
The Strengths And Weaknesses Of The Good Friday Agreement

The achievement of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement in 1998 created history, where for the first time the contentious and previously irreconcilable differences between the rigid stance assumed by the opposing factions reached a situation of a possible harmony in a manner that was acceptable to the concerned parties-after 30 years of violence. This ground-breaking Agreement resulted in a new political system, designed to balance power sharing between the two communities. While the Agreement is a mere 30 pages long, it deals with a 'host of interrelated issues associated with how to approach, represent, remember and acknowledge the history of violence' (Armstrong, et al., 2019, p. 89). The Agreement has been 'extraordinary' according to McGarry in three ways, it is 'consociational, it is coherent, and it is maximal in its commitments' (2001, p. 89). The Agreement has also brought about remarkable change in many arenas, foremost amongst them has been the fact that political violence has largely ceased – while threats from dissident groups remain, there has been a sharp fall in the rates of street crime. Further with the power sharing government in place, both sides have had to work together for the overall good of the country instead of banging on partisan drums. The Agreement also generated much needed international goodwill, helping the country develop for the better. Additionally, significant change can be seen in the mindset of young people- who have started to be more flexible in their identity rejecting the binary of being either Irish or British and instead associating as being from Northern Ireland. Economically the country has flourished due to an influx of foreign investment and overseas tourism. However, the one thing that hasn't changed is the entrenched sectarianism. Which while disheartening still has scope for improvement. (Whysall, 2018)

Strengths

One of the many yet more significant successes of the Good Friday Agreement was that it 'repositioned the British state, so that it no longer sat at the apex of an unstable triangular structure of conflict'.(Todd, 2003, p. 5) Todd goes on to define a 'Triangular Conflict' as one where 'two communities come into unequal and mutually dependent relations with a state.' Stating that it is quintessentially found in nations having born the yolk of colonialism. The situation in Northern Ireland being one where the functioning of the state itself is affected by communal discord, especially in securing of order in its territory. This happens because there is no single agent who can assert order especially given that the state itself is complicit in the conflict and its actions are limited by the fact that it is dependent on one or more of the communities involved in said conflict. The Agreement gives the British state in effect two major roles, according to Todd, who states that the first is that it makes them in effect 'an arbiter of the internal communal conflict', and secondly it places the British state in a position whereby it is a 'comanager of the ethno-national conflict together with the Irish state'. The way that the Agreement deals with this issue is to secure egalitarian binational policies, some examples of this can be seen in the parity in roles of the First Minister and the Deputy First minister, as well the right of citizens to possess either or both English and Irish passports (2003, p. 5). Ergo the Agreement transformed the original structure of inequality and dominance and replaced it with a more egalitarian system and creates the continued frame work for bilateral dialogue between

the British and Irish states. The conflict thus has moved from an unstable triangular conflict to a more stable symmetrical form with scholars currently suggesting that there is a shift towards a 'multi-variable conflict' which is a direct result of the emergence of multiple power centres in communities as they compete for resources (Todd, 2003 , p. 2). According to Pollak, the reason this Agreement works so well, is due to the fact that it has a 'complex system of checks and balances', he further states that the institutions it puts forwards are not only complex but that they also cover such a wide range of subjects that people have no reason to mistrust it. (2001, p. 13)

