THE PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND SINCE 1998: SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF POST-AGREEMENT RECONSTRUCTION?

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Introduction

With the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998, a long-lasting peace process in Northern Ireland moved into a qualitatively new stage, which in relation to other conflicts, is often described as post-conflict reconstruction. In the case of Northern Ireland, this would be a misleading term: the fundamental conflict between the proponents of two competing visions of national belonging is far from over; (some of) the conflict parties have merely agreed on a new framework in which they want to pursue these distinct visions. From this perspective, it is more appropriate then to speak of post-agreement reconstruction. In order to examine and assess this latest stage in Northern Ireland's current peace process, I will look at three distinct, yet closely related dimensions of any post-agreement reconstruction process: the building of political institutions, economic development, and social reconstruction. Following a conceptual clarification of 'post-agreement reconstruction', I proceed in three steps. First, I outline the dynamics of post-agreement reconstruction in Northern Ireland. Second, I look at some general developments in each of the three dimensions and examine to what extent they have been influenced by past and present conditions in Northern Ireland and whether, and how much, they have contributed to achieving a degree of sustainability in the peace process. Finally, I draw some conclusions as to whether the current post-agreement reconstruction efforts will be able to succeed in bringing a permanent and stable peace to Northern Ireland.

Post-agreement Reconstruction: Conceptual Clarification

Protracted ethnonational conflicts shape the societies in which they take place in many different, yet almost always exclusively negative ways, resulting in a lack of functioning or legitimate political institutions, weak economic performance, non-existing or polarised structures of civil society, and antagonised elites. Thus, the setting in which post-agreement reconstruction is to begin is often unfavourable in the extreme for the task to be accomplished. However, without a comprehensive programme aimed at rebuilding a conflict-torn society, no settlement would be worth the paper on which it had been written. Post-agreement reconstruction is an extraordinarily complex challenge, and in order to understand its dynamics, a number of distinct dimensions need to be examined, including the various elements it needs to involve, its place in the overall timeline of conflict settlement, the factors that will determine its success, and the indicators by which its success can reliably be measured.

Elements of Post-agreement Reconstruction

The essential aim of post-agreement reconstruction is to create a set of political, economic, and social structures in accordance with an agreed conflict settlement that allow the conduct of a non-violent, just, and democratic political process. As such, it is distinct from similar efforts made to facilitate the negotiation processes at the end of which a settlement can be agreed.

It is important to bear in mind the multi-dimensionality of post-agreement reconstruction and take a holistic and long-term view of transforming conflicts, as 'rushed agreements aimed primarily at stopping conflict may not be the best base on which to try to build a viable democratic state' (Harris and Reilly 1998). The nature of post-agreement reconstruction also means that *re*construction is, in fact, a

misleading term, as it really involves 'the creation of new, sustainable, institutions which are more democratic, fair and responsive to the needs, concerns, and aspirations of an entire population' (Bush 1998: 34). That is, the aim is to establish institutions that are superior to those that existed before the violent escalation of the conflict in that they do not contain the same failures that led to the conflict in the first place. In order to achieve this, post-agreement reconstruction needs to address three different areas – the building of (political) institutions, economic recovery, and establishing conditions conducive for the development of civil society.

At the level of political institutions, one of the foremost tasks is the restoration of law and order and of a judicial system. Equally important is the setting-up of a system for democratically accountable government bound by the rule of law. While democratic accountability is important in the long run and from the perspective of consolidating an inclusive and democratic political process after conflict, it is critical to realise that democratic elections alone are insufficient to guarantee this particular outcome. In most cases of agreed settlements, elections figure prominently as part of the rebuilding of political institutions, yet at the wrong time and based on the 'wrong' electoral system they can just as easily destroy a beginning post-agreement reconstruction process by giving opponents of an agreement an opportunity to polarise public opinion, to encourage 'ethnic' voting, and to limit the room for manoeuvre and compromise for moderate political leaders. Thus, institution-building needs to focus on establishing a system of governance that is appropriate for the particular conflict and that is created in a way and by people most suitable for the particular conflict situation. This can mean both immediate elections or elections after a transitory period. The primary task of the institutions set up in accordance with an agreed settlement is to create conditions that are conducive to the success for a comprehensive programme of post-agreement reconstruction. From this perspective, the roots of potential success or failure of

post-agreement reconstruction may lie in the agreed settlement itself. At the same time, however, the way in which the implementation of an agreement is carried out, and thus how politicians act during the implementation stage, is another major factor that has bearing on the eventual success or failure of post-agreement reconstruction. This means, with respect to Northern Ireland, that the analysis of post-agreement reconstruction needs to include a thorough examination of the Good Friday Agreement and its suitability, or lack thereof, to serve as a framework for sustainable peace, as well as an assessment of how actions by political and paramilitary leaders have affected its implementation.

At the level of economic reconstruction, the task is normally one of transforming a conflict-driven economy into a robust 'peace economy' with sustainable levels of growth, benefiting all communities. This includes the integration of former combatants into the economic process. In Northern Ireland, there are two additional economic problems that are directly related to the consequences of the particular nature of the conflict over the past thirty-some years. On the one hand, the most obvious effect of the conflict on the economy, apart from overall economic decline and high unemployment rates, has been the disproportionately strong developed security sector, providing employment almost exclusively to Protestants.[2] Downsizing the security sector will therefore also primarily affect Protestants, thus potentially contributing to disaffection and resentment. The other major economic problem in Northern Ireland during the years of conflict (and before) has been the decline in its traditional industries (mainly linen and ship-building), also affecting suppliers and service industries, which combined with low levels of inward and Foreign Direct Investment. This resulted in high levels of unemployment throughout the period from the late 1960s onwards. The worst affected population group has

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[2] This has been a result of discrimination against Catholics within the police service and the army as well as of peer pressure in the Nationalist/Republican community not to join security forces.

been that of Roman Catholic males, who, at persistently high levels of unemployment, were on average more than twice as likely not to have a job than Protestant males. The challenge for post-agreement reconstruction in the area of the economy, therefore, is not merely one of creating new jobs, but also one of addressing long-standing and potential new inequalities in the labour market.

With regard to civil society, conflict-torn societies are either faced with a complete lack of any civil society, or with a strongly polarised one, i.e., the existence of two separate civil societies. To (re)build civil society is crucial for the long-term consolidation of democracy, and thus for the establishment of social and political processes in which conflict issues are addressed by non-violent means. After often decades of conflict, this is clearly an extremely difficult task. It requires both trust and reconciliation between (formerly) antagonised communities, which may take years to establish. This is very much the case in Northern Ireland where the levels of social and political participation, cooperation and trust *within* each community is quite high compared to those *across* the communities. Dynamics within each community indicate that there are further significant divisions affecting the functioning of civil society in Northern Ireland. The task therefore is one of creating new patterns of, and structures for, interaction that allow new organisations to develop as well as to increase the level of contact and cooperation between already existing organisations. Clearly, for both economic recovery and the (re)building of civil society, political institutions play a key role in providing an appropriate legislative framework as well as necessary funding or co-funding.

