Has the Northern Ireland question been resolved?

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The legitimacy of Northern Ireland and its constitutional position has been at the centre of political and social conflict for 800 years. The 20th century and early 21st century watched the metamorphosis from the "Troubles" to what was known as the Northern Ireland Peace Process. The polarised unionism and nationalism spheres of the political arena needed a framework in which a solution could be pursed. In assessing the resolution of the Northern Ireland question, it is necessary to consider the wide variety of political initiatives undertaken and their success rate in social and international satisfaction and approval. These include the analysis of the re-birth of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) 1970; the premature ideas of devolution by means of Sunningdale Agreement 1973; the rise and fall of attempted assemblies; cessation of violence; changing attitudes and political developments; fundamental set-backs to the Northern Ireland Peace Process; and the current situation. The essay begins with an appraisal of the origins of violence and the four competing explanations of the problem, before considering the merits of the electoral and constitutional politics that built the framework for a devolved government in Northern Ireland today.

The struggle for Irish independence from Britain can be traced back to as early as 1641, yet for the purpose of this essay, the campaign and its domino effect conflicts will begin with the 1920 Government of Ireland Act and the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. The question of discrimination as set out by Jonathon Tonge "Northern nationalists, trapped within what quickly developed into a unionist-dominated enclave, did not like Northern Ireland and loathed the discrimination they endured", became of key importance post-treaties of 1920 and 1921; which may have been able to bring a "fairly peaceful closure to the Irish question" [1] However, the discrimination that occurred within Northern Ireland can be "scarcely disputed"[2] lead to agitation on the nationalist side and eventually to the rise of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement (NICRA), an umbrella term for the uneasy coalition of nationalists, republicans and socialists, on-aligned radicals, working class, non-ideological Catholic 'defenders', middle class moderate Catholics, veteran Republican IRA sympathizers, trade unionists and a small number of liberal unionists; with little in common other than a shared desire to confront a discriminatory unionist regime. The modest unionist reforms agenda put forward by Prime Minister Terrance O'Neill in the 1960's reflected the growing feeling of potential reform in Northern Ireland, furthermore influenced on an international scale by the Black Civil Rights Movement in United States of America and Paris Student Protests in France. In practice, O'Neill's reforms did not change any constitutional illegitimacy as perceived by Catholics, combined with the negative spin from Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble put on NICRA as "the republican movement in another guise"[3], reflected the sceptic nature of unionism of equal rights at this time, in a period unable to move forward dramatically. This is furthermore reflected in the policing state and their primary concerns against the threat of nationalism; "Farrell (1983) highlights the insecure nature of the state, in which a large number of Protestants were employed in the police force to ward off a supposed threat from nationalists."[4] The discriminatory actions of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were not just "republican propaganda"[5], as illustrated with the European Court of Human Rights confirming the ill-treatment of suspects during the 1970s. The idea of policing and the unjust sectarian nature would be a common theme throughout the Northern Irish conflict and timelines the progress through into the 21st century and its advancements.

Parlimilitary violence was the form of expression for dissidents and the discontented within Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles. From 1970 there was a split within the IRA on the basis of a clash of desired direction, participatory politics or continuing with an armed struggle. The Provisional IRA was formed to continue with violence as a means of battle for the 'war', aiding the disintegration of relations between the now occupying British army and the catholic community. "The British army, Royal Ulster Constabulary and Ulster Defence Regiment were the main

targets of the most sustained campaign in the history of the IRA"[6], leading to a total of 3,326 deaths between 1969-97 during the Troubles. [7]It is important to understand the number of civilian deaths, totalling at 2,372 [8] to reflect the feeling of the Northern Irish population on a bread and butter level by the time peace talks can begin. The work of the IRA throughout this period was insufficient to end British rule in Northern Ireland, despite nearly 60% of deaths were accountable to republican paramilitaries in aid of the cause and the "long war"[9]. To resolve the Northern Ireland question, it is understood that certain areas of the problem, explanations, had to be addressed individually and it was in the hands of those without guns to execute the changes that Northern Ireland needed to where it is today.

