**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

The Northern Irish Peace Process

Brewer, J. (2018). The Northern Irish Peace Process. *Journal of Conflict and Integration*, 2(1), 166-173.

Published in:
Journal of Conflict and Integration

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights
© 2018 Journal of Conflict and Integration.
This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

The Northern Irish Peace Process

Professor John D Brewer HDSSc, MRIA, FRSE, FAcSS, FRSA

Professor of Post Conflict Studies
Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1NN
Northern Ireland

In April 2018, Northern Ireland celebrated the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Few remarked on the deep irony that the revelries have coincided with the weakest and lowest ebb of the Agreement. The power-sharing Executive established under the Agreement that permits formerly warring factions to govern jointly has been suspended since January 2017, Direct Rule by the British government from Westminster looms, and some of the key principles of the Agreement about parity of esteem and respect are in dispute.

The fact that political parties to the settlement could not agree its name in 1998 did not bode well for its implementation, with Catholics-Nationalists-Republicans (CNR) preferring Good Friday Agreement and Protestants-Unionists-Loyalists (PUL) preferring Belfast Agreement. Yet the kind of settlement it represented always made it fragile. Parties gave up on their first preference – approximating for the CNR community to a United Ireland and the PUL community to continued Union with Britain – for a mutually agreed second preference. Some groups, however, were reluctant to give up on first preferences, with Dissident Republicans still seeking to bomb and kill their way into a United Ireland, and some Unionist parties reluctant to share power, preferring instead a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people. The Rev Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), for example, never signed up to the GFA, despite deciding after the 2007 St Andrew's Agreement to share power with Republican Sinn Féin under its terms. Indeed, the current leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster, and one of its chief representatives in the British House of Commons, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, both left the Ulster Unionist Party to join the DUP rather than sign up to the GFA. This means that the travails of the peace settlement, as erstwhile enemies learn to live together in tolerance, are being managed while under the constant threat of renewed violence and a

begrudging acceptance, or even ambivalence, towards its terms by the leading PUL party.

There have been 158 paramilitary killings since the signing of the GFA and countless bomb attacks, and some leading PUL politicians argue that it is redundant.

What is often forgotten is that serendipity and chance played a very large role in the signing of the Agreement; so too in its potential demise. Social scientists in particular look to deep patterns, regularities and structures as explanatory factors, neglecting the role of luck and chance. The GFA, however, was the confluence of several coincidental factors. We can distinguish between internal and external factors. Internally, the IRA and the British military had long realised that the war could not be won militarily and that a political solution was needed but the question was how this political option could be agreed and sold to the different constituencies that had endured thirty years of anger, polarisation and victimhood. The war crept on mercilessly whilst a solution could not be found to this conundrum.

However, Loyalists, momentarily, had developed a combined command that brought together very many splinter groups, under the leadership of two activists, David Ervine and Billy Mitchell who were ex-combatants that had emerged from prison committed to political solutions. It was clear, for once, with whom to negotiate within Loyalism. Civil society groups in the churches, in the cross community and reconciliation fields, trade unions, women's groups and the like had long been active, but their patient back-channel communication and dialogue had little impact while the wider political circumstances remained unhelpful.

These political circumstances matured largely as a result of external coincidental factors. New governments in Dublin and London were in power and in 1997, the Labour government in Britain under Tony Blair, out of power since 1979, became a neutral broker since it was not dependent on Unionist votes in the British House of Commons because of a slender Conservative Party majority, which had bedevilled John Major. What is more, President Clinton wanted to make a significant gesture on the international stage to compensate for the very bad publicity he was getting domestically from the Monica Lewinsky Affair, and he put considerable effort into supporting the GFA and the efforts of the Dublin and London governments. Serendipitous factors coincided to make the settlement of 'the Troubles' a political ambition at home and abroad.

