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Incomplete Peace and Social Stagnation: Shortcomings of the Good Friday Agreement

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Twenty years beyond its signing, the Good Friday Agreement remains the cornerstone of 'peace' in Northern Ireland, even as it has faced political, social, and cultural challenges. Despite the lack of renewed violence in the region since 1998, the Good Friday Agreement left many issues unaddressed, hampered by the region's reality as a 'deeply divided society' and ultimately a 'negative peace'. This article seeks to address the reasons peace has failed to flourish in the region, claiming that a 'peace process' ultimately concerned with governmental structures and paramilitary ceasefire was inadequate to truly resolve the conflict, resulting in the endurance of tensions into the present. As a result, the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement is a social stalemate from which the region cannot progress. Northern Ireland remains polarised by many of the same differences visible at the start of the Troubles half a century ago, as old divisions play out in new ways. This has resulted in a 'culture war', further dividing the populace. Current political instability in both Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom continue to challenge the tentative peace in the region, raising doubts that such divisions can be reasonably overcome.

Article

Good Friday 1998 brought with it great hope for the future of Northern Ireland: a future heralded by the Good Friday Agreement itself as a new path forward. While the crafters of the Good Friday Agreement made a laudable effort toward this goal, simply ending violent conflict has not been sufficient to bring about the hoped-for future. This article addresses enduring shortcomings of the Agreement, specifically its impact on division across civil society and the resulting 'culture war' acting out historical grievances in less violent ways. Peace remains elusive in Northern Ireland, particularly considering political upheavals felt in both Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom since 2015, making the evaluation contained in this article well-timed, assessing the ways 'peace' has struggled to take root. The Good Friday Agreement was flawed, failing to address lingering issues from inter-community division to cultural expression that have continued to threaten the stability of peace into the present. Yet, the ways in which these flaws continue to manifest today, with the potential to destabilise the region and upend the hard-won peace, have not been fully understood. As was the case two decades ago, the region is polarised politically and socially, demonstrated from the still-suspended Northern Ireland Executive to recent allegations of hate crimes affiliated with the summer marching season — a polarisation that has been cemented by a peace accord that succeeded in ending violence but which did not truly resolve the conflict. In building on decades of deep societal division and focusing primarily on an end to violence, the Good Friday Agreement set in motion a peace process that is still not yet completed, making its legacy today one of stagnation and missed opportunity.

Two major frameworks can be used to address the yawning gap between the stated goals of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and the reality 20 years later. It is first important to conceptualise Northern Ireland as a 'deeply divided society', defined by strong conceptions of in-groups and out-groups solidifying community division on nearly all levels (Guelke, 2012). This on-going divide reinforces 'negative peace' in the region — it managed and reduced violence, rather than transformed conflict and society (Galtung, 1967). Transformed conflict and positive peace will continue to

struggle to take root without critical evaluation of the Good Friday Agreement and its legacy of successes and failures. The shortcomings of the Good Friday Agreement and its stunted legacy are direct products of the social conditions in Northern Ireland that brought them about, making these explanatory theories a driving force of reality today. First, however, it is important to define these terms as they will be used. 'Negative peace' refers to the condition of peace in which violence is managed or reduced, but the conflict has yet to be transformed (Galtung, 1967). This allows for the continuance of past structures and fails to address the root causes of conflict – facts that, this article argues, make 'peace' in Northern Ireland more illusory than realised today. This can be seen in the fact that the paramilitary ceasefire has endured and power-sharing has intermittently held, but civil society remains divided in many respects by the same patterns that initially fuelled the conflict. These root causes of conflict are explained by Guelke's model of a 'deeply divided society', specifically the binary model. He argues that the lack of viable and mainstream political or social third-party options entrenches division and makes inter-community relations more difficult (2012: 13). The model further applies to Northern Ireland for its explanation of how division in society, while not always violent, can make reconciliation of differences nearly impossible (Ibid.: 30–2). This is the case in Northern Ireland today, as it has been for decades. With both major community groups intractable in their claims to the region, finding common consensus appears nearly impossible. This stalled peace defines the social, political, and cultural legacy of the Agreement.

The context of the Troubles drove the creation of the Good Friday Agreement, while the post-conflict environment has determined its legacy. This article investigates the interplay between these ideas, supporting the claim that 'peace' as it is currently observed – while constructive and critically important to the safety and security of millions of people – is also riddled with shortcomings as a result of division. Despite its longevity and considerable positive impact, the Good Friday Agreement has fallen short of its promise – though perhaps not its potential. This critique of the Good Friday Agreement should not be interpreted as claiming the Agreement has somehow failed, should be thrown out, or should not have been

signed at all. This article moves beyond this potential binary, arguing that while the Good Friday Agreement has been successful in achieving a significant milestone, this does not excuse it from critique. The peace process failed to address many issues that endure to the present. This argument begins with a discussion of the quality of peace in Northern Ireland today, along with the historical sources of conflict and their present manifestations, questioning the label of 'peace'. This facilitates discussion of the inherent shortcomings of the consociational system put in place by the Good Friday Agreement, including the ways in which division has been fostered. Through its impact on both politics and culture in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement cemented social division in the region – division with the potential to challenge or even overturn that 'peace' which has been achieved. The ultimate legacy of the Good Friday Agreement, however, is that 'peace' in some form has held over the last two decades; this must not be discounted even in discussions of how it can be improved.

