

Anti-consociationalism and the Good Friday Agreement: A Rejoinder

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Abstract

Peace processes can have the effect of reinforcing ethnic divisions. This is done by the privileging of ethnonationalist actors throughout negotiations, the framing of a conflict in “groupist” terminology and the post-conflict structuring of ethnicized institutions. The unintended corollary is that post-conflict settlements can often give an institutional basis for ethnic identity. However, this essay argues that the Good Friday Agreement (1998) should not be seen within this trend. Whilst the Agreement is no ethnosectarian panacea, it has proved to have reduced the conflict potential of ethnicity. More importantly, the Agreement recognizes the resilience of ethnosectarian identification and prevents majoritarianism – which is the *only way* there can be a later decline in the salience of ethnicity in Northern Ireland.

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International policy-makers, despite their intentions, have contributed to the reinforcing of ethnic divisions in states undergoing conflict. Primarily, this is because post-conflict institutions are built on an implicit assumption that the nature and salience of ethnic divisions are beyond transformation – an “assumption of intransigence” (Simonsen, 2005: 298). Such an assumption is dangerous: it legitimizes both an ethnically divisive discourse and the manoeuvres of ethnonationalist leaders to justify conflict, militarism and secession.

Yet the assumption often belies the experiences of the individual constituents. In Yugoslavia, for instance, before the eruption of ethnic violence, there lived people who existed co-operatively for thirty-five years. Evidence is of intermarriage, shared holiday destinations and neighbourliness (Obserschall, 2000: 989). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the post-World War II history before the outbreak of conflict in 1992 is of harmonious inter-ethnic relations – “with high levels of accommodation, contact, and trust” (Simonsen, 2005: 299).

The fact that international policy-makers continually ordained the problems in Bosnia using an ethnic lexicon had the effect of institutionalizing ethnicity. The partition of Bosnia into separate ethnic entities (formalized as the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina) under the Dayton Agreement was only inevitable because of the “ethnic framing” of the problem at the onset of the conflict (Aitken, 2007: 249). Had the international community sought alternative ways of framing the conflict, there might have been the possibility of reaching alternative solutions where ethnicity did not emerge as the primary identifier (Campbell, 1999: 417). The introduction of ethnic quotas under the Accords has also had the effect of reinforcing ethnic cleavages between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats (Belloni, 2004: 336). As a result, the exogenous pressure of international “outsiders” has created shallow endogenous foundations for a negotiated settlement (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006a: 53) – thus comprising the inherent instability in Bosnia, twelve years on from the Accords.

However, the Good Friday Agreement is not representative of this trend. This essay argues that the institutional provisions of the Agreement have not reinforced ethnicity, and accusations that it has – through employment of PR-STV voting, communal registration of Assembly Members, the d’Hondt method of executive formation, the emphasis on group rights and its constitutional “consent principle” – are unconvincing. Such arguments trade on a misunderstanding of ethnosectarianism in Northern Ireland, and concentrate narrowly on areas that selectively picked from the Agreement. Moreover, such arguments pay insufficient attention to matters that truly do determine the salience of ethnicity in Northern Ireland, such as policing reform, moderation of political parties, civil and human rights, the treatment of victims of the conflict and demilitarisation. This essay recommends a holistic analysis of both the Agreement and the longevity of ethnonationalism in the region. By doing so, the Agreement can be defended.

The Nature of the Agreement

The Agreement has been widely interpreted in different ways. Some view it as signaling of a profound transformation in the politics of Northern Ireland (Bew, 2000; Farren, 2000). Others see it as a vaporous and uneasy settlement which has reinforced an institutional basis for ethnicity. Whilst Tony Blair and others proclaimed the

Agreement and the returning of the Northern Ireland Assembly as having escaped “the heavy chains of history” (BBC, 2007a), some have merely highlighted the “paucity of a peace process” that camouflages the on-the-ground reality that sectarianized allegiances remain (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 4).

