# Is the Northern Ireland Peace Process Flagging?

*Recent disturbances in Belfast naturally invite questions as to how this is grounded in a longer history of conflict within Northern Ireland. Jim Hughes explains how the current social strife is deeply rooted in the past but is also a product of profound changes, not least of all demographic, within the country.*

The conflict in Northern Ireland has been fought as intensely in the arena of symbolic power as in any other. Under the old Unionist Stormont Regime (1921-72) the Irish tricolour was never formally banned, but in practice there was little toleration of its public display. On grounds of "public order", Unionism limited displays of the tricolour to specifically catholic cultural domains and the catholic ghettos.

The assertion of Unionist hegemony could often assume crude forms, such as in the Divis Street riot during the General Election campaign of October 1964, one of the key trigger events leading up to the "Troubles" of 1969. It was sparked by the removal by police of a tricolour from the election office of an independent republican candidate in the Nationalist Falls area, which was classed as "provocative". It was an event which apparently radicalised Gerry Adams into joining Sinn Féin. The vote by Belfast City Council on 3 December 2012 to only fly the Union flag on 15 designated days during the year, in line with the practice of the Stormont Assembly and some other councils in the North, was a demonstration of how the balance of political power has been transformed over the years since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Nationalists wanted a total ban, but compromised on a centrist Alliance Party proposal. It marks a dramatic change to the policy of the last century by which the flag was displayed on top of the building 365 days a year.

Not surprisingly, it was an unwelcome reminder to protestants of their loss of hegemonic power, not only in Northern Ireland, but in its capital Belfast. The vote was followed by weeks of minor rioting and blockage protests in some working class areas of Belfast, and on an even smaller scale outside the city. For some commentators the disturbances suggest flagging protestant support for the Agreement. The affair, however, is more emblematic of deeper structural changes in society.



Credit: PPCC Antifa (Creative Commons)

Demography, or in local parlance "headcountery", is the pivot for power struggles in a divided society like Northern Ireland. The second 2011 census release occurred almost simultaneously with the loyalist disturbances in December. For the first time, the protestant community in Northern Ireland no longer has an overall majority. Of 1.8 million citizens, protestants account for 48 per cent (down from 53 per cent in 2001), catholics almost 46 per cent (up from 44 per cent in 2001), and the rest are either other religious minorities or atheists. For the first time, a question on national identity had been included, and it revealed that less than half the population (48 per cent) regarded themselves as "British" (and 40 per cent defined themselves as "British only"), while 29% labelled themselves as Northern Irish, and 28% as Irish. In Belfast, catholics now outnumber protestants by 49 per cent to 42 per cent. Furthermore the trend is for a growing catholic population while the protestant population is in decline and ageing. Northern Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe, and in every five year age group under 25 catholics are well over 50 per cent. Education, still overwhelmingly divided by religion, is increasingly dominated by the catholic secondary sector, and catholics are also in a large majority at the two universities in the North, with obvious implications for future upward social mobility.

The disturbances are not driven by deprivation. UK government statistics show that the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland are in Belfast, but they are catholic areas. Indeed, the most deprived areas at the start of the Troubles in 1969 are still the most deprived today, some forty odd years later. In addition to demography, we should add the radical shift in the political economy of Northern Ireland, and Belfast, over the last forty years. The decline of manufacturing, engineering, textiles (Belfast's last linen factory closed this week) and shipbuilding has undermined the privileged position of the protestant working class as part of the hegemonic "Unionist Family". Traditionally, the protestant working class was socially and politically disciplined by its class of foremen and skilled workers, its association with the police, local militias, and the British Army. These institutions provided leadership and role models. Their disappearance, coupled with inner-city redevelopment, has blighted the cohesion of the protestant working class, and the old authority figures and structures have been replaced by the rise of the paramilitaries during the conflict. Some, but not enough, of the loyalist paramilitary ex-prisoners have made the transition into community work and reconciliation projects. These are communities that have been politically marginalised due to the post-Agreement factionalisation and rise of class politics within Unionism, but mostly the marginalisation is social.

It is a paradox of the peace agreement in Northern Ireland that it has fostered inter-ethnic elite accommodation and cooperation (a form of consociational elite pact), while at least in the short term hardening the obstacles to a progressive social transformation from divided society to a more integrated one. The Agreement itself recognised that changing society was a critical element of political stabilisation, yet its content in this area was minimal and rhetorical. The institutional engineering focused on the minutiae of the governing institutions, security arrangements, and the relationships between the UK and Ireland.

