

Stop–Go Democracy: The Peace Process in Northern Ireland Revisited

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‘Today is only the beginning, it is not the end’ (*Irish News* 11 April 1998)

This front-page headline the day after the Good Friday Agreement was reached was a prophetic warning about the difficulties that would lie ahead in implementing the negotiated deal.

Introduction

Political conflict and community sectarianism have plagued Northern Ireland’s society for several generations. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 10 April 1998 was seen by many to be an end-point to this particular period of instability and to herald a new beginning for the region based on a carefully constructed range of institutions based on power sharing between the unionists and the nationalists, negotiated through inclusive consensus. This study seeks to examine the problems and difficulties that emerged after the GFA and will attempt to answer the questions What went wrong? and Why has this peace process experienced difficulties and setbacks during the implementation phase?

The central argument presented in this study is that the Northern Ireland example illustrates that negotiating a political settlement is often more straightforward than implementing it within deeply divided communities that have experienced violent conflict. The study will try to illustrate what problems have emerged in the attempts to implement the institutions of the GFA and explain the wider reasons behind these and why they have become such difficult sticking points in the peace process.

From Negotiation to Implementation

To understand the stop–go nature of the GFA it is essential to understand both the dynamics of the negotiations that led to the agreement and the specific terms of the agreement itself. While it is often seen as a negotiated settlement, the GFA can more

accurately be viewed as a framework for a settlement, setting out a number of institutions and relationships that could, over time, develop into an agreed settlement that would be capable of transcending political and cultural differences within Northern Ireland's deeply divided society. By viewing it as a framework for, rather than the achievement of, a settlement, it is easier to understand why it has been beset by so many implementation problems.

The GFA was the product of a protracted set of often fractious negotiations that were unique in terms of their inclusiveness and in the extent of third-party involvement. In terms of their structure, the multiparty negotiations that took place from 1997 until 1998 were ambitious in terms of the range of conflict parties involved, and in the roles of the British and Irish governments as well as the US Administration. Achieving *any* level of political agreement between both republican and loyalist sets of paramilitary groups as well as the main constitutional parties (with the exception of the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP) was no small feat in the context of the history of failed political dialogue of the past. The inclusive nature of the negotiations was a vital element in terms of building a constituency of support for whatever agreement was eventually reached. The importance of this was reflected by the actions of Mo Mowlam, then British secretary of state for Northern Ireland, who visited the Maze prison during the latter stages of the negotiations to 'sell' the basic GFA architecture to leading loyalist paramilitary prisoners. This was a serious political risk taken by one of the leading negotiators, undertaken because of the importance of attaining the agreement of paramilitary factions to the settlement. This focus on achieving inclusive support for the negotiated settlement is highlighted by Hampson (1996), among others, as being inextricably linked with the chances of successful implementation.

There were two other specific elements of the negotiations that have had a bearing upon subsequent difficulties in achieving its full implementation. The first concerns the fact that several key issues (mainly the precise conditions for weapons decommissioning and the future of policing) were avoided in the negotiations and the details were left outside the terms of the agreement. Second, in their latter stages, the negotiations were conducted in a pressurized atmosphere, designed to produce a result, which may have been better at engineering an outcome than at achieving an agreed settlement. It is also fair to say that the precise terms of paramilitary weapons decommissioning and the future structures of policing were left out of the GFA precisely because it was impossible to achieve agreement on them in 1998.

It was in this necessary ambiguity within the carefully balanced text of the GFA that the seeds of subsequent difficulties took root. Just what had been agreed by these negotiators on 10 April 1998? Despite the fact that a printed copy of the agreement was delivered to every home in Northern Ireland in advance of a referendum, to be held as a mechanism for determining popular support for the terms of the settlement, there was confusion among many nationalists and unionists over both its terms and its long-term political implications. This was not helped by the fact that several of the negotiators disagreed with one another about what the GFA amounted to and provided dramatically differing

narratives of its terms and conditions. ‘Inevitably, proGFA unionists and nationalists presented the Agreement to their supporters in very different terms. For unionists it entrenched the Union and was a disaster for republicans, while for republicans, it was a further step towards Irish unity’ (Dixon 2001: 271). Sinn Fein’s chief negotiator, Martin McGuinness, defended his party’s acceptance of the new institutions provided for by the GFA in the following statement: ‘I think the mood all over the island is that moving into the assembly to further our republican objectives towards our ultimate goal of a united Ireland is at this moment in time the sensible thing to do’ (BBC 10 May 1998). This comment reflected what many Irish nationalists regarded as an inescapable political reality, but was far from advancing their constitutional objectives in the sense of Irish national self-determination. In other words, the GFA was sold to Catholic nationalists by Sinn Fein as ‘jam today’ in terms of the civil rights agenda, with the promise of ‘jam tomorrow’ in terms of the goal of reuniting the island of Ireland politically. What McGuinness did not articulate so loudly was that he was prepared to participate in a British political institution and recognize the constitutional apparatus of the United Kingdom (UK) in the hope that this would evolve into a form of Irish unity in the future.

