

From the 'Long War' to the 'Long Peace': An introduction to the special edition

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Abstract

In this introduction, we set out to provide the appropriate historical context for the nine essays that follow. The article documents all of the tortuous course that the Northern Irish peace process has taken over the last two decades, but its principal focus falls on the period in which the previously unlikely pairing of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party agreed to share power at Stormont. While the coalition partners were often at odds over ethno-national issues such as flags and parades, they frequently found common cause when it came to the introduction of distinctly neoliberal social and economic strategies. The decade in which the two parties shared office seemed to offer the prospect, finally, of stable government in Northern Ireland. At the beginning of 2017, however, the tensions between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionists became insurmountable and led to the Stormont institutions being mothballed for a fifth time. Although often attributed to the introduction of a controversial green energy scheme in the six counties, the collapse of the power sharing executive owes its origins rather more to seismic political developments elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The outcome of the Brexit referendum has meant that Northern Ireland is now at the centre of a political storm that threatens/promises to usher in an era of radical constitutional change for the region.

Keywords

Brexit, ethno-nationalism, neoliberalism, power sharing

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Introduction

In recent decades, there have been multiple attempts to introduce the institutions of consociational governance in a range of settings where ethno-cultural divisions have given rise to sustained political violence. The context in which this experiment in cross-cultural power sharing is most often identified as having worked best is Northern Ireland (Fenton 2018: 3). The status of the Good Friday Agreement as ‘the brightest star in the new consociational universe’ (Taylor 2009: 7) was underlined at a gathering of the great and the good in Queen’s University Belfast held on 10 April 2018 to mark the 20th anniversary of the deal. Addressing a receptive audience in the Whitla Hall, Bill Clinton (2018) made the case that the design of the Northern Irish peace settlement had been crafted with sufficient skill that it would withstand the human error of those politicians who had been entrusted with putting it into practice. The Good Friday Agreement, the former US President insisted, should be acknowledged as ‘the work of genius that is applicable if you care at all about preserving democracy’. The lavish praise, often shading into hyperbole, that has perennially characterised international commentary on the Northern Irish peace process has, it should be said, no little basis in fact. Since the advent of the Good Friday Agreement, after all, incidents of politically motivated violence that were once an everyday reality of life in Northern Ireland have thankfully become more and more rare. According to one estimate, there are at present around 2,400 Northern Irish people who are alive and well but who would have long since been cold in the grave had the peace deal not materialised (McCaffery 2018). It is important to mark at the outset then that the single greatest achievement of the Good Friday Agreement has been ‘the removal of the gun from Irish politics’ (Shirlow 2018: 392).

While the praise that international commentators have frequently heaped on the Northern Irish political settlement has some grounding in fact it is also a product of the flattering distortions that can arise when viewing events from the safety of a comfortable distance. What sometimes appears to people living elsewhere as a seamless transition to peace has in reality been a remarkably arduous process that has entailed seemingly endless rounds of re-negotiation and that has seen the political institutions at Stormont suspended on no fewer than five occasions. The latest of these suspensions occurred in January 2017 when a visibly ailing Martin McGuinness announced that Sinn Féin was withdrawing from the power-sharing executive. All attempts to revive the Stormont assembly have subsequently come to nothing and consequently when the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement came around the devolved institutions that were supposed to be its principal achievement remained in a state of suspended animation. It was hardly surprising then that an event such as that hosted in Queen’s University Belfast that was no doubt originally conceived as a star studded celebration of two decades of the peace deal would in the end have a distinctly elegiac tone.

In the autumn of 1999, *Capital & Class* published a special edition devoted to a Good Friday Agreement that was at that stage barely a year old. The arrival of the 20th anniversary of the Northern Irish peace deal naturally prompted a great deal of reflection on its progress, or otherwise, and provided the rationale for the collection of 10 essays presented here. In the articles that follow, scholars working in different settings and writing from different academic disciplines set out to provide a critical and engaging profile of

Northern Ireland two decades on from the Good Friday Agreement. The essays gathered here underline the progress that has been made over the course of the peace process, with the emergence in the six counties of a society that is a great deal more multicultural than ever before and in which younger people are often able to explore more progressive and cosmopolitan cultural preferences than previous generations. The authors also seek, however, to illustrate the abiding stasis of a mainstream political culture that remains consumed with the competing ethno-national claims that animate the 'constitutional question'. We hope that this special edition will prove a worthy companion to its predecessor and will provide a radical and accessible profile of a society that has emerged from the traumas of its 'long war' only to endure the paralysis of its 'long peace'. In all likelihood, most readers will not be entirely familiar with the often dense narrative that has unfolded since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. It would be prudent then to begin the collection with a broad overview of the tortuous path that Northern Irish political history has taken over the last two decades.

Guns and government

While the Good Friday Agreement sought to deal with the 'totality of relationships' between the peoples of Ireland and Great Britain, its principal concern was of course to mend the historically troubled relations between the 'two traditions' often said to co-exist in Northern Ireland (Shirlow & Coulter 2007: 207–209). The peace deal made provision for institutions of government that would require unionists and nationalists to share power and responsibility with one another. Although the principle of consociationalism found favour among most shades of political opinion in Northern Ireland from the outset, it would nonetheless take almost a decade for the institutions envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement to begin operating in a manner that even appeared to be sustainable. The main initial obstacle to the formation of a stable power sharing government illustrated the facility of the peace deal to mean often radically different things to different people (O'Kane 2013: 516). In order to square the circle of at times mutually exclusive ethno-national demands, those who framed the Good Friday Agreement engaged in a certain 'constructive ambiguity' (Nagle 2018: 399). This particular attribute – and, perhaps, shortcoming – of the document was especially apparent in its provisions for the disposal of illegally held arms or 'decommissioning'.

