

Northern Ireland

Background

Following Ireland's independence in 1921, the north of the island remained part of the UK, becoming known as Northern Ireland. Most of the Protestant majority in the north supported remaining within the UK (unionists). The Catholic minority largely considered itself Irish, with many desiring a united Ireland (nationalists).

A civil rights movement emerged in the late 1960s involving both unionists and nationalists. Many Catholics saw this as a call for equal rights after decades of political and economic marginalisation. Marches increasingly led to confrontations with the police, and involved more militant sections of each community. In August 1969, British troops were deployed to try to maintain control. There was also a rapid growth of paramilitary activity, including the nationalist Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the unionist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

In the early 1970s, a new phase of open and violent hostility developed. The IRA carried out numerous bombings and shootings including attacks on British army and state targets. Violence between the two communities also escalated, and included targeted shootings by paramilitary groups.

A number of early initiatives sponsored by the British, such as the *Sunningdale Agreement* of 1974, sought to exclude 'extreme' elements of Northern Irish politics such as Sinn Féin (the political wing of the IRA). In 1985, the Irish and British governments came together and signed the *Anglo-Irish Agreement*, signalling a new

willingness to cooperate. However, it would be another 10 years before the majority of Northern Irish parties would agree to share a negotiating table and Sinn Féin was recognised as a legitimate participant.

By the 1990s, ethno-political antagonism shaped social and political life in Northern Ireland. Hostility between communities produced separate housing, education and leisure. Nevertheless, the political process progressed and multi-party talks began in June 1996, eventually leading to the *Belfast Agreement* in 1998. The agreement set forth arrangements for a Northern Irish Assembly and Executive Committee in which Unionist and Nationalist parties would share power. It also contained provisions on disarmament, police reform, demilitarisation and the status of prisoners.

Continued disputes over decommissioning of IRA weapons saw repeated suspensions of the executive from 2000. Decommissioning, overseen by the Independent International Commission for Decommissioning, was completed in 2006. Yet it was only the conclusion of the *St Andrew's Agreement* by the major parties in October 2006, which included devolution of policing and justice powers, that enabled the restoration of the executive in May 2007. While power-sharing has since continued, largely without interruption, there has been renewed paramilitary violence and continued social tensions and conflict triggered by contentious issues such as parades and flags.

In focus

Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past

The Legacy Gender Integration Group

In September 2015, the *Gender Principles for Dealing with the Legacy of the Past* were launched in Belfast. They consist of 10 principles to address the gendered impact of the conflict and were developed by a group of women from non-governmental organisations and universities in Britain and Ireland (the Legacy Gender Integration Group): Yasmine Ahmed, Sara Duddy, Claire Hackett, Patricia Lundy, Mary McCallan, Gemma McKeown, Andrée Murphy, Catherine O'Rourke, Emma Patterson-Bennett, and Leah Wing.

There are clear gender patterns to victimhood and survival in Northern Ireland, for example the vast majority of those killed in the conflict were men and the majority of surviving family members are women. The Principles were a response to the gaps and shortcomings with regard to gender – evident in previous government attempts to design a comprehensive process for dealing with the past – in the *Stormont House Agreement* (SHA) of December 2014. The SHA set out, for the first time, an agreed set of institutions to deal with issues of accountability outstanding from the conflict.

The Legacy Gender Integration Group came together with a sense of urgency about the need to draw attention to silence on gender and to make a positive intervention in an ongoing process. The resulting 10 principles provide guidance for the integration of gender in both the design and implementation of a process to deal with the past:

1. Gender integration: Fully integrate gender into processes for dealing with the past
2. Process-orientation: Understand gender and dealing with the past as a process, not an event
3. Empowerment, participation, ownership and control: Prioritise victim ownership and control of process
4. Inclusivity: Be inclusive and accommodate complexity
5. Addressing structural obstacles: Recognise and redress structural obstacles to inclusion
6. Holistic approach: Respond to the whole victim and survivor
7. Giving voice and being heard: Honour individual stories
8. Macro analysis: Be attentive to the bigger picture
9. Equality and diversity: Value gender expertise and lived experience
10. Local and global learning: Craft bottom-up local responses that draw on international good practice.

