**Twenty Years After the Belfast Agreement**

Peter Shirlow

Twenty years after the Agreement with two names (Belfast and Good Friday) we have, following W.B Yeats, shifted from the intensity of the ‘great hatred’ but remain confined in the ‘little room’. Hatred remains but the daily drip of sectarian and state violence has lost flow. Northern Ireland is always located in discursive moments. Tussling as it does with the main narratives and tropes of identity. The Northern Ireland Assembly has been part success as much as it has been part failure. It has been brought down by various scandals and an inability to square circles. Up until the Assembly election of 2017, that was driven by the latest scandal and the cultural war, the Assembly had successful driven ethnic tribune voting while at the same time delivering a greater number of non-voters. The great divide was as much to do with orange and green as it was ethnic tribune versus a rejection of the politics of war by other means. The Agreement’s greatest achievement has been the removal of the gun from Irish politics which is a seismic shift from what was a wearied and predictable series of events.

It is that negation of pluralist thinking and the daily rows over the past, parading, language and resources that frames the management as opposed to transformation of Northern Ireland’s identity crises. There has been ‘little room’ for progressive, shared and future oriented inclusive politics. That near-removal of violence has stimulated, along with globalising trends, an increasing inter-generational diversity. It is those who endured the perniciousness of violence who vote and maintain the politics of ethnic tribune. But they are at odds with a younger generation who have ditched the abstract core of social conservatism and sectarian pre-occupation.

Older voters are supporters of devolution as they clearly vote to keep ‘their dog in the fight’. But the young have generally walked away. As the ESRC Northern Ireland election survey 2015 found some 74% of those aged 18-29 did not vote. Of these the vast majority were pro-choice, pro-mixed marriage and pro-equal marriage. The majority were self-described as Protestants and of these the bulk was pro-union but they did not accept the label nationalist or unionist. These young people embody the idea of a post-nationalist imagination as outlined in the Agreement given their detachment from the traditional labels of national identity. They have not been framed by the politics of devolution but have, through a reduction in violence, been able to explore across the sectarian divide. However, whether Catholic or Protestant they generally remain tied to the constitutional preferences of their parents. The border and its rootedness in identity and even post identity politics will at some point be measured in a border poll once nationalist and republicans out-vote unionists. The means of calling poll under-estimates the size of pro-union opinion and such a poll may have de-stabilising effects if pro-union non-voters engage and dent an over-confident project of Irish unification. We could at some point have the irony of a majority nationalist and republican Assembly located within the United Kingdom. Instability is written into the DNA of Northern Irish politics – it was ever thus. So at some point we could have a majority nationalist/republican Assembly in the United Kingdom held up by older voters with the most progressive and inclusive post-violence generation remaining disengaged, alienated and dissatisfied. Flann O’Brien’s point that ‘moderation, we find, is an extremely difficult thing to get in this country’ is partly true but a more apt rendition would be ‘moderation exists in wider society, but is an extremely difficult thing to get in the Assembly’.

As Brendan Murtagh shows within this special edition, politics and practice remains problematic as complex issues are dealt within ‘in preferential but inevitably partial ways’. He argues that community relations can serve little more than particularistic interests when it is not built upon principles of socio-economic cohesion. Therefore, the capacity to build out of ‘we’ as a mentality of groupness and into ‘us’ as an amalgamation of contested identities remains remote and potentially unachievable. The industry that is peace-building is, as Murtagh highlights, an amalgam of groups and bodies with ‘each working to different and often contradictory legitimacies and rationalities’. The fundamental flaw of on-the-ground processes that are state funded and asset providing is the replication of resource completion which is a form of conflict by other means. He contends that interface walls, which are to be removed by government policy, are understood as artefacts as opposed to socio-economic and cultural constructs and more importantly as physical entities that undermine capital and technology flows. Alas most policy making in Belfast and elsewhere functions best in places in which sectarian claims do not exist. That problem is exacerbated by academic and policy thinking which creates the idea that interface communities are read not as the product ‘of poverty, fatalism and alienation’ but as ‘the contours of a dysfunctional hinterland’. They should and need to be read as containing diverse identities and as ‘the out-workings of uneven growth and its evident inequalities’. As Murtagh indicates the local routines of power are shaded at times by paramilitarism, an issues that need to be addressed. The elevation of the DUP as government sponsor brought that more local angle to national attention.

John Nagle’s paper highlights how the experiment in devolution needs to take advantage of an emerging culture of conviviality and liberalism with it being ‘necessary for the elites to demonstrate an imaginaire which sees the Good Friday Agreement‘ not (as) a holding operation but as an instrument for societal transformation so that Northern Ireland truly merits the title of a ‘post–conflict’ society’. However, his paper concludes the precariousness of weak consociational institutions and the consequences of Brexit ‘risk stymieing and even reversing progress’. In a similar vein Shirlow’s paper challenges forms of victimhood that are blind to harm-causing by self. The victims and survivors of conflict have been treated shoddily and used for political expediency. Their use as political fodder is replete with reproducing the stale and unthinking narratives of conflict. The failure to create a framework of support and aftercare shows that harm caused remains relegated to the demand of contested political legitimacy.

Iris Murdoch’s contention ‘I think being a woman is like being Irish... Everyone says you're important and nice, but you take second place all the time’ is firmly grasped in Pierson’s account through which she explores how peace accords may bring ‘most public political violence’ to an end but ‘societal memory and glorification of this violence can last for generations’. That permeation of militarisation on society can impact upon normative ideals of male identity and dislocates women from inclusion in positions of power and ultimately influence. As Pierson’s work shows, the Agreement’s commitments ‘to women’s participation on paper, were not backed by any form of implementation mechanism’.

The conflict in Northern Ireland which is at heart a territorial conflict over constitutional positions cannot be resolved. Republicans will not be British and unionists will not shift their constitutional allegiance. But it can be transformed and in particular, as outlined in the Belfast Agreement, politics should embrace such divisions not merely as rights of nationhood but also as responsibilities of citizenship and mutual respect. The Agreement is a holding operation and at some point the constitutional position will be re-negotiated. In the meantime the political actors have a choice to make. They can maintain sectarianised identity politics and in so doing freeze the mobility of women and the socially disadvantaged for the sake of maintaining the conflict by other means. Or they can create a more enduring and sustaining legacy of conflict transformation embedded in justice, recovery and societal healing. What is an ultimate crisis for political actors in Northern Ireland is their need to persuade the ‘other’ side to aid the development of a post-conflict society which means addressing poverty and gender issues as much as anything else. Twenty years after the Agreement the language of political actors is that of the past with ‘little room’ for a language of shared futures.