While unionist politicians took the view that the Good Friday Agreement required republican (as well as loyalist) paramilitaries to dispose of their armouries, Sinn Féin tended to counter, entirely accurately as it happens, that the text of the deal merely required them to 'use any influence they may have' to persuade the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) to give up its arms. These radically divergent readings of one of the principal ambiguities at the heart of the peace settlement would haunt all of the initial attempts to establish power sharing government in Northern Ireland. On each occasion, the choreography of political failure would unfold in the same predictable manner: the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) would agree to enter government on the proviso that republicans would in the near future decommission their weapons (Aughey 2006: 129–130); Sinn Féin would also agree to form a government but insist that the Provisional IRA was under no obligation to put its arms beyond use and that unionist

demands that it do so were in fact prompted by a repugnance at the thought of sharing power with nationalists (Shirlow & Murtagh 2006: 43); finally, after a short interlude marked by intense bickering, unionists would note that republicans had failed to decommission and would then refuse to continue in government, precipitating its collapse. In the initial phase of the peace process, this sequence of mutual recrimination and political stalemate would be repeated on no fewer than four separate occasions (Tonge 2006: 200). By the time the last of these suspensions of the institutions of government occurred in October 2002, much of the initial enthusiasm for the peace process had dissipated and a palpable sense of political disillusionment had descended on Northern Ireland.

The dismal failure of the initial attempts to form sustainable power sharing government in Northern Ireland would initiate a process of polarisation between the 'two communities' that would in time, ironically, facilitate the cause of political progress in the region. The refusal of unionists to remain in power with republicans in the absence of 'decommissioning' served to alienate members of the nationalist community who came increasingly to see Sinn Féin as the party with the capacity to defend their interests most resolutely. At the same time, the refusal of the republican movement to dispose of their arms became a growing source of disquiet among unionists already sceptical towards the peace process and led them to see the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as the most effective bulwark against further concessions to nationalists (Nagle 2018: 401). The symbiotic interplay between these radicalising forces would become ever more apparent in electoral terms. In the early days of the peace process, Sinn Féin and the DUP were only the secondary political voices within their respective ethno-political communities. As each attempt to establish stable devolved government in Northern Ireland ran aground, however, these parties that had been previously dismissed as 'extremists' began to attract larger and more diverse bodies of support (Evans & Tonge 2009: 1016–1017). By the time of the 2003 elections to an assembly that was no longer sitting, Sinn Féin and DUP had clearly established themselves as the principal political forces within their respective communities and the years since have merely confirmed their electoral hegemony (O'Kane 2013: 527).

While the rise of these radically opposed parties often seemed to imperil the cause of political progress in Northern Ireland, it would in time prove to be its prerequisite. One of the problems that face 'moderate' political parties seeking to reach agreement in all divided societies is the prospect of being outflanked by more radical voices emanating from within their own communities. And that is precisely the fate that befell the UUP and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the course of the Northern Irish peace process. These parties were once the principal voices within the unionist and nationalist traditions but they were eclipsed as the wrangles over 'guns and government' rumbled on and the ongoing erosion of their electorate has left them facing the very real prospect of political extinction. The pressures that sent the UUP and SDLP into seemingly terminal decline were ones to which the parties that overtook them would remain largely immune. While both Sinn Féin and the DUP continue to face criticism from dissenting voices within their own communities, those political forces adopting more fundamentalist positions have never been able to garner sufficient support to mount a meaningful challenge. The immunity of both parties to 'ethnic outbidding' (O'Kane 2013: 526) would ensure that it was this combination of 'extremists' that would strike

the deal that would finally bring what, for a time at least, seemed like stable power sharing government to Northern Ireland.

If Sinn Féin and the DUP were to enter government with one another that would require a resolution of the 'decommissioning' issue that had bedevilled previous Stormont administrations. On 28 July 2005, the Provisional IRA announced that it had disbanded and destroyed its weaponry (Nagle 2018: 401). While the structures of the paramilitary organisation would remain in place and elements of its armoury would surface from time to time, the semblance of decommissioning was sufficient to remove the most fundamental obstacle in the path of Sinn Féin and the DUP reaching an accommodation. In October 2006, the British and Irish governments convened talks in the Scottish town of St Andrews aimed at the restoration of devolved government in the six counties. During the negotiations, Sinn Féin committed itself to supporting the recently reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), while the DUP agreed that it was willing to share power with republicans. The St Andrews Agreement that emerged out of the talks paved the way for the Northern Ireland assembly to begin operating again after a hiatus of 5 years. A fresh round of elections confirmed that Sinn Féin and the DUP would dominate the incoming executive and on 8 May 2007 the new coalition partners were unveiled before an audience of the global media. The presence of an unusually large contingent of international journalists in the Great Hall at Stormont was guaranteed by the prospect of witnessing the two principal positions in the restored Northern Ireland executive being filled by a pair of notoriously bitter erstwhile rivals. The spectacle of the Reverend Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness trading jokes and evidently enjoying one another's company simply beggared belief for anyone who remembered their mutual rancour when the conflict was still raging (Fenton 2018: 278). The combination of the most irascible voice of fundamentalist unionism and the former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA would have been unthinkable only a few years before. Nevertheless, this unlikely pairing would join forces to begin the most stable period of devolved government that Northern Ireland had enjoyed in more than 40 years.