Historic Precedent and the Quality of Peace

The 'Declaration of Support' at the beginning of the Good Friday Agreement heralded the peace agreement as 'a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning' and 'a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all' (UK Government, 1998: 1.1–1.2). Whilst the language of the document showed signs of promise, its practical implementation has ultimately driven people apart on issues of both politics and culture. This has been described as the product of the 'transitional process [of] societal reconciliation' – a process taking generations, rather than a matter of years, to fully carry out (Aiken, 2014: 4). The notion that it is impossible to flip a switch – or vote on a peace agreement – and have the process be completed explains why peace in Northern Ireland remains incomplete even after 20 years. On-going division in Northern Ireland is characterised by a lack of consensus over an (ultimately) shared future, increasing the value of what is at stake in 'winning' the conflict (Guelke, 2012: 42). This divide is not the product of the Good

Friday Agreement, but the product of the division that brought about the Troubles. 'Winning' for one community goes hand-in-hand with 'loss' for the other. Two decades of global upheaval have failed to fundamentally alter these patterns. Even in times of 'peace', division has remained a factor in all aspects of life, determining patterns of education, socialisation, employment, and economic participation. Due to this impact, it makes sense to first consider Northern Ireland before the outbreak of the Troubles, laying the groundwork for the region's classification as a deeply divided society. This previous period of 'tranquillity' – a condition described by Frank Wright as somewhere between peace and conflict, with the potential for a resurgence of violence at any time – is noteworthy for the way in which a lack of cross-community violence failed to bring an end to cross-community distrust, and a reminder that the period cannot be considered truly 'peaceful' (1988: 18–9). Despite the obvious failure of this period – the Troubles broke out in the following decade, as hindsight proves 'tranquillity' was not enough to ensure long-term stability – it is the closest pre-Good Friday Agreement period of limited violence in Northern Ireland, making it a significant metric against which current efforts can be measured.

Research on the role of division in times of relative peace was carried out between the end of the Second World War and the outbreak of the Troubles. The 1950s were marked by comparative quiet in Northern Ireland, most significantly a drop-off in support for the Irish Republican Army (English, 2004: 72–5). It seems logical, therefore, to compare this prior period of calm with current conditions in order to explain the on-going risks to 'peace' today. In the 1950s, it appeared as though Northern Ireland had reached a social equilibrium, and communities co-existed with little outward friction. Why, then, did conflict return less than six years later? Further, have the factors leading to violence following this period of 'peace' in the 1950s truly been addressed? They have not, but instead remain hallmarks of life in Northern Ireland so long as inter-community division endures; this makes understanding these enduring factors critical to ensuring the region remains stable today. The outbreak of the Troubles 50 years ago can be explained by many of the same factors seen in the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement today. Denis P. Barritt

and Charles F. Carter described life during the 'peaceful' years of the late 1950s as follows, making it clear that this 'peace' was not all it seemed:

In politics, in education, in business, in social life, and in recreation, strong forces tend to place a man according to the church with which he worships – in the Ulster phrase, according to which foot he digs with. There is no assurance that the divisions are becoming less with the passage of time; on the contrary, a divided education and a divided social and political life tend to deepen and confirm the fundamental cleavage. That cleavage is, of course, much more than a difference of theology, for the differences of religion run alongside differences of race and of historical origin. (Barritt & Carter, 1962: 1)

In the 1950s, two decades after Irish partition, the northern region of the island remained entrenched in past patterns of 'us' versus 'them', bonded superficially by neighbourliness and location-based collective feelings but ultimately loyal to their own side. Despite the perceived worsening of divisions, Barritt and Carter also observed these differences did not prevent individuals from living in close contact, seemingly happily, with those from the opposite tradition (Barritt & Carter, 1962: 2). Such patterns remain visible today, with 77% of those surveyed by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey indicating that they would be happy to live in a mixed-religion neighbourhood, while a smaller percentage (62%) indicated their opinion that Catholics and Protestants did not lead parallel lives regarding issues like shops to frequent and medical practices with which to register (NILTS, 2016). Despite this similarity, there has been progress on the issue of residential segregation: 'single identity wards' have declined in number since 2001, from 'over 50%' in 2001 to just 37% (Nolan, 2013: 113). While this indicates progress, it also demonstrates that over one-third of the population live in wards where 80% or more of the population shares the same religious background (Ibid.). Beyond this, the facts of residential desegregation do not ensure that residents do not divide themselves in other ways. Rosemary Harris (1972) explored the notion of these necessary overlaps in research

carried out roughly contemporaneously with Barritt and Carter. She concluded peaceful co-existence was possible, but Northern Ireland even in peacetime remained divided at its core down lines defined by religious labels (Harris, 1972). Harris further noted that there was very little possibility of meaningfully overcoming division. Similar patterns can be seen in some areas today, and can help to explain the reasons peace in Northern Ireland remains negative. Despite obvious classification as a deeply divided society, the region remained relatively calm through the early 1960s before erupting into the decades of violence of the Troubles. Two decades of relative peace failed to bring about forward motion on the issue of entrenched division – an eerily similar reality to Northern Ireland today.

Twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland can still be evaluated by the in-groups and out-groups inherent to a deeply divided society – the same groupings legitimised by the Good Friday Agreement, going so far as to require members of the newly-formed Assembly to self-identify as ‘nationalist, unionist or other – for the purposes of measuring cross-community support in Assembly votes’ (UK Government, 1998: 3.6). This entrenchment of in-groups and out-groups in the very fabric of the body of cooperation the Agreement aimed to develop indicates that such classifications were and remain at the bedrock of society. These groupings exist as people classify themselves based on the group to which they belong (their in-group) as well as to the group with which they do not identify (their out-group) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This schism is heightened in societies such as Northern Ireland, where the bipolar nature of division means most can be willingly classified into one of only two groups. Guelke addresses this issue with his framework of deeply divided societies, labelling Northern Ireland a binary society, in which having only two options for identification exacerbates inter-group conflict (2012: 13). Much of the work on the pre-Troubles ‘peace time’ can be considered similarly, addressing the binary nature of society with no significant or meaningful ‘middle ground’, defined more by what it *is not* than what it is. With no viable ‘other’ group, it thus becomes difficult for individuals to break out of the in-group/out-group identity binary and form new connections. Such entrenched division remains

