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The Northern Ireland Peace Process in an Age of Austerity

95 percent of wars today are civil wars, 70 percent of them ethnic conflicts. As the leading source of global insecurity, internal conflicts and their terrorist outriders cry out for solutions. Does Northern Ireland shine as a beacon of hope for strife-torn regions from Congo and Palestine to Iraq and Afghanistan? Those in Northern Ireland, Britain and the Republic of Ireland would answer in the affirmative: indeed, Gerry Adams travels far and wide as an emissary for the Northern Ireland model of conflict resolution.

Yet not all is perfect in the model province. Growing dissident republican attacks and ongoing loyalist paramilitary violence have taken place just as fresh cuts in public spending are beginning to bite in a province whose economy largely depends on the public sector. Economic turmoil in the South adds another potential source of uncertainty into the mix. Though media coverage of Northern Ireland tailed off after the guns fell silent in 1997 and, especially, since constitutional settlements in 1998 and 2007, progress cannot be taken for granted. With these developments in mind, PQ decided that the time was opportune to revisit the Northern Ireland question. Contributors to this issue were asked to address the theme of 'Northern Ireland: Fragile Peace in an Age of Austerity.' Some twenty other experts from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and mainland Britain joined them at our day-long roundtable symposium in the Council Room at Birkbeck College on 14 October 2011. The event was wide-ranging, passionate and productive: as Jean Seaton remarked at the time, the tragic history of Northern Ireland tends to ensure that debate is rarely boring.

Villains of the Peace?

If there was a common thread in the discussion, it was this: a return to war is extremely unlikely, but many barriers must be overcome to transform the conflict from a 'cold peace' into a lasting one.

Colm Campbell[1] rightly claimed that a truth commission along the lines of the South African model needed to implemented before one could even begin to speak of the conflict having been 'resolved.' Indeed, the quest for a common narrative of the Northern Ireland conflict remains as elusive as ever.

Martyn Frampton and Jon Tonge, among others, write of the measurable increase in republican dissident activity since Sinn Fein inked the St. Andrews Agreement and recognised the authority of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in 2007. This rise has been processed differently by the two major ethnic communities. Tonge presents results that show a far greater level of concern over the rise of dissident activity expressed by Unionists than by Nationalists. During the discussion, Henry Patterson pointed to the tangible sense of fear of dissidents that exists among border Protestants in parts of Tyrone, Armagh, Fermanagh and other Catholic-majority areas. Though the dissidents are no threat to Northern Ireland's place in the Union, their campaign of intimidation in border areas comes hard on the heels of years of Provisional IRA (PIRA) assassinations and ethnic cleansing.

On the loyalist side, Graham Spencer and Peter Shirlow reveal that the civilianisation of paramilitary men and former prisoners has made progress, and can be measured in the form of fewer punishment beatings. Yet the behaviour of the paramilitaries is often unpredictable, as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)'s murder of loyalist ex-prisoner Bobby Moffett in May 2010 revealed. Dissident republican and loyalist movements share a common problem: they are not supported by the wider ethnic communities they claim to represent. Though this has always been the case, prior to the mid-1990s armed republicans could rely on the tacit support of a significant minority, especially in their 'home turf' of, for example, the Bogside in Derry or the Falls in Belfast. The lack of legitimation was deemed more of a problem for loyalist groups. Since then, with the severing of the connection between republican armed groups and Sinn Fein, that constituency has shrunk. The sense of going it alone - or, as Tonge and Bean noted, waiting for history to confer vindication - has taken over. Like loyalist groups, dissident republicans must soldier on without communal applause.

The vacuum of legitimacy produces groups which tend to be localised, fragmented, and therefore less predictable. This is certainly not the first time such movements have splintered. Niall O'Dochartaigh reminds us that splits in armed republicanism in the 1940s and 50s took place as vertical links to politicians and the community evaporated. Dissident movements are also not without local command structures: as Graham Spencer claims with respect to Bobby Moffett's murder in May 2010 by the UVF, leaders can act - and brutally - when threatened by insubordination. Yet these hierarchies can sometimes be put to good use: Shirlow cites the nonaggression pacts between leaders of dissident republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, who have used their influence and power of fear to dissuade their ranks from retaliating in response to each other's attacks. This is heartening since it is at the interface between these two sets of political pariahs that a replay of the Troubles' tit-for-tat script might emerge. Such actors also express concern over any processes (trials, government discourse or public enquiries) that threaten to criminalise them or otherwise challenge their protected legal status.