Post-agreement Reconstruction as a Component of Conflict Transformation
Taking a holistic and long-term view at transforming conflicts, this process includes three stages: negotiation, implementation, and operation of an agreed settlement. Admittedly, this is a rather crude description of a far more complex and multi-

facetted process, but it allows determining relatively precisely the place of post-agreement reconstruction in the implementation and operation stages. To the extent that post-agreement reconstruction is concerned with the building of (political) institutions, it forms part of the implementation stage. Where it involves programmes aimed at economic recovery and establishing conditions conducive for the development of civil society, post-agreement reconstruction needs to be an element in both the implementation and operation stages of conflict settlement. To be sure, there is certain degree of parallelism and overlap between the dimensions of post-agreement reconstruction. However, as most settlement agreements, including the Good Friday Agreement, are primarily about the building of viable political institutions that enable the former conflict parties to resolve their differences by means other than violence, institution-building is a crucial element of the implementation stage of any agreement and as such a precondition for its operation. It is equally important to realise that institution-building itself is not sufficient for successful post-agreement reconstruction, but without it, it is very unlikely that economic reconstruction or the development of civil society will have any prospects of success. In the case of Northern Ireland, the problem is less one of non-existing institutions, but one of institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of both communities. Post-agreement reconstruction as an element in the overall settlement of the conflict therefore needs to address the issue of creating and sustaining institutional legitimacy across the range of existing and new institutions.

Factors Determining the Dynamics and Outcome of Post-agreement Reconstruction
Apart from the overall suitability of the agreed settlement for the conflict in question, the factors determining the dynamics and outcome of post-agreement reconstruction can be grouped in a number of relatively broad categories – inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations in the actual conflict zone; in case of a regionally confined conflict

within a state, the situation in this state in general needs to be taken into account as well; the same goes for cases in which one of the ethnic groups in the conflict has a kin-relation with a neighbouring state; and, almost as a matter of cause, the broader international context and the actors within it need to be considered. More precisely, the particular nature of the Northern Ireland conflict suggests that the factors displayed in Table 1 are those most likely to determine the dynamics and outcome of the post-agreement reconstruction process.

Table 1: Factors Determining the Dynamics and Outcome of Post-agreement Reconstruction in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland	UK/Republic of Ireland	International
General Political • Power differential and its interpretation • Performance and Legitimacy of government organs and their institutional set-up Intra-ethnic • Group identity, awareness and solidarity • Party-political homogeneity • Basis for and degree of mobilisation • Policy agendas and policies of major intra-group actors and their mutual perception Inter-ethnic • Ethnic stratification of society and its perception • Relationship between ethnic groups, their members and leaders • Influence of identity-related aspects on inter-group policies • Policy agendas and policies of the principal conflict parties and their mutual perception	• Policy aims of the two governments and the way in which they are perceived in Northern Ireland • Means by which aims are sought to realise • Role and degree of involvement in the post-agreement reconstruction process • Approach vis-à-vis each other and the two communities in Northern Ireland • Domestic and international policy constraints	• Motivation of international actors for their involvement • Availability and commitment of resources • Skill and determination of intervention

Indicators to Measure the Success of Post-agreement Reconstruction

Bush (1998: 21f.) suggests to group indicators for the success of post-agreement reconstruction into five categories – security, psychological, social, political, and judicial indicators. Apart from the fact that a separate category of economic indicators would need to be added to this classification, in the context of Northern

Ireland it seems more sensible to measure success in each of the three main dimensions of post-agreement reconstruction – institution building (political, security, and judicial indicators), economic recovery and the rebuilding of civil society (social and psychological indicators). Table 2 specifies the relevant direct and indirect indicators in each of the three dimensions for Northern Ireland.

Table 2: Indicators to Measure the Success of Post-agreement Reconstruction in Northern Ireland

Institution-building	Economic Recovery	Rebuilding of Civil Society
Political Indicators • Level and type of political participation (e.g. pro- or anti-agreement) • Vote share of political parties (moderates, cross-communal, radicals, parties linked to paramilitary organisations) • Performance and legitimacy of government institutions Security Indicators • Conflict-related killings and other forms of violence, including intra-ethnic 'policing' and internal feuds • Conduct of security forces (arrests, detention, treatment) • Decommissioning • Demilitarisation • Reform of the policing system Judicial Indicators • Rule of law • Even-handed law enforcement • Prisoner release and prison conditions • Human rights bill and commission • Judicial enquiries in past	• Growth rates • Level of inward investment • Level of FDI • Unemployment rates (total and community-specific) • Community participation in, and support for, regeneration and development	Social Indicators • Level of residential segregation • Level of integrated education • Level of intermarriage • Number of intra- and cross-communal organisations • Number of cross-communal local print and electronic media Psychological Indicators • Perception of security situation (individual and collective) • Perceptions of 'others', including persistence of stereotypes and prejudice • Level of confidence in future • Significance of 'symbols' (flags, RUC, etc.)

The Nature and Characteristics of the Northern Ireland Conflict

In order to assess properly the nature and characteristics of the Northern Ireland conflict, and more importantly their impact on a society during the process of post-agreement reconstruction, a number of aspects need to be considered. Apart from a purely academic (and no less subjective) assessment of what this conflict really is about, it is vitally important to examine what views about the conflict, and thus about its possible solutions, are held within the society in question and by whom. It is equally significant to consider the conduct of the conflict itself: how long and how

intense has it been, have there been any previous attempts to settle it, and if so, why have they failed. Finally, there is the question of the long-term impact of the conflict on society. While no conflict simply erupts in a peaceful and harmonious society, but is normally preceded by more or less lengthy periods of latent conflict, political radicalisation, and group antagonisation, a prolonged period of violent conflict, as Northern Ireland has seen it over 30 years, leaves its mark on society in many different ways that all affect post-agreement reconstruction, such as victimisation of civilians, economic decline and social segregation, to name just a few. Given the vast body of literature on the Northern Ireland conflict that already exists, I shall not attempt to provide comprehensive answers to all the questions raised above; rather I focus on two key issues – intensity and long-term impact of the conflict – that have significant bearing on my argument as a whole.