Conversely, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), David Trimble, claimed a rather different set of outcomes from the GFA in a speech on the 17 April 1998. ‘The new Agreement reached at Castle Buildings is a disaster for Sinn Fein/IRA [Irish Republican Army]. Violent republicanism has failed to “smash the Union”; in fact it has failed in all its stated objectives. Instead, Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom has been secured’ (Trimble 17 April 1998).

One of the central explanations for the stop–go nature of the peace process from this point onwards is that there was never an agreement between the main parties either about the short-term modalities concerning the rate of weapons decommissioning and the link between this and Sinn Fein’s presence within the GFA’s institutions of governance, or about the longer-term implications of the GFA for Northern Ireland’s constitutional position between Britain and Ireland. This lack of clarity can be explained. The leaderships of Sinn Fein and the UUP came under sustained attack following their negotiation of the GFA on the basis that this was an unacceptable compromise. The UUP visibly fractured, with one of Trimble’s senior colleagues at the negotiations, Jeffrey Donaldson, walking out before the details of the agreement were announced. Donaldson, along with several other senior party figures, subsequently campaigned against the GFA for several years in an attempt to change UUP party policy. As Tonge (2003: 39) has pointed out, 11 special meetings of the party’s ruling Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) have been held since 1998, each one narrowly backing the policy of party leader David Trimble by an average of 56 per cent to 44 per cent, indicative of the divisions within the unionist community.

This succeeded only in destabilizing the party, weakening it vis-à-vis its DUP rivals and undermining the implementation of the institutions of the agreement. Jeffrey Donaldson subsequently defected from the UUP to the DUP in 2004. The effect of

unionist opposition to the GFA from within his party and from the DUP acted as a form of Chinese water torture on Trimble's leadership of the UUP and was fundamental to the implementation problems that beset the GFA.

On the other side of the political fence, the Sinn Fein leadership came under attack for supporting the GFA by radical republicans who disagreed with the above analysis of Martin McGuinness and viewed the agreement as anathema to traditional republican objectives. The most violent example of this opposition was provided on 15 August 1998 when the dissident republican group the Real IRA exploded a car bomb in Omagh which killed 29 people, including an unborn child.

The important point to draw from this is that both Sinn Fein and the UUP were driven to promote competing narratives of the GFA to justify their support of the settlement. These narratives differed fundamentally from each other in terms of what could be expected from the deal and what was expected from the different parties to the negotiations. Once again, this is not unnatural within the context of an intractable political conflict that is emerging out of violence. Given these circumstances it was highly unlikely that either unionists or nationalists would view the GFA (publicly at least) as a messy compromise that they could reluctantly accept, rather than the achievement of fundamental objectives that they could readily endorse.

The fact that the negotiators themselves were only giving the GFA two cheers rather than three was highlighted in their lacklustre campaigns in the referendum during May 1998. The parties campaigned separately rather than together (indicative of the fundamental divisions over their reading of the agreement); coherence and energy only entered the campaign when an Independent Yes Campaign was formed to coordinate the messages of the parties supporting the GFA with wider civil society initiatives. Even during the honeymoon period, therefore, with the ink on the GFA barely dry, enthusiasm for the settlement was ambivalent, even among its supposed advocates. As Dixon suggests, 'Although the Good Friday Agreement had been endorsed in the referendum by a majority of both Catholics and Protestants, they were each probably endorsing contrasting interpretations of the Agreement' (Dixon 2001: 274).

The subsequent problems in the implementation of the GFA therefore need to be seen against the background context of the negotiations, the fact that several important issues were avoided completely or were drafted ambiguously within the GFA, and the main political parties' constructed alternative narratives about what it meant for Northern Ireland's constitutional position.

It's Democracy, Jim, But Not As We Know It

While it is possible to cite disagreements between the central political actors as being chiefly responsible for the stop-go nature of the peace process, there is also a view that the implementation problems that beset the GFA were linked to the unique political architecture contained in the provisions for a new Assembly.

