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Transformation or Truce? Tracing the Decline of “Reconciliation” and Its Consequences for Northern Ireland Since 1998

Reconciliation and consociation were at the core of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA) in 1998. Analysis of the politics of the last 25 years in Northern Ireland (NI), however, reveals that many presumed aspects of reconciliation – integrated education, desegregated living, the disbandment of armed groups, cultural rapprochement, linguistic and cultural diversity, safe and secure shared public space, an approach to the past which puts the suffering of victims at its core – remain unaddressed or are deeply disputed. The article explores how consociational government in Northern Ireland has gradually decayed under pressure from this weakness. Since 2016, reconciliation has been a second-order consideration for the shaping partnership between the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Ireland which made the Agreement possible, leaving the Agreement at risk from the repeated exercise of the veto and dependent on the absence of any alternative, rather than proactive commitment.

Keywords: reconciliation, Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, consociation, peacebuilding.

Preobrazba ali premirje? Zmanjševanje pomena sprave in posledice za Severno Irsko po letu 1998

Čprav sta sprava in konsociacija bistvo Velikonočnega sporazuma, sprejetega leta 1998, analiza politike na Severnem Irskem v zadnjih 25 letih kaže, da številni vidiki sprave – integrirane šole, bivanje v mešanih skupnostih, razpustitev oboroženih skupin, kulturno zблиževanje, jezikovna in kulturna raznolikost, varen skupni javni prostor, pristop k preteklosti, ki v središče postavlja trpljenje žrtev – ostajajo nerešeni ali pa so zelo sporni, kar ima za posledico oslabitev konsociacijskega vladanja. Od leta 2016 naprej je za partnerstvo med Združenim kraljestvom in Irsko, ki je temelj Velikonočnega sporazuma, vprašanje sprave drugorazrednega pomena, sporazum pa je, namesto da bi predstavljal proaktivno zavezo, zaradi pogoste uporabe veta in odsotnosti kakršne koli alternative vse bolj ogrožen.

Ključne besede: sprava, Velikonočni sporazum, konsociacija, vzpostavljanje miru.

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1. Introduction: Containment

Until partition, conflict over the legitimacy of Britishness in Ireland polarised British and Irish politics. Thereafter, as the trauma of civil war gradually dissipated, the Irish Free State evolved into an unusually homogeneously Catholic Republic, reducing the immediacy of conflict between the Free State and Britain. But the lasting effect in the North (powerfully reinforced by NI's arm's-length neither independent nor fully integrated distance from the rest of the U.K.) was not to remove conflict but to corral the most toxic legacy of the wider struggle into this place apart. Beneath its formally democratic mechanisms, the 1920s version of settlement bequeathed a Unionist monopoly of political power relying on a permanent state of emergency *vis-à-vis* a permanently alienated minority.

The creation of NI contained conflict, but never achieved anything that could be called reconciliation. Unresolved antagonism and the potential for violent confrontation was the substrate on which NI grew. There was no history before contest and no halcyon time without division. NI incubated a political culture in which the existential issues at stake were the legitimacy of its existence and the extent to which violence was legitimate in that struggle. Far from shifting the inherited axis of politics, fifty years of a Belfast parliament institutionalised the foundational division into every aspect of life. Politically, culturally and religiously, NI developed as a deeply divided them and us polity defined by antagonism over the state.

2. Reconciliation in Politics

After demands for civil rights for Catholics escalated into confrontation with the police and violence escalated beyond the control of the Unionist government in the 1960s, the political and security elites of Britain and the Irish Republic were reluctantly forced to re-engage in the day-to-day affairs of NI. But by 1972, shared interest in containing violence to NI encouraged both London and Dublin governments to accelerate practical collaboration. When both states joined the European Economic Community in 1973, additional opportunities to recalibrate relations, and even for historically unexpected common cause, began to emerge.

