

The Northern Ireland Peace Process: Sharing Experiences of Transition

Allan Leonard and Quintin Oliver

At its 2011 gathering, the Forum for Cities in Transition in Derry-Londonderry set out a programme of panel discussions, workshops and plenary sessions, so that participants could discuss learning points and examine how examples could be implemented in other areas. As expressed by its Chair, Angela Askin, *“We hope that you can learn from our positive experiences in conflict transformation, and avoid many of the mistakes that we have made in addressing it. We also hope to learn from you in terms of sharing best practice from your areas.”*

The first panel discussion was a review of the Northern Ireland peace process, where contributors were asked to make two or three points from their direct experience. Before the session began, it was made clear to the audience that there was no suggestion that Northern Ireland has a model or template. Rather, what was on offer were experiences, and that the description, explanation and discussion of them may provide useful understanding, which itself would be a further beneficial outcome of this gathering.

The panellists were: Mark Durkan MP; Bairbre de Brun MEP; Ken Maginnis, The Lord Maginnis of Drumglass; Niall Burgess; Sir William Jeffrey; Ambassador Nancy Soderberg; and Jeffrey Donaldson MP.

While contributors emphasised some insights more than others, some primary themes emerged:

1. Inclusivity and equality within the peace process
2. Leadership and persistence
3. The promise of economic prosperity.

Inclusivity

One explanation why the 1998 Good Friday / Belfast Agreement was *‘Sunningdale for slow learners’* is that if only (Protestant) unionist politicians

would have worked harder to lead their constituents to the righteousness of sharing power with (Catholic) nationalists at the time of the 1974 Sunningdale Agreement, then the misery of the intervening 24 years might have been avoided.

Of course, this ignores the dynamics of not only internal unionist politics, but also the rationales that were applied to justify violence across the whole political spectrum.

For decades, unionists saw the situation as one where compromises with the Irish Free State had been made in 1925, and the proper course of action by both governments of Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland was to respect the agreed border and leave the Northern Ireland government to manage its own affairs unfettered. Unionists added that the discussion alone of a role for the Irish Government in Northern Ireland matters (e.g. via a Council of Ireland) was enough to jeopardise progress of political reform within Northern Ireland.

Ultimately, when it became clear that the majority of unionists did not support the Sunningdale power-sharing arrangement, it became untenable.

Under subsequent direct rule Northern Ireland government, whereby legislative matters were addressed at Westminster in London, and executive matters through ministers appointed by the British Prime Minister, repeated efforts were made to encourage a majority unionist community to return to power-sharing government with nationalists.

The philosophy during this time, from 1974 to the ‘Brooke-Mayhew’ talks of 1989-1992, was to have some consensus around a “*centre ground*”, which meant namely nationalist SDLP, centrist Alliance, and unionist UUP. After all, this was what was possible originally, so hopefully only minor modifications would be required to get devolved government going again.

But there were two key events that would make this centre-ground approach ever more difficult: the 1981 republican hunger strikes and the negative unionist reaction to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.

The 1981 hunger strikes had the effect of increased societal polarisation and new nationalist (republican) participation.

After the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, the UUP formed an electoral pact with Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and caused a region-wide

by-election in 1986. This was only partly successful — the UUP lost a seat at Westminster. But it emboldened the defensiveness of unionist politics.

Within nationalist politics, talks between John Hume (leader, SDLP) and Gerry Adams (president, Sinn Féin) were initiated in 1988. Although these talks broke down after a few months, they were rekindled in spring 1993. These publicly known discussions between two political leaders did not lead to a direct or immediate breakthrough, but it clearly demonstrated reconciliation among political rivals. For John Hume, the motivation was to remove the gun from Irish politics.

The subsequent ceasefires of the Irish Republican Army (31 August 1994) and loyalist paramilitaries (under the umbrella body of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (13 October 1994)), introduced the prospect of paramilitary representation, via associated political parties, in a forthcoming political dialogue.

Political talks on the governance of Northern Ireland thus had evolved some way from a more narrowly defined ‘centre ground’.

Back in 1972, there was no discussion on the role of paramilitary-associated incorporation in devolved government in Northern Ireland. Now, it was inconceivable that this political dimension would not secure due influence. The peace process of silencing the guns was as intertwined as the political process of a wider and more inclusive arrangement.

As Mark Durkan MP explained,

“One of the things that we understood was that solving our problem wasn’t just about relations between Unionists or Nationalists, Protestants or Catholics in Northern Ireland. It was also about relations within the island of Ireland — between two great traditions — and also about relations between Ireland and Britain.”

Durkan emphasised the importance of making sure that the framework of the problem can also be co-opted as the framework of the solution. He argued that *“our problem was originally a problem in British-Irish relations”* and how everything else stemmed from that. The full context that was developed by his party leader, John Hume, was a three-stranded approach: within Northern Ireland (the ‘internal approach’), between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (‘North-South relations’), and between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom (‘Anglo-Irish relations’).

