

A Shared Future or A Civic Future? Speaking Truth to Powersharing

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The overall aim of this policy is to establish, over time, a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all individuals are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependence.

OFMDFM (2005), A Shared Future¹

The full extent of the [Ta'if] accord's commitment to de-confessionalisation boils down to this: It gives the confessional establishment an unguided, nonbinding, open-ended mandate to abolish itself.

Daoud L Khairallah²

[T]he limitations of diplomacy to achieve durable peaceful outcomes to contemporary conflicts and to prevent others from turning violent, means that there needs to be innovation in traditional ideas and practice. We need to go beyond the containment of violence and negotiation, to transform social injustices, perceptions, cultural tensions, deep rooted hatred and issues of institutional legitimacy.

Leatherman, quoted in Ryan (2007)³

Introduction – The Duality of ‘Peace’

This article poses a provocative question, a question about the long term trajectory of power-sharing in Northern Ireland. Broadly, we ask whether the Belfast Agreement is more successful at managing the consequences of the past than it is at charting a transformed future. The question emanates from a premise that may well be considered contestable, but it cannot be dismissed. The premise is that while power-sharing might be a necessary *first* step towards a peaceful Northern Ireland, it is not sufficient in and of itself. There have always been criticisms of power-sharing and consociationalism, not least by many of the local political actors involved.⁴ Yet it is likely that – to paraphrase Churchill's comment concerning democracy – power-sharing was the least worst option available. The conditions of possibility that prevailed at the close of the twentieth century could permit no alternative. Indeed, the rudiments of power-sharing through the Belfast Agreement of 1998 are

sometimes argued to be a reflection of previous attempts, most notably the Sunningdale agreement of the mid 1970s. Nevertheless, despite the dramatic reduction in violence, an awkward – if obvious – question remains. What next? Is power-sharing the end point of political rapprochement? Is the fragile elite level accommodation combined with wider mutual indifference or even residual suspicion within Northern Irish society the best to be hoped for? Are the people of Northern Ireland, with the exception of those willing to involve themselves in ‘cross-community’ work, forever condemned to the Cattle description of ‘parallel lives’?⁵ The contemporary practitioner of politics and those involved in interface work might well raise a hand in exasperation and declare: ‘we’re working on it’. And who might doubt it? Who would argue with the first of the above quotes, a veritable treasure store of positive aspirations? The *Shared Future* document, from which it is drawn, sets out an official vision and an aspiration to ‘move on’. In particular it embodies a desire for a ‘normal’ society. We cannot doubt the intentions. However, given the paucity of genuinely successful peace processes and residual interface tensions we are entitled to ask: is it working?

The subject of Khairallah’s critique above was the peace accord signed in the Saudi Arabian city of Ta’if in 1989, which – supposedly – ended the Lebanese Civil War.⁶ Signed almost a decade earlier than the Belfast Agreement its evident difficulties and flaws offer some important insights into the operation of power-sharing in a divided society. Under Ta’if Lebanon operates a refined version of its earlier (1943) National Pact arrangement. Notwithstanding the undoubted differences between the Lebanese context and our own, there are strikingly relevant comparisons to be made. Like Northern Ireland, Lebanon was and remains deeply divided, primarily along confessional or sectarian lines, albeit with multiple fracture points rather than merely two. As a political entity it borders nation-states with difficult mutual histories. Despite over two decades of Ta’if Lebanese society remains inherently fragile. It suffers from the nefarious interference of outside interests, notably Syria, Iran and Israel, and it harbours a political entity in Hezbollah that in certain regions both parallels and displaces the functions of the state.

Northern Ireland is not Lebanon. Yet balancing power between distrustful and hostile factions embodies similar challenges. Northern Ireland appears to have managed this much better, not least because of the benign and even supportive political landscape around it. The final quote from Leatherman embodies the suspicion among some peace and conflict researchers that elite level compromises and pragmatic political bargaining among what we in conflict studies refer to as ‘primary actors’ might well be necessary – but they

are not sufficient. More is needed. The momentum for peace is more than the absence of violence. It is the presence of something else, and labels like justice, reconciliation and parity of esteem only hint at these. After over a decade since April 1998 and after the completion of a full term of power-sharing dominated by the polarities of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein, it is surely time to look beyond the horizon of 'successful' power-sharing to the process whereby we envisage and evaluate the possibility of 'post' power-sharing. In this article we engage with these deeper questions and consider the less obvious obstacles standing in the way of a post power-sharing reality.