The Principles are accompanied by two case studies that illustrate the nature of the issues faced by women affected by the conflict in the Northern Ireland. They demonstrate how deaths from the conflict led to multiple related harms from state and non-state actors. These include impoverishment, neglect, harassment and vulnerability to other abuses that affect the whole family, for whom the woman may now be the sole caregiver.

We argue that failure to recognise the whole story of harm will affect how a particular case is understood and addressed. We also argue that individual experiences are part of a wider narrative of the conflict. Without scrutiny and investigation of patterns and policies, such as the lack of investigation of killings and abuses, impunity,

media reporting, compensation policies, and the use of informers and agents, there is a greater risk of recurrence of these abuses in the future. Applying a gender lens brings individual experiences to bear in a wider process of acknowledgement, redress and building of the future.

A report on the consultation workshops carried out with bereaved women to inform the Gender Principles has been produced since they were launched. We have also advocated the adoption of the Principles throughout policy and approaches to dealing with the past by several key stakeholders in political and policy circles, such as the Department of Justice, the Victims Commissioner and the Victims and Survivors Service, political parties, the Northern Ireland Office and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. The advocacy work made clear the need to show how the principles could be translated into practice. Subsequently, we developed a further working document on implementation guidance for the structures envisaged in the SHA.

The implementation document recommends a series of measures including the establishment and resourcing of an oversight group to facilitate, support, monitor and oversee the integration of gender throughout the work of the SHA institutions. To give expression to the principles on empowerment, participation and inclusivity we recommend a provision for victims and survivors to make a single transferable statement that gathers as complete a picture as possible of victims' experiences, and can be used across the four institutions envisaged by the SHA. We believe this would enable victims and survivors to engage holistically with the proposed SHA institutions rather than deal with them separately, and would avoid victims and survivors having to tell their story repeatedly.

The single transferable statement would enable a fuller story of harm to emerge than has been possible to date, which could support the detection and investigation of specific gender harms. Such a victim-centred approach could potentially reverse a damaging pattern, whereby individuals have to respond to the requirements of official institutions for particular testimony in a legalistic framework that excludes some parts of the victim's story. Instead it facilitates the development of practice whereby the institution responds to the story of the person who has been harmed.

The document highlights the importance of multi-disciplinary investigation teams as another way of enabling victims and survivors to engage with the legacy institutions as integrated processes, rather than a series of institutions that they must adapt and fit into. This also brings a focus to the importance of gender expertise within the personnel appointed to the various institutions that make up the SHA legacy package.

The Gender Principles and our recommendations for implementing them are a blueprint for addressing the marginalisation of victims and survivors, both male and female. We believe they can create a more effective, inclusive and deeper process for dealing with the past.



Poster from The Detail infographic campaign, 'Future must be shared' (2015), to highlight major issues for conflict transformation in Northern Ireland © Allan Leonard licensed by CC BY-NC

From enemies to partners? Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

Dr Duncan Morrow

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early release of prisoners following the Belfast Agreement. He currently advises the Scottish Government on tackling Sectarianism and Hate Crime. He is the author of numerous reports, articles, chapters and studies and a regular contributor to public debate on peace and community relations issues.

Reconciliation in Northern Ireland ultimately describes the *possibility* that violent enemies in the past might have a future marked by partnership, civic equality and the rule of law – or even trust and friendship. In contrast to a negative 'absence of visible violence' or 'hostile truce', reconciliation carries a positive vision of sustainable peace as transformed political and social relationships. It involves a future-oriented commitment to good relations as well as drawing a line under the conflict and violence of the past.

