

Northern Ireland is no country for old idealists but it is certainly a best practice case of consociational democracy and conflict regulation

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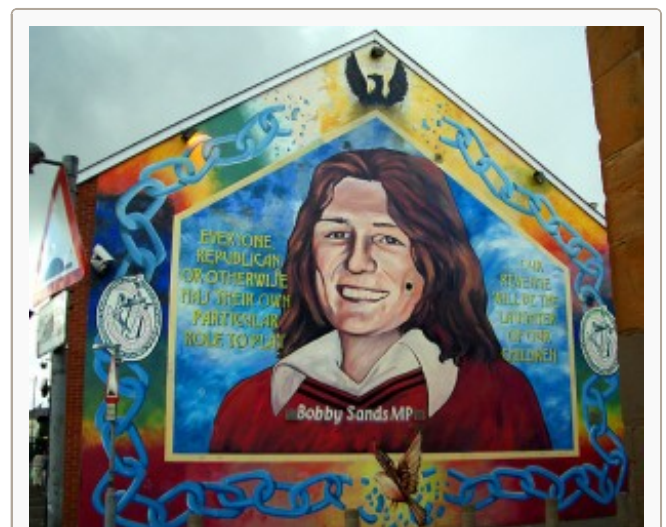
*This weekend marks the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, which saw 26 people shot by the British army while on a civil rights march in Derry. **Michael Kerr** finds that the Northern Ireland of today is governed with a remarkable degree of consensus and represents a best practice case of ethnic conflict regulation.*



Were he alive today, IRA hunger strike leader Bobby Sands would hardly approve of the radical transformation that Northern Ireland has experienced over the last decade or so. He held radical ideas about the future of this divided province, how direct rule from Westminster should be ended, and about how the six counties in question should be forcibly integrated into a revolutionary 32 county republic. This struggle led him to forsake his own life in defiance of a British state that both he and his jail mates loathed and misunderstood, and it also led him to be remembered. It is ironic, and perhaps a sign of the times, that the lives of both Bobby Sands as hunger striker and Margaret Thatcher as prime minister are being remembered on celluloid at this time.

Sands would have probably taken a favorable view of Steve McQueen's searing prison drama - *Hunger* – set during his standoff with Thatcher and detailing the last days of his life. This gripping and important piece of work depicts the uncompromising young martyr as the likable, charismatic ideologically driven extremist that he was. His violent death however, along with all the other victims of the troubles, achieved practically nothing. I use the word victim. This is how McQueen portrays Sands, forgiving both his self-destructive determinism and the pitiless brutality of his jailers.

In *Hunger*, the socialisation into conflict and violence by those who inhabit the Maze prison could not be more complete. The prisoners, guards, riot police and priests are all trapped in the same cycle of conflict: conflict not of their making; conflict without boundaries, conflict without compromise or release; conflict that creeps into every facet of everyday life. The film has an eerie sense of predictability about it; the actors on the grand stage that is the h-block prison each play out their roles with such functionality and fatalism that the perversity of the Northern Ireland Troubles appears banal – which of course it was for all those *who experienced it*. This was the part of Ireland that Sands lived, died, perhaps killed for, and remained stuck in until the end of his life.



Credit: PPCC Antifa

The present alternative to the 32 county republican, socialist Ireland, which was the ideal that Sands died for, rather than the political status IRA prisoners sought from the British, is no less radical. Today Northern Ireland is a society shared by nationalists, republicans, unionists, loyalists and

others. Although it remains deeply divided, comparatively speaking, Northern Ireland has come to represent something of a best practice case of ethnic conflict regulation.

Following the 1998 Belfast Agreement, the democratic, consociational model has been used to manage the rival national identities and conflicting aspirations of its two main communities. Although this has not fully resolved the troubles, it has successfully addressed the legacy of partition that led to both the outbreak of violence in 1969 and the Irish republican renaissance that Sands and colleagues Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and the recently deceased Brendan Hughes were at the very heart of. Some might take issue with the view that the hunger strikes achieved nothing, for they obviously led to the politicisation of Sinn Fein.

However, Sands' electoral victory and subsequent death were merely catalysts in a process of change that had its origins in the early 1970s and Adams and McGuinness knew this all too well. For they had once been young guns in a new IRA with an old leadership which, in the mid-1970s, had grasped that the British had no desire to stay in Northern Ireland and that politics was the only means by which they could advance their aspiration to unite Ireland.

Their formative political experiences were secret negotiations with the British. The first were with a Conservative government that sought a Provisional IRA ceasefire to help pave the way for a power-sharing agreement at the early stages of Northern Ireland's first peace process. The second were with a Labour government that sought to politicise Northern Ireland's republican and loyalist paramilitaries in tune with more radical leanings towards withdrawal or dominion status.

No doubt these engagements and their failure opened the young IRA leaders' eyes to the reality of what the British were actually doing in Northern Ireland. Sands and Hughes had no such experience and underwent no such political conversion. While Sands died for his political colleagues and their cause, Hughes lived to see them consolidate the Belfast Agreement with arch enemies the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and as a castaway from a republican movement in which he was once an icon.

Since then, Northern Ireland has been governed with a considerable degree of consensus, and under the leadership of the DUP and Sinn Fein a power-sharing executive has served a full term for the first time, avoiding the splits, suspensions and unconstitutional opposition that undermined previous governments. A remarkable success, the Belfast Agreement has led unionists to accept that there can be no return to majority rule and republicans to accept that Ireland cannot be united by force or without the consent of the majority community.

Equally importantly, both sides have come to accept that their conflict lies with each other rather than with the respective states that they do not want Northern Ireland to be a part of. The idea of power-sharing has been widely accepted in both communities; a culture of pluralism has been nurtured at many levels of a society which hitherto had practically no cross cutting cleavages. So much so, that all commentators now view an immediate return to violence as most unlikely. One explanation for the dissident republicans' failure to find significant support for their violent campaign against the detente between realist unionists and republicans, is that they have nothing more than the memory of the idealism of Sands and Hughes to go on.

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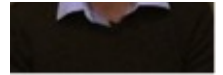
About the author

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