The Intensity of the Northern Ireland Conflict

By global standards of death tolls in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, the one in Northern Ireland has not been very intense. Between 1969 and 1994, when the first IRA and Loyalist ceasefires were announced in the current peace process, about 3,200 people had been killed (Fay et al. 1997). Yet, these statistics only tell half the story. Apart from killings, paramilitaries have committed many more acts of violence, ranging from beatings and kneecappings to intimidation, and they were directed both at the alleged enemy and members of their own communities. These many forms of violence have had a significant impact on community relations in Northern Ireland, whose examination can provide a good understanding of the degree to which the conflict as a whole has affected society.

Violence, and its increasing acceptance as a means to achieve political objectives among some sections of both communities, has had an impact on community relations and vice versa at three levels – segregation, polarisation, and

alienation (see Hamilton 1990). Violence may not be the primary cause for, or result of, either of these three dimensions of community relations, yet there is a strong inter-relation between them.

Segregation, although it has been a long-term trend has increased as a result of inter-communal violence. This was the case especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but on a lower level it has continued in subsequent decades. While intimidation from the 'other' community and fear of violence have contributed to increasing residential segregation, peer pressure from within one's own community has also played a role in establishing the largely segregated structure of residence in Northern Ireland today. Segregation has important consequences in societies affected by inter-ethnic conflict because it makes it easier to develop and maintain stereotypes about the other community and its intentions towards one's own community. Because of this, there will be even less understanding for the position of the other community, which, in its rejection, increases homogeneity and solidarity within one's own community. On this basis, violence against this other community becomes more easily acceptable and justifications for its use are more readily available. One other feature of segregation that contributes to this phenomenon in Northern Ireland is the maintenance of a confession-based school system with only few opportunities for integrated schooling.

The degree to which both communities differ in their perceptions of the nature of the Northern Ireland conflict and its potential solutions is influenced by more or less informed judgements about the other community and its political agenda. Violence and the interpretation of violent acts is likely to reinforce the degree of polarisation between the two communities. At the same time, the significant differences in views of what could be an acceptable and desirable future for Northern Ireland, and the inability to reach an agreement on this by peaceful means, increased the preparedness of some sections within each community to engage in

violence to either achieve their goals or, at least, prevent the other community from achieving theirs.

The lack of political progress over almost thirty years of violent conflict and the inability of the security forces to provide protection from acts of terrorist violence has also contributed, though unequally, to an increasing alienation of both communities from the British state and its institutions. While this has always been a feature of the relationship between the Nationalist/Republican community and the Stormont and later the British political systems, alienation has also affected the Unionist/Loyalist community, especially after the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and after the recent Good Friday Agreement. The sense of being left alone with unresolved problems has triggered processes in both communities in which paramilitary organisations have partly replaced organs of the state. This is more obvious and widespread within sections of the Republican community, where paramilitaries not only 'protect' their community from sectarian attacks, but also police it and provide a number of community 'services.' Unionist and Loyalist alienation from Britain has its origins in the days of partition when national political parties withdrew from campaigning in Northern Ireland, thus encouraging the build-up of an almost exclusively sectarian party system for the decades to come. The creation of a parliament in Northern Ireland was not the preferred option of Unionists, because it marked Northern Ireland as different from the rest of the United Kingdom, yet having a parliament elected by popular vote was at the same time perceived as a safeguard against a British sell-out, and thus still an option with a fairly positive connotation.[3]

Community relations that are based on the historic experience of inequality, deprivation, and discrimination are more likely to form the background against which inter-communal violence can develop and escalate. Yet, the acceptability of violence

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[3] Personal communication from Antony Alcock.

has not only affected inter- but also intra-community relations. Feuds between rival paramilitary groups in each community, such as the Loyalist turf wars of summer 2000, and punishment beatings, intimidation and expulsions of individuals and entire families have contributed to a deterioration of social relations, decline in trust in the effectiveness of state institutions to perform essential functions, and widespread disillusionment with the political process in Northern Ireland for several decades.

It has, therefore, been important to reduce the level of violence and 'to take the gun out of politics', but the various policies applied to do so have had different degrees of success, and have had and will have distinct consequences. However, while there is no correlation between the reduction of inequality, deprivation, and discrimination and the general downward trend in death tolls recorded in the Northern Ireland conflict over the past two decades (McGarry and O'Leary 1996: 288ff.), positive correlation exists in relation to increasing residential segregation, but it is hard to say whether and where a causal relationship exists.[4] Most likely, the reduction of death tolls since the early 1970s can be attributed to a number of factors – improved capabilities of the security forces, better security co-operation between the British and Irish governments and changed tactics and political agendas of the paramilitary organisations and the radical political parties in both communities (McGarry and O'Leary 1996; O'Duffy and O'Leary 1990).

The Long-term Impact of the Conflict on Northern Irish Society
The overall pattern of conflict intensity has also been affected by various (failed) attempts to settle the conflict in Northern Ireland. The most significant and instructive of these were the Sunningdale and Anglo-Irish Agreements of 1973 and

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[4] Residential segregation, for example, can work both ways. On the one hand, living among one's own community may increase security because of enhanced 'defence capabilities', but on the other, it is the clearest indication of community membership, thus also increasing the risk of either being singled out for an attack or becoming a victim of random violence targeted at the whole community.

1985 and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. What has primarily changed since 1973 are contextual circumstances increasing the acceptability of power-sharing among some sections of the political elites in both communities and their respective constituencies, a more consistent and cooperative effort on part of the British and Irish governments to incentivise and pressurise the political parties in Northern Ireland into an agreement and its implementation, and a fundamental change for the better in the international context leading to sustained positive engagement on the part of the European Union as well as the Clinton and Bush administrations and the Irish diaspora in the United States. These overall positive changes not withstanding, post-agreement reconstruction in Northern Ireland faces constant challenges from the persistence of patterns of prejudice, unease and fear, and their political manipulation and instrumentalisation. These are among the main reasons for the difficulties that have been experienced in the implementation process of the Good Friday Agreement so far.

Although the Good Friday Agreement provides a comprehensive institutional framework for the settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict, its implementation and operation so far has been hampered by the different expectations and interpretations that exist within each of the two communities in Northern Ireland regarding the final outcome of the implementation process. This, in turn has led to four key problems that have, over time, become the core stumbling blocs of implementation and thus of success or failure of the current peace process: decommissioning, the reform of the policing system, normalisation of the security situation, and the stability of the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement. In addition, there are a number of other issues to which the two communities attach equally high symbolic value, such as parades and flags. While these might not have the same political significance, together with the other core problems they reflect quite clearly the persisting divisions in Northern Ireland; and it is the apparent inability to overcome

these divisions, not even at the elite level, that has important consequences for the process of post-agreement reconstruction.

