

The Peace Process in Northern Ireland: A Real Breakthrough?

Michal Mravinac

Although ‘friendship’ was not on offer, March 26th 2007 witnessed a historical moment when leaders of the two main parties representing rival factions of society in Northern Ireland sat down at the same table. Who would ever have imagined Ian Paisley, a hawkish protestant cleric heading the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), who has always refused dialogue with radical Irish republicans, and Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), discussing earnestly, face-to-face, the future of Northern Ireland’s self-governance.

The peoples of Northern Ireland have long borne a heavy weight of history. Home to divided communities that have been sharing the territory for centuries, but never lived in harmony, the province experienced decades of brutal violence commonly known as ‘the Troubles.’ On one side of the divide are the unionists: mostly Protestant descendants of British settlers, who supported the imperial military presence. They identify strongly with Great Britain and aim to maintain the Union, which they consider the principal guarantee of their rights and freedoms. Since the partition of Ireland in 1920, the unionists represent the dominant faction of Northern Irish society, both demographically (in the 1920s, the unionists accounted for 65% of the population, presently 55%) and political and economic influence. On the other side are the nationalists: descendants of native Irishmen, mostly of the Catholic confession. In nationalist public opinion, the partition of Ireland was an undemocratic way for Great Britain to maintain its influence over part of the Island. The nationalist’s goal is the elimination of discrimination between the communities, equal power-sharing in provincial legislative and executive bodies and, in the long run, reunification with the rest of Ireland.

The violent past of the province spawned radical streams in both communities. On the nationalist side the republican movement emerged, struggling for nothing less than the ‘cleansing’ the island of the British, using all means available to them, including extreme violence. Alternatively, the loyalist wing of unionism (loyal to the British queen) deployed force to prevent and punish republican activities. However, despite deeply entrenched grudges and distrust between both communities of Northern Ireland, recent developments give signs of hope for reconciliation and better relations between the two communities.

The road to peace has been a long and complicated one. After a sharp escalation of violence in the early 1970s, the British government dissolved the unionist-dominated Northern Ireland Assembly based at the Stormont Castle in Belfast, introduced Direct Rule from London and deployed in armed forces to quell unrest and prevent further atrocities. Nearly 22 years ago, Margaret Thatcher (then British Prime Minister) agreed after many years that the Irish government should be involved in British attempts to solve ‘the Troubles.’ The so-called Anglo-Irish agreement, portrayed at the time by Ian Paisley as a ‘sell-out’ of unionists, paved the way to peace negotiations with the IRA and enabled Sinn Fein to pursue a peaceful path to obtaining political power. The IRA ceasefire in 1994, shortly followed by the ceasefires of all other major paramilitary organisations on both sides, set the stage for a process which resulted in the Belfast Agreement (also called the Good Friday Agreement). The agreement was

designed to produce a legislative assembly and executive based on general suffrage in Northern Ireland and the principle of power-sharing between the communities.¹ The DUP was the only official political party in Northern Ireland that did not support the Belfast Agreement at the time.

However, to date, attempts at establishing functioning, devolved political institutions in Northern Ireland have failed due to distrust between political representatives of both communities. Firstly, for years the republicans refused to submit their weapons as agreed under the terms of Belfast Agreement, and denounce their criminal and subversive activities. Secondly, the province suffered immensely from a lack of respect for the rule of law, which represents the basis of any democratic society. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has been seen by the republicans as a poorly reformed descendant of the infamous unionist-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Also, a report by Northern Ireland's police ombudsman Nuala O'Loan released on 22 January 2007 revealed past collusions, many going on for nearly a decade, between the PSNI and some loyalist paramilitaries.

The lack of the rule of law, and ongoing political violence in the province after the Belfast Agreement, strengthened the position of radical political parties on both sides – the DUP and Sinn Fein – at the expense of moderate elements that initially brokered the peace talks in the 1990s. The DUP won the last two general elections with Sinn Fein as the second strongest party. Ian Paisley of the DUP made it clear that his party will never form an executive with republican ‘terrorists’ unless they decommission all their weapons, denounce violence and give full support to the PSNI. Sinn Fein, on the other hand, refused to make such concessions unless they had proof that the DUP was serious about forming the executive. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Irish *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern, both of whom were instrumental in reaching the Belfast Agreement and have struggled for its full implementation ever since, have been eager to see devolution happen soon and expended much energy to pressure the DUP and Sinn Fein to cooperate.

Finally, cumulative pressures, from many sides, achieved the desired results. On 28 January 2007, the Sinn Fein *Ard Fheis* (High Council) decided to fully support law and order in the province represented by the PSNI. On 12 March 2007, the Independent Monitoring Commission, established under the terms of Belfast Agreement, published its fourteenth report on the IRA, stating that the organisation denounced violence and posed no security threat. These revelations prepared the ground for the historical meeting on 26 March 2007.

Seeing Ian Paisley, an 80-year-old veteran of Northern Irish politics, who built his career by inspiring hatred against anyone maintaining a contrary opinion, and Gerry Adams, allegedly the ‘godfather’ of republican terrorism, getting down to business, raised hopes and repulsion in equal measure. The two politicians agreed on forming the devolved government on 8 May 2007. Many, from both camps, are averse to the idea of power-sharing, not least because of their leaders’ formative positions on the issue. At the same time, there is a growing sense in the province that current impasses cannot hold forever. Politicians themselves have vested interests, as the bill on the devolution of powers in Northern Ireland adopted by the British

¹ Under the power-sharing arrangement the Executive must consist of representatives of the strongest parties from both communities. Also, any bill to be passed by the Assembly must gain majority support from representatives of both communities.

House of Commons arranges for their salaries to be entirely withdrawn unless an executive is formed.

It remains to be seen whether the devolved institutions will last. Both Sinn Fein and the DUP have a long history of acrimony and their leaders will undoubtedly use any opportunity to vilify the other party. The province is going to face tough times and strong political leadership is needed. Over the past years, billions of British pounds and euros have poured into Northern Ireland. The constant flow of subventions created a subsidy-dependent economy that needs painful structural readjustments in order to restore normal market conditions.

Current developments have come to reflect 'politics as usual' – that is corruption based on nepotism. Although this type of 'politics as usual' is not optimal, it can be overcome and offers more hope for reconciliation than the use of political violence.