

'...for peace comes dropping slow.' Lessons from the middle in Northern Ireland's peace process.

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On August 15, 1998 a terrorist car bomb exploded in the town of Omagh in Northern Ireland killing 29 and injuring over 200. Omagh was the deadliest single bomb attack of Northern Ireland's Troubles, though it occurred after the [Good Friday peace agreement](#) there had been ratified by convincing referendum majorities. Like with the assault on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, history will primarily teach these events as markers of the end of a particular phase and the beginning of a new one (think 9/11) and certainly events like these offer moments of punctuation that are useful in developing narratives and communicating the past to a wider audience. The problem is however that episodes of conflict and violence can come to dominate our understanding of history to the detriment of other factors, trends and behaviors. They remain of course important, as when people are hurt, suffer or die their deaths have profound effects, and when dramatic events happen people pay attention. This emphasis on history as drama replayed in high contrast however dangerously muddies the wider reality where violence is never the whole picture and government action far from the only or even best response. If we view conflict and violence as the interruption of ordinary life; if we see them as aberrant, local, temporal and discordant, then we can see how push-button responses by the state can actually metastasize problems when applied in the longer term as well as how forbearance, stoicism and trust can be the better response to violent division.

In measurable fact Northern Ireland in 1998 like the United States in 2021 had in reality come a long way from the era of overt discrimination, and violent protest of the 1960s and 1970s. Both had gone through a long period of reform and even restitution before their Omagh or Capitol events. On January 6 the people of America went to work and to school and to hospital without disruption. There was no failure of substance that inspired the Capitol riots apart from a conviction a great wrong was taking place. This was the case too in Northern Ireland in 1998 when the bomb in Omagh exploded as a protest against the referendum result three months earlier.

To clarify, the challenge faced in Northern Ireland following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement was great, but it was far less than the challenges that were faced by an earlier generation when arguably the distance between the two communities in Northern Ireland (nationalist/republican/Catholic and unionist/loyalist/Protestant) was much greater. The Agreement of 1998 only granted further reforms than those that had been enacted at economic and social levels during the Troubles. The renaming and reforming of the police, and the licensed release of paramilitary prisoners, took place alongside the decommissioning of the military presence and paramilitaries' unseen arsenals. These were agreements between the fighting extremes of the conflict rather than the conciliatory middle having been incentivized by years of civil, social and community activity toward reconciliation. The political solution in Northern Ireland ([power sharing](#) between Catholics and Protestants with an [Irish Dimension](#)) had in fact been worked out as early as the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement and, one veteran of that agreement. Seamus Mallon memorably quipped at the time that Good Friday was in fact 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. Those that attacked Omagh sought to disrupt this agreement and to provoke a state response against them, neither of which occurred. Instead, [acts of protest against the terrorists](#) took place, the homes and offices of the leaders were harassed and [they were sent for a time into hiding from their own communities](#) who stood, not by them, but by the Peace Agreement.

Looking at conciliation and the history of consensus in Ireland one must avoid being allured solely by the chronology of the conflict and the logic that violence always leads to more violence. By separating the history of peace-making from the history of conflict, even temporarily, one can generate useful space to the force and power of competing logics that stem not from those seeking to force or coerce a settlement but, rather unromantically, to minimize and de-valorize violence in order to truly unite. Rather uncomfortably for some, in 1968 the Irish Prime Minister (Taoiseach) was advised by [T.K Whitaker](#) – his trusted confidante on Northern Ireland – that 'our 1937 Constitution appears to claim for Dublin a premature and dogmatic right, without reservations as to form, to rule the whole of Ireland. But there is nothing we can do about this, in present circumstances, except to forget it!'. And though this claim was not lifted until 1998, this unromantic truth that Irish unity was a social rather than a political end was as true then as it was in 1998, as is the broader truth that it was always beyond the power of governments to change that. This story, and those to follow, fit uneasily within the loud and distracting noise of violent act after violent act but they come from a wider range of actors. With this view, those often derided as idealists or

peaceniks (or business owners, clergy, sportspeople) are seen in the context of their wider societal intersections, offering more practical alternative perspectives than are usually realized. This essay seeks to highlight simply the margins of these groups' contributions to peace in Northern Ireland both before and after 1998 in order to make one consider the potential of how similar actions can be promoted in civil society within the United States today.