The GFA sought to establish a hybrid system of power sharing between unionist and nationalist political parties to encourage cooperation and consensus between them. The plan for the Assembly was based on a form of consociational democracy, predicated on the need for cross-community power sharing between nationalist and unionist parties to lock both main ethno-national blocs into a positive-sum relationship of interdependence. Consociational theory was developed by Arend Lijphart in response to the view that deeply divided societies are not inevitably condemned to violence, and that a significant role could be played by the character of political institutions in determining whether such tensions could be contained within the political system (Lijphart 1969). The GFA was based on the consociational logic that institutions should be built which primarily contain and manage societal divisions and that regulate existing sectarian tensions, rather than attempting (at the outset) to transcend or overcome them. This system of governance was based on the prioritization of group rights and identities over individual ones, the premise being that checks and balances in the distribution and exercise of power had to be woven into the fabric of the institutions, to reflect and obviate the central political cleavage between Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism.

This produced a form of sectarian mathematics within the new political system where, to ensure cross-community support, either by parallel consent or by weighted majority, members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) were required to designate themselves as 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. This produced the criticism (Taylor 2001; Wilford and Wilson 2003) that the institutions that evolved out of the GFA contained the seeds of their own destruction by institutionalizing sectarian divisions within the fabric of the Assembly, rather than transcending or overcoming them. 'The fundamental problem with consociationalism is that it rests on precisely the division it is supposed to solve. It assumes that identities are primordial and exclusive, rather than malleable and relational: high fences, in other words, make good neighbours' (Wilford and Wilson 2003: 11). From this perspective, therefore, the implementation problems suffered by the GFA were rooted in the undemocratic and sectarian nature of the institutions that were set up as part of the political settlement. Critics of this perspective (O'Leary and McGarry 1996; Horowitz 2001) have, however, argued that the conflict within Northern Ireland required consociational structures of this type to reflect the dynamic realities of that conflict and protect the nationalist minority community from domination by the majority (which was one of the fundamental causes of the conflict after 1969), and represented the only viable institutional structures capable of containing the various tensions between the unionist and nationalist blocs. The consociational nature of the GFA was an inevitable consequence of the divisions among those who negotiated it, given that one group defined itself as British and wished to remain constitutionally within the UK, while the other main bloc viewed itself as Irish, and wanted to break with the UK.

If these were the starting points of political negotiation, then it is hardly surprising that the institutional structures of the GFA attempted to contain vastly differing goals through a consociational mechanism. As McGarry puts it, 'what is needed, therefore,

are political institutions, like those in the Agreement, that cater to the bi-national nature of Northern Ireland's society' (McGarry 2001a: 23).

Todd has pointed out that the consociational structure of the new political institutions was designed to evolve over time rather than act as a barrier to transformation taking place in the conflict relationships between nationalists and unionists; 'the consociational elements exist in the context of an agreement that was conceived holistically, not just as a stable set of institutions but as institutions that would themselves develop and transform in the course of their functioning' (Todd 2005: 101). Those who believe that this consociational structure institutionalizes sectarianism suggest that this lies at the heart of the reasons why the GFA has not been effectively implemented. 'It is neither obvious nor logical that ethno-nationalism can be cured by prescribing more of it through constitutional engineering. There is no *prima facie* case to suppose that this will occur' (Taylor 2001: 38–39). For those who see consociational theory as an inappropriate basis for political institutions to mediate the ethno-national divisions in Northern Ireland, the stop-go nature of the peace process since 1998 was unsurprising. How can we be surprised that sectarian tensions and ethno-national distrust have undermined the implementation of the GFA when that very logic has been woven into the sinews of the political institutions that emerged out of it in the first place? Conversely, for those who regard the consociational nature of the GFA as being an appropriate way of recognizing existing realities and regulating entrenched ethno-national conflict, the problems of implementing the GFA lie outside the technicalities of the institutions themselves.

Northern Ireland's Groundhog Day

Even within the context of Northern Ireland's fractious political history, the implementation of the GFA was slow, tortuous and often tedious, with claim and counter-claim from the unionist and nationalist sides to the effect that one group or the other was renegeing on commitments made in the text of the GFA. The agreement itself slowly bled to death by a thousand cuts, as the various political parties and other factions argued around the corpse.

The first difficult issues context of the precise circumstances in which Sinn Fein would enter the new Executive, which would be drawn from the Northern Ireland Assembly on the basis of party strength, and how and when paramilitary weapons would be disposed of. Fundamentally this problem is at the heart of the reasons why the GFA has not been implemented successfully: the main negotiators, and their respective constituencies, did not trust one another to keep their part of the bargain. As a result, the wording of the GFA on decommissioning was picked at like an infected scab, with allegations of bad faith hurled backwards and forwards from Sinn Fein and the UUP in particular.