The Agreement itself is based on the consociationalist model of “constitutional engineering” for societies experiencing social cleavages, whether linguistic, religious, racial or otherwise. Its consociational nature is not entirely novel: British governments attempted to develop similar power-sharing settlements at the Sunningdale negotiations in 1973 (McGarry & O’Leary, 1995a: 321). Here, deeply divided societies can become democratic through elite-level bargaining in a form of power-sharing at an executive level (Lijphart, 1969, 1977, 1984, 1996). This is done through the structuring of various institutions: a “grand coalition” of representatives of the polity’s ethnic groups; a mutual veto arrangement between them when vital interests are affected; autonomy for group self-governance; and a proportionate distribution of employment in public institutions (McGarry, 2001: 15). The purpose of this is to promote “parity of esteem” and “mutual consent” via elite-level political bargaining. In doing so, it responds to the fear of minority ethnic “lock-in” by constraining majority rule (Horowitz, 2001: 299-305). Such a settlement aims to eventually remove the realities of economic and cultural sectarianism (Shirlow, 2003: 89). It appears that the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Mo Mowlam and a number of her advisors had a personal interest in consociational engineering (Bew, 2000: 40).

Such a theory is not without its critics. Primarily, opponents argue that the “consociational project” propagates the very divisions it is supposed to be disentangling. Here, the consociational nature of the Agreement reinforces the view that there are obstinate and mutually exclusive ethnonational groups in Northern Ireland. “Catholic” and “Protestant” categories are held up as fixed and entrenched in nature: each with their own cultural norms, values and practices. The Agreement, it is argued, rejects the “one community” approach to politics offered by Northern Ireland’s existing political centre (Evans & Tonge, 2003: 48). By doing so, ethnosectarian divisions that consociational approaches are attempting to unravel are actually “fastened” in the process. Such methods assume that ethnonationalism is primordial and exclusive, rather than relational (Wilford & Wilson, 2003: 11). As such, it advances “a rather bleak view of humanity” and threatens to cast divisions in “marble” (Wilford, 1992: 31). Viewing the conflict in Northern Ireland in this way is “presumptive, inscriptive and far from progressive” (Taylor, 2006: 223).

Secondly, it furthers the inaccurate axiom that these two categories are synonymous with binary political traditions. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) are seen as figureheads for the politics of Ulster Unionism, whilst the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin are seen to embody the cause of Irish Nationalism. This is dangerously inaccurate for it justifies an ethnically divisive discourse. It also facilitates “the manoeuvres of various historical and political leaders and to deny the full variety of cultures” (Nic Craith, 2002: 178). One might, for instance, point to the 35% of people who claim to be neither unionist nor nationalist as indicative of the diminishing respect for consociationalism (Taylor, 2006: 223).

Specifically, critics argue that the Agreement has reinforced ethnosectarian divisions in five ways:

1. *The requirement of communal registration for assembly members (MLAs) as “nationalist”, “unionist” or “other”.* This is because when decisions need to be made that require “cross community” support, the designation of “others” does not carry meaningful weight and thus provides a disincentive for MLAs to change designation. This has been at the expense of parties such as the Alliance Party who argue against sectarian reductionism. Furthermore, it marginalizes any identity formation other than Catholics and Protestants. Such exclusive categorising institutionalizes sectarianism in a form of “benign apartheid” (Wilford & Wilson, 2003: 15). Recently, the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 strengthens this by restricting the MLA’s ability to change political designation (HMSO, 2006a: 15).
2. *The PR-STV (single-transferable-vote) electoral system for the Assembly.* Critics argue that the PR-STV electoral system across six member constituencies has not encouraged cross-community support seeking, as originally intended. The allocation of votes simply occurs within the respective ethnonational “blocs”. Employment of the PR-STV system may have actually encouraged communal bloc voting between the respective unionist and nationalist communities (Hazleton, 2004: 229). In reality, politicians are disinclined to moderate their positions as the level of lower-preference votes transferred across is minimal – as little as 10% in the 1998 Assembly election (Evans & O’Leary, 2000: 89).
3. *The use of the d’Hondt electoral formula for executive formation.* Because the Executive shares power without collective responsibility like the Westminster system, this has meant that the Executive has not supplied the “cement” between the adversarial political factions (Wilford & Wilson, 2003: 16). Ministerial portfolios, as allocated to political parties along the d’Hondt electoral formula, become less accountable and are not open to scrutiny from people other than party *apparatchiks*. The effect of this has been deeper tribalism amongst elites and exclusion of the wider – less party-political – community.
4. *The Agreement privileges the universal group rights of the ethnosectarian communities and has reinforced ethnosectarian labels as determining public identifiers.* For example, the Agreement obliges all “on government and public bodies fully to respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both communities in Northern Ireland” (NIO, 1998: 21). It sheds little light on the rights of those who do not, or do not want to, belong to either community. The Agreement can be chastised for having prioritized group equality before the higher and more dignified principle of individual rights (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 41). This is an integral feature of a consociational settlement as its power-sharing model is inextricably linked to a communalist, rather than individualist, concept of society (O’Leary, 2001: 49).