Strange bedfellows

Those remarkable scenes that signalled the return of devolved power to Stormont created an afterglow that tended to overstate the degree of political progress that had actually been achieved in Northern Ireland. In the minds of people living elsewhere, in particular, the sight of Paisley and McGuinness evidently at ease with one another created an impression of stable government that would long outlast the relatively brief stretch of time that the pair actually spent in office with one another. The 'honeymoon period' (Nagle 2018: 405) enjoyed by the strange bedfellows heading the new coalition would, in fact, last barely a year. As the disgruntlement caused by his close personal relationship with the former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA grew within the grassroots of the DUP, Paisley's position as party leader became increasingly untenable. In June 2008, the ageing former firebrand was replaced by his long-standing political apprentice Peter Robinson. The promotion of this rather more taciturn figure would bring a distinctly cooler tone to relations between the parties of government at Stormont. And over time,

the various often emotive issues that inflame Northern Irish political life would, as we shall see shortly, test that already fragile relationship to the limit.

While the new coalition partners would often find themselves divided over matters of culture and identity, they would swiftly find common cause when it came to issues of social and economic policy. In the period between 2002 and 2007 when the Stormont institutions were suspended, the New Labour government had employed its restored powers to instal policies and institutions that had a distinctly neoliberal hue. Indeed, the first act of the Blair government after the restoration of direct rule was to extend the remit of the Private Finance Initiative in Northern Ireland (Hellowell et al. 2008: 9). This entailed the creation in 2003 of a Strategic Investment Board with the remit of securing private capital in the funding and execution of public infrastructural projects such as building schools and hospitals. The statutory agency would quickly expand the scale of its operations and by the time devolution was restored in Northern Ireland it had already established some 38 Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) collaborating on projects with a total value of £5.3 billion (Strategic Investment Board 2007: 8–9).

When the new coalition partners took office then they did so in a context where the Blair administration had placed social and economic policy in a distinctly neoliberal frame. As a party leaning to the right of the political spectrum, it was entirely predictable that the DUP would embrace this turn towards the marketisation of public goods. What was rather more surprising was the position that republicans adopted in government. Sinn Féin has traditionally styled itself as a ‘socialist’ party and hence might have been expected to set its face against the neoliberal agenda operationalised by Westminster. While in office, however, republicans would seem just as convinced as their unionist counterparts by the dogma that the untrammelled operation of the free market would pave the way for economic prosperity in Northern Ireland. This ‘unusual unanimity’ (Horgan & Gray 2012: 475) was keenly expressed in the unflinching support of the coalition partners for the Private Finance Initiative. In common with other regions of the United Kingdom, the Northern Irish experience has been that the creation of PPPs has not led to the savings on infrastructural projects that were promised and has in fact merely acted to direct huge volumes of public money into the coffers of private corporations (Nagle 2009: 183). The evidently dysfunctional nature of the Private Finance Initiative would serve little, however, to dampen the enthusiasm of Sinn Féin and the DUP for this quintessential neoliberal project. In 2017, the year that the coalition partners acrimoniously parted company, there remained no fewer than 31 PPPs in Northern Ireland with a total value of some £1.73 billion (Her Majesty’s Treasury 2017).

The commitment of both unionists and republicans in government to neoliberal strategies was also revealed in what often appeared to be the *one big idea* shared by the coalition partners. Over the course of a decade in power, Sinn Féin and the DUP consistently took the line that the Northern Irish economy was being held back by the relatively high level of corporation tax set by Westminster for the United Kingdom as whole. If the Stormont assembly were given the relevant fiscal powers, it would be able to lower the rate to 12.5% to match that of the Irish Republic, a country that in proportionate terms has attracted 20 times more foreign direct investment over recent decades (Smyth & Cebulla 2008: 180). Given the opportunity to operate on a level playing field, the argument went, Northern Ireland would have the chance to compete with its neighbour and

in time perhaps even to replicate its success in luring multinational capital. While the simple logic of their own argument was clearly pleasing to the coalition partners, there were few others who found their keynote economic strategy quite as convincing. The financial consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers, for instance, argued that the proposed cuts in corporation tax were unlikely to induce much greater levels of foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland, counsel that was echoed in the findings of the Stormont assembly's own research team (Horgan & Gray 2012: 475). The parties in government were, however, content to ignore advice that was widely available in house and out, electing instead to cling to the comforting fiction that the 'magic bullet' (O'Hearn 2008: 112) of yet more tax breaks for multinational capital would pave the way to economic recovery.

While the coalition partners would often find common cause on matters of social and economic policy, they were of course altogether less likely to see eye to eye on those issues that are the more traditional fare of Northern Irish political life. On 3 December 2012, Belfast City Councillors met to consider a key element of the cultural symbolism of the building in which they were sitting. A motion from the largest party, Sinn Féin, was placed before the council proposing that the Union flag would no longer be flown constantly over City Hall and would instead appear only on 18 designated days, bringing it into line with public buildings elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The decision of the centre ground Alliance Party to support the motion tipped the balance in its favour, allowing it to pass by a margin of 29 votes to 21 (McDonald 2012). As the council reached its controversial decision, there were violent scenes outside City Hall as a large gathering of unionist protestors, drawn in part by 40,000 leaflets distributed by both the DUP and UUP (Nolan et al. 2014: 9), vented their anger and clashed with riot police. This would prove to be the first of many heated demonstrations against the new policy adopted by Belfast City Council. Over the next 4 months, there were almost 3,000 separate 'occurrences' (Nolan et al. 2014) in which predominantly young working class men from unionist backgrounds took to the streets to air their grievances. It was apparent from the outset that the flag protests had tapped into a deeper well of anger within those loyalist neighbourhoods that had never enjoyed the 'peace dividend' of economic prosperity promised when the Good Friday Agreement was signed. By the time the disturbances ran out of momentum in the spring of 2013, 411 people had been processed for alleged criminal offences and 160 officers had been injured in a policing operation costing £22 million (Nolan et al. 2014: 10).