The critical paragraph here within the GFA reads as follows:

All participants accordingly reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. They also confirm their intention to continue

to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission [on Decommissioning] and to use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement' (*The Agreement: Agreement Reached in Multi-Party Negotiations*: 20).

It was this tortured paragraph more than any other which holds the key to the implementation problems experienced by the GFA. The main players in this drama did not trust one another, despite having negotiated a settlement. The wording of this paragraph was vague in places and open to interpretation, and, crucially, the paramilitary groups themselves were not signatories to the GFA. Thus, while the UUP claimed that Sinn Fein was not working in 'good faith' with the Independent Commission on Decommissioning, or was not using 'any influence they may have' with the IRA, Sinn Fein would respond by claiming that it was doing so and, moreover, that the UUP's lack of commitment to the overall structures of the GFA was making it impossible for Sinn Fein to argue the case for weapons decommissioning. This was a circular zero-sum argument driven by two negative yet omnipresent features of the post-GFA period—first, a lack of trust between the two ethno-national blocs (chiefly Sinn Fein and the UUP) and, second, internal pressure within these blocs (again featuring Sinn Fein and the UUP) over conceding ground to the other side. For Sinn Fein the central issue concerned the decommissioning of IRA weapons within the context of a total disarmament that did not single republicans out for special treatment and that linked paramilitary weapons with the legally held arms of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)/Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the British Army.

The consistent position of Sinn Fein from 1998 onwards was that it wished to see *all* weapons taken out of Irish politics and that the constant prevarication of the UUP over implementing the GFA in full was making it impossible for Sinn Fein to achieve its end of the bargain. Needless to say, unionists in general and the UUP in particular were unconvinced, and believed that Sinn Fein was merely paying lip service to the decommissioning issue while pocketing 'gains' related to the implementation of other aspects of the GFA, chiefly its presence in the Executive, the creation of the North–South institutions and the implementation of the Patten Report on policing which saw the RUC become the PSNI.

The political consequences of this disagreement over weapons decommissioning were an intensification of internal divisions within the UUP and constant instability in the peace process more generally, as both David Trimble and the British Government precipitated repeated suspensions of the GFA institutions. In fact, despite the media attention that has been given to the issue of IRA weapons decommissioning, there is no specific connection between this and Sinn Fein's presence in the structures of government contained within the GFA. This linkage only occurs if you believe that the IRA and Sinn Fein are one and the same organization, which of course unionists for the most part do believe and Sinn Fein adamantly rejects. Technically, of course,

neither the IRA nor the Ulster Freedom Fighters on the loyalist side were signatories to the GFA, and any movement on weapons decommissioning was defined by them as a voluntary act of good faith rather than a requirement of the GFA.

This confusion contained within the carefully worded paragraphs of the GFA over who promised what to whom (and by when) was magnified by particular third-party involvement during the last-minute negotiations on the deal in April 1998. In an effort to persuade Trimble to gamble with internal dissent within his party over the precise terms of weapons decommissioning, British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote to the UUP leader at the 11th hour with a series of pledges and to insist that *for him* weapons decommissioning was a requirement that had to be adhered to by the paramilitary factions.¹ Trimble placed much faith in these promises from the British prime minister but could not avoid the fact that this was the personal position of the prime minister rather than part of the terms of the GFA itself, and thus held no sway with either Sinn Fein or the various sets of paramilitary groups.

The political structures set up as part of the GFA have been suspended on four separate occasions during this period, while the four elections that have taken place have resulted in a radicalization of the electorate at the expense of the moderate centre. This has reflected unionist disillusionment with a divided UUP and the peace process more generally, and growing support within the nationalist community for Sinn Fein from an electorate incensed by the unionist reluctance to participate fully in the structures of government agreed in the GFA, aided and abetted by a vacillating British Government.

More than eight years after the GFA was signed, the blunt fact is that, despite the 71 per cent vote in favour of it in the Northern Ireland referendum in 1998, it has failed at the implementation stage. This failure was caused by insufficient effort being put into combating the mistrust between the UUP and Sinn Fein and inadequate clarity over the precise terms of the agreement itself. The UUP had split down the middle following the GFA negotiations in 1998 and has remained divided ever since, with several of its leading members being openly opposed to party policy and lobbying against it internally, as well as during election campaigns. Symbolically, a group of these dissidents resigned from the UUP when they failed to change party policy over the GFA and joined Ian Paisley's anti-agreement DUP. This internal meltdown within the UUP, precipitated by the GFA, has had predictable impacts in terms of the party's behaviour and its electoral fortunes. On the one hand, desperate to achieve some movement over IRA decommissioning and anxious to satisfy critics within the party, the UUP has caused the GFA institutions to be suspended on several occasions in a bid to wrestle concessions out of Sinn Fein and preserve what was left of party unity. This only resulted in further political crisis and inertia, as Sinn Fein blamed the UUP for a lack of commitment to the implementation of the political settlement. The other impact of this ambivalent attitude towards the GFA was electoral decline. While half of the UUP seemed to be in support of the agreement, the other half appeared to be opposed to it. The DUP took a much more coherent line of opposition and gradually overtook the UUP as the largest