With notable exceptions, the conviction of armed groups in NI of the legitimacy of their mutually exclusive struggle for Irishness and Britishness was successfully contained within the six counties. Violence, and indeed NI, was treated as a native problem, rooted in anachronistic local sectarian religious obsessions rather than the consequences of an unstable settlement. Yet military deployment came at the cost of over 3,000 deaths, direct confrontation, persistent accusations of systemic human rights abuses, and profound polarisation lasting

thirty years. Efforts to establish a basis for devolved government at Sunningdale in 1973 and through rolling devolution in the 1980s foundered on the, by now explosive, hostility between Unionists and Nationalists.

Significant change within NI required a step-change in wider British-Irish co-operation heralded in the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) in 1985. Desperate for an exit from conflict, London and Dublin now proactively advocated a solution that could command cross-community support, bypassing objections in Belfast to reconfigure their bilateral relationship into a political-security partnership. The Irish government gained a consultative role in the affairs of NI in exchange for security co-operation. NI was reconceived as a British-Irish legacy to be solved through “continuing efforts to reconcile and to acknowledge the rights of the two major traditions”, the “mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s rights” and a “total rejection of any attempt to promote political objectives by violence or the threat of violence” (Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985).

Reconciliation was the ethical alternative to the carnage of the zero-sum game. Intercommunity cooperation and the end of political violence nonetheless demanded an unprecedented reversal of the structure and dynamics of NI politics since 1920. Initially, the most obvious consequence of the AIA was to set the British government into bitter confrontation with political Unionism while achieving little to bring republican violence to an end. Yet within ten years, and sometimes only for fear of further radical intergovernmental action, unstoppable force of the governments backed by a unanimous diplomatic coalition had brought the immovable objects of Unionism and Nationalism into talks to bring political violence to an end and revisit the totality of political relationships.

3. Reconciliation Postponed?

The charter for peace and reconciliation in Ireland known as the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, explicitly plotted a path towards the inclusion of Sinn Féin (SF) in all-party talks. The British government re-emphasised that they had “no selfish strategic or economic interest in NI”, and committed to fostering “agreement and reconciliation, leading to a new political framework founded on consent”. Jointly, the governments declared that their “primary interest was to see peace, stability and reconciliation established by agreement” (Joint Declaration 1993).

The commitments were reiterated in the intergovernmental Framework Documents of early 1995. The governments called for collective effort “to create, through agreement and reconciliation, a new beginning founded on consent”, envisaging an Agreement, “developing and extending their co-operation, reflecting the totality of relationships between the two islands, and dedicated to fostering co-operation, reconciliation and agreement in Ireland at all levels” (Governments of UK and Ireland 1995).

Reconciliation was already becoming future-aspirational rather than present-preconditional. In 1996, Unionist demands that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) decommission weapons in advance paralysed negotiations, prompting the IRA to end its ceasefire. In what became known as the Mitchell Principles of parallel decommissioning after their primary author, U.S. Senator George Mitchell, parties were asked to declare their **commitment** to exclusively peaceful means of resolving political disputes and to the **principle** of disarmament of all paramilitary groups rather than to specific **actions** (Mitchell 1996). After heavy U.K. government pressure on David Trimble, this balance (or fudge) enabled talks to begin (Phoenix 2019). Indeed, when Mitchell was named as chair of talks in 1997, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) walked out and negotiations between Ulster Unionists and SF were conducted without direct interface. More intentional collaboration (socioeconomic reconstruction and relationship-building) was left to civil society and local partnerships, largely funded by international donors, above all the European Union (E.U.'s) Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Lagana 2021).

4. A Fine Balance?

In the second paragraph of the Agreement's Declaration of Support the signatories dedicated themselves to "the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all" based on "partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within NI, between North and South, and between these islands" (The Belfast Agreement 1998).

Nonetheless, the core political institutions of the Agreement were primarily designed to stabilise existing ethnic anxieties by recasting the balance of power rather than driving visionary transformation. Drawing on the influential work of Arend Lijphart (1977) modified locally in the work of Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry (Taylor 2009), consociation was built on mandatory coalition between the elites of groups separately designated as Unionists and Nationalists. Regulated distribution of power and position was the viable institutional form of peacebuilding, relying as little as possible on reconciliation, and as much as possible on self-interested communal balance and an intricate system of mutual checks including a right to veto unpalatable legislation.

