



A Legacy of Divisions in Northern Ireland

Context

2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which put an end to the Troubles (1960s to 1998) which pitted Catholics/Nationalists against Protestants/Unionists. Now that a whole generation of Northern Irish citizens has grown up in a "post-conflict" environment, the anniversary year is an opportunity to reflect on the achievements, difficulties and possible shortfalls of the historic accord and to focus on the way forward. As Tony Blair (former Labour Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007) concluded, "The peace, like the political institutions to which the GFA gave rise, was imperfect and fragile, and it remains so. But compare Northern Ireland today with how it was a quarter-century ago, and you can legitimately call what has been achieved a transformation"¹.




Large-scale violence has since subsided and few envisage a return to the Troubles. Many commentators ask what can be done to improve this imperfect or negative peace, building a more integrated and harmonious society in the North and a shared future on the island.

Fears that widespread violence could return to the island have been stoked by Brexit. Indeed, when the UK left the EU, a deal was required to allow trade to continue between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – which is still part of the EU. The EU has strict food rules and requires border checks when certain goods - such as milk and eggs - arrive from non-EU countries like the UK. Paperwork is also required for other goods. But the idea of checks at the Irish border (between NI and the Republic of Ireland) is a sensitive issue because of Northern Ireland's political history. The Brexit withdrawal agreement includes a protocol (referred to as "the Northern Ireland protocol") which introduced an "Irish Sea Border" meaning new checks on goods from Great Britain, at Northern Ireland's ports, instead of the border between NI and the Republic of Ireland. The Democratic Unionist Party (and unionists in general) are not happy about the deal. The protocol was amended by another agreement called the Windsor Framework, which was adopted by the UK and EU in 2023. It created two "lanes" for goods arriving in Northern Ireland from Great Britain:

- A **green lane** for goods remaining in Northern Ireland
- A **red lane** for goods which may be sent on to the EU

¹ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/lessons-from-good-friday-agreement-25-years-later-by-tony-blair-2023-04?barrier=accesspaylog> (accessed 12 June 2023).

The following session aims at getting impressions from the ground to see how far daily life in NI has evolved.

	Warm-up and fact check
	Listening comprehension
	Reading comprehension: The Belfast Agreement, 25 years later: 'Wise up Daddy, things aren't like that anymore'
Extra content	A mural to describe, analyse and discuss

Warm-up and fact-check

- What do you know about Northern Ireland (NI)?
- Have you ever been to NI? What did you do / see and what were your impressions?
- If you haven't been, what have you heard about the region?
- What Nation State is NI part of?
- What Nation State does NI share an island with?
- What were the Troubles?

Reading Comprehension

The Belfast Agreement, 25 years later: 'Wise up Daddy, things aren't like that anymore', The Irish Times, April 5 2023, by Claire Simpson.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/04/05/twenty-five-years-of-the-belfast-agreement-wise-up-daddy-things-arent-like-that-any-more/>

In a mixed community half a mile from the predominantly loyalist Westland Estate, fears of sectarian violence have receded - and people are looking for solutions to new problems

As a teenager growing up in north Belfast during the Troubles, Martina O'Toole knew which streets were safe to walk down and which she had to avoid. "It was just kind of normal," she said. "You just stuck to your own area." She grew up in Ardoyne, a predominantly working-class nationalist area which saw some of the worst violence of the conflict and, around a decade ago, experienced sustained rioting around a flashpoint Twelfth of July march.

O'Toole (40) later moved to Fortwilliam, an area where Catholics and Protestants lived side by side. Aged 15 when the Belfast Agreement was signed on Good Friday in 1998, she recalled that, just a few years before the accord, neighbours' homes were burnt in sectarian violence and rioting. "It was part of your growing up really," she said.

O'Toole now lives with her partner and three children in Marsden Gardens, a mixed area close to the large Waterworks public park and around half a mile from the predominantly loyalist Westland Estate. During lockdown, she and several neighbours cleared an overgrown alley at the back of their terraced houses and transformed it into a community garden. She said the garden has fostered better relationships between the two main communities. "Last June, we had a load of pallets [from the garden] here sitting around the side and we needed rid of them," she said. "One [woman] from Westland came over and got them for the bonfire. "Last week, we were looking for pallets and I was tempted to go down [to Westland] and ask if we could have some of theirs."