As it was, the GFA went through several iterations, it was suspended for short periods more than once, and had a major overhaul in the 2007 St Andrew's Agreement, which ended up with an outcome that the negotiators in 1998 never intended, with the two parties representing the extremes – Sinn Féin on the CNR side and the DUP on the PUL side – sharing power. What had happened was that the instability of the whole peace process since 1998 had encouraged support for the two polarities, which came to represent the electoral polarisation that the thirty-year violence had created and which the unstable peace process never reduced or diminished.

Indeed, the consociational nature of the Agreement reinforced the imperfections of the peace and bolstered the polarities. The whole point to consociationalism is that ethnic power blocs are consolidated as power is shared between them according to electoral support within each. This ensures that the major electoral power struggles occur *within*

each ethnic bloc as CNR parties compete to represent its bloc, and PUL parties theirs. The only competition *between* the ethnic blocs is to determine which party has the largest number of seats and thus gets to elect the First Minister. This very system reinforces the old sectarian identity politics of the past and undercuts the middle ground that might appeal to moderate voters on both sides. Consociational theory has yet to explain how consociationalism evolves once the ethnic power blocs become dysfunctional to normal politics.

If chance played a part in the genesis of the GFA, it has done so also in its demise. With the terminal illness and eventual death of Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness in 2017, the GFA lost its most ardent and patient supporter in Sinn Féin. Many times he could have resigned in the face of allegations of financial corruption involving the DUP, Sinn Féin's power-sharing partners; it was not until the final such allegation, involving a renewable energy initiative, when his health was quickly fading, that he resigned, bringing power-sharing to an end. It has not been restored. Brexit has dominated in the meantime, consuming all the emotional efforts and investments of the British and Irish governments. Moreover, Obama made race relations in the USA the motif of his presidency not foreign affairs, and Trump's election has prospered US isolationism not international intervention. Northern Ireland is on a very far distant back burner in the USA. The US has yet to appoint a Special Envoy to Northern Ireland, let alone the President become personally involved in the peace process. Above all, the miscalculation of the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, in calling an early election in 2018 to win a Brexit mandate resulted in a markedly diminished parliamentary majority and dependency on the ten DUP MPs in Westminster to get any

legislation passed, let alone controversial Brexit legislation. The British government is no longer a neutral broker and the DUP's leverage is immense.

This clout is temporary but while the DUP benefits from it, it is being used to bash the GFA, revisiting the DUP's commitments to parity of esteem, imposing conditions on the resumption of the power sharing executive knowing that Sinn Fein cannot meet them, and even reneging on earlier agreed positions in the 2007 St Andrew's Agreement and the 2014 Stormont House Agreement, to which the DUP signed up, on key policy questions like official recognition of the Irish language, legislation on dealing with the past and on victims. The British or Irish governments are not able now to keep the DUP to their earlier promises; indeed, the Conservative government had to temporarily withdraw from an agreement with the EU over the first stage of Brexit strategy because the DUP objected.

The paradox is that the GFA has not failed; it is that it is not being properly implemented.

Brexit, however, has also shifted Sinn Fein's strategy from power sharing in the North of Ireland to reunification of the Island. This is not to suggest that they do not want power sharing restored or for power sharing to work, but their perspective has been realigned as a result of Brexit. Reunification was rarely mentioned by Northern Sinn Fein when Martin McGuinness was doing his utmost to keep the Agreement alive, making reconciliatory gesture after gesture to persuade the PUL community of Sinn Fein's seriousness as a governing party in Northern Ireland. With Brexit, almost immediately the call went out from Sinn Fein for a border poll on reunification, on the back of the Scottish Nationalist Party's demand for a second referendum on Scottish independence. The fragmentation of the

United Kingdom may not be likely following Brexit, but it has been made imaginable by Brexit and Sinn Fein have begun to discuss reunification with passion.