the 'social boundary' of religion, maintaining division even without active conflict – despite actual religious practice becoming less significant in the daily lives of most people (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995: 185). A shifting of larger cultural viewpoints on issues such as religion and its role in everyday life – part of a larger trend of secularisation seen throughout Western Europe – has done little to change the significance of this organising unit. This social, if not religious, boundary reinforces the deep divisions of society in Northern Ireland, characterised by 'a lack of consensus on the framework for the making of decisions and a contested political process in which the legitimacy of outcomes is commonly challenged by political representatives of one of the segments' (Guelke, 2012: 32), rather than enduring violence or the threat thereof. This hallmark of negative peace is seen as the by-product of community division. These patterns of division were well-documented in the early years of the Troubles, and yet left unchallenged. There is little incentive to change these patterns in a region where even the peace agreement considers forward progress to be 'promotion of a culture of tolerance' across historic divisions of education and housing, rather than concrete initiatives to make this a reality (UK Government, 1998: 6.12). The social legacy of the Good Friday Agreement at 20 is a product of this divide, as the document formalised and legitimised both political and social in-groups and out-groups, allowing it to flourish and encouraging its repetition in a new generation. As such, the deeply divided society that has existed in Northern Ireland for decades is at the heart of *why* negative peace endures, providing the basis for a social stalemate from which the region cannot progress and playing out old divisions in new ways. While violence has the potential to arise from such division, this negative peace has endured above all else. If the social legacy of the Good Friday Agreement is to change from 'negative' (but functional) to 'positive', however, division must both be addressed and challenged. Conversations about this legacy must consider both the quality of peace today as well as the long history of peace, conflict, and division if culturally-sensitive progress (to both communities) is to be made without the risk of significant backslide or a return of active fighting. While this shift may be difficult in the face of uncertainty over what could possibly take the place of the current model or how to find a new common ground, it seems

little will change without such initiatives; failing to consider them may yet risk the current peace and cause a return to violence all the same.

While the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement and its endurance for two decades should not be discounted, achieving only a formalised cessation of violence cannot be considered equal to functional peace. The potential for such a situation in Northern Ireland was described as early as 1988, a decade before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, by Frank Wright as the difference between 'peace' and 'tranquillity' – truly ending the conflict, including its root causes, versus a managing of tensions (Wright, 1988: 18–9). The Good Friday Agreement achieved the latter. Wright argued that tranquillity thus becomes a threat to itself, '[requiring] an extreme caution not to offend ... Tranquillity was always at the mercy of whoever disturbed it for whatever reason' (Ibid.). This indicates that the lack of sustainable peace in Northern Ireland serves the same kind of threat as active fighting, with the potential to inspire violence if it is disturbed by actions perceived to be a slight to one community. Such is the reality in Northern Ireland today, as the Good Friday Agreement has allowed these old disputes to continue to drive patterns of association and belonging. Wright's tranquillity is Galtung's negative peace by another name: a precarious situation in which old tensions remain just below the surface of life. In 2013, Neil Jarman argued that in Northern Ireland, as in other post-conflict societies:

[t]he transition from violent conflict to sustainable peace is rarely smooth or simple. The reality is that armed conflict impacts on the totality of a society. It changes attitudes as well as behaviour. It fractures relationships, destroys trust, and creates a legacy of fear, hostility and insecurity. (Jarman, 2013: 1)

This influence 'on the totality of a society' is a conceptualisation of the quality of peace, driving further apart communities and reinforcing division inherent to the conflict due to the potential for a resurgence of violence, as the schisms at the heart of the Troubles have yet to be fully addressed. By not addressing these schisms, the peace process in Northern Ireland allowed them to endure to the present: the hard-won peace is at risk.

Reinforcement of division can be seen through the formal language of the Good Friday Agreement. This is obvious in the Agreement's call for 'a new regional development strategy ... tackling the problems of a divided society and social cohesion in urban, rural and border areas' (UK Government, 1998: 6.7.2.1). It understands that the situation in Northern Ireland was shaped by these divisions, but it fails to commit to concrete action for bringing communities together. This acknowledgement without offering a solution is seen throughout the section of the Agreement concerned with 'Rights, Safeguard and Equality of Opportunity' on issues from the economy to cultural displays, implying that these divisions were to be allowed to endure, shaping every aspect of life in Northern Ireland through to the present day. This makes the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement about more than just 'have both the paramilitary ceasefire and the power-sharing remained in place?'. The negative peace entrenched by the Good Friday Agreement has the potential to exacerbate tensions beyond what is sustainable for current institutions to endure. By not addressing the issues of the deeply divided society, the Good Friday Agreement set the stage for tenuous tranquillity in the region, at the mercy of being disturbed by agitators on both sides. Peace in Northern Ireland today therefore demonstrates varied success. Paramilitary splinter groups have emerged on both sides, while major paramilitary groups have decommissioned; power-sharing has intermittently governed the region, while Stormont has been suspended twice within the last five years and, at present, seems unlikely to cooperate to form a new government soon (BBC News Northern Ireland, 2017b). The political and social legacy of the Agreement, therefore, remain intertwined with both the language of 'peace' and the reality of life in the region for generations.

The political legacy of the Good Friday Agreement is one of negative peace, succeeding in bringing people together in a power-sharing governmental structure but failing to achieve its objectives of stability and endurance – most recently, at the time of writing, with the failure to form a government in Northern Ireland since March 2017. Without the success of the political elements of the Good Friday Agreement, social and cultural initiatives struggle to gain support from politicians

and constituents alike, meaning the peace process has struggled to embed at all levels of life. Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd describe peace in any region of the world as potentially 'emancipatory', with the caveat that such emancipation from previous violence depends on dismantling and replacing existing structures, rather than forcing them to fit into a new model (1996: 14). This is the major shortcoming of the Good Friday Agreement as it was written and voted on in 1998, attempting to rebrand existing division as the cornerstone of consociational government and generating a negative peace based on the foundation of a deeply divided society. Such rebranding is evident in the text of the document: acknowledging that the Assembly would '[operate] *where appropriate* on a cross-community basis'—documenting not only that the divided society model was likely to endure, but also that, in some situations (left unidentified) such cross-community cooperation may be inappropriate (UK Government, 1998: 3.4, emphasis added). This, combined with provisions of either parallel consent or weighted majority voting 'to ensure key decisions are taken on a cross-community basis' indicates that power-sharing government in Northern Ireland depends on division to function as intended (Ibid.: 3.5.d). As such, an emancipatory peace has yet to be achieved, trapping the region in a cycle of old divisions played out in a new age. It is not within the aim of this article to attempt to restructure Stormont, and indeed this may be impossible. What is not impossible, however, is critical evaluation of current systems to understand how best to address these shortcomings outside current structures — the goal of the next section of this article, addressing the lack of embedded peace in Northern Ireland today. These critical efforts to counter current division are competing with myriad narratives on the conflict. They are encouraged and supported by organisations and institutions with a much longer history, and a much higher degree of public confidence than governmental structures in Northern Ireland have ever achieved. Such competition ensures the Good Friday Agreement has continually struggled to realise its objective of a unified society, instead codifying the divisive way of life that produced the Troubles. By reinforcing historical patterns of division in Northern Ireland through political structures, the Good Friday Agreement ensured its legacy

would remain one of peace marred by social cleavage, giving significant power to non-governmental actors in determining the course of the region. The direction of this course has yet to be fully set today.

