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Northern Ireland 25 years after the Good Friday Agreement: an introduction to the special issue

Colin Coulter[a] and Peter Shirlow[b]

[a]Department of Sociology, Maynooth University, Kildare, Ireland; [b]Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

In this introduction, we set up a theme that runs through the special issue. There are, we suggest, two dominant readings of the Northern Irish peace process – one 'liberal,' the other 'nationalist' – that see the region in the process of becoming a multicultural (neo)liberal democracy, albeit in different constitutional settings. The teleogical nature of these perspectives means, however, that they fail to grasp what is perhaps the most essential characteristic of contemporary Northern Irish society, namely its liminality. If we are to understand the true nature of post-conflict Northern Ireland, it is imperative, we contest, to grasp its quintessential 'inbetweenness.'

Introduction

On 10 April 1998, a political deal was struck bringing to a close three decades of political conflict in Northern Ireland – often designated by the euphemism 'the Troubles' – that had claimed more than 3,700 lives. At its heart, the Belfast, or Good Friday, Agreement was an attempt to resolve the differences between the region's two principal ethnonational communities which are conventionally distinguished as Catholic and Protestant, respectively, in their religious affiliation, Irish and British in their cultural orientation, and nationalist (pro-united Ireland) and unionist (pro-United Kingdom) in their political aspiration. The peace deal provided for the creation of a new devolved assembly located at the old seat of power at Stormont in east Belfast that would be headed by an executive comprising representatives from each of the 'two communities' and in which 'key decisions' could only be made with the simultaneous assent of both nationalist and unionist politicians. These consociational arrangements – familiar from other settings where ethnic division had led to political violence – would in time produce some rather unusual political alliances. Certainly the most memorable was forged in May 2007 when Martin McGuinness and the Reverend Ian Paisley were unveiled to the world's media as the next leaders of Northern Ireland (Coulter & Murray, 2008, p. 12). The sight of the former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA and the erstwhile

embodiment of unionist fundamentalism trading jokes and evidently enjoying each other's company was one that simply beggared belief for anyone who remembered their mutual enmity during the Troubles. That evident rapport between the previously implacable foes provided an instant metaphor for the political reconciliation assumed to be happening in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it gave the impression, especially to those living elsewhere, that rather more political progress had occurred in the region than was, in fact, the case.

In the quarter century since it was signed, the Belfast Agreement has been celebrated time and again by a host of global political figures. The political deal struck between all but one of Northern Ireland's parties – Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party had originally opposed it – is widely regarded as a model for how to share power and resolve divisions in societies with sharp ethnonational fissures. Indeed, as Taylor has noted, the Good Friday Agreement has come to be seen as 'the brightest star in the new consociational universe.' The reverence in which Northern Ireland's peace deal is held was evinced most clearly at a stellar event hosted at Queen's University Belfast in the spring of 2018 to mark its twentieth anniversary. Although the power-sharing institutions that are its centrepiece were not in fact functioning at the time, Bill Clinton was still moved to tell a captive audience that the Good Friday Agreement represents no less than 'the work of genius that's applicable if you care at all about preserving democracy' (Coulter et al., 2021, p. 1).

The ardent praise of the former US President might be taken as emblematic of the hugely enthusiastic – and profoundly teleological – reading that has come to dominate discussion of Northern Ireland's peace deal, among those based outside the region at least. The most prevalent interpretation among international commentators is that the Belfast Agreement was crafted with sufficient skill that it will withstand the human error of those politicians charged with bringing its provisions to fruition. Given its status as 'a work of genius,' the Northern Irish peace deal will, in time, allow the region to transcend the horrors of its recent past and to move inexorably towards a future in which the institutions for which it provides will allow existing political identities to be respected and, eventually perhaps, new political identities to emerge. That political stability will, inevitably, prepare the ground for an economic prosperity that will in turn copper-fasten the peace process. As MacGinty (2008) has noted, those strategies of peace-making that have held sway over recent decades tend to be both liberal in their politics and *neo*liberal in their economics. The counsel that privatising public services and cutting corporation tax will revive the flagging Northern Irish economy has, predictably, proved deeply persuasive to local politicians who often seem incapable of agreeing on anything else (Coulter, 2014, 2019).

The discourse that has dominated discussion of the Belfast Agreement from the outset is, therefore, one that sees Northern Ireland moving slowly, but inevitably, towards its telos as a stable, multicultural polity and prosperous, neoliberal economy. More recently, another reading has gained ground that sees a rather similar future for the region but, significantly, places it in an altogether different constitutional context. The origins of this second interpretation of Northern Ireland's future might be traced, inevitably, to the most seismic regional political moment that has occurred in the twenty-five years since the peace deal was signed. The historic decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union had potentially graver repercussions for Northern

Ireland than any other region of the state (Boyle et al., 2018). In particular, the outcome of the June 2016 Brexit referendum raised the spectre of a return to a 'hard' border on the island of Ireland.