The situation in Northern Ireland today is characterised both by the legacy of 30 years of failed conflict resolution and the hopes and aspirations connected with the Good Friday Agreement. The former solidified the distrust between significant sections of both communities, manifesting itself in attitudes such as 'Unionists will never fairly share power' and 'Republicans will never give up violence'. Yet, inter-communal distrust is only part of the story. Relationships between the two communities and British and Irish authorities were equally strained. While Nationalists/Republicans primarily distrusted the British government's proclaimed neutrality in the conflict and saw the RUC as an 'Orange' police force, Unionists/Loyalists were not only fearful of a British sell-out, but also regarded the Irish government as patron-state of Nationalists and in pursuit of a reunification agenda.

Given these past and present dynamics of the inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland, there are, in each of the three dimensions of post-agreement reconstruction, aspects that are of particular significance as indicators of success and failure. Among the political indicators for institution-building, these are the vote share obtained by different political parties, and the performance and legitimacy of government institutions. In relation to security indicators, the level of violence, decommissioning and demilitarisation, and police reform are important as they allow an assessment of the progress of post-agreement reconstruction. Aspects of the judicial process to which both communities attach particular importance are the way in which the law is enforced, the speed of prisoner release, and the conduct of judicial enquiries in the past. Economically, community-specific unemployment rates, i.e., the employment differential between the two communities, can be deemed significant, as can the degree to which members of both communities partake in

regeneration projects and the level to which they benefit from them. As far as the rebuilding of (civil) society is concerned, the provision of integrated education, and the number of intercommunal organisations and local media are important among social indicators, while the perception of the security situation and of the agenda and policies of the respectively other community, and the significance of community-specific symbols are among psychological indicators.

This is not to deny the significance of all other indicators listed in Table 2. Rather, the purpose of this singling-out exercise is to provide the basis for context-related analysis of post-agreement reconstruction in Northern Ireland and to allow for an adequate assessment of its current status.

The Process of Post-agreement Reconstruction in Northern Ireland so far

Institution-Building

Not surprisingly, the two communities and the political parties representing them have interpreted the Good Friday Agreement in very different fashions. These interpretations reached from 'destruction of the union with Britain' (DUP, UKUP) to 'strengthening the union' (UUP, PUP) in the Unionist/Loyalist community, and from 'basis for a (permanent) settlement' (SDLP) to 'transitional arrangement on the road to a united Ireland' (Sinn Féin) in the Nationalist/Republican community. This, of course, reflects the different political traditions from which the parties come and what they perceive to be the core interests of their electorate. The Good Friday Agreement itself has not been able to fundamentally change these different aspirations (nor was it reasonable to expect this). Northern Irish society continues to be divided along traditional lines of community-based politics. The stability of the political process will therefore essentially depend upon the skill and determination of all the leading politicians to work within the established set of arrangements and to manage and accommodate the diverse expectations about what the long-term

political and constitutional perspectives for Northern Ireland are under the Good Friday Agreement. This is particularly significant in relation to how the performance and thus legitimacy of the new institutions in Northern Ireland will be assessed across the two communities. At the same time, this process is also fraught with extreme difficulty in the face of two long-term problems – policing and decommissioning – and the highly emotional nature of symbolic and ritualistic politics in Northern Ireland in relation to, among other things, flags and parades.

Policing

Against the background of very different community experiences and levels of identification with the police forces in Northern Ireland, the issue of policing has remained one of the most contentious areas of disagreement, even after the two major parties in the assembly, the UUP an the SDLP, have agreed to nominate representatives to the Policing Board and thus ended the impasse in the implementation of the government's plans for police reform. The fundamental conflict here has not been, and is not, so much over whether there should or should not be a reform of the policing system, but over the degree to which such a reform should be carried out. While Nationalist/Republican opinion tended towards radical reform, up to the disbanding of the RUC, Unionist/Loyalist attitudes, although recognising the need for a more representative police force, favoured less decisive reforms. This difference in approach had not least to do with the widespread feeling among Unionists/Loyalists that the RUC was 'our' police force as compared to the Nationalist/Republican perception of the RUC being 'their' police force. Clearly, from this point of view, both communities had very different expectations about the degree of reform necessary. Although the Good Friday Agreement did not make any specific provisions in relation to a reform of the police service, but left details to further negotiations and the recommendations of an independent commission. The

terms of reference for the work of this independent commission were quite tight.[5] The recommendations of the report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland (1999) sought to find an acceptable middle ground, but were not received very well in either community – Unionists and Loyalists felt they were going too far, particularly with respect to the proposed name change, while especially Republicans had hoped for even farther reaching reforms. Under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000, which became law on 23 November 2000, and the Implementation Plan, the British Government committed itself a number of deliverables suggested by the Patten Report. These included the new Policing Board representing both communities, new arrangements for accountability, a new code of ethics, a new name, a new badge and flag, a human rights-orientated training and development programme and balanced recruitment to the police force in order to achieve greater representativeness. The implementation of these commitments was initially at best sporadic, which further contributed to a climate of uncertainty in which the issue could be, and was, used for politicising and polarising Northern Irish society, which essentially played into the hands of hardliners on both sides.

Decommissioning

As early as June 1998, the British and Irish governments had put in place the legal and regulatory framework for the proposed International Independent Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) in a bilateral Agreement (1998) that followed earlier steps taken on decommissioning since 1995.[6] However, apart from a symbolic act of

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[5] Annex A of the provisions on "Policing and Justice" stipulates in relation to the independent commission that "[i]ts proposals on policing should be designed to ensure that policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols, are such that in a new approach Northern Ireland has a police service that can enjoy widespread support from, and is seen as an integral part of, the community as a whole." It goes then on to outline in relative great detail how the proposals of the independent commission are to contribute to enabling the RUC of policing in a peaceful society.

[6] These included the two governments' decision on 28 November 1995 to establish an International Body to provide an independent assessment of the decommissioning issue, the 1997 Decommissioning Act in the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act of the same year in the

decommissioning in December 1998 by the Loyalist Volunteer Force, nothing happened on the decommissioning front until 2 December 1999, when the IRA announced the appointment of a representative to liase with the IICD, followed by similar moves on the part of the UVF and UFF. After some ups and downs in the engagement with the IICD, in a statement of 6 May 2000 the IRA (2000) committed itself to put IRA weapons 'completely and verifiably … beyond use' and announced as a confidence building measure that 'contents of a number of … arms dumps will be inspected by agreed third parties who will report that they have done so to the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. The dumps will be re-inspected regularly to ensure that the weapons have remained silent.' After the appointment of Cyril Ramaphosa and Marti Ahtisaari, several inspections took place, confirming that the weapons seen were secure and had not been used. However, even intensive discussions between the IICD and representatives from IRA, UVF and UFF did not manage to move the decommissioning issue any further after May 2000 when a deadline had been set by the British and Irish governments on the full implementation of the GFA by June 2001. This standoff on decommissioning was characterised by mutual recriminations. The IRA claimed in a statement on 8 March 2001 that the British government had failed to 'deliver on the agreement made with us on May 5th, 2000' (IRA 2001a). According to an IICD report of June 2001, 'the UVF will not consider decommissioning before they know the IRA's intentions and hear their declaration that the war is over', while the UFF found it 'difficult to discuss decommissioning further with us while members of the UFF were continuing to be interned.' (IICD 2001). Among political parties, the picture is similar – Unionists refused to sit in government with Sinn Féin as long as there is no move on decommissioning, Sinn Féin insist that they were in no position to dictate to the IRA

