

# ➤ Lessons of Northern Ireland and the Relevance of the Regional Context

Adrian Guelke

**I**t should be stated at the outset that the notion of Northern Ireland's political settlement as a model for other societies evokes as much hostility as it does enthusiasm. Indeed, at least as much has been written in criticism of the idea of Northern Ireland as a model as in its support. Understanding the perspective of the critics on this issue is a useful starting point for reviewing the lessons to be learnt from the application to Northern Ireland of a variety of counter terrorism and conflict resolution policies, since it provides a means of sorting out in which respects Northern Ireland's experience might be relevant to other cases and in which it is not.

Couching the issue as one of lessons is helpful to begin with, since unlike the notion of a model, it permits the drawing of negative as well as positive lessons from the Northern Ireland case. However, this does not override some of the commonest objections that are made to using the Northern Ireland case to draw conclusions about how ethnic conflicts might be settled. Until quite recently, the argument could be advanced that it was premature to derive lessons from Northern Ireland simply because the story of the peace process was by no means complete. As recently as the beginning of 2010 it seemed entirely conceivable that the whole settlement, based on the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the subsequent 2006 St Andrews Agreement, might unravel. Intensive negotiations among the parties resulted in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, which provided a formula for the devolution of justice and policing powers. This step was widely described as being the last piece of the jigsaw of the peace process.

Confidence in the durability of the new dispensation received two further boosts from events in 2011. The first of these events was the completion of a full term by the Northern Ireland Assembly without the necessity of suspension for the first time since it was established in 1998. That success was underpinned by the outcome of the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly in May, which was widely interpreted as an endorsement of power-sharing among the parties, and of constructive cooperation between the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in particular. The results were a resounding endorsement of these leaders and their parties (see Table 1). The second event was the Queen's highly successful visit to the Republic of Ireland in May 2011. This underscored a dimension of the Northern Ireland peace process that has tended to be underplayed: the institutionalisation of cooperation between the UK and the Republic of Ireland going back to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985. Indeed, one way the Northern Ireland peace process can be interpreted is as a case of successful conflict management by the British and Irish governments.

But if these developments made it more difficult to question the staying power of the settlement, it was still possible for critics to raise questions about the quality of the peace that had been achieved. They tended to focus on three areas: political polarisation, the persistence of segregation and continuing political violence. Since the start of the peace process with the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, voters

have deserted the more moderate of the political parties on either side of the province's sectarian divide for their radical counterparts. This trend is illustrated in Table 1, which sets out the results in terms of seats of the four elections that have taken place to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Thus, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) overtook the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) in the 2003 elections, while Sinn Féin also displaced the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as the dominant party of Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland in the same elections. The DUP and Sinn Féin consolidated their position in the elections of 2007 and 2011. However, the nature of the election campaigns run by the two parties in 2011 was markedly different from previous campaigns, with both parties championing their role in making the settlement work. The triumph of the radical parties might be seen as a vindication of the thesis that an alliance of the extremes offered the best prospect of stable government because the radical parties were less vulnerable to outbidding than the UUP and the SDLP. However, it would be absurd to suggest that this outcome was arrived at by the design of the British and Irish governments. It was only after the dominance of the radical parties had been established that the two governments started to find virtue in the necessity of having to shape the settlement in the interests of the radicals.

**Table 1: Results of elections to Northern Ireland Assembly under the Belfast Agreement, indicating seats won by main parties and showing polarisation of opinion**

Party/Year	1998	2003	2007	2011
Democratic Unionist Party	20	30	36	38
Sinn Féin	18	24	26	29
Ulster Unionist Party	28	27	18	16
Social Democratic and Labour Party	24	18	16	14
Alliance Party	6	6	7	8
Others	12	3	3	3
TOTAL	108	108	108	108

Source: Information taken from Nicholas Whyte, 'Elections Northern Ireland' on <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/>

British Prime Minister David Cameron raised the issue of the persistence of segregation in his speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 2011. He expressed his dismay that the number of peace walls dividing Protestant and Catholic communities had increased since the 2006 St Andrews Agreement from 38 to 48, and cited a survey that estimated the cost of the duplication of services in Northern Ireland as a result of segregation at £1.5 billion a year. Echoing criticism that has been made by groups in Northern Ireland that have championed integration such as Platform for Change, Cameron asserted: 'Northern Ireland needs a genuinely shared future, not a shared out future'.