5. *The either-or constitutional choice between a United Kingdom and a United Ireland.* The “consent principle” – where it is recognized that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority of people wish so – does nothing to separate Catholicism from nationalism or Protestantism from unionism, but furthers the characterization of Northern Ireland as a “deeply divided society” (Wilford & Wilson, 2003: 13).

On this last point, the Agreement empowers the Northern Ireland Secretary of State to order a referendum:

“[I]f at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be a part of the United Kingdom and form part of a United Ireland” (NIO, 1998: 5).

Yet the idea of a referendum stands in stark contrast with the consensual nature of the institutions established under the peace accord. By invoking an either-or constitutional choice through the use of referenda in situations of profound ethnonational conflict, there will inevitably be “winners” and “losers”. The “blunt reductionism” of such a choice is “grossly-oversimplifying” and provides a way for the legitimation of majority domination (Mac Ginty, 2003: 3). Not only do referendums in such situations oversimplify, they also radicalize opinion and can prompt violence. It is for this reason why the “seeds of the Agreement’s downfall are contained in the Agreement itself” (Mac Ginty, 2003: 19).

Post-Agreement polarization

The turbulence in the initial period after the Agreement and the four suspensions of the Assembly between 2000 and 2007 had the unintended consequence of the erosion of a political middle ground. This is an accusation usually made by members of the Alliance, Democratic Left, and the Women’s Coalition. As originally envisaged, the Agreement would help to transcend the demands of constitutional absolutes – i.e. a United Ireland or a United Kingdom. However, the hostility between the DUP and Sinn Féin in the beginnings of devolution saw both parties voice superior claims to cultural identification and political triumph (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 33).

This polarization often belied the social experiences of the individual constituents. The party leaders’ persistent claims to identify with “their” communities engendered a divisive ethnosectarian discourse, contrary to the intentions of the Agreement. What resulted was the emergence of Sinn Féin as the foremost voice of nationalism at the expense of the more moderate SDLP. This has been reinforced by the “groupist stereotyping” characteristic of media reporting in Northern Ireland, whereby individuals became “hoovered up” into ethnonationalist communities (Wilson, 2003: 14).

This groupist stereotyping was exasperated by significant unionist unease with the Agreement. In particular, the lack of progress on IRA weapons decommissioning presented problems to implementing the Agreement and stalled the peace process. Survey data now showed a lack of unionist support for the Agreement – dropping as low as 36% in 2003, compared to 55% in May 2000, shortly after the IRA said they would “completely and verifiably put their arms beyond use” (McAuley, 2003: 66).

Significant disagreements between the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin over weapons decommissioning being a pre-condition to power-sharing raised the quixotic demands that political parties made of one another. Unionist leaders such as Ian Paisley continued to put pressure on moderate Unionists not to sit in the same executive as Sinn Féin. This indicated a “siege mentality” where politicians sought to resist power-sharing with perceived terrorists (Byrne, 2001: 331). Here, we see an example of intra-ethnic competition – or “flanking” – along Horowitzian lines (2000: 410). This led to the repeated collapse of the Assembly and as a result, the electorate further fermented along ethnosectarian fissures.