It is striking in retrospect that those elements of the Agreement which explicitly undermined binary segregation – the civic forum, integrated housing and education, intercommunity relationship-building and support for victims – remained dependent on vague voluntary enthusiasm. The practical limits to agreement became quickly evident in legal and cultural disputes over disarmament, the release of prisoners, human rights, equality legislation, cultural parity of esteem, and reform of policing. Often progress was only possible through direct governmental action independent of consensus in NI. Nationality was

devolved to personal choice: people born in NI could to be “Irish or British or both, as they may choose”, in perpetuity (The Belfast Agreement 1998).

Co-operation could not be entirely eliminated, of course. At the apex of the system stood the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), where the leaders of Unionism and Nationalism were to act in tandem as equals, providing a platform for negotiation and collaboration on socioeconomic interests. But if consociation was, above all, a method to re-balance and contain division by balance, the obvious risk was that transformative change towards reconciliation posed a direct threat rather than an opportunity.

The immediate challenge lay in the demobilisation of non-state armed groups, which relied primarily on voluntary decommissioning. Disputes over whether the decommissioning of IRA weapons was a prerequisite or consequence of powersharing eroded the political capital of the political axis of 1998 and especially the Ulster Unionists. By 2002, devolved government had collapsed and, in elections a year later, Trimble’s Ulster Unionists and Hume’s Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) were outflanked by their radical rivals in the DUP and SF.

In the face of this implosion, the British government made moves to translate reconciliation from vague aspiration into tangible public policy. Declaring that “separate but equal are not an option” they published a new strategy promoting intercommunity relations entitled *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM 2005). The PEACE programme commissioned two academics to clarify what reconciliation might mean in a secular context, identifying five critical areas for change:

- a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society;
- acknowledging and dealing with the past;
- building positive relationships and addressing issues of trust, prejudice and intolerance;
- significant cultural and attitudinal change especially around suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence; and
- substantial social, economic and political change in the structures which gave rise to conflict (Hamber & Kelly 2004).

In retrospect, it is striking how accurately Hamber and Kelly identified the areas of least progress over the next decades. It is also striking that repeated promises for radical change like removing peacewalls, integrated education, and housing were never matched by mainstream action. Intercommunity work was outsourced to (sizeable) EU PEACE II and International Fund for Ireland grant-making to pilot projects (McCall & O’Dowd 2008) where Hamber and Kelly’s ideas were treated as a funding formula. As a consequence, the impact of civic work for peacebuilding, which continued on a broadly anti-sectarian pattern, was increasingly detached from the direction of wider politics, and its ability to act as a pilot for change limited to localised or sectional outcomes.

London and Dublin's direct route to success ran through renegotiated consociation. Social transformation was desirable: NI managing its own intractable issues without absorbing governments was essential. The narrower yet more achievable negative peace goals of managing violence and establishing institutions were, officially, the route not the alternative to reconciliation (what Johan Galtung might have called positive peace) (Galtung 1969). After 2003, the re-establishment of the institutions was treated as synonymous with peace itself.

Revising the BGFA bargain with the newly dominant parties to this end entailed a twin strategy of reinforcing the limits to collaboration with SF to make powersharing more palatable to the DUP and, following the major act of IRA decommissioning in 2005 while reducing further obstacles to powersharing to a credible SF commitment to the rule of law through participation in the NI Policing Board (Powell 2010). Under the St Andrews Agreement signed by the governments in 2006, the requirement for cross-community collaboration in selecting a First and Deputy First Minister was removed by allocating the First Minister position to the largest party. SF took up seats on the NI Policing Board, although SF demands that justice be devolved to the Assembly were delayed for up to a year in the face of continuing DUP hostility. After five months, both SF and, specifically, the DUP approved the amendments (Agreement at St Andrews 2006).

5. Peace without Reconciliation?

The restoration of devolution in May 2007 seemed to the world to be the inauguration of a new era. Images of arch-enemies Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness laughing together defined a remarkable sea-change in NI unimaginable only months previously. Despite the Agreement, 120 people were killed in NI in conflict-related violence between 1998 and 2007 (Nolan 2018), including 29 in a single bomb in Omagh. In the decade following restoration 24 died, by far the lowest total in any decade since the 1960s.