Statistics from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, which aims to trace demographic and other changes in the North, found that a majority of people – 87% according to the most recent figures taken in 2005 – believe that better relations between Protestants and Catholics will only come about through greater mixing between the communities.

O'Toole's friend and neighbour, Seana Seaward (40), said relations between the two communities in the area had changed dramatically since the Agreement. When she was a child, pupils avoided walking down certain streets in their school uniforms because strangers would be able to identify their religion. "When we were younger, we were told the front part of the Waterworks is our side [nationalist] and then the back part was the other side [unionist]," she said. "So we were always told 'don't go round the far side, don't play on the swings around there'." She added: "It was annoying because the Protestant way was quicker and they had the better park." Now, when Seaward takes her 11-year-old son to the park, children of all religions "just go off and play".

Her neighbour, Marty McWilliams (57), said when he went for job interviews as a young man "the first thing they asked you was 'what school did you go to?'" "And when you answered that question you knew how the interview was going to go," he said. McWilliams said he recently warned his son not to walk through a predominantly loyalist area. "He said to me 'wise up Daddy, things aren't like that any more'," he said. "We were always looking over our shoulders, looking for the next car coming up, the next black taxi."

O'Toole's eldest son, Kevin Ruddy (20), who was born a few years after the Agreement was signed, is studying engineering at Belfast Metropolitan College. He has friends from across the community, including new migrants from India and China. "I've a friend who's Muslim. He's fasting for Ramadan at the moment," he said.

Seaward said the demography of Marsden Gardens and surrounding streets is changing.

"We have Syrians living up the street, Romanians, refugees from all over," she said. "You see so many different types of people and from different cultural backgrounds as well. "It makes it more normal than the old way of being normal if you know what I mean."

O'Toole, Seaward and McWilliams said increases in hard drug use and suicide over the last 15 years have overtaken any concerns about sectarian violence. "The drug thing – both sides are facing it," Seaward said. One of O'Toole's brothers died from a heroin overdose several years ago. McWilliams's wife died by suicide several years ago. O'Toole said used needles are a regular sight on the streets, including outside schools. "Now it's just heroin, heroin, heroin," she said. She said drug use and suicide "stem from the Troubles" "It's the trauma. It's the PTSD side of it," O'Toole said. "When things quiet down, what do you do with the stuff in your head? The easiest way is you take drugs, switch off and escape from it all." She added: "With drugs it doesn't matter what area you're from. It's every area. It doesn't matter whether you're low income, middle, upper class, you know, it doesn't matter at all."

The North has had no functioning Government for over a year amid rows over Brexit. Ms O'Toole expressed huge frustration at the ongoing political stalemate. She said if the North is to progress, politics needed to move away from sectarian divisions. "It's gonna be the people versus the politicians rather than the green versus the orange," she said.

Note: The 12th July is traditionally celebrated by NI Protestants to commemorate the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne.

Questions

1. Pick out words linked to conflict in the article.
2. Fill in the table below showing different labels for the 2 "main communities" in Northern Ireland.

Labels for the 2 main or traditional communities in Northern Ireland		
Religion		Protestant
Colour	Green	
Constitutional (general)		Unionist
Constitutional (more radical)	Republican	

3. Give 2 examples of antagonistic relations between communities 25 years ago?
4. Explain in your own words how people *felt* 25 years ago? (give 2 examples from the article to support your answer)
5. What local initiative has improved relations between the 2 sides and how has It improved relations?

6. What positive changes to people's daily lives have occurred since the Good Friday Agreement?
7. What new problems have arisen?

Listening Comprehension

Watch the extract from *Financial Times Film*, broadcast on 28th April 2022, and answer the following questions.

1. What do Carl Frampton, Harry Smith and Kate Clark have in common? How is each of them going about it?
2. Is Paddy Hearte optimistic in your opinion? Justify your answer.
3. Why has the Good Friday Agreement come under pressure recently?
4. What are peace walls and why are they difficult to remove?
5. How does age affect attitudes towards the Troubles according to the reporter?

6. What happens every July?

Extra activity: describe the mural below (sections, colours, key words, environment...). Can you guess what is the caption at the bottom? Compare and contrast the vision of the future with the depiction of the past. Discuss what message it sends.

