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To cite this article: Peter Shirlow & Colin Coulter (2014) Northern Ireland: 20 Years After the Cease-Fires, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37:9, 713-719, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2014.931224](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.931224)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.931224>



Accepted author version posted online: 16 Jun 2014.
Published online: 16 Jun 2014.



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Introduction

Northern Ireland: 20 Years After the Cease-Fires

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In the closing months of 1994, the principal paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland declared that their campaigns of violence were at an end. The cease-fires called by republican and loyalist groupings represented the most significant heralds of a complex process of conflict transformation that continues to unfold even twenty years on. In this introduction, we set out to map the key developments that have shaped the tortuous narrative of the Northern Irish ‘peace process’, thereby providing the historical backdrop for the articles that follow. While remarkable progress has been made over the two decades since the paramilitary cease-fires, the political context and future of the region remain rather more fraught than is often assumed abroad. It is perhaps best, then, to speak of the six counties in terms not of resolution but rather of ambiguity. Twenty years on from the optimism that greeted the paramilitary cease-fires, Northern Ireland retains the essential ‘inbetweeness’ of a political space that has moved from a ‘long war’ through a ‘long peace’ and into a profoundly undecided future.

In late 1993, it often seemed that Northern Ireland was on the verge of descending into a spiral of violence reminiscent of the 1970s when “the Troubles” were at their height. On the morning of 23 October 1993, two Irish Republican Army (IRA) members, disguised as delivery workers, planted a bomb in a fish mongers located in the loyalist heartland of the Shankill Road. The intention of the operation was ostensibly to kill the leaders of the local company of the Ulster Defence Association¹ who were engaged in a vicious campaign of violence against adjacent working-class nationalist/republican districts and who were known to meet above the premises. It would, however, transpire that the leadership of the loyalist paramilitary organization was elsewhere. The bomb detonated prematurely,

Received 14 January 2014; accepted 16 May 2014.

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claiming the lives of ten people as well as an unborn child. Among the corpses recovered from the rubble of Frizzell's fish shop² was one of the republican bombers. In the main, the victims were local women and girls doing the weekend shopping. In the wake of this atrocity, a piece of graffiti in a nearby republican community declared "9 battered 50 well done." In a symbolic gesture, the ghoulish taunt was removed by a former republican prisoner whose brother had been killed by loyalists. He had no desire to delight in the death of others.

The widely anticipated retaliation for the attack would be swift and indiscriminate. In the week after the bombing, six nationalist/republican civilians would lose their lives at the hands of loyalist gunmen. These tragedies would soon be overshadowed on the following Saturday when the Ulster Freedom Fighters attacked a bar with a predominantly nationalist/republican clientele in the village of Greysteel, near Derry/Londonderry. Wearing Halloween masks, the loyalist killers entered the Rising Sun bar and shouted "trick or treat" before spraying the place with automatic fire. Eight men, two of whom happened to be Protestants, were to lose their lives. A further macabre expression of sectarian loathing was given vent two and half weeks after the slaughter in Greysteel. In the midst of a crucial World Cup qualifier soccer game in Belfast between Northern Ireland and arch rivals the Irish Republic, sections of the home support shocked even those who considered themselves inured to the basest forms of sectarian enmity by taunting the visiting team with the chant "trick or treat."

What few knew at the time was that the sequence of harrowing events sketched above was taking place against a backdrop of secret talks between paramilitary leaders and the Irish and British states. The atrocities that littered the closing weeks of 1993 offered a further, powerful reminder to certain key paramilitary figures, most of whom had been imprisoned early in the conflict, that such violence was pernicious, unsustainable, and futile. At a time of widespread concern and speculation that Northern Ireland was on the verge of lapsing into civil war, behind the scenes the essential components of a viable peace process were being assembled.³ Indeed, by the time the first anniversaries of the Shankill Road and Greysteel massacres arrived, the IRA and the main loyalist paramilitary groups had already declared cease-fires. The IRA statement that it would observe a "complete cessation of military operations" went against the grain of its own discourse of the legitimacy of violence and disclosed that it recognized the potential of peace-building and was committed to embracing the democratic process. Somewhat prophetically, the British prime minister at the time, John Major, stated that "we are beyond the beginning but we are not yet in sight of the end."⁴ In a gesture toward the inter-communal healing essential to the prospects of the peace process, the Combined Loyalist Military Command stated when announcing their cease-fire that "in all sincerity, we offer to the loved ones of all innocent victims over the past 25 years, abject and true remorse. No words of ours will compensate for the intolerable suffering they have undergone during the conflict."⁵ Thus began a process that would lead to power-sharing, the return of devolution, demilitarization and decommissioning, policing reform, and the delivery of the most sustained decline in armed violence since the conflict began.