With governments everywhere facing into a global financial crisis, the residual leadership required to process peace in Ireland was handed back to Belfast. The new Executive agreed a Programme for Government, signed off on further E.U. PEACE funding (PEACE III) and began considering a Single Equality Act with perhaps surprising speed. The British government convened a Consultative Group on the Past (Consultative Group on the Past 2009), a Commission to design a new process for managing the contentious issue of Parades (Hamilton 2008) and a Bill of Rights Forum including all parties in NI to consider additional rights beyond the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Bill of Rights Forum 2008).

For as long as consociation gave the appearance of functioning and inter-community tension was contained in NI once more, there was no obvious need,

and certainly no desire, for interference over subordinate issues. But while they remained unaddressed, the potential for the many unresolved and profoundly emotive issues (ranging from policing and the past to parades, flags or indigenous languages) to undermine consociational balance remained. One by one, the issues associated with reconciliation became arenas of inter-party impasse or delay.

Failure to develop community relations policy was an early warning. Prior to 2007, the DUP was actively hostile to cultural pluralism or religious ecumenism and had no immediate electoral incentive to change. OFMDFM emphasised equality and diversity and legitimate aspirations rather than interdependence and shared future. Although the new Executive promised to refresh inherited strategy, an NIO-sponsored economic study on the costs of division was suppressed. A Shared Future was publicly repudiated by the responsible SF Minister (An Phoblacht 2007). Asserting that the good relations duty in the NI Act (Northern Ireland Act 1998) (Section 75(2)) was subordinate to the equality duty (Section 75(1)), SF attacked good relations as a reactionary subversion of fundamental equality, rather than its guarantor. With the international architects of agreement leaving the stage, Hamber and Kelly's definition of reconciliation was consigned to another era.

With A Shared Future frozen and no enthusiasm for re-establishing any Civic Forum, the efforts of the Bill of Rights Forum chaired by the South African Chris Sidoti were frustrated by more acrimony (Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission 2008). In the face of Unionist opposition to its recommendations, the British government shelved the report (NI Assembly Research and Information Service 2020), despite promises and even agreements to revisit the issue.

If anything, the DUP were more suspicious of the Republican equality agenda, approaching proposals for a Single Equality Bill as an effort to distort the balance of power more than a vehicle to simplify and standardise legislation. If equality transferred resources from Unionists to Nationalists, it appeared to many Unionists as dangerous code for a new iteration of NI's historical zero-sum game. The easiest way to distinguish equality from a trojan horse was to insist on a consociational (one for my side, one for yours) model.

When Westminster passed an Equality Act harmonising most equality legislation and bringing protection levels up to E.U. standards, NI was not included (NI Assembly Research and Information Service 2011). As devolution evolved, it became clear that Unionist general suspicion of equality and direct opposition to specific aspects, especially in relation to sexual minorities, meant that no new Bill could be agreed.

None of these issues yet interrupted the functioning of the Executive. The unfinished business of devolving responsibility for policing and justice to NI or dealing with the consequences of past violence might. Although the timetable

and details were left vague in 2007, devolving Justice was regarded as non-negotiable by SF. When, in 2009, DUP figures suggested that devolution might be delayed until 2011, SF threatened to collapse the Executive.

Events were overtaken in early 2010 when the First Minister Peter Robinson was forced to step down to address a storm over his wife's affairs, leaving the DUP keen to avoid an election. The Prime Minister and Taoiseach again flew into Hillsborough to convene emergency talks. Although they left empty-handed, the parties resumed negotiations with other Ministers under intense public pressure, finally agreeing a new deal after ten days (BBC News 2010).

The Hillsborough deal set two important precedents. The outcome demonstrated that justice issues could not be resolved by consociationalism. Neither the DUP nor SF could accept the jurisdiction of the other. Justice was exempted from *d'Hondt* proportionality and devolved by agreement to the Alliance Party as the only available representative of intercommunity neutrality. Second, the sustainability of devolution on contested issues remained dependent on the mediation of the governments.