Thematically, the problem of Northern Ireland has been tried to be resolved in different ways, based on the different aspects of the conflict itself. The question of who has the claim to Northern Ireland has resulted in a number of initiatives to share power on a north-south east-west axis. Constitutional claims has sparked debate and is a key cause of speed bumps on the road to peace, until 1998 Republic of Ireland still held constitutional claim on the basis of the entire island and was part of the political agenda in the Irish government. The Sunningdale agreement of 1973 which provided a political blueprint for northern Irish cross boarder relations; was criticised and opposed by the unionist for its clauses on the Council for Ireland, which appeared step too far into an Irish dimension. The idea of sharing power with not only nationalists, but with the Republic itself was met with scepticism. John Taylor suggested in an interview Frank Millar in the Irish Times that the Sunningdale Agreement and power sharing failed because of lack of political support in the country where people would "not accept the logic"[10], he further states that it was indeed the Irish Council that was the main reason for unionist discontent, "the power-sharing government Executive was overthrown mainly because of the executive powers given to the Council of Ireland, That was the main issue"[11]. Structurally the initiative wasn't convincing enough for the unionists, despite the declaration noting that there "could be no change in the constitutional status if Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority of its population"[12]. The lesson learnt that the unionist required a lot more reassurance to move forward and the nationalists were still left out in the cold.

By 1985, irrespective of unionist opinion, as demonstrated by the "Ulster Says No" campaign and rally at Belfast City Hall attracting 100,000 people, and the resignation of fifteen unionist MPs, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was passed, giving the Irish government a greater role in assisting matters on political, security, legal and cooperative measures in Northern Ireland.[13]. This agreement followed what appeared to be a "barren time for Northern Ireland politics"[14]. Policies of Ulsterization and Criminalization were further wedging a gap between the elite and the IRA criminals on the ground. "Frustrated by failure to achieve power sharing, the British government was now prepared to allow the Irish government to 'put forward views and proposals' concerning matters that 'are not the responsibility of a devolved administration in Northern Ireland" [15] The influence of Anglo-Irish governmental dialogue was a result of no prospect of local agreement, at this stage and in this time period of the Troubles, and the grievances entrenched were trying to be insufficiently and ineffectively satisfied.

The attempted solution of the re-establishment of a devolved government was the aim of the late 1980s early 1990s, this marks the beginning of the Peace Process, and most significantly, the moderation of republican politics. This is such demonstrated The Hume-Adams talks began in 1988 between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, followed by The Brooke Initiative, communicating with the IRA. The latter involved what is known as the Back Channel[16], a line of communication developed in the 1980s with a Catholic Priest, Father Alec Reid, acting as an intermediary, conveying to Gerry Adams and visa versa"[17] The private development of relations was concurrently accompanied by public political initiatives, This included the Downing Street Declaration in December 1993, whereby both communities were being fulfilled their own concerns are priorities. The ethno-nationalism of the unionist community with the assurance Northern Ireland would remain constitutionally aligned with Great Britain relying on the majority vote. On the nationalist side of the Declaration, the idea of self-determination, an idea of supporting their rights to determine their own future provided their consent both sides of the boarder. Furthermore, on a paramilitary scale during this détente of the early 1990s, the IRA believed it might grow and strengthen by means of an unarmed strategy and a cessation of violence was announced in 1994. Suspicions surrounding this unarmed strategy remained within the unionist community, and by 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement saw a hostile welcome from less moderate parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party, despite the advancements in the Peace Process prior.

"Sunningdale for slow learners", famously named by Seamus Mallon, otherwise know as the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and was the modern day adaptation of the early power-sharing proposal in 1973. Key changes had occurred within the societal attitudes and the gestures made by the IRA through cessation in 1997 and multi party talks beginning the same year. The former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern spoke in an interview on the inevitable fate of the Sunningdale Agreement by comparison the Belfast Agreement 25 years later. "Sunningdale hadn't got a hope. We didn't have a hope. It was like a negotiation in a vacuum without people being involved…it wasn't until the '90s that there was a genuine attempt, in my view, to try and start pulling people together. And it was only when you got a collective position that you could make any advance"[18]. The Northern Ireland question is comparable to a self help programme; it is only when the paramilitaries began to seek other means of achieving long term objectives, and when unionists see the benefits of local government by contrast to Anglo-Irish government that a devolved government could be addressed.