The febrile mood within sections of the unionist community manifested in the flag protests would find further expression a few months later when the Orange marching season reached its annual climax. In previous years, a bitter and seemingly intractable dispute had developed over a parade from Ligoniel Orange Lodge passing the edge of the republican Ardoyne district on its way to and from the Twelfth of July celebrations. In the summer of 2012, a ruling by the Parades Commission that the Orange Order would be allowed to follow this contested route provoked widespread anger among republicans. As the loyalist bandsmen returned past Ardoyne, there were sustained scenes of violence as the police came under attack from often very young males who seemed in part at least to be under the influence of local dissident republican figures. The rioting that scarred the summer of 2012 would prompt the Parades Commission to reach a compromise

ruling the following year. While the Ligoniel Orange Lodge would be allowed to pass the shops that fringe Ardoyne early on the morning of the Twelfth of July, they would not be granted permission to return via the same route. The decision was greeted with indignation by the Orange Order and, coming quick on the heels of the decision to restrict the flying of the Union flag over Belfast City Hall, fed into a growing sense among many working class unionists that they were the casualties of an escalating 'culture war' (Halliday & Ferguson 2016: 527). On the evening of 12 July 2013, when members of the Ligoniel Orange Lodge sought to return along their 'traditional' route, they were stopped by a heavily fortified police line on Twaddell Avenue, on one side of the roundabout that informally marks the sectarian interface with Ardoyne on the other. What followed, inevitably, was a sustained and at times frenzied assault on the PSNI that continued long into the night. Amid dramatic scenes, one indelible image of a young loyalist brandishing an Ulster flag being propelled by water cannon from the bonnet of a police land rover would become a favourite of news agencies around the world (Moriarty 2013).

The anger that the Orange Order and its supporters vented on several occasions would, however, prove insufficient to persuade the authorities to change their minds. As it became ever more apparent that the Ligoniel Orange Lodge would not be allowed to process north along the Crumlin Road and past Ardoyne, a permanent camp was established on Twaddell Avenue to highlight what was cast as an abuse of human rights. While set up to illustrate the indomitable will of those supporting the 'right to march', the ragged encampment in plain view of the other side of the sectarian interface instead became a daily reminder of this latest abject defeat for the loyalist cause. Over time, wiser counsel would prevail and the Orange Order would come eventually to the realisation that a resolution of the dispute would require negotiation with representatives from Ardoyne. Protracted discussions with the Crumlin Ardoyne Residents' Association, a body closely associated with Sinn Féin, would eventually lead to an honourable compromise for both parties. The deal would ensure that early on the morning of Saturday 1 October 2016, the Ligoniel Orange Order was allowed to process north past the row of shops that marks the edge of Ardoyne, completing a journey that it had begun more than 3 years earlier.

The flags dispute and the ongoing controversy over Orange parades in north Belfast would place even greater pressure on the already strained relations between the coalition partners at Stormont. Throughout the course of 2013, Sinn Féin and the DUP found themselves increasingly at loggerheads and it seemed for a time that there was a danger that the government might fall. In an effort to avoid that eventuality, the Obama administration sent Dr Richard Haass and Professor Meghan O'Sullivan to Belfast in the autumn to negotiate talks among the five main local parties. The pair would spend more than 3 months overseeing intense negotiations designed to break the impasse on issues concerning flags, parades and how to deal with Northern Ireland's troubled past. As with many before them, the efforts of Haass and O'Sullivan to broker a deal between the local parties would come to nothing. On New Year's Eve 2013, it was announced that no agreement had been reached on the outstanding issues and the two US diplomatic figures who had chaired the discussions prepared for their flights home (BBC News 2013).

The tensions simmering within the Stormont executive over matters such as flags and parades would be compounded by an issue rather less familiar to Northern Irish political life. One of the keynote policies of the coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal

Democrats formed after the 2010 Westminster elections was a radical overhaul of the UK's social welfare system. The Welfare Reform Act passed 2 years later would see the elimination of certain crucial forms of social security and the advent of various bureaucratic procedures designed to prevent claimants from accessing their entitlements. In view of the high levels of dependency on disability allowance in particular in Northern Ireland, it was widely anticipated that the region would be the one most severely affected by era of 'welfare reform' (Beatty & Fothergill 2013). Issues of social security are among those devolved to the Stormont assembly and hence there was the prospect at least that the six counties might be spared the introduction of the new draconian regime (Tomlinson 2016: 105). The Westminster government made it clear from the outset, however, that the Welfare Reform Act was to operate throughout the entire United Kingdom and that it was prepared to use financial sanctions to ensure that outcome.

The new era of 'welfare reform' would shed light on the very different ideological profiles of the two main partners in government in Northern Ireland. As a party very much to the right of the political spectrum, the DUP was only too willing to implement the changes in social security provision demanded by Westminster. The advent of the Welfare Reform Act would, however, draw a rather different response from Sinn Féin. The proposed cuts in crucial forms of social security were anathema to a party that claimed to be 'socialist' and that had emerged from some of those poor neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland that would be most dramatically affected by the changes. Accordingly, when initial proposals for the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act were brought to the Stormont executive, the response of Sinn Féin Ministers was to reject them out of hand. As this latest impasse between the coalition partners showed little sign of resolution, the Westminster authorities began to act on their threats of financial sanctions. In the fiscal year 2014–2015, for instance, the British government reduced the block grant to Northern Ireland by some £87 million (Tomlinson 2016: 107). With the prospect of even greater reductions in the near future, the republicans in government in Belfast would begin to revise their previously implacable opposition to 'welfare reform'.