I was born in Londonderry
I was born in Derry City too
Oh what a special child to see such things and still to smile
I knew that there was something wrong
But I kept my head down and carried on.

Neil Hannon, *Sunrise* (1998).

When looking at the government's role in promoting peace and justice in Northern Ireland one first must recognize that sometimes by accident, sometimes necessity and sometimes out of political expediency the government played a significant role in fighting and even escalating the conflict there too. As a participant, the state's role (and from 1972 Northern Ireland was directly ruled by the UK Government) in peacemaking was not neutral but nor was the power of the state absolute. That said, pushing for political reform and equality legislation (the demands of the Civil Rights protests of the late 1960s) was as much a responsibility as was the provision of security (and the control of the excesses of their Security Forces). Both took time, but by the 1990s proactive [equality legislation](#) that monitored discrimination in hiring and promotion practices had forced Northern Ireland's larger employers to think seriously about work culture and the environment they provided. Hefty fines and lengthy tribunals made government policy stick and added to this the [promotion of inward investment](#), particularly from US firms, meant businesses reformed significantly to become beacons of what a non-sectarian society might look like, long before the peace process in Northern Ireland took off. The success of these policies has been significant, and from 1990 to 2019 Northern Ireland's Equality Commission have noted an increase of Catholics in their monitored workforce from [34.9% to 49.5%](#). The state also played an important role too and today Catholics both apply and are hired by Northern Ireland's civil service at a higher rate than their proportion of the population. The progress was slower among small employers admittedly, but often because these relied on familial

connections or operated in homogenous locales, but that sectarianism in the workplace became frowned upon as a result of legislation and its enforcement, despite being amidst an ongoing sectarian conflict is itself notable.

Beyond the state, the actions of religious leaders and churches is remarkable too. From individual clergy offering mediation, to secret connections between church hierarchies and the state by the 1990s, the opposition to continuing violence in Northern Ireland became a shared goal and platform on which leaders of all the main Christian denominations of Northern Ireland were [prepared to stand together on](#). Like the state, the limitations of intervention by the clergy was also apparent however, and the majority of Catholic priests for example preferred to remain aloof from efforts to proactively secure peace or to encourage interaction between the different faith communities (though there are prominent exceptions) as they sought to rise above the political considerations of their parishioners as well as to avoid unpopular entanglement with them. In so doing, the Catholic Church in particular avoided calls to liberalize education (and end self-inflicted religious segregation in Northern Ireland) either through the abolition of grammar schools (academic selection) or through the secularization of education, changes that would arguably have engineered a more cosmopolitan Northern Ireland community much earlier than it in fact appeared. But this is no different to the police who saw their job as the equal provision of justice despite the allegations of bias and the obvious imbalance in terms of their recruitment. Religious groups could also be proactive and church-based work on community reconciliation began even before the conflict itself. Almost anticipating the Troubles, the [Corrymeela community](#) was established in 1965 by the Presbyterian Dean of Queen's University Belfast with the specific but simple hope of bringing people together, in a shared community within a divided society, however briefly. Corrymeela continues its work to this day with residential retreats and workshops as well as outreach programs.

In some areas of Northern Ireland the developments of the late twentieth century were perhaps more apparent. In youth culture and pop music, the jazz and blues scene of Belfast in the early 1960s provided a place apart where religion and politics were entirely irrelevant. This was the scene not only from which Van Morrison would emerge but Rory Gallagher and countless showbands that would keep an a-political music scene going in Northern Ireland throughout the height of the troubles despite the threats and even [murderous attacks that they faced](#). Later, punk music in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s allowed for that genuine disinterest in the political order to be celebrated and the political ambivalence of groups like

The Undertones rebelled against what to them was a staid, violent political (dis)order by writing songs about Mars bars and teenage crushes. Alternatively, the band Stiff Little Fingers embraced politics and politicians as subjects for their songwriting, but with a biting cynicism aimed at all leaders in Northern Ireland;

