

Foreword

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One of the most remarkable events of 1998 was the signing of the Belfast Agreement. It was arrived at after a long and arduous process of negotiations, promised to bring to an end one of the world's longest running conflicts. At the time, it was hailed as a triumph for the process of conflict resolution through democratic negotiations rather than through the power of the gun.

The euphoria that surrounded the Agreement evaporated somewhat in the months that followed. It soon became apparent that getting Northern Ireland's political parties to implement the various provisions of the Agreement was not going to be as straightforward as had been hoped. But despite the inter-party wrangles over the interpretation of key provisions of the Agreement, there is little doubt that there has been a dramatic change in atmosphere in the province. A ceasefire by the main armed groups has more or less held, the level of violence has decreased dramatically, and ordinary people are increasingly getting accustomed to living their lives without the constant fear of disorder.

The Belfast Agreement is significant not merely for the people of the province, but for those caught in similar conflicts around the world. While every conflict is unique, shaped by its own particular circumstances, disputes between groups of people over issues of nationality, identity and statehood also have universal elements. This is why it is rewarding to study peace processes in other parts of the world: there are always lessons to be drawn from successful, or even failed peace attempts which can be applied to one's own situation.

There are several elements in Northern Ireland's path to peace that are worth studying. One of these is the process by which the Irish republican movement gradually changed its tactics from an almost exclusive reliance on armed struggle to trying to achieve their aims through negotiations and the ballot box. The transformation of an armed struggle into democratic political movement is one of the hardest tasks in conflict resolution. This volume provides insights into the

conditions and strategies that made this possible in Northern Ireland.

It is not only armed groups who have to abandon long held strategies in the interests of peace. Democratic parties have often to make painful compromises as well, as illustrated by the experience of the Ulster Unionists, the principal party of the Protestant, unionist community. The experience of the Ulster Unionists as they 'travelled that extra mile to reach an agreement', as one of the contributors to this volume puts it, holds valuable lessons.

Three governments, Britain, Ireland and the United States played key roles in the peace process. Britain and Ireland, as the two countries directly involved, played a variety of roles at different times ranging from mediation to acting as a proxy for the different parties in Northern Ireland. But by far their most important contribution was to have laid a foundation for peace talks by declaring they were willing to abide by the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. This created the space for the political parties in the province to decide their own future through negotiations.

Perhaps the most striking part of the Belfast Agreement has been the way the principle of consent has been woven into its every strand. The essence of the Agreement is that the future of the province can only be determined by the consent of its people. What is important is that this consent is not mechanically defined as agreement by the majority of the population, but instead as an agreement by the majority of people in both the Protestant and Catholic communities. In other words, Northern Ireland's future can only be determined on the basis of a genuinely popular consensus that would cut across communal and sectarian divisions.

The Belfast Agreement was arrived at through negotiations, endorsed by a popular referendum and backed by the international community. This is a pattern of conflict resolution that is worth emulating.