

Volume XXIV - (2023)

Celebrating 25 Years of the Good Friday Agreement

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Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 24, 2023 - Pages 17 - 30

It is hard to believe standing here in Belfast in 2023 that one can talk about Northern Ireland in post-conflict terms, given that for a half my life this was a virtual war zone, being consumed with the euphemistically titled “Troubles” from 1968-1993 and by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) for the past quarter of a century. That the GFA has so dominated the political landscape since 1998 is testament to its importance and how it has so transformatively altered the experience of the people of Northern Ireland and beyond and the perception of it as a place no longer synonymous with conflict, but instead new hope and opportunity. Is it really true that 800+ years of historic sectarianism, tribal and colonial strife has been laid to rest?

Of course, nowhere on earth can be considered a nirvana of perfect environment, least of all modern-day Northern Ireland, but relative to where it was in the grim old days of the 1970s and 1980s particularly, it is fair to say that things have come a long way in terms of restorative justice and “parity of esteem,”^[1] to use what is at this stage is surely a hackneyed phrase. This can be said to be true, without out even going back further in history to the 16th century and the Plantation of Ulster by Lowland Scots Presbyterians and English Protestants, an era which many would cite as the real origins of “The Troubles”, or at least the start of the modern version of the sectarian element of the conflict. I will try, however, to focus on the more recent conflict and subsequent peace process, for it is here we can see an example of how a society can be transformed from one of barbed wire, bombs and bullets as a daily experience, to one of peace talks; and if not harmony and unity, then at least the absence of violence and chance for the attainment of economic development and opportunities, at least in theory, for large swathes of the almost 2 million population of Northern Ireland. As the GFA celebrates 25 years this year, the question has to be asked, “is it strong enough to withstand the challenges of the future, to continue to deal with the past and to create a just society for all?”

The Good Friday Agreement and Its Challenges

The Good Friday Agreement is widely regarded by most on both sides and none as the “only show in town,” and the continued peace and prosperity of Northern Ireland, if not the whole island of Ireland, seems tied rather umbilically to the GFA. It seems to still be very wed to its principles despite recent challenges or setbacks such as Brexit and the suspension of the institutions of the Agreement, especially the devolved Assembly or Northern Irish Parliament.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) were not party to the agreement in 1998 but became the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly after the 2003 elections, winning 30 seats. They have sought credibility with a strategy of trying to re-negotiate parts of the GFA that it didn't like whenever possible based on its initial “red lines” of paramilitary decommissioning, then latterly policing, justice and the accountability of the Executive to the Assembly.^[2] It generally represents a cohort of Unionists who are extremely distrustful of the GFA and who have the built-in fear that any agreement with the Dublin government or involving Nationalism could be a “Trojan Horse” that leads to a United Ireland.

The cornerstone of the GFA, and what has allowed it to endure for a quarter of a century despite many setbacks, is the fact that it is underpinned by the “Principle of Consent,” or the agreement amongst all the signatories, that change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can only be brought about by a vote or by the democratic “consent” of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

The biggest setback of all to the GFA was delivered only three months after its signing in the form of a dissident Republic atrocity in Omagh. On August 15th, 1998, the detonation of a car bomb killed 29 innocent civilians including a pregnant woman and injured another 200. It was carried out by the so-called Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) and was designed to destroy the agreement and the all-Ireland, cross-party desire for peace and reconciliation. That it failed utterly to achieve the demise of the nascent Agreement and somewhat paradoxically only strengthened the resolve of those determined to see a new era of peace, is remarkable.

However, from the viewpoint of those who had already lost loved ones in the 30-year conflict, McNamara argues:

The violent challenge the bombing posed to the peace process revealed the extent of profound personal public hopes for peace and reconciliation. The bombing also indicated that, despite the hopes surrounding the GFA, justice would remain extremely difficult for victims to achieve legally even after the Agreement.^[3]

It was clear that while former terrorists like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had been brought into the mainstream by the GFA to the point that even its political leader, Sinn Féin's Gerry Adams, had finally been granted a visa to the US by President Bill Clinton against the advice of his Irish advisors in Capitol Hill,^[4] there was still a core of hardliners who refused to give up the armed struggle and join the establishment, who regarded the “Shinners” as having sold out, and who were determined to heap more years of misery and suffering on their fellow countrymen in “the North”.