unionist party in terms of both number of seats and share of the popular vote. In the 2003 Assembly elections, the DUP won 30 seats and 25 per cent of the vote, compared the UUP's 27 seats and 22 per cent of the vote.

This reversal of fortune for the UUP was significant for two reasons. First, it indicated that its divisions over the GFA had damaged its electoral support and that a substantial number of its supporters were opposed to implementation of the GFA, at least under the existing conditions. Second, the political architecture of the GFA meant that, as the largest party in the new Assembly, the anti-agreement DUP had the right to nominate a candidate from its own party to become the next first minister. Given the fact that the other major story of the 2003 Assembly election was the strengthening of Sinn Fein relative to the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), the prospects for reviving the flagging peace process appeared bleak. As Sinn Fein had become the largest nationalist party it had the right to nominate its candidate for deputy first minister, holding out the unlikely prospect of a DUP and Sinn Fein team as first and deputy first ministers of a new Assembly and Executive.

While repeated efforts have been made to resurrect the GFA, the political structures that were central to it (most notably a functioning Assembly and Executive) have been suspended since 14 October 2002. Since this date the structures of the GFA have only had a nominal existence and Northern Ireland has been governed by direct rule from Westminster. While a new round of talks took place from September to December 2004 in an attempt to revive the GFA, a conclusive deal remains elusive. Although some progress was made between the DUP and Sinn Fein during this phase of negotiations, the initiative ended in failure. Once again, the central reason for this failure related to a lack of trust between the parties to the conflict. While movement on weapons decommissioning by the IRA seemed possible, in return for a more robust set of institutions that could not be so easily suspended, the DUP demanded photographic evidence of the decommissioning process before it was willing to enter the Executive alongside Sinn Fein. The IRA was reluctant to grant this and by December 2004 the initiative had collapsed in mutual recriminations, sparked off by DUP leader Ian Paisley's comment that the IRA should 'wear sackcloth and ashes' and demonstrate 'repentance' for its past actions.

This illustrated once again that there had been little transformation in the attitudes of the conflict parties towards one another since the GFA was reached in 1998; old enmities had been preserved (and in some cases had been intensified), with many unionists viewing the IRA (and by extension Sinn Fein) as unreconstructed terrorists, while republicans viewed the unionist community as reluctant partners in the peace process who were intent on undermining it.

Events that Damaged the Peace Process

Aside from the on-again-off-again nature of the political structures, a number of specific events have served to confirm communal suspicions since 1998, further heightening

mistrust, generating mutual recriminations and fuelling the collapse of the peace process. On 4 October 2002, the PSNI raided Sinn Fein's offices at Stormont as part of a police investigation into alleged intelligence-gathering operations by the IRA. This was a highly public event which embarrassed Sinn Fein and resulted in the UUP forcing the British Government to suspend devolved government on 14 October. This raid and the subsequent arrest of a leading Sinn Fein member for 'possessing documents likely to be of use to terrorists' allowed unionists to make a connection between Sinn Fein and the IRA, as well as fuelling the unionist perception that republicans were not committed to totally democratic methods. The fact that this public raid on Sinn Fein was not accompanied by a significant amount of evidence, or by a prosecution nearly three years later, has led many nationalists to believe that this was a cynical attempt to blacken the reputation of Sinn Fein and undermine the peace process and the institutions of the GFA. Notwithstanding the dearth of evidence, the PSNI raid on Sinn Fein's Stormont offices served to further strengthen the unionist view that republicans were not committed to exclusively peaceful methods and could not therefore be trusted in the devolved structures associated with the GFA.

