



Introduction: Instability and the Peace Process

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As we write this introduction Northern Ireland is preparing for an election to the power-sharing Assembly that was established under the terms of the peace Agreement signed in April 1998.¹ The elections, to be held on the 26th of November 2003, are taking place against a backdrop of uncertainty and confusion. The elections were announced on the morning of the 21st of October 2003 and were conceived as part of a package designed to re-establish the power-sharing Assembly, which had been suspended the previous October (amid allegations that Sinn Fein were spying on the other political parties and on the two governments). The latest attempt to re-establish the power-sharing Assembly failed on the afternoon of the 21st of October 2003, when the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader, David Trimble, announced that he was not going to agree to re-establish the Assembly because there had been no 'clear transparent report of major acts of decommissioning of a nature which would have a significant impact on public opinion' (BBC News, 23/10/03). Consequently the elections are being held for an institution which is not currently running, has not run for the last year and has been suspended four times since it got up and running in December 1999. Added to these problems is the widely held assumption that the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) will outpoll the UUP in the election.

The election of the DUP as the largest Unionist party could create problems for the political institutions established under the terms of the Agreement. The election of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister in the Assembly requires cross-community support from the Members of the (Legislative) Assembly (MLAs). The DUP is unlikely to gain sufficient votes from the Nationalist parties (the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein) to allow them to take either role. Consequently the reconvened Assembly could be immediately plunged into crisis. The DUP have also given a manifesto commitment to renegotiate the terms of the Agreement. This is not in itself detrimental to the Agreement, under the terms of the Agreement itself a review of its workings is required four years after it 'comes into effect', but as Wolff points out in this volume:

The complexity of the compromise that was reached in April 1998 and the difficulty of reaching it are but a taste of what lies ahead for the negotiators and facilitators if they embark on a review of the Agreement (11).

Even if the DUP are not the largest party in the Assembly the political prospects do not look rosy. The UUP continue to be beset by internal conflict (see McAuley and Tonge, both in this volume). Sinn Fein look set to become the largest Nationalist party and, given the difficulties associated with the ongoing issue of the decommissioning of Irish Republican Army (IRA) weapons, they are likely to continue to come into conflict with Unionists in any future Assembly. Added to this is the declining cross-community space in Northern Irish politics (see Tonge in this volume) and the ongoing, some say increased, problem of sectarianism in Northern Irish society (see Shirlow in this volume). All of which adds up to a bleak picture of the future.

¹ The official title of the document signed by the British and Irish governments and the majority of the main political parties in Northern Ireland is the 'Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations'. It is more commonly referred to as the 'Good Friday Agreement' (the day on which it was signed) or the 'Belfast Agreement' (the city in which it was signed). Some authors refer to it as the 'British-Irish Agreement' (in order to draw attention to its international dimensions). This diversity of usage is found amongst the authors writing for this Special Issue. The editors have not attempted to impose uniformity of usage amongst the authors.



Some more optimistic readings of the political future of Northern Ireland are possible. Although there is declining cross-community space at the level of political institutions this has taken place against the backdrop of greater moderation amongst the parties. There may be a great divide between the two communities, but the distance between them, measured in terms of policies and behaviour, is narrower than it has ever been in the history of the region. In this sense we are not seeing the disappearance of the 'middle ground' in Northern Ireland, but a crowding into the 'middle ground' by all the parties. Any review of the Agreement could remove the cross-community elements of the Agreement that have stymied its operation and that have arguably been a barrier to greater cross-community cooperation (see Wolff in this volume). The declining saliency of the parading issue indicates that conflicts can be resolved and that new institutional frameworks for dealing with conflict have been successfully developed (see Jarman in this volume).

Whether one takes an optimistic or pessimistic view of the future prospects for Northern Ireland all of the authors agree that the peace process has been prone to crises. The articles in this special issue of *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* examine why the foundations of the political process have been less than secure. The explanations range from those which examine the technical inadequacies of institution-building (Wolff) to a more fundamental critique of the diminished nature of human agency at the heart of the process (Gilligan). Instability is likely to continue to be a defining feature of the peace process, for this reason alone the articles in the Special Issue are worth reading for the insights that they provide into the peace process in Northern Ireland and for the possible lessons that the Northern Ireland case illustrates for peace processes in other countries.