The third issue latched on to by critics of the functioning of Northern Ireland's devolved government was the continuation of political violence. Significantly, the police continued to collect statistics under the

heading of 'deaths due to the Northern Ireland security situation', the first year of which was 1969. The police published annual assessments of the number of such deaths, not merely after the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, but even after the Belfast Agreement received its popular mandate in both jurisdictions in Ireland in referendums in May 1998. The figures for 1998 to 2010 are given in Table 2. By far the most lethal of these post-Troubles years was 1998 itself, largely as a result of the Omagh bomb, perpetrated by dissident Republicans. While the overwhelming majority of those killed throughout the period since the Belfast Agreement were civilians, it should be noted that this category includes members of paramilitary organisations. Indeed, one factor contributing to the killings since 1998 has been internal feuds within and between paramilitary groups. It remains the case, however, that members of the security forces are prime

targets for dissident Republicans. This was reflected in the murder of two soldiers and a police officer in March 2009, as well as the murder of another police officer, Ronan Kerr, in April 2011. Kerr’s death followed a series of unsuccessful attempts by dissident Republican groups to kill police officers. That mirrors the pattern present in the latter stage of the Troubles before 1994, which was that through the course of the conflict, the security forces became increasingly successful in protecting themselves against the groups that sought to kill their members.

In the case of the Loyalist paramilitaries, two killings gave rise to widespread concern in 2009 and 2010. The first of these was the killing of a Catholic community worker Kevin McDaid in Coleraine in May 2009 by a sectarian mob linked to a Loyalist paramilitary group. It raised fears that further sectarian killings might

undermine the peace. The second was the result of an internal feud in the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Bobby Moffett was shot dead in broad daylight in the Shankill Road area of Belfast. The sanctioning of the killing by the UVF, after the organisation had completed the decommissioning of its weapons, showed the lengths paramilitary groups were willing to go to defend their turf and pointed to how far Northern Ireland still had to go to be free of such groups. However, lethal violence is only one aspect of post-Belfast Agreement political violence. The period since 1998 has seen a high level of low-level violence, particularly where Protestant and Catholic working class districts intersect. At one of these interfaces there was sustained rioting over two nights in June 2011. Further rioting in the summer months in Northern Ireland is linked to continuing disagreement over the routes of a small number of Orange Order parades.

**Table 2: Deaths Due to the Northern Ireland Security Situation**

Year	Police	Reserve	Army	UDR/RIR	Civilians	Total
1998	1	0	1	0	53	55
1999	0	0	0	0	7	7
2000	0	0	0	0	18	18
2001	0	0	0	0	17	17
2002	0	0	0	0	13	13
2003	0	0	0	0	11	11
2004	0	0	0	0	5	5
2005	0	0	0	0	5	5
2006	0	0	0	0	3	3
2007	0	0	0	0	3	3
2008	0	0	0	0	1	1
2009	1	0	2	0	2	5
2010	0	0	0	0	2	2
TOTALS	2	0	3	0	140	145

Police	Royal Ulster Constabulary
Reserve	Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment
RIR	Royal Irish Regiment
CIVILIANS	including members of illegal paramilitary organisations

Source: <http://www.psnl.police.uk>

But even if the imperfections of Northern Ireland's settlement are set to one side, the relevance of the Northern Ireland case to other parts of the world can be questioned on a number of grounds. In the first place, unlike many other deeply divided societies with which comparisons are made with Northern Ireland, the province is not a state. Indeed, it is a small region within what is otherwise a longstanding and stable liberal-democracy. Further, Northern Ireland is part of the rich industrialised world. As a region of the UK, Northern Ireland, like the Republic of Ireland, has been part of the European Community/Union since 1973. However, these particular features of the Northern Ireland situation can also be used as a way of identifying certain cases to which Northern Ireland's experience is most likely to be relevant.

