

Suspending judgement

the politics of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

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Five years on from the signing of the *Belfast Agreement* (popularly known as the *Good Friday Agreement*) on 10 April 1998 it is unclear if the Northern Ireland peace process can be held up as an example of good practice. It may never be possible to give a definite judgment on any peace process - certainly not in the short term. Some seem to have created a positive new beginning for the people involved in the conflict and their societies, but there may be the seeds of further conflict lurking underneath. Others seem to have failed but we cannot be sure if the failed process has started a new cycle of reflection out of which true peace can emerge. The Northern Ireland peace process is hard to judge because there are tangible benefits but at the same time obvious and real obstacles.

When the Agreement was reached there were significant forces opposed to the arrangements. However there were high expectations that the new institutions would begin to function smoothly and demonstrate the benefits of an agreed approach to the problems of Northern Ireland, thereby diminishing the opposition. But the implementation of the Agreement has been a roller-coaster ride with hope interspersed with tensions and uncertainty and a series of critical moments and deadlines when the Agreement might have collapsed. To date, on each occasion some statement of understanding has eventually been reached by the parties supporting the Agreement which has allowed the implementation process to continue, albeit slowly. It is still by no means clear that the Agreement will survive. This supplement to *Striking a Balance: The Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Accord Issue 8) offers some reflections on the challenges and opportunities for consolidating the peace process in Northern Ireland.



Achievements

Perhaps the biggest achievement of the peace process is that there are few people who would welcome a return to violence. In many ways the peace process was a sign that most paramilitary organizations had accepted that they could not achieve their goals by a military campaign and they were prepared to see if a negotiated settlement could offer a better outcome. Many paramilitary leaders said that they did not want the violence to continue into the next generation.

As a result of the peace process new institutions have been formed in which all parties have taken part (brief descriptions of these are provided on page 19). The Northern Ireland Assembly has been seen to work effectively, agreeing a Programme for Government and budgets to implement the programmes. North-South bodies have met and discussed issues of common concern for the whole island of Ireland. The Civic Forum was established and the members appointed were able to respond to the Programme for Government, though it may have been less effective in setting out its own agenda and taking the initiative to raise issues itself.

Further, parties opposed to the Agreement have played an active part in most of these new bodies. Unlike previous attempts to set up devolved institutions, no elected members have boycotted them. Most notably, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the second largest unionist party, did not take part in the negotiations and

opposed the Agreement but its members have taken their ministerial seats in the Northern Ireland Executive and they have been recognized as among the most able ministers. They justify their involvement on the grounds that they should take part in statutory bodies and take the posts to which they are entitled in order to represent their supporters and also to ensure that the posts do not go to republicans. However they have not taken part personally in meetings of the Executive at which Sinn Féin are present or meetings of North-South bodies because they consider them a move towards unification of the island.

Doubts

Violence has continued, which is perhaps not surprising given that a culture of violence had become pervasive during the previous thirty years. Ironically street violence has increased and there has been much more overt tension at the interfaces between opposing communities, as though they were testing who had won and who had lost. Though somewhat abated, violence within communities has continued in the form of punishment beatings and shootings, mainly for anti-social activities. Some sections of paramilitary groups have themselves been involved in drug dealing and other anti-social activities as they find new openings for their skills. There have been two bitter feuds within loyalist paramilitary groups. They have also been responsible for sporadic sectarian killings, though now all loyalist groups seem to have returned to a ceasefire situation.

Nonetheless for people in most areas the perception is that the level of violence has markedly declined compared to the period before the ceasefires in 1994.

The continuing low level of violence touches on a deeper question which has had profound political consequences. The current status and future of the paramilitary groups is still not clear. Are they still active? What is to happen to their weapons? This has been the most visible source of uncertainty since the Agreement was reached in 1998 and there is no obvious precedent for how such issues are resolved. Unlike many other conflicts the active combatants were not operating publicly and therefore they do not constitute a visible group which can now be observed and monitored.