In practice, reconciliation is only secure if linked to clear decisions, actions and gestures. Reconciliation is ultimately inseparable from the real-world decisions that respond to concrete challenges associated with addressing armed conflict, and which derive from fear, anger, resentment and discrimination. Yet how, and on what basis, can a bitter,

violent 'economy of action and reaction' between rivals for power, become a partnership based on cooperation and even forgiveness? What does transformation from violent conflict to reconciliation actually entail?

A reconciliatory approach to peace is inevitably experimental: reconciliation is always 'learning to do what we don't know how to do'. Reconciliation describes both a goal and a journey, and peace depends more on the learning and agreements that come from answers to material questions than on actions based on formulae. Bland and Powell suggest that four questions are particularly critical:

- Is the future each party seeks to present bearable or acceptable, and in which each can see their fundamental interests protected? (Shared futures)

- What practical steps do each party have to take to make agreed change a realistic possibility? (Trust and confidence)
- What changes have to be made to politics, society and economy to enable sustainable peace? (Justice and entitlements)
- How do all parties address and manage the losses of making peace? (Adjusting to loss).

What reconciliation *is* depends on time and place. At different times in the Northern Ireland peace process, reconciliation has required different emphases – from political and constitutional design, to the development of non-governmental organisation (NGO) practice and the requirement for disarmament and reintegration. There is also no specific answer to the question of *who* leads reconciliation. Since threat and risk can re-appear at any level of society, leadership emerges opportunistically and ultimately depends on organic (holistic) rather than mechanical (linear) top-down or bottom-up theories of change.

“ **A reconciliatory approach to peace is inevitably experimental: reconciliation is always ‘learning to do what we don’t know how to do’.** ”

Eventually reconciliation must come to characterise relations across the whole society. As South Africans learned, moving from enemies to partners can be modelled but never secured by a single event or person. The transformation of complex relationships has dimensions that require changes both between communities, and between communities and the state. The potential for abandoning the goal and returning to traditional antagonisms is considerable.

“No one can say his heart is altogether clean, his hands altogether pure. Thus, as we wish to be forgiven, let us forgive those who have sinned against us and ours: That was the beginning of American reconciliation, and it must be the beginning of Northern Ireland’s reconciliation.” *US President Bill Clinton, Belfast 1995*

Antagonism and reconciliation

Societies polarised by violent struggles over inter-group justice are marked by extreme sensitivity to compromises that might put group security at risk. Reconciliation *always* proceeds alongside the conviction that the enemy remains aggressive. In practice, progress is measured by the resilience of the impetus for change, despite persistent and deep-rooted popular anxieties.

The resilience of reconciliation in Northern Ireland stemmed from three primary sources:

- By the mid 1980s, both the UK and Ireland’s overriding interest was ending violence. This diplomatic alliance drew support from both the US and European Union (EU),

and for two decades generated a mostly persistent and resilient commitment to negotiation.

- The 1985 *Anglo-Irish Agreement* generated new priorities in public policy, including policing and education reforms, equality legislation and funding for grassroots activity. Increasingly, direct political authority over Northern Ireland from London (known as Direct Rule) was mediated through locally recruited bodies that were required to comply with principles of ethnic neutrality, equality, human rights and operational independence. This process produced new norms of equality of opportunity in employment and encouraged significant bottom-up innovation.
- By the mid 1990s, few inside Northern Ireland doubted that the military situation had reached a stalemate. Popular desire for an end to violence enabled a pragmatic, if uneven, process of negotiation, despite recurrent setbacks.

Despite this, obstacles to reconciliation remained deeply embedded. The ability of governments to act as sponsors for peace was profoundly compromised by their own historic roles in Ireland. For Republicans, British imperialism rather than Northern Irish Unionism was the historic enemy. British responsibility for security had included direct Army deployment in many Catholic-majority areas for 25 years, internment without trial, secret operations including the recruitment of agents, state killings, torture and breaches of human rights norms. Unionists, in contrast, felt under existential attack by Republican ‘terrorism’ and deeply resented the claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland outlined in the Irish Republic’s constitution.