When the Stormont assembly resumed after the 2014 summer recess, it was apparent that the Northern Ireland executive now faced a sequence of challenges that threatened its very future. Not only were Sinn Féin and the DUP required to deal with the controversies over flags and parades that are the traditional staples of local politics, they were now confronted with the rather less familiar class issues arising out of Westminster's demands for 'welfare reform'. As the threat grew of government grinding to a halt in Northern Ireland, the British Secretary of State Theresa Villiers and Irish Foreign Secretary Charlie Flanagan convened another round of talks in the grounds of the Stormont estate in September 2014. Eleven weeks of negotiation would on this occasion prove sufficient for the local parties to strike a deal. Agreed in November 2014 and published the following month, the Stormont House Agreement would address some of those ethno-national disputes that were threatening the political stability of Northern Ireland. The text of the deal allowed for the creation of a Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition and raised the prospect of powers for regulating parades being devolved to the Stormont assembly. In addition, the agreement marked some progress in the critical and neglected area of dealing with Northern Ireland's violent past. The terms of the deal specified the creation of a Historical Investigations Unit to examine unsolved

deaths from the Troubles and the establishment of an oral history archive giving ordinary people the opportunity to record their experiences of the conflict.

While the Stormont House Agreement dealt with those ethno-national preoccupations with which Northern Ireland has become synonymous, it also addressed certain 'bread and butter' matters that are less frequently the substance of political life in the region. Indeed, what was perhaps most significant about the document was that for the first time since the outbreak of the Troubles a political deal had been brokered in the six counties that placed class issues up front and centre. The first section of the Stormont House Agreement was, significantly, one addressing issues of 'finance and welfare'. In signing the deal, the local parties committed themselves to cutting both social security ('welfare changes') and jobs in the state sector ('public sector reform and restructuring'). While the text of the agreement required the Westminster government to provide an additional £2 billion in funding for Northern Ireland, that sum would in all likelihood have been quickly overtaken by the reductions in public spending envisaged elsewhere in the document.

The advent of the Stormont House Agreement meant then that both of the principal parties were now committed – the DUP in principle, Sinn Féin in practice – to the introduction of social security cuts that would have a devastating impact on the poorest sections of one of the United Kingdom's poorest regions. This common purpose would become apparent at a meeting of the Stormont executive in January 2015 when the coalition partners joined forces to vote through a budget allowing for 'welfare reform' (Gilligan 2016: 42). The conversion of Sinn Féin to the neoliberal course dictated by Westminster would inevitably create political headaches for the republican leadership. In the early months of 2015, the party would find itself in the unaccustomed position of being outflanked by its main electoral rival the SDLP which had adopted a more radical and consistent position on the issue of welfare cuts. More significantly perhaps, the apparent 'neoliberal turn' (Nagle 2018: 404) on the part of the Sinn Féin leadership inevitably generated concern among rank and file republicans. The disquiet aired at the party's *Ard Fheis* held in Derry would appear to have persuaded the republican leadership to have another change of heart. On 9 March 2015, 2 days after the Sinn Féin annual conference ended, the Stormont assembly met to consider the extension of the Welfare Reform Act to Northern Ireland. When it came time to vote on the proposed legislation, the republicans in the chamber astonished their coalition partners by opposing the bill (Gilligan 2016: 42). Amid a welter of mutual recrimination, the fault-lines within the Northern Ireland executive became even more apparent than before. The already fractious relationship between Sinn Féin and the DUP would soon become more perilous still when the return of political violence to the streets of Northern Ireland begged fundamental questions of the nature and the status of the peace process.

On 5 May 2015, Gerard 'Jock' Davison was murdered in the Markets area of inner city Belfast. A former commander in the Provisional IRA, Davison was said to have been involved in that organisation's campaign of violence against drug dealers and was alleged to have given the order leading to the infamously brutal murder of Robert McCartney in a city centre bar 10 years earlier. Given his status as a senior republican, it was always likely that Davison's murder would lead to retaliation and so it was to prove. On 12 August 2015, Kevin McGuigan was shot dead outside his home in the republican Short

Strand district of east Belfast. A former IRA volunteer who had once worked closely with Davison in the republican front group Direct Action Against Drugs, McGuigan had fallen out with his erstwhile comrade and was alleged to have murdered him in a contract killing ordered by local criminals (McDonald 2015). Although the individuals responsible for the death of Kevin McGuigan have yet to be brought to justice, all available intelligence pointed to them being members of the Provisional IRA (Fenton 2018: 92). The very real possibility that members of the republican movement had carried out the murder represented perhaps the greatest challenge that the Northern Irish executive had faced to date. When the DUP had agreed to enter government with Sinn Féin, it had done so on the assumption that the Provisional IRA had disbanded and decommissioned its weapons. Events in the summer of 2015 would, however, confirm the widespread suspicion that the structures of the paramilitary organisation were still intact and that it retained the capacity for occasional acts of violence. It was simply untenable that the DUP would continue in power with Sinn Féin if it were established that the latter's armed wing remained in existence. Once the authorities attributed the death of Kevin McGuigan to the Provisional IRA, therefore, it seemed there was little prospect that the coalition partners could remain in office together. As the Stormont executive teetered on the brink of collapse once more, the British Secretary of State Theresa Villiers convened yet another round of talks between the local parties.