The level of support for the Agreement has dropped, partly as a reaction to these factors. The Catholic community has remained largely in favour but an opinion poll in February 2003 found that only 36 per cent of Protestants would still vote for the Agreement in a referendum (although 60 per cent would still be happy to see it succeed). This will become particularly important as the first term of the members of the Northern Ireland Assembly is about to end.

Politics in the devolved institutions

Striking a Balance took the story of the peace process to the end of 1999. At this point the presence of Sinn Féin in the Executive while the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had not decommissioned their weapons had become the biggest stumbling block. It has remained the issue that divides the parties and has consistently brought the devolved institutions close to collapse. However there have also been periods when a spirit of co-operation between the pro-Agreement parties has been evident. Outside the Assembly they have at times shown a greater joint resolve to deal with some of the grassroots disputes over issues such as territory and parades, which cause instability and uncertainty.

The first suspension of the devolved institutions came 72 days after they were established. In November 1999, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) had agreed to continue to support the implementation of the Agreement and co-operate in the establishment of the Executive on the basis that it would lead to decommissioning. The IRA said in a statement on 3 December that it would appoint an interlocutor with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). But the UUP determined that it would review its support at a meeting of the ruling council two months later at the end of February 2000. By then, it appeared that there had been insufficient progress to ensure that the UUP leader, David

Trimble, could command the support of his party to stay in office. If Trimble had resigned it might have meant the collapse of the whole system as there were no other Unionists willing or able to make it work. So the then British Secretary of State Peter Mandelson used his power to suspend the Assembly, eventually restoring it three and half months later.

The hiatus was broken by another round of talks, out of which emerged a new deadline for decommissioning at the end of June 2001. On that basis the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive began to work and deal with the everyday issues of government. The institutions performed well with all parties playing mainly responsible and constructive roles. But the manoeuvring continued over key issues such as decommissioning and policing and other less central matters. The UUP still felt vulnerable in the unionist community over decommissioning and continued to cajole and threaten the UK government to exert pressure on the IRA and Sinn Féin. Another tactic was to bar Sinn Féin ministers from taking part in the joint bodies representing the Irish government and the Northern Ireland Executive. These are important for Sinn Féin as they point to possible all-Ireland institutions in the future. David Trimble argued that as First Minister he had the power to determine who attended these bodies. While the courts did not uphold this claim, the Ministers were still unable to attend meetings while the case went to appeal.

In the run-up to June 2001 elections, in an attempt to bolster his precarious position, Trimble submitted a letter of resignation as First Minister post-dated for midnight on 30 June. On that date, with no evidence that decommissioning was imminent and under pressure from his party, Trimble's resignation took effect on the grounds that decommissioning should have taken place. A new First and Deputy First Minister had to be appointed within six weeks or else the whole system would collapse. There seemed to be no possibility that the UUP would re-appoint David Trimble or appoint an alternative unless there were further moves on decommissioning. During the intervening six weeks, the British and Irish governments held a new round of talks at Weston Park in England which resulted in a paper dealing with most of the outstanding concerns of the parties. It focused mainly on issues of security and policing, which nationalists had been unhappy about, and indicated that decommissioning was an essential element that would be dealt with by the IICD. There was a widespread assumption that the contents of the paper would lead to some shift on decommissioning by the IRA. A period of consultation followed within the pro-Agreement parties to assess whether the proposals were sufficient to reassure all of them that they should continue the process.



However the elements of the paper which met nationalist demands further alienated unionist opinion by avoiding specific commitment on decommissioning. The UUP was unwilling and indeed in no position to reinstate the First Minister. The Secretary of State, now John Reid, ordered another short suspension of the Assembly, giving a further six weeks to reach some breakthrough. However, the use of these legal niceties as a way to avoid a vote in the assembly was against the spirit of the provision and was in danger of bringing the whole process into disrepute.

