

UPF Ireland: Celebrating 25 Years of the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement

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Introduction:

The year 2023 marks a remarkable moment in Belfast's history. It's difficult to fathom that Northern Ireland can be described as "post-conflict" today. For nearly half a century, from 1968 to 1993, it was ravaged by what was euphemistically termed "The Troubles". However, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998, Northern Ireland has undergone a transformative journey. The GFA has shifted perceptions, turning a region once synonymous with conflict into a place teeming with new hope and opportunity. The question that looms large is whether this agreement, which has played a pivotal role in ending 800+ years of historic sectarianism and strife, is robust enough to withstand the challenges of the future.

Good Friday Agreement

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) stands as an emblematic turning point in Northern Ireland's history. Widely regarded as the "only show in town," in terms of Peace and Conflict Resolution on the island, it has been instrumental in maintaining peace and fostering prosperity, not only in Northern Ireland but potentially for the entire island of Ireland. Despite recent obstacles like Brexit and the suspension of key GFA institutions, the majority of the population remains firmly committed to its principles. It's worth noting the journey of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which initially opposed the GFA but subsequently became the largest party in Northern Ireland's Assembly. More on this later.

Challenges to the GFA

Only three months after the GFA's signing, a devastating event shook the peace process. In August 1998, the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) executed a car bombing in Omagh, claiming the lives of 29 innocent civilians, including a pregnant woman, and injuring 200 more. Their aim was to dismantle the agreement and thwart the desire for peace and reconciliation shared by both sides. Astonishingly, the RIRA's violent act failed to achieve its intended result. Instead, it galvanized those dedicated to ushering in a new era of peace. However, for those who had already suffered the loss of loved ones during the 30-year conflict, the Omagh bombing underscored the difficulties of achieving justice, even after the GFA's signing.

International Involvement

The success of the GFA can be attributed, in part, to international support. The United States, under

President Bill Clinton, played a pivotal role. The European Union (EU) also contributed by emphasizing shared citizenship and cooperation among the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Legacy of "The Troubles"

Key figures like the late John Hume and the late David Trimble played instrumental roles in bringing former terrorists, particularly those associated with the IRA, into the peace process. The first IRA ceasefire in 1994 marked a significant turning point. John Hume's strategy of including the political wing of armed militias in negotiations, despite initial resistance, proved essential to the peace process's success.

3-Strand Process

The GFA's "3 strand process" addressed critical issues related to Northern Ireland internally, East/West relations between Britain and Ireland and North-South, or all-island relations. This comprehensive approach significantly contributed to the agreement's success.

Arguments for Irish Unification

Brendan O'Leary examines various scenarios for Irish reunification. He underscores the importance of proactive preparation by governments in Dublin, London, Belfast, Washington D.C., and Brussels. While the outcome of a reunification border poll remains uncertain, O'Leary insists that failing to prepare would be a grave mistake. He also highlights the potential economic benefits of reunification, given the Republics sustained economic growth, which could benefit both Northern Ireland and the Republic in the long run.

The Irish "Nationalist" perspective is one that sees the "Troubles" as a civil war of sorts, caused historically by the Plantation of Ireland in the 16th and 17th centuries, when English and Scottish lowland settlers were given lands in Ireland by the crown in and especially in Ulster, where Presbyterian and Protestant "loyalists" were incentivised to replace the rebellious Gaelic who had allied with Spain and Catholicism. Plantation was designed to change the country's religion and political allegiances and ward off the influence of the Catholic Church and the Spanish Empire, which had allied with local Gaelic Chieftains against the Crown, in what was effectively another theatre of the Anglo-Spanish War.

More recently, the conflict has been seen by Nationalists as one of British intervention, occupation, and refusal to grant full independence, following attempts to gain Home Rule and Catholic Emancipation after the Great Famines of 1740-41 and particularly, 1845-1849, where over a million died and a million emigrated. The GFA heralded a new era of unprecedented warming of relations between Britain and Ireland and although it followed a modern tradition of co-operation between Irish and British diplomats, civil servants and politicians based on earlier breakthroughs by previous administrations, notably those of Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds who agreed the "Downing Street Declaration" in 1993.

Both governments had been striving to bring an end to the "Troubles" in Ireland and establish a sustainable peace process: one that could give parity of esteem to "both" sides, where all could build a viable Northern Ireland that could be a good neighbour to the Republic in the South. Ultimately however, it took a confluence of fortuitous circumstances in the 1990s, where all the "stars aligned" as a Prime Minister was elected in the UK, Tony Blair, who saw Northern Ireland as a priority and had a kindred spirit in Ireland, with Bertie Ahern as the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) there. The two men were to go "above and beyond" the call of duty in terms of the time and investment that they put into achieving the GFA in 1998. Blair had spent childhood holidays in Donegal in the Republic of Ireland, his grandmother being from there and he attributes his interest to this connection and his enthusiasm in part to his inexperience and that he was new to government, and had no expectation of failure, despite many commentators, civil servants and party colleagues advising him not to get too invested in Northern Ireland, due to the lack of hope that any sort of progress could be made on the issue. Ahern for his part famously left early from his mother's funeral to fly back to Belfast for the conclusion of the tense Agreement negotiations, such was his commitment and determination to get it "over the line" on that historic Good Friday of 1998.