Outline of the Contents

In the opening article, Stefan Wolff outlines how the perception of the conflict as ethnonational has led to the particular form of political deal evident in the Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement created devolved power sharing and linked the unionist and nationalist communities to their respective nations, in a deal mediated by the UK and Irish governments, abetted by the US. In a sympathetic commentary, Wolff concurs with successive British secretaries of state in viewing the Good Friday Agreement as the only show in town, whilst acknowledging the institutional and political failing associated with the deal. For Wolff, the solutions lie in technocratic fine-tuning and a more positive attitudinal approach from those politicians reluctant to endorse the agreement. Revised arrangements could include the removal of the D'Hondt mechanism of selecting ministerial offices, which, even supporters of the Good Friday Agreement acknowledge, has often produced party departmental fiefdoms rather than cohesive government. D'Hondt might be retained for the quasi-presidency of the Office of First and Deputy First Minister, but not beyond. Qualified majority voting could replace the Celtic-Rangers politics of Assembly members self-designating as Nationalist, or Unionist, with majority support reward from each Assembly community. Sufficiency of consensus would replace the rigidities of designation and parallel consent. As the later article by Jon Tonge indicates, the invisibility of Alliance in respect of cross-community consent has further diminished that party's electoral fortunes, as electors see that the 'two communities' matter more at the institutional level.

This pro-consociational approach acknowledges the communalism underpinning the deal, seeing this as a part of a necessary realism. The parties compete in limited electoral space, in parallel electoral contests. Wolff points out that the switch to Sinn Fein from the SDLP in the intra-nationalist contest is reward for that party's moderation (a point reiterated by Tonge). Wolff acknowledges the loss of confidence in the deal among Unionists, amid allegations of continuing IRA activity and a rising tide of mainly loyalist non-fatal shootings and assaults from 1998 until 2002.

Gilligan's account offers a wider critique of the fundamental basis of the peace and political process, which cannot be mitigated merely by changing institutional procedures. In his account, these processes have been constructed upon a diminished sense of human agency, in which the raising of legitimate political questions has been downgraded amid the demand for peace. He suggests that this is a strength and weakness of the agreement, useful in maintaining the Agreement as a politically ambiguous document with a 'moral' heart, but less appropriate as a means of bringing permanent stability. The Agreement attempts to defuse politics. It renders the Irish national question as a form of cultural or psychological question, rather than a territorial issue centred upon the politics of national self-determination. Nationalists are offered this as a right, but one that may never be exercised. As territorial politics have been neutered, the 'political' process has been diverted into arguments of symbolism or affect, epitomised by the attempts to create hierarchies of victimhood. Ultimately, this exercise in depoliticisation leads to a cynicism that has now come to infect the peace process itself.

Some of these themes are developed in Tonge's analysis of political parties, based upon recent surveys of party members. Given that all parties are centrists now, in that none is prepared to dismantle the state of Northern Ireland on the grounds of its long-held illegitimacy, the role of the existing centre, represented by the Alliance Party, has been questioned. The traditional unionist-nationalist faultline exists, reflected in communal voting, but it has narrowed rather than widened (whatever the claims of anti-consociationalists) given that even Sinn Fein, having promised not to do so throughout the conflict, is now signed up to an agreement based upon the 'consent principle', the old political divisions have less meaning. As Alliance was built upon a rejection of unionism and nationalism as pernicious, its value, like the ideologies themselves, has less salience. The other 'moderate' parties are also scrutinised by Tonge. With a majority of the SDLP's members believing that the party has 'achieved its objectives' via the Good Friday Agreement (whatever happened to nationalism and Irish unity?) there is clearly greater logic in a nationalist voting for Sinn Fein, a party which is still liable to believe in an end goal, even if this remains as elusive as ever under the terms of an Agreement far from transient to Irish unity. Within the Ulster Unionist Party, the commitment to devolution remains far from universal, with a section of the party's ruling Ulster Unionist Council (UUC). After all, the comfort blanket of direct rule did not bring with it substantial policing changes, prisoner releases and Sinn Fein in government. This continuing integrationist tendency raises the wider question of the extent of commitment to devolution. As Wolff notes, devolution in Northern Ireland is 'more a by-product of conflict resolution than part of a comprehensive devolution strategy'. As such, its continuing utility, in the absence of war, might be questioned. Devolved power sharing has been a desired (evidences by the government's willingness to indulge party antics) but non-essential component of strategy for a British government whose primary aim has been to minimise conflict. With the key paramilitary players neutered, a return of devolution remains desired by this government, but its centrality to overall goals remains debatable.

