

PEACE IN OUR TIME? THE 1998 AGREEMENT

Steve Bruce

On Good Friday 1998, the British and Irish governments and political parties representing most of Northern Ireland's voters signed an historic agreement on its future government and constitutional position. If the accords work, it will represent the belated completion of the process which the British government began in 1972, when it responded to the violence in Northern Ireland by assuming direct control of the province. Since proroguing the devolved Stormont parliament, Westminster has been trying to build a stable political future for a divided society by promoting an alliance of moderate Catholics and Protestants or, to use their constitutional labels, nationalists and unionists, and by marginalizing the extremes on each side.

What is now most striking about early British initiatives is their naivete. The initial proposals for the 1973 Sunningdale agreement were constructed by the British government with little understanding of local politics and little appreciation of the difficulties of those who would have to sell the proposals to their voters. It was assumed that rational solutions would command the support of the main political leaders and that they in turn would command their parties. Brian Faulkner, the last Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, would deliver the Ulster Unionist party (UUP) and the Protestant vote. Gerry Fitt and John Hume would deliver the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP) and through it the Catholic vote. And the newly-formed Alliance party, which was neither unionist nor nationalist, would mobilize the professional middle classes. The results of the elections to the 1973 Assembly should have sent a powerful warning - a clear majority of unionist representatives were opposed to government plans - but, rather than pull back, the government went ahead with the conference at Sunningdale and solved the problem of unionist dissent by not inviting the dissenters.

Steve Bruce is professor of sociology at Aberdeen University, and has written extensively on Northern Ireland Unionism. The research which informs this article has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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The Sunningdale agreement of 1973 was based on much the same elements as formed the 1998 agreement: a raft of legal measures to end discrimination and to ensure individual liberties; a devolved government for Northern Ireland in which power would be shared between unionists and nationalists; and a formal association, through a Council of Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

The power-sharing executive had barely started to function (and the Council of Ireland never met) before the deal was destroyed by the Ulster Workers Council strike. From the first, Sunningdale had a legitimacy problem in that a clear majority of unionists, who were a clear majority of the population, did not support it. Outside the UUP was Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist party (DUP) and Bill Craig's Vanguard (which included the young David Trimble, now the First Minister of the 1998 Assembly). They were supported by a large number of senior figures in the UUP who were trying to regain control of their party from Brian Faulkner. In January the ruling council of the party voted against Sunningdale, and Faulkner resigned to form his own party. On the nationalist side there were important divisions, with some within the SDLP clearly viewing the Sunningdale agreement as a stop-gap measure: more a matter of a symbolic claim to status than a plausible long-term settlement.

In addition, the IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries were engaged in a bloody war. In 1973, 250 people were killed and there were over a 1000 explosions: almost three a day. In that context, unionists were being asked to accept a major weakening of the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom with no assurance that such compromise would produce the desired benefit of satisfying nationalist demands, and every sign that the 'physical force' republican movement would simply continue to try to bomb Ulster into a united Ireland.

Before the Executive had had a chance to prove its worth, a Westminster general election provided the dissenting unionists with an opportunity to prove that Faulkner did not speak for them. It would have required an enormous leap of faith and might well have back-fired, but the pro-Executive parties could have formed an electoral pact across the confessional divide and stood together in defence of the new experiment. Instead they competed: Alliance, the SDLP and Faulkner's liberal unionists took votes from each other and handed a huge propaganda victory to the anti-Sunningdale 'United Ulster Unionist' candidates, who won 11 of the 12 parliamentary seats and 51 per cent of the votes cast.

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With all they needed by way of legitimation, the combination of unionist politicians, paramilitaries, and workers destroyed Sunningdale. The loyalist paramilitaries blocked the roads; the skilled working class ran down the power generating industry; and a large part of the Protestant middle class made little effort to defy the strikers. The Labour government, influenced partly by a reluctance to break a strike, allowed the army to stand back. Lacking both a popular mandate and the power to resist the strikers, the Executive resigned.

The failure of Sunningdale was followed by two decades of unsuccessful political initiatives. Every attempt to find agreement foundered on the refusal of either side to concede enough to win over the other. Although the security forces were able to reduce the mayhem of the early 1970s to what one British politician called 'an acceptable level of violence', the province came no closer to finding a solution. Indeed, a solution was initially made harder by the rise of Sinn Fein. When in October 1980 republican prisoners in the Maze escalated their long-running protest for political status into a hunger strike, few expected either that ten men would starve themselves to death or that Sinn Fein would be able to use the nationalist response to those deaths to turn its community support into a viable electoral party. Large numbers voted for the dual strategy which Danny Morrison called 'the Armalite and the Ballot Box'. By June 1983, Sinn Fein was taking 13 per cent of the vote in Northern Ireland compared with the SDLP's 18 per cent.