Yet the calm is fragile. Though acting to police violent rogue elements in their ranks, paramilitary leaders may occasionally look the other way so long as troublemakers do not threaten their interests. The local East Belfast UVF's involvement in the Short Strand riots in June 2011 was excused by the leadership as 'letting off steam.' This intimates that comity between loyalist groups and dissident republicans cannot be taken for granted. A loyalist strike against Catholics in retaliation for dissident activity, or vice-versa, cannot be ruled out, though Shirlow doubts that loyalists will hit back. Perhaps the anxieties of the Security Forces, MI5 and the PSNI have a basis in reality, and not solely, as Colm Campbell suggested at the roundtable, in a convenient narrative designed to protect their budgets and influence in a time of economic contraction.

Austerity and the Risk of Violence

The economic crisis is bad in the North, whose economy is heavily dependent on a British Treasury which has announced a plan of significant public spending cuts. It is worse in the South, where bad financial decisions in major banks threaten the very solvency of the country. It is often presumed that austerity contributes to violence, as was clear in interwar Germany, for example. Indeed, comparative politics research shows that poorer countries are more likely to experience civil wars. Yet in Northern Ireland, dissidents and paramilitaries inhabited deprived economic zones even during the boom years. It might even be argued that a general economic malaise, by sharing the pain, may mollify the alienation of the lumpenproletariat. On the other hand, Frank Bean and Graham Spencer warned at the conference that socioeconomic deprivation has the potential to increase the risk of violence. As Bean remarks, the new Catholic middle class in the north is heavily dependent on the public sector and may experience alienation as cuts begin to threaten their newfound status. Whereas economic protest in other countries commonly flows along lines of class, in Northern Ireland it is frequently expressed through the idiom of the 'national question.' If so, poverty could expand the constituency for dissident republican violence.

That said, Jon Tonge's analysis of contemporary surveys finds that support for dissident republicanism is not primarily predicted by social class. Rather, self-identifying as a Nationalist, an ideological stance largely independent of class, is most significant. Age is, if anything, a more important social indicator than class. Catholics in their 20s and 30s are more supportive of the motives of dissidents than those over 60. Religion matters too: the secular are much more likely to sympathise with the motives of dissident republicans than practicing Catholics.

On the loyalist side, notes Spencer, a withdrawal of state funding for conflict transformation work could lead to trouble. The Conflict Transformation Initiative (CTI) has proven effective in easing former paramilitaries from violence towards civilian activity. For the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) with its communal welfare function, public money has been instrumental in providing alternatives to paramilitary membership for ex-prisoners. Ex-prisoners, whom Shirlow notes tend to suffer health problems and a feeling of having been manipulated by Unionist political

elites, in turn help to dissuade younger men from joining loyalist paramilitary movements. Should funding dry up, Spencer fears that the very real progress that has been made thus far might begin to unravel. Shirlow demurs, citing the robustness of the Conflict Transformation Initiative and the degree of investment that loyalist leaders have sunk into the civilisanisation process. Brian Feeney's impression was that the loyalist working class were a 'lost tribe', lacking access to jobs and social mobility. For Spencer, a withdrawal of support for the good work being done, especially in UDA-controlled areas such as parts of North Belfast, would not help loyalists overcome their sense of hopelessness. He underscores the chasm between loyalist groups and the Unionist mainstream, citing loyalists who feel they had better relations with Dublin than with Unionist politicians. Healing this divide, urges Spencer, would pay considerable dividends in terms of reducing the alienation of working-class loyalists.

In an interesting intervention on gender, Brian Feeney[2] noted that female loyalist participants at a meeting of loyalist and republican ex-prisoners he attended appeared to be more hardline in their attitudes than the often battle-scarred loyalist men. Cathy Gormley-Heenan[3] and Jean Seaton probed this comment further, asking whether there was a gendered aspect to the militant edges of loyalism and republicanism. Peter Shirlow commented that this may have to do with the fact that men had been through programmes of civilianisation and shared a common 'prison narrative' which abetted mutual understanding. For the loyalist women, exposure to men of violence in the Nationalist community was novel, shocking, and lacked common reference points.

To Strike or to Talk: A Counterinsurgency Strategy for Dissident Republicanism

Martyn Frampton, in this issue, leans toward the 'glass half empty' perspective, concentrating our attention on the step-change increase in dissident attacks between 2002-6 and 2007-11. The trajectory of Sinn Fein since St. Andrews, from decommissioning and recognising the PSNI to its disastrous performance in the southern elections removed the aura of omnipotence from

Adams and McGuinness. McGuinness and Adams' labelling of dissidents as traitors to Ireland and their attending the funeral of a slain Catholic policemen has prompted armed republicans to accuse Sinn Fein of treachery and a wholesale abandoning of 'physical force' principles they once held dear. For Frampton, this new phase may prove the opening stanza of a new 'Long War' in which dissidents pose an endemic threat. They cannot disrupt the peace, but can successfully challenge the authority of Sinn Fein and the validity of the entire Peace Process. In compelling the Security Forces to re-militarise, and police - especially Catholic recruits - to abandon soft-skinned policing, they prevent normalisation, and thus transformation, of the conflict. How might their deadly attacks end? Frampton envisions dissidents embarking upon a slow learning path akin to that trod by PIRA during the Troubles: successive military and political failures will eventually produce the realisation that theirs is a 'politics of illusion.'