Towards the end of this six weeks a possibility of progress began to emerge. In the eyes of republicans decommissioning is more related to the British presence than to the actions of unionists, because the IRA had always argued that its campaign was against the British. Therefore throughout this period it had been understood that a reduction of the British military presence would make it easier to achieve acceptance of decommissioning within the IRA. Considerable steps towards the removal of the military presence had been taken during the ceasefire and after the Agreement. However there were still some contentious installations in republican areas and the British government had been slow to remove them, allegedly because of pressure from its military and intelligence advisers, but also in light of the continuing threats from dissident republican groups. Now the government agreed privately to take further steps if decommissioning commenced and, with that assurance and the steps agreed at the negotiations in the summer,

the IRA decommissioned a quantity of weapons. Despite unionist complaints that it was done in secret with only the IICD knowing the numbers of weapons and the method of disposal, the government immediately ordered the removal of some military installations. The UUP then agreed to re-nominate David Trimble as the First Minister, and Mark Durkan, who was expected to take over the leadership of the SDLP, was nominated as new Deputy First Minister.

Despite the ensuing successful vote to elect Trimble and Durkan, the credibility of the process had been challenged by the need to rely on artifices. Not only did it depend on re-designation as unionists by some of the centre-ground Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), but the new initiatives had happened so close to the six week deadline that the first vote took place on the very last day. At this point the Secretary of State should have considered calling elections or further suspension. However the second vote took place the following Monday. The DUP subsequently began legal proceedings to show the actions of the Secretary of State and the election to be unlawful.

The Assembly and Executive began working again, together with the cross-border bodies, and to all outward appearances they were functioning well and envisioning a long term future. However the threat remained that unionists hostile to the Agreement would bring down the system. One possibility was that the DUP would attract sufficient disaffected UUP MLAs

to be able to vote down the UUP. However the DUP was working effectively within the system and any moves to precipitate a crisis were rather half-hearted. It was more likely that the disaffected members of the UUP would change party policy at a party council meeting.

Paramilitary involvement in the Holy Cross incident in summer 2001, which is described below, served as a reminder that the paramilitary groups were still active even if the earlier type of military action had largely ceased. While any evidence of continuing paramilitary activity was unsettling, the main focus was on republican activity. This was partly because the unionists felt that it was in their interest to raise the issue, and because participation in the Executive was dependent on renouncing violence (two members of Sinn Féin, which is linked to the IRA, were in the Executive). A number of IRA activities also drew attention to themselves. Three members were arrested in Colombia after spending time with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the militant revolutionary group which at that stage was still in negotiations with the Colombian government. Also, some members were arrested for shipping armaments from Miami, USA to Ireland. The police service also accused the IRA of being responsible for a raid on police headquarters when special branch documents were stolen.

Other issues were also still causing severe strains, not least the reform of policing. The Royal Ulster Constabulary had been reformed to create the new Northern Ireland Policing Service (PSNI), but Sinn Féin considered the reforms inadequate and refused to take their seats on the new Policing Board.

Pressure built up through 2002 and it began to appear that a new challenge by anti-Agreement UUP members to its participation in the Executive was imminent. There was talk that Sinn Féin should be excluded from the Assembly; this could be done by a vote of the members but it was unlikely that it would gain the necessary nationalist support. There were also calls that the Secretary of State should use his powers to exclude them.

The issue came to a head on 5 October 2002 when the PSNI raided the offices of Sinn Féin at Stormont. It appeared that party workers had been carrying out surveillance of other parties, compiling dossiers of information and acquiring confidential documents. There were different views on the seriousness of these activities. While some argue that all parties use the best intelligence that they can get, it reflected the conspiratorial nature of Northern Irish politics and may even have been a way of keeping former combatants

occupied. However the breach of trust angered unionist representatives who said politics could not work if that trust was missing.

The momentum of events put increasing pressure on each unionist party to outdo the other in their toughness. Amid a flurry of motions to exclude Sinn Féin from the Executive, John Reid suspended the institutions again. Prime Minister Tony Blair's subsequent call for "acts of completion" seemed to signal what was required for a resolution of the situation. The Agreement had stated when different processes had to begin, but not when they would be complete, and perhaps his implication was that schemes such as those for decommissioning should be nearing completion.