Psephologists, for instance, have observed the polarizing of distinct voting patterns in Northern Ireland since 1998. Whilst parties such as the DUP and Sinn Féin had massive expansions in the Westminster vote between 1997 and 2005 (+125% and +37.5%, respectively), other parties such as the UUP and SDLP, who presented a more moderate stance, have seen a significant drop in their vote (–50.7% and –34.7%, respectively) (ARK, 2007). This has been polarized further by the Alliance Party being effectively “pulled” over to unionist side to rescue the Agreement in 2003, thus compromising its rejection of unionist-nationalist politics (Evans & Tonge, 2003: 48-49). The parties who displayed their ethnosectarian credentials most brazenly are the ones that benefited the most in the post-Agreement settlement. Those touting ethnosectarian mandates outflanked proponents of the “middle-ground”.

The verdict is damning. Consociational politics “[closes] down the space for people to question conventional understandings...and extend political imaginings” (Taylor, 2006: 223). The point is that consociational politics – and, by implication, the peace process in Northern Ireland – fails to see identity as “active” and renders everything in ethnonational terms. Here, power-sharing and consociational settlements give institutional basis for ethnic identity which bypasses “a diachronic focus on the process and politics of subject formation” (Taylor, 2001: 47).

Against this view

This essay, however, wholeheartedly rejects this view. There is no real reason to suggest that the Agreement axiomatically presumes that ethnicity is primordial. Such an argument is overstated. What the Agreement and its consociational nature recognise is that such identities are *historically resilient*. This does not mean, however, that such identities are permanent.

The objections trade on a serious misunderstanding of ethnosectarianism which is that the cause for societal dissensus is the imposed peace processes of external ethno-guarantors, at the level of political elites. We would be better viewing the conflict in Northern Ireland as socio-psychological at various levels, rooted in historically established collective identities and the desire to be governed by one’s conationals, both for security and for collective freedom (McGarry & O’Leary, 1995b: 860). Neither unionists nor nationalists want to be subsumed within the other’s nation-state, even when guaranteed equal citizenship (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006b: 255). Unfortunately, there is much to the truism that for Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, “[t]he reference point for self is other” (Mitchell, 2006: 64).

Understanding the history of ethnonationalism in Northern Ireland can help explain why ethnosectarian identities are still prevalent. Byrne (2001: 33), for instance, argues that from 1920 to 1972, a majoritarian political model – i.e. single

party, unitary government, an uncodified constitution with parliamentary sovereignty, and cabinet sovereignty – was superimposed on the political culture of Northern Ireland. This had the effect of politicizing the existing ethno-religious cleavage.

Consequently, for over a century, Northern Ireland *has* been divided electorally into two ethnonational blocs. This was not an unintended corollary of the Agreement, but a fact of the political climate up to, and beyond, 1998. No political party outside of the two ethnonational blocs has *ever* shown any serious sign of making a breakthrough. As McGarry argues, the total combined vote in the 1996 and 1998 regional elections of those parties outside ethnonational blocs (Alliance Party, the Northern Ireland's Women Coalition and the Labour Party) amounted to only 8.4% – which is the same percentage as the average of the Alliance Party in its first five Northern Ireland election campaigns between 1973-5 (McGarry, 2001: 132). Within the last twenty years, the middle-ground parties have only had marginal success electorally and this has remained true after the signing of the Agreement. Most recently in March 2007, the Alliance Party only secured 5.2% in the Assembly vote (ARK, 2007). Crossing the communal political divide has always been extremely rare (Mitchell, 2006: 30). The Agreement, therefore, has not closed down the space for new “political imaginings” but *reflects* a continuing trend in electoral results. The argument that it entrenches division fails to see how deep the divisions have been historically.

This does not mean that those involved in the creation of the Agreement believe in the existence of primordial Catholic and Protestant identities which are distinct and diametric ethnonational identities: each with its own tradition, culture or genealogical lineage. Instead, it is a sensible acceptance that such collective identities are resilient and have been for a number of decades. Turnout in Northern Ireland elections has been consistently higher than in the United Kingdom as a whole and the position of the political parties *actually do* reflect, broadly, the preferences of survey data of the respective communities on constitutional issues (McGarry, 2001: 117). It would have been powerfully hubristic for policy-makers not to not have acknowledged this.