The benchmark for what was idiosyncratically known in Northern Ireland as an 'acceptable level of violence' has lowered considerably since 1998. The power-sharing executive is functioning well enough to merit little if any negative international media attention. The Agreement and its political arrangements have become embedded and legitimised locally, and these are underpinned by markedly improved bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland. Two approaches are brought together into a theoretically informed analysis of power-sharing in Northern Ireland and its more subtle impact on the process of post-conflict 'normalisation'. The text of the Belfast Agreement, the later St Andrews Declaration and the *Shared Future* and ancillary documents set the normative tone prior to the re-establishment of the Executive in 2007. In terms of broad aspirations the *normalisation* of Northern Irish society was an explicitly laid out objective of the Executive and the two governments. Setting aside (for now) the question of defining what a 'normal' society is, we can at least assume that it is in some sense an alternative to what is generally considered an abnormal one. There is recognition, at the very least, that the status quo ante is no longer an acceptable system of rule, and that a concerted effort needs to be made to reformulate the practice of politics in Northern Ireland into something that it was not before. What we cannot do here, and will not attempt, is an overall appraisal of something as complex and multifaceted as power-sharing. There may well be good reason to be optimistic about the future of power-sharing. Yet it is worth remembering that since 1990, Lebanon has brought up a generation of young people who have never experienced the horror of internecine carnage. Add to this the fact that Lebanon remains highly fragmented and bereft of any real sense of national unity. It is even yet the playground of regional powers. Older generations may well shrink at the prospect of conflict settlement through the use of Kalashnikovs, but younger and more idealistic partisans may harbour fewer inhibitions. Time is the real enemy of power-sharing. Its failure to evolve into more recognisably 'normal' politics chips away at the salience of violent conflict and its legacy.

Examined here is whether or not power-sharing can move Northern Irish governance and society beyond what we might refer to as ‘special arrangements’ towards a full-fledged democratic society with more recognisable cleavages, a society where the historical division is mercifully incidental in the collective minds of its populace. Specifically, the article highlights a principal stumbling block that stands in the way of ‘normalisation’ – the relentless reproduction of the sectarian divide in small ways every day. This obstacle infuses all of Northern Irish society, but examined here is its manifestation in policy discourse, specifically some key documents that preceded the Executive’s first full term in office.

It might legitimately be asked whether such a wholesale transformation is possible, pragmatic or even desirable? David Trimble, former First Minister, noted that it might be just as well for people of different backgrounds to live separate – if peaceful – lives.⁷ As Jabri pointed out some years ago, the language of war, its institutionalisation and legitimacy as a collective act, both predates and constitutes the possibility of war itself.⁸ War, or more specifically violent conflict, is made conceptually possible through its official articulation as a ‘legitimate’ course of action. Drawing upon this insight further, we might tentatively apply this beyond the specific subject of war or violence and contend that the premises of ethno-nationalist conflict are discursive and institutional in nature; they are made possible through the production and reproduction of meanings and symbols that institutionalise and legitimise ‘difference’. As such it is therefore more than mere ‘history’ or historical grievances bearing upon the present. The divisions of the present are the product of historical categories that continue to remake and reorder Northern Ireland’s political landscape – and the horizons that limit an alternative ontology. The whole framework of the Northern Ireland conflict is understood by its participants and observers through a particular prism, which goes beyond the lenses of Nationalism and Unionism to the more fundamental framework of the ‘natural’ divide. In Northern Ireland this divide happens to be sectarian, ethno-nationalist and – ultimately – mutually exclusive in their respective narratives and aspirations. Our task therefore is to examine the extent to which these categories infuse even the most positive peace-building policy articulations, and then speculate on the possibility that these categories might be overcome. Two questions emerge. Are the power-sharing structures established by the Belfast Agreement both conditioned by and a contributor to the reproduction of socio-political division to the point where the potential for an organically emerging civic identity is hindered? Is consensus-building between polarised ethno-nationalist perspectives realistic in the longer term? Ultimately, what is thrown into relief is whether the template offered by

the Belfast Agreement can provide a sufficient basis for a genuinely transformative trajectory away from Northern Ireland's sectarian legacy.