Special Advisor to then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Johnathan Powell, who now travels the world advising different peace processes and often leads tours of Belfast to groups involved in peace studies and negotiations, described how common membership of the EU was crucial to the attempts in 1998 to downplay differences in nationality, identity and culture, in favour of an emphasis on common citizenship and the elimination of borders. This is something that he laments was lost on the English and Welsh who voted “Yes” to leave the European Union in 2016, in contrast to the Scots and Northern Irish who voted to Remain.

The DUP were the only major party in Northern Ireland to advocate a “Leave” vote, perhaps sensing an opportunity in Brexit for a further distancing of any future ambitions of Nationalists to create a United Ireland through the GFA's principle of consent. Its alliance with Theresa May's government, which followed the resignation of David Cameron as UK Prime Minister following the shock “Leave” vote in 2016, was to be relatively short-lived however. Once Boris Johnson returned to power with a huge Tory majority in July 2019, he no longer needed the DUP, and he proceeded to “throw Unionism under the bus” as he made the Northern Ireland Protocol deal with Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Leo Varadkar and subsequently, the European Union.

The challenge of Brexit was that for most of the duration of the Agreement, Ireland and the UK had common trade, customs and emigration rules and borderless access to each other territories by virtue of the common travel area and EU membership. Brexit meant that this seamless co-operation was now about to cease, and with it so many of the assumptions that had been taken for granted in 1998, so much so that it had never entered the minds of any of the signatories that such an act of self-exclusion could happen.

Powell^[5] describes Brexit as the culmination of anti-EU sentiment in Britain following the economic crisis of the preceding years, which revitalised nationalist and populist forces sought to exploit, in their desire for power, by a new emphasis on borders and exclusion. This reaction to “globalism,” spearheaded by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and hardliner European Research Group (ERG), the Eurosceptic wing of the Tories led by the ever-opportunistic Johnson, culminated with him and his party being swept into power on a promise of “getting Brexit done.” But this was not before the UK was nearly torn apart with its own civil war, and the controversial proroguing of parliament,^[6] as pro-Brexiters fought against “Remainers” on fault lines that ran across party allegiances.

International Involvement in the Peace Process

Crucial to the success of the GFA besides American involvement was the EU, which served as forum for the two Prime Ministers, Blair and Ahern from the UK and Ireland respectively, to meet and spend time together in the final months of 1998 on the margins of other EU summits, especially during the UK's 6-month rotating presidency of the body during that time. The personal investment of US President Bill Clinton was enormously helpful and significant, as was the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as chairman of the talks.

Mitchell's appointment especially was a masterstroke, as it is difficult to imagine anyone else having such patience as he in dealing with the hours and hours of disagreement and bickering by the parties, some of whom refused to talk directly to each other but instead relied on passing communications through intermediaries such as the Women's Coalition and the two sponsoring governments of the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. “Cometh the hour, cometh the man”: Senator Mitchell had been Bill Clinton's Senate Majority leader on Capitol Hill, and although well used of trying to keep order there, he had long been looking forward to retirement and settling down to some well-earned family time when he got the call from President Clinton to go to Belfast^[7], a place that already had become endeared to Bill and his mercurial charms: the “wee country” no doubt flattered by commanding so much of the attentions of the world's most powerful nation and leader.

The Legacy of “The Troubles”

Advocates for the Union for Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who still today are in the majority in Northern Ireland despite the growing demographic swing towards Irish nationalism, would mostly prefer the status quo, or at least to hold onto the gains of devolution and the “spoils” of peace, in terms of economic development, social mobility and much enhanced quality of life. This cohort, which I will refer to as Unionists, has been represented in terms of their aspirations by the DUP. The DUP took over the mantle of the largest Unionist party from the Ulster Unionist party, the party which founded Northern Ireland in 1921 following the partition of the island and creation of the Irish Free State in the south. Northern Ireland was characterized until recently as a region dominated by that one party, which was in power in the local assembly from 1921 until 1972 with the collapse of the Northern Ireland parliament due to civil strife and the escalation of the Troubles, which were to last for another 23 years or so until the first IRA ceasefire of 1994.