Formalising Division: Consociationalism to 'Culture Wars'

The chief political change enacted by the Good Friday Agreement was the restructuring of devolved powers to the Executive in Stormont as a consociational democracy. While directing formal institutions toward a shared future, this has done little to bridge the enduring societal gap and instead encouraged the 'us versus them', in-group and out-group model to become part of the political process. The model of consociationalism implemented by the peace process was designed externally to Northern Ireland, responding to issues of majority governance in pluralistic societies more generally (Lijphart, 1977: 3–4). In Northern Ireland, consociationalism allows both Nationalists and Unionists to protect their positions within official government channels. Such protections are at the core of the Good Friday Agreement, and its 'Safeguards' to 'Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland' dictate exactly how this shared power should be utilised to make decisions (UK Government, 1998: 3). Yet, they also threaten the nature of the 'peace' the document has built. Guelke summarised the shortcomings of consociationalism as '[tending] to entrench the ethnic divisions that arose in the course of the conflict' (2012: 121). This entrenchment is obvious in Northern Ireland, legitimising the political stalemate threatening power-sharing. The challenges of implementing consociational democracy were understood before it was applied in Northern Ireland: Frank Wright argued consociationalism 'only works when it isn't very necessary (or indeed when it isn't strictly necessary at all)' (Wright, 1988: 274–5), as such it was unlikely to ever work in Northern Ireland. Wright argued the system was more likely a threat in Northern Ireland, due to the nature of consociationalism to encourage extremism among both leaders and followers to maintain influence (Ibid.). Such extremism was thus an opponent to the best-case-scenario, according to Wright, of mutual deterrence from violence maintaining post-conflict 'tranquillity' (Ibid.). Thirty years on from this warning, Wright's words have rung true, as moderate parties on both sides of the political

divide in Northern Ireland continue to lose electoral ground (BBC News, 2017). While mainstream Nationalist and Unionist groups have moderated since 1998, this moderation has not spread to the point of cross-community inclusion, with the centre of the political system in Northern Ireland a product of deliberate choice by its members, and without the source of power and support seen by either major identity group. Losing the middle ground between still-extreme ends of the political spectrum is the natural course of a system rewarding actions along political fringes, legitimising threats of violence by responding to them, implicitly encouraging extremism while providing little incentive for compromise and moderation. Such division at the highest levels encourages division of civilians, making the political shortcomings of the Good Friday Agreement still keenly felt through culture and society, where they continue to pose a risk to peace.

Power-sharing may force some measure of cross-community political cooperation, but the Good Friday Agreement does little to bridge the cultural gap between Nationalists and Unionists. Divisive community events continue to erode societal middle ground. This, in turn, has led to more polarising displays, creating a feedback loop making it difficult for moderate forces to have a significant cultural impact, just as they have lost influence politically. The result of this feedback loop is unembedded peace, in which tensions between groups are managed to avoid violence, rather than transforming conflict and developing an inclusive, shared society. Cultural protections of the Good Friday Agreement have thus paradoxically supported markers of this division, including bonfires and parades, invigorating social division rather than bridging divides. Such a process stems from the peace process itself, as the Agreement devoted relatively little attention to these social issues. It acknowledged the need for further work, but failed to articulate what should be done – a marked contrast to the level of detail paid to governmental or security concerns. The Good Friday Agreement only addresses these insofar as saying ‘The parties affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community’ (UK Government, 1998: 6.1). While important to consider the many ways these rights may come under threat, the Agreement fails to address *how* the ideal of mutual respect for civil rights

and religious liberties should be enacted. This has been taken as *carte blanche* for groups to resist any limitations on their use of flags or other communal markers, resulting in controversies including the 2012 Flag Protests. Such displays are at the core of many of the shortcomings of peace perceived by the Community Relations Council in their Peace Monitoring Reports. In 2014 and 2016, these investigations noted the significance of the 'culture wars' replacing paramilitary violence between communities in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2014: 154–63; Wilson, 2016: 123–39). While this 'culture war' is less outwardly violent than the Troubles, the continued schism and negative peace it represents continue to risk stability. This indicates support for the argument of this article. Efforts ostensibly aimed at bringing groups closer together have allowed them instead to draw a line in the sand, eschewing violence but holding fast to mechanisms marking themselves as a unique in-group opposition to the 'other' of the out-group.

The enduring social stratification seen in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement have given rise to a 'culture war' in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2014: 160). This schism – a signpost of ethnic conflict – has been exacerbated in the years since 1998 as division previously modelled by violent actors is now acted upon by civilians at all walks of life. This reality has even been mentioned in Belfast's application to be the 2023 European 'City of Culture', with leaked application materials going so far as to claim that culture in the region has been 'used as a continuation of conflict by other means' (Meredith, 2017). This makes the stakes for finding mutually agreeable solutions to the conflict seemingly higher with each passing day, as a failure to act continues to support and entrench these divisions. To create positive change, the Good Friday Agreement and associated peace must contend with the on-going 'culture war', and the realisation 'that even liberal democratic institutions and a standard of living enviable in all but the wealthiest countries were no proof against ethnic conflict in the contemporary age' (Mulholland, 2003: preface). Such a realisation articulates the high stakes nature of challenging existing social structures to fully embed peace, as well as the risks if such goals are not met. Northern Ireland today is an on-going ethnic conflict, struggling with division between two ethnic communities (as understood to be 'a named human population, with a myth of common ancestry,