Interrogating Power-sharing

The following is an interrogation of the role of 'official' language, or 'discourse', in social processes, particularly the implicit contribution of strategic policy discourse to questions of identity construction and maintenance relative to the normalisation/transformation of Northern Ireland. A question mark is placed over the assumption that the mediation of the conflict through established identity categories is either positive or inevitable. We examine whether Northern Irish politics and society should inevitably and indefinitely continue to be a prisoner of these historical categories and cleavages. A preliminary sketch of how policy – and official political discourse⁹ – would both shape and manage the tensions around two distinct approaches to post-conflict governance is readily afforded through examination of wider strategic policy embodied in the main agreements. Further analysis is undertaken of broad policy objectives for various departments set out in key official documents published just prior to and since the re-establishment of the Executive.

The main agreements (Belfast and St Andrews) both establish the necessity of building on the formal ending of violence towards a 'shared' future that explicitly affords 'parity of esteem' for the 'diversity of their identities and traditions' in order to safeguard equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities (BFA). The Belfast Agreement also established the Equality Commission to monitor the effective implementation of the parity of esteem policy 'between the two main communities'. There is a notable emphasis on 'cross-community' relations, the framing of plural 'communities', and the applicability and benefits of various measures for 'both sections of the community'. Within the St Andrews Agreement, there is a declared stance on the need to ensure that the 'culture, rights and aspirations of all are respected and valued, free from sectarianism, racism and intolerance'. There is also reference to the need to 'build confidence in both communities' in order to pursue the goal of a 'shared future'. The concepts and language deployed here chime closely with the communitarian inflection of politics in many European countries over the last few decades, not least in the UK. When New Labour assumed the reins of government in the UK in 1997 this orientation towards identity politics accelerated and infused many aspects of public policy.

Sandwiched between both agreements is the aptly titled *A Shared Future* document¹⁰, which outlines a strategy for the establishment of ‘good relations’ and a shared society. ‘Community relations’ is explicitly defined in this document as ‘the division between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland’. Society, moreover, is to be ‘normal’ and ‘civic’. It is a society that places an emphasis on ‘respect for diversity’ and simultaneous recognition of cross-community interdependence. More specifically, there is a clear intent to pursue a comprehensive policy fostering inter-community contact, particularly through programmes involving young people. In tandem, however, there is also the expressed intention to ‘help young people understand their own heritage and tradition more fully’. The clear intention in these core documents is to substitute ‘difference’ and hostile division for ‘diversity’ in the hope that a more positive framing of the social and political reality will lead – in time – to a political consensus about the process of living together, even if there can be no real prospect of an agreement on the issue of the respective final status aspirations of either tradition. This strategy is even elaborated upon within the *Shared Future* document:

In aspirational and/or optimistic contexts, ‘cultural diversity’ is seen as a potentially celebratory situation that encompasses and gives voice to the richness that varied communities can contribute to the greater society of which they are a part.¹¹

All this is, in short, a concession to the reality of division, but also an attempt to transcend it by reframing it in more positive language, drawing upon dominant currents in political thought and praxis. The sticking point in the latter quote rests in the term ‘potentially’, recognition perhaps that it is far from certain that this strategy will be successful. For our purposes it is noteworthy that a subtle but very fundamental tension continues to exert itself within official policy aimed at peace-building. This is usefully illustrated by contrasting the headline goals of the various Executive departments as outlined in the *A Shared Future First Triennial Action Programme 2006-2009*.¹² On the one hand, some departments exhibit a highly functional perspective on the consequences of historical and political division. Within its headline actions, the Department of Trade and Enterprise sets as a specific goal the need to:

Promote greater understanding and mutual respect among the Northern Ireland workforce *regardless of religious/political background, race or level of ability* (Emphasis added).¹³

The Department of Finance and Personnel, in its inevitably pragmatic way, endeavoured to:

Identify and implement opportunities to reduce the costs of division across public spending, particularly in education and housing.¹⁴

Encouragingly, given the extent of residential segregation in the province, the Department of the Environment articulated an imperative to ‘ensure that planning policy promotes sharing over separation’, albeit with an emphasis on access to shared spaces and services. A critic might, conceivably, pick up on the term ‘access’, which implies that the sharing is a temporary respite from more permanently segregated homes. The Department of Social Development, through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, outlined a bold ambition to ‘identify opportunities to promote and maintain mixed estates’. These more functional imperatives have shaped broad policy objectives that cut across the political antipodes. They appear more inclined to sideline the fact of division in favour of focusing on problems and issues common to ‘both communities’.