`Inflammable material, planted in my head
It's a suspect device that's left two thousand dead'
Stiff Little Fingers [`Suspect Device'](#) (1979)

Similarly women's movements for peace in Northern Ireland have often negated the sectarian divide (and even ridiculed it) in order to pour scorn on the politics of division and those that promote and benefit from it. Women organizing themselves in May 1972 forced the waning Official IRA into a permanent ceasefire following a series of incidents in which young women were publicly tarred and feather as punishment for alleged contacts with British Soldiers and the murder of [William Best](#), a 19 year old soldier on leave from the British Army and abducted from his family's home in Derry. The Peace People (established as Women for Peace in 1976) similarly marched and protested against violence from all sides. They came into being after the horrific death of three children following a [high speed pursuit](#) through Belfast. Tens of thousands of women took to the streets in support of non-violence, catching the public mood of anguish and publicly chastising both the paramilitaries and the security forces for their irresponsible behavior. For their work the group's two founding members were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The election of former women's rights activist Mary Robinson as President of the Republic of Ireland in 1990 (succeeded in 1997 by Belfast born Mary McAleese who had worked previously with ecumenical and anti-sectarian groups in Northern Ireland) arguably both inspired and were themselves part of the new wave of female activism in Northern Ireland and the [Northern Ireland Women's Coalition](#) (NIWC) benefitted from this surge, campaigning as a political party on a non-sectarian platform. NIWC peaked at a pivotal moment when they had two members elected to the Northern Ireland Forum in 1996 (the body that negotiated the eventual Good Friday Agreement). Alumni of virtually all these organizations have often continued their work subsequently, bringing their expertise to bear internationally from Columbia to Timor-Leste and from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Sport has remained a fundamentally divided area of interaction in Northern Ireland for three main but overlapping reasons; culture, class and international politics but it remains an important place, away from the conflict, where changed attitudes can at times be identified. In a cultural sense the dichotomous (and myopic) perception in Northern Ireland of their being 'Gaelic' sports and 'British' sports has been a difficult one to shake. The Gaelic Athletic Association's 1897 ban (repealed in 2001) of membership by the British Security forces (including the police) became a largely moot point in the Republic of Ireland after independence in 1921 but one which fed suspicion between the police and GAA till well after the peace process had started. The GAA still remember members who were also republican paramilitaries but significant milestones were reached more recently with the first [North-South police](#) match in 2002 and the attendance of then Northern Ireland First Minister [Arlene Foster at the Ulster Final](#) in 2018. In soccer, Northern Ireland's Irish Football Association pre-dates both partition and Irish independence (with the Republic of Ireland's Football Association of Ireland being the break-away group) and although it formally avers sectarianism, communal divisions result in fewer Catholics wanting to play for Northern Ireland internationally than qualifying by way of merit. Also, while Catholic teams certainly play in Northern Ireland's leagues only one of the most prominent teams, Cliftonville FC, has a predominantly Catholic following. Derry City FC have the unique position of being located in one jurisdiction (Northern Ireland) while playing in the other, a result of other teams' refusal to play at their ground in the 1970s for security reasons. Like the GAA, in Rugby Union, Irish unity was successfully maintained despite the constitutional changes of the 1920s because the Irish Rugby Football Union largely ignored its occurrence. Unlike the GAA, the lack of significant nationalist membership, along with the sport's ties to the Commonwealth, meant that Rugby (along with Cricket) could continue to exist as an all-Ireland body representing Ireland as a whole whilst remaining ambiguous on the wider political issues. In Olympic sports such ambiguity was impossible and even minority sports, like cycling, hockey and most recently golf have had to align with the practicalities of IOC membership. Often this has occasioned regrettable controversies and dilution of funding as a result. More recent sporting imports have however managed to avoid sectarian labelling even if they have struggled to compete at the grass roots level. The [Belfast Giants](#) Ice Hockey team, established in 2000 following the construction of Belfast's Odyssey Arena complex (itself a project notionally attached to the peace process and opened by US President Bill Clinton) has successfully detached itself from the sectarian divide that other sports in Northern Ireland have failed to do and indicates once again the ability of the

private sector and market forces to transform attitudes and behaviors in Northern Ireland especially when a gentle nudge from the state is made in that direction.