shared memories, and cultural elements; a link with a historic territory or homeland; and a measure of solidarity') (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995: 218). The ethnic conflict label proposed by McGarry and O'Leary informs current understandings of the shortcomings of the Good Friday Agreement, and the impact of the Agreement on society today, by contextualising them as part of a long history of division, including the 'culture wars' of the last 20 years. While community relations in Northern Ireland have improved to some degree since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, only two-thirds of respondents in the most recent Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) felt as though leisure centres (61%), parks (63%), libraries (67%), and shopping centres (67%) in their area were 'yes, definitely' "shared and open" to both Protestants and Catholics' (NILTS, 2016).¹ While 'yes, probably' was the second-most popular response to each of these questions, the conditional nature implies there is a chance shared spaces may not be truly inclusive. That parts of civil society may not be welcoming to all individuals in 2016, 18 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, supports the notion that the new and inclusive society aimed for in 1998 may continue to struggle to take root, while the unembedded nature of peace threatens stability in the region even today.

This idea of a 'culture war' is not unique to Northern Ireland, and yet the region does not fit the traditional mould. Generally considered in the terms of American politics and society, culture wars in this context are concerned with issues of values – ranging from gun control to immigration to censorship (Hunter, 1992). Hunter describes the pervasive nature of these debates as '... discussions about what is fundamentally right and wrong about the world we live in – about what is ultimately good and what is finally intolerable in our communities' (Ibid.: 31). In that sense, patterns of 'culture wars' in Northern Ireland are similar: impassioned debate about seemingly-insurmountable differences in morals and mores. Despite these similarities in the strength of collective belief, Northern Ireland remains distinct from the typical culture war due to the way in which the societal split defines every aspect of life, rather than a

¹ Other responses to questions in this module were 'yes, probably', 'no, probably not', 'no, definitely not', 'none in this area', and 'don't know' (NILTS, 2016).

specific deeply-held conviction as in the American application of the term. The culture war in Northern Ireland is part of the historical deeply divided society, with the binary split in the region on a single, all-encompassing issue. This is a marked departure from American-style culture wars defined by narrow, though deep, views. This difference is most visible in the results of the culture war in the region: the outbreak of the Troubles, and the ways in which these decades of conflict still influence life today. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, this has been acted out through parades, protests, bonfires, murals, and flags – cultural markers that have come to carry far heavier meaning. The 2014 *Peace Monitoring Report* noted that this deeper meaning has been encouraged since 1998 by a resurgence in ‘arguments over parades and flags [that] have proved more, rather than less, intense in an environment where violence has become much less so’ (Nolan, 2014: 123). Patterns of expression and association have adapted to an end in paramilitary violence. By assigning meaning to these forms of cultural expression, tensions are raised around events and demonstrations that would otherwise be considered single-community. The binary nature of life in Northern Ireland has allowed these situations to become smokescreens for division in other ways. While it may be possible to be a ‘moderate’ on issues such as gun control in the United States while remaining staunchly anti-censorship, the ‘culture war’ in Northern Ireland has manifested such that to hold an opinion on one issue is, in many respects, to hold an opinion on them all. Due to the historical deeply divided society, as well as the enduring negative peace, Northern Ireland’s culture war – entrenched by a formal peace process built on traditional patterns of division – involves nearly all its inhabitants and seemingly has only two sides.

Northern Ireland’s shift from a militarised conflict to a civil and political conflict sharing the same grievances has allowed the current negative peace to take root, supported by a peace process permitting old grievances to be carried out in new ways. Recent years have seen visible and vocal agitation from Loyalists and, more broadly, Unionists, demonstrating discontent with a peace agreement and a process many believe has left them behind and given preferential treatment to Catholics (Nolan, 2014: 154–7). While generally non-violent, these demonstrations articulate many of the complaints and opinions previously backed by Loyalist paramilitary action,

including concerns over creeping encroachment on their way of life by their out-group. Protests and marches allow for visible airing of grievances, forcing attention on – if not resolution to – these perceived injustices. They bring old grievances to public attention in new ways. This highlights how ‘tranquillity’ rather than true ‘peace’ has developed in Northern Ireland over the last two decades. Protests have historically been a doubled-edged sword in Northern Ireland, with some inciting further violence, including August 1969 in Derry/Londonderry and 1996 in Drumcree. Restricting marches can be equally problematic. Efforts by the Parades Commission to control routes of parades or to ban specific events have also resulted in violence and long-term protests, including permanent displays of cultural markers such as flags, at ever-increasing costs of money and person-hours (Nolan, 2014: 158–9). Nolan’s report attributed such increases in violence to the ‘culture war [by Unionists] on two fronts: one to curb the advance of Irish nationalism, and the other to keep a modern and liberalising Britain at bay’ (2014: 160). This indicates a modern iteration of old concerns. While it would be irresponsible to shift the blame for this cultural development completely to the Good Friday Agreement, many actors in the ‘culture war’ cite the peace process as the beginning of a political attack on their beliefs and ideology (Ibid.: 154). This cultural divide endures, as individuals and political parties seek to control present narratives as a means of controlling narratives of the past (Wilson, 2016: 123). Debates over these narratives of the past were largely glossed over in the Good Friday Agreement, which addressed many flashpoints with a blanket statement:

All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division. Arrangements will be made to monitor this issue and consider what action might be required. (UK Government, 1998: 6.7.5)

‘Symbols and emblems’, and their potential to unite as well as divide, were significant enough in 1998 to warrant inclusion in the Good Friday Agreement, and yet this significance was only obliquely addressed. Despite understanding the

role of community-specific markers in dividing society, the Good Friday Agreement legitimised their role as means of acting out historical division, leading to a building of resentment and grievance on both sides. This resulted in the current 'culture war', which shows no signs of ending soon. Such a culture war extends beyond issues directly related to the peace process. There is significant community division on a wide variety of social issues, ranging from marriage equality and abortion rights to Brexit and the border. The lines between these viewpoints remain polarised down traditional community barriers. While the peace process focused on ending paramilitary violence and setting up a power-sharing government, issues left behind have festered, producing a social stalemate hardening into negative peace.