That prospect evidently inflamed and galvanised many Irish nationalists who came to issue an ever more cogent and vocal demand for constitutional change. The civil society group *Ireland's Future*, for instance, was formed to make the case for a 'border poll' for which the Good Friday Agreement allows but about which it provides little practical detail (Ireland's Future, 2019). Those who advocate constitutional change emphasise that Irish reunification would enable the residents of Northern Ireland both to become EU citizens once more and to enjoy the benefits of a southern economy which – according to conventional metrics and especially if only experienced second hand (Coulter & Arqueros-Fernández, 2020) – appears to be booming (Ireland's Future, 2021). They also underline that the process of demographic change at work during the peace process – the 2021 Census recorded more Catholics than Protestants in Northern Ireland for the first time ever – has strengthened the case for a 'border poll'. While nationalist commentators are at pains to avoid the suggestion that 'demography is destiny' they often appear to proceed on precisely that basis, with frequent claims that the emergence of Catholics as the largest minority in the region means that – in the words of one prominent campaigner (DeSouza, 2023) – 'the tide is turning' in favour of a united Ireland.

The mainstream discussion of the course that Northern Ireland has followed during the peace process has, therefore, been dominated by a pair of readings – one 'liberal,' the other 'nationalist' – that see the region heading towards a broadly similar future, albeit in different constitutional settings. Both interpretations envisage that Northern Ireland will evolve towards becoming a stable, multicultural, (neo)liberal democracy, but only the former allows that it can, or will, continue to exist as a distinct political entity. While the two readings set out here certainly enjoy widespread currency, we would suggest that they are profoundly flawed due, specifically, to their teleological nature. Both the 'liberal' and the 'nationalist' interpretations of recent Northern Irish history presume that the region is moving inexorably towards destinations which are, of course, ideologically convenient for their advocates.

The current cultural and political realities of the region are, however, rather more complicated, and contradictory, than that. As the essays in this special issue will illustrate, it is ever more apparent that Northern Ireland is not in fact moving inexorably from one state of being to another bur rather seems destined to exist perennially somewhere in between. If we are to understand the region, we need to acknowledge from the outset its quintessential liminality, what Declan Long (2017, p. x) has termed adroitly its 'disconcerting, backwards-and-forwards post-Troubles reality.' Hence, we will begin our discussion by examining four distinct, but connected, aspects of the 'inbetweenness' that pervades and defines Northern Ireland twenty-five years after the Good Friday Agreement.

Between the past and the future

One of the principal challenges facing Northern Ireland at the outset of the peace process was how to deal with its own violent recent history. The Belfast Agreement would,

however, provide remarkably little guidance in this particular regard. The text of the peace accord[1] opens with an explicit acknowledgement that the Troubles entailed many 'tragedies' that have 'left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering.' It soon becomes apparent, however, that those who signed the Good Friday Agreement were unwilling, or unable at least, to deal with the multiple traumas arising from three decades of political violence. The myriad atrocities and fatalities that marked the Troubles are consigned in the document to 'the past', a discrete historical period evidently assumed to be separated by a firewall from that under construction in a society intent on making 'a fresh start'. Those who designed the Belfast Agreement were evidently keen to bring about the 'cauterisation' (Graham, 2005, p. 568) of Northern Ireland's recent violent history and, in doing so, allow its people to 'move on' to a more stable and peaceful future. That ambition would ensure that there has never been a comprehensive 'truth and reconciliation' process in the region. There have, of course, been several prominent public tribunals into major atrocities that occurred during the conflict, primarily those committed by the security forces. The most critical case in point was the Saville Inquiry into the deaths of fourteen nationalist civilians in Derry in January 1972 at the hands of British paratroopers. That investigation into the events on 'Bloody Sunday' prompted the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron to issue an unprecedented apology for the actions of state forces which were, he told the House of Commons in June 2010, 'unjustified and unjustifiable' (McDonald et al., 2010).

There has been a series of further public inquiries into critical events during the Troubles but there has yet to be a more systematic attempt to deal with the complex legacies of that baleful period. The closest that Northern Ireland has come to such a 'truth and reconciliation' process was in January 2009 when a report penned by Episcopalian Archbishop Robin Eames and former Catholic priest Denis Bradley recommended payments to close relatives of those who had been killed during the conflict (Consultative Group on the Past, 2009). The endless wrangles between nationalist and unionist politicians over who should qualify for the status of 'victim' would, however, ensure that their recommendations were put on ice. While successive UK governments have often seemed distinctly reticent about dealing with the complex 'legacy issues' arising from the Troubles, the current Conservative administration clearly intends to be rather more decisive on the matter.