There were several reasons for the shifts in direction that heralded the peace process in Northern Ireland. There was, inevitably, a profound sense of war weariness and a desire that future generations should be spared the suffering endured by many communities over the previous quarter of a century of political conflict. In addition, the security forces had infiltrated paramilitary organizations and were gaining more exact knowledge and information that increasingly allowed non-state violence to be contained. Some paramilitaries had been converted to peaceful means whilst in prison and through education had come to a clearer sense of where the conflict came from and how it might be resolved. Within certain sections of loyalism, the conviction had gathered strength that they had been duped and used both by unionist politicians and British military intelligence. Social forces were also important. The

provision of fair employment legislation and other anti-discrimination policies took some of the heat out of the sense of grievance within the nationalist community that had been central to the narrative of the conflict. The growth of a Catholic middle class through the mechanisms of state policy was an evident strategy in social control. The capacity to recruit into paramilitary groups was also declining and there were internal fears that younger members were increasingly and overtly sectarian. In sum, by the early 1990s, a complex series of processes had drawn the various players in the Northern Irish conflict to the increasingly sharp realization that their interests could no longer be advanced through military means. It might be said that the British strategy of “normalization” had prevailed and had clearly undermined the capacity, rationale, and desire of non-state actors for further political violence.

The advent of the cease-fires carried enormous symbolic importance. Until the republican and loyalist cessations were declared, there was a pervasive, gnawing sense among people in Northern Ireland that the “Long War” would in all probability continue indefinitely. The enactment of the cease-fires engendered a greater general feeling of security and initially altered the mood of communities that had been drained by loss, harm, militarization and, ultimately, fear. However, in reality, while the cease-fires signaled the potential end to political violence they also marked its sublimation in the guise of a discursively constructed proxy war that continues through residential segregation, the contestation over victims and ethno-sectarian political stalemate. It should be acknowledged that, at the time, the cease-fires allowed an indispensable room for recovery to beleaguered communities that had been exposed to more than two decades of conflict. The emergence of the peace process would not, however, signal an end to the forms of ethno-sectarian competition that have long since characterized Northern Irish political life. Indeed, if anything the cease-fires ushered in a new and more “agreed” version of ethno-sectarian (crisis) management.

It is clear that the British and Irish governments, post-cease-fires, created channels through which to bring the main paramilitary groups and their political representatives into a process that would lead to demilitarization and the restoration of local political institutions in Northern Ireland. In delivering paramilitary support, London and Dublin constantly reminded paramilitary leaders that that there could be no united Ireland without the consent of the Northern Irish people (a principle that suited loyalists and their preference for remaining in the United Kingdom) and that political future of the region was a matter for “the people of the island of Ireland alone” (an axiom of a united Ireland being achievable through constitutional politics that suited Irish republicans). While these inducements were mutually contradictory—an early indication of the ambiguity that would become a feature of the peace process—they had the desired effect.

The British general election of May 1997 saw the return of a Labour government with a palpable commitment to advancing the cause of political progress in Northern Ireland. Persuaded that the Blair government would be more accommodating of its interests, the republican movement reinstated its cease-fire, which it had broken in February 1996 with the detonation of a bomb in London’s Canary Wharf. By July 1997, Sinn Féin had been readmitted to the political negotiations scheduled to begin in the autumn. The talks convened by Senator George Mitchell moved, predictably, at a glacial pace, and were hindered not least by the unwillingness of Unionist politicians to deal directly with republican delegates. In the spring of 1998, the former U.S. senator, despairing of the possibility of progress, issued a deadline for the conclusion of the talks. This sparked a frenzied period of political negotiation that would eventually produce the Belfast Agreement between all the parties—save for the (then still) fundamentalist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—which was signed on Good Friday 1998.