Frampton's contention that PIRA were largely brought to the table by the actions of the Security Forces was reiterated by Tom Hennessey[4], who said that PIRA were forced to settle for far less than what they wanted. In his words, 'Brits won, Unionists won,' because PIRA were forced to sign up to a ceasefire without having first secured the prospect of a United Ireland. This was, in his terms, a 'strategic defeat.' Henry Patterson added that infiltration greatly increased the risk for PIRA volunteers towards the end of the armed campaign, dissuading them from joining.

Frampton and Hennessey's contention that PIRA was 'defeated' was roundly challenged by Paul Dixon, who insisted that the conflict was a muddled stalemate in which nobody realised who had won or lost. He charged Frampton with adopting a 'neo-conservative' interpretation of the Northern Ireland conflict in which PIRA are considered to have been crushed by force and forced to negotiate from a position of weakness. This, warns Dixon, gives succour to the dissidents - who wish to challenge Sinn Fein - as well as military hawks in other conflicts who might draw the erroneous conclusion that one must first defeat terrorists before talking to them. Dixon stressed that it was the messy process of 'constructive ambiguity' in statements and constitutions, incremental negotiations and shifts of narrative that moved the tortoise of peace toward the finish line. The use of

deception if not outright lying to core constituencies by politicians from Paisley and Adams to Tony Blair helped finesse the process along, developing momentum to a point where it seemed inevitable. Violence offers the illusion of a clean sweep, but for Dixon there is no substitute for the dance and theatre of politics and negotiation.

Eamonn O'Kane[5], partly echoing Dixon, reminded the audience that in the 1990s, nobody believed the Security Forces had defeated the IRA, and there is a temptation to reinterpret the past to draw the conclusion that the British government was winning. It follows from this new narrative that the British government conceded too much to the republicans in their zeal to silence PIRA guns and bombs. Henry Patterson agreed somewhat with O'Kane, saying that the security apparatus did not think in terms of a decisive victory or a strategy of striking first and talking later. They operated in the heat of the moment, seeking to put maximum military pressure on PIRA whilst remaining open to negotiation. Colm Campbell demurred against Frampton from another angle, claiming that the decisive factor in turning the PIRA away from violence was not the security campaign but Britain's abandonment of extra-judicial methods like internment or Bloody Sunday-style assaults. This helped, in his view, to increase Catholic support for law and order, and, eventually, a peace deal. In response, Frampton rejected Dixon's 'neo-conservative' label, pointing out that military variables could not be ignored when it came to explaining PIRA's strategic shifts toward an eventual ceasefire. He responded to O'Kane, claiming that the Security Forces realized they were succeeding and withheld concessions to PIRA until after the IRA Army Council had committed to a ceasefire. Counterinsurgency can coexist with negotiation.

Militant Groups and Mainstream Parties

Ginger groups do not exist in isolation from mainstream political movements. Henry Patterson's work examines shifts in the wider politics of Unionism within which paramilitaries operate. He finds that the discourse of 'civic Unionism' - oriented to mainland Britain and pan-

British symbols - has failed. Its pre-eminent sponsor, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) of David Trimble, has been eviscerated at the polls. Yet the UUP programme in 1998 was basically a carbon copy of that to which its hardline adversary Ian Paisley (and his DUP) signed up to in 2007. However, the framing of Trimble in 1998 as a traitor by hardline Unionists stuck a chord among rank-and-file 'No' Unionists unprepared to accept 'guns in government.' Trimble was ahead of Unionist opinion and his sacrifice prepared the Unionist electorate for compromise. Drawing off Unionist ire, he primed the narrative which the DUP only marginally altered at St. Andrews.

Paisley, who had cynically jumped on the anti-Trimble bandwagon, was thus able to perform a volte-face and survive 'the Deal' with Sinn Fein and even 'Chuckle Brothers' scenes with Martin McGuinness. In addition, he benefited from the absence of a credible hardline challenger. Though voted out as leader of his own church, his party's stock among the Protestant masses survived the Deal. The British government, focused primarily on ending the security threat posed by violent republicanism, never really understood what made Unionists tick. In sealing Trimble's fate by refusing to hold Sinn Fein to its Good Friday commitments, they assisted the DUP and ensured a deal, but at a cost. The price was the head of moderate, positive, outward-looking Unionism. Integration with British modernity and high culture has yielded to a narrower ethnic Ulster nationalism.