As we complete this special issue, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill is nearing the end of its journey through the UK parliament. The legislation would provide an amnesty for those convicted of offences during the conflict who cooperate with a proposed truth-recovery body and appears motivated primarily by the desire to protect former British military personnel from what their supporters often term 'vexatious' attempts at prosecution. Although the reticence of previous British governments about dealing with the past certainly exacerbated the traumas of the Troubles period, the more decisive approach of the current incarnation has proved even more damaging. The legislation currently wending its way through Westminster has managed the unlikely achievement of uniting *all* shades of political opinion in Northern Ireland in outrage at the prospect that those who committed (certain, though not necessarily all) acts of violence may never face prosecution (BBC News, 2023).

The ongoing controversy that surrounds the UK government's legacy bill reminds us that for all that Northern Ireland has 'moved on' it remains very firmly in the shadow of

its own dark recent history. The complex legacies of the Troubles are examined closely in two of the essays that feature in this special issue. In his contribution, Niall Gilmartin relates the stories of those who were forced from their homes at the beginning of the conflict. Drawing on interviews with those who were displaced, Gilmartin underscores that the traumas of their experiences remain palpable even half a century on. Those who were 'burnt out' in the early, cataclysmic years of the Troubles, he suggests, continue to have a sense of 'ontological insecurity.' They have, in other words, no place to call home.

In their article, Eimear Rosato and Patricia Lundy focus on a rather different way in which the past continues to play itself out in present-day Northern Ireland. One of the abiding controversies of the peace process has centred on how we should remember those who were victims of violence during the Troubles and, in particular, those who were its agents. The very public row that ignited in June 2023 over the decision of Sinn Féin MP John Finucane to address a memorial for dead republican combatants in South Armagh underlines that the issue of commemoration remains a very sensitive one in Northern Ireland. In their essay, Rosato and Lundy consider the politics of memory in the very specific context of Ardoyne, the working-class Catholic community in North Belfast that was perhaps the one most deeply affected by the Troubles. The authors adopt a longitudinal approach, examining commemorative projects that have unfolded at different points in time across the quarter century since the Belfast Agreement was signed. These undertakings reveal the deeply contested nature of memorialisation, with disputes arising over who should be remembered, how they should be remembered, and, even, where they should be remembered. In mapping out these tensions, the authors offer a sense of how commemoration alters over time and how these changes reflect shifts in how the wider community experiences and perceives the peace process.

Taken together, this pair of articles serves to illuminate the profoundly liminal nature of Northern Ireland as we mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Belfast Agreement. While the peace accord offered the prospect of a 'fresh start,' it has become increasingly apparent that the people of the region remain largely unable to 'move on' from their violent recent history. The events of the Troubles, as Gilmartin intimates, continue to haunt those who lived through those dark times, and perhaps even those who were born after the conflict drew ostensibly to a close. A growing body of work, after all, suggests that there is widespread intergenerational trauma in Northern Ireland, impacting most directly on the children of those who were bereaved during the conflict (Tomlinson, 2016). The invariably doleful influence of the past is evinced further, as Rosato and Lundy illustrate, in the seemingly endless controversies surrounding acts of commemoration, especially of those who were combatants during the Troubles. These recurrent and sharply divisive debates around the politics of memory underline that while Northern Irish society has made many valiant efforts to leave its violent past behind, it remains subject nonetheless to its gravitational pull. Northern Ireland is a place, in other words, that exists in a profound state of liminality. It is a society that remains trapped somewhere between its actual past and its putative future, a region that is no longer at war but even now does not quite feel quite at peace with itself.

Between 'dual ethnocracy' and multicultural democracy

In the minds of its many admirers, the Belfast Agreement would allow Northern Ireland to follow a more progressive political course, one that would see it evolve towards what are often assumed to be European 'norms.' The architecture of the peace accord would afford 'parity of esteem' to the 'two communities' in the region and, in so doing, create the stability to ensure that the dark days of the Troubles would never return. As the institutions matured and peace normalised, perhaps the issues and fault lines that had hitherto dominated Northern Irish political life could even begin to dissolve. It might be possible that political identities would emerge to challenge those of nationalism and unionism, or that political imperatives other than 'the border' might move to the centre of public life. The course that Northern Ireland has followed since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement has not, however, quite been that envisaged by its numerous influential supporters.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that those who claimed the Belfast Agreement would see an end to violence have been almost entirely vindicated. In the quarter-century since it was signed, there have been just 164 'security-related deaths' (Mitchell, 2023) and more than 2,400 people are alive in Northern Ireland who would be cold in the ground if it were not for the peace deal (McCaffery, 2018).[2] There are, of course, those with ambitions to rehearse the violence and intimidation that were so commonplace during the Troubles. Small 'dissident' republican factions still seek to kill members of the security forces, with attacks often targeting officers from Catholic backgrounds. And loyalist paramilitary organisations continue with their criminal empires almost thirty years on from declaring ceasefires which were supposed to signal their demise. While these groupings are clearly an insidious presence in contemporary Northern Irish society, they lack the capacity or support to represent, under current conditions at least, a genuine threat to the peace process, their sporadic outrages nostalgic simulations of the more wholesale violence that occurred in a previous era many of them are too young to remember (Coulter et al., 2021, pp. 5–6).