The rise of Sinn Fein strengthened the hand of those Dublin politicians who were trying to persuade the British government that containing republicanism required greater concessions to the moderate nationalist agenda. The result was a new phase, signalled by the Anglo-Irish Accord of November 1985, which for the first time gave the Irish Republic a formal (though only consultative) role in the running of Northern Ireland. From that point on London took the view that Northern Ireland was a problem which would only be solved with the active assistance of Dublin (and, increasingly, the United States).

TALKS AND CEASE-FIRES

In 1993 John Hume of the SDLP began a series of talks with Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, which were eventually to lead to the IRA calling a cease-fire in August 1994. Although just what was agreed in those talks (and in the secret contacts between the British government and the IRA) is a matter of much contention, the key elements appear to have been a recognition from the IRA that it could not blast unionists into a united

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Ireland, and an acceptance that the British government was sincere in saying that, if the people of Northern Ireland wished to leave the United Kingdom, London would put no obstacles in the way. There was much talk of consent and the will of the people. The question of just which people's will was vital was left sufficiently ambiguous to bridge the gap between the British (and unionist) view that the position of Northern Ireland should be determined only by the people of Northern Ireland, and the anti-partitionist view that it should be determined by the people of the island of Ireland, north and south. But if Sinn Fein's commitments were sincere, they represented a major shift from the traditional revolutionary view that it alone embodied the will of the Irish nation to the idea that the actual people of Ireland should decide.

At the same time as the IRA was being talked and was talking itself into a cease-fire, the loyalist paramilitaries (especially those of the Ulster Volunteer Force) were moving in the same direction. For a long time, leaders of both the UVF and the Ulster Defence Association had entertained doubts about the wisdom and value of political murder. Although they remained firmly unionist, many in both organizations had come to accept those parts of the Sunningdale Agreement which related to Northern Ireland. The Progressive Unionist Party (which was closely aligned with the UVF) accepted the idea of power-sharing, which it called 'shared responsibility'. That was of no consequence to UVF men, or to anyone else, so long as the IRA's campaign encouraged retaliation, but as informal contacts passed on details of the increasingly likelihood of an IRA cessation, so the case for a loyalist cease-fire was strengthened. Two months after the IRA cease-fire was announced, Gusty Spence read out a statement from the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando calling a halt to loyalist violence and promising that so long as the IRA desisted the loyalists would not return to war.

In early 1995 the British and Irish governments published their joint **Frameworks for the Future** document which broadly outlined what was to be finally accepted three years later. Nationalist reaction was favourable; unionist reaction was hostile, largely because changes to Northern Ireland were not sufficiently matched by changes in the Irish Republic's claims to the North. Sceptical of republican sincerity, the British government moved very slowly in accepting Sinn Fein, and repeatedly stressed the need for the de-commissioning of all IRA weapons prior to Sinn Fein's entry to talks. Eighteen months after it called its cease-fire, the IRA bombed London's Docklands and attacked other British targets. However, it soon became clear that what was intended was increased political pressure rather than a full-scale resumption of war, and the main loyalist paramilitary organizations largely maintained their cease-fires.

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During this period of not-quite-phoney war, a major change occurred in the Ulster Unionist party. James Molyneux, who had been party leader since 1979, resigned and was replaced by David Trimble. Molyneux's departure was no surprise. In contrast to Paisley's confrontational approach, Molyneux had always hoped that his good relations with the British government would win favour for his cause. Instead he had been betrayed by Margaret Thatcher over the Anglo-Irish accord and now his reservations about the Framework proposals had been ignored. What was a surprise was the outcome of the leadership battle. Trimble was one of the most junior of the members of parliament and he was the least fancied by the political commentators. But he was more articulate than most of his competitors and his very public support for the Orangemen who wished to march down the Garvaghy Road in Portadown had established his right-wing credentials.

Trimble had one immediate success. While the SDLP and Sinn Fein mobilised Dublin and US support, the UUP won a major victory in getting the British government to accept its view that political progress required a local democratic mandate. A Forum to which members were elected in May 1996 was created with two purposes. In part it was to be a deliberative assembly; in part it was to provide the base from which parties would select their teams to negotiate in what were intended to be all-party talks. Unionists preferred to stress the first aspect; nationalists the second. What was most significant was that the elections to the Forum were designed to ensure that even very small parties had some representation. The publicly announced point of this was to ensure that the talks were as inclusive as possible. Equally important was to ensure that the loyalist paramilitaries would fill what was expected to be a large space on the unionist side of the table. It was well known that Paisley's DUP and the UK Unionists led by Robert McCartney QC, a man who had moved from the liberal wing of the UUP to an extreme right-wing alliance with Paisley, would walk out when Sinn Fein walked in.