The Good Friday Agreement makes clear it is 'the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose' (UK Government, 1998: 1.1.vi). While this clause relates to legal citizenship, it is important to interpret it as a memorandum on identity more generally: individuals are free to associate with either one community, or both (at least in theory). In practice, this permission not only divides people on the basis of personal identification, but provides legal categories into which people can determine belonging of both themselves and others. This social division is marked by demonstrations such as parades and bonfires – all of which long pre-date the Good Friday Agreement – making moving forward to a collective civil society difficult in the shadow of displays 'othering' a specific out-group (Jarman & Bell, 2009: 8). The longer these contentious issues remain the status quo, the more difficult it may be to enact widespread change; the urgency to end the Troubles has been replaced with a type of complacency over division. This entrenchment and legitimisation of divisive cultural expressions mean initiatives such as the Parades Commission – aimed at addressing potentially sensitive issues of marching from both communities – have been met with resistance or even backlash from both sides (see Belfast Telegraph, 2016; McAdam, 2017). That such divisive issues were left relatively unaddressed by the Good Friday Agreement demonstrates both the lengths taken to ensure its passage, as well as the shortcomings that have tarnished its legacy in the two decades since.

While passage was a critical first step toward positive peace in the region, it had the lasting impact of legitimising already-existing division and failing to address more wide-ranging societal issues. Ultimately, it is due to these shortcomings that peace has failed to positively embed in Northern Ireland. The 'peace process' remained largely concerned with ending violence and forming power-sharing government, rather than the lived experiences of ordinary people.

The Good Friday Agreement attempted to bring together groups divided by years of conflict and mistrust, making the document a high-stakes attempt to find a middle ground on issues with no clear, mutually-agreeable solution. While this has worked politically, with power-sharing government intermittently functioning for 20 years, in many ways the social aspects of the Good Friday Agreement can be read more as a set of ideals, rather than concrete achievements to be made. This aspirational quality is most keenly observed in the wide-ranging list of 'Human Rights' under Section 6 of the Agreement (UK Government, 1998). Superficially, this list sets forward cultural and political expectations for life in Northern Ireland after the end of the Troubles. Realistically, it represents a series of known sources of discrimination and segregation, many of which still endure and lack clear means of social redress, despite potential legal ramifications. Specific among such shortcomings is the degree to which the right 'to freedom from sectarian harassment' has failed to materialise. The July Twelfth parades and bonfires are annual flashpoints for further displays of sectarianism. It is estimated that, in 2013, nearly half of all bonfires in Northern Ireland included the Irish flag or other insignia (Ibid.). Many interpret these markers as signs of aggression or even hate crimes, as in the case of Sinn Féin candidate John Finucane's campaign poster on a Belfast bonfire in 2017 (Williamson, 2017). The number of bonfires with contentious decorations demonstrates significant improvement over the period from 2005 to 2013, thanks to financial incentives and support programmes available to communities hosting bonfires without such markers – incentives that have not been enough to end the use of these markers completely (Nolan, 2014: 124–5). Despite official discouragement, sectarianism in Northern Ireland continues to be felt in physical ways. Perhaps the most visible is

the return of Loyalist sectarian murals to many parts of Belfast from 2007 to 2011, which endure to the present (Nolan, 2014: 125). This is a reclaiming of paramilitary territory in an ostensibly post-paramilitary age. Such displays are not unwelcome in their communities, which suggests a return to the rhetoric of paramilitary groups as protectors of a territory. Such a worrisome trend speaks to the toothless nature of provisions ensuring cross-community tranquillity. While the peace process may have envisioned a future in which there was no sectarian division or harassment in Northern Ireland, simply saying so was not enough to make it possible – just as achieving relative peace, as in the 1950s, was not enough to ensure that violence would not return. Even attempts at reform and oversight of policing, laws, and organisations aimed at monitoring and controlling such activities have struggled, leaving many sectarian displays outside of both the goals of 20 years ago and the public services of today, which are frequently made to bear the brunt of on-going distrust. In preparation for Eleventh Night 2017, Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service produced a social media campaign reminding celebrants that any firefighters seen at bonfires had been called there because people were worried the fire was out of control, but were ‘not there to spoil anyone’s fun’ as they had no power to remove safe structures, encouraging community leaders to protect firefighters if their intervention was necessary (Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service, 2017a; Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service, 2017b). Despite such warnings, two groups of firefighters came under attack over the course of the evening after attending to bonfires threatening property and personal safety (BBC News Northern Ireland, 2017a). That such reminders were necessary, but seemed to have little impact, speaks to the divide between civil society and government officials, raising significant doubts about the potential for government intervention encouraging meaningful dialogue. Even non-partisan public service actors have become politicised. In this way, the enduring division is most obvious, as the deeply divided society manifests through negative peace to politicise even the most neutral of actors and goals. The lack of concrete provisions in the Good Friday Agreement for bridging social divides tarnishes the legacy of the document and its related peace negotiations, leaving Northern Ireland let down by politicians who over-promised and under-delivered

to end the Troubles. Decades of active fighting has been replaced with cultural disconnect threatening all in the region.

Cultural Division, Social Stagnation

Northern Ireland today is the product of the Good Friday Agreement – politically, culturally, and socially – as the deeply divided society of 1998 has been supported, developing into negative peace. Despite the success of the Good Friday Agreement in securing paramilitary ceasefire, there remains significant disconnect between the aspirational language of the peace process and the reality of life – a disconnect that threatens the legitimacy and stability of the Agreement today. The Good Friday Agreement continually references ‘the community’ in Northern Ireland, as though the region has a single population. While such unity may have been the goal of peace negotiations in 1998, the language reads as out of touch with the region both then and now, making the document idealistic to the point where it seems to be addressing a place that does not exist. If a single community were a goal of the peace process, its acceptance of two cultural groups and identities appears misplaced; if such dual communities are to fully be accepted, talk of a single community seems unnecessary. This ambiguity and unclear goal are the ‘residual issues’ left behind by the Troubles (Aiken, 2014: 19). These issues, including economic and social conditions, identify the importance of peace processes prioritising ‘changing the motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of the great majority of society members regarding the conflict, the nature of the relationship between the parties, and the parties themselves’ (Bar-Tal & Bennick, 2004: 12; see also Aiken [2014: 19–22]). The importance of each was understood by negotiators, and yet efforts to fully address them in the text of the peace agreement were unlikely to be successful. Negotiations remained tenuous even on the items to which most could agree: paramilitary ceasefire and the establishment of power-sharing government. While indirectly addressing issues of division brought about by divergent identities, the Good Friday Agreement supports disparate cultural and social aims. The Agreement’s reference to any single community must be read as a geographic label, rather than a marker of a shared society. Writing both before and after peace negotiations, many