The exact date of when the modern Troubles ended and when the post conflict era started is difficult to pin-point precisely, as is normally the case with these issues, but the first IRA ceasefire of 1994 was definitely a seminal moment. That the IRA was willing to go to the negotiating table is testament to the work of a few key figures, chief among them the late John Hume, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP), who early on in the peace process sought to include the “hard men” or terrorists. This was due to his realization that past efforts at conflict resolution and the related concept of power-sharing, such as that of the ill-fated Sunningdale Agreement of 1974, were doomed to failure if they only sought to include “constitutional” parties only and not those who were the political wing of armed militia.

This approach in the late 80's and early '90s, of seeking to include the IRA's political wing Sinn Féin in any future settlement or power sharing arrangement, was one that Hume was vilified for in the early years of this strategy. It was called the “Hume-Adams” approach – Gerry Adams being the key negotiator for Sinn Féin/IRA, who at the time was outside of any talks process since they refused to eschew violence and seeking a united Ireland through force, with a combination of the “Armalite^[8] and the ballot-box.” This of course was unacceptable to the Irish government, which had placed a broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin representatives. The British government for its part refused to deal with Sinn Féin in any meaningful way, not least because the party's MPs refused to take their seats in the House of Commons in Westminster ostensibly because they were unwilling to take the oath of allegiance to what it considered a “foreign sovereign.”

Hume was willing to put all this aside and take risks for peace, risks that would eventually win him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999,^[9] but risks for which his party suffered post-GFA, losing most of its seats in the first Northern Ireland devolved Assembly elections to a rejuvenated Sinn Féin.

He shared that prize with Ulster Unionist Leader David Trimble, who although regarded earlier in the process as truculent and belligerent, a hardliner who famously marched

arm-in-arm with Orangemen in Drumree, showed tremendous courage in “staying in the room” with Sinn Féin during the peace process negotiations when the other “constitutional” unionist party, the DUP, walked out, refusing to “talk to terrorists” on the principle that they wouldn’t talk to those who advocated violence.

Trimble’s party also suffered a near-wipe out in the first assembly elections and would not have been able to bring Unionism to the table had he not had the support of the Loyalist parties, such as the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), led by Gary McMichael and particularly the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), led by David Ervine, an enlightened Socialist who had learned to distrust the Tories as much, if not more, than Republicans. These were not “constitutional” parties, both having armed wings (UVF and UDA respectively), but nonetheless had, like the IRA and INLA, become exhausted with the fighting and senseless loss of life and misery of the Troubles.

Central to the success of the GFA was the “three strand process,”^[10] chaired by former US Democratic Senator George Mitchell, the first, involving negotiations in Northern Ireland itself between the Republican/Nationalist side and the Unionist/Loyalist side, the second “East/West” strand between the North and South and finally, the third strand, the relationship between the two “sovereign” governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Part 3 of the text of the Agreement sets out the three strands in the context of the relationships between the parties in Northern Ireland: with Strand One, involving the Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland, Strand Two, the North/South Ministerial Council, and Strand Three, the British-Irish Council and British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.^[11]

While the successful conclusion of negotiations led to a Nobel Peace Prize for Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble and SDLP leader John Hume, ultimately it was a bargain struck by the leadership shown by all the 10 parties to talks has brought us peace today. Their willingness to take risks for peace has left a powerful legacy, but one that has to be constantly renewed and commitments re-stated, to ensure that it does not unravel. Its continued existence is dependent upon “reconciliation based on mutual respects and rights” and while “[Irish] unification can occur via referendums, the heart of the Agreement was the logical need to unite people across the three strands through meaningful reconciliation, mutual respect and equal rights.”^[12]

Arguments for Irish Unification^[13]

Brendan O’Leary comprehensively lays out the options and the choices that are feasible according to a roadmap made possible by the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998, which is now 25 years old.^[14] This historic agreement between the British and Irish governments changed the landscape of modern Ireland and if it holds, has the potential to ensure that we will never again enter the sectarian and political civil war that we saw in Northern Ireland and which also deeply affected and traumatised the economy, culture, and collective psyche of the Republic of Ireland. His prescription is one that entails seeing the island’s destiny as one politically united by peaceful means, but only if that is the wish of the majority of both parts of the island as per the formula laid out in the GFA, through the “Principle of Consent”, where both Northern Ireland (“the North”) and the Republic of Ireland (“the South”) would vote for re-unification.