One lesson that had been learnt from Sunningdale was that formal agreement was pointless unless it could command popular support. Though the Frameworks documents included a referendum as the final test, the talks were constructed on a system which tried to at least maintain the appearance of democratic accountability along the road to that referendum. All proposals required 'sufficient consensus' on each side, which meant a majority of the parties on each side. For the nationalists, the SDLP alone would do but, with the DUP absent, the Ulster Unionist Party needed the support of the two fringe loyalist parties to be able to claim to speak for the unionist people.

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Talks were scheduled to begin in June 1996 but they made very little progress through that year. The IRA moved to a de facto cease-fire. The issue of de-commissioning of terrorist weapons was gradually side-lined but little else happened as everyone waited for the Conservative government to fall, which it duly did in May 1997. When Labour took power with an unassailable majority, the new Secretary of State Dr Mo Mowlam pressed ahead quickly. In September, the talks began in earnest. Sinn Fein was admitted and as expected the DUP and UKUP walked out. A tight timetable was established and, with much final grand-standing and the personal intervention in the last few days of Tony Blair, the agreement was signed on Good Friday 1998.

At the start of the talks, Seamus Mallon (deputy leader of the SDLP and now Deputy First Minister) memorably called the expected outcome 'Sunningdale for Slow Learners'. In an apt metaphor, David McKittrick, the **Independent's** Northern Ireland correspondent, drew a parallel with school maths books. Pupils were expected to work out the sums themselves but the teacher's copy had the answers at the back of the book. It is true that everyone had a pretty good idea of the limits of what would be acceptable and hence of the likely outcome. In case they had forgotten, the **Frameworks for the Future** documents served to remind them. Nonetheless there were significant differences between the approach of Sunningdale and the method of the Good Friday agreement which go some way to explaining why the latter succeeded.

The proposed Assembly was designed to be 'power-sharing' but it would achieve this by a route acceptable to those unionists who objected to the mechanical allocation approach of Sunningdale. Instead of having offices divvied up between nationalists and unionists, the scheme was based on PR systems (which themselves had become much more popular over the previous two decades). Although not as blatantly rigged as the Forum elections, the election of 6 members by a Single Transferable Vote system of PR from each of the existing 18 Westminster constituencies gave a good chance of some of the minor parties winning seats. On entering the Assembly, parties would have to declare themselves 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other'. While routine business would be conducted by simple majority voting, any contentious issues would require either a majority of each ethnic bloc or 60 per cent of all members voting and 40 per cent of each ethnic bloc. Seats in the ten-person Executive would be allocated on the basis not of ethnicity but of party support. This managed to satisfy minority fears while allowing the overall structure to be viewed as democratic.

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The issue of cross-border relationships was also much more adroitly handled in 1998 than in 1973. A number of cross-border agencies would be created to handle matters of mutual benefit (which is what the nationalists wanted so that they could say they had created something which could evolve into a united Ireland) but the powers and composition of those agencies would be determined by the elected Assembly, in which unionists would for some time have a majority but in which they could not operate without cross-community support. Those who took part in those agencies would remain under the control of the Assembly. Thus unionists could see the new bodies as enshrining good neighbourly cooperation rather than being some sort of constitutional innovation which would allow the Irish Republic control over the North. The Sunningdale deal allowed nationalists and unionists to have very different ideas of what would be the role of the Council. Faulkner saw it as purely advisory; Fitt and Hume saw it as the embodiment of their nationalist aspirations. The Good Friday Agreement is much clearer about the constitutional issues. Rather than have two very different interpretations of what has been agreed, this time we have a structure which bears just one interpretation and that interpretation allows for change if that is what most people really want. Unionist critics of the Good Friday Agreement rightly point out that the potential for change is unevenly distributed. The cross-border bodies can become more powerful if the Assembly wishes to give powers to them; they cannot in theory become less powerful than they will be at their inception (though the reality may be far less impressive than the rhetoric, especially as Dublin will also have to cede influence and power and is unlikely to do so).

The North-South bodies were made acceptable to unionists by being balanced by East-West ties: the Good Friday Agreement established a Council of the Islands which will bring together representatives of the British and Irish governments and representatives of the devolved bodies for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Although privately dismissed by nationalists as being of little significance (in the same way that unionists dismiss the Council of Ireland), this new body is likely to perform some useful functions in two areas. Clearly Ireland and Britain share many common interests associated with the Irish Sea and matters environmental. Northern Ireland will also share common interests with Scotland and Wales vis-à-vis Westminster in, for example, negotiating over regional policy.