Reconciliation as a shared goal also imposed starkly different risks and burdens on the leadership of asymmetric groups – government, Unionist and Nationalist. The potential for any step in the negotiation process to provoke resistance from one part of the population was ever-present. Maintaining balanced process while addressing asymmetric issues created risks throughout.

The potential for bottom-up activity to sustain momentum was compromised by the fact that it was almost entirely financed by inter-governmental funding. The capacity of NGOs to innovate, establish inter-community relationships and engage as many people as possible in promoting reconciliation was thus in part dependent on a top-down commitment to paying for it, as well as grassroots commitment to action. Funding meant that NGO engagement was able to expand rapidly into a wide range of areas, but the relative weakness of autonomous action left much of this vulnerable to changes in policy and resources.

Reconciliation in practice

The practical significance of reconciliation in Northern Ireland falls into four distinct phases:

Setting the tone (1985–97)

The division of citizens into antagonistic ethno-political groups had defined society and politics in Northern Ireland since the 1920s, and included separation in residence, education and leisure. For both Unionism and Republicanism, justice and sustainable peace could only be pursued through victory and political control. As violence escalated, reconciliation



was the preserve of isolated and politically inconsequential groups of activists. As polarisation deepened in the 1980s, inter-governmental partnership on security and stability gradually emerged as the only viable alternative to chaos and confrontation.

The *Anglo-Irish Agreement* concluded that 'diminishing divisions and achieving lasting peace and stability' and 'the need for continuing efforts to reconcile and to acknowledge the rights of the two major traditions' took precedence over territorial sovereignty or assumed support for sides.

Apart from a declared destination, however, the policy implications of reconciliation remained undefined. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) rejected the *Anglo-Irish Agreement*, while Unionists organised protests and a campaign of civil disobedience. The formal agreement did elicit American and European support through the establishment of an International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which prioritised economic growth and social cooperation – the exploration of reconciliation could now also be pursued through community action. The IFI and EU promotion of redevelopment as well as engagement and dialogue cultivated a bottom-up peace process engaging community activity and partnership. All of this contributed to a wider atmosphere of dynamic change.

However, this phase also saw a shift from the framing of reconciliation in the *Anglo-Irish Agreement* as a shared inter-governmental goal to one requiring all-party negotiations. While Unionist failure to block the Agreement ultimately led to further talks, both Governments were also convinced that dialogue with Republicans was necessary, conditional on the suspension of violence. A fragile ceasefire among the largest paramilitary organisations appeared to open the door.

External intervention also provided momentum: proposals by US Special Envoy for Northern Ireland Senator George Mitchell provided a path to overcome the impasse on disarmament that would enable both Unionists and Republicans to engage in

direct negotiations. The 'Mitchell Principles' – that paramilitary decommissioning was neither a prerequisite of negotiation nor dependent on the outcome of talks, but should proceed in parallel with them – created sufficient political room for the British and Irish governments to call for negotiations.

“ While the scale of constitutional agreement was unprecedented, aspirational commitments to reconciliation left questions of implementation unresolved. ”

Through the ups and downs of the negotiations that eventually produced the 1998 *Belfast Agreement*, reconciliation was the rhetorical device used to promote inter-community partnership. In parallel with attempts to kick-start the political process, the UK Government promoted community relations activity, integrated education and increased participation in communities, including by those with connections to paramilitary organisations. The Irish Government set up a Fund for Peace and Reconciliation and a Forum to encourage dialogue. With the approval of the two governments, the EU also established an enormous 'Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation' which focused on peacebuilding, social inclusion and restarting a conflict-affected economy.

1998: A Constitution for reconciliation?