While the violence of the Troubles era has all but disappeared, it is worth remembering that the divisions and animosities that often fuelled it remain deeply embedded in Northern Ireland. The segregation that still defines Northern Irish society is most vividly apparent in the region's school system. At present, only one in fourteen children attend 'integrated' schools designed to educate pupils from both of the principal ethnonational traditions and, indeed, beyond (Department of Education, Northern Ireland, 2022). The distinctions between the 'two communities' in Northern Ireland are further illustrated in patterns of residential segregation that are especially stark in the region's capital. In his article, Théo Leschevin draws on doctoral research conducted in adjacent nationalist and unionist communities in North Belfast. He explains that the interfaces between these neighbourhoods have in recent years been the site of pre-organised sectarian gang fights among young people. While the persistence, perhaps even escalation, of such moments of violence at 'peace lines' might seem counter-intuitive in the era of the Good Friday Agreement, Leschevin argues that they are in fact, ironically, a product precisely of the forms of heightened cross-communal interaction that the peace process has allowed.

It is critical to underline that the patterns of segregation and violence that Leschevin documents are intimately connected to matters of social class. The 'peace lines' that are an enduring feature of the Belfast landscape only exist in working-class districts of the city. Those poor neighbourhoods bore the brunt of the violence of the Troubles and were promised that the end of the conflict would signal a time of prosperity. However, as Flaherty and McAuley detail in their article, that long awaited 'peace dividend' has yet to materialise. Drawing on a range of quantitative sources, they illustrate that the socio-economic divisions in Northern Irish society have, if anything, become even more pronounced in the period since the Belfast Agreement was signed. The introduction of the controversial Welfare Reform Act to Northern Ireland in 2016, in particular, served to sharpen the material inequalities in the region (Coulter, 2019). In a society with only 1.9 million people who were promised that peace would be the prelude to prosperity, there is now an unprecedented total of 81,084 residents dependent on emergency food parcels annually (Trussell Trust, 2023).

While the peace that was pledged in the Good Friday Agreement has certainly held, the political stability that was intended as its guarantor has proved rather more elusive. The terms of the peace deal require, of course, compulsory power-sharing between representatives of the nationalist and unionist communities. That consociational arrangement was always likely to produce tensions among those political figures forced to share executive power and so it was to prove. Nationalist and unionist politicians have continually bickered over a range of mainly predictable issues – the 'decommissioning' of paramilitary weapons, flags, parades, the Irish language, 'legacy' issues, even Covid-19 strategies – and on no fewer than six occasions these disputes have led to the devolved institutions being suspended (Ó Rálaigh, 2023, p. 10).

In the twenty-five years since it was established, the Northern Ireland assembly has spent more than nine in cold storage.[3] The most recent suspension – sparked, as we shall see, by unionist misgivings at post-Brexit trade arrangements – began in February 2022 and, at the time of writing, remains in place. This ensured that when a stellar cast of global political figures gathered at Queen's University Belfast to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Belfast Agreement the institutions often regarded as its crowning achievement were not in fact functioning. That rather unfortunate detail served to dampen some of the hyperbole that had marked a similar event in the same venue some five years earlier. The arch evangelist for the Good Friday Agreement on that previous occasion, Bill Clinton, was now noticeably more circumspect in his judgment. What was previously a 'work of genius' was now simply 'really good' and the former US President was reduced to placating the audience with the observation that the Northern Irish peace process might be deemed a relative success as most others 'fall apart in less than a decade' (Clinton, 2023). Perhaps sensing the deflated mood in the room, the normally more measured figure of George Mitchell (2023), who had chaired the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement, opted to play to the gallery when he made this quite remarkable assessment of the peace deal:

> When you approved the agreement, you also were talking to Israelis and Palestinians, to Colombians, to Africans, to Asians, to Americans. In fact, you were talking to the world. This is an agreement for peace and for the future, not just here, but everywhere. We are living in fractured times. We need you. We need your ongoing patience, stamina, and perseverance.

