, and 10% of all births recorded in the past year have been to mothers from outside the UK or the Republic of Ireland. While racism and hate crime persist, there is evidence of more positive experiences in the exchanges between the new communities and the host population. The level of racist hate crime has dropped and is comparatively low by UK standards. The level of homophobic crime has also dropped and there has been incremental progress in the respect shown to the LGBT community.

4. The Assembly has faltered as a legislative chamber

In the past year the Assembly has not been used as an effective political forum. The concentration of power in the Executive has had the corresponding effect of diminishing the centrality of the Assembly as the decision-making body. The legislative programme, which had increased in tempo in 2011, faltered in 2012 when only five bills were enacted. MLAs are increasingly inclined to gravitate to the committees a more direct way to achieve results. This has resulted in a chamber that is often under-populated. A continuing focus on symbolic and divisive issues has increased polarisation, but even where a consensus has been reached on bread-and-butter issues MLAs have found it difficult to make progress, or to show any real peace dividend to those areas that are the most disadvantaged and where political alienation is deepest.

5. The real debates on national identity and sovereignty are taking place elsewhere

The attention paid to symbolic issues relating to national identity has obscured the ways in which the content of national identity is being re-shaped by larger forces in Britain and Ireland. While the Republic of Ireland has been pulled tighter into a centralising European Union, the magnetic forces in the UK are pulling sentiment in the opposite direction. A pledge has been given by the Conservative Party

that it will hold a referendum on EU membership if it is returned to power. More immediately, a referendum on Scottish independence is scheduled for the autumn of 2014. There are profound implications for both nationalism and unionism in these developments but the debates on national identity within Northern Ireland do not align with those in Ireland, the UK or Europe.

6. The fragility of the peace process has increased because of the continuing absence of a policy on division

The most significant failing of the Executive has been the impasse reached over the Cohesion Sharing and Integration document, which was intended to be the policy framework for community relations. The continuing absence of any agreed strategy for flags, parades or dealing with the past left the political establishment vulnerable to the shocks delivered by particular incidents and events. In addition, public order and the rule of law was undermined by the lack of shared commitment to existing institutions like the Parades Commission and by the absence of clear agreed understandings on the legislation governing public protest. These problems were very much in evidence during the flag dispute that followed Belfast City Council's decision on 3 December 2012 to restrict the flying of the union flag to certain designated days.

7. Some paramilitaries have been marginalised, others have been granted a degree of legitimisation

Paramilitarism remains a threat, as evidenced by the killing of Prison Officer David Black and the many 'punishment' attacks carried out by both republican and loyalist groups. The reduced level of violence and the MI5 analysis of the diminished capacity of dissident republicans gave Secretary of State Theresa Villiers sufficient confidence in October to reduce the threat level in Great Britain (though not in Northern Ireland) from 'substantial' to 'moderate'. However, while dissident republicans have failed to develop a political profile, loyalist paramilitaries have been granted a degree of recognition by their stewardship of their communities during the flags protest, and have been brought back within the unionist fold by the mainstream unionist parties wishing to build a united front in the face of perceived threats to British culture.

8. The flag dispute has exposed the alienation of sections of working-class loyalism

The disturbances that began in December revealed that a section of loyalism still sees itself in fundamental opposition to the peace process. The electoral successes of those unionist parties prepared to work the new dispensation, and the corresponding inability of anti-Agreement unionism to make electoral inroads, had created the impression that the hard rock of resistance to the 1998 settlement had softened

over time. The activities of the flags protestors, and the tacit sympathy they were able to call upon within unionism, have shown that an underground stream of opposition has now surfaced in ways that have threatened the solidity of the political detente between unionism and nationalism. In 2010 and 2011 when the threat to the political institutions came from dissident republicans there were strong public displays of solidarity by the political leadership of all parties. This was noticeably absent during the flags dispute; in its place the unionist leadership focused on communal solidarity. Although some unionist politicians participated in the street protests, the leadership did not – a very distinct difference from the expressions of unionist unrest in the 1980s and 1990s, when the party leaders were at the forefront of the disturbances. While the flags protests proved more determined and more persistent than had been expected, the overall scale was very small when compared with the expressions of unionist unrest in those previous periods. The net effect nonetheless has been a re-sectarianisation of politics.

9. There has been a decline of residential segregation and an expansion of shared space

Residential segregation has diminished for the first time in a couple of generations. The data from the 2011 census shows that only 37% of electoral wards are now single identity (as defined by having 80% or more from one communal background). This compares with over 50% having a single identity in the 2001 census. There has also been an increase in wards with mixed identity, where neither community has more than a 50% share of housing. In addition, the amount of neutral urban space where people can experience freedom from communal identities has also been increased by the investment in large-scale arts, conference, and leisure spaces,

and the commercial development of inner-city zones that play host to cafes, clubs and retail outlets.

10. Inequality gaps persist but are perceived differently

Political stability cannot be built upon inequality fault lines, and equality gaps persist in variety of ways. The deprivation indices show that Catholics experience considerably more socio-economic disadvantage than Protestants. Fifteen of the top twenty most disadvantaged wards have a majority Catholic population, while only six of the twenty least disadvantaged wards have a Catholic majority. The deprivation indices show that 22% of Catholics live in households experiencing poverty, compared to 17% of Protestants. Those who have entered the labour market operate on a level playing field, and amongst the older age cohorts the numbers of Catholics and Protestants who are unemployed are proportionate to their population size. However, the growth of youth unemployment has opened up a new communal differential: 20% of Catholics aged 18-24 are unemployed, as opposed to 15% of Protestants. The equality imbalances are not all weighted towards one community. Catholics continue to enjoy greater educational success than Protestants, and working class Protestant males continue to underachieve. On both sides these inequality gaps are understood through narratives that allow all new developments to fit within a story that connects with the patterns of the past. The nationalist narrative is of an upward trajectory, while the unionist narrative is one of loss. This latter perspective tends to magnify the sense of diminishing shares, while the nationalist perspective tends to emphasise an historical drive towards equality. The conflict of the two narratives risks a return to zero sum politics where a gain for one is seen as a loss for the other.

The Northern Ireland Peace Monitor is written by Dr. Paul Nolan

Advisory Board: Mr Tony McCusker (Chair), Professor Adrian Guelke, Professor Neil Gibson, Professor Paddy Hillyard, Professor Jennifer Todd, Professor Gillian Robinson, Ms Kathryn Torney, Professor Frank Gaffikin, Ms Jacqueline Irwin, Ms Celia McKeon, and Ms Aleks Collingwood.



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