At the political level it was assumed that suspension would be followed by a new round of discussions and possibly a review under the terms of the Agreement. However there was a lengthy pause with occasional bilateral meetings between the local political parties and the Irish and British governments. The most remarkable feature of the suspension was the lack of reaction from the public. Perhaps there was a feeling that similar situations had happened before. Perhaps people did not see that suspension would make a great deal of difference, even among those who liked the idea of local institutions of government.

The next deadline arose because under the Agreement rules on elections the term of the Assembly would expire at the end of April 2003. New elections were scheduled for 1 May. It was the general view that the more intransigent parties would benefit if the institutions were not operating and the UUP in particular would suffer. It also seemed to be the view of the British government that it would not be helpful if the DUP became the largest unionist party.

However one read the prospects, the search for a resolution began to gain momentum. The procedure seemed to be similar to previous suspensions. The governments would develop a plan of action that they would undertake and as a result the IRA would make some movement on decommissioning. This would then be sufficient for David Trimble to get the support of his party for going back into the Assembly and restarting the process. However it seemed likely that the party's supporters - if not the members of its ruling council - were unlikely to be impressed with their leader and any proposals he would bring. They had been in similar situations a number of times since the signing of the Agreement and from their perspective no progress had been made on their concerns.

On the fifth Good Friday since the signing of the Agreement it seemed there was little hope that the existing positions would be reconciled and a new formula found to restart the institutions - certainly not before the date for the elections. So after postponing the elections to 29 May the UK Prime Minister suspended them indefinitely arguing that there was no consensus among the parties to make the institutions work and therefore the electorate would not know for what body they were electing members.

Reflections on the implementation process

To the outside observer this process must be hard to understand. Having made the enormous efforts and mental reorientation to reach an agreement, it seems remarkable that the parties have been so hesitant to make the further effort to embed and consolidate the new institutions. However what has been happening provides instructive insights into the difficulties of an implementation process or a post-settlement situation.

Moving to a post conflict culture

Northern Ireland is in a post-settlement phase but the experience of the last five years demonstrates clearly that this is not the same thing as a post-conflict phase. Although the violence has diminished, the conflict has not and the situation has been characterized by argument and stand-off. It is not a collaborative period but one where each side is struggling for advantage to maximize its gains from the Agreement in whatever way it can. This in fact was the intention of the *Belfast Agreement*: that the conflict over equality and constitutional aspirations would be transferred from the streets into the debating chamber where it might be sorted out by constitutional if not co-operative means.

However the parties have continued to operate in a defensive mode, assuming that opponents are seeking a negotiating advantage, and looking for weaknesses in their opponents' positions which might provide an opportunity to gain the upper hand. The parties also look for allies and extra arguments to bolster their positions. There is a good deal of talk about the need for trust and confidence-building by the other side because they are seen as untrustworthy but little awareness that one's own defensive behaviour does not inspire trust. So each party acts in ways which reinforce the image that their opponents hold of them and as a result the opponents respond in ways which fulfil the stereotype. While this may be evident to an external observer it is not obvious to the parties themselves. Their reality is that for over five years they have taken risks to keep the Agreement alive. However they have not taken

the risk of a new form of co-operative politics where they try to create a shared analysis of the problems and show mutual generosity. Instead there is a form of 'amplification feedback' which helps each party to justify creating increasing distance between itself and others.

