The Unfinished Peace

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More than twenty-five years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), Northern Ireland (NI) is widely regarded as one of the most successful examples of modern peacebuilding. The agreement largely ended three decades of violence known as The Troubles, a conflict rooted in competing national identities, constitutional disputes and historical grievances between nationalist and unionist communities. During this period, over 3,500 people were killed, making it one of the most significant conflicts in post-war Western Europe (English, 2003). Since 1998, widespread political violence has largely disappeared, and democratic institutions have replaced armed struggle as the primary means of political expression (Tonge, 2014).

However, describing NI simply as a peacebuilding success obscures its more complicated reality. Peace walls continue to divide communities, residential segregation remains widespread, and competing interpretations of the past continue to shape political identities. More than a generation after the agreement, mistrust and division remain visible despite the absence of widespread violence.

This raises an important question: if peace arrived in 1998, why do many of the divisions that fuelled conflict still remain? This brief argues that NI should be understood as an unfinished peace. The GFA successfully transformed violent conflict into democratic political competition but failed to eliminate the divisions that caused the conflict in the first place.

The GFA sought to address the constitutional dispute at the heart of The Troubles by creating institutions capable of accommodating competing national identities. Its most significant innovation was the establishment of a power-sharing government at Stormont, designed to ensure that both nationalist and unionist communities participated in political decision-making. Instead of attempting to create a single political identity, the agreement recognised the legitimacy of both traditions and created mechanisms through which they could coexist within the same political system (O'Leary, 2019).

A key element of this settlement was the principle of consent, which guaranteed that NI's constitutional status could only change with the support of a majority of its population. This reassured unionists that NI would remain part of the United Kingdom unless voters decided otherwise, while allowing nationalists to pursue constitutional change through democratic means. In doing so, the agreement replaced questions previously contested through violence with political competition.

However, the GFA was not designed to eliminate conflict but to manage it. Rather than resolving competing understandings of identity, sovereignty and belonging, it created a framework within which these disagreements could be expressed peacefully. The continued existence of distinct nationalist and unionist political blocs was therefore not an unintended consequence of the agreement, but an assumption upon which it was built.

This remains evident in contemporary politics in the North. Voting patterns continue to be strongly influenced by communal identities, with

electoral competition often reflecting constitutional preferences rather than ideological divisions (McGarry & O'Leary, 2009). Many of the political cleavages that characterised The Troubles, therefore, continue to influence public life, despite the absence of widespread violence.

The NI experience reveals a central paradox of peacebuilding. The institutions created in 1998 transformed the way conflict was expressed, yet they did not remove the divisions that sustained it. Violence ended, but conflict endured. Peace was achieved not through the elimination of disagreement, but through the creation of institutions capable of managing disagreement without a return to violence.

The 1981 hunger strikes provide one of the clearest examples of the limitations of state power during The Troubles. The protests emerged from a dispute over the status of republican prisoners following the removal of Special Category Status in 1976. Under the British government's policy of criminalisation, republican prisoners were no longer treated as political prisoners and were instead classified as ordinary criminals. This policy sought to deny political legitimacy to paramilitary organisations and reinforce the authority of the state (English, 2003).

Prime Minister Thatcher remained firmly committed to this approach, refusing to recognise political status for prisoners. From the government's perspective, granting special treatment would have legitimised violence and undermined the rule of law. However, this position was challenged in 1981 when republican prisoners began a hunger strike demanding political recognition. Over a period of seven months, ten prisoners died, including Bobby Sands, who was elected as a Member of Parliament during the protest (English, 2003).

While Thatcher successfully prevented the restoration of political status, the political consequences of the hunger strikes extended far beyond the prison walls. Rather than weakening republicanism, the deaths generated widespread sympathy within nationalist communities and contributed to the growth of Sinn Féin as an electoral force (Hayes & McAllister, 2013). The hunger strikers became powerful symbols of sacrifice and resistance, creating a martyrdom narrative that remains influential today.

Consequently, the hunger strikes reveal a fundamental limitation of coercive conflict management. Although the British government maintained its authority in the short term, it strengthened the long-term political identity of its opposition. More than forty years later, murals, memorials and commemorations continue to honour the hunger strikers, demonstrating their enduring significance within nationalist memory (Mitchell, 2014). The British government won the dispute over prisoner status but lost control over the symbolic meaning of the hunger strikes. As a result, the episode highlights how governments can suppress violence without resolving the identities and grievances that sustain conflict.

Northern Ireland is frequently described as a post-conflict society. On the surface, this description appears justified. The Good Friday Agreement

largely ended three decades of violence, political institutions replaced armed struggle, and the region has avoided a return to the widespread bombings and shootings that characterised The Troubles. However, describing Northern Ireland as post-conflict risks obscuring a more complex reality. While violence has largely disappeared, many of the divisions that fuelled the conflict remain embedded within society. Northern Ireland therefore challenges the assumption that the end of violence automatically signifies the end of conflict.