Unionist trust in Sinn Fein's bona fides continued at a nadir at the end of 2004 following a massive 26 million GBP robbery of the Northern Bank in Belfast on 20 December. Responsibility for the largest bank raid in UK history was laid squarely at the door of the IRA by the PSNI, and by leading politicians in Britain and Ireland, with the inference that if the IRA had carried it out, then the leadership of Sinn Fein must also have been aware of it. Hugh Orde, chief constable of the PSNI, was quick to lay the blame for the robbery at the door of the IRA. 'In my opinion the Provisional IRA were responsible for this crime and all main lines of inquiry currently undertaken are in that direction' (BBC 7 January 2005). Despite an IRA statement denying any involvement in the robbery, few unionists were inclined to believe them, not least because Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern seemed happy to take the PSNI chief constable at his word: 'An operation of this magnitude . . . has obviously been planned at a stage when I was in negotiations with those that would know the leadership of the Provisional movement' (BBC 7 January 2005). While, significantly, no evidence has yet been produced by the PSNI that links the IRA with this robbery, perceptions are all-important, and Sinn Fein has been damaged by such allegations, as has the peace process more generally.

The Northern Bank robbery was followed by the murder of Robert McCartney, allegedly by members of the IRA, in the Short Strand area of Belfast on 30 January 2005. McCartney's murder heaped further pressure on the IRA and Sinn Fein over allegations that republicans had attempted to cover up the murder and had pressurized witnesses not to come forward to the police with information. McCartney's sisters led a public campaign to assist the PSNI investigation that involved a public rally in Belfast, worldwide media appearances and an invitation to the US White House to meet US Senator Edward Kennedy and President George W. Bush on St Patrick's Day (17 March 2005). These meetings provided disastrous public relations for Sinn Fein, as Gerry Adams was not invited to meet either Kennedy or Bush, and the contrasting treatment of Adams and the McCartney sisters was a deliberate and highly symbolic

slap in the face for the republican movement. This event cast the IRA (and its defenders) in the role of community parasites rather than community defenders, and such criticism coming from within its own community was a bruising experience for the Sinn Fein leadership. While the IRA issued a statement threatening to shoot those responsible for McCartney's murder, this was rejected by the family. Given that the IRA was supposed to be on a ceasefire, and committed to the peace process, this offer to murder its own 'volunteers' responsible for the McCartney murder was an alarming development to many. British Secretary of State Paul Murphy declared that 'there is no place for those who signed up to the Good Friday Agreement for the sort of arbitrary justice and murder that is being suggested here' (BBC 9 March 2005). The DUP leader, Ian Paisley, called for the leaders of Sinn Fein to be arrested following the IRA statement. 'The offer to shoot those responsible for the murder of Robert McCartney confirms again that terrorism is the only stock and trade of Sinn Fein/IRA' (BBC 9 March 2005).

While Sinn Fein denied any knowledge of this murder or any attempt by republicans to cover up the evidence or suppress statements to the police, few people within the unionist community were inclined to believe it.

These events were emblematic of a more endemic malaise in the peace process, namely the total lack of trust between the main ethno-national blocs, both at the community and at the elite political levels. The architecture of the GFA played some part in this, in that its institutions and procedures (e.g. parallel consent) tended to recognize and nourish ethno-national differences rather than transcending them. The British Government also has some responsibility here, as its repeated interventions to suspend the structures of the GFA acted as a safety net for nervous or recalcitrant unionists, and provided no sense of collective responsibility that went beyond the zero-sum ethnic equations. In short, it has allowed politicians (and the wider public) in Northern Ireland to squabble like children in the knowledge that the adults will intervene when the fighting gets too serious and restore order. 'The existence of this failsafe device [suspension of devolved powers] has perhaps not focused the minds of politicians in Northern Ireland hard enough on making the institutions work within the existing framework and has allowed the creation of crises in which one could prove that one remained a true believer in the cause, Republican or Unionist' (Wolff 2003: 18). It has also been suggested that the personalities of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahearn, and their habits of pragmatic deal-making, were more suited to the negotiations that led to the GFA than to the difficulties surrounding its implementation. 'The governments have tended to act as power-brokers, swaying to different pressures, rather than as upholders of an agreement . . . These skills and habits allowed the leaders to broker agreement in the first place. They were, however, less suited to the process of implementation, which required more formal respect for the principles of the agreement. Instead, government actions encouraged power-play within the institutions of the agreement' (Todd 2005: 105).

The GFA has failed to be implemented because there was never a clear agreement about what it amounted to in the first place or how its modalities would progress, and no one

is sufficiently afraid of what will happen if and when it fails. Muddling through and the ‘cold peace’ of direct rule from London, closely linked with British–Irish cooperation and internal reforms within Northern Ireland, has proved to be most people’s least worst option. However, the troubled implementation of the GFA does not mean that political progress has not taken place in Northern Ireland since 1998.