Only by framing ethno-political conflict in identity-terms can there be the basis for an eventual peaceful settlement. Framing the conflict in identity-terms helps establish a framework for successful engagement between the parties. Pre-negotiation can help the parties soothe underlying identity needs by “demystifying stereotypes and by addressing fears, mistrust, and misperceptions” (Byrne, 2001: 332).

Moreover, this schismatic worldview is not simply at the level of political elites. The most popular civil society organizations throughout Northern Ireland – such as the Orange Order and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) – are also firmly unionist and nationalist, respectively (McGarry, 2001: 117). In addition, the majority of grass-roots unionist and nationalist civic associations actually favour a bi-national constitutional compromise (Cochrane, 2001: 153-156). The idea that division is being fostered purely by “ethno-political entrepreneurs” at an elite level is incorrect.

It is no wonder why ethnonational identification remains prevalent given the remaining levels of ethno-sectarian violence. Whilst there has been a shift from heavily sponsored paramilitary violence, there has been a noticeable surge in localized patterns of sectarian violence upon symbols of tradition (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 3). The rioting and attacks on these symbols – such as Orange Halls, Gaelic Athletic Association property and different denominational churches – is still a prevalent

problem, post-Agreement. The Parade Commission's rerouting of the Drumcree march in July 1998, the Omagh bombing in August 1998, the unrest at Holy Cross Girl's Primary School in 2001 and the violence at the Orange Order Whiterock parade in 2005 have shown that ethnosectarian tensions remain high. The brutality didn't stop with ceasefires and shared government (Wallace, 2002). Jarman (2005: 20), for example, states that there were 6,623 incidences of sectarian disorder in interface areas in North Belfast between 1996 and 2004 alone – i.e. before and after the Agreement was signed.

Moreover, space and territory remain intrinsically linked with ethnosectarian identification. Against the wishes of the both governments, there is often a resistance to reconciliation and an insistence on difference. This is expressed primarily through a territoriality defined by symbolic representations often grounded in possession over space and place (Graham & Nash, 2006: 273). Shirlow's (2003) research, gathered from the Ardoyne district of Belfast, suggests that residential segregation continues to steer ethnosectarian animosity through complex spatial devices. The painting of kerbstones in red, white and blue, or green, orange and white, the continual flying of flags and painting of murals on the sides of houses mark the different territories (Brown & Mac Ginty, 2003: 84). This, in turn, fuels fear, further mistrust and territorial division.

Ethnosectarian identities in Northern Ireland and are complexly entrenched; socially, territorially and psychologically. Lanclos's (2003) study into the social identities of pupils at five Belfast primary schools demonstrates the prevalence of perceived ethnosectarian divisions amongst children. In particular, the methods of "telling" – i.e. observing one Protestant schoolchild from a Catholic schoolchild by observation of stereotypical names, football paraphernalia and the name of the street that a child lives on – show the methods of ethnosectarian identification amongst certain groups of children (2003: 128). Clearly, the peace process and the Agreement have not banished ethnosectarian divisions.

The question is: has the Agreement made it worse? Wilford and Wilson (2003: 11) argue that if consociational constructs are a response to conflict it will tend to reinforce communal separation. This essay rejects this view. To take these objections as a *dénouement* against the Agreement is inadequate: they focus on only a minor part of the whole body of the Agreement and the intricacies of the Northern Ireland peace process.

We can defend the Agreement against such criticisms. Whilst consociational settlements have privileged ethnonationalist actors in the electoral process elsewhere – e.g. in Cyprus and Lebanon (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006b: 271) – this has not been the case for Northern Ireland. The Agreement actually facilitates the promotion of the middle-ground parties more than before its inception. Moreover, the PR-STV system at least provides an *opportunity* for voting on lower-preferences across the ethnonational divide. Currently the percentage of votes transferred over is low, but the PR-STV system is still more conducive to trans-bloc voting than the Westminster system ever was. The PR-STV system actually helped moderate the position of Sinn Féin in the latter-half of the 1980s by seeking the lower-preference votes from the SDLP voters in the Irish Republic (McGarry & O'Leary, 2006b: 269). Should there be a reduction in local violence and greater dialogue across communities it seems likely that there will be more trans-bloc voting.