Of course, the details of what type of re-unification would take place or what this would look like was not prescribed in the 1998 Agreement. Professor O’Leary maintains that preparation must be made for this potential re-unification by governments in Dublin, London, Belfast, Washington D.C. and Brussels, and that failure to do so would be a dereliction of duty that would render any “border poll” on re-unification as allowed for in terms of the GFA, an exercise in gross negligence. Much transitional justice has already been delivered by the GFA and the Peace Process since the historic settlement of Easter 1998, and while there are risks to “reunification as a long-term peace and justice” strategy, there is equally a risk, arguably a greater one, in denying the wishes of the majority and settling for the “remain” status quo, if that does not comport with those wishes.^[15]

As one of the most senior experts on Northern Ireland and a key advisor to stakeholder parties to the GFA, O’Leary does not totally dismiss the chances of a re-unification border poll being voted down in Northern Ireland. The implications for Unionists are that they should continue to make the “remain” case for staying in the United Kingdom, especially to those cultural Catholics and undecided swing voters who have benefitted from the structural reforms in education, justice, and policing in Northern Ireland over the past 30 years and who have reached important positions within Northern Ireland’s and the United Kingdom’s political, academic, economic, professional, and administrative establishment.^[16]

While he does not provide a detailed economic comparison of what leaving or remaining in the UK will mean for Northerners or Southerners in terms of taxes or pensions rates, etc., he does imply that in all scenarios of unification, the North and the South will be better off economically in the long run should the patterns of the last 25 years continue, where the Republic has been enjoying a sustained period of growth. It now has a modern economy and workforce with a higher GDP and GNI than the North and most parts of the UK. The Republic had a GDP per capita of over \$88,000 compared to the North’s \$40,000, GNI figures showing less of a gap, with the South’s at \$48,000 per capita versus the North’s \$38,000 in 2018^[17].

The Irish nationalist perspective is one that sees the Troubles as a civil war of sorts, caused historically by the Plantation of Ireland in the 16th and 17th centuries. English and Scottish lowland settlers were given lands in Ireland by the crown and especially in Ulster, where Presbyterian and Protestant “loyalists” were incentivized to replace the rebellious Gaelic natives who had allied with Spain and Catholicism. The Plantation was designed to change the country’s religion, political and allegiance, and ward off the influence of the Catholic Church and the Spanish Empire which had allied with local Gaelic Chieftains against the Crown, in what was effectively another theatre of the Anglo-Spanish War.^[18]

More recently, the conflict has been seen by Nationalists as one of British intervention, occupation, and refusal to grant full independence following attempts to gain Home Rule and Catholic emancipation after the Great Famines of 1740-41 and particularly 1845-1849, when over a million died and a million emigrated.

A New Era of Peace

The GFA heralded a new era of unprecedented warming of relations between Britain and Ireland, and followed a modern tradition of co-operation between Irish and British diplomats, civil servants and politicians based on earlier breakthroughs by previous administrations, notably John Major and Albert Reynolds who agreed to the Downing Street Declaration in 1993.^[19] Both governments had been striving to bring an end to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and establish a sustainable peace process, one that could give parity of esteem to both sides, where all could build a viable Northern Ireland that could be a good neighbor to the Republic in the South.

Ultimately however, it took a confluence of fortuitous circumstances in the 1990s, where all the “stars aligned” as a Prime Minister was elected in the UK, Tony Blair, who saw Northern Ireland as a priority and had a kindred spirit in Ireland, where Bertie Ahern was the Taoiseach (Prime Minister). These two men went above and beyond the call of duty in terms of the time and investment that they put into achieving the GFA in 1998.