The instability of the Stormont institutions might be seen as both the cause and symptom of the broader sectarian sclerosis of Northern Irish political culture. When the peace accord was struck, it was anticipated that the political identities and issues animating people in the region might, given time, move beyond those of nationalism and unionism. And there is certainly some evidence that the political culture of the region might be changing. The annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2022), for instance, suggests that a large minority of people, perhaps as many as two in five, no longer recognise themselves in the traditional designations of 'nationalist' and 'unionist.'

That important ontological shift has certainly had some, albeit understated, expression at the level of electoral politics (Coakley, 2021). Over recent years, there has, for instance, been a surge in support for the cross-community Alliance Party which now represents the third largest grouping in the Northern Ireland Assembly. In addition, smaller, but energetic, groupings have emerged seeking to place issues of poverty and ecology at the heart of the political agenda. While these developments may have broadened the political debate in Northern Ireland, public life in the region remains defined primarily by the contest between nationalism and unionism. In the most recent elections – those to local councils held in May 2023 – four out of every five voters cast their ballots for parties defined by their position on the 'constitutional question.' The sectarian stasis that has charactersed Northern Irish political life during the peace process is cast into even bolder relief by the remarkable fluorescence of artistic and cultural life that has occurred over the same time frame. In the last few years, artists from, or living in, the region have garnered the Booker Prize, the Turner Prize, the EU Prize for Literature, the Women's Prize for Fiction, and an Oscar. It would seem, then, that if we are looking for evidence of progressive cultural change in Northern Ireland we need to widen our gaze beyond the invariably 'torpid' (Legg, 2018, p. 64) realm of mainstream electoral politics and focus our attention on a civil society that has never before seemed quite so vital.

The sheer verve of its cultural life provides us not least with a sense that Northern Ireland is gradually becoming a rather more diverse society. There are now more than a quarter of a million people living in the region who were not born there, and almost half of those hail from beyond 'these islands' (NISRA, 2022). The slow transition towards a more multicultural society has not, of course, been without its problems. Many of these derive from the fact that the mainstream political culture of Northern Ireland is geared to reflect solely the concerns and interests of the two principal ethnonational communities in the region. As Fiona Murphy and Ulrike Vieten suggest in their article, this dominant sectarian binary means that local political players and state institutions often have little real interest in those who come from different backgrounds. In particular, they argue, it has ensured that the Stormont authorities have failed to develop a meaningful strategy for dealing with refugees and asylum seekers. The persistence of a bicommunal mindset in what is an increasingly multicultural society has served to ensure, Murphy and Vieten contest, that those fleeing war and persecution have often found Northern Ireland something less than a place of refuge.

It would seem, then, that Northern Ireland has followed a somewhat different path than many influential voices envisaged at the time of its historic peace deal. The region has certainly left behind the levels of civil unrest that were the hallmark of the Troubles period. While the multiple punishment beatings, sporadic rioting at

urban interfaces, and occasional attacks on security personnel can, at times, suggest otherwise, there is little real prospect that Northern Ireland will return to the mass political violence with which it was once synonymous. Rather less progress has, however, been made with regards to transforming the political culture of the region. When the Belfast Agreement was signed, there were hopes that Northern Ireland would, eventually, move to become a stable liberal democracy capable of accommodating a range of cultural identities and political interests. The region appears at times, however, to be paralysed at a relatively early stage of that particular political journey. Those protocols and structures of governance that were designed to nurture mutual cooperation have instead provided both principal ethnonational traditions with a mutual veto whose exercise has led to repeated suspensions of the Stormont institutions. Indeed, Northern Ireland now holds the unenviable record as the democratic society that has had no functioning government for the longest period ever during peace time (Patterson, 2019, p. 33).

The provisions of the Good Friday Agreement have not only encouraged political instability but stifled political diversity as well. At the heart of the peace accord is the presumption that more or less everyone in Northern Ireland sees themselves as either nationalist or unionist. While that might have just about been a reasonable premise at the time the Belfast Agreement was struck, it no longer fits the radically different society that has emerged in the quarter century that has elapsed since. The terms of the peace accord mean that Northern Ireland is, in essence, governed as what Liam O'Dowd (2014, p. 807) has termed a 'dual ethnocracy' in which those who reject the dominant ethnonational binary effectively do not exist. In the protocols determining whether 'key decisions' at Stormont have cross-communal support, for instance, the votes of those politicians who designate as 'nationalist' and 'unionist' count while those who deem themselves 'other' do not. One inevitable consequence of this 'sectarian carve-up' (Nagle, 2018, p. 403) is that the ever larger minority of people in the region who reject the sectarian identities of their forbears often feel that there is little point casting their ballot. The protocols and institutions introduced by the Good Friday Agreement seem more and more inappropriate for the increasingly secular and diverse society that it, in part, brought into being. In particular, the provisions of the vaunted peace accord seem intent on trapping in a bicommunal mode a Northern Ireland that has long since become really quite multicultural indeed.