By contrast other departments lay an emphasis on the issue of identity and the categories of history, and chart a strategic course that endeavours to turn negative relations into positive ones. Given its policy remit it is not surprising that the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) articulates the most obvious example of this modality of thought.

Encourage the culture, arts and leisure sector to highlight the multi-faceted and overlapping nature of identities and their wider global connections, and encourage understanding of the diversity of our shared history.¹⁵

The DCAL also, more recently, published a Cultural Awareness Strategy, which aims to give funding directly to any organisation ‘whose activities promote and enhance a specific cultural tradition within Northern Ireland’¹⁶.

The Department of Education, while recognising the need to promote sharing and collaboration in the provision of education services, also outlined a policy, articulated in the TACOTIE Report of seeking to:

[Improve] the effectiveness and appropriateness of the present structure of the Schools Community Relations Programme and the future role of cross community contact in promoting a culture of tolerance.¹⁷

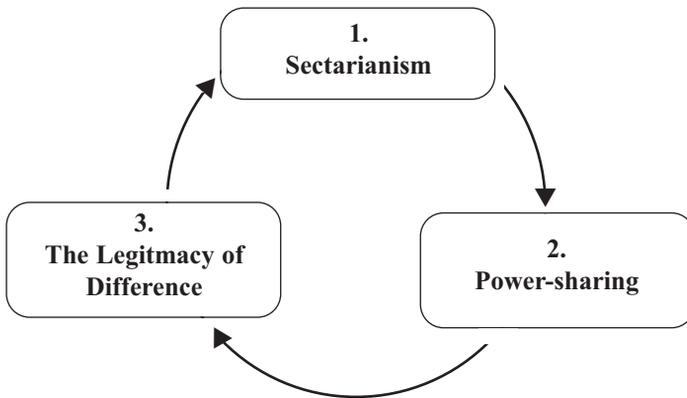
Tacitly implied in the logic emanating from this language is that inter-community relations are best improved by stressing their ‘*inter-*’ nature, rather than tackle the question of why integrated education is still in such a minority.

However, it is – ironically – the Commission for Equality that embodies the most unambiguous reproduction of social division. In its model form¹⁸ for employer equality monitoring it suggests that candidates for employment vacancies should identify themselves by selecting the appropriate box, demarcating themselves as a member of either the Catholic or Protestant communities. The categories of opposition continue to dominate, and policy continues to reproduce ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’ as the predominant interpretive language of citizenship. Most disconcertingly, from our perspective, the document ends with a suggested statement that insists on the identification of the citizen, regardless of their desire to be so identified.

If you do not answer the above question, we are encouraged to use the residuary method of making a determination, which means that we can make a determination as to your community background on the basis of the personal information supplied by you in your application form/personnel file.¹⁹

The central point here is that this tension between the ‘management’ and ‘transformation’ of conflict infuses public policy discourse in Northern Ireland. The power-sharing executive and the societal structures extant today are perhaps the inevitable product of their inheritance.²⁰ It is difficult to conceive of an alternative given the necessity of securing ‘buy-in’ from the political actors, and the prevailing language and unspoken assumptions in the lead up to and around the time of the Belfast Agreement. This brings us to a key point about power-sharing and the long term goal of establishing a peaceful society. The imperative to ensure the establishment of a legitimate process in the eyes of the main protagonists, actors who have been largely successful in shaping the narratives of the opposing blocs, means that the political outcome would inevitably favour them. Power-sharing arrangements emanate from the legacy and perpetuity of sectarianism. The dilemma emerges when power-sharing itself is seen to institutionalise the ‘naturalness’ of division, which in turn further perpetuates the institutional and discursive strategies that give rise to sectarianism. And so the circle is complete. Beyond the objectives of ending violence and carving up the levers of power, most peace-building efforts have tended to concentrate on transforming the area between points three and one on the chart; that is, validating the legitimacy of difference while labouring against its descent into mutual hostility and sectarianism. By contrast, this analysis has sought to open up a new front by