Issues of injustice in the past posed a potentially deeper threat. The Consultative Group under a former Church of Ireland Primate of all-Ireland, Robin Eames and the first nationalist Deputy Chairman of the Policing Board, Denis Bradley was directed "to find a way forward out of the shadows of the past" by enabling "our society to do this together [...] through the widest possible consultation" (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, 14). Declaring that existing processes created "a tendency to re-fight the conflict through the courts; to pursue truth through litigation; to deal with the past without a perspective for the future" (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, 124), Eames-Bradley proposed a time-limited Legacy Commission to replace existing processes for most historic cases, establishing a new Historic Investigations Unit, with a separate information recovery process, the potential to establish various thematic inquiries into contentious themes such as paramilitary activity or collusion and "make recommendations on how a line might be drawn at the end of its five-year mandate so that NI may best move to a shared future" (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, 40).

On the day of its launch, however, the report was dramatically torpedoed by a group of ultra-Unionist activists, including victims' rights campaigners. They objected to a proposal, leaked days before the official launch, that a one-off *ex gratia* recognition payment of £12,000 to "the nearest relative of someone who died as a result of the conflict in and about NI, from January 1966" (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, 31) could include relatives of terrorists. Although Denis Bradley observed that "politicians have found a political accommodation but, yet they are preventing society from finding a human accommodation" (Kelly 2009) parliaments in London, Dublin and Belfast balked and shelved the report. No report ever came closer to creating a new basis for addressing issues emerging from this past, which now became a source of recurrent recrimination.

Nonetheless, by 2011, most were persuaded that the successes of devolution outweighed any shortcomings. Violence was measurably reduced, Justice was devolved, SF supported policing and the 2007 Executive saw out its full electoral term. Commenting to politicians on the content of his first independent NI Peace Monitoring Report (Nolan 2012), Paul Nolan commented that

[...] the first thing to be said about the situation in NI at present is that the political institutions are secure [...]. If NI gets mentioned at all now, it is to say that NI is the example of what had been seen to be an intractable conflict that has moved to a point at which it can be deemed successful.

Any reconciliation deficit seemed a minor detail.

6. Culture Wars

Celebrations were premature, however. After 2012, unresolved issues of reconciliation gradually undermined first, powersharing and, then, the Agreement's supporting British-Irish architecture in almost annual sequence. The first Christmas crisis was in 2012. Months of serious Loyalist rioting broke out after Nationalists supported an Alliance Party amendment in Belfast City Council proposing to fly the Union flag on Belfast City Hall to a number of designated days (McDonald 2012).

When protesters targeted Alliance Party offices with fire-bombs and elected representatives received death threats it exposed an emerging fault-line in NI between the liberal cosmopolitan middle classes in Alliance and elements of loyalism over a wider range of issues (Melaugh 2013). Over the next few years, divisions over attacks on newly-arrived people of minority ethnic background, often living in largely Loyalist areas, and the use by the DUP of the Petition of Concern (the veto rule designed to protect minorities in the Assembly) to prevent, first marriage equality and then liberalisation of NI's nineteenth century rules prohibiting abortion recreated the same division. Further, the DUP's approach contrasted most obviously with the modern Irish Republic where gay marriage and abortion reform were approved by referendum.

United States (U.S.) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's presence in Belfast as flag protests broke out drew unwanted attention to NI's underlying fragility. Committed to hold the global G8 summit in Fermanagh in 2013 (ironically to celebrate the success of the peace process), the U.K. government put pressure on the NI Executive to re-establish unity and agree its long-promised refresh of A Shared Future before the scheduled arrival of the global elite.

Stung by the criticism, political parties met police leaders in Cardiff in an effort to repair relationships. A policy on community relations (Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) (NI Executive 2013)) was hurriedly pushed

through the Executive by DUP and SF Ministers, reiterating the new orthodoxy that "Peace is now firmly established with stable political structures that are delivering for local people." T:BUC was presented as "a clear choice to move away from division, and instead establish a new, reconciled and shared society" promising remarkable transformative change – the removal of all peace walls by 2023 (albeit with community consent) and a locally-sponsored independent process to resolve critical identity issues of Parades, Flags and the Past by the end of 2013.