Between states and unions

The liminality that so defines Northern Ireland was there, of course, from the very outset. The political entity that was forged a century ago was an historical accident, a bungled attempt on the part of the British political establishment to square the circle of the competing demands of Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists (Coulter & Shirlow, 2021). There was little expectation that this unwanted child would survive long and that contingent status was reflected in the decidedly marginal position that Northern Ireland was allowed to occupy within the now truncated United Kingdom. While the historically highly centralised British state was always deeply resistant to bestowing legislative authority on its constituent parts, it was quick to do so in the case of the region least suited to the exercise of devolved power. In the half century that followed partition, the resources

of state invested in the newly created parliament at Stormont were monopolised by an Ulster Unionist Party which exercised them solely in the interests of what was then a substantial Protestant majority. The sovereign power at Westminster took little interest in the fledgling Northern Ireland, which in effect became the *secret garden* of the British state. It was only in the late nineteen sixties – when the multiple abuses of Unionist power produced a backlash among nationalists, and others, demanding civil rights – that the London government was forced, so very reluctantly, to involve itself in the bewildering sectarian affairs of the region.

The exceptional, marginal position within the United Kingdom that Northern Ireland had held before the onset of the Troubles would be confirmed in several of the key diplomatic developments that unfolded during the conflict. As the violence continued, one of the strategies adopted by the British government was to nurture closer ties with their counterparts in Dublin in an attempt mend fences with an alienated nationalist community north of the border. During the latter half of the conflict, there were several diplomatic deals between the two parties in which the London authorities acknowledged that, contrary to the insistence of Margaret Thatcher, Northern Ireland was not in fact 'as British as Finchley.'[4]

In the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), the Downing Street Declaration (1993) and the Framework Documents (1995), the UK government acknowledged that the aspiration towards a united Ireland among nationalists was a legitimate one that should be facilitated if endorsed by the majority of Northern Irish people. In doing so, the Westminster political establishment disclosed more explicitly than hitherto their longstanding conviction that Northern Ireland represents 'a place part' (Rose, 1982). They acknowledged, in other words, that they would be only too willing to envisage a future for the region beyond the United Kingdom that they would simply never be prepared even to comtemplate in the case of Scotland or Wales. That formal indifference to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would be expressed once more, of course, in the text of the Belfast Agreement. As a signatory to the peace accord, the British government has committed that it would regard any future majority vote in favour of Irish reunification as a 'binding obligation' and would introduce legislation at Westminster to facilitate that democratic wish. That disinterest in the constitutional fate of Northern Ireland on the part of a UK state that fought tooth and nail to defeat the forces of Scottish independence during the 2014 referendum underscores that the region has only ever really existed on the window ledge of the Union.

The marginal constitutional status of Northern Ireland has only been amplified, of course, by the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Although rarely discussed in advance, the outcome of the Brexit referendum would have particularly grave implications for Northern Ireland as the only UK region that shares a land border with an EU member state. As a consequence, the prolonged withdrawal negotiations between the British government and the EU authorities have been bedevilled time and again about how to deal with trade between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. These discussions have led to the introduction of two improvised deals. The first, the Northern Ireland Protocol, allowed the region to remain a *de facto* part of the EU Single Market and Customs Union, for goods but not services. While Northern Irish companies trading with the Irish Republic would not be subject to tariffs, businesses in Great Britain sending their goods to Northern Ireland would be

liable to customs checks at Larne and Belfast in case their wares were to end up in the southern Irish market.

As John O'Brennan notes in his article, this novel arrangement has invoked the ire of many unionists who believe that the Protocol has effectively created a trade barrier in the Irish Sea that cuts them off, symbolically at least, from the rest of the United Kingdom. It was that sense of the post-Brexit trade arrangements weakening the ties between Northern Ireland and Great Britain which, as O'Brennan explains, prompted the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to withdraw from government and collapse the Stormont institutions in February 2022. That latest suspension would require UK and EU negotiators to return to the drawing board and produce a further revised trade deal. Under the terms of the Windsor Agreement, finalised in April 2023, goods from Great Britain arriving in Northern Ireland will only require customs checks if they are destined ultimately for an EU country. It was hoped that this arrangement, which returns trade within the UK rather closer to pre-Brexit norms, would placate those unionists keen to ensure there would be 'no sea border.' The leadership of the DUP has, however, demanded further amendment to the new deal and continues to refuse to return to Stormont. In the eyes of many nationalists, that refusal is motivated rather less by objections to the Windsor Framework than an unwillingness to form a government in which the First Minister would for the first time be drawn from Sinn Féin, which emerged as the largest party from the May 2022 Assembly elections. At the moment of writing, early July 2023, the Stormont institutions remain in suspended animation, although many commentators have divined that the DUP are already preparing the ground for a return to power-sharing in the autumn of this year (Manley, 2023).