While the Agreement sought to deal with the “totality of relationships” between the peoples of Ireland and Great Britain, its principal concern was to mend the troubled relations between the two main ethno-national communities within Northern Ireland. Although the principle of consociationalism found favor among most shades of political opinion in the region, it would nonetheless take almost a decade for the institutions envisaged to operate in a stable manner. The main obstacle to political progress arose out of disagreements over paramilitary “decommissioning.” While unionist politicians tended to argue that the Agreement required republican (as well as loyalist) paramilitaries to dispose of their armories, Sinn Féin countered, accurately, that the text of the Agreement merely required them to “use any influence they may have” to bring about such an eventuality. This crucially divergent reading of the Agreement would haunt each of the initial attempts to establish power-sharing. The choreography of political failure would invariably unfold as follows: unionist politicians would agree to enter government on the proviso that republicans would in the near future decommission their weapons; Sinn Féin would also agree to form a government but insist that the IRA was under no obligation to put its arms beyond use and that unionist demands that it do so merely veiled a distaste for sharing power with nationalists; finally, after a short interval, unionists would note that republicans had failed to decommission and would then refuse to continue in government, ensuring its collapse. This sequence of mutual recrimination and political stalemate would be repeated on no fewer than four separate occasions. By the time the last of these suspensions of the institutions of government occurred, in October 2002, much of the initial enthusiasm for the peace process had dissipated and a palpable sense of political disillusionment had descended on Northern Ireland.⁶

In the early days of the peace process, Sinn Féin and the DUP represented substantial but nonetheless secondary political voices within their respective ethno-political communities. As successive attempts to install stable devolved institutions faltered and political opinion began to harden even further, these parties often previously depicted as “extremist” grew quickly in electoral strength. While the rise of Sinn Féin and the DUP often seemed to imperil the cause of political progress in Northern Ireland, it would in reality prove to be its prerequisite. One of the recurrent problems that face “moderate” political parties seeking to reach agreement in divided societies is the prospect of being outflanked by more radical ethno-sectarian voices. This is precisely the fate that befell the Ulster Unionist Party and Social Democratic and Labour Party, the main architects of the Agreement. The collapse of each successive attempt at devolved government lent greater influence to more fundamentalist voices at their flanks, sending both parties into an electoral decline that might in time lead to their ultimate demise.

The decision of the republican movement to disband and decommission in 2005 removed the most fundamental obstacle to reviving the flagging fortunes of the peace process. In October of the following year, the British and Irish governments convened talks in the Scottish town of St. Andrews aimed at the restoration of devolved government to Northern Ireland. In the course of negotiations, Sinn Féin committed itself to supporting the police while the DUP agreed to power-sharing. On 8 May 2007, the new power sharing government was unveiled before an audience of the global media. The intense interest of journalists was piqued primarily by the fact that the two principal positions in the Northern Irish executive were to be filled by a pair of previously bitter political rivals. The spectacle of the Reverend Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness trading jokes and evidently enjoying one another’s company simply beggared belief for anyone who remembered their mutual rancor when the conflict was still raging. Nevertheless, this unlikely pairing would initiate the most stable period of devolved government of the peace process era. The

most crucial expression of this comparative stability has of course been the accelerated decline in incidents of politically motivated violence. Those shootings, bombings, and punishment beatings that were once everyday occurrences in Northern Ireland are now decidedly rare. Indeed, the number of murders perpetrated by paramilitary organizations in the seven years since the restoration of the devolved assembly at Stormont is less than the total committed in those baleful seven days alone that spanned the Shankill Road and Greysteel atrocities. The welcome trend of falling fatality rates has been echoed in patterns of less serious forms of political violence. In 2013, it was reported that less than one percent of all crimes reported in Northern Ireland were deemed to have a "sectarian" motivation.⁷

The current political dispensation may well represent a relative success but it remains beset nonetheless by a sequence of challenges that at times threaten its existence. While the death toll has dwindled in Northern Ireland, there is still the very real prospect of further politically motivated violence in the future. In certain working-class nationalist communities, there exist a network of dissident republican organizations that enjoy meaningful and growing support and evidently harbor substantial military ambitions. On the other side of the communal divide, moreover, there is growing evidence that ostensibly disbanded loyalist groupings continue to recruit and possess the appetite and ability for at least intermittent acts of violence.