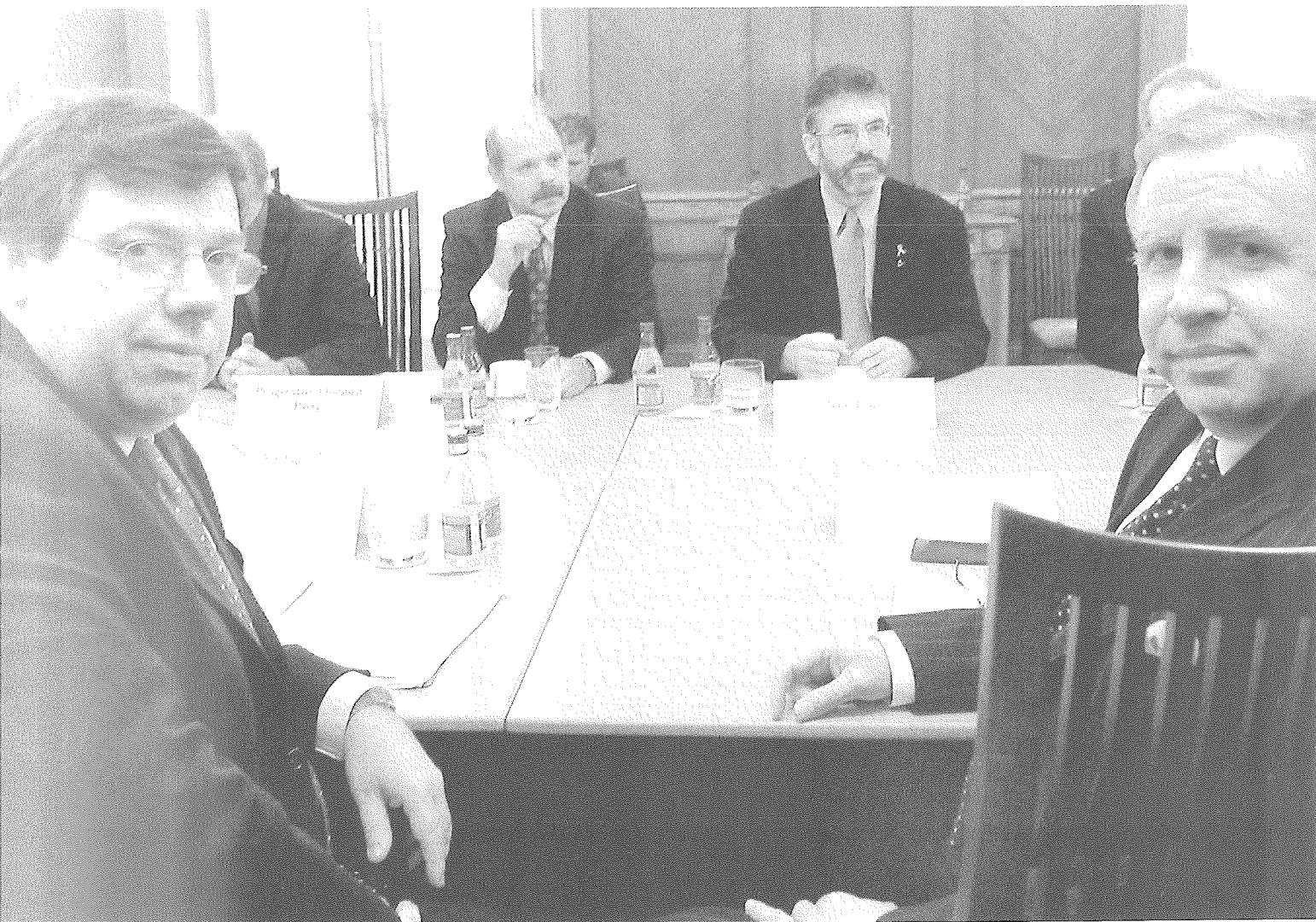
Roelf Meyer, the National Party Chief negotiator in the South African peace process was in Ireland recently arguing for such a change of culture. He made the point that the parties in South Africa were unaware that such a shift had not taken place. He recalled his own experience as late as 1994 when it appeared to outside observers that real progress was being made: "As a team we did not really believe in what we were doing. Basically we were still locked in negotiation behaviour that aimed at policy amendment, pragmatism. Opportunistic reasoning informed our behaviour."