The *Belfast Agreement* depended on establishing legitimacy for shared governance arrangements on the basis of a definitive end to violence, agreement on constitutional principles and institutions, and guarantees of citizen equality. The implicit retreat by all sides from incompatible assertions of cultural and territorial domination was reconfigured as a common aspiration to reconciliation. The Agreement committed to 'fostering agreement and reconciliation' and to 'removing

the causes of conflict, to overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions'. Parties identified specific areas where reconciliation has a particular contribution: in acknowledging and addressing the suffering of the victims of violence, in developing mutual understanding and respect between communities, and in promoting a culture of tolerance.

Despite its high aspirations, much of the Agreement lacked detail. While the scale of constitutional agreement was unprecedented, aspirational commitments to reconciliation left questions of implementation unresolved. This was perhaps essential, insofar as further attempts to establish commitments might well have come at the cost of delaying, or even preventing, the Agreement's completion. However, these were indeed serious omissions, given that they included core issues of disarmament, the timetable for implementing devolution, responsibility for past violence, the role of victims, the status of released prisoners, and content of future changes to policing, community relations and rights. Furthermore, in the ensuing referendum Sinn Féin sought support on the basis that the deal was temporary and 'transitional to a united Ireland', while the pro-Agreement Unionist leadership emphasised that it 'copper-fastened the Union' with Great Britain.

While responsibility for implementation lay in London and Dublin, the political heart of reconciliation depended on power sharing in a devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. Government was to be rigorously consociational, complete with mandatory coalition, separate designation of elected representatives, and a requirement for mutual consent and the potential for veto. Despite all of these safeguards it rapidly became clear that without the mediation of governments, politics in Northern Ireland very quickly dissolved into recrimination and the potential for renewed antagonism. Paradoxically, it was unclear whether the Agreement's core aspiration – reconciliation – could survive implementation of its primary political vehicle – devolved government, which was riddled with ambivalence over a shared future.

Rescuing reconciliation? (1998–2007)

Despite a referendum producing a 70 per cent domestic majority in favour of the Agreement, four uncertainties still obstructed implementation:

- There was no timetable for paramilitary disarmament and no agreement over who was responsible for delivery or what consequences would flow from failure.
- The Agreement provided no guidance on dealing with the legacy of violence. Victim suffering was acknowledged, but there was no recognition of responsibility, or clarity as to how this would be taken forward. Meanwhile paramilitary prisoners were released early, but their criminal records were not expunged.
- Policing reform was agreed in principle, but the outcome still depended on the deliberations of an international commission.
- Commitments to address profoundly contentious issues such as rights, community relations, equality, symbolism and culture remained undefined.

The absence of clarity over disarmament proved toxic to power sharing. In the context of increasingly bitter recrimination, the Assembly collapsed, and political leadership passed to anti-Agreement Unionists and Sinn Féin.

Under renewed direct rule from 2002–07, the Irish and British governments relied on a combination of public policy and civil society to maintain the momentum of reconciliation. For example, the Patten Commission report proposed root and branch reform of policing including a changed name, badge and uniform, an independent Police Ombudsman and a new focus on accountability, representativeness, community policing and human rights. These proposals gained the unequivocal support of the British, Irish and US governments as well as the backing of wider Irish nationalism, and eventual acquiescence of Unionists. Sinn Féin found itself increasingly isolated.

Alongside policing reform, London engaged directly with civic activists on policy change intended to promote reconciliation. Many activists, especially those working on projects supported by the various funding programmes, were anxious to see the principles developed in small-scale local projects applied across the full range of government services. After wide-ranging consultation with civil society and local government, far-reaching proposals to prioritise inter-community relations were launched in 2005 under the title *A Shared Future*, declaring that 'separate but equal is not an option' and that 'parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable, morally and economically'. The primary vehicle for translating this into practice was the €1 billion made available through the EU Special Support Fund for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE II) from 2000–04, and IFI. These explicitly supported civil society reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts in communities affected by violence and polarisation.