It was the last of these strands that Irish Taoiseach Garrett FitzGerald recognised as blocking progress of the whole, and FitzGerald's work here, with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, proved pivotal in forcing the other two strands to evolve.

Niall Burgess, a senior Department of Foreign Affairs official (Republic of Ireland) called this "getting on with the neighbours", describing how the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland made public the degree to which the British and Irish governments enjoy a very good relationship. *"But those great reconciling words that were spoken at Dublin Castle last week come at the end of a 25-year process,"* he added.

Bairbre de Brún MEP described how the principle of inclusivity was crucial for her and her party's participation in the peace process: *"The fact that our country was divided meant that we wanted to have [all-Ireland] institutions; my party Sinn Féin could not have gone into institutions that were only for the North of Ireland."*

And within Northern Ireland, Ms de Brun made the point that another objective was to reform the policing service, which *"was made up of 97% of a community that was not the community that I came from"*, to one that *"everyone could join, and be part of and support"*.

Thus, in the case of Northern Ireland, inclusivity meant treating with equality all sections of its community within its six-county constituency, as well as treating the relationships (strands) of all three constituencies concerned as equally significant.

Leadership And Persistence

Jonathan Powell was British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Chief of Staff and chief negotiator during the Multi-Party Talks. In *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, Powell describes the role of constructive ambiguity:

"In the initial stages, ambiguity is often an essential tool to bridge the gap between irreconcilable positions. The only way we could get over decommissioning at the time of the Good Friday Agreement was to make its terms ambiguous so that each side was able to interpret the Agreement as endorsing their position ... But later in the process, ambiguity ceased to be constructive and became the enemy of progress. Each side began to distrust the other because it had not implemented the Agreement in

accordance with their own interpretation of it ... The ambiguity that had been essential at the beginning began to undermine the Agreement and discredit the government – the referee for its implementation. We then had to drive ambiguity out of the process ... [because] a durable peace cannot rest on an ambiguous understanding.”¹

One could argue that the price of squeezing out this ambiguity was the sacrifice of the UUP, particularly by the British Government in its increasing pragmatism of dealing with a rising DUP, leading ultimately to the 2006 St. Andrews Agreement.

As Lord Maginnis put it:

“The strange thing has been that over the last 10 years or thereabouts, the people who have actually been drawn to the centre ... were those two ‘extremes’ [Sinn Féin (Nationalist/Republican) and DUP (Unionist)]; they have moved to occupy the ground that David Trimble [former UUP leader] and John Hume [former SDLP leader] created.”

Indeed, this result would have been deemed implausible at the start of the Multi-Party Talks in 1996. It reveals the significance of the role of leadership at all levels of the negotiations. As Sir William Jeffrey remarked:

“It seems to me ... that to resolve conflicts of this kind needs political leadership of the highest order. Looking back on it, it did not seem that evident ... that we would reach the agreement we did.”

Sir William particularly credited the work of Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald, British Prime Ministers John Major and Tony Blair.

Meanwhile, Jeffrey Donaldson MP underlined the importance of group leadership, when explaining the self-exclusion of the Democratic Unionist Party from the Multi-Party Talks:

“I would say that was a mistake. At the time, Unionism was divided: half of the Unionist representation was in the talks, the other half was not ... If you opt out of negotiations, then you significantly diminish your capacity to influence the outcome of those negotiations ... You’ve got to be at the table.”

Niall Burgess credits persistence and optimism. Over the years, it regularly appeared that the Northern Ireland peace process had faced an irreversible setback: *“And yet, somehow, the process represents the triumph of optimism*

over experience, again and again. It represents the simple fact that persistence and optimism pays..."

So, while individual and group leadership is required for such complex situations, the Northern Ireland experience shows that while you can design the framework for the negotiations, you can't predict how the use of constructive ambiguity is going to affect the outcomes and further demands of good leadership. Persistence and optimism appear to be two useful additional ingredients.

Economic Prosperity

A distinguishing feature of Northern Ireland is its considerable financial subvention from the British government as well as contributions by the European Union, because other areas have not had these resources provided in the course of their conflict management and/or resolution.

With the onset of *'The Troubles'*, the public sector in Northern Ireland grew, partially to address high unemployment and guarantee an end to Nationalist / Catholic discrimination. While manufacturing industry suffered across the UK in the 1980s and beyond, it found some cushioning through continued Government subsidy in Northern Ireland (at least compared to England). The political situation kept Northern Ireland as unattractive for significant inward investment (in contrast to the successful efforts in the Republic of Ireland), and the grants commonly went towards capital costs, with little net gain in employment.