Similarly, because the executive is constituted proportionately under the d'Hondt system, a party can form part of the government on a lesser share of votes from the legislature. Middle-ground parties therefore have a better chance of influencing public policy and achieve greater visibility (McGarry, 2001: 124). Whilst two parties dominate Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly is dominated by four. Similarly, Ministers – who undertake a Pledge of Office, as opposed to an Oath of Allegiance – are elected by an allocation of votes that is “difference-blind” and operates according to strength of representation won by parties in the Assembly, not one’s self-designated national identity (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006b: 271).

With regards to the “consent principle,” it is extremely unlikely that republicans would have approved of the Agreement had it not formally recognized the right to self-determination upon the expressed will of the people of Ireland (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006a: 57). This owed first and foremost to a practical acknowledgement of the disputes since the 1920 partition of Ireland. Nationalist and republican parties simply would not have signed up to the Agreement without the sovereignty referendum option (Mac Ginty, 2003: 18).

There is, however, truth to the argument that the Agreement gives greater weight to Catholic and Protestant labels, at the expense of “others”. The reason for the requirement to register as “nationalist”, “unionist” or “other” is to safeguard against majority unionist voting on ethnically sensitive issues – such as flags, policing and human rights. The passage of certain key decisions requires either a concurrent majority, or a weighted majority of 60% in the Assembly including at least 40% of both nationalists and unionists (NIO, 1998: 7-8). It is true that this provides a disincentive for Assembly Members to change designation and adopt a non-sectarian “other” identity, but it does so to prevent against unionist majoritarianism – *the main cause* of civil unrest in Northern Ireland and the reason why ethnicity has been so salient. This does not, for instance, “[freeze] ethnic tensions at the moment of greatest tension and limit the possibilities of a later decline in the salience of ethnicity” (Aitken, 2007: 260). Precisely the opposite: it recognizes the resilience of ethnosectarian identification and prevents majoritarianism – which is the *only way* there can be a later decline in the salience of ethnicity. It is therefore inadequate to argue that communal registration has reinforced ethnosectarian dichotomization, whilst ignoring the far more important *causa movens*.

A holistic analysis is needed

As this essay argues, the salience of ethnosectarianism in Northern Ireland is determined socio-psychologically by a variety of complex historical factors. Accusations that the Agreement has reinforced ethnosectarianism are weak, given that they do not take account of the Agreement in its entirety. They do not pay sufficient attention to the widely encompassing nature of the Agreement in areas such as police reform, human and civil rights, recognition of victims of the conflict and demilitarization. These are the real drivers of the salience of ethnicity in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement has many provisions that help engender a less ethnically salient climate. Firstly, the assertion that the Agreement entrenches group rights at the expense of recognizing individual rights is simply not correct. Each Minister has to undertake a pledge of office to “to serve all the people of Northern Ireland equally,

and to act in accordance with the general obligations on government to promote equality and prevent discrimination” (NIO, 1998: 12). It also establishes a Human Rights Commission which will eventually lead to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland – at some point in 2008 (NIHRC, 2007). This has also been strengthened by the Government’s commitment to establish a Bill of Rights Forum – a commitment made during the negotiations of the St Andrews Agreement (NIO, 2006: 11). The forum is designed to “be as inclusive as possible of Assembly parties and wider civic society” (HREU, 2006: 2). Furthermore, the Agreement looks towards the codification of the European Convention of Human Rights (NIO, 1998: 20) and under the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, has led to a statutory Equality Commission (NIO, 1998: 8). This has helped “the breaking down of ethnically defined labour markets” (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 38, 179). The Agreement has also established a Civic Forum alongside the Assembly (NIO, 1998: 12). This is comprised of members who lie outside the ethnonational party blocs and includes representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors and provides a consultative mechanism on economic, social and cultural issues. Such a forum is has no real counterpart elsewhere in the UK. Though the Forum has yet to play a central role in creating a new political culture, it is an institution that facilitates dealing with diversity in a less antagonistic manner (Singstad Pålshaugen, 2005).