Inter-community partnership at grassroots and local government level, once largely confined to small-scale dialogue and initiatives on specific issues, expanded rapidly into a myriad of increasingly sophisticated and targeted projects. These included: investment in shared capital projects and strategic planning; support programmes for victims and survivors; systematic engagement with former prisoners and combatants from all sides; projects involving the police; human rights promotion; work in schools and with young people; economic regeneration; cross-border connections; and work to reduce tensions at interfaces or between churches.

Despite the political impasse, a significant consensus emerged on the conceptual core of reconciliation. Research by Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly identified five interrelated elements:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent, fair society.
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past, including mechanisms for justice, healing and restoration.
3. Building positive relationships following violent conflict.
4. Significant attitudinal change towards a culture of respect for human rights and differences.

5. Substantial social, economic and political change to address legitimate grievances, identified inequality and injustice.

The formulation's simplicity was striking, and it was immediately adopted by funding programmes.

Belated clarity about the content of reconciliation was, however, of much less immediate significance than the imperative of restoring self-government and ensuring the absence of violence. Realistically, the participation of anti-Agreement Unionists depended on the commitment to an end to IRA violence, and at minimum cost to traditional community antagonisms.

Indeed, reconciliation, with its holistic agenda and emphasis on integration, sharing and cooperation, ran almost entirely contrary to this short-run objective. At St Andrews in 2006, the Governments re-engineered the *Belfast Agreement* to further limit the content of partnership as a means to facilitate partnership in practice. The prerogative of ensuring a sustainable truce (containment) trumped aspirational transformation (reconciliation).

Peace without reconciliation? (2007–present)

Renewed devolved government in 2007 was the triumph of *realpolitik*. While images of mortal enemies sitting on the same sofa suggested transformation, devolution was in reality a carefully managed retreat. Inclusive government was established because the key parties concluded that any alternative was worse. For Sinn Féin, apparent concessions on policing and decommissioning were less important than evidence of political progress. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) concluded that leadership in devolved government on this basis was preferable to further concessions to Sinn Féin. Both parties assured their supporters that they had made no concessions on their mutually incompatible goals.

For governments, however, especially the British, the prospect of being divested of direct responsibility for Northern Ireland was the historic prize. The new realism rested on two assumptions: first, that the absence of violence was sufficient and urgent, whereas good relations were desirable but could be postponed; second, that while reconciliation was desirable, containment was *essential*.

If an aspiration to reconciliation had failed to secure the complete absence of violence, the new deal risked eliminating it without the prospect of underlying change. Over time, the strengths and weaknesses of this 'new realism' became obvious. The absence of any alternative to devolved government was clear, and violence on the old scale was contained. Reconciliation, however, was no longer a policy priority. Peace was now equated with the stability of the governing coalition. The first draft *Programme for Government*, launched in 2008 replaced the notion of 'a shared future' with 'a better future', and substituted economic prosperity for reconciliation as the primary policy goal. 'Sharing' clearly remained suspect in some political quarters, especially where it might impact upon political ideology or aspirations to traditional, exclusive national outcomes.

The result was an increasingly clear division between the cold peace on the ground and emphatic inter-governmental level insistence on reconciliation. The royal visit to Ireland in 2011 and the reciprocal Irish State visit to London in 2014 were designed to emphasise that both governments had now consigned Catholic-Protestant and post-imperial antagonism to history.

In Northern Ireland itself, however, inter-community government without reconciliation replaced permanent macro-crisis with recurrent mini-crisis. Between 2010 and 2015, disagreements over unresolved cultural and historic issues required formal talks over: devolution of policing and justice; flags, parades and the past; budgets; and paramilitarism. It was only the threat that a crisis over flags would spoil the international image of harmony at the 2013 G8 summit that forced Sinn Féin and the DUP to produce any formal commitment to implementing the policies outlined in *A Shared Future*.