Various factors may create the conditions in which a shift to a culture of co-operative negotiations can take place but in many ways the form in which the negotiations are taking place in the Northern Irish situation actually encourages the parties to remain entrenched in defensive bargaining.

Political culture at the grassroots has not adapted to co-operative politics either. Persistent street violence has continued. While it has often reflected local tensions it has also showed signs in some situations of being orchestrated by paramilitary groups and used and accentuated by politicians to challenge their political opponents. One example which gained notoriety in the world press was a stand-off over children going to the Catholic maintained Holy Cross primary school in north Belfast. The school was just outside a Catholic enclave and the most direct access was through a Protestant housing estate. In early summer 2001 a minor incident arose unrelated to the school and the Protestants reacted by blocking the road. They found that this had an immediate impact and while it showed them in an unflattering light as adults bullying small children they nevertheless felt that they were at last being noticed.

The protests became a daily occurrence and the Catholic parents demanded their right to walk to school. The authorities accepted their responsibility to ensure the children could get to school safely and responded by creating a passageway through the protesters with lines of police vehicles. They also tried to offer a package of financial measures to improve amenities for both communities in the area.

The protest eventually petered out, although tensions remained and the focus of street violence moved to another part of Belfast. Nonetheless, these incidents



were a very graphic indication that Northern Ireland is still not a normal society. The school protest was particularly stark but gang fighting and other incidents not dissimilar to events in Northern Ireland do take place in other societies. However they have much greater potential to destabilize in Northern Ireland. First the community was uncertain and looking for signs which would tell them if the conflict was over and if the Agreement was working. These incidents encouraged a negative answer. The tensions reflected existing fault lines between Protestants and Catholics and provided plenty of material which people could use to reinforce their negative stereotypes of the other community. And thirdly politicians encouraged such thinking and worked hard to lay the blame on the other community.

Geography of the negotiations framework

The negotiation process with the political parties which led to the *Belfast Agreement* was characterized by inclusiveness. All the parties were involved apart from the DUP and its allies. Bilateral meetings took place but the issues came back to plenary sessions on a regular basis. This had the important function that all parties knew pretty well what was happening and had to justify their positions to the other parties involved. It also meant that

smaller parties and sometimes one of the larger parties could stand back from a deadlock because they did not have a strong position on the topic under discussion. They could then make alternative suggestions or facilitate dialogue between the parties having trouble with the issue. And in the plenary session, if not in bilateral meetings, the parties heard each other explaining their positions and difficulties and understanding developed. Under the chairmanship of Senator George Mitchell it was clear that responsibility for the future arrangements lay in the hands of the Northern Irish parties. He would not find a solution for them and he could not impose a solution on them.

However towards the end of the Stormont negotiations, and subsequently, a new geography emerged. The British Prime Minister became more directly involved and the Northern Irish parties found it more congenial and more effective to go directly to him to lobby on their demands. The result is that the parties met less frequently. They did not have to hammer out a common understanding of the issues and a mutually acceptable outcome. Instead they began to use the British Prime Minister and the *Taoiseach* (Irish Prime Minister) as arbitrators who would be able to bring the opposing parties round to their positions. This they did after each problem but such mutual acceptance

Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs Brian Cowen (left) sits with Britain's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Paul Murphy (right) and Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams (back right) at the start of all-party roundtable talks at Stormont, 21 November 2002.

Source: REUTERS/Paul McErlane

became harder to achieve as each agreement did not actually deal with the fundamental concerns which had caused the problem in the first place.

The case for an inclusive process was argued, especially by the Women's Coalition and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). It was becoming an elite process with an emphasis on two parties (UUP and Sinn Féin and the two individual leaders of those parties, David Trimble and Gerry Adams). They effectively had a veto over the process because their withdrawal would destroy the concept of participation by both communities which was a cornerstone of the Agreement. At the same time they were seen as people who could deliver their communities.