Those who are outraged by the post-Brexit trade arrangements invariably insist that they mark Northern Ireland out as 'different' or 'lesser' within the United Kingdom. It is worth remembering, however, that the region has *always* had that liminal, subaltern status. From the moment of its inception, Northern Ireland effectively existed in a state of constitutional limbo, formally part of one state, the United Kingdom, that did not really want it, while formally claimed, until the Belfast Agreement at least,[5] by another state, the Irish Republic, that did not really want it either. That very particular, marginal condition persists into the present day. While the Brexit negotiations have lent it a temporary significance once more, Northern Ireland continues to exist on the very margins of the United Kingdom and at the very edge of the field of vision of the Irish Republic. That liminality has, of course, only been compounded by the trade arrangements devised during the withdrawal negotiations.

The Protocol and Windsor Framework mean that Northern Ireland now has the unique status of being part of both the UK internal market and the EU single market. That ambiguous position has, as O'Brennan documents, generated anxiety and instability in the region. Others have suggested that Northern Ireland's singular status as the only part of the world that can trade freely with the UK and EU alike will eventually prove the source of long awaited prosperity (Shirlow et al., 2021). Time will, of course, tell whether the Windsor Framework will transpire to be the origin of continued political sclerosis or newfound economic opportunity. What is rather easier to predict is that Northern Ireland will remain in that distinctive state of liminality that has defined the region since its creation a century ago.

Between two majorities

There is, of course, another school of thought that suggests that the quintessential 'inbetweenness' of Northern Ireland is in the process of being resolved. In the aftermath of Brexit, as we noted earlier, an increasingly vocal campaign emerged insisting that Irish unification is on the cards in the near future. That faith is premised in part on the assumption that demographic trends mean that there will soon be a Catholic majority that would vote for the dissolution of Northern Ireland in a prospective border poll for which the Belfast Agreement allows but provides only scant detail (O'Leary, 2021, p. 2). While that prognosis has certainly become a dominant frame of popular debate on the region's future(s) in recent years, it has at least two critical flaws.

The first is that the demographic change that has so animated the advocates of a united Ireland may well not be happening on the scale they assume. It is important to remember that the Census of Population is not merely a dispassionate bureaucratic procedure but also a discursive biopolitical process that generates many of the realities that it claims merely to record (Foucault, 1978). That holds especially true in an ethnically divided society like Northern Ireland where the delicate balance of sectarian forces is a matter of acute public interest. As Coulter, Flaherty and Shirlow argue in their essay, in the years leading up to the 2021 Census there had been recurrent claims that this particular instalment would be the one when Catholics would finally outnumber Protestants. That ongoing discourse of 'historic opportunity' would seem to have persuaded many citizens to complete their questionnaires in ways that might give a distorted impression of what is really happening in Northern Ireland. While the factors that had previously facilitated their demographic advance in previous Censuses had largely evaporated by 2021, that particular instalment would nonetheless record the Catholic community expanding even more quickly than before. If we are to explain that apparent paradox, Coulter et al. suggest, we need to consider an important but often overlooked constituency in Northern Ireland, namely those residents, principally from Catholic backgrounds, who have refused historically to divulge their ethnoreligious affiliation.

One of the more remarkable – although rarely remarked upon – developments in the 2021 Census was the virtual disappearance of the 'not stated' category. What this is most likely to mean is that literally tens of thousands of Catholics who had previously refused to do so have now identified themselves in precisely those terms. That change of heart gives the impression of fresh growth within the Catholic community when what in fact has happened is that growth from previous decades has only now registered in the Census figures. A closer examination of the data would suggest, therefore, that a Catholic population that appears to be growing more quickly than before may well be slowing down, possibly even moving into a plateau that may prove the prelude to demographic decline. This observation leads Coulter et al. to suggest that wherever the solutions lie to Northern Ireland's perennial political problems, they are unlikely to be found in the realm of population change.

The second fatal weakness in the argument that demographic change will provide the critical catalyst for Irish reunification is that it rests upon a familiar – but, as it happens, erroneous – assumption about the association between cultural identity and political aspiration. Those who campaign for a united Ireland assume that once Catholics become a majority in Northern Ireland – and some speak as though they already were

(Ó Rálaigh, 2023, p. 7) – they will vote *en masse* in favour of constitutional change. Anyone familiar with the endless sequence of opinion polls conducted in the region would know, however, that things are unlikely to pan out in precisely that manner. Surveys carried out over several decades show consistently that while Protestants in Northern Ireland almost exclusively support the constitutional status quo there is, however, a substantial minority of the Catholic community not in favour of a united Ireland. A recent major IPSOS poll, for instance, confirmed a longstanding trend when it disclosed that 79% of Protestant respondents expressed a wish to remain within the United Kingdom, but only a bare majority, 55%, of Catholics aligned themselves with a united Ireland (Leahy, 2022).

