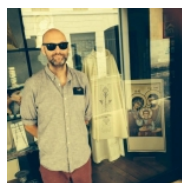


Why the Good Friday Agreement is on life support – and why hope still remains



The central support beams of the Good Friday Agreement — power-sharing and Europeanisation — have become so weakened that its sustainability is now under threat, explains [John Nagle](#). But there is still hope for recovery, and it rests with Northern Ireland's liberal younger generation.

April 10 2018 marked the 20th anniversary of the signing of the [Good Friday Agreement](#) (GFA). Few would begrudge the Agreement's central role in ending thirty years of violence that led to 3,700 deaths and approximately 100,000 injuries. Yet any urge to celebrate the GFA is tempered by the realisation that the GFA is currently experiencing a deep crisis. The very moorings on which the GFA rest are loosening. The power-sharing government lies in a [state of collapse](#) while [Brexit](#) puts into question the future security of the region. The GFA is on life support. It is at this moment of existential crisis that some reflection is required to remind us of its central features and why they have gradually become dangerously untethered.

The central support beams of the Agreement

The first and central support beam of the GFA is power-sharing between nationalists and unionists. The GFA forms an important part of a recent wave of divided societies falling under the influence of power-sharing. Such is the prevailing orthodoxy among the international community regarding power-sharing's propensity to build peaceful democracy, that it is used or prescribed for Bosnia, Lebanon, Burundi, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq.

Northern Ireland's power-sharing comprised innovative features to deal with the complexity of the conflict. [The institutions are liberal](#) – there are no seats or political positions reserved for specific groups, and executive places are distributed among parties based on their electoral performances. To accommodate the dual national character of the conflict, power-sharing initiated cross-border institutions. It further made provisions for the release of paramilitary prisoners, the reform of policing, human rights, victims, and paramilitary weapons decommissioning.

Second, the GFA is shaped by [the European Union's approach](#) to resolving territorial disputes. Conflict management is achieved through two steps. First, security is secured by affirming the territorial status quo, which requires member states to revoke territorial claims over neighbouring states. Second, states are required to recognise and promote the rights of their substate national minorities. In combination, these two aspects made it possible to soften borders to facilitate peaceful crossborder links between minority groups and their homeland. Thus, in the GFA, the Republic of Ireland swapped its constitutional claim over Northern Ireland for the North–South Institutions and the UK agreed to subscribe to minority rights protections.

These two central support beams – power-sharing and Europeanisation – have become unhinged and undermine the peace process as a result. Power-sharing presented the best option for peace but it came with a high risk. Power-sharing governments are notoriously prone to rewarding ethnic hardliners, exacerbating communal divisions and provoking policy paralysis. Northern Ireland's power-sharing suffered from a combination of these dynamics. Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangements were deliberately designed to be inclusive by capturing a broad spectrum of moderate and hardline parties. This it did, but the enterprise relied on maintaining the moderate wings of nationalism and unionism at the centre of power-sharing. These moderates would engage in elite level compromise that would eventually erode antagonistic communal divisions.

Why the agreement is under threat: the DUP/Sinn Fein axis

By 2003 a reverse situation came to fruition. The so-called hardline parties – the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein – stood as the leading factions of unionism and nationalism respectively. It is often said that the DUP and Sinn Fein's electoral dominance represents a triumph of the extremes but not for extremism. This [thesis](#) stresses how both parties combine moderation with robust policies defending their community's interests.

The DUP/Sinn Fein axis provided some welcome stability but such accommodation worked only as long as these parties reaped the benefits from a sectarian carve up of government. But neither parties could not resist being locked into zero-sum rather than collaborative politics. Instead of working together, the DUP and Sinn Fein defined their politics in binary terms as one of implacable opposition to each other. This divisive politics found particular expression in culture wars. Flags, symbols, parades, language rights and even same-sex marriage provided major battlelines for the DUP and Sinn Fein as human rights became [war by other means](#).

The mechanisms of power-sharing did not encourage cooperation and healthy governance. Rather than 'joined up' government, the system of allocating government ministerial portfolios allowed ministers to use their offices as party fiefdoms. The mandatory rather than voluntary system of executive coalition meant that government lacked any cohesive opposition bloc. The veto, designed to ensure that the interests of the respective communities would be protected, became a [blocking tool](#) that infected the system with policy logjam. Nor did power-sharing facilitate inclusion. Survey data demonstrates a significant [gender gap](#) with women less supportive for the power-sharing institutions, a situation that indicates women's disaffection with a lack of progress towards gender equality in areas such as reproductive choice. Legislation to introduce [same-sex marriage](#) was vetoed.

Why the agreement is under threat: Brexit

The Europeanisation of the GFA is jeopardised. In June 2016 the results of the EU referendum represented a victory for the Leave campaign. The voters of Northern Ireland overwhelmingly supported remain by a margin of [55.78% to 44.22%](#). Only the DUP of the major parties campaigned to leave. The GFA is inextricably entwined with the European project. It is secured via bilateral treaty relations between the UK and the Republic of Ireland and North–South institutions, all of which are facilitated by the UK and Ireland both being EU member states. The North–South institutions, in particular, are designed to facilitate relevant EU matters, including the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland, which has overseen the distribution of 1.3 billion Euros for peacebuilding projects.

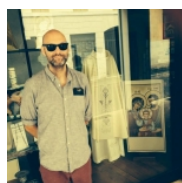
Brexit could result in a £300 million shortfall to Northern Ireland's budget. Of particular concern for future security, Brexit could see the possible return of a hard border – replete with customs and posts and security checkpoints – between the North and the South thus ending the common travel area between the two jurisdictions. The adverse effects of Brexit, therefore, are most likely to be felt in Northern Ireland. The threat Brexit poses to the GFA and even the peace process requires new and creative forms of political thinking to minimise the potential harm.

Is there hope?

The GFA may be flatlining but there remains optimism for recovery. In the past two decades the North has become an utterly transformed place. The ingrained residue of social and political conservatism running through Northern Ireland is being replaced by a more liberal and progressive younger generation. This cohort demonstrates strong support for LGBT and reproductive rights, for tackling sectarianism and racism, and ending segregation. Northern Ireland is historically seen as a place where leaders lead and followers follow. There now exists a fissure between the political elites and this generation. If the political instincts for survival remain strong among Northern Ireland's political class, they will need to demonstrate an imaginaire which sees the GFA not as a holding operation but as an instrument for societal transformation.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Parliamentary Affairs*.

About the Author



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