This is not to detract from the remarkable efforts by those who did bring jobs to their *locales*, particularly in Derry-Londonderry. John Hume is associated with bringing Fruit of the Loom and Seagate to the Maiden City, and through Boston-Derry Initiatives stimulating other networks and clusters.

Another positive result of reaching out to the Irish Diaspora was the creation and continued funding over the next quarter century of the International Fund for Ireland (IFI). Niall Burgess described how former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, was convinced after a visit to Derry-Londonderry that *"you would never build a lasting peace process unless you built hope at the local level and in local communities"*. The IFI spends c. £30 million per year on local economic and social projects.

The European Union has also provided many millions of pounds in peace and reconciliation projects in Northern Ireland. The importance of this

contribution was reflected in a report that Bairbre de Brún MEP wrote for the European Parliament. This report aspires to have the lessons from the projects and its processes shared with others in a Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Centre at the former Maze / Long Kesh prison site.

Yet in economic terms, the facts remain:

- Northern Ireland's productivity levels are 84% of the rest of UK, lowest of all regions²
- Public sector jobs account for 30% of total NI employment, highest of all regions³
- Economic inactivity rate of 27% in NI, is the highest of all regions (UK average 21%)⁴
- Subvention is £5-6 billion per year, c. 20-25% NI GDP⁵

Currently, there are two major economic challenges facing Northern Ireland: (1) the desire by the British Government to reduce the amount of subsidy it provides (notwithstanding its obligations to provide equality of UK 'national' public services); and (2) the sharp reduction in funding available to community and voluntary sector (NGO) organisations, due to changed circumstances in EU and other external grant-making bodies.

In regards to the former, the locally accountable Northern Ireland Executive is pursuing a supply-side policy to encourage private business sector development, through a proposed reduction in UK corporation tax. Supporters make reference to the success story of the Irish Republic in attracting foreign direct investment this way, while detractors argue that the relevant benign circumstances no longer exist; the Northern Ireland economy is not today in a similar enough place as Ireland's was 25 years ago. Or as they say to tourists in Ireland looking for directions, "I wouldn't start from here..."

The impending sharp drop in community and voluntary sector finances, though, is potentially more calamitous, as a significant proportion of Northern Ireland's economy already relies upon the wider public sector. The fact is that many organisations that flourished during the generous influx of external funding were not able to give sufficient consideration to ensure their own sustainability. Cooperation and collaboration within the sector is now required, but in evident short supply, which is perhaps ironic considering many of their projects' objectives and stated values.

This then begs the question, can economic prosperity lead to reconciliation, or does development towards reconciliation lead to economic prosperity?

A Shared Future?

During the first devolved power-sharing administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly, in 2001, there was a formal review of community relations policy. A report was presented to the Northern Ireland Executive in January 2002, which failed to stimulate any further action on the matter. Following a suspension later that year of the devolved government, direct rule minister Des Browne MP launched a public consultation document, “A Shared Future” (ASF), which asked fundamental questions about a shared way forward for the people of Northern Ireland.

ASF offered the following vision:

“Our vision for Northern Ireland is of a peaceful society in which everyone can freely and fully participate, achieve their full potential, and live free from poverty. We want a fair and effective system of government, underpinned by rights that are guaranteed for all, and responsibilities that all must share. We wish to support dialogue, and to foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity.”

ASF aims for a “shared society” ... “in which people are encouraged to make choices in their lives that are not bound by historical divisions and are free to do so”; and a “pluralist society” ... “with respect and tolerance for cultural diversity, where people are free to assert their identity”.

Some in the political community saw ASF more as a threat to their singular communal identity, than as an opportunity for mutual respect. Meanwhile, ASF was generally welcomed by voluntary and community sectors, which argued that the mere management of division and segregation hinders the ability of people to choose the “*kind of community they want to live in or the kind of identity they wish to adopt*”.⁶ There were also arguments about the financial costs of the provision of duplicated or separate services, based on social segregation.

With the return of devolved Northern Ireland government in March 2007, following the 2006 St Andrews Agreement, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) promptly dropped ASF or any community relations-based policy proposal. Pressure from the community and voluntary sector is credited with forcing a u-turn, with OFMdfM announcing a new policy process on the themes of cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI). This policy process commenced in 2007, and five years later there remains no formally agreed Northern Ireland Government policy.

Community relations work in Northern Ireland is undertaken mainly through the Community Relations Council (CRC), which is an independent charity, with public accountability that administers grant funding from public agencies. Some see current CSI proposals as a threat to CRC's *raison d'être*.

Angela Askin, Chair of the Derry-Londonderry Forum and a Community Relations Officer for Derry City Council, defended the importance of community relations work in her opening remarks to delegates:

“It’s very fitting that this conference is taking place [during Community Relations Week], as it is the one week of the year when we focus on community relations issues, both locally and nationally. This year, the theme nationally is ‘No quick fix’, and we locally are looking at the legacy issues from the conflict years.”