have identified the Troubles' 'devastating impact' on even minor social cohesion (Aiken, 2014: 60; see also Ruane & Todd [1996: 71]). The outbreak of the Troubles came at a time when research – both then and more recently – described a level of social cooperation (see: Barritt & Carter, 1962; Harris, 1972; Ruane & Todd, 1996). This indicates two things. The first is that, even in a time of 'peace', the divisions and grievances that underlie today's deeply divided society have not gone away. The second is the notion that, no matter how peaceful the region may seem on the surface, until these root causes are addressed the region continues to risk a return to active fighting. As such, the negative peace observed today is a potential risk to Northern Ireland, indicating the importance of continuing to work toward a truly inclusive society. This is the incomplete legacy of the Good Friday Agreement, as these deeply-rooted issues were left unaddressed in 1998 and continue to threaten stability two decades later.

The Good Friday Agreement has not been above challenge in the past 20 years, as aspects of the peace have been tested and communities continue to resist efforts to be legislated into cross-community interaction. As a result, formal peace processes have been revisited. The St Andrews Agreement and the Stormont House/Fresh Start Agreement aimed to address a glaring shortcoming of peace: threats to power-sharing over perceived injustices on cross-community issues. Such efforts have brought about positive change, addressing pressing issues of policing, flags, parades, and language, while maintaining devolved government and power-sharing institutions – even as such institutions have been temporarily disrupted (UK Government, 2006; UK Government, 2015). Despite tenuous advancement, current political conditions make apparent that the debate over cultural expression and community organisation is far from over, with the continued ability to threaten progress and destabilise peace. Even today, Stormont has not yet been restored after the March 2017 election, with intense debates on language legislation seen to benefit Nationalists at the expense of Unionists at the heart of the on-going stalemate. Such on-going debates are examples of the 'zero-sum game' of the conflict and the interpretation by many that they 'lose' political or cultural ground,

should their opponents 'gain' community-specific rights (Aiken, 2014: 60; see also: Guelke, 2012; Muldoon et al., 2007). This supports the perception that initiatives taken to support one community in Northern Ireland automatically disadvantage the other. Guelke cites this zero-sum game as a unique and pervasive challenge to binary societies (2012: 13). The binary nature of Northern Ireland incentivises, and even encourages, this 'us versus them' mentality, further polarising the region rather than bringing people together. History in Northern Ireland makes clear such debates are far from new. Similar clashes can be observed at nearly every attempt at major political change, from the first suggestion of Home Rule in 1886, through the 1972 fall of Stormont and the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (Ruane & Todd, 1996: 114). The zero-sum game has endured throughout the lifetime of the Good Friday Agreement, even as both localised political shifts and the larger forces of globalisation have brought communities in Northern Ireland and Great Britain closer together; lingering cultural inequality has largely benefitted Unionists (Ibid.: 190–1, 200). Ruane and Todd attribute this to the hegemony of 'Protestant culture' in Northern Ireland, defining this culture as 'identity, values, norms, ethos, world view, sense of place in history and in the world' (Ibid.: 178). Despite these outward displays of Unionism, the Flag Protests of 2012–2013 raise questions about the degree to which many Loyalists and Unionists see themselves represented by those in power. The zero-sum nature of conflict in Northern Ireland has meant that, so long as individuals on both sides remain unsatisfied with their rights and representation, the 'peace' in the region will never be truly positive. Cultural issues including language and flags were left unevaluated by the Good Friday Agreement, allowing them to endure and become an increasing source of tension, despite the potential to damage already insecure community relations. This is just one example of the current manifestation of the deeply divided society in Northern Ireland. Further efforts to maintain such practices, through policies of both the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent peace documents, have ultimately fostered the impression that a gain for one community is a loss for the other, exacerbating the social schism and further entrenching the conditions that have brought about the enduring negative peace.

Efforts to maintain peace and uphold the Good Friday Agreement have been forced to compete with the looming threat of a resurgence of violence from splinter paramilitary groups who refuse to accept the authority of the paramilitary ceasefire. Government officials have been forced to make decisions based on such potential threats (Hall, 2018). Recently, this included the November 2015 Fresh Start Agreement. These negotiations and the resultant agreement followed a summer of partisan clashes over issues of parades, flags, and bonfires, culminating with two paramilitary-linked murders in August of that year. As a result, the 2014 Stormont House Agreement was reevaluated, and both communities recommitted themselves to addressing 'the legacy and impact of paramilitary activity' (UK Government, 2015: 13). The document agrees to working against paramilitaries, and to 'accept no authority, direction or control on our political activities other than our democratic mandate alongside our own personal and party judgment' (Ibid.: 15). That such a declaration was necessary speaks to the control paramilitary groups retained over portions of Northern Ireland well after the unilateral ceasefire, making it clear this 'success' of the Good Friday Agreement was not complete. Division appears potentially more widespread in Northern Ireland today than during the height of violence: there is no longer a shared goal of an end to active fighting on which most people in both communities can agree. The Good Friday Agreement and fledging peace in Northern Ireland have equally been challenged by those with no violent agenda, significantly with the Flags Protest of 2012–2013. While these protests saw paramilitary involvement, they also saw significant support from individuals with no such overt ties; the issue of flag displays remains contentious today. Visible markers of territory carry heightened significance during this period of negative peace, as the tensions inherent to the conflict in Northern Ireland continue to simmer for 20 years. While it is important to consider the Good Friday Agreement as a living document, subject to new challenges and changes but ultimately serving as the standard-bearer for peace, this shortcoming highlights a major flaw: it tried to do too much for too many. Such a wide-ranging scope meant the Good Friday Agreement was shallow in depth, covering many issues only on a surface level and leaving others untouched. As a result, the deeply divided society has endured, supported by

a framework of peace legitimising and encouraging negative peace. Enduring gaps in the peace process mean many remained unhappy with the Agreement, making the threat of this dissatisfaction significant, and colouring governance and life in Northern Ireland to this day. This worrisome legacy that cannot be discarded until the risk to peace and stability is mitigated.