An additional success of the Agreement is that it to a great extent attempts to put forward a working system of 'equality and human rights'(Fenton, 2018). Cohen extrapolates on this idea in a more coherent manner when he says that 'if orange domination of green was wrong and unworkable, green domination of orange would be equally wrong and unworkable... if you want to create a stable and constructive relationship between the two communities, it is pointless to try to do so except on the basis of equality', he goes on to say that the Agreement has the ability to rise above the "either/or" mentality and therefore circumvents the zero-sum outlook (2001, p. 5) (2008, p. 38) Durkan furthers this understanding by saying that the agreement did many things but the one thing that it did not do was 'make nationalists unionists in waiting. Nor does it make unionists nationalists in waiting', he says that it provided a shared island where both sides are free to 'pursue and promote their constitutional preferences while working together on the important economic, social and environmental issues' (Durkan, 2002). The Agreement brings about this egalitarianism through several clauses which not only acknowledge the central problems affecting the peaceful coexistence between the two communities, but also puts forwards structural solutions which are acceptable, taking into consideration the geopolitical status quo. It protects the status of Northern Ireland in a manner whereby they have the ability to hold a referendum- where if a majority votes to leave the United Kingdom, they will be free to do so; it provides an adequate mechanism for ending the partition; the Agreement also focuses heavily upon the promotion of inter communal equality where it acknowledged the cultural diversity of the region and that respecting the cultures, traditions, symbols etc of one another's communities is essential, allowing for free expression of ones ideologies without repercussion; it also provides for dual citizenship to those living in Northern Ireland, where they can choose to either be Irish, British or both (Coakley, 2001). Another very interesting dimension of the Agreement which brings about equality for everybody who resides within its territory is that it gave impetus to the 'issue of cultural diversity ...extending to the issues of smaller language groups... such as the Ulster Scots' (Craith, 2001, p. 2) through instances like this the Agreement shows time and again that it paid great attention to detail and ensures that no minority community would be left out of the negotiations.

Weaknesses

A consistent scholastic view on the most prominent drawbacks of the Agreement is that it failed to address institutionalised sectarianism which has a deep negative consequence on the peace process. 'The entrenchment of group identities has reinforced divisions and fuelled intercommunal conflict' (Neuhesier & Wolff, 2002, pp. 40-42). If one were to undertake a deeper appreciation of the facts underlying the forgoing statement, the following would present themselves as obvious conclusions,

under these circumstances the peace process has left a lot of perceived hotspots unattended

and unresolved the resultant of course is that Northern Ireland remains a divided society. At present there are more peace walls now than there were in 1998 and 74% of the local populace live in single community housing zones regardless of the fact that almost four fifths of them would like to live in a religiously mixed area (BlackBourn & Rekawek, 2008, p. 38). The BlackBourn and Rekawek report goes on to show that about 57% of Protestant respondents felt that the increase in the number of peace walls was due to security threats from the other community while only a third of the Catholics shared this view, and about 30% of respondents on both sides felt that sectarianism was to blame.

The remaining viewed the walls to be a response to either bigotry or the inability of communities to forget the past. Other areas of segregation can be seen in both education and housing, where the common understanding should be that segregated schools and housing further a 'us versus them' mentality which leads to the further development of the sectarian mind frames. A large number of young people in Northern Ireland do not experience cross community education until they attend university, this has caused 'ethno-religious isolation reinforcing intra-sectoral bias, stereotyping and prejudice' (Borooah & Knox, 2015).

Another weakness of the Agreement was that it did not sufficiently address the issue of Paramilitaries and their sphere of influence. A popular opinion here being that the Agreement was 'a product of violence' and attempted to 'buy off paramilitaries' to prevent further violence (Neuhesier & Wolff, 2002, p. 32). Depending on one's opinion Northern Ireland functions as a democracy or at the very least it aspires to function as one, keeping this in mind, the existence of political parties associated with paramilitary wings is at clear odds with democratic ideals. The Agreement further does not account for the 'inability of paramilitaries to provide sufficient confidence in the durability of their cease fires, through the decommissioning of weapons and the ending of violence' (Neuhesier & Wolff, 2002, pp. 40-42). This threat to the rule of law can be seen very clearly not only the continued terrorist threat from both dissident republicans and loyalists, but also by the obvious lack of regard paramilitaries hold for "ending violence" which they make blatantly clear by the continuation of punishment attacks, and murder of people who they allege are part of gangs or drug dealers. Since 1998 there has been a notable decline in the number of incidences related to paramilitary violence, statistics from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report show that the number of deaths have fallen from 55 in 1998 to 5 in 2005 (2008, p. 63). However the BlackBourn and Rekawek report also stated that when opinions were gathered on whether the Agreement was a reason for the decrease in violence, 50% of Protestants and 84% of Catholics thought so, this suggests according to the report that 'more of the low level violent acts, which often are unreported, are perpetrated in the loyalist communities than in the nationalist/republican heartlands' (2008, p. 70). However, the latest report goes on to show that while the rates of murders have decreased, the violence is still prominent, where in 2017/18, 576 sectarian motivated hate crimes were recorded (decreased since 2016/17 by 118). (2018, p. 4)