There is also a now frequently-cited report from Deloitte that estimated direct and indirect costs of Northern Ireland's community relations environment — as evidenced by duplication of services and dealing with violent disturbances — to be £1.5 billion, *per annum*. So far, few Northern Ireland politicians have made the connection between redirecting financial savings here towards frontline services for everyone. Instead, they place such potential savings into the longer term.

Physical manifestations of this policy stalemate are the interface barriers, or ‘*peace walls*’, throughout Belfast and Derry-Londonderry. Jeffrey Donaldson MP recognised these as literal barriers to the realisation of building a shared future, where “*people can come together ... without fear and with confidence*”.

Yet there is a paradox of leadership on this issue. As Dr Jonny Byrne at the University of Ulster describes current peace wall policy development: local projects improve community relations and add to good practice, with local participants and community leaders looking to the Northern Ireland Executive to provide a framework and leadership for further progress; yet the Executive's current position is that further progress will be determined by the local communities, not as targeted by, or seen to be driven by, the Executive itself.

On one hand, Northern Ireland's 40 years' experience of managing interface areas lends it to serve as an expert practitioner for other places with contested spaces. But, perhaps ironically, it is Cyprus, with its 112-mile (180 km) ‘*Green Line*’, that may provide more useful lessons. Within the divided city of Nicosia (Lefkosia), a practical matter of water and sewerage brought together the

respective mayors/communal leaders of the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot municipal constituencies.

Always mindful that they alone were not going to solve the ‘Cyprus Question’ (especially vis-à-vis Turkey and the European Union), Lellos Demetriades and Mustafa Akinci (both Forum members) used their established trust in a visionary way — the ultimate unification and regeneration of the city. The Nicosia Master Plan that they authored will not be completed by them, but impressively it has provided the framework for subsequent political and community leaders in the city. Consequently, when there is progress at a higher, national level, then the local people of Nicosia are ready for it. For example, instead of a shock like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the opening of Ledra Street was an achievement that was prepared for, at all levels of leadership, for some years.

Positively, Belfast City Council has taken up the promise of a more cohesive and shared city seriously. Although they did not initiate it, the city’s elected representatives unanimously endorsed a municipal investment strategy that sets out a vision with a codified aim of removing all interface barriers in Belfast.

This council is greatly assisted by a particular composition of its Good Relations Committee — a combination of elected councillors and representatives from the voluntary, community and minority ethnic group sectors.

Likewise in Derry-Londonderry, the inter-sectoral participation of the political, community, voluntary and business sectors proved crucial in the city’s success in attaining the UK City of Culture in 2013. There, a longer-term master plan has been set out by an urban regeneration company, ILEX.

Important community relations challenges remain in both of these cities, but these have not weakened the exercise of leadership. Indeed, the lessons of inclusivity, persistence and the promise of economic benefits have encouraged participants to keep moving forward.

Why can these various sectors — across the political and social spectrum — formulate visions for their local areas, but the development of one for Northern Ireland remains so elusive?

Conclusion

To be fair, in most deeply contested areas, while there may be peace agreements, seldom are there codified plans for reconciliation. As Niall Burgess said, “*Reconciliation is a work of generations.*” In this way, Northern Ireland is not unique.

The achievement of Northern Ireland's peace was a result of a process that incorporated many varied actors, over at least a 30-year period. There is ample evidence how inclusivity, leadership and its persistence, and the promise of economic prosperity all contributed to the effort. Achieving that peace was hard work.

Achieving reconciliation will be even harder. The same ingredients for peace are required. But the pressure is not as intense in the cooker.

The external agencies of the British and Irish governments saw obvious gains to be achieved from a peace agreement, and thus had a motivation to work together for a satisfactory outcome. Yet understandably neither would see themselves as primarily responsible for achieving reconciliation within Northern Ireland.

What the discussion on Northern Ireland's experience revealed was how its political leaders were successful in securing peace, how some community and voluntary organisations are achieving progress on reconciliation, and how some municipalities are employing a multi-sectoral approach to deliver local visions.

But is the incoherence and ambiguity of Northern Ireland's reconciliation efforts risking its prosperity, if not its peace?

NOTES

- 1 Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland*, London: The Bodley Head, 2008, p. 315.
- 2 Office of National Statistics, 2006.
- 3 Office of National Statistics, June 2005.
- 4 DETI, Monthly Labour Market Report, 16 April 2008.
- 5 Peter Hain, Economic and Social Challenges in Northern Ireland: Speech to the Fabian Society, 31 January 2006.
- 6 NICVA, *A Shared Future: NICVA Briefing Paper*; Belfast: www.nicva.org, 2005.