The urgency of the situation in which the party negotiators found themselves this time around would appear to have concentrated minds to good effect. The fresh round of discussions that began in September 2015 would reach what seemed to be a successful conclusion 2 months later. In view of events the previous summer, it was inevitable that the agreed text that emerged from the negotiations would concentrate largely on dealing with the activities of paramilitary organisations. The signatories of *A Fresh Start* reaffirmed their commitment to the Mitchell Principles on the pursuit of political goals through purely non-violent means. For its part, the British government signalled greater seriousness of purpose in dealing with the remnants of organised violence in Northern Ireland. Westminster pledged to spend some £160 million over the next 5 years to improve security in general and £25 million to combat paramilitary groupings in particular. The text of *A Fresh Start* also provided for the implementation of several commitments made in the Stormont House Agreement signed only a year before. In particular, the new deal committed all of the parties once more to the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act, with £585 million of existing funds available to the Stormont executive being made available to ameliorate its initial impact. Mindful of the previous failure of the Stormont assembly to implement 'welfare reform', those who framed *A Fresh Start* were unwilling to leave matters to chance on this occasion. The new deal required that when it came to the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act the Stormont institutions would in this instance cede their legislative powers to Westminster. On 18 November 2015, the Northern Ireland assembly duly voted by a margin of 70–22 to allow to this to happen. Five days later, the British parliament passed the relevant legislation and the era of 'welfare reform' became a baleful reality for hundreds of thousands of people living in the six counties.

While the agreement that emerged from Northern Ireland's latest political crisis would promise *A Fresh Start*, the rather more likely outcome would be more of the same.

With 'welfare reform' in place and a public pledge to the use of purely peaceful political means reaffirmed, Sinn Féin and the DUP were now in a position to resume their duopoly of power in the six counties. The assembly elections held in May 2016 confirmed once more the political dominance of the coalition partners. In the last election before the number of members returned to the assembly fell from 108 to 90, the DUP secured 38 seats and Sinn Féin 28. While the headline figures in the 2016 assembly election evidently augured well for the two parties, there were, however, certain underlying trends that might have given them pause for thought. One of these was that the latest poll had confirmed a long running trend of falling voter turnout. In 2016, a mere 55% of those entitled to vote actually did so, a full 15% lower than in the first assembly election held after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement 18 years earlier. The decline in voter turnout in recent years would seem to have had a somewhat greater impact on the two main nationalist parties. Over the course of the current decade, there have been signs of decline in the overall nationalist vote and the 2016 assembly elections saw a 'significant dip' (O'Leary 2018b: 227) in the first preferences secured by both Sinn Féin and the SDLP. While most of this decline is likely to reflect the forms of apathy what were always likely to emerge over time as the power sharing experiment bedded down (Murtagh & Shirlow 2012: 59), it might also reflect the kindling of political alternatives to the competing ethno-national agendas that have traditionally dominated Northern Irish political life. An important development during the 2016 elections was the emergence of the People Before Profit Alliance as a small but credible electoral force providing a radical critique of the austerity measures administered by Sinn Féin in particular under the guise of 'welfare reform'. The left wing grouping emerged with two seats, even managing to top the poll in the republican citadel of west Belfast. For the first time since the outbreak of The Troubles, the Stormont assembly would feature political figures whose principal designation would be neither 'unionist' nor 'nationalist' but 'socialist'.

While voter apathy and the challenge of a nascent Left opposition may have given some concern to republican strategists, the outcome of the 2016 assembly elections would nonetheless be one that overwhelmingly confirmed the political status quo in Northern Ireland. When Sinn Féin and the DUP renewed their vows as coalition partners, the likelihood was that they would put their recent troubles behind them and spend the next 5 years colluding once more in the 'sectarian carve up' (Nagle 2018: 403) that has routinely passed for governance during the peace process. As it turned out, the new Stormont executive would in fact last a mere 8 months. While the latest collapse of the devolved institutions would be widely attributed to a local political scandal, its origins might more accurately be traced to questionable political developments elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Constitutional chaos

On 9 January 2017, deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness cut a frail figure as he informed journalists gathered at Stormont that he was resigning from the post. The ostensible cause of this latest crisis in Northern Ireland's power sharing experiment was what had originally seemed a fairly innocuous project to encourage the use of more environmentally friendly energy sources. Under the terms of the Renewable Heating

Incentive (RHI) scheme, homeowners and businesses that moved away from burning fossil fuels were given £1.60 for every £1 spent on alternatives. In effect, therefore, some people in Northern Ireland were actually being paid to heat their homes and premises, prompting the project to be renamed 'cash for ash'. The politician who had introduced the RHI scheme was Arlene Foster during her stint in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. In December 2015, Foster had taken over as leader of the DUP and the following month assumed the position of First Minister, replacing Peter Robinson who had moved aside after a sequence of scandals in relation to his personal and business affairs. This elevation ensured that when the RHI controversy broke in earnest it would reach the very highest levels of government in Northern Ireland. In the closing weeks of 2016, stories began to surface of canny farmers heating empty barns in order to avail of 'cash for ash' and estimates suggested that the total cost of the scheme might eventually amount to as much as £490 million (Nagle 2018: 408). As the scandal gathered momentum, Sinn Féin demanded that the DUP leader should stand aside temporarily to allow an investigation into the operation of the RHI. While her predecessor, Peter Robinson, had agreed to such a move in 2010 when alleged financial improprieties associated with his wife threatened his credibility as First Minister, Foster refused to countenance stepping down, claiming it was not for republicans to dictate who headed her party (O'Leary 2018b: 230). On 19 December 2016, the DUP leader survived a vote of no confidence in the assembly and when Stormont broke for Christmas the future of the power sharing executive once more seemed in considerable doubt. The dramatic announcement that Martin McGuinness would make early in the New Year would of course bring a certain clarity to proceedings.