United Kingdom, and the Joint Communiqué issued on 29 July 1997 by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on completing preparations for the establishment of an Independent Commission on decommissioning.

and that there should be no link between individual aspects of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

To make matters even worse, on 14 August 2001, the process moved back to square one. Following UUP leader David Trimble's resignation as First Minister as of 1 July, there was (according to the provisions in the Agreement) a six-week period in which a new First Minister had to be found. Trimble's resignation, intended to to put pressure on the IRA, seemed to pay off when a surprise announcement by the IRA (2001b) on 9 August confirmed 'that the IRA leadership has agreed a scheme with the IICD, which will put IRA arms completely and verifiably beyond use'. However, this was deemed insufficient by the UUP to agree to put forward a candidate for the election of First Minister. Given a choice between suspension and new elections, the British government opted for a 24-hour suspension of the institutions, hoping that another six weeks of 'breathing space' would provide sufficient time to facilitate an agreement between the parties that would bring the UUP back into government. The prospects for that, however, quickly faded away after the IRA (2001c) announced on 14 August that, because of the renewed suspension, 'the conditions therefore do not exist for progressing' on the basis of their earlier proposal for decommissioning and that they were therefore withdrawing their proposal.

Faced with the imminent collapse of the political institutions created by the Good Friday Agreement and under considerable national and international pressure, Sinn Féin publicly called on the IRA in October 2001 to begin decommissioning their weapons, which was followed by a subsequent announcement of the IICD that a first set of arms and other equipment had been put beyond use. While this prevented the feared collapse of the institutions in October 2001, it remains to be seen in how far decommissioning can in fact 'save' a peace process that is confronted with numerous other difficulties as well. Notwithstanding those, it is also significant, and indicative of further progress on the decommissioning front in the near future, that the British

government proposed an amendment to the current decommissioning legislation, extending the amnesty period from the end of February 2002 initially until 2003, with possible further extensions until 2007. Despite Unionist and Conservative concerns that this would take the pressure off the paramilitary groups, the Northern Ireland Decommissioning (Amendment) Bill was passed in the House of Commons on 9 January 2002 and sent to the House of Lords.

Having lived through thirty years of troubles, both the constitutional and paramilitary camps have had rather similar experiences, yet their interpretations and conclusions were fundamentally different. What complicates the issue further is the fact that it seems difficult for the hardcore in each community to understand that the security of one's own group, based on the continued ability to defend oneself with arms, is very often perceived as a threat by the respective other group. Mistrust and the experience of suffering over decades are unlikely to be transformed into trust and mutual understanding in the short term. On the other hand, even if decommissioning takes place, it might give a false sense of security as it does not involve a disruption of the existing paramilitary structures nor a destruction of the paramilitary's capability to rearm themselves at any time.

Demilitarisation

As a further element of the security sector reform, the British government has undertaken a number of steps towards a normalization of the security situation in Northern Ireland, including a reduction of numbers and role of armed forces,[7] the removal of security installations,[8] the replacement of the Emergency Provisions

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[7] By July 2001, the number of troops in Northern Ireland had been reduced by 3,500, military patrolling had decreased by 50% since 1995, the number of Army helicopter flying hours had gone down by 21%, and one of the six Royal Irish Regiments had been disbanded. Following the first substantive act of decommissioning by the IRA, the Army presence in Northern Ireland was further reduced and has dropped to less than 13,500 troops on 59 bases by January 2002.

[8] By July 2001, 42 military installations had been closed, demolished or vacated, and 102 cross-border roads had been re-opened between the Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Act by a new UK-wide Terrorism Act, and the closure of the so-called holding centres in Castlereagh and Strand Road. In this context of security sector reform, it must also not be forgotten that since 1998, 444 prisoners who qualified for early release were set free in Northern Ireland and 57 in the Republic.

Parades

Similarly to security sector reform, the parades issue is highly contentious between the two communities, which is again related to the rather different experiences historically and the notions connected with it. Clearly, parades form an important aspect of Unionist identity. The commitment towards recognition of equal chances for both traditions in Northern Ireland to be expressed and developed requires respect for the right to hold parades. Equally, however, it requires the respect for the feelings of the Nationalist community, many of whom feel offended by what they perceive as triumphalist and sectarian manifestation of Unionist supremacy. Yet again, the division between the communities is not as clear-cut. The Nationalist community does not in general dispute the right of Unionists to march and perform their rituals, but rather demands equal respect for the feelings of its members, i.e., to abstain from marching through mainly Catholic estates. The Unionist community, on the other hand, is prepared to make certain concessions, such as not having their bands play while marching through Nationalist residential areas, but they insist on their right to march on the 'Queen's/King's highway' and see any limitation of this right as violation of their basic civil liberties and as a threat to their traditional way of life. This highly symbolic nature of parades becomes particularly apparent if one considers the following figures: in 1999/2000 there were of 3403 parades. Of these, less than ten per cent (297) were contentious and referred to the Parades Commission, which imposed route restrictions on 152 parades (Parades Commission 2000). Yet, this relatively small number of contentious parades, and in particular the

Orange Order parades in Portadown/Drumcree, still have the ability to reinforce existing communal divides and increase the alienation of both communities from each other and, depending on the decision reached by the Commission and its enforcement by the police, of at least one of them from the political institutions in Northern Ireland. This has meant that the Parades Commission has so far not been very successful in brokering any long-term deal between the opposing sides in any of the main areas of contention, all of which are predominantly Catholic housing estates. The Commission's aim to establish 'important principles that are essential to a successful pluralist society' (Parades Commission 1999) has so far not affected a change in attitudes or even of circumstances in which this would be possible.[9] However, it also needs to be stated that the 2001 parades passed without the levels of violence that had characterised the marching season in previous years.