A further improvement over Sunningdale from the unionist point of view is that the Good Friday Agreement very firmly enshrines the Irish Republic's commitment to the principle of consent. Dublin will replace Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish constitution, which lay claim to the territory of Northern Ireland, with statements of aspiration for unity 'brought about only by peaceful means

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with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island'.

From a nationalist point of view the Good Friday Agreement creates the long-term possibility of ever-closer ties between North and South, gives nationalist a proportionate say in the running of Northern Ireland, promises various forms of recognition of the Irish identity within Northern Ireland (such as support for the Irish language), and established a commission to look at ways of reforming the Royal Ulster Constabulary so as to make it more broadly acceptable.

In essence Sunningdale tried to find a set of outcomes that everyone liked. The Good Friday Agreement follows a very different model of establishing operating procedures which allow all parties to pursue their dreams. If there is a majority will for a united Ireland then the institutions would gradually change shape in that direction; if there is not, they will remain as now framed. At every stage the requirement for cross-community support is built in so that neither side can choose to operate only those parts of the agreement that it likes.

WHAT CHANGED BETWEEN 1973 AND 1998?

We can thus see that the approach of the most recent talks process had a much better chance of carrying the day than that of Sunningdale. But crucial to its success were a series of changes in the environment and in the interests of the major players.

Throughout the slow process there have been doubts about Sinn Fein's intentions. The Paisley view (widely shared among unionists) is that the IRA's cessation of violence is purely tactical. Its immediate purpose is to win the release of highly skilled terrorists to strengthen a weakened IRA. Its long-term purpose is to establish a new base line for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. Some excuse, preferably something which can be presented as unionist intransigence, will be contrived to justify the IRA returning to violence. After another five or ten years of terror, a further cease-fire will lead to new negotiations which will start from the concessions made in the Good Friday Agreement and further shift Northern Ireland towards the Republic. The alternative view is that at least that part of the IRA which is controlled by Adams and McGuinness is serious in its belief that it can now achieve more change through democratic politics than through violence. They think they can displace the SDLP as the main voice of northern nationalism and make sufficient electoral headway in the Irish Republic to

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achieve through democratic means what they failed to achieve through terror. The view of the civil servants is that, whatever the intentions of the IRA, it can be painted into a corner. By getting Sinn Fein implicated in democratic government and at the same time winning Irish and American support for the new deal, the government will so marginalise those who wish to use the process cynically that any return to violence will be too unpopular to be sustained.

The position of the loyalist paramilitaries is clearer: the vast majority of UVF and UDA members accept that there is no longer any great value in terror. A small section of each organization tried to oppose the talks process. It is worth spending a few moments on identifying these people. This simplifies, of course, but we can imagine a series of overlapping constituencies. Ian Paisley and the DUP represent a sort of unionism which thinks in 'ethnic' terms: of a Protestant people which has rights to self-determination comparable to those of Irish nationalists. That people is defined largely by its religious heritage and it finds its clearest expression in the Orange Order. Ethnic unionism is strongest in the rural areas of Northern Ireland, both the border regions where Protestants are a threatened minority and the rural parts of the north (such as Paisley's Westminster constituency of North Antrim) where they are in a large majority.

An alternative unionism sees the Union not in ethnic terms but in 'civic' terms. Unionists are defined by their commitment to the Union, which is preferable to a united Ireland because (in theory at least) the United Kingdom is a multi-national, multi-cultural modern democracy while the Irish Republic is a culturally imperialist and economically backward Catholic state. This is the unionism of those who would break from the Orange Order, who do not talk about a 'Protestant' people, and who claim no religious legitimation for their desires to remain British. Although we might expect that those who feel most emotionally committed to the Union would also be most willing to use violence to preserve it, willingness to use terror does not map neatly on to being ethnic rather than civic. Although the civic type of unionism is strongest in the Alliance party and the liberal wing of the UUP, it is also the view of many within the UVF and UDA.

Although his critics can find statements and actions from his forty year career which suggest otherwise, Paisley has been fairly consistent in his rejection of violence. He takes the view that the citizen cedes to the state a monopoly of violence in return for the state's protection. Only if the state betrays the citizen does the citizen regain the right to vigilante activity. Paisley has often encouraged people to prepare for militant defence of their interests (as the original UVF did in 1912) but has always said that present circumstances do

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not yet justify taking the law into one's own hands. And he has consistently denounced individual acts of violence by loyalists. This has created an enormous amount of ill-feeling between the paramilitaries and Paisley. They feel that he has used them by making militant noises when it suits him and then, when others do what he seems to be telling them to do, he dismisses them as 'unworthy of the name of Protestant'. In addition, though his critics find inconsistencies in his attitudes to republican and loyalist terror (for example by working with the UDA and UVF in the 1974 strike), Paisley's hatred of the IRA frequently leads him to oppose policies which would benefit both sets of terrorists. For example, he opposed the Forum election system for the legitimacy it would confer on the UDA and UVF, repeatedly tried to have their political spokesmen expelled from the talks, and campaigned against the early release of prisoners.