The work of the wider Peace and Conflict Resolution NGOs in Northern Ireland has undoubtedly had [a mixed record](#). There was, for a time, a virtual peace industry there with over 5,000 such bodies being recorded (for a population of 1.5million) in 1997. Their work was wide in scope, ranging from computer literacy courses and community regeneration projects to the confronting of paramilitary groups themselves. Of note were projects, often funded by the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#), and led by English Quakers who engaged directly with the Provisional IRA and the Security Forces. [Will Warren](#) – a retired printer – arrived in Derry in 1971 and chose to live in a squat in the city's troubled Bogside area to act as a witness for peace. There he befriended young rioters, sometimes standing between them and the Security Forces and literally calling out for peace. Through this and other work he became known to paramilitary leaders in the city. Set apart by both his age and his Englishness, Warren became a respected local figure on the margins of the conflict; suspected and yet trusted equally by all sides. Warren's legacy was the city's Peace and Reconciliation Group that continued with the support of the Rowntree Foundation and from 1983 was joined by John and Diane Lampen whose work in developing contacts between the communities in Derry (and between the Security Forces and the IRA) led ultimately to a secret local peace agreement known as the [Derry Experiment](#), modelled on the de-escalation tactics developed during Détente, but which became a vital part of the nascent peace process in the early 1990s, and a pivotal moment in Martin McGuinness' transformation from paramilitary leader to politician.

The national and international funding for such organizations and their work in Northern Ireland was not limited to charitable groups, but nor was peacebuilding limited to charity. The UK had invested millions in the Northern Ireland economy and its infrastructure, and had subsidized public housing construction and education there on an unprecedented scale in the 1970s and 80s. From the 1990s the EU invested €1.3billion in its [PEACE programs](#) on top of further billions in the structural subsidies it received from the European Regional Development Fund. From 1992 the EU's single market made the customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic obsolete, meaning all border infrastructure in Ireland was able to disappear after the Good Friday Agreement, uniting Ireland in virtually all practical (if not political) senses. In the United States, funding from private donors was for a time partisan, and Irish American donors undoubtedly put substantial sums of money into Irish

Republican prisoner support programs as well as arms for the IRA to support the 'old cause' of independence particularly in the 1970s. From the time of the Carter Administration, and with the new understanding constituted with the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, the establishment of a British and Irish government-backed [International Fund for Ireland](#) (alongside an FBI unit devoted to end gun-running to Northern Ireland) funds from Irish America were successfully channeled to community projects and Northern Ireland was promoted as an investment opportunity to a range of American multinationals. The diplomatic weight of the United States in the Clinton era – backed of course by the Irish Caucus (and its 'four horsemen' of Ted Kennedy, Tip O'Neill, Hugh Carey and Pat Moynihan) – successfully leveraged the Anglo-American special relationship against Britain's loyalty to Northern Ireland's majority unionist population, especially once the Provisional IRA's ceasefire became an established fact.

There is no doubt that all of this interaction from the moderate center; of local, national and world opinion had a vital role in the instigation and support of Northern Ireland's road to peace. But it is also clear that peace remained a contested issue between the extremes in Northern Ireland that the eventual constitutional settlement (the Good Friday Agreement) actively institutionalized. But to have been brought from revolutionary politics into a competitive democratic process (and to stay there) remains a credit to those that sought peace and were prepared to be side-lined themselves in the process. In some respects the conflict has been caged since 1998, and kept there to wither by good governance, fair legislation, NGO funding and sensitively targeted security policies. The middle meanwhile has both expanded and moved on, increased secularization, a rise in 'mixed' (Protestant and Catholic) marriages, rising standards of living and property ownership (through boom *and* bust) have set the conflict in the past for most. In urban social housing the story has undoubtedly been different and sectarian attitudes and even acts of intimidation continue periodically. Some of this has come from the perception at the extremes that they lost *their* conflict, some has come from a romanticism among the young that they somehow missed *their* chance to fight but their cohesion in the last decade or so has come from the revolution in social media and their ability to connect with each other without contradiction. Dissident Irish Republicans re-emerged from the ashes of the Omagh bomb and have rebuilt their support among disadvantaged young Catholics, particularly since 2008. Loyalist groups, under the watch of government-backed community funders are beginning to lose control over young people upset by the threat they have seen to the Union with Britain in the