Flags

The debate over flags, that is, on what days and buildings the Union Jack (and Irish Tricolour) should be flown, also points to the persistence of deep inter-communal divisions. In the words of the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson (2000), '... in Northern Ireland symbols matter a lot ... Symbols represent the different identities and different traditions of those who live in this part of the United Kingdom and, like other symbols, flags have historically been a source of conflict that has driven people apart.' That this is not only a matter of the past became obvious in the deliberations of an Ad Hoc Committee set up by the Northern

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[9] The 2000 report of the commission indirectly admits this failure, of which the public in Northern Ireland is very much aware. In a special survey, only 15% of respondents considered the work of the Commission successful. However, the Commission was also able to point out a number of advances: parades in 1999 were conducted largely peacefully, and over 80% of respondents in the same survey stated that there was a need for dialogue and engagement with the commission in order to resolve contentious parades issues. (Parades Commission 2000)

Ireland Assembly on 11 September 2000 to consider the draft Regulations by the Secretary of State under the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000.[10]

<u>Other Indicators</u>

The verdict on other indicators in this area is equally mixed. Even though the recent elections indicated a continued interest in political issues among the majority of the population, the results also confirm a tendency (although not as strong as in 1974) of a weakening of the moderate middle ground and a strengthening of more radical parties in either of the two communities. The SDLP and UUP lost votes and seats to Sinn Féin and the DUP, respectively, in the parliamentary and local council elections in June 2001 and this is likely to have long-term implications for the peace process.

The overall trend of decreasing violence has been reversed since 2001 with acts of spontaneous and organised mob and paramilitary violence once again becoming a feature of Northern Irish politics. The months-long stand-off and clashes between Catholics and Protestants around the Holy Cross Girls' Primary School in the Ardoyne area North Belfast, the murder of a Catholic postal worker and the, subsequently withdrawn, UDA threat against Catholic school teachers and postal workers, as well as the threat by the Republican paramilitary group INLA against the Protestant staff at a Marks & Spencer distribution centre testify to the persistence of sectarian divisions and mindsets in Northern Ireland. However, what is equally, if not more significant, is that the murder of the Catholic postal worker was not only widely condemned by representatives from all major political parties in Northern Ireland, but also led to thousands of people from both communities participating in rallies against hatred and sectarianism. By the same token, it is interesting to observe that the clashes around the Holy Cross Girls' Primary School did not spread across Northern Ireland or even led to wider rioting in Belfast itself, as similar events did

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[10] Cf. Ad Hoc Committee (2000).

over the past years. What this indicates is a decreasing acceptance of violence as a useful means to achieve political aims, and as such points to a change in the overall political climate in Northern Ireland over the past several years that must not be underestimated in its significance for post-agreement reconstruction.

The appointment of a Human Rights Commissioner, the release of paramilitary prisoners, and the initiation of public inquiries into unresolved issues, such as Bloody Sunday and allegations of security forces collusion in high-profile killings over the past thirty years,[11] have individually addressed specific needs of both communities.

The Economic Dimension of Post-agreement Reconstruction

Developments in relation to the economic recovery of Northern Ireland allow painting a more optimistic picture in terms of growth rates, investment, unemployment, and community involvement in specific reconstruction projects.

Sustained economic growth in Northern Ireland since the early 1990s has not only been reflected in actual GDP growth figures, but has also had a positive impact on unemployment, pay increases, and economic confidence among businesses in the region. In the first half of the 1990s, unemployment had been around or above 100,000 people until 1994, but then declined sharply to 40,000 by March 2001, equalling 5.1% of the total workforce. Both communities have almost equally benefited from economic recovery in the 1990s: between 1990 and 1999 Catholic unemployment has fallen by 45%, Protestant unemployment has fallen by almost 42% (NISRA 2001). However, it is still almost twice as likely for Catholics to be unemployed than it is for Protestants, which means that the unemployment

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[11] As part of the political package agreed between the UK and Irish governments in summer 2001, it was agreed to appoint an international and independent judge to investigate the following cases: Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson, Robert Hamill, Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan, Lord Justice and Lady Gibson, and Billy Wright.

differential between the two communities has not yet sufficiently been addressed. What is more, the latest available comprehensive labour market survey of autumn 2001 indicates that, rather than narrowing, the gap between Protestant and Catholic unemployment rates is in fact increasing. Compared to the previous quarter (covering the period June-August 2001), Protestant unemployment dropped from 4.4% to 4.0%, while that among Catholics increased from 8.5% to 9.0%. Especially for the significant category of males, it is now more than 2.5 times as likely for a Catholic to be unemployed than it is for a Protestant (10.9% compared to 4.2%). This has been despite the fact that the Labour government recognised the need to effect change in this area and committed itself to reducing such inequality as one of the key targets of its 'New Targeting Social Need' (New TSN) initiative in November 1999 (New TSN 1999). New TSN had been mentioned as a key instrument in the creation of a fairer and more prosperous society in Northern Ireland in the Good Friday Agreement, yet its objectives are in many ways broader than one would expect in the context of post-agreement reconstruction, and there are very few references to the particularity of the situation in Northern Ireland as being one of transition after three decades of conflict.[12]

More explicit references to the conflict and to building the conditions of sustainable peace in Northern Ireland were made in the 'European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland', which was initiated in 1995, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the first round of ceasefires announced in 1994.[13] The strategic aim of the programme was set as reinforcing 'progress towards a peaceful

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[12] In an almost typical case of British understatement, the introductory paragraph to the first New TSN Annual Report reads: 'New TSN is about the way the Government, its Departments and public bodies approach some of the most important problems in society, *including some which are special to Northern Ireland.*' (New TSN 1999, my emphasis.)

[13] Additionally, Northern Ireland has also benefited from other EU programmes: Belfast and Londonderry received funding from the URBAN Initiative for inner-city regeneration, and from the INTERREG Programme, which promotes the creation and development of cross-border networks in order address negative effects of peripherality in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

and stable society and to promote reconciliation by increasing economic development and employment, promoting urban and rural regeneration, developing cross-border cooperation and extending social inclusion.' Peace I ran from 1995 to 1999 allocating a total of €503m,[14] 80% of which were spent on projects in Northern Ireland, and the remainder was allocated to projects in the Republic of Ireland. A total of around 15% of all funds were invested in cross-border initiatives. There are eight sub-programmes: employment, urban and rural regeneration, cross-border, social inclusion, productive investment, partnerships, technical assistance, and flagships. Probably the most interesting one from the perspective of post-agreement reconstruction is the one on district partnerships, which is administered by a company specifically established for that purpose in 1996, the Northern Ireland Partnership Board Limited (NIPB). The EU-defined rationale behind the partnership sub-programme was to 'harness the energies and talents of local groups in pursuit of *common* goals' so as to 'benefit *all communities* … while concentrating on those areas and people who have suffered most from the conflict' (my emphasis). A KPMG evaluation report (NIPB 2000) of the partnership programme and the work of NIPB found that 70% of partnership funds were allocated to social inclusion projects, that 65% of projects operated in an area identified by TSN, that 68% of all initiatives under programme were cross-community in nature and that 25% had a cross-border element. A survey carried out for this report among project participants revealed that the coming together of community leaders was the key impact of the partnership sub-programme. This is also reflected in the following figures: of 601 participants polled,

- 60% stated that as a result of the sub-programme, cooperation between the communities increased
- 58% agreed that relations between the two communities had improved over the first three years of the sub-programme

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[14] On 25 March 1999, the European Union Council agreed a new Peace Programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties, committing €500 million over a five year period beginning in 2000.