With the help of recurrent intervention, the order of the day has been 'crisis-managed containment'. After recurrent periods of polarisation and paralysis, the peace of 2007 was loveless but intact, and violence has essentially been contained.

Reconciliation and peacebuilding

Reconciliation has played a crucial role in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Since it equates progress with a transformation of relationships, reconciliation cannot be defined by a single technique. It has, however, had many practical implications:

- Recalibrating ethno-national goals towards accommodation.
- Reframing constitutional reform to allow for flexible citizenship.
- Establishing core political norms and values such as equality, human rights, consent and self-determination.
- Insisting on non-violence and the rule of law in all political activities.
- Developing extensive grassroots experience and capacity for building inter-group relationships.
- Addressing injustice and violence in the past and present.
- Addressing socioeconomic injustice and inequality.

Although progress is hard to measure in the short term, a longer-term perspective shows real change. The redefinition of political progress away from victory towards transformation, and the generation of a framework for political inclusion and non-violence are significant successes, leaving a lasting legacy on the constitutional landscape. Change involved sustained top-down engagement and significant progress through legislation and grassroots activity. In consequence, Northern Ireland in 2016 is unrecognisable from the violence of 1985.

Much of this is also due to the action of civic organisations. At violent interfaces between traditionally hostile communities, locally led organisations have been mediating when tensions flare and on key cultural issues, planning for future shared action, and working closely with police and business. Youth

and schools groups pioneered programmes for young people across the community.

The attempt to make a radical transition has, however, also highlighted significant challenges and limits. Firstly, there is and was no shared narrative regarding the origins and nature of conflict. While reconciliation gave shape to the quality and goals of peacebuilding, the complex nature of relationships meant that in practice it was not to be 'achieved' through a single approach, but rather pursued in a variety of complex and inter-related dimensions.

“ Although progress is hard to measure in the short term, a longer-term perspective shows real change. ”

Secondly, reconciliation remains a profound challenge to the coherence of communities, which over time had developed in opposition and hostility. Ending inter-group antagonism disrupts the ritual, cultural and narrative order as well as prevailing political norms and vested interests. Both Unionism and Nationalism were premised on the necessity of dominance and the permanence of suspicion and vigilance. Resistance to reconciliation was very strong, especially where symbolic or cultural behaviour was challenged.

Thirdly, reconciliation requires a reckoning with power and violence in the past. The 1998 Agreement included no assessment of responsibility for past violence except to acknowledge its tragic consequences. Progress depended on contentious but ad hoc measures addressing emergent issues, including: early release for paramilitaries; financial and institutional support for victims and survivors; public inquiries into specific incidents; and the establishment of uncoordinated

investigatory opportunities by the Ombudsman and Police Historical Enquiries Team.

Meanwhile, both the court system and the police continued to operate under international obligations to investigate. An attempt by an independent group tasked with establishing a common approach in 2007, known as the Eames-Bradley report, came to grief over its suggestion of a recognition payment to acknowledge suffering. As late as 2015, the DUP and Sinn Féin agreed to continue in government without any deal on moving forward. Instead of providing a coherent framework or a set of principles, failure merely heightened the impression that the past was being denied and allowed to fester, rather than being faced and laid to rest.

Finally, commitments to reconciliation are subject to changes in the international order that produced negotiation. The Northern Irish settlement is increasingly at risk from constitutional turmoil in the UK, and the potential impact that withdrawal from the EU would have on British relationships with Ireland. The possibility that Scotland would exit the UK, and with it leave Northern Ireland as a geographical extension of an overwhelmingly English state, also represented a significant change in the structures that had led to the *Belfast Agreement*.

Reconciliation has provided a crucial direction for efforts to move away from violent conflict towards peaceful partnership, and this in turn shaped a wide variety of grassroots interventions. The recurrent crises of the political process and cultural disputes over historical issues, however, suggest that shared government has not yet made reconciliation the mutual destination; nor has it succeeded in prioritising reconciliation over traditional hostilities.