So we have two very different constituencies: the religiously-legitimated ethnic unionists of the DUP and the rural parts of the Orange Order, and the urban secular paramilitaries. The two places they overlap are the Armagh and Mid-Ulster areas, (where the UVF is much closer to DUP thinking) and in Larne and south-east Antrim (where the DUP is much closer to the paramilitaries). From the late 1980s, the UVF in Portadown was led by Billy 'King Rat' Wright, who had been raised in the rural evangelical tradition and who, during a prison sentence in the late 1970s, was converted. On his release he spent some time as a lay preacher until, in response to the Anglo-Irish Accord, he rejoined the UVF and began a reign of terror which was to make him notorious. In the year leading up to the cease-fire and in the first year of its operation, he vacillated between supporting the Progressive Unionist Party and criticising its willingness to compromise with the enemies of Ulster. After he had broken the cease-fire by trying to heighten sectarian tensions in the period surrounding the contested Orange parades in 1996 by murdering a Catholic taxi-driver, Wright was expelled by the UVF and sentenced to death. He led a small group to form the Loyalist Volunteer Force in which he was joined by Alex Kerr, a former South Belfast brigadier of the UDA. Another dissident UVF man in north Belfast was seriously wounded in a UVF assassination attempt. Although the UVF committed a number of murders and briefly persuaded the UDA in west Belfast to end its ceasefire in late 1997, the murder of Wright in December of that year and the expulsion of Kerr effectively ended its threat.

The Mid-Ulster area also produced Ulster Resistance in the 1980s, a short-lived terror group formed by a number of Paisleyites which, although it did not do much by way of murder, was involved in a successful deal to buy weapons from South Africa and an unsuccessful deal to swap missile technology stolen from Shorts in Belfast for further South African weapons.

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The point is that by and large the UVF and UDA have maintained their cease-fires and seem unlikely to return to violence. Again as with the IRA, there are dissidents within the organizations who were unhappy about ending the war and who would like a reason to go back to it, but they will have very little popular support. That a large part of the unionist population is unhappy with the Good Friday Agreement has not provided the necessary legitimation for a new mobilization of loyalist violence.

In addition, reaching agreement, though it would create all manner of internal problems as the UDA and UVF try to find new roles in a time of peace, was attractive to the paramilitaries for its prospect of early prisoner release.

A second major difference between 1974 and 1998 for unionists can be found in demography. During the Stormont era, when the unionist-nationalist population breakdown varied between 66:33 and 60:40, unionists could defend unionism as simply being the will of the majority. Although there are considerable arguments about when or even if nationalists will ever overtake unionists, it is a pretty good guess that the two populations will be about even in 2020. Certainly the size of the unionist majority has been steadily shrinking. Coupled with 'Orange flight' from the borders and towards the north and east, this has produced a steady fall of councils to nationalists. In 1997 Belfast gained its first ever nationalist major. The leaders of the UUP might not have publicly described the Mitchell talks as the last chance to save the Union but they were well aware that the political capital that came from being able to claim to be the majority was being rapidly depleted. However strong or weak their hand in 1998, it would certainly be weaker in the future.

It was also clear that the United Kingdom was changing in ways that weakened the bonds that held together the state to which unionists wished to be loyal, that gave new opportunities for reasserting the case for local democracy, and that created a new framework for a less 'British' unionism. With devolution for Scotland and Wales, the old unionist insistence on having Belfast treated just like Birmingham rang increasingly hollow. There was clearly no value in arguing, as Robert McCartney did, for greater integration with Britain at a time when the Welsh and the Scots, whose Britishness was far more widely accepted, were heading in the opposite direction. The creation of a Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly strengthened the unionist argument for the restoration of local government. The new distribution of power allowed unionist and nationalists, from their very different perspectives, to find something attractive in a new structure which would bring together London, Dublin, Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff in pursuit of common interests. Nationalists got their Dublin link but

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unionists wrapped it within a series of links of which those between UK cities would predominate.

Why did the SDLP support an agreement that is arguably less favourable than Sunningdale? There are many answers which can only be briefly touched on. First, the past twenty-five years has seen a massive growth in the Catholic middle-class, which has been so successful that it need no longer see national reunification as a pre-condition for social and economic advance. Instead it can regard its nationalism as a cultural trait and as a long-term aspiration. Second, the increasing power of the European Union has slightly but importantly weakened the links between nations and states. Third, the demographic changes that have weakened the unionists have correspondingly strengthened nationalists. There was an inadvertent illustration of this in the reporting of the elections for the Assembly. The fragmentation of the unionist vote meant that the first results declared (a slow process in an STV PR system) suggested that the SDLP might actually be the largest party and the **Irish News** ran a premature front page headline announcing 'SDLP tops popular vote for the first time ever' (27 June 1998).