- 63% said that their participation had enabled them to understand better the views of the respectively other community
- 90% were convinced that the partnerships sub-programme had a positive impact on peace and reconciliation in their specific community.

Clearly, these figures are impressive, but they may not be totally representative for the views of society in Northern Ireland as a whole. As the report itself indicates, there is an inherent danger of such initiatives to reach only those people who already share a commitment to peace and reconciliation and are prepared to compromise and engage with the other community, while those who are hard-line opponents of any compromise do not participate at all. As a consequence, they do not share in the benefits, and often interpret this as confirming their opposition to the peace process in general. This implies that if the outreach of these and similar programmes cannot be increased, significant inter-communal divides will remain, as will intra-communal ones, with both having the potential to endanger the long-term stability of the Good Friday Agreement.

New Structures for Northern Ireland's Civil Society?

There can be little doubt that a functioning civil society is a key ingredient for any viable democratic political process, as it provides the structures and opportunities for citizen participation and engagement, including access to the public discourse for otherwise underrepresented or marginalized interests. A particular consequence of the conflict in Northern Ireland on society there has been that there are, in fact, *two* civil societies with relatively little overlap. This is mostly a result of the deep divisions in Northern Ireland, including the fact that significant levels of residential segregation persist. While indicators of social capital, such as trust and membership in civic organisations is rather high in Northern Ireland, these figures can not be taken as an indication for a well-integrated civil society that goes beyond communal boundaries. Therefore, the success or failure so far of post-agreement reconstruction in the area

of civil society is best measured in terms of the establishment of new structures within which the two existing civil societies can be integrated and within which existing organisations, which have grown historically and reflect the character of one particular community, such as the Orange Order or the Gaelic Athletics Association, can be complemented by new organisations that are not primarily based within a single community. Such a 'new' civil society could become a major political factor in Northern Ireland to contribute to a sustained and stable peace process.

A significant step in this direction was taken through the establishment, on 16 February 1999, of 60 person strong Civic Forum under the aegis of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. According to the Good Friday Agreement, the forum is act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic, and cultural issues as well as on any independent consultative forum established in relation to North-South cooperation.[15] The members of the Civic Forum representatives form the business community (7), from agriculture and fisheries (3), from the trade unions (7), from the voluntary sector (18), from the churches (5), from culture (4), from arts and sports (4), victims (2), from community relations (2), from education (2) and from the office of the First Minister and his Deputy (6). Even though the forum is not a body exclusively made up of members of civil society, the attempt to bring together representatives from the private sector, the political institutions, the voluntary sector, and other parts of Northern Irish society is important insofar as it raises the profile of civil society organisations, increases their public presence, and offers opportunities for them to cooperate beyond communal boundaries. The period since its inauguration, however, has been characterised by a remarkable degree of inactivity and it remains to be seen whether the Civic Forum can accomplish these tasks.

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[15] Cf. Paragraph 24, Strand 1, and Paragraph 19, Strand 2, of the Good Friday Agreement.

A somewhat older body with relevance for the development of civil society is the Central Community Relations Unit, which was set up in 1987 and whose central task is to increase the degree of mutual understanding between the two communities in Northern Ireland. This is fairly well incorporated with initiatives on education (integrated education and the programme on Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage) and a variety of initiatives directly sponsored by the government that fund the development of specific local responses to community relations problems. However, the results of all these programmes are not far-reaching enough yet to make it possible to speak of a functioning and integrated civil society in Northern Ireland. Apart from some occasional local projects and a number of high-profile initiatives, the situation in Northern Ireland to date is one that reflects deep communal divisions in all sectors of public life, including civil society. While some progress has been made, in particular in relation to victims groups, there is still a general lack of cross-communal civil society organisations.

This underlines the importance of fostering contact and cooperation between the two communities in other sectors. Successful and mutually beneficial cooperation in the economy and politics have the potential to work as precedents for closer interaction in civil society, too. However, there is no automatism in this. An integrated civil society cannot be imposed on the two communities, but it has to grow organically. As the Good Friday Agreement, together with earlier government initiatives, provides some of the structures for such a *new* civil society, it is not unlikely that, over time, new cross-communal organisations will emerge to complement existing ones and help to fuse them into one over-arching civil society in which both communities can find spaces to express, preserve and develop their distinct identities as well as to work together on issues of mutual concern.

Conclusions

Almost four years after the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society, shaped by over thirty years of violent inter-ethnic conflict. The general elections on 7 June 2001, which saw the moderate Unionists and Nationalists weakened at the expense of Sinn Féin and the DUP have confirmed a trend of increasing divisions and a declining willingness to compromise and cooperate. On the other hand, recent positive developments in relation to policing and decommissioning might allow a more optimistic assessment of the future of the peace process.

However, the persistence of divisions and mutual suspicion in itself is not surprising – the time it takes to move a conflict-torn society away from long-established patterns of prejudice and distrust is measured in generations not years. The point of this concluding analysis is therefore not to decry the failure of the Good Friday Agreement to achieve a miracle, but to lay the foundations for a critical examination of the post-agreement reconstruction process so far and to assess its future prospects and requirements.

Table 3 provides a general assessment of the situation in Northern Ireland as of November 2001, in relation to individual indicators of post-agreement reconstruction.

Table 3: The Status of Post-agreement Reconstruction in Northern Ireland

Institution-Building

INDICATOR	STATUS
Political Indicators	
Participation	Remains high, but contributes to polarisation
Vote share	Increased for extremists at the expense of moderates
Performance of government institutions	Good
Legitimacy of government institutions	Remains low among significant sections in both communities, leading to institutional instability
Security Indicators	
Violence	Has increased locally since 2000
Conduct of security forces	Fair
Decommissioning	Significant progress with the beginning of actual IRA decommissioning in October 2001
Demilitarisation	Initial progress continues after the beginning of IRA decommissioning
Police reform	Progresses according to the British government's implementation plan
Judicial Indicators	
Rule of Law	Exists
Law enforcement	Even-handed
Prisoner release	All eligible prisoners released
Human Rights Commission	Set up, but largely inactive
Judicial enquiries into past	Set up, but contribute to polarisation, rather than reconciliation

Economic Recovery

Growth rates	Remain above 3% since 1998
Investment	High in 1997/98, but remains at high levels since
Unemployment (total)	Significantly down for both communities since 1998
Unemployment (community-specific)	Employment differential remains almost unchanged
Community participation in regeneration	Apparent, but insufficient improvement for most deprived areas

Rebuilding of (Civil) Society

Social indicators	
Residential segregation	Remains at high levels
Integrated education	Remains at low levels
Intermarriage	Remains at low levels
Intracommunal organisations	Many and slightly increasing
Intercommunal organisations	Remain few
Intercommunal local media	Remain few
Psychological indicators	
Perception of security situation	Initial sense of improvement has given way to perception of matters turning worse
Perception of others	Significant lack of trust remains
Level of confidence in future of Good Friday Agreement	Decreases, particularly among Unionists
Significance of community -specific symbols	Remains high

Note: ▢ indicates important issue.   Note: ▢ indicates negative impact.