This is nowhere more evident than in Northern Ireland's higher education sector. Already displaying little concern at Protestant underrepresentation in the student body, the DUP has, in addition, approved a new two-tier fee structure. This favours Northern Ireland students and discriminates against those from mainland Britain, further weakening the capacity of Unionists to maintain British cultural connections. For Patterson, Nationalism is more self-confident, but this has been dented by the republic's debt crisis. The polyannaish view of many in the English political class that the Celtic Tiger would take the problem of Northern Ireland off their hands has now been exposed as the naive illusion it always was.

International Factors

A number of those present commented on the importance of adopting a bird's eye view of the conflict to better situate in comparative context. Niall O'Dochartaigh, in this volume, taking the West German and South Korean examples as his points of comparison, finds that 'artificial' borders tend to naturalise as networks of communication and jurisdiction bed down. Yet a substantial majority of those in the south of Ireland remain attached to the narrative of an all-island republic, defying this logic. Bill Kissane[6] added that this might be explained by the geographic unity of Ireland as an island, which has become an icon that those in the republic identify with. A truncated 26-county geographical image akin to Northern Ireland's 6-county representation would be deemed alien.

Brendan O' Duffy[7] remarked that the British-Irish intergovernmental context needed to be factored in to any analysis of the Peace Process. A focus solely upon local actors and their interaction with the Security Forces fails to consider the process of mutual evolution among the British and Irish governments who in turn brough pressure to bear on the protagonists, thereby helping to shape the outlines of a settlement. The American dimension was mentioned by Paul Morland[8], who highlighted the importance of anti-terrorist discourse in the United States in changing attitudes toward the IRA among American politicians and, especially, Irish Americans.

The Role of the Media in Northern Ireland

Sparked by *Political Quarterly* editor Jean Seaton, whose research on the BBC encompasses its contribution to the Northern Ireland question, the roundtable turned to issues pertaining to changes in the media in Northern Ireland. The political sophistication of the Northern Ireland audience and its appetite for political reporting mark it out as distinct from other UK regions. The degree of international media attention on the province, with local leaders attaining global profiles

while many ordinary people were caught up in extraordinary circumstances, make Northern Ireland an important laboratory for media studies. Greg McLaughlin writes that the BBC's role in a changing Northern Ireland is very much a matter for debate. Cutbacks and pressures to commercialise have forced the corporation to prune its politics coverage. Meanwhile local news outlets complain that the BBC's size and clout make it that much harder for them to survive.

Mark Devenport, who has covered Northern Ireland politics for the BBC for many years, writes that the media in Northern Ireland is being buffeted by processes that have affected other jurisdictions, and by dynamics all its own. As elsewhere, the internet is reshaping the Northern Ireland media: Devenport and McLaughlin both comment that newspaper circulation has fallen drastically on both sides of the communal divide. Unionist papers seem to have suffered somewhat more than Nationalist ones, but the latter have not been spared the carnage. Blogs and websites like the BBC site have absorbed some of this readership, but there is also the reality that peace brings a change of focus and loss of interest at home and abroad. During the Troubles, the priority was on speed and the reporting of fast-moving violent events. After the second ceasefire, the focus shifted to the minutiae of constitutional changes and internal party politics. This dimmed international interest. Since the devolved institutions have begun to operate, mainland British attention - always fickle - has rapidly faded. This is manifested, comments McLaughlin, in the multiple closure of the Northern Ireland desks of British and international newspapers. In some cases, Northern Ireland's important reservoir of media talent and equipment is being reassigned to cover stories on the British mainland.

Meanwhile local concerns have shifted from politics toward the more 'normal' distractions of lifestyle and celebrity culture. There is certainly an important role for local media in scrutinising politicians' record on bread and butter issues and the more infrequent episodes of violence or local political change remain newsworthy items in Northern Ireland. Yet this creates a new challenge: the new generation of reporters and audiences lacks a familiarity with the reference points of the Troubles, and may have difficulty contextualising events as adroitly as the journalists who cut their

teeth during Northern Ireland's turbulent period. The craft of journalism in Northern Ireland is evolving in response to the flow of events, as it did when guns and bombs gave way to constitutional wrangling and what Devenport refers to as Northern Ireland 'kremlinology.'

All told, while our contributors find cause for continued faith in Northern Ireland's transformation, the current climate of austerity poses challenges to its society, politics and media. Only time will tell whether the encouraging developments in Northern Ireland during the first decade of the new millennium have built up sufficient momentum to survive the current lean times.

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