The dominant narrative surrounding the most recent collapse of power sharing in Northern Ireland tends to lay the blame squarely at the feet of a RHI scheme that over time created insurmountable divisions between the two main parties of government at Stormont. This version of events certainly contains an element of truth but it fails to tell the whole story. While republicans managed to pin the entire blame for the 'cash for ash' scandal on their partners in government, they too played an important supporting role in the evolution of the controversial green energy scheme. The period that Michelle O'Neill served as Minister for Agriculture would, for instance, see her department organise no fewer than 58 separate meetings promoting the opportunities of the RHI scheme to an evidently receptive farming community (BBC News 2017). In addition, the current ongoing public inquiry into the controversial green energy project has unearthed correspondence indicating that the prominent south Belfast MLA Máirtín Ó Muilleoir actively lobbied for its deadline to be extended (McBride 2018). The track record of certain key figures in Sinn Féin – and not least that of the future leader of the party in the Stormont assembly – indicates then that republicans were not in fact opposed to the 'cash for ash' scheme for much of its period in existence and suggests that their subsequent vehement objections to the project owed rather less to political principle than to political opportunism. In order to understand the dramatic, and largely forgotten, change of heart that overtook republicans in relation to the RHI scheme, we need to leave behind all those lurid tales of boilers running all night in empty barns in rural Northern Ireland and turn our attention instead towards rather more seismic developments elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

On 23 June 2016, a slim majority of UK voters took the historic decision to leave the European Union (EU). While the discussions that preceded the Brexit referendum rarely mentioned Northern Ireland and most people (56%) living there actually voted to remain EU citizens (Fenton 2018: 226, 259–265), it would soon become apparent that the six counties would be the region most gravely affected by this dramatic political development. The increasingly fraught negotiations between the UK government and the EU authorities have raised the very real prospect of the return of a fortified frontier on the island of Ireland. A border that had long since become invisible because of the peace process might once more be marked by customs posts and fortifications reminiscent of the dark days of The Troubles. The prospect of a ‘hard Brexit’ has inevitably served to radicalise opinion across the breadth of nationalist Ireland. A border that barely registered in mainstream political debate previously has now become a ‘live issue’ (Fenton 2018: 247), and support for a united Ireland that only recently appeared at an ‘all time low’ (Nagle 2012: 23) suddenly seems to be gaining ground (O’Leary 2018b: 233–239). While republicans played little role in the debates that preceded the referendum on EU membership, they have been the principal beneficiaries of its outcome. In the climate of ever more favourable ideological flux summoned by the Brexit vote, Sinn Féin has clearly decided to adopt a more radical political strategy that has manifested itself not least in the adoption of a more abrasive tone when dealing with its erstwhile partners in government at Stormont.

One of the more remarkable features of the decade in which Sinn Féin shared power with the DUP was that it often appeared to be the former that was a great deal more committed to making the relationship work. A republican movement that had for a quarter century engaged in ‘armed struggle’ in order to destroy the institutions of government in Northern Ireland now seemed to be willing to go to great lengths to ensure their healthy functioning. This commitment to the peace process was embodied most obviously in the most senior republican figure serving in the Stormont executive. It often appeared that deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness was on a personal mission to reach out to the unionist community. The most resonant of the many gestures of reconciliation that the Derry republican would make came in June 2012 when he greeted Queen Elizabeth II in public for the first time in the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. Few images summed up more vividly the progress that Northern Ireland appeared to have made during the peace process than that of the former Chief of Staff of the Provisional IRA sharing pleasantries with the head of the House of Windsor (Nagle 2018: 405). These remarkable gestures towards healing the wounds of the past would not always, however, play well within the wider republican community. Over time, there was a growing feeling among elements within Sinn Féin that the party had become too accommodating in its dealings with an often abrasive DUP, a conciliatory disposition that came to be dismissed in some quarters as ‘Project Martin’. In the changed ideological circumstances summoned by the Brexit referendum, the republican leadership would apparently come to decide that the climate was right to adopt a rather more aggressive political strategy (Fenton 2018: 290). In a meeting held in the Felons’ Club in west Belfast on 7 January 2017 and addressed by then Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, there was rapturous applause when the call came to ‘bring the [Stormont] institutions down now’ (Rowan 2017). The first public intimation of the new republican strategy would come just 2 days later. In

announcing his resignation as deputy First Minister, an ailing Martin McGuinness was also signalling the end of the project of reconciliation he had sustained over the previous decade. While the republican movement had in effect side lined its most revered figure, the advent of this palace coup was concealed by the Derry veteran's deteriorating health which required him to withdraw from front line politics and which would lead to his death a mere 2 months later.

The more belligerent republican strategy unveiled in the Felons' Club would become apparent in the run up to the 2 March 2017 assembly elections necessitated by the recent collapse of the Stormont executive. On this occasion, Sinn Féin would reverse its previous losses, gaining almost 60,000 votes and coming within 1,300 of becoming the largest party in Northern Ireland. In terms of seats gained, the existing gap of 10 between the former coalition partners had been whittled down to just one and for the first time ever a Stormont assembly had been returned without a unionist majority. The sectarian logic of Northern Irish political life would inevitably mean that the electoral success of Sinn Féin would invite a response from the other ethno-national bloc. The Westminster elections held in June 2017 had the feeling of a proxy border poll in the context of Northern Ireland. While Sinn Féin would gain 15,000 more votes than last time out, this creditable performance was eclipsed by the more substantial advances made by their main political rivals. The DUP would gain almost 70,000 votes and secure 10 Westminster seats, allowing the party to enter a controversial 'confidence and supply' arrangement that would see the Conservatives remain in power in return for £1.5 billion in new funding for Northern Ireland (Fenton 2018: 307).