But there was also an element of party political self-interest in the SDLP's position. Many members feared that, by conferring legitimacy on Sinn Fein and blurring the divide between democrats and terrorists, Hume's courting of Adams was weakening the party. In 1997 Adams had won back the West Belfast seat from which he had been displaced by Joe Hendron, and Martin McGuinness had beaten the SDLP candidate to take the Mid-Ulster seat that had previously been delivered to the DUP by a more even split in what should have been a majority nationalist vote. The party's three remaining MPs - Hume, Mallon and Eddie McGrady - were old men and there was a widespread feeling that unless the SDLP could deliver then it would be overtaken by Sinn Fein.

The thinking of Sinn Fein has already been discussed. If one does not see it as purely opportunistic, it seems likely that Sinn Fein had come to the conclusion that, however cathartically satisfying it might be to kill representatives of the state and ordinary Ulster Protestants, it was not bringing a united Ireland any closer. Indeed although republicans routinely claim that all acts of loyalist violence are actually the work of British security forces in drag, the resurgence of loyalist violence in 1990s made it clear that a British withdrawal from Ireland would leave a straight fight with loyalists who would not be easily defeated.

In all, this amounted to a significant shift in the social and political forces that shaped the thinking of the major players. However, alone this would not have

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been enough. Equally important was the slow and painstaking way in which the British and Irish governments created processes which drew in the major players with very small commitments and then made it very hard for them to withdraw from the process. In the final stages, this process of gradual entrapment was enormously strengthened by the replacement of a weak Conservative administration by a Labour government with an overwhelming majority.

THE REFERENDUM AND ELECTIONS

The euphoria that greeted the signing of the agreement quickly subsided as it became clear from opinion polling that a Yes vote was by no means assured. Although the Good Friday Agreement was markedly more unionist than had seemed likely two years earlier, the SDLP and SF endorsed it. As expected, Paisley's DUP and Robert McCartney's UK Unionists rejected it out of hand. There was also significant opposition within Trimble's UUP: immediately after the signing Jeffrey Donaldson MP, a key figure in ensuring the support of the Orange Order, delivered an emotional denunciation of his party leader's position. Here the problem was not so much the constitutional proposals but two ancillary issues and the general assumption about what the future really held.

An important concession to Sinn Fein was the agreement to introduce a phased early release programme that would see all prisoners out within two years and many out in the first six months. Although many prisoners would by then have served their time, many people in Northern Ireland (and not just unionists) felt it abhorrent to release murderers who in some cases would have served less than three years.

The second point that stuck in many throats was the none-too subtle fudging of the decommissioning issue. At the very start of the talks London and Dublin had made robust noises about the need for terrorists to decommission their weapons before they could be accepted into the political process. The unwillingness of the IRA, UVF and UDA to hand over their weapons could have been a stumbling block at various points but the government managed to find ways of side-lining the issue. Allowed it permitted a variety of interpretations, the Good Friday Agreement made de-commissioning a long term aspiration and a consequence of, rather than a precondition for, access to political power.

The referendum campaign began badly for the parties which supported the agreement. Although the executive of the UUP supported it by two to one,

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more than half of his Westminster MPs opposed it and Trimble himself at times seemed unenthusiastic. The main sentiment from the unionist camp seemed to be that there was no alternative, a correct assessment but not one likely to win many votes. In contrast Paisley and McCartney had had a year to prepare their campaign and they were armed with the many statements made by the parties over the course of the negotiations which showed that what had been confidently asserted at one stage had been altered at another.

What became clear to me as I attended rallies and meetings over the province was that specific objections to the Good Friday Agreement were less important than a general fear for the future. That nationalists liked it was itself enough for many unionists to dislike it. At one meeting in south Belfast, David Ervine of the (pro-agreement) PUP was challenged by a member of the audience who concluded a long list of objections with: 'Well if this is supposed to be so good for us, why do they want it?'. As well as the persisting view that Ulster politics was a zero-sum game, there was an all-pervasive lack of confidence in the intentions of the pro-Good Friday Agreement parties and in the power of unionists to operate the new systems. When the supporters of the agreement cited its texts, the doubters responded that the British, or the Irish, or the northern nationalists actually intended something far worse. Opponents of the agreement seemed to assume a disparity in how the provisions would actually work. Unionists would not get their due; nationalists would get more than their due. Thus, whatever the agreement actually said, the future was a united Ireland.