This would be an agreement that would tackle the historic injustice and mistreatment of the "second class" citizens, the Catholic, largely Nationalist population, which although still a minority in the 1990's, would become a majority by 2020 if demographic trends continued, which they have. There would be reform of the Police Service, the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was set up on the recommendations of the Patten Commission and would seek to recruit Nationalists to a force that would replace the largely Protestant, Unionist Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), with a 50/50 recruiting policy. The security environment changed significantly over the next decade, under the terms of the GFA. In return for the release of paramilitary prisoners from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and paramilitaries "on license", the Army took down its checkpoints and border infrastructure and all British army personnel and patrols were removed from the streets of Northern Ireland.

De-militarisation and para-demilitarisation took place as IRA weapons were decommissioned under the stewardship of Canadian General John deChastelain and his Decommissioning remit. Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA was granted a visa for the US, where he could visit the sizeable Irish emigrant and sympathetic Irish Republican diaspora, who had historically contributed funds to "Irish causes" including the IRA. The visit, along with other new breakthroughs such as the removal of the broadcasting ban that had been in place on Sinn Féin in the Republic, helped those violent revolutionaries to morph into peace activists over time, as we witnessed the transformation of the Republican movement from a reactionary, violent, terrorist movement, bent on achieving unification by violent means, to one that called and observed a ceasefire, decommissioned its weapons and started to work to achieve its aims of unification by solely peaceful and democratic means, finally dispensing the "Armalite" in favour of the "ballot box".

IRA leaders Adams, and future Deputy First Minister, the late Martin McGuinness (believed to be a former IRA Chief of Staff) deserved much credit for being able to bring the "hard men", IRA terrorists and prisoners with them to the new dispensation of political settlement. A new Northern Ireland Assembly was constituted under the GFA with cross party and cross community participation and the establishment of a North South Executive and North South bodies to co-operate in various sectors as well as the setting up of the British-Irish Council.

A new era had begun, and the men of violence seemed to have turned their swords into ploughshares. Sinn Féin are now the biggest party in the Assembly and with the support of the other Nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and others could easily nominate a First Minister and indeed are waiting for Michelle O'Neill to take the position as First Minister designate. It is difficult to see what the tactic is here for the DUP, once passionately in favour of devolution under their late founder, firebrand preacher the Reverend Ian Paisley. Would they now prefer direct rule from Westminster rather than have to "serve under" a Sinn Féin First Minister?

Perhaps all sides had grown weary of war and conflict by the time the GFA was eventually concluded, and the time was finally right for peace, as the British and Irish governments and all the parties in the North agreed to work out a peace plan that would bring about a new inclusive Ireland where "parity of esteem" for all cultures, traditions and faiths would be the priority. The "peace dividend" would be one that would mean that the next generations would live in peace if the previous generations were able to overcome their pain and hurt and resentment of the previous decades. The prize was indeed great, but sacrifice would have to be made on all sides, as former enemies had to sit down and negotiate with each other and work together to establish the new political institutions, where the end goals of the other side were the diametric opposite, one favouring the status quo of remaining in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the other side, Irish reunification.

Brexit

While most Unionists voted in favour of Brexit and Nationalists overwhelmingly voted against, NI as a whole voted to remain by 56%-44% . The events of 2016, and the subsequent departure of the UK from the EU, represented a threat to the stability of the GFA. To some degree it is to the credit of the British Government that in the end, despite the "civil war" that was Brexit, it kept to this international agreement which underpins the Peace Process and worked out a Brexit deal with the EU that would ensure no "hard border" or border checks on the island of Ireland between North and South. Of course, the cynic might argue that it was forced to do so, and that particularly Prime Minister Boris Johnson was obliged by pressure from the US and Biden Administration to uphold the agreement, on pain of the threat of no favourable post-Brexit trade deals with the US. Whereas the Republic of Ireland and Nationalists had been unlucky that a grandson of a Scots Gaelic speaker, President Trump, was an admirer of chief Europhobe Nigel Farage, was pro-Brexit, and seemed to care little for the stance of his Gaelic cousins on the matter, on the other hand they were very lucky that President Biden was a proud "son" of Ireland and determined to protect the GFA, seeing the Brexit issue as a fight for Irish rather than British Independence, as Farage, Johnson and other Brexiteers were fond of depicting the latter.