The wider community has also been marginalized from the process and while most people have been glad to leave politics to the politicians the process has been weakened as a result. The main grassroots influence on the political process has been from disaffected anti-agreement sections of the community who have used the local tensions and street violence to create the feeling that the Agreement was in crisis and not delivering peace and stability. In fact tensions were rife only in small pockets of the community, but they could touch on more widely held atavistic fears and give the impression that the whole community was erupting in violence.

A number of individuals and groups did try to show popular support for the peace process, including the recent One Small Step Campaign, but people have been slow to take an active part. Over the years it seems that the people do not take an active role in campaigning for peace until there is a real crisis. During the last five years the only show of moderate support for peace rallies was after the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) shot a postman and seemed intent on provoking a new cycle of sectarian violence. The UDA leadership quickly moved to declare that they would not sanction such killings in the future but it is not clear if they were more influenced by public protests sponsored by the trade union movement or by unease within their own community.

The geography of the negotiations has also made it difficult for civil society to engage with the politicians and they have concentrated more on peacebuilding in local communities. The Civic Forum stands alongside the constitutional process and deals mainly with social issues. Its secretariat is drawn from the public service rather than appointed specifically for the Forum, which

may partly explain why the Forum has been disinclined towards direct involvement in the peace process. It has been provided with plans and consultations by the Executive and has allowed most of its time to be taken up with preparing responses. When the Assembly was first suspended some Civic Forum members discussed the idea of continuing to meet and trying to make a contribution to dealing with the crisis but in the end the view prevailed that they should cease to meet when the Assembly is suspended.

A number of important broader issues in building a new society, such as reconciliation, 'dealing with the past' and developing a bill of rights have been marginalized because they are not the political issues that politicians are most immediately interested in. The term 'human rights' has been often used in the arguments and debates but mainly in connection with oversight of policing, not in terms of a wider culture of human rights. The Human Rights Commission established under the Agreement was charged with developing a bill of rights but it has found it difficult to keep it on the political agenda and there is still no consensus on its provisions. The challenge of 'dealing with the past' mainly receives attention from the politicians in terms of public enquiries into alleged failures by the security forces, such as the investigation of the events of 'Bloody Sunday' in January 1972. Responsibility for victims' issues is divided between the Northern Ireland Office's Victims Liaison Unit and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Victims Unit. But it has been mainly left to the voluntary sector (for example the Healing Through Remembering Project) to attempt to initiate a serious debate about developing some process of understanding the past and dealing with the hurts and mistrust that now exist and inhibit reconciliation. For the politicians these are side issues and potential challenges they wish to avoid, or issues which can be used to score points over opponents. They overlook the importance of such reconciliatory processes in building a new society based on democratic principles, supportive of human rights and at peace with itself. The absence of progress towards such a society may partially explain the failure of the Agreement to take root and gain strong public commitment.

The politicians themselves spend a lot of time at Stormont, where the Assembly sits and which is not conveniently located for the general public. They are now financed to have teams of advisers and supporters and much of their time is spent on internal consultation. It is arguable that they would benefit from hearing challenging voices from outside their own circle.

Moreover, the elite nature and the style of the process encourages them in the view that the public are there to be persuaded and not that they should meaningfully engage with them and their concerns.

Persuasion and inducements

Along with this focus on key individuals there was also a change of style within the negotiation process that saw the governments increasingly relying on persuasion and inducements. This seemed to reflect the natural approach to problem-solving of the British Prime Minister. Tony Blair had, in other situations both internationally and domestically, found charm and the offer of incentives were effective ways to gain support. However this approach is much more limited when faced with convictions as deeply held as those of participants on both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict. They will not compromise on these convictions for the sake of short-term political advantage or material gain.