The vote in the Irish Republic was almost Soviet: of the 56 per cent who voted, 94 per cent were in favour. This was important because it gave Sinn Fein the mandate it needed to end the armed struggle (or, if one prefers the cynical interpretation, forced the same outcome). Of course this did not impress such dissident groups as Republican Sinn Fein and the 32 County Sovereignty Committee but it strengthened the hand of Adams. In the North, 71 per cent voted 'Yes', but that was composed of a solid nationalist vote in favour and unionists being divided about evenly.

That was followed immediately by the elections to the Assembly. On the nationalist side, the main issue was the relative strengths of the SDLP and Sinn Fein. On the unionist side the election was a repeat of the referendum with Paisley and McCartney hoping to increase their support enough to prevent the Assembly functioning. Additionally, there were echoes of 1973 as dissidents within the UUP tried to win nominations and Trimble, like Faulkner before him, had to live with his inability to veto candidate selection. In the event the party's executive was able to use the general rule against members running for two legislatures to prevent well-known dissidents such

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as Donaldson standing, and only three or four avowedly anti-Trimble names went forward.

In a further parallel with the anti-Sunningdale campaign, Paisley and McCartney had the advantage over Trimble that they were able to ensure that anti-Good Friday Agreement candidates did not compete while the various unionist parties that were in favour ran against each other.

The result was close. Despite fears that Sinn Fein might overtake the SDLP, it won only 18 seats to the SDLP's 24. The UUP won 28 seats and Paisley's DUP took 20. With the support for Robert McCartney's 5 UK Unionists and 3 independent unionists, that means 28 unionists opposed to the deal. The Ulster Democratic Party (the political front of the UDA) failed to win any seats, but the Progressive Unionists won two: Ervine was elected in East Belfast and Billy Hutchinson scraped home in North Belfast. The Alliance party won only 6 seats rather than the 8 that had been projected, but the Women's Coalition (on a platform very similar to that of Alliance) won 2. That meant a huge majority in favour of the Good Friday Agreement but, under the rules requiring consensus in each block, unionist support remained precarious. In order to prevent the Assembly functioning the No camp need 40 per cent of those registering as unionists: 34 votes. Initially there were fears that the three people elected as UUP members who were known to be opposed to the agreement would side with the DUP (which would leave the No camp tantalisingly close to the blocking 40 per cent). However, in the first test - the election of the First Minister - one of Trimble's cuckoos absented himself and the others voted for him.

This places the dissident unionists in an extremely difficult position. Before the Assembly assumes its powers early in 1999, a series of vital decisions concerning such matters as the remit and composition of the new cross-border agencies have to be taken. If the dissidents refuse to support Trimble, they will merely strengthen the nationalists. If the DUP refuses to take the two seats in the Executive to which it is entitled, these will be given to other parties and the unionist hand will be further weakened. There are already signs that the DUP will not pursue its hatred of Trimble and the agreement to such self-defeating lengths. In the election for the chairman of the Standing Orders Committee, Paisley was nominated and polled the same as the SDLP candidate. He then withdrew his nomination and proposed a UUP man who was a strong supporter of the agreement.

The No camp is hoping that the next few months will see the UUP crash on the rocks of de-commissioning. It is clear that the British government does not intend to make Sinn Fein's entry to office depend on the IRA handing in

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weapons or a complete absence of republican violence. All the paramilitary organizations have made it clear that, although they will continue to meet with the commission established to oversee the surrender of weapons, they do not envisage de-commissioning within the next few years. And all have continued to use violence to discipline their own people and to neutralise threats from within their own communities. Although it cannot state it openly, the government view seems to be that so long as the IRA and UVF are not 'structurally involved' in political violence (as distinct from racketeering, for example), Sinn Fein and the PUP will be allowed to operate as legitimate parties.

This will cause considerable difficulties for Trimble who has repeatedly insisted that Sinn Fein cannot take part in government until it has completely given up violence. Even if he is prepared to live with the expected fudge, it is always possible that 7 or 8 of his members might not be so willing. But Sinn Fein cannot be entirely unaccommodating this early in the new era. With the SDLP supporting Trimble, and the Dublin and London governments determined to ensure that the Executive begins work in 1999, Sinn Fein will not find it easy to resist pressure for some sort of declaration that the war is over.

THE FINE BALANCE

Given the enormous depths of communal hatred it is difficult to see the Assembly functioning. It is hard to imagine Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson of the DUP sitting in an Executive with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. However, it is worth recalling that something similar has been happening, in a minor key, in Northern Ireland's local councils for over a decade. Initially unionists refused to work with Sinn Fein councillors, but after a few years the costs of boycotting became obvious, and unionists who would rather not have sat in the same room as republicans found that their refusal to do so hurt only the interests of their own voters. It is now common for nationalists and unionists to rotate positions and Sinn Fein members have served as committee chairs and even as mayors.