For Jim McAuley, the crisis within unionism may be so great that solutions based upon institutional fine-tuning may be insufficient to address the problem. The Agreement was sold to unionists as a deal that kept Northern Ireland within the Union. Indeed it did, as republican dissidents have rightly pointed out. Electoral gains for Sinn Fein cannot hide the 'consent principle', which runs throughout the deal. It was assumed by many therefore, that any unionist objections would be short-term, based upon hostility to the supposedly immoral, distasteful medicine, which accompanied the constitutional protection of the Agreement. However, whilst these unpleasanties for unionists formed a major part of the critique offered by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Paisley's party,



seemingly unconcerned by any literal reading of the deal, continued to deride the Agreement as part of a longer term constitutional sell-out. The sell-out thesis has of course been central to DUP discourse since the formation of the party, against most visible evidence and all government assertion. With Sinn Fein in government in Northern Ireland, however, sufficient unionists were alarmed that this amounted to another shift towards the withdrawal by instalments of the British government. Naturally, Sinn Fein welcomes such an interpretation, allowing the party to escape censure for its tactical somersaults. Growing disillusionment may not automatically be translated into increased support for the DUP. There remains a section of working class loyalism hostile to Paisleyism. This section may lean towards the pro-Agreement unionism of the PUP, but it appears to be a diminishing constituency.

The Good Friday Agreement says remarkable little about sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Further, the Executive, when functioning (admittedly not a common event thus far) has not addressed the issue in depth in its annual Programme for Government. The final two articles, in different ways and with different perspectives on the issues, examine the question of sectarian conflict.

The article by Peter Shirlow highlights the limits of the elite driven peace process. Shirlow outlines the extent of residential segregation in Belfast and its impact in producing a collective self and overriding intra-community division. The building of twenty 'peace lines' between 1969 and 2003 consolidated a negative sense of the 'other' community. Shirlow's work highlights interface areas, divided by such walls, as the most common sites of deaths during the conflict, having aided the identification of the 'opposing' community. Ethno-sectarianism remains evident, highlighted by distrust of the rival community, an unwillingness to transfer across marked territorial boundaries and reluctance to engage in anti-sectarian, cross-community initiatives.

Finally, Neil Jarman highlights another aspect of the post-Agreement growth of apathy, the diminution of disputes over Orange Order parades. Jarman highlights the role of 'grassroots' initiatives, involving local dialogue, in diluting the contentiousness of parades. In some cases informal 'policing' arrangements have been developed by local paramilitary groups, in others local business elites have been anxious to pressure marchers and protesters into accommodation to protect commercial enterprises. Jarman also points to the role of the Parades Commission (established prior to the Agreement), and in particular its local mediators, in facilitating dialogue between opposed communities. Jarman also points to factors internal to the Orange Order in helping to facilitate greater dialogue. The parades issue does indicate that there are possibilities for dealing with conflict in Northern Ireland. It is unclear, however, the extent to which the parades issue provides wider lessons here for the peace process. As Jarman himself points out:

The disputes over parades and parade routes have been an integral feature of the Northern Ireland peace process. But the disputes have been closely connected with that process rather than being determined by it or determining of it. The two have run in parallel, occasionally intersecting, at other times progressing under their own dynamics (104).

The role of conflict management, and an evaluation of its effectiveness, in the Northern Ireland peace process is a topic that is worthy of further investigation. The articles in this special issue provide a good starting point for such research.

A Few Words of Thanks

We would like to thank Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff for inviting us to edit this, the first, Special Issue of *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*. Work on the Special Issue began in earnest in September 2003, the short turn around period from commissioning articles to publication has been possible because of the obvious diligence of the contributors. A less obvious, but invaluable, contribution was made by the anonymous peer reviewers who made useful and informed comments on the first drafts of the articles. We apologise for the punishing deadlines, but the finished product is much sharper thanks to your input. Finally, the Special Issue also contains seventeen pages of book reviews on topics ranging from victims of the conflict to wall murals to racism in Northern Ireland. Thanks to all of the reviewers.