Those figures remind us that in Northern Ireland ethnoreligious affiliation and constitutional aspiration are not mere analogues of one another. That a sizeable minority of Catholics – 21% in the aforementioned IPSOS poll – express opposition to a united Ireland has, of course, no little constitutional significance. It means, not least, that if there were ever to be a democratic vote in favour of a united Ireland it may require Catholics to become not merely a majority but a rather substantial one. Such an eventuality would take several decades and, as the birth rate begins to decline within a Catholic community with an ever larger middle class, it appears an even more distant prospect than that. Those who aspire towards Irish reunification will no doubt continue to argue that demographic trends are pointing inexorably in that direction. If we look more critically at what the Census and survey data are telling us, however, it seems rather more likely that Northern Ireland will remain for some time to come in its habitual state of constitutional limbo.

Conclusion

Mainstream debate on the path that Northern Ireland has followed since the Belfast Agreement has, then, been dominated by two distinctive, but connected, teleologies, one that was present at the birth of the historic peace deal, the other emerging more recently in the moment of ideological flux sparked by the Brexit referendum. While both of these readings share a common vision for the region, one sees it becoming a mature, prosperous, multicultural (neo)liberal democracy in the context of the United Kingdom, the other presumes a similar destiny/fate in the locus of a newly reunified Ireland. For all the influence that these approaches have exercised over popular discussion, neither could be said to provide a genuinely convincing portrait of post-conflict Northern Ireland. In particular, the teleological nature of their accounts means they are incapable of appreciating the quintessentially liminal nature of the region. If we are to grasp the true character of contemporary Northern Irish society, we need to acknowledge that it is not inexorably moving between two states of being but rather that it remains trapped somewhere between them. For all the many advances that Northern Ireland has made over the last quarter century, it is still caught between an appalling past that never quite recedes and an appealing future that never quite materialises, between the 'dual ethnocracy' that it is and the multicultural democracy that it might yet become, between two states and indeed two unions, between a Protestant majority that once existed and a Catholic majority that might yet exist but most likely will not. In the essays that follow, the authors seek to explore and explain this abiding

'inbetweenness' through a range of issues and from a variety of perspectives. It is antici-pated that the collection will provide the reader with a critical and engaging portrait of a notoriously complicated society – one that manages somehow to be both static and chan-geful all at the same time – as it passes the twenty-fifth anniversary of its widely lauded, though often hugely dispiriting, peace process.

Notes

1. The quotations in this sentence and the two that follow are from the original text officially titled *Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations* (1998). https://www.dfa. ie/media/dfa/alldfawebsitemedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/good-friday-agreement. pdf.
2. McCaffrey's calculation that 2,400 people were living who would not be without the Belfast Agreement was made on its twentieth anniversary. Presumably, that guesstimate would now be rather closer to 3,000, a figure that is beginning to approach the total number of fatalities that actually occurred in the Troubles.
3. *FactCheckNI* calculated that on 8 November 2022 the Assembly had been suspended, at various stages, for 3,162 days. A further 227 days had elapsed by the time of writing, 7 July 2023. That gives a total of 3,389 days, or 9.3 years. See: https://factcheckni.org/ articles/has-the-executive-been-in-a-state-of-collapse-for-40-of-its-existence/.
4. Finchley was the affluent north London constituency represented by the then Conservative Party leader. Her famous quotation was, of course, intended to convey that Northern Ireland was simply another region of the United Kingdom, but its self-evident absurdity ensured that it had precisely the opposite effect.
5. The Agreement saw the Dublin government pledge to replace the existing articles 2 & 3 of the Irish Constitution that had laid claim to the territory of Northern Ireland. Those provisions were replaced with a rather gentler aspiration to 'unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland.' https://assets.gov.ie/6523/5d90822b41e94532a63d955ca76fdc72.pdf.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Professor Colin Coulter teaches in the Department of Sociology, Maynooth University, Ireland. He works primarily on the political and socio-economic divisions in Northern Ireland, the political economy of the Republic of Ireland, and the politics of popular music. His most recent book is the co-authored Northern Ireland a generation after Good Friday: lost futures and new horizons in the 'long peace' (Manchester University Press, 2021).

Professor Peter Shirlow is the Director of the Institute of Irish Studies in the University of Liver-pool, UK. His research focuses primarily on the spatial and ideological expressions of ethnona-tional division in Northern Ireland. His most recent book is the co-authored Northern Ireland a generation after Good Friday: lost futures and new horizons in the 'long peace' (Manchester University Press, 2021).

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