Northern Ireland protocol (BREXIT's supposed Irish solution). These challenges however remain contained within the bars of the political and constitutional settlement. But what was built strong is once again [being tested](#). But such tests are not new either, and fringe conspiracies are hardly an invention of our own time. In Irish History the [Comber Letter](#) of 1689 was 'fake news' and similar texts promoting anti-Catholic conspiracies have emerged and reemerged over the centuries. Distrust and suspicion of difference are more easily communicable than before but the answer to them remains the same, leadership, reason and forbearance.

If Yeats was right, and peace does indeed come '[dropping slow](#)' then peace in Northern Ireland at least has come further now than it has ultimately to travel; something that the US may also bear in mind. The extremes remain but too much has been ventured in living together to once again be drawn apart and civil society has done its part, sometime subsidised, sometime not, to change attitudes and draw people from the extremes. This is when the emphasis on conflict in Northern Ireland becomes unhelpful and can even interfere in the purposes of the present and the continued need for reform and the disruptive characteristics of revolution. But fortunately, violent revolution is far from the only way to frame Northern Ireland's history and the job of historians should be as much the exploration of intersectionality by considering other, wider and layered experiences too. This is especially so if that means measuring and evaluating these intersections against the significance of those who seek division (even though they may even call this 'unity'). For a time historians in Ireland were successful in changing the way Northern Ireland was viewed and how Ireland was prepared to view itself, the late Keith Jeffrey's work on [Ireland and the Great War](#) was written against the grain of Ireland's traditions and succeeding in its aim to 'reconcile the two contending narratives of Irish history.' So too the Island of Ireland Peace Park and Village has continued its work quietly in Messines, Belgium bringing school children (and adults) together on visits to one of the battlefields of World War One where their ancestors, Catholic *and* Protestant, [fought and died together](#). But some of this impetus has waned throughout Ireland's decade of centenaries (2012-2023) and the continued exposure of seemingly unending injustices that all too often were [covered up by the state in Northern Ireland's past](#) continually bring the conversation back around to the conflict.

This essay has consciously avoided, until now, mentioning the work of John Hume who, as an Irish nationalist, could not strictly represent a non-partisan view (although neither could Dr King). But Hume nevertheless operated throughout his career as an advocate of

democracy and constitutionalism in Northern Ireland. Irish unity for Hume, meant first a social unity that involved a degree of acceptance on both sides and a profound belief that agreement could never be arrived at through coercion. Politics and the 'rule of law', in Hume's experience were limited in its power too and no legitimate state could ever forcefully change the opinions of its citizens either. The acceptance of difference therefore was, for Hume, a necessity but more important still was having the long term forbearance to simply realize the following:

'Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace – respect for diversity.'

John Hume, [Nobel Peace Prize Lecture](#), Oslo December 10, 1998.

In many respects Northern Ireland should be a lesson to no one. Mistakenly formed, mistakenly governed and mistakenly fought over, Northern Ireland's legacy has time and again proven the truism that there are no quick fixes for difficult problems. But democracy – free and fair – has a way of listening to people, and the strong scaffolding of constitutions have the means to contain disagreement. The mutual interests of people – outside of politics – offers the way to understanding that in the long-term can allow people to grow and live together. The state has a role to play, but it cannot and should never attempt to step out of the confines of its constitution or act outside the letter or spirit of its laws. In times of internal division it should '[establish justice](#)' and '[promote the general welfare](#)'; it can correct wrongs and address injustices; it can even nudge occasionally, but ultimately it must trust in its people too.

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