Conclusion

While the stop–go nature of the peace process has been frustrating for many of its supporters, the picture is not completely bleak, despite the inertia associated with the establishment of the institutions associated with the agreement. Behind the headlines of the GFA’s various implementation problems, significant changes have nonetheless been taking place in Northern Ireland since 1998 that hold out the possibility of progress in the future. Crucially among these, all the major political parties, including Sinn Fein, now accept that Northern Ireland will remain within the UK for as long as a majority of the people living in the region wish to do so, and the main paramilitary factions show no desire to return to violence in pursuit of their political objectives. By endorsing the terms of the GFA and enthusiastically playing their part in the political institutions derived from it, Sinn Fein has de facto made Northern Ireland a ‘successful political entity’. Pro-GFA unionists, meanwhile, have recognized that Northern Ireland is not *exactly* the same as other regions within the UK, and even the DUP are not seriously quarrelling with either power sharing or a North–South dimension in principle.² While Sinn Fein has recognized Northern Ireland as a political reality to be reformed/terminated by democratic means, unionists (even those critical of the GFA) have accepted the principle of devolved government based on power sharing with an Irish dimension. In other words, despite the implementation problems plaguing the GFA, its basic political geometry has been accepted by the vast majority of people living there.

While ethno-national divisions remain, and have in some cases have become entrenched, the divisions between unionists and nationalists have narrowed significantly, and revolve around emotional issues such as mistrust and bitterness rather than the political mechanics of the GFA itself, or indeed disagreements over the constitutional sovereignty of Northern Ireland. While the success of the DUP and Sinn Fein at the 2003 Assembly elections seems to preclude progress, it does provide inter-ethnic stability for future agreements, as it is unlikely that either the SDLP or the UUP would be willing (or able) to undermine any agreement that was reached. There are signs that beyond the rhetoric both the DUP and Sinn Fein are preparing their parties and their wider constituencies of support to enter government together. At the 2005 Sinn Fein Ard Fheis (annual convention), for example, there was evidence that the party was laying the groundwork for Sinn Fein’s entry onto the Policing Board of the PSNI, with more traditional republican motions criticizing British ‘crown forces’ being heavily defeated. Similarly, the DUP now regularly participates in television debates that include members of Sinn Fein (which it would have boycotted in the past) and Ian Paisley himself visited Dublin for meetings with the Irish Government in 2004. So there are signs that the main protagonists have been tiptoeing slowly towards one another despite the ongoing inertia with the implementation of the GFA.

Nevertheless, as a framework for political settlement, the GFA has so far failed to impact upon the grass-roots communities in Northern Ireland, especially in urban interface areas where community conflict is most acutely experienced. As Todd has argued, the institutions of the GFA became assimilated into old patterns of interaction, where the revolutionary innovations of the agreement were not matched by similarly radical changes in the wider political context within which the GFA and its institutions tried to operate (Todd 2005: 92). The GFA, for instance, had very little to say about community sectarianism, focusing more upon elite-level political institutions, and as a consequence it has lacked relevance at the grass-roots level. This is illustrated by the fact that, despite the existence of the GFA and the long-standing paramilitary ceasefires, the number of non-fatal shootings rose from 216 in 1998 to 330 in 2001 (Wolff 2003: 15) while in 2000 there were 262 punishment shootings and beatings (Tonge 2002: 212).

The key difference between these statistics on violence and those before 1998 is that after 1998 most violence was directed inwards by paramilitary groups and generated by intra-ethnic rivalries, rather than directed outwards across the ethno-national divide. In this sense, the political conflict within Northern Ireland as previously defined (zero-sum ethno-national dispute between two polarized blocs) is in its death throes, but violent conflict remains and will do so for the foreseeable future. This is both predictable and natural given the past 40 years of low-intensity warfare and sectarianism within the region. It is within this context that the peace process in Northern Ireland should be assessed, where moving out of conflict is seen as a complex, difficult and long-term process, where setback rather than breakthrough is the norm. Given this set of more realistic performance indicators, the stop-go nature of the Northern Ireland peace process begins to look less disappointing and perhaps provides a more realizable way forward for the future.

Notes

1. During a pre-referendum speech and photo-opportunity on 20 May 1998, Tony Blair unveiled the following handwritten pledges to the people of Northern Ireland, intended to sway nervous unionists to support the terms of the agreement. 'I pledge to the people of Northern Ireland:
 - No change in the status of Northern Ireland without the express consent of the people of Northern Ireland.
 - Power to take decisions returned to a Northern Ireland Assembly, with accountable North/South co-operation.
 - Fairness and equality guaranteed for all.
 - Those who use or threaten violence excluded from the Government of Northern Ireland.
 - Prisoners kept in unless violence is given up for good'.
2. The DUP's manifesto for the 2005 Westminster general election, entitled 'Leadership That's Working', focused on what it was demanding from Sinn Fein before devolution is restored to Northern Ireland, but did not reject the underlying political architecture embodied within the GFA (<<http://www.dup.org.uk/>>).