throwing open the question as to whether any emphasis needs to be placed on the role of ‘difference’ at all. Here, intervention might conceivably be located between nodes two and three, breaking down the existing connection between power-sharing and legitimised ‘difference’. Through its monopoly on official discourse, the power-sharing executive could utilise its position to foster an even more forceful vision of civic commonality, rather than fund bodies and groups that perpetuate ideas of difference. Instead of *A Shared Future*, they could initiate a broad strategy focused on ‘*Our Future*’. Sharing connotes, even implicitly, a distribution of political resources among *distinct* socio-political entities. Stressing functional commonality, on the other hand, downplays the importance of differences in order to achieve collective goods. The collective possession of a common future transcends the dichotomy of traditional distinctions.



Presently, a greater emphasis on the functional-transformative approach is implicitly inhibited through the reproduction of difference as inevitable and acceptable in public discourse. The language of ‘the two communities’, the ‘two traditions’, ‘both sections of our community’, ‘cross-community’, ‘parity of esteem’, ‘rich diversity’, ‘diverse cultures’ – even the ideas of ‘sharing’ and ‘shared future’ itself – all of these both reflect and reproduce the social ‘fact’ of division. Real transformation can only occur when the division becomes incidental to the lives of ordinary citizens. There appears to be little inclination to re-structure either the language or the social practices of the past. Northern Irish people of a certain political persuasion are more likely to read one news periodical than another. Even the act of buying either the Irish News or the Newsletter is a performative act of identity reproduction. Segregated schooling remains predominant, as does segregated housing and efforts to alter the status quo are, while well intentioned, largely piecemeal and minnow-

like in the face of the task at hand. Another problem area not previously considered is the whole question of memorialisation and remembrance. It is undoubtedly appropriate that those individuals who lost their lives be remembered by loved ones. But the collective and community memorialisation of atrocity and events, or even the totality of the 'Troubles', brings its own special set of problems. The literature from the branch of social psychology known as Terror Management Theory (TMT) is quite convincing in this respect. Raising the level of death awareness among individuals – something implicit in memorialisation – prompts them to retreat into more exclusive cultural fortresses, strengthening the exclusivity of identity tropes. Time and again, social psychology experiments undertaken through TMT methodologies clearly demonstrate that elevated levels of hostility occur within in-groups towards out-groups when reminders of death are introduced into social interaction.

People have, of course, the right to be distinct and different. The problem in Northern Ireland is that, with the possible exception of the more affluent, most people have little real choice about being different. It is something imposed by virtue of birth and geography, and it is constitutive and formative throughout early life, education and into adulthood. The challenge of transforming this is immense. The entire apparatus of Northern Ireland's social and political institutions reflects this dichotomy, and now so does its agreed political arrangement. Although the potential benefits of inter-community contact initiatives like cross-community programmes and school twinning might seem a *sine qua non* of peace-building, they too contribute towards the acceptability and naturalness of socio-cultural cleavage. The New Labour investment in the Peace Process is underpinned by a wider political philosophy, one that has reaped its own controversies in Britain.²¹ Division becomes diversity; no longer a negative, but a positive. Diversity is considered 'rich' while homogeneity is something to be avoided. The alternative to 'diversity' is sameness, stasis and lack vibrancy or distinction. Conformity and uniformity have, through the alchemy of multicultural politics, become the enemies of good society. This dichotomy is a false one. Civic politics does not equate to monochrome societies.

Even documents that seek to put a more devolved stamp on policy cannot escape the discourse inherited from the past. We see a reflection of the ongoing tension between accommodation and integration, between 'culturalist' and civic dimensions. The Executive's own *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* consultation document continues to reflect and reproduce the discourse of its predecessor when it outlined the goal to:

[B]uild a society where cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated and to promote pride in who we are and confidence in our different cultural identities (section 2.3)

Despite allusions to the need to enhance the provision of integrated education, CSI still reproduces the central, irreducible dichotomy.

Integrated schools give equal recognition to and promote equal expression of the two main traditions and other cultures. They welcome children from other cultures and are open to those of all faiths and none (section 3.13)

Finally, it sets itself, *inter alia*, the goals of:

- Promoting greater understanding of cultural diversity and expressions of cultural identity.
- Encouraging greater engagement with, and understanding of, cultural diversity and intercultural relations (5.33)

Nevertheless, there is also the fragile prototype of a newer discourse. The Department of Justice, for example, has articulated the view that:

The delivery of effective policing relies on a contract between the Police Service and the community that it serves. The foundations of that contract are the close, mutually beneficial ties between police and community members.

