

[Michael Cox](#)

The lessons of Northern Ireland: foreword

Report

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➤ Foreword

My interest in Northern Ireland is rather personal. Against the advice of nearly everybody I then knew – except one very wild Scottish republican – I moved there to teach Politics at The Queen’s University at the very height of the Troubles in October 1972; and only left (rather reluctantly it has to be said) not long after the IRA had called its first cease fire in August 1994. Over that time at least three university colleagues were shot, a number of students murdered, I attended my fair share of funerals, and on quieter nights, I could even hear the sounds of gun battles bouncing off the hills that surrounded Belfast – albeit from the safety of my own middle class ghetto in leafy south Belfast. I did my bit, of course. I taught for two years in what was then known as the Long Kesh prison – this as a protest against internment. Much later I did my best in helping bring about reconciliation through the vehicle of the then nascent integrated school movement (my wife was the first Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education). But all to no avail. The troubles rumbled on like some permanent, incurable, stomach disease that never quite killed the patient.

Inevitably, the Troubles generated their own myths and truths, the most repeated of which was that because this most unique of conflicts was like no other, there was absolutely no chance of it ever coming to an end. Indeed, I have the most vivid memory of one debate at Queen’s soon after 1989 warning us more naïve souls not to expect too much change in ‘wee Ulster’. Whole economic orders might collapse in Eastern Europe. Walls might come tumbling down in faraway, distant Germany. But they would do no such thing in Belfast. And of course, in a way, they did not. Yet some form of peace was constructed, after a fashion: and though it has taken more than fifteen years to get to where we are today, the peace not only seems to be holding – just – but according to some in the commentariat, contains all sorts of meaningful lessons for other deeply divided societies at war with themselves.

It was to interrogate such views that I thought it worthwhile to bring together some of those who had helped make the peace, as well as many of those who had written intelligently about it since. The richness of our two days of deliberations at LSE IDEAS in spring 2011 can only be partially conveyed here in these brief and excellent contributions. But taken together they provide a flavour of the occasion; as well as an idea of how difficult it is to draw any simple lessons from what has happened in Northern Ireland since the 1990s. The conference was a memorable experience for me, and I hope for those who attended too. Made possible by the generosity of Dame Veronica Sutherland and The Airey Neave Foundation and of the LSE Annual Fund, the discussions were some of the best I have attended, tinged only by a sense of regret and sadness: regret that my old friend Fred Halliday who had died the year before (but had a unique insight into the Irish Question) could not be there; and sadness that Professor Paul Wilkinson – without whom the conference would never have been possible – passed away only a few months after it had been held. It is to their memories that this report is dedicated in deep appreciation.

Professor Michael Cox
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