While the prospect of further *material* acts of violence committed by vestigial paramilitary bodies clearly represents a threat to the peace process, a perhaps more substantial danger owes its origins to a series of rather more *symbolic* practices. The frequent public expressions of mutual solidarity and respect issued by mainstream Northern Irish politicians cannot conceal that the political culture of the region remains riven by the preoccupations and ambitions that are the hallmark of ethno-national division. In recent times, increasingly bitter disputes over political commemoration, cultural symbols, and, above all perhaps, contentious parades have exposed just how little ground is still shared between the two principal political traditions in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the growing rancor between those sharing power at Stormont was deemed a sufficient threat to the entire political settlement in the region that in 2013 the Obama administration dispensed a "peace envoy" to convene talks aimed at resolving the various disputed issues. The advent of yet another round of political negotiations among local politicians offers a stark reminder that for all the progress that has undoubtedly made over the last couple of decades, the ultimate success of the Northern Irish peace process remains far from fully guaranteed. Twenty years after the cease-fires, Northern Ireland may no longer be at war with itself, but nor does it feel quite like a society that has genuinely found peace.⁸

From Long War to an Undecided Future

The purpose of this special issue is to examine the complex and often contradictory ways that a peace process often vaunted as a model for conflict transformation elsewhere has, and has not, altered the social and political realities of Northern Ireland. In the articles that follow, three distinct generations of scholars from a range of academic disciplines will seek to critically interrogate the nature of Northern Irish society twenty years after the cease-fires. Our intention here is not to rehearse the familiar narrative detail of the peace process but rather to offer a rather more analytical approach that seeks to frame an understanding of contemporary Northern Ireland through a series of concepts and concerns including gender, age, ethno-national affiliation, space, social class, and conflict resolution. It is envisaged that this collection will provide the reader with a broad ranging and engaging account of

a society that has over the last two decades undergone a remarkable process of political change; one that has taken Northern Ireland from the “long war,” through the “long peace” and into a distinctly undecided future.

Without doubt, the conflict in Northern Ireland has remained on a territorial hinge that swings on the constitutional future. The nationalist community has emerged from the post-cease-fire era in an altogether stronger demographic, cultural, political, and economic position. Policing has been reformed, power-sharing delivered, and there has emerged a significant and growing Catholic middle class. It is widely expected that nationalists will be a majority in electoral terms within a generation, although that will not necessarily herald the advent of Irish unification. The evidence furnished by opinion polls would suggest the constitutional aspirations of the nationalist community have become increasingly ambivalent, with middle-class Catholics in particular seeming far from troubled from the prospect of remaining within the United Kingdom. But such preferences are of course fluid and, as Arthur Aughey argues in his article, the field of constitutional possibility is rather more unpredictable than was the case when the cease-fires were originally called. In echoing this point, Liam O’Dowd concludes that Northern Ireland may survive as a constitutional entity but for that to happen it will require significant shifts in inter- and intra-communal relations. The challenge facing Northern Ireland, he suggests, is to cease to exist as a quasi-archaeological site for some of the most toxic and virulent vestiges of troubled British–Irish relationships.

In his contribution, Kevin Bean shows the most substantial and immediate threat of violence in Northern Ireland is located within a network of dissident republican groups that, although still relatively small, enjoy increasing levels of support in some working-class nationalist/republican districts. In loyalist communities, there are evidently some paramilitaries who consider the peace process to have conceded too much ground to republicans and these individuals are widely regarded as orchestrating some of the periods of communal rioting that still frequently punctuate political life in Northern Ireland. However, as Peter Shirlow indicates, among former loyalist prisoners there is a general desire to reintegrate into society through processes of restorative justice. That ambition is, however, generally met with indifference and even hostility from wider Northern Irish society.