One of the clearest examples of this reality is the continued significance of the 1981 hunger strikes. More than forty years after the deaths of Bobby Sands and the nine other hunger strikers, their memory remains politically influential. Across many nationalist communities, murals, memorials and annual commemorations continue to honour the hunger strikers. Yet these interpretations are not universally shared. Many unionists maintain fundamentally different views regarding both the hunger strikes and the broader conflict. As a result, historical memory remains contested rather than reconciled.

The persistence of division is also evident within Northern Ireland's education system. Despite efforts to expand integrated education, most children continue to attend either predominantly Catholic-maintained schools or predominantly Protestant-controlled schools (Mitchell, 2014). This separation means that many young people have limited interaction with members of the other community during some of the most formative years of their lives. Consequently, perceptions of key events associated with The Troubles are often shaped by different community narratives transmitted through schools, families and local communities.

The significance of segregated education extends beyond the classroom. Schools play an important role in shaping identity and collective memory. When children grow up largely separated from one another, opportunities to challenge stereotypes and develop mutual understanding become more limited. The most enduring legacy of conflict is often not found on the battlefield but in the stories that each generation teaches the next.

NI is therefore better understood as post-violence rather than post-conflict. Conflict is no longer expressed through widespread violence, yet it continues to exist through competing identities, contested memories and social separation. Peace walls still divide some communities, voting patterns remain strongly influenced by identity, and historical grievances continue to shape political discourse (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006).

The NI experience highlights a central challenge of peacebuilding: ending violence is often easier than achieving reconciliation. While political agreements can establish stability, they cannot automatically create trust, shared identities or common interpretations of history. Northern Ireland demonstrates that peace is not a destination reached once violence ends but an ongoing process of addressing the legacies of conflict.

The Northern Ireland peace process offers lessons that extend far beyond the region itself. While every conflict is shaped by its own unique historical circumstances, NI demonstrates several broader principles that remain relevant for societies experiencing political polarisation, ethnic tensions and identity-based divisions. More importantly, it challenges conventional assumptions about what peace actually means and how it should be achieved.

One of the most important lessons is that inclusion is essential. The eventual success of the peace process depended upon bringing together actors who had previously viewed one another as enemies. While the inclusion of groups associated with violence was controversial, excluding significant stakeholders would likely have undermined the legitimacy and durability of any settlement. The NI experience demonstrates that peace processes cannot simply involve those who are easiest to negotiate with; they must include those capable of either sustaining or disrupting peace. Durable settlements require participation from all major actors, regardless of how politically uncomfortable that may be.

A second lesson is that shared futures matter more than shared histories. More than two decades after the GFA, unionists and nationalists continue to disagree fundamentally about the causes, meanings and legacy of The Troubles. Competing interpretations of events such as the hunger strikes remain deeply embedded within community identities. Yet the success of the peace process did not depend upon creating a common understanding of the past. Instead, it depended upon creating institutions capable of allowing different communities to coexist despite those disagreements. NI therefore demonstrates that peace does not require a shared history; it requires a shared commitment to a common future.

These lessons have important implications for how peace is understood. Traditional approaches often present peace and conflict as opposites, suggesting that a society moves from one condition to the other. Northern Ireland challenges this assumption (Galtung, 1969). Violence has largely disappeared, democratic institutions continue to function, and political disputes are overwhelmingly managed through constitutional means. Yet mistrust between communities remains evident. Segregated neighbourhoods persist, peace walls continue to exist and voting patterns remain heavily influenced by identity (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2006). Conflict has not disappeared; rather, it has changed form.

For this reason, NI cannot be understood simply through the distinction between positive and negative peace. While such frameworks provide useful insights, they risk presenting peace as a final condition that societies either achieve or fail to achieve. The reality is more complex. NI is simultaneously peaceful and divided, stable and mistrustful. The persistence of hostility between communities does not necessarily indicate the failure of peace, but rather highlights that peace is an ongoing process rather than a completed achievement.

The Northern Ireland peace process represents a significant achievement in modern conflict resolution. The Good Friday Agreement successfully reduced large-scale violence, established democratic institutions and created a framework through which competing constitutional aspirations could be pursued peacefully. However, the continued significance of the hunger strikes, segregated schooling, and identity-based voting patterns demonstrates that many of the divisions underpinning The Troubles remain embedded within society.

NI should therefore be understood as an unfinished peace. The GFA did not eliminate conflict; rather, it transformed conflict from violent confrontation into democratic competition. Its success lies not in creating complete reconciliation, but in establishing institutions capable of managing disagreement without a return to violence.

The broader lesson is that peace should not be measured by the absence of conflict but by a society's ability to manage conflict peacefully. NI demonstrates that communities do not need to share the same history, identity or political aspirations in order to coexist. Peace is not an endpoint reached when violence ends but an ongoing process of managing memory, identity and disagreement without returning to violence.

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