The Assembly is different, of course, in that its business has much greater practical ramifications and much greater symbolic charge. The slender majority of Yes over No unionists in the Assembly is merely one illustration of the very finely balanced position of Northern Ireland. It is not hard to envisage circumstances which will precipitate a walkout by Sinn Fein or a swing against Trimble in the UUP.

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However, a number of events in the summer of 1998 suggest that the overall balance of forces is now such that the actions of extremists, though designed to break the fragile consensus, are having the effect of strengthening it. The first such test was the by now annual Drumcree stand-off. Since 1995 the Portadown Orange Lodge parade to and from the Church of Ireland church at Drumcree has triggered rioting and sectarian murder as the RUC has alternated between preventing the Orangemen marching back to Portadown along the nationalist Garvaghy Road and forcing nationalist demonstrators aside to permit the march. Drumcree 1998 was set to provide a major challenge to the Assembly as the Orange Order used it to re-fight the referendum. It also provided the first serious test of the Parades Commission, which had been established in 1997 to determine which parades should go ahead on which routes and thus provide some distance between the government and the RUC and decisions which were bound to be unpopular with one side or the other. The RUC was determined to prevent the parade. Dissident unionists were determined to march, and tensions were heightened by the remnants of Billy Wright's LVF joining the field at Drumcree to attack the RUC and firebombing Catholics churches and schools around the province.

Then what was intended as a routine act of sectarian intimidation went badly wrong. As so often during times of tension, loyalists fire-bombed the home of a mixed-marriage family on a predominantly Protestant council estate in Ballymoney. Usually no one is hurt and the family moves out. This time three young boys were murdered.

The next morning during his Sunday sermon, the Reverend William Bingham, one of the leading Orange chaplains, clearly distressed, called for the protests to be ended: 'A 15-minute walk down the Garvaghy Road would be ... in the shadow of the coffins of three little boys who wouldn't even know what the Orange Order is about. No road is worth a life' (*Guardian* 13 July 1998). Other leading clergymen followed suit: in Scotland the only clergyman to hold office in the Orange Order resigned. Although the Portadown Orangemen protested that they had not been responsible for the deaths, a lot of unionists took the view that the anti-Good Friday Agreement forces were morally responsible for the murders.

Then in late August, militant republicanism suffered a similar propaganda defeat. A group calling itself the 'Real IRA', which had previously set off a number of bombs without causing casualties (including one which destroyed the centre of Banbridge), detonated a bomb in a crowded street in Omagh at 3.10 on a Saturday afternoon. Twenty-eight people, many of them children, died immediately and over a hundred people were injured, many of them

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seriously. The atrocity was immediately condemned from every part of the political spectrum. Much of the response, though doubtless heart-felt, was routine. But there were three new and highly significant elements. Adams, for the first time in a long career of being asked to respond to republican violence, denounced the bombing. Second, the Dublin government immediately authorised a crackdown on dissident republicans and the cabinet met in emergency session to discuss the introduction of new anti-terrorist measures. Third and most significant, ordinary people in the Irish Republic did what they had never done before: they turned on those they had tolerated for twenty-five years. It is widely known that the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, led by Bernadette Sands McKeivitt (the sister of the first hunger striker to die, Bobby Sands) and Michael McKeivitt, was the front for the Real IRA. Bernadette McKeivitt ran a T-shirt printing shop in a shopping centre in Dundalk, the town just across the border which has long harboured leading Northern Irish Republicans. Despite her denials, issued through a Catholic priest, that she had anything to do with the Omagh bomb, the shop was picketed by local people and, under pressure from other shop-keepers, it was closed down by the owners of the mall.

Although they denied it was a response to the Omagh deaths, the Irish National Liberation Army, one of the other small republican groups which had rejected the Good Friday agreement, quickly announced a complete and absolute end to its terror campaign. In so doing, it cited as its primary reason the fact that the Irish people had overwhelmingly endorsed the agreement which it found unacceptable. In so doing, it gave very public confirmation that the British and Irish strategy of gradually engineering consent for change had succeeded.

It would be facile to suggest, as the professional optimists among politicians and journalists habitually do, that the Ballymoney and Omagh deaths will unite the people of Ireland against the extremists and neutralise the animosity created by over a quarter of a century of violence. Almost four thousand dead and a similar number wounded in a population of only one-and-a-half million people leaves a legacy of hatred and distrust that is not swept away by two events of communal mourning. Nonetheless it remains highly significant that, for the first time since 1966, no-one is threatening to retaliate.

SOURCES

Two of the best and most readily accessible sources for the recent history of developments in Northern Ireland are:

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Paul Bew And Gordon Gillespie, 1993. **Northern Ireland: a chronology of the Troubles 1968-93**. London: Serif.

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