The Good Friday Agreement as a means of conflict resolution dealt with key areas of providing a new framework for the Northern Irish Assembly. Of the devolved responsibilities, most lay with the 'grand coalition' executive and this diffusion of power was accompanied by inter dependence. [19]; This domino effect of collapsing institutions occurred in 2002. The second means of reducing conflict through the Good Friday Agreement was the equality agenda between rival groupings; "tolerance and acceptance, before integration underpinned the thinking of the Good Friday Agreement"[20]. However, it was clear that the pro-verses anti-GFA and electoral rivalries within the unionist bloc, primarily DUP and UUP, destabilized the 1998 Agreement and undermined its "diminution of interethnic conflict."[21]

This period from May 1998 until May 2000 can be analysed and timeline in the rise in the level of unionist disaffection, immediately from the first elections to the new Northern Ireland assembly whereby the Ulster Unionist Party became the largest party, having to face a power struggle within the party ranks as discontented with leader David Trimble grew. "It can be questioned whether a viable and active level of support for the peace process has ever really existed within the unionist community"[22], evidence can be determined from such actions as the 12th July Orange Parade through Ballymoney Co. Antrim which ended in the murder of three Catholic brothers aged between eight and eleven, a blatant sectarian act personifying the inability of extreme unionists to move as fast as the peace process would desire. Similarly, the Omagh Bombing on the 15th August 1998 at the fault of the Real IRA killed 29 people including women pregnant with twins; all contributed to the set-backs in the Peace Process and pushed the solution of the Northern Ireland question further away.

Devolution was part of a New Labour Blairite programme that was rolled out throughout the UK; Wales Scotland and Northern Ireland, and due to this national programme, the devolution of Northern Ireland was in a new political context whereby unionists could still feel part of Great Britain. The consociational approach to the new devolved government has received criticism for its power-sharing dynamic and the limited devolved powers itself. Granted in 2000, Rick Professor Rick Wilford of Queen's University Belfast questions the changes in the new power sharing government in control of local issues, potentially a critic of consociationalism "Do these changes promote the politics of accommodation or the politics of constraint and threaten gridlock?"[23] The idea of consociationalism has been mirrored throughout Europe primarily in Belgium. The suspension of the assembly in 2002 was a clear indication that the assembly could not survive until trust and relations inter-party and cross community could evolve into a stronger position. Issues of debate such as decommissioning and policing remained hurdles for the Northern Irish Parties and the Peace Process could not tolerate them whilst concurrently attempted to modernise the system of the preferred peaceful Northern Ireland.

Decommissioning, policing and disaffection played a quintessential role in the Peace Process and in the resolution of the problems. Peter Mandelson articulated two key issues when he visited USA in April 2006, those of "commitment to supporting the police and an end to IRA criminality."[24] It was these two concerns that would be the final nail in the framework for a peaceful Northern Ireland. In 1999, UUP leader David Trimble spoke to his party saying "Read my lips. No guns, no government"[25], his message was to follow through with decommissioning until after the imposition of devolved government. By 2000 the executive and assembly were suspended based on the IRA's perception of Trimble's ultimatum of six weeks to start a decommission process ;the republicans prolongation of decommissioning once again lead to a step back in the wrong direction of sustaining an assembly. The provisional IRA announced in 2005 the abandonment of its armed campaign, and signalled the end of conflict, through pressure

from USA, Britain and the public within Northern Ireland.

Policing and in particular the Patten Commission, sought to revolutionise the policing service from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Policies Service of Northern Ireland which was specifically concentrated on the ethos of the policing service and the cross-community aims to include a positive discrimination scheme of 50/50 recruitment criteria based on religion, as well as the political background of applicants. The removal of Britishness from emblems and symbols were long contested, yet in spite of unionist objections the policing force evolved into a satisfactory, and by approval and acceptance of Sinn Fein in January 2006, organisation for both sides of the divide.

The new attempt to restore devolution began at the Navan Centre, Armagh, April 2006 and talk's progresses to the St. Andrew's Agreement, October 2006. These agreements lead to consequent elections whereby the "changing party strengths" [26] demonstrated the new devolved governmental dynamic that would kick start the assembly once again. Critics of consociationalism contest that by using Single Transferable vote in a divided society, entrenchment of sectarian feelings is therefore constitutional. "Normal Issues such as economic left-wing issues are suffocated by the all-important and dominant ethno-national/constitutional issues"[27] . Voting Behaviour reflects the religious element to voting and by preference voting, it is evident that in the last election only 7 voters placed Sinn Fein directly behind DUP on the ballot, demonstrating the lack of an electoral spring on the horizon for cross community voting and preferences.

Therefore, this essay concludes that the ethno-national, colonial and paramilitary conflicts of the extremists within Northern Ireland are the key issues for development and the orchestrated Northern Ireland Peace Process. Until their full decommissioning on both sides of the divide, and electoral results are not bases on constitutional issues- rather the bread and butter priorities on the mandate–the Northern Irish politics struggles to find resolution, in spite of the frame work of power sharing being in place.

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