Secondly, the Agreement should be commended for its recognition of the episodes of history that have been determining factors of the salience of ethnicity. Blair’s positive role in recognising the past with the inquiry into Bloody Sunday, the Bloomfield Commission and the Patten Commission have been important in helping address why ethnicity has been so salient whilst also making provisions for the future. In particular, the work of the Patten Commission led to the creation a completely independent system for investigating complaints against the police – the first of its kind in Europe (Dickson, 2000: 106) – and a fifty-fifty recruitment policy for Catholics and Protestants (HMSO, 1999: 88). This has had success: the proportion of Catholic officers has doubled over the past four years after April 2002 (HMSO, 2006c: 43). This is particularly important given the – now proven – collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and members of the Northern Ireland police (O’Loan, 2007). The work of the Bloomfield Commission recommends that “victims must, as the barest minimum, be as well served as former prisoners in terms of their rehabilitation, future employment etc” (Bloomfield, 1998: 50). More recently, this has been strengthened by the Victims and Survivors Order which establishes a statutory office of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors since the beginning of “the Troubles” in 1968 (HMSO, 2006b). The Saville Report, despite its spiraling costs, is due to be published next year. Though the conclusions are unknown, it is important that throughout the course of the peace process the significance of past events is recognized: by doing so, the salience of ethnicity can become less eruptive.

There is hard evidence that the Agreement has reduced the volatility and conflict potential of ethnicity in Northern Ireland. Firstly, the IRA ceasefire has held. As the major protagonist of the conflict, it has been a serious achievement that the IRA has announced an end to its armed campaign (BBC, 2005). There can be no question that this has moved the region to greater stability. Meanwhile, loyalist paramilitaries – such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) – have become fragmented and weakened. This seems likely to continue with the halting of funding from the Assembly until there has been

decommissioning (McDonald, 2007). The release of jailed paramilitaries, as part of the Agreement, has infused the local population with veterans of conflict. Generally, these have been a force for calm by arguing for change through peaceful political means (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006b: 260). Only a month before the time of writing, the British Army has ended military operations in Northern Ireland after 38 years (Press Association, 2007). The DUP leader, Ian Paisley has met with Archbishops from the Catholic Church (BBC, 2006). Marching and parades, once a hotbed of the conflict potential of ethnicity, have passed peacefully for another year (Irish Times, 2007). Ian Paisley and DUP ministers have also met as part of the North-South Ministerial Council for the first time (BBC, 2007b) – the council set up as part of the Agreement. All these examples are to be taken as evidence that the peace process has decreased the conflict potential of ethnicity.

Conclusion

The Agreement is no ethnosectarian panacea. There is still the need to understand the perpetual realities of political intransigence that surround issues such as marching, decommissioning, flag bearing, policing and job allocation (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006: 41). Northern Ireland has been, and still is, perpetually divided. Sectarianism continues to “profoundly structure where people are born, where they go to school, where they live, where they work, where they socialise, what sports teams they support and where they are buried” (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007: 17).

However, the arguments that the Agreement has reinforced ethnicity are generally rather weak. In fact, the Agreement does much to address the reasons why ethnicity has become so salient throughout many decades. By doing so, it allows greater hope that there will be a time when ethnonational and religious identities become less salient. Neither does the Agreement force the destruction of a political middle ground – such a middle ground has always been marginal in the Northern Irish political landscape. If anything, the subsequent weakening of the UUP and SDLP has presented a clear opportunity for the Alliance to make increasing electoral gains.² Moreover, there is much hard evidence that the Agreement has been successful in reducing the conflict potential of ethnicity. The Agreement will not be the sole determiner of ethnic identification in Northern Ireland; such complex identities emerge socio-psychologically, over enduring periods of time. However, there is much to be defended in the Agreement as have helping foster conditions where ethnicity will no longer be a primary identifier.

² A point made by Stephen Farry MLA for North Down, General Secretary of the Alliance Party, in email correspondence with myself, July-August 2007.

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