Conclusion

While the Good Friday Agreement has many shortcomings, it is crucial to consider the alternative: what non-passage of the Good Friday Agreement and a collapse of the peace process in 1998 could have meant for the region. This counterfactual is useful for explaining major gaps in the document, and the reasons it is easy to read the Agreement as toothless today. The Good Friday Agreement came up short on many issues – from social cohesion, to issues of demilitarisation and legacy issues relating to justice and policing – because coming up short was the only option available. The ‘alternative’ was further violent conflict, and a past to which no one wanted to return. Finding a solution to each issue related to the Troubles was an impossible task. As a result, the peace process focused on the mutually-agreeable goal of ending violence; by negotiating, each represented paramilitary group had already signalled this was among their aims. Insisting on more action on social issues, such as policing or paramilitary demilitarisation, risked the peace process before it had the chance to take root. The goal of the peace process was therefore never explicitly to deal with these on-going crises. Instead, the goal was far easier to articulate and agree to: ending violence and discouraging its return. This made a negative peace, concerned with managing and reducing violence rather than transforming the conflict, the only reasonable result. This best-case scenario of immediate tranquillity through power-sharing, with other details addressed later, was envisioned a decade before when the deeply divided society was still glaringly obvious. As Frank Wright argued, ‘The closer the threats of violence to the surface of political life, the more the preservation of tranquillity looks like accepting a balance of communal deterring powers, knowing violence may rapidly escalate beyond the point at which it can be criminalized’ (1988: 275). Power-sharing government, needing support from both major communities to function, therefore acts

as this 'detering power' – both carrot and stick to encourage once-violent individuals and groups to maintain civility and participate in public life. This is an extension of the ways in which peace negotiations were incentivised, and a method that has been successful to date. In 1998, the threats of violence were very real: while the paramilitary ceasefire endured, resistance to demilitarisation meant there was no way to ensure the trend would continue. A collapse of the peace process would have removed the only major incentive at hand, risking a return to violence and the abandonment of the shared dream of peace. While it may be easy to critique the Agreement for its many shortcomings, it endured – despite challenges – making such critique possible today.

Could the Good Friday Agreement have been better? Adrian Guelke identifies the binary nature of society as particularly difficult to overcome in any context; such division is keenly felt today, observed in protest rhetoric around issues of expression and rights. This binary split does not appear to be changing – as the negative peace set out by the Good Friday Agreement made plain two decades ago. The divisions at the heart of the Troubles continue to impact the everyday experiences of the 1.8 million people living in Northern Ireland, defining experiences from childhood through old age. The 'don't talk about the war' ethos in shared spaces makes it harder for communities to move on, drawing people closer to their in-group while driving them away from their out-group (Jarman & Bell, 2009: 9). Despite this, some places have had success in becoming more 'mixed'; these include places of business where such matters are explicitly not discussed, placing all employees on an equal level (Ibid.: 7, 11). Such models may work in formal associations such as shared employment, but are not transferable to other walks of life. As a result, the Good Friday Agreement – while laudable for its success in ending decades of violence in Northern Ireland – should be viewed sceptically, for failing to sufficiently address patterns of separation responsible for the initial outbreak of violence. These patterns, and the deeply divided society they both represent and reinforce, are at the heart of the negative peace seen today in the region, even 20 years after the signing of a landmark peace agreement. Northern Ireland has served as a model for peace processes and post-conflict politics around the world, but more work must be done to ensure the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement lives up to its potential.

The Good Friday Agreement was a product of its time. It set forward an agenda that has not always adapted smoothly to the present, just as it was not whole-heartedly received in 1998. Despite such struggles, the document has set forward the social, cultural, and political landscape in Northern Ireland over the last two decades. Its legacy is significant, even if its continuance has occasionally been questionable. Crucially, the Good Friday Agreement addressed both political and cultural violence directly, forcing paramilitary organisations to declare and maintain a ceasefire if they wished to be party to peace talks. Despite threats to this ceasefire from splinter groups, both at the time and in years since, it has achieved its stated objectives. Arguments in Northern Ireland have shifted away from definition by violence, allowing political and cultural actors to form more official channels for the airing of both historical and contemporary grievances. While not explicitly touching on social issues, including many facets of life currently addressed by NGOs and other civil actors, the impact of the Good Friday Agreement on politics and culture has unsurprisingly left an obvious mark on social action and interaction. It defines the ways in which individuals relate to members of their in-group and out-group. This is the degree to which peace has failed to fully embed in Northern Ireland, remaining precarious even after two decades, due to the depth and breadth of social segregation that seems impossible to fully disrupt and dismantle.

Unfortunately, the trajectory of negative peace means such patterns of division remain nearly unchanged, with parallel civil societies, rather than the single-community vision of the Good Friday Agreement. For the time being, however, this divided model may be the most reasonable option for Northern Ireland, allowing these entrenched parallel societies to flourish relatively free from the threat of violence. This social arrangement neatly parallels the period before the Troubles, proving no 'Peace' in Northern Ireland can endure without overcoming the divisions at the heart of conflict – a high bar for success. Clearly, such a model of society was unstable then, resulting in decades of violence. The almost-inherent deeply divided society in Northern Ireland has produced the negative peace of the Good Friday Agreement and its subsequent renegotiations. The model of a deeply divided society

may be fraught with the very shortcomings that brought about the Troubles, and yet its role in incentivising the relatively stable negative peace since 1998 makes it a flawed-but-workable model until major change can be instigated. It is clear there is still considerable work to be done in Northern Ireland before the future promised by the Good Friday Agreement is achieved. The legacy of the Good Friday Agreement is therefore one of blighted potential: succeeding just enough not to fail, but failing to bring about a truly sustainable peace.

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