For example, Northern Ireland can be compared with other divided regions within states. An interesting case in point is Kashmir. As in the case of Northern Ireland, it can be argued that progress towards a resolution of this conflict is dependent on the evolving relationship between India and Pakistan and their governments' taking on the role of conflict managers. While the South Asian Free Trade Area is by no means equivalent to the European Union, it does provide a useful framework for the promotion of cooperation between India and Pakistan that is not dependent on progress on the issue of Kashmir. An aspect of the Belfast Agreement of particular interest in Kashmir was its provision for cross-border cooperation on a range of issues. The initiation of a bus service between the Pakistan-controlled and Indian-ruled Kashmir in 2005 was seen in the sub-continent as a confidence-building measure, as well as a first step towards the development of such cooperation in the context of this long-running dispute. A case within Europe with some similarities to Northern Ireland is Cyprus. While partitioned Cyprus is not part of any other state, the role of external parties, particularly the relationship between Greece and Turkey, has been a significant element in efforts to settle this bloodless conflict. The best opportunity for a settlement arose in the context of Cyprus's membership of the European Union in 2004. Ironically, the complicated Annan Plan (so-called after the UN Secretary-General) for the island's reunification was rejected in a referendum that year by a majority of Greek Cypriots, while Turkish Cypriots accepted

the deal. Just as Northern Ireland's consociational institutions providing for power-sharing among the province's main political parties was the product of external conflict management rather than of internal elite political accommodation, as in Lijphart's original example of consociationalism in the Netherlands, so too in Cyprus it was the external parties who took the lead in designing the country's institutions at its independence in 1960. That experiment failed, as did the Sunningdale Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1973-4. However, these failures have not deterred external powers from using consociationalism as a tool of conflict management and resolution in other cases, including that of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The similarities have not gone unnoticed. In particular, a number of scholars with widely different views on their outcomes have compared the cases of the Belfast Agreement and the Dayton Accords.

However, the case that has generated the most controversy both among politicians and scholars has been that of Israel/Palestine. Peter Hain put forward the view that the appropriate lesson for Israel from the Northern Ireland peace process is that Israel should be ready to enter into negotiations with Hamas. David Trimble has argued that this misrepresents what happened in Northern Ireland. Trimble emphasises the parameters within which negotiations on Northern Ireland's future took place, including the observance of a ceasefire and the two governments' insistence that the principle of consent would form part of the settlement. In other words, it would be provided that a united Ireland could only come about with the consent of majorities in both jurisdictions in Ireland, underpinning what nationalists had once opposed as amounting to a Unionist veto. Trimble's approach might seem to beg the question as to what are the roughly equivalent parameters in the case of the Middle East conflict. The obvious factors would seem to be ending violence and an acceptance of the borders that prevailed before the Six Day War in 1967, subject only to the negotiation of a few, mutually agreed adjustments. The fact that the current Prime Minister of Israel has emphatically rejected the second of these parameters is one indication, among many, as to why the prospects for an externally promoted peace settlement along the lines of what was achieved in Northern Ireland remain so poor. Even so, the parties

in the Middle East, as well as external mediators in the conflict, are likely to continue to pay attention to aspects of Northern Ireland's experience that may fit with developments in the Israel/Palestinian conflict, both because of the features they have in common and the resonance that exists between them. Admittedly, this is limited by the fact that the inhabitants of Northern Ireland remain far more alive to the comparison than anyone in the Middle East.

The length of time it took for Northern Ireland's political settlement to crystallise, as well as the relatively benign regional context of the conflict, provide ample basis for scepticism about how far the province's experience of conflict resolution can be successfully exported to other regions of the world. Situated on Western Europe's inner periphery, the island of Ireland lay beyond the areas of competition among the major powers, even during the Cold War. The Irish Question was exploited from time to time by the Soviet Union for propaganda purposes, but there was never any prospect that the Soviet Union would gain a foothold on the island. The rhetoric of one British minister, that if the Republican challenge was not met that Ireland might become another Cuba, had little credibility and attracted little interest. The lack of strategic significance of Ireland was even more evident after the end of the Cold War. By contrast, a number of the divided societies with which Northern Ireland is compared lie in areas which for oil or other reasons have continued to be regarded as strategically important to major powers.

It is worth underlining that an argument which had considerable traction during the late 1980s was that there was very little prospect of a settlement in the Irish case, not because of the impossibility of compromise, but because there were too few incentives for the parties to end the conflict. Too little was at stake for the parties to arrive at any settlement, it was asserted. In the event, that view proved mistaken. The commonly expressed assumption now that parties elsewhere will prove unable to derive usable and valuable lessons from the outcome in Northern Ireland is also unlikely to hold. But both the forms and consequences of the application of these lessons are likely to vary widely. ■