A simple computation exercise alone reveals that with regard to 15 out of 29 indicators the current status of post-agreement reconstruction has had a negative impact, i.e., has failed to provide conditions for sustainable peace. Even more significantly, out of the 18 indicators deemed important because of the specificities of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the current status of 12 reveals a negative impact. With the exception of judicial and security indicators in the area of institution-building, the failure of post-agreement reconstruction to contribute to sustainable peace is resounding. The question that therefore arises is whether this failure is due to bad implementation of the Good Friday Agreement as the 'founding document' of the post-agreement reconstruction process or whether the roots for failure lie much deeper, namely in the agreement itself and its unsuitability as a framework for sustainable peace in Northern Ireland.

At a very general level, there has always been a degree of uncertainty about whether the Good Friday Agreement could really deliver on its promise: a rigid framework for consociationalism, it required the two communities to accept a political process which essentially tried to square the circle of Nationalist and Unionist aspirations, i.e., a united Ireland and continued strong links with Great Britain. For this to be possible, it would have been necessary for both communities to drop their maximum demands, that is, in particular to accept the proposed North-South institutions as a compromise structure within which both groups' aspirations and concepts of national belonging could be accommodated. The change in attitude necessary for this acceptance to happen, however, has not been forthcoming, and it is questionable whether it really could be expected to appear on the horizon within only a few years after entire group identities have been constructed around this Irish dimension for decades if not centuries. Therefore, it could be argued that the agreement was fundamentally flawed from the beginning, and nothing that politicians in Belfast, Dublin and London were doing would have prevented the

inevitable failure of the implementation process. Yet, this is too easy an answer and too easy a way out especially for politicians in Northern Ireland who bear a fair share of the responsibility for the difficulties that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has experienced so far, but they also deserve credit for the progress that has been made.

Within Northern Ireland, the emotionalisation in particular of decommissioning and police reform by politicians of both communities combined with largely simulative politics on both issues and a crucial lack of leadership has created a situation characterised by mutually reinforcing conceptions of resentment and entitlement among large sections in both communities. Political leaders, by playing to, and thereby often actually encouraging and strengthening, alleged fears and myths among their electorates, have managed to boost self-perceptions of victimhood and perceptions of victimisation at the hands of the other community. Clearly, divisions, prejudice, and stereotype have long been features of inter-communal relations in Northern Ireland, but since 1998 politicians in both communities have done little to overcome these. Neither has it helped that Unionists and Loyalists have tried to prevent any substantial reform of the police forces in Northern Ireland, nor has the initial rejection by Nationalists and Republicans of the proposals on the table contributed in any way to creating a situation of normality in which a Northern Irish police force could have been created that would have been acceptable to both communities. By the same token, the damaging linkage between decommissioning and Unionist participation in the power-sharing government has left it for paramilitaries to decide the progress, if any, of the implementation process. The initially merely verbal gestures from the IRA were obviously unacceptable to Unionist leaders who had created a 'sideshow' over the decommissioning issue although it was fairly obvious that any actual decommissioning of whatever quantity of arms and explosives would be purely symbolic – exploitable as defeat of the IRA

while completely unverifiable as to the extent of paramilitary equipment actually surrendered, let alone sufficient to prevent rearmament. Strong leadership could have been expressed on both sides: Sinn Féin could have publicly declared its strong support for decommissioning much earlier, while the UUP should not have allowed itself to make power-sharing dependent on decommissioning. This would have made it possible for a political process in Northern Ireland to develop in which the work of the institutions created under the Good Friday Agreement would have dominated the public and political discourses, and not decommissioning. Thus, legitimate political leaders could have retained control instead of surrendering it to paramilitaries. While this has changed as of October 2001 with the beginning of IRA decommissioning, the damage done to the peace process over the first three-and-a-half years of one impasse chasing another will be more difficult to undo and has been a major contributor to Unionist support for the Good Friday Agreement falling from about 55 percent in May 1998 to just over 42 percent in September 2001 (Hearts and Minds Survey 2001)

The government in London, too, is not free of blame. In contrast to the situation in 1973/74 when there was a lack of involvement and support for the then pro-agreement parties, the period since 1998 is characterised by some kind of over-involvement. On the one hand, London deserves to be commended for its determination to bring a lasting peace to Northern Ireland. On the other hand, however, the strong role that the British government has retained in Northern Irish politics and its *deus-ex-machina*-like rescue attempts of the agreement have taken away control, and thus responsibility, from politicians in Northern Ireland making it possible for them to have a convenient scapegoat to blame other than themselves for any failure. While the first suspension of the institutions in February 2000 may have been justifiable, the situation in August 2001 was different. Calling elections to the assembly would have given the people in Northern Ireland a chance to deliver

their verdict on the post-agreement reconstruction process so far, and would also have corresponded to the wishes of a relative majority of people in Northern Ireland who preferred this option to either another one-day or an indefinite suspension of the assembly (Hearts and Minds Survey 2001). The outcome of these elections would, in all likelihood, have altered the balance of power between the political parties, but it would not have meant the automatic end of the peace process. Instead of the current climate of political engineering, it might have served as a reminder for the people and politicians in Northern Ireland that it is their future that is at stake. In retrospect, however, the government's decision not to call elections has paid off in so far as that IRA decommissioning has begun and that now an assembly is still in place that includes a majority, and more favourable distribution, of members in favour of the agreement.

Thus, in conclusion, the prospects of the Good Friday Agreement to have a long-term positive impact on the peace process, and thus on politics and society in Northern Ireland, are not bad. However, the Agreement is only one step in a much longer process of transforming the ethno-national conflict at the heart Northern Ireland's problems. To maintain the current positive momentum in this process will require skill and determination of all those involved in the Northern Irish peace process in London and Dublin, Brussels and Washington, and foremost in Belfast itself.

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