‘Community’ is singular, and its members are not categorised. Policing is a ubiquitous issue that transcends the divide. What is demonstrated here is the alternate conceptual prism used by the political authority. How does the institutions of government, in the full range of its policy remits, view the members of the society over which it governs? Can there be a civic alternative to the categories of ‘Unionist’ and ‘Nationalist’?

All this is not to say that the official discourse emanating from the Executive is somehow *promoting* division. That is certainly not its normative intention, nor arguably is this its principal effect. Division has not lessened and arguably has even increased. The problem is the manifest failure to de-emphasise it, thereby reinforcing the more basic idea – and fundamental problem – that division is part of the natural socio-political and cultural order in Northern Ireland. To transform the conflict, *really* transform it, means a radical deconstruction of these unreflective assumptions. There is, of course,

some potency in the argument that it was simply not possible to reach a workable, real-world agreement that consolidated the end of violence by merely wishing away salient identities. But our exploration here has not been about eradicating one identity in favour of a contrived one or condemning past action, but rather to pose the question implied in Khairallah's statement above: when – and from where – will the drive towards transformation come? How, in short, do we begin the practical process of shifting the discursive, institutional and practical parameters away from the 'natural' division of Northern Ireland towards a civic Northern Ireland?

Conclusion

A focus on functional commonality, rather than substantive 'identity' politics, however positively framed, offers an alternative future strategy for ongoing peace-building in the province. The principal impediment towards a truly transformative post-conflict trajectory is the extent to which the willingness of the main political actors to lead in the direction of functional commonality is hindered by their dependence upon sectarian narratives. Here the idea of political consensus – a bulwark of current understandings of conflict resolution – comes up hard against reality. The idea of consensus, of a studied mutual rethink of prevailing attitudes and arrangements, ultimately hinges on an approximation of the Habermasian ideal speech situation; the idea that parties to dialogue enter that process with good intentions toward better knowledge and understanding.²² However, as Flyvbjerg points out:

Power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation. Power procures the knowledge which supports its purposes, while it ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not serve it.²³

The normative tension at the heart of the current political arrangement in Northern Ireland rests on the incompatibility between two desired ends and the two distinct approaches deployed to achieve these. On the one hand we have the imperative to integrate and transform the working relationship between political elites that embody opposing ethno-nationalist and sectarian-based ideologies from one of violent confrontation into a working system of cooperative political government. It has been achieved, like it or not, by confining community aspirations or 'final status' (beyond a tacit acceptance by nationalists of British jurisdiction) to the long finger. In this prevailing scenario a pragmatic consensus between the principal polarities is engineered and reinforced at decision-making level. This complex arrangement has paid

dividends in terms of political stability. But the perennial question that lingers beyond the de-escalation of the violent phase of a conflict still remains: what next? Often, even accounting for long periods of peace, violence does not so much ‘end’ as ‘stop’. Despite the striking progress at the political level, there is a risk that the demos – or at least significant portions of it – has been left behind.

This brings us to the outstanding – and quite daunting - imperative to transform the relationship between the sectarian poles at the demotic level in order to embed something like a future peaceful society. Time alone may achieve this, but there are no guarantees. The pursuit of reconciliation and cross-community work through contact is undoubtedly replete with many micro-level victories of tolerance over prejudice. These are necessary but, once again, not sufficient. The question that continues to haunt these efforts is that of scale up – expanding it beyond its immediate impact to bolster transformative potential across Northern Ireland’s painted estates. Only by succeeding at this level will the latent centrifugal social forces that threaten elite-led progress be neutralised. Success here would prevent a reversion to violence that might escape either the regulation of the civil power or the salience of recent memory. Most of the work done in this area has been left to what is often referred to as civil society or the community and voluntary sector, with support spearheaded by the European Union Peace Programmes. This profoundly delicate work has sometimes been denigrated as ‘fluffy’ or inconsequential. Nevertheless, it reflects a realisation among many operating at the coal face that the unresolved and untreated polarisation of Northern Ireland harbours latent dangers. It is ironic that intercommunity work should sometimes be viewed so unsympathetically or with indifference by elements of the political class, given that it is the only expression of peace-building conceivable under the hegemony of the ethno-national/confessional narrative. In the age of identity politics, one would have thought that inter-identity relations in a divided society would have been given greater priority than it has been beyond the rhetoric of agreement texts.