The G8 summit proceeded without incident. Yet while high-profile aspirations calmed high-profile visitors, there was little detectable appetite in the core of either the DUP or SF to actively persuade anyone to remove peace walls or change position on flags or parades. T:BUC finance was allocated to largely single-community economic initiatives under the banner Urban Villages, or micro-projects in shared Housing. Commitments to "shared educational campuses" marked an increasingly obvious avoidance of integrated education. Other programs, such as buddy up schemes for primary schools relied on voluntary partners (NI Executive 2013).

The summer saw renewed confrontations over parading and when the DUP retreated from commitments to build an international peace centre on the site of the former Maze-Long Kesh prison, relations with SF strained further (Irish Times 2013). Despite the efforts of skilled international diplomats, Richard Haass and Megan O'Sullivan, the promised interparty negotiations on the past, flags and parades extended through and past Christmas but broke up without agreement (Rowan 2014).

Tensions over cultural and legacy issues spread into issues of lawfulness and legitimacy. Unionists reacted angrily when an Old Bailey court case revealed that IRA escapees from prison (so-called on-the-runs) had been given immunity from arrest or prosecution by the British government in 2007 without public debate. British government proposals to extend the jurisdiction of the new National Crime Agency to NI were rejected by Nationalists. Nationalists also refused to vote through welfare reform measures passed at Westminster to be applied in NI. After yet another summer of parading tension, relations had ebbed to the point that the Executive could not continue (Moriarty 2014).

Eleven weeks of talks culminated in the Christmas Stormont House Agreement (Stormont House Agreement 2014). Having secured £2bn from the U.K. Treasury, the parties agreed to pass welfare reform and reduce the size of the NI Assembly and the number of NI Ministries. Measures were introduced to allow for an official opposition. Yet in retrospect, Stormont House was longer on promise than action. A new Historical Investigations Unit to investigate Troubles-related crimes was agreed, without a timetable. Commitments to the Irish Language were reiterated, without binding action. A Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) was agreed but under political veto-power. Responsibility for parading was to be devolved, as was local Corporation Tax, but without a timetable.

The stop-start pattern was becoming engrained. When, in August 2015, the police declared that the killing of an IRA-dissident, Kevin McGuigan, had been carried out by elements within the Provisional IRA, pressure on Unionists to withdraw from the Executive escalated again and the governments were forced to convene further talks.

In another deal, entitled A Fresh Start (NI Executive 2015), the parties promised “a resolute commitment” to end paramilitarism “once and for all” by challenging “paramilitary attempts to control communities”, “supporting the rule of law unequivocally”, working together “to achieve the disbandment of all paramilitary organisations and their structures” (NI Executive 2015, 15). They pledged to appoint a Civic Advisory Panel and implement the commitments of the previous year’s deal, while the British made further financial commitments.

7. Brexit, Borders and Boycotts

Assembly elections in May 2016 confirmed the dominance of the DUP and SF. New rules allowing opposition left the two parties alone in government, save for an independent Justice Minister. Hopes for bilateral stability were raised by the early establishment of the Commission on Flags, Identity and Cultural Traditions (FICT) and a Tackling Paramilitarism Programme (TPP).

Perhaps the apartness of Northern Ireland politics obscured the emerging consequences for the whole BGFA system of the U.K.’s referendum decision to leave the E.U. (Brexit). NI’s parties initially seemed united on the need to limit damage. Arlene Foster and Martin McGuinness co-signed a letter underlining NI’s uniqueness in relation to Brexit, its vulnerability to a hard border and its dependency on E.U. funding and expressing appreciation for the “stated determination that the border will not become an impediment to the movement of people, goods and services” (First and deputy First Minister 2016). “As far as possible” they petitioned to retain “the ease with which we currently trade with E.U. member states [...]” (ibid. 2016).