A pattern developed where dissatisfaction would grow in the unionist community, who felt that they were not gaining sufficient advantage from the *Belfast Agreement* and concessions were repeatedly being given to nationalists. Even if there was no basis for these feelings it would lead to a crisis where the unionist leadership argued that they could not keep their support and some movement was needed within the republican movement – for example, through decommissioning by the IRA. The British and Irish Prime Ministers would take up the issue, not wanting unionist support to collapse, and would go to the republican leadership looking for some action by them. The republican leadership would feel that the process was working and they were supporting it and that the unionist complaints were only a form of blackmail and delaying tactics which deserved to be ignored. But they in turn wanted movement by the British government on issues such as policing or the scaling down of the British Army. The two governments would respond by preparing a set of measures that they (primarily the British government) would take on policing, security, human rights or other republican concerns and then hope that those measures would gain a positive response from the IRA. However, the effect of this approach was to turn the negotiations into gesture politics around issues such as human rights and decommissioning which were real issues for the parties concerned and should not have been treated as bargaining chips. As a result the issues kept returning and hindered the process by which the new system and a new approach to politics would become embedded in the political culture.

Weakness in the Agreement

The issues just discussed refer to difficulties which are not in the Agreement itself but in the way the parties and the two governments have chosen to work on the implementation. But with hindsight there are also difficulties in the Agreement itself.

The way in which the Agreement requires support in each community is an essential element but it is also criticized for thereby entrenching ethnic divisions. Members of the Assembly have to declare their identity and on key votes there must be a majority in each community. This also has the corollary that those who do not identify with either bloc such as the Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition, have no influence on such votes unless they register as one or other identity group. In this sense, a weighted majority of, for example, 70 per cent gives less protection for each identity group but does mean that there is an incentive to maximize support from other groups to get sufficient votes to reach the agreed majority.

The Agreement included provisions for review but did not have a mechanism for ongoing problem-solving. It has been noted already that some parties recognized the importance of such a body representing all parties, but while the idea was accepted after two years as part of the Weston Park proposals and the Implementation Committee was reactivated, it has met only sporadically and has not had a significant role in the negotiations.

Thirdly a number of key issues were left open in the Agreement including decommissioning and policing. They were given only a few lines in the Agreement which proposed further processes for dealing with them. But they were among the most contentious issues to be resolved. Many people now feel that they should have been dealt with in the original negotiations and then the parties would have been able to see the full extent of the commitments and how the whole package satisfied or did not satisfy their concerns and aspirations. Some parties had already made concessions in accepting the Agreement but had only a hope that other developments in policing, human rights or decommissioning would make the overall result more palatable to them. They have since found that there has been insufficient movement on some of these issues or the proposals are not to their liking and so they continue to be contentious. But the reason that they were not dealt with in the original Agreement was because they were contentious and postponing them was one way, perhaps the only way, to reach the



level of consensus which was achieved. Ideally all the issues should have been dealt with at the time but there is no way to know if that ideal could actually have been realized.

Prospects

We have seen that under the current style of politics it has not been possible to move into a new era and embed the peace process. One might expect that if the DUP and Sinn Féin emerge from future elections as the dominant parties there is little likelihood of progress given their histories of militancy. However the prospect may not be so bleak. The DUP would then be in a position where they would have to take responsibility for what happened and there are some indications that they are beginning to recognize this and show signs of becoming more accommodating. They would also be freer than the UUP who are constantly accused of being too soft by the DUP. If the DUP becomes responsible there will be no other significant more militant group to criticize them on this ground. It is often more militant groups that have the capacity to reach an agreement and carry it through - Sinn Féin being a case in point.

Ironically the two parties that can open up the process are Sinn Féin and the DUP. Sinn Féin will not have confidence in the process while a major unionist party is standing outside and so DUP involvement will provide them and the wider republican movement with the confidence to take radical steps. However the DUP will not have the confidence to join the process unequivocally if the IRA still have the potential to go back to war and to use that threat to gain a political advantage. The removal of that threat would provide the DUP with the confidence to fully support the new arrangements with some minor adjustments which should not be an obstacle. So they both need to understand each other and see how movement by one helps them both. Recent press statements and the DUP willingness to take part in media discussions with Sinn Féin for the first time show that that realization is emerging. The postponement of the elections, however, may act as a disincentive to such progress.

18 April 2003 (Good Friday)