In spite of the noble intentions of these interventions, the failure to address the continued reproduction and legitimacy of division represents a much deeper problem. The problem has emerged because at its core the prevailing combination of pragmatic political accommodation at elite level and the apathetic acceptance of largely ‘parallel lives’ among ascribed ‘nationalist’ and ‘unionist’ citizens is an unsatisfactory end state. Add to this the officially legitimised idea of distinct and plural ‘communities’ and the interventions shaped by such ideas risks putting off the attainment of a civic politics. In a sense, we see a repeat of the predicament outlined by Khairallah in Lebanon.

The dilemma is finding a way for Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangement to begin the process of abolishing itself, by orientating and facilitating the de-sectarianisation and de-differentiation of its socio-political space. Would parties as fundamentally divergent as the one-time proponents of violent separation from Britain, Sinn Féin, and the most trenchant defenders of the Union, the DUP, really collude in undermining the confessional and ethno-nationalist narrative that sustained that conflict, and their own voter base? One suspects not, and this may well render the idea of 'consensus' an unrealistic pipe dream.

Power-sharing does exactly what it says on the tin: it shares power. But where this is generally accepted as a form of post-conflict compromise between two socio-cultural blocs, what it is in reality is the sharing of power between specific political persuasion about how those blocs are constituted, self-perceived and understood. The conceptual horizons about what it is to be a citizen in the province is shaped and reinforced through the language and political practice of what Schattschneider called 'mobilised biases'. It is precisely these constituted identities and perspectives that need to be transformed and eventually abolished, not through emphasising them – or even granting them parity of esteem. What is arguably needed is an institutionalised process of *ignoring* the differences.

Alterity, the idea of Otherness, looms large in the politics of Northern Ireland, and it has shaped and defined what is possible politically. The problem with ideas like parity of esteem and mutual respect is that they assume away a fundamental component of identity construction. Identity is much less a form of self expression as it is a form of expression against an Other. Identity is, ultimately, a self-refining process of exclusion. 'Nationalist' and 'Unionist' are irreducible binaries that are not amenable to compromise. Irrespective of what is possible, there is also the question of what is necessary. What is necessary is the restructuring of a society that is, as all articulations of policy stress, fair and equitable. But this needs to extend beyond the horizons of bipolarism. Northern Ireland, if it is to truly transform, must abolish the immutability of its own narrative. If it seems inconceivable, it may well be that it is.

Notes

- 1 OFMDFM (2005), p8
- 2 Daoud Khairallah in Collings (1994), p263
- 3 Ryan (2007), p22
- 4 See Lijphart (1999). For an excellent overview of the debate around consociational theory applied to Northern Ireland see Taylor (2009). For an early critical analysis see Barry (1975).
- 5 The term was coined by Ted Cantle in his report into the outbreak of riots in northern England in 2001. See Cantle (2001).
- 6 For a comparative analysis see Kerr (2005).
- 7 Taylor (2009), p326
- 8 See Jabri (1996) for an excellent analysis of the role of discourse in conflict.
- 9 On the concept of 'official discourse' see Burton and Carlen (1979) and more recently in relation to the Irish context see Hayward (2009).
- 10 See OFMDFM (2005).
- 11 See OFMDFM (2005), p32.
- 12 See OFMDFM (2006)
- 13 OFMDFM (2006), p33.
- 14 OFMDFM (2006), p34.
- 15 OFMDFM (2006)
- 16 DCAL (2011).
- 17 See the TACOTIE Report (2007)
- 18 Equality Commission website.
- 19 Ibid, emphasis added.
- 20 See Little in Taylor (2009) and Ruane and Todd (2007).
- 21 For a critical stance on the question of what is usually labelled multiculturalism, see Hasan (2010) and Sen (2006).
- 22 On this see Habermas (1992), and also Flyvbjerg (1998b) for a useful commentary.
- 23 Flyvbjerg (1998a), p226; see also Flyvbjerg (1998b) for a further discussion of these ideas.

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