Blair had spent childhood holidays in Donegal in the Republic of Ireland, his grandmother being from there. He attributes his interest to this connection, and his enthusiasm in part to his inexperience – he was new to government and had no expectation of failure. Hence, he worked for the Agreement despite many commentators, civil servants and party colleagues advising him not to get too invested in Northern Ireland due to their lack of hope that any sort of progress could be made on the issue.

Ahern for his part famously left early from his mother’s funeral to fly back to Belfast for the conclusion of the tense Agreement negotiations, such was his commitment and determination to get it “over the line” on that historic Good Friday of 1998.^[20]

This would be an agreement that would tackle the historic injustice and mistreatment of the Catholic, largely Nationalist population, who were treated as second class citizens, and who, still a minority in the 1990’s, would become a majority by 2020 if demographic trends continued, which they have.

There would be reform of the Police Service: the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was set up on the recommendations of the Patten Commission to replace the largely Protestant, Unionist Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and it would seek to recruit Nationalists to that force with a 50/50 recruiting policy.

The security environment changed significantly over the next decade, under the terms of the GFA. In return for the release of paramilitary prisoners of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and paramilitaries “on license,” the British army took down its checkpoints and border infrastructure and all army personnel and patrols were removed from the streets of Northern Ireland.^[21]

De-militarisation and para-demilitarisation took place as IRA weapons were decommissioned under the stewardship of Canadian General John deChastelain and his Decommissioning remit. Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, was granted a visa for the US, where he could visit the sizeable Irish emigrant and sympathetic Irish Republican diaspora who had historically contributed funds to “Irish causes” including the IRA. The visit, along with other new breakthroughs such as the removal of the broadcasting ban that had been in place on Sinn Féin in the Republic, helped those violent revolutionaries to morph into peace activists over time, as we witnessed the transformation of the Republican movement from a reactionary, violent, terrorist movement bent on achieving unification by violent means to one that called and observed a ceasefire, decommissioned its weapons and started to work to achieve its aims of unification by solely peaceful and democratic means.

IRA leaders Adams and future Deputy First Minister the late Martin McGuinness (believed to be a former IRA Chief of Staff) deserved much credit for being able to bring the “hard men,” IRA terrorists and prisoners, with them to the new dispensation of political settlement.

A new Northern Ireland Assembly was constituted under the GFA with cross-party and cross-community participation. A North-South Executive and other North-South bodies were established to co-operate in various sectors, and the British-Irish Council was set up. A new era had begun, and the men of violence seemed to have turned their swords into ploughshares. Sinn Féin is now the biggest party in the Assembly, and with the support of the other Nationalist party, the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) and others, would easily nominate a First Minister and are waiting for Michelle O’Neill to take the position as First Minister designate.

It is difficult to see what the tactic is available for the DUP, once passionately in favor of devolution under their late founder, firebrand preacher the Reverend Ian Paisley. Would they now prefer direct rule from Westminster rather than have to serve under a Sinn Féin First Minister?

Perhaps all sides had grown weary of war and conflict by the time the GFA was eventually concluded, and the time was finally right for peace, as the British and Irish governments and all the parties in the North agreed to work out a peace plan that would bring about a new inclusive Ireland where “parity of esteem” for all cultures, traditions and faiths would be the priority. The “peace dividend” would mean that the next generations would live in peace, if the previous generations were able to overcome their pain and hurt and resentment of the previous decades. The prize was indeed great, but sacrifice would have to be made on all sides, as former enemies had to sit down and negotiate with each other and work together to establish the new political institutions where the end goals of the other side were the diametric opposite, one favoring the status quo of remaining in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the other side, Irish reunification.

The Brexit Era

While most Unionists voted in favor of Brexit and Nationalists overwhelmingly voted against, Northern Ireland as a whole voted to remain by 56%-44%.^[22] The events of 2016 and the subsequent departure of the UK from the EU represented a threat to the stability of the GFA. To some degree it is to the credit of the British Government that in the end, despite the “civil war” of Brexit, it kept to this international agreement which underpins the peace process and worked out a Brexit deal with the EU that would ensure that there would be no “hard border” or border checks on the island of Ireland between North and South.