In the end common sense prevailed and the GFA was protected by the UK, US, EU and the Republic of Ireland, all those who acted as guarantors a quarter of a century earlier. That said, it remains to be seen how long this arrangement will last: one that effectively sees Northern Ireland continue as part of the EU "single market" and enjoying dual EU and UK market access, uniquely in the world, through the "Northern Ireland Protocol" trade agreement, which set up a series of checks at ports, mainly in Larne, NI, consisting of red and green lanes: with goods that are destined for "export" to the South travelling on "EU red lanes" and goods staying in NI travelling on "green lanes". Following the failure to ensure any exercise of their "sovereignty" and any meaningful Brexit for NI, the Protocol has become the new focus for Unionist anger at the looming prospect of a United Ireland and it is this, along with their refusal to enter the NI Assembly in Stormont as the minority for the first time, that dominates the current political landscape in the "province". Will the agreement survive another 25 years, especially if Unionists do not co-operate with the GFA institutions? The GFA is a cross community settlement and requires Nationalist

and Unionist cooperation to function legally, at least in its current form.

Challenges for "The South"

One of the challenges for the "South" going forward is how can Unionists be encouraged or incentivised to participate in the institutions of the GFA, if the end result is a perceived (and/or actual) loss of their "sovereignty" or "identity" or both, through eventual absorption into a United Ireland after the inevitable "Border Poll"? Does no amount of Southern economic success tempt Unionists to "throw their lot in" with the South and the promise of a better standard of living in a united Ireland, with a "Celtic Tiger" which has seen the state's fortunes rise from a situation where it was the "poor man" of Europe on entering the EEC in 1973, to today, where by some measures it is the second richest country in the EU. A remarkable achievement and all the more so, considering it was done despite the state surviving a banking and debt crisis and a "bail-out" of its economy by the EU/IMF/Eurozone "Troika" over a decade ago and by other measures is considered a top performer and prime location for foreign direct investment (FDI) and high value employment in Big Tech, Big Pharma and Medical Devices.

These are tough questions and ones which Nationalists are being encouraged to answer in the South and North through different fora such as "Ireland's Future", which maintains that unity is somewhat inevitable, and that it is the job of the Irish people and state to prepare for this responsibly, not the British Government - through planning, conversations, and policy formulation on economic, social, and cultural issues.

Although crucially it does argue that due to the GFA being a Peace Agreement in territory where sovereignty is disputed, the British government should not interfere with this process, as it did in the Scottish referendum in 2014, campaigning with "Better Together" as its slogan, narrowly winning that vote. Many Unionists invariably feel that no matter how economically successful the modern Republic of Ireland is, they will do all in their power to ensure that the "Motherland" does not cast them aside, regardless of any international agreements or commitments (hoping that "security" will take priority over democracy), even if that means a return to violence. Such a spectre might be calculated or engineered to weaken the resolve of not just Nationalists, but especially of the Dublin government and Southerners, many of whom would not wish a return to conflict and the "bad old days" and would prefer partition and the peaceful status quo, rather than trying to accommodate a disgruntled rump of over 1 million disaffected Unionists in what would be a combined population of circa 7 million (the Republic has a population of c. 5 million), were unification to happen in the morning.

Of course, not all of the 1 million would be classed "disaffected" and prone to violence, the overwhelming majority being peace-loving, law-abiding citizens. Nevertheless, the fear of such a campaign of violence directed against a state seeking to bring unification by "force" as this disgruntled minority might see it, might well be a very real one. When both parts of the island were in the EU it didn't matter as much, but since Brexit, identity has now become that little bit more important, and as ever, there is always a danger that a significant minority can turn to violence and make a society ungovernable, if there is not sufficient desire and wherewithal to placate them.

The next 25 years will more than likely see some sort of accommodation or even a review or changes to the GFA, but until the majority of Unionists are happy that their identity and to some degree their sovereignty, is protected, there is every danger that a United Ireland would not be a peaceful and harmonious one. Brexit has made this task that little bit harder unfortunately. If the EU ever does allow the UK to rejoin, should it ever wish to do so, or even if an independent Scotland were to rejoin, that might help with the sovereignty issue, as it is likely that the UK itself would be further weakened should the Scots secede, although this is also predicated on the EU continuing to be itself one of the most successful peace processes the world has seen and not implode economically, or start to fall apart if other member states were to follow the unprecedented UK example of leaving. The EU is after all a co-creator of the NI Protocol and now faces the challenge of continuing to act as a guarantor of the GFA for NI, even though its Charter of Fundamental Rights no longer applies here, post-Brexit.