The analysis of ongoing territorial disputes associated with contentious parades provided by Katy Hayward and Milena Komarova shows that political authority in Northern Ireland is not derived from a common civic culture and that political legitimacy remains intimately associated with a sense of cultural interest and assertion. These intense processes and moments of spatial disputation, they reveal, remain attached to social class and are a reminder that the benefits of the peace process have been neither universal nor evenly distributed. Socially deprived communities that endured most during the conflict have derived few of the economic benefits that have attended the era of the peace process. As Colin Coulter shows, Northern Ireland is now a more socially unequal society than before the cease-fires. These intense and enduring material divisions not least suggest that we should take care not to talk about the Northern Irish peace process in singular terms. There is, in a sense, more than one Northern Ireland and indeed more than one peace process. As elsewhere, the distinctions between these discrete social worlds are mediated and maintained through the resources and restraints of social class.

The conflict in Northern Ireland was from the outset explicitly gendered in predictable ways. In essence, the Troubles entailed young working-class men dying at the hands of other young working-class men. In their contribution, Fidelma Ashe and Ken Harland underline the need to address the complexity and multiplicity of masculinities in relation to the specific contours of both the pre- and post-cease-fire periods. As they illustrate, the constitution of masculinities has impacted both men and women in negative ways. It

is contested that a feminist agenda, while still underdeveloped, remains vital to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. In terms of young people growing up in areas of high religious segregation, Brendan Browne and Clare Dwyer evaluate how the reproduction of poverty post-cease-fires perpetuates social harms not dissimilar to those located prior to 1994. As they contend, there is an imprecise understanding of what growing up in the “new” Northern Ireland represents among those who feel that they are merely at the sharp end of proxy violence, social exclusion, and reproduced trauma. In the twenty years since the cease-fires, a generation has come of age in socially deprived neighborhoods whose horizons are essentially as limited as those of their parents. The persistence of residential segregation ensures that opportunities to meet let alone befriend members of the “other tradition” are rare, while the new age of global austerity means that the prospects of secure and well-paid employment remain dismal. In light of this, it would seem reasonable to suggest that when we consider the course of political change since the cease-fires we are in fact talking about what is, at the very least, a “twin speed” peace process defined less by ethno-sectarian status and more by social class position.

It is intended that this collection will provide a critical and valuable snapshot of a society emerging from a prolonged and complex process of conflict transformation. If there is a common thread that runs through these diverse articles it is perhaps the keen sense of the fundamental ambivalence of the changes that have attended the past two decades. In official discourse, Northern Irish society is invariably depicted as having moved beyond the hatreds of the past and evolved into something more progressive and “modern.” It is, however, rather more fruitful to understand the region not in terms of this familiar transition but rather through the lens of its profound “inbetweenness.” When we look more closely, it becomes apparent that Northern Ireland remains snared between a whole sequence of binaries: it has edged its way from something that often felt like war toward something that does not, even yet, quite feel like peace; it exists on the fringes of the British state and at the outer limits of the peripheral vision of its Irish counterpart; it still has a unionist majority but within a generation will not; above all perhaps, it resides in the eternal antechamber—not quite British, not quite Irish—fashioned out of the competing imaginations of its principal ethno-sectarian traditions. It is these fundamental ambiguities—its quintessential “inbetweenness”—that make Northern Ireland such a volatile political context, even twenty years after the cease-fires.

Notes

1. Peter Shirlow and Mark McGovern, “Sectarianism, Socioeconomic Competition and the Political Economy of Ulster Loyalism,” *Antipode* 28(4) (1996), pp. 379–398.
2. Colin Coulter, *Contemporary Northern Irish Society* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).
3. Peter Shirlow, *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
4. See news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/31/newsid_3605000/3605348.stm (accessed 8 September 2013).
5. See www.nytimes.com/1994/10/14/world/protestant-words-exciting-beginning.html (accessed 8 September 2013).
6. Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Northern Ireland: Beyond the Belfast Agreement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).
7. Peter Shirlow, Laura Taylor, Christine Merrilees, Marcie Goeke-Morey, and Mark Cummings, “Hate Crime: Record or Perception?” *Space and Polity* 17 (2013), pp. 237–252.
8. Colin Coulter and Michael Murray, eds., *Northern Ireland After the Troubles: A Society in Transition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).