Of course, the cynic might argue that it was forced to do so, and that particularly Prime Minister Boris Johnson was obliged by pressure from the United States and the Biden administration to uphold the agreement, on pain of the threat that there would be no favorable post-Brexit trade deals with the US. Whereas the Republic of Ireland and Nationalists had been unlucky that a grandson of a Scots Gaelic speaker, President Trump, was an admirer of chief Europhobe Nigel Farage and was pro-Brexit, and seemed to care little for the stance of his Gaelic cousins on the matter, on the other hand they were very lucky that President Biden was a proud “son” of Ireland who was determined to protect the GFA, seeing the Brexit issue as a fight for Irish rather than British Independence, even as Farage, Johnson and other Brexiteers were fond of depicting it as the latter.

In the end, common sense prevailed and the GFA was protected by the UK, US, EU and the Republic of Ireland, all the same parties that acted as guarantors of the GFA a quarter of a century earlier. That said, it remains to be seen how long this arrangement will last: one that effectively sees Northern Ireland continue as part of the EU “single

market” and enjoying dual EU and UK market access, uniquely in the world. This was done through the Northern Ireland Protocol trade agreement, which has, at the time of writing, set up a series of checks at ports, mainly in Larne, Northern Ireland, consisting of red and green lanes for goods that are destined for “export” to the South travelling on “EU red lanes” and goods staying in NI travelling on “green lanes.”

Following the failure to ensure any exercise of their “sovereignty” and any meaningful Brexit for Northern Ireland, the Protocol has become the new focus for Unionist anger at the looming prospect of a United Ireland. It is this, along with their refusal to enter the NI Assembly in Stormont as the minority for the first time, which dominates the current political landscape in the “province.” Will the agreement survive another 25 years, especially if Unionists do not co-operate with the GFA institutions? The GFA is a cross-community settlement and requires Nationalist and Unionist cooperation to function legally, at least in its current form.

One of the challenges for the South going forward is how it can encourage or incentivize Unionists to participate in the institutions of the GFA, if the end result is a perceived (and actual) loss of their “sovereignty” or “identity” or both, through eventual absorption into a United Ireland after an inevitable Border Poll. Does no amount of Southern economic success tempt Unionists to throw their lot in with the South and the promise of a better standard of living in a united Ireland? The South has become a “Celtic tiger,” whose fortunes have risen from a situation where it was the “poor man” of Europe on entering the EEC in 1973, to today where by some measures it is the second richest country in the EU.^[23] It is a remarkable achievement, and all the more so considering it was done despite surviving a banking and debt crisis and a bail-out of its economy by the EU/IMF/Eurozone “Troika” over a decade ago. Today by all measures it is considered a top performer and prime location for foreign direct investment and high value employment in Big Tech, Big Pharma and medical devices.

These are tough questions, and ones which Nationalists are being encouraged to answer in the South and North through different fora such as “Ireland’s Future”,^[24] which maintains that unity is somewhat inevitable, and that it is the job of the Irish people and state, not the British government, to prepare for this responsibly through planning, conversations, and policy formulation on economic, social, and cultural issues. Crucially it argues that due to the GFA being a peace agreement in a territory where sovereignty is disputed, the British government should not interfere with this process, as it did in the Scottish referendum in 2014 when it campaigned with “Better Together”^[25] as its slogan and narrowly won that vote.

Nevertheless, many Unionists feel that no matter how economically successful the modern Republic of Ireland is, they will do all in their power to ensure that the Motherland does not cast them aside, regardless of any international agreements or commitments (hoping that “security” will take priority over democracy), even if that means a return to violence. Such a specter might be calculated or engineered to weaken the resolve of not just Nationalists, but especially of the Dublin government and Southerners, many of whom would not wish a return to conflict and the “bad old days.” Preferring today’s partition and the peaceful status quo rather than renewed violence were unification to happen in the morning, they would accommodate a disgruntled rump of over 1 million disaffected Unionists in what would be a combined population of circa 7 million (the Republic has a population of c. 5 million). Of course, not all of the 1 million Unionists would be classed “disaffected” and prone to violence; the overwhelming majority are peace-loving, law-abiding citizens. Nevertheless, the fear of such a campaign of violence directed against a state seeking to bring unification by “force,” as this disgruntled minority might see it, might well be a very real one.