The outcome of the pair of elections held 3 months apart in 2017 did not seem to augur well for the prospect of political progress in Northern Ireland. Both of the main political parties had been amply rewarded by the electorate for their belligerent disposition towards one another and that tone would carry over into subsequent negotiations between them. In the period since the last Westminster election, the British and Irish governments have initiated yet more rounds of talks between Sinn Féin and the DUP. What has emerged as the largest bone of contention in these discussions is the repeated call of republicans for the introduction of an Irish language act. This demand represents in part a matter of principle. While Irish is the first language of only one in every 400 people in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2012: 17), it has nonetheless a genuinely widespread symbolic significance throughout the nationalist community. The call for an Irish language act should also be seen, however, as an astute strategic calculation on the part of republican negotiators. According to Dr Richard Haass, when he convened talks in Northern Ireland in the closing months of 2013, linguistic issues ranked as only a 'tertiary' concern for the Sinn Féin negotiation team (Manley 2017). The recent promotion of the Irish language to the top of the republican agenda represents in part an acknowledgement that demands for its introduction play well with a nationalist audience not least because they constantly bring out the worst in the unionists sitting across the table. One of the moments that accelerated the collapse of the last power sharing government was when DUP Minister for Communities Paul Givan decided to withdraw £50,000 in funding from *Líofa*, an organisation that brings children from deprived neighbourhoods to the Gaeltacht to improve their Irish (O'Leary 2018b: 230). The transparent spitefulness of this act evidently touched a nerve

within a nationalist community whose mood was hardly improved when First Minister Arlene Foster commented subsequently that to give further grants to Irish language groups was to 'feed the crocodile'. Ever since that gaffe, the issue of Irish has assumed an even more heightened figurative power for nationalists, symbolising as it does the cultural pride even of those who do not speak the language and summoning as it does the worst cultural prejudices of political unionism. A party as astute as Sinn Féin was unlikely to fail to spot the suddenly even greater political capital flowing from agitation for an Irish language act and it came as little surprise then that the call for its introduction would emerge as the principal 'red line' issue for republicans during the negotiations convened since the collapse of the Stormont executive.

In the opening weeks of 2018, it appeared once again that Sinn Féin and the DUP might finally be on the verge of resolving their political differences and striking a deal that would allow the restoration of the devolved institutions. Media speculation reached fever pitch on Monday 12 February when the British Prime Minister and the Irish Taoiseach arrived in Belfast in what appeared to be an omen of imminent political progress. Both Theresa May and Leo Varadkar would, however, leave Stormont empty handed. Two days later, the DUP leader Arlene Foster announced that the finalised political deal that journalists believed to exist had only ever been a draft document and that this had now been rejected by her party. In a series of increasingly heated exchanges, Sinn Féin countered that the text under discussion was in fact a final agreement and that their prospective partners in government had now reneged upon it. All of the detail that would emerge subsequently appeared to bear out the version of events provided by republicans (Moriarty & Leahy 2018). This latest setback in the Northern Irish peace process apparently owed its origins to shifts in the balance of power within the principal party of unionism that occurred after the Westminster elections the year before. The DUP team at Stormont seemed willing to sign off on a political agreement that would see the creation of language acts for both Irish and Ulster Scots, a symmetry that was designed to conceal the fact that Arlene Foster was now effectively going back on her previous insistence that there would be no 'stand alone' legislation for the Irish language. This deal was vetoed, however, by the party's 10 MPs at Westminster, a grouping whose power had grown substantially since the 'confidence and supply' agreement made with the Conservatives the previous summer (Fenton 2018: 321). With a seemingly feasible agreement now dead in the water and relations between the two main parties once more in a state of disrepair, Northern Ireland has again returned to its accustomed condition of political stalemate. At the time of writing, September 2018, the prospect of political progress in the region appears distant and any future settlement will almost certainly have to wait until the current chaotic negotiations between the United Kingdom and the EU finally reach their conclusion.

Conclusion: crossroads and roundabouts

Recounting the events that have unfolded over the 20 years of the Northern Irish peace process reveals, therefore, a remarkable degree of political paralysis. Time and again, the shifting balance of power among the parties in the region has given rise to attempts to redraw the political settlement in ways that invariably serve narrow

ethno-national interests but almost never the wider public good. On each occasion that these renegotiations take place, it is said that Northern Ireland stands one more at a crossroads. A more appropriate metaphor would be one that acknowledges that the place more often feels like it is forever circumnavigating a roundabout. The eternal recurrence of the same that typifies Northern Irish political life would of course be shattered by the outcome of the Brexit referendum. Writing in 2014 to mark the 20th anniversary of the paramilitary ceasefires that were a critical staging post in the peace process, we argued that the quintessential feature of Northern Ireland was its 'in-betweenness', existing both on the outer margins of the British state and on the very edge of the field of vision of its Irish counterpart (Shirlow & Coulter 2014: 717–719). Things look altogether different, however, on the other side of the Brexit vote. While the region retains much of its liminal quality it also finds itself suddenly at the eye of a constitutional storm that threatens to engulf the entire EU (O'Leary 2018a: 325). In this current period of quite remarkable political chaos, the future of Northern Ireland appears much less certain than it did only a couple of years ago. It is entirely plausible that in the not too distant future the region will operate beyond the current parameters of the Good Friday Agreement and even, perhaps, beyond the existing boundaries of the United Kingdom (Shirlow 2018: 394).

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