A further consequence of this gap which is little spoken of is highlighted by Fenton when she talks about how the Agreement was so focused on sectarian violence that it overlooked the fact that domestic and sexual violence increased exponentially during the troubles. She states that this was possible only because firearms were more easily accessible and that women's access to justice was hampered by the breakdown in normal policing. (2018, p. 163). The reluctance on the part of the state to tackle paramilitarism and criminality can be viewed as putting the peace process in peril. The only way to address this glaring inconsistency according to Bew (2007, p.

50) is if the government stops turning 'a blind eye to gun-running and murder', and that it has to take notice of how subversive these are to a genuine peace process.

Looking forward

The Agreement constituted an honourable compromise between the competing factions within Northern Ireland and the governments of the United Kingdom and the republic of Ireland. This has however resulted in failure, because the pro agreement parties have been obstinate in accommodating one another concerns, the obvious ones being in 'Interpretation, sequencing and who is responsible for action' (Neuhesier & Wolff, 2002). In Northern Ireland today, the Agreement has started to lose the relevance it enjoyed years ago, this can be seen in many ways, primarily due to the change that society is undergoing. The most noticeable is that the 'power-sharing government' that it established has not functioned in over a year with the backing of both major parties, and now with Brexit underway, the issue of the Irish border becomes of vital importance (Whysall, 2018). The Agreement is also beginning to show its age where its provisions are no longer relevant in the modern social context, as most of its provisions were designed with sectarianism as a backdrop, it fails to address discrimination in forms other than ethno-national, key amongst these are the rights of the LGBTQ community and those of women (Fenton, 2018, p. 162). As the Agreement was a constitutional, political project, it did not aim at addressing the economic or social shortcomings of the country in detail, therefore one cannot place the blame for the lack of success on individuals or communities (BlackBourn & Rekawek, 2008, p. 76). The only way forward is to implement reforms to the Agreement, they way to do this according to Neuhesier and Wolff is by, removing designations, by reforming the electoral system and making it more cross-communal, and to introduce collective responsibility in the Executive, they believe that 'top-down power sharing should be complemented with bottom-up reconciliation within the community' (2002, p. 44).

Conclusion

The Agreement provided Northern Ireland with an opportunity to re-imagine its future, and to 'be a beacon of hope for other societies coming out of conflict.' It serves as a facilitator and promoter of good governance which must be founded on 'equality, human rights, good relations and social justice.' These values must inform not only policy but also be the basis of all future relations the state has with the world as well as within its own communities (Council, 2017, p. 6). It dealt with the conflict on two distinct yet related ways, it is a political deal which provides for a governance with power-sharing, allowing for the two communities to work together harmoniously despite their different interests, aspirations and allegiances, it also functions as a means to address the conflict in ways that are transformative to society. As a political deal it addressed the conflict of communal interests, of political legitimacy and more importantly it continues to address the future. It further tries to acknowledge and redress the roots of sectarianism, to reconcile Northern Ireland (Ruane & Todd, 1999, p. 16). The Agreement was nothing short of miraculous in not just its aims but also the feats it achieved, it gave the country a much-needed respite from the violence that was its heritage and hope for a much brighter, shared future.