When both parts of the island were in the EU it didn’t matter as much, but since Brexit, identity has now become that little bit more important, and as ever, there is always a danger that a significant minority can turn to violence and make a society ungovernable, if there is not sufficient desire and wherewithal to placate them. The next 25 years will more than likely see some sort of accommodation or even a review or changes to the GFA, but until the majority of Unionists are happy that their identity and to some degree their sovereignty is protected, there is every danger that a United Ireland would not be peaceful and harmonious one. Brexit has made this task that little bit harder unfortunately.

If the EU ever does allow the UK to rejoin, should it ever wish to do so, that might help with the sovereignty issue. Or even if an independent Scotland were to rejoin, as it is likely that the UK itself would be further weakened should the Scots secede. This is also predicated on the EU continuing to be itself one of the most successful peace processes the world has ever seen, and that it does not implode economically or start to fall apart if other member states were to follow the unprecedented UK example of leaving. The EU is, after all, a co-creator of the Northern Ireland Protocol, and now it faces the challenge of continuing to act as a guarantor as the GFA for Northern Ireland, even though its Charter of Fundamental Rights no longer applies there, post-Brexit.^[26]

Notes

[1] C. I. Armstrong, D. Herbert and Jan Erik Mustad, *The Legacy of the Good Friday Agreement: Northern Irish Politics, Culture and Art after 1998* (Springer International Publishing) pp. vii-viii.

[2] “As I Remember It: Bertie Ahern & the Good Friday Agreement on Apple Podcasts,” Episode 9: Jeffery Donaldson, DUP Leader on “Red Lines, Apple Podcasts, <https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/as-i-remember-it-berdie-ahern-the-good-friday-agreement/id1670671845>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

[3] E. McNamara, “Across the bridge of hope: The Omagh bombing and public discourse in Northern Ireland,” *The Australasian Journal of Irish Studies* 21 (2021): 33-55.

[4] “As I Remember It,” Episode 8. <https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/as-i-remember-it-berdie-ahern-the-good-friday-agreement/id1670671845>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

[5] Ibid.: Johnathan Powell on Brexit and change in sentiment in UK politics.

[6] Jessica Elgot, “What is prorogation and why is Boris Johnson using it?” *The Guardian*. (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/28/what-is-prorogation-prorogue-parliament-boris-johnson-brexit>, n.d.). Retrieved June 26, 2023.

[7] “As I Remember It,” Episode 7. <https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/as-i-remember-it-berdie-ahern-the-good-friday-agreement/id1670671845>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

[8] Armalite is slang for the AR-15 rifle, which the Armalite company manufactured in the US from 1959-1964.

[9] J. Kearney, P. Shirlow and E. Tannam, “Partition to Partnership to Brexit,” *The RUSI Journal* (2022): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2022.2124078>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Department of Foreign Affairs, Government of Ireland <https://www.dfa.ie/media/dfa/aadfawebstimedia/ourrolesandpolicies/northernireland/good-friday-agreement.pdf>. Retrieved May 12, 2023

[13] B. O’Leary, *Making Sense of a United Ireland* (Sandycove, 2022).

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., supplementary graph after p. 280.

[18] R. J. Hunter, *Ulster transformed: Plantation in early modern Ireland c.1590–1641* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2020), pp. 32, 42.

[19] PA-X: Peace Agreements Database. [https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/127/joint%20Declaration%20issued%20by%20The%20Prime%20Minister%20Rt%20John%20Major%20MP%20and%20the%20Taoiseach%20Mr%20Albert%20Reynolds%20TD%20\(Downing%20Street](https://www.peaceagreements.org/wview/127/joint%20Declaration%20issued%20by%20The%20Prime%20Minister%20Rt%20John%20Major%20MP%20and%20the%20Taoiseach%20Mr%20Albert%20Reynolds%20TD%20(Downing%20Street). Accessed May 6, 2023.

[20] “As I Remember It.”

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