Domestic divisions still seemed most dangerous. In December (again), the reluctance of the First Minister to step aside to facilitate an investigation into allegations of corruption around a Renewable Heating Initiative (RHI) escalated into another bitter stand-off, this time over undelivered Irish Language rights. When Martin McGuinness died suddenly, SF’s decision to withdraw from the Executive marked a historic watershed. In the resulting Assembly elections, SF almost outpolled the DUP and Unionism lost its numerical majority in a NI Assembly for the first time since 1920.

For most Nationalists a unilateral hard border seemed akin to the repartition of the island: not so much a textual breach of the Agreement as a fundamental breach of trust. Not only would the cross-border agricultural economy unravel, but it risked re-opening the security crisis on the border by requiring British en-

forcement against unwilling local majorities. Prompted by the Irish government, the E.U. agreed that "in view of the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, flexible and imaginative solutions will be required, with the aim of avoiding a hard border" in April 2017 (European Council 2017). NI was now the biggest obstacle to any clean Brexit.

A snap U.K. General Election in June 2017 provided the DUP with an unanticipated opportunity for electoral recovery. After winning 10 of NI's 18 seats, they found themselves holding the balance of power in the House of Commons, the only available allies for a Conservative government charged with negotiating Brexit. With talks to re-establish an Executive going nowhere and an alternative arena for influence, the DUP entered a confidence and supply arrangement maintaining the Conservatives in office in exchange for a generous financial settlement.

SF, with their own ambitions to govern in the Republic, turned their attention towards the Dail and European Parliament. Despite repeated assurance that their commitment to the Agreement was unchanged, the capacity of both or either government to act as mediators or honest brokers in disputes within NI while negotiating their own vital interests was increasingly implausible. Without a mediator or champion, the NI political system ground to a halt, leaving administration but no government for three years.

Intercommunity divisions were being both reinforced and subtly recast (Morrow 2019). As nationalists began openly campaigning for a referendum on Irish unity as a means to rejoin the E.U., the DUP increasingly identified with the hardline pro-Brexit European Research Group (ERG). Brexit was reinforcing the split between liberals and conservatives, emerging since 2012. But whereas, before 1998, the consensus against violence had left SF isolated from the mainstream, now an emergent anti-Brexit coalition of parties with a majority of votes but no parliamentary presence faced a minority pro-Leave DUP, holding the balance of power at Westminster.

The border was again at the centre of politics and there was no escape from the conundrum. Boris Johnson set the tone at the DUP party conference:

If we wanted to do free trade deals, if we wanted to cut tariffs or vary our regulation then we would have to leave NI behind as an economic semi-colony of the E.U. and we would be damaging the fabric of the Union with regulatory checks and even customs controls between GB and NI [...]. No British Conservative government could or should sign up to anything of the kind (Steerpike 2018).

But without a deal over Ireland, the U.K. would leave the E.U. without any deal. The only remaining answer was special arrangements for NI. With deadlines looming, Johnson concluded the outlines of a Protocol in bilateral talks with the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar. NI would remain within the single market for goods

requiring checks on goods in transit from Britain at sea ports, despite Johnson's assurances. Although the NI Assembly could vote to continue or discontinue the Protocol after four years, it would not require cross-community consent (Collins 2022).

Armed with a supposedly oven-ready deal, Johnson won a landslide victory in England with the promise to Get Brexit Done. Losing their leverage at Westminster and facing growing popular anger at three years without government, the DUP now faced recrimination from other Unionists for negotiating a border in the Irish Sea. Unionists won less than half of NI's Westminster seats. For the third time in 2019, up to a fifth of the population voted for parties outside the blocs, boosting the anti-Brexit, anti-consociation and socially liberal Alliance Party.

With the governments regrouped to act as brokers, negotiations to restore devolved government produced New Decade, New Approach, reaffirming "commitment to the Declaration of Support contained in the [BGFA] and successor agreements" and proposing reform to ensure greater stability in the Executive, deals on the Irish and Ulster-Scots language and commitments to increase police numbers, support integrated education and build roads (New Decade, New Approach 2020).