Peacemaking and reconciliation was largely left to "civil society". This is a big business in Northern Ireland. By the time of the Belfast Agreement, according to official figures, there were approximately 5000 voluntary and community organisations alone in Northern Ireland, which provided employment to some 33,000 people – more than were employed in manufacturing. The income was in the hundreds of millions annually, most of which came from the EU's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland (currently in a "Peace III" iteration). The funding has created a somewhat parasitical private sector of professional "mediators" and academic consultants. Equally, this funding has helped to build community organisations and sustain economic life in working class ghettos, where funds are normally brokered and distributed usefully by political organizations and ex-paramilitary organizations (or both). Some of that work is being set back years by the current disturbances.

There is a general recognition that the two key pillars of structural social division are housing and education. Belfast experienced one of the largest ethnic cleansing episodes (up to 60,000 people, mainly catholics) in Europe between the end of World War Two and the collapse of communism. The British government's own research found that housing became more segregated throughout the conflict, a process that was formalised in public housing on security grounds by the government's own housing quango. By 2003 more than 70% of Housing Executive estates were more than 90% Protestant or more than 90% Roman Catholic. Similarly, school education in Northern Ireland is almost wholly segregated, with around only 6 per cent of students attending interdenominational schools (ie they are still schools with a religious ethos).

The UK government's *A Shared Future* consultation and policy aimed to address the structures of the divide, and was pushed during the interlude in 2003-05 when the Agreement was in crisis and its political institutions were temporarily suspended. The stated policy goal was normative: "a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society" and "interdependence". There was also, however a public management agenda to rationalise and reduce duplications in public expenditure. This approach was abandoned to achieve the St Andrew's Accord and the reestablishment of the power-sharing Executive in Northern Ireland in 2007. Similarly, the government "parked" the report of its Consultative Group on the Past in January 2009 which was supposed to recommend ways of dealing with "legacy" issues from the conflict, largely due to Unionist opposition.

It took almost three years for the new DUP-Sinn Féin Executive to produce its own policy on social

transformation in the *Programme For Cohesion, Sharing And Integration* (July 2010). It reflected a more pragmatic understanding of Northern Ireland's divided society, and stressed the practical tasks of creating shared and safe spaces through local community involvement. Its concern is with 'mutual accommodation', a perspective which is accepting of the ethnic divide, rather than the grand vision of 'reconciliation'. The local strategy is fundamentally opposed to Whitehall's *Shared Future,* reflecting the differences between bottom-up versus top-down solutions. One of the new Executive's strategic aims is to promote pride in an "intercultural society" but the critics of the Agreement, especially liberals, see the new concept as a "reification of 'cultures'".

The flag affair in Belfast reflects deep continuities and changes in Northern Ireland's society. The structure of the divide is at root a product of four centuries of colonial authoritarian social engineering. Only authoritarian social engineering can rapidly achieve the kind of social transformation aspired to by the critics of the Agreement. The demographic changes at work in Northern Ireland are having multiple knock-on effects in the divided society and in its multiple domains of segregation: relationships and marriage, work, culture, use of public services and facilities, public policy on welfare, health, education, and leisure, use of public transport, employment, shopping, and of course security. There is also the psychological frame with regard to mental mapping of territory, "ownership" and movement within public space, and calculations about identity, power, risk and the desirability of contact. Not surprisingly, some sections of the protestant community, in particular but not exclusively parts of its working class, have been discomfited by these structural changes not only because of the perceived threat to identity but also because of the shift towards more equitable power relations and the growing "presence" of catholics.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

**About the author**

**Jim Hughes** *is a professor of comparative politics at LSE and Director of the Conflict Research Group.*

**You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):**

1. Book Review: The Destructors: The Story of Northern Ireland's Lost Peace Process (65)
2. Bloody Sunday is almost universally recognised as 'unjustified and unjustifiable'. But lessons must be drawn for peace in Northern Ireland, and for counterinsurgency more generally (49.3)
3. Book Review: Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland (48.7)
4. Although political progress has been made in Northern Ireland, the polarisation of the communities still firmly exists (36.6)