What is more, politicians across the Island of Ireland have made reunification imaginable. Political parties in the Irish Republic also took a United Ireland off their political agenda. Their political priority was the GFA and power sharing in the North. Indeed, the CNR community in the North felt abandoned by the South, feeling unwanted and unloved. Political parties in the Irish Republic now openly discuss reunification; it is raised in the media and talked about in popular culture. Northern Ireland as a political and cultural entity has been made vulnerable by Brexit because the hugely negative implications of Brexit for the all-Island nature of Ireland's economy has opened up the constitutional question of reunification as a solution to the UK's withdrawal from the EU. The GFA is no longer the political priority it was for the Irish government, or Sinn Fein.

The irony for the DUP, which never signed up to the GFA and which now uses its temporary leverage in Westminster to undermine it, is that its future post-Brexit may well lie in the principles of the GFA but by which time the GFA may have become irrelevant.

The status of the Irish border is the single most important issue in delaying the Brexit negotiations. Brexiteers know this. They have ramped up their criticism of the Irish government, evoked Ireland as the thorn in Britain's side historically, despite Britain being the coloniser, and accused the Irish of using the border as succour to those who wish to remain against the democratic will of the British people. The prospect, God forbid, of the Irish dictating to the British people, profoundly alarms the ardent Brexiteers. Without any

hint of irony, they urge Irexit – Ireland’s exit from the EU – as a solution to the problems Brexit causes Britain’s relationship with Ireland. The language is emotive and the historical facts perverse, but the GFA and the status of the border between the two parts of Ireland is caught up in a war of words about what is primarily the nature of Britain’s borders with the Continent, to which Ireland was – as it always is to London – an afterthought.

Serendipity plays its role here too. There is a chance that in order to win Irish government support to free themselves of the EU, Brexiteers will agree to Ireland’s demand for regulatory alignment between North and South, giving Northern Ireland special status in the EU in all but name, honouring the all-Island nature of Ireland’s economy. It is unlikely that the EU will agree to any terms that the Irish government is unhappy with, giving the ardent Brexiteers in Britain the disastrous Hobson’s Choice of either Ireland’s deal or no deal. They may well choose Ireland’s deal. This in effect means the British government abandoning the DUP for the sake of a soft border to placate the Irish. Brexiteers’ desire for exit from the EU is stronger than any loyalty to the DUP; and a general election on the strength of a negotiated Brexit deal may well see sufficient electoral support in England and Wales at least, which overwhelmingly supported Brexit in the Referendum, to lose the DUP their command over the Conservative Party’s majority.

The DUP may well be sacrificed on the alter of Brexit. The DUP’s strong support for Brexit, therefore, against the economic interests of the Irish people is a form of political suicide, to which their Unionism makes them blind. Not only does their unfailing commitment to Brexit cut the DUP off from winning middle class Catholic votes, it loses them Protestant support amongst those co-religionists who see their economic prosperity lying in Europe.

Brexit in Ireland is about the economic regulatory framework between the two parts of the Island, but the border takes on unusual constitutional significance if Northern Ireland wins special status within the EU. To stave off a border poll on reunification and to stymie debate about a United Ireland, the DUP may well find itself in the ironic position of calling on the GFA as its defence against further constitutional change. The GFA upholds power sharing and enshrines the principle that constitutional change can occur only with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP will thereby find itself in the unenviable position of wishing to strengthen an agreement it now seeks to weaken; and by that time, it may be too late to resurrect something it helped kill. The DUP will not be capable of enlivening it however, for with special status for Northern Ireland in an all-Island economic regulatory framework most political parties across the Island will see reunification as the next step. This will truly test Karl Marx's theory – the anniversary of whose birth is also marked in 2018 – that economics drives politics.

All this is, of course, just one scenario for Northern Ireland's peace process, but British and Irish politics are increasingly unpredictable, no longer subject to logic and reason but the unbending ideology of Brexiteers in Britain. This exposes all analysis to serendipity. How the Northern Irish peace process ends up is thus open to chance.