Appendix

Chronology of Events Since 1998

- 10 Apr. 1998 Good Friday Agreement is concluded and published
- 10 May 1998 At a special conference in Dublin, Sinn Fein votes to change its constitution, ending its abstention policy and allowing its candidates to take seats in a new Northern Ireland Assembly
- 22 May 1998 Referendums on the Agreement in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In this first all-Ireland poll since 1918, 71% of people vote for the GFA in Northern Ireland with 28% voting against it. The turnout is 81%. In the Irish Republic, 94% vote in favour with only 5% voting against it and a turnout of 56% of the electorate
- 25 June 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly elections are held, to a new 108-member Assembly
- 1 July 1998 First meeting of the 'Shadow' Assembly and election of David Trimble as first minister-designate and Seamus Mallon as deputy first minister-designate. This is referred to as the shadow assembly as powers have not yet been devolved to it from Westminster
- 15 Aug. 1998 29 people are killed following a bomb explosion in Omagh. The bomb was planted by the Real IRA and was the single worst incident in 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland
- 29 Nov. 1999 The Northern Ireland Assembly meets, triggering the d'Hondt mechanism and the nomination of 10 ministers to the Northern Ireland Executive
- 2 Dec. 1999 Devolved powers formally pass from Westminster to Belfast and the new Executive meets for the first time
- 11 Feb. 2000 After 72 days, the Assembly and Executive are suspended by British Secretary of State Peter Mandelson due to lack of detailed timetable from the IRA on weapons decommissioning
- 6 May 2000 The IRA releases a statement saying that it is willing to begin a process that would 'completely and verifiably' put its weapons beyond use
- 27 May 2000 UUP leader and First Minister David Trimble secures his party's support to re-enter power-sharing Assembly and Executive with Sinn Fein despite the absence of IRA weapons decommissioning
- 30 May 2000 The devolved powers suspended in February are restored to Northern Ireland
- 23 Oct. 2001 The IRA begins weapons decommissioning, in its own words, 'in order to save the peace process', in an act verified by the Independent Commission on Decommissioning as 'significant'
- 4 Nov. 2001 New Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) formally comes into being, replacing the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC)
- 4 Oct. 2002 Sinn Fein offices at Stormont are raided by the PSNI as part of alleged investigation into an IRA intelligence-gathering operation. The UUP subsequently threatens to walk away from the Assembly unless action is taken by the British Government
- 14 Oct. 2002 British Secretary of State John Reid announces the suspension of devolved government and the return of direct rule

- 1 May 2003 British Prime Minister Tony Blair announces the postponement of new elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly because of a lack of clarity over the IRA position on decommissioning
- 26 Nov. 2003 The delayed Assembly election finally takes place. The DUP and Sinn Fein emerge as the largest parties within unionism and nationalism
- 3 Feb. 2004 A review of the working of the Good Friday Agreement begins at Stormont, involving all the major political parties
- 18 Sep. 2004 Three days of intensive negotiations at Leeds Castle end with the parties failing to secure an agreement over the restoration of devolved government
- 4 Oct. 2004 DUP leader Ian Paisley has a landmark meeting in Dublin with the Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. This is the first time the DUP has officially met an Irish prime minister in Dublin
- 29 Nov. 2004 Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams holds first-ever meeting with Chief Constable of the PSNI Hugh Orde
- 20 Dec. 2004 The largest bank raid in UK history takes place at the Northern Bank in Belfast where over 26 million GBP is stolen. The PSNI, as well as senior members of the Irish Government, place responsibility for the robbery on the IRA, although the IRA denies any involvement. Despite such allegations, no charges have yet been brought against any members of the IRA in relation to the robbery
- 30 Jan. 2005 Robert McCartney, a Catholic from the Short Strand area of Belfast, is murdered in a bar, allegedly by members of the IRA. This murder and its alleged cover-up by republican sympathizers cause huge embarrassment for Sinn Fein
- 17 Mar. 2005 Senator Edward Kennedy and President George Bush meet Robert McCartney's sisters in Washington and refuse to meet Gerry Adams, who is also in Washington as part of the St Patrick's Day celebrations
- 5 May 2005 The date set for the Westminster general election

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