Yet nothing was as it had been. While the DUP was on the defensive, SF emerged from the Irish general election in February as the largest party by votes, and ambitions to lead the government. As Unionists took fright at the Protocol after January 2020, nationalist agitation for a referendum on Irish unity grew (Teague 2019). Greater turmoil was probably delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which, even in NI, dominated popular, political, and media attention. As the pandemic waned, however, the profoundly destabilising effects of Brexit immediately resurfaced.

In May 2021, Arlene Foster was deposed as leader of the DUP and First Minister, only for her vanquisher to be deposed a month later in a counter-coup. Elections in 2022 brought further bad news to Unionism, however, when SF emerged as the largest party for the first time. While the DUP boycotted NI's institutions in protest against the Protocol, SF claimed the right to nominate the First Minister of a place they had fought to destroy. Meanwhile, Alliance made further gains, leaving both Nationalism and Unionism as minorities and threatening to interrupt consociation itself.

8. Conclusions

Peacebuilding in deeply divided societies is concerned with transformation from endemic conflict to social and political systems that command legitimacy and protect all citizens. The NI peace process since 1985 was a paradigm example. Central to its conceptual framework was a commitment to reconciliation

through political agreement and the repudiation of violence as the antithesis of everything that preceded it.

In 2003, Hamber and Kelly defined the policy domains in which post-conflict reconciliation might be made concrete, concluding that these necessarily included a developing vision of a shared future, dealing with the consequences of past violence, less polarisation in cultural attitudes, desegregated social relationships and reduced economic and social inequality. Far from defining the politics of the peace process, however, this agenda of transformed relationships rather than hostile antagonism became the story of what did **not** happen.

Despite the foundation of the Agreement in an experiment in inter-ethnic reconciliation, and the explicit commitment of all parties to pursue it as the basis of partnership government, Northern Ireland evolved after 1998 as a system for peacebuilding without reconciliation. Devolved government became a mechanism to reduce violence through consociational trade-offs based on an implicit reliance on balance, dependent on the reinforcing authority of the British and Irish governments acting together in emergencies.

Any review of events since 1998 demonstrates that pursuing interethnic balance without radical policy accommodation has not produced political stability but four distinct phases of growing instability: the crisis over disarmament and the rule of law before 2007, reinforced consociation between 2007 and 2012, annual crises between 2012 and 2017, and the post-Brexit collapse of consociation and intergovernmental partnership.

What the Agreement did become was a political vehicle to move away from failed strategies relying on political violence. The transition in the landscape of force and violence is unmistakable. The transformation of policing and the primacy of international human rights and equality of treatment have (so far) provided a stabilising framework for public policy, criminal justice and employment. Since 1998 unresolved issues produce lengthy stalemate, veto and impasse rather than deaths. Socioeconomic inequalities and the Unionist monopoly of power of the 1960s have altered substantially. The unique secularisation of nationality in Northern Ireland (Irish or British or both as they may choose) made the state a protector of plural equality while the traditional identification between religion and political identity in Northern Ireland has loosened and formal equality in areas of gender, race, and sexual orientation has progressed in ways that were once unimaginable.

The price of indifference to reconciliation, including the continued existence of armed groups, however, has been the progressive erosion of the ethical pillars of 1998 – reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust. None of the outstanding issues of law and order, the past or culture have been progressed by bilateral negotiation. Some matters – policing, equality and human rights – were progressed by early direct rule. Others – notably justice – progressed with cajoling from governments. But since Brexit, much of the Conservative party seems

to regard the collaborative nature of the Agreement as an impediment to taking back control, a deal about Ireland not Britain. With British-Irish partnership weakened, there is persistent concern that neither Unionists and Nationalists are interested in making an intercommunity NI work. Proposals in the U.K. to abandon the ECHR or render the Common Travel Area more awkward by differing approaches to immigration will further erode the Agreement's pillars.

It may be that the political era of reconciliation has now passed, although the rise of the Alliance party since 2016 suggests that alienation from the failures of consociation and Brexit is also growing. Equally clear, however, is that, despite demographic change, antagonism offers no other mechanism for social stability. For as long as transformative change is off the agenda, the management of antagonism will remain the central challenge under any constitutional settlement, and the potential for unexpected escalation the central risk. Be careful what you wish for.

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