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# Introduction – Twenty-Five Years on And the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: Some Critical Reflections

Uvod – Petindvajset let po velikonočnem sporazumu:  
 nekaj kritičnih premislekov

## 1. Introduction

Internal issues and rival actors with identity ties to the same territory and natural resources often escalate ethno-political conflicts institutionalizing division and violence (Chandler 2017). In addition, the external international dimension like postcoloniality, global capitalism and security, and neoliberal peacebuilding attempt to re-engineer states like Northern Ireland striving to emerge from a violent and painful past (Mac Ginty 2008; Maiangwa et al. 2022; Thiessen & Byrne 2017). It is challenging, therefore, to create peace in societies with deep demarcating social cleavages and political disconnections where the fear of violence shapes communities' perceptions and behavior with "representative violence and communal deterrence" fortifying deep divisions in societies such as Northern Ireland trying to transition to peace through ethnonational elite accommodation and powersharing governments (Guelke 2012).

Twenty-five years ago, in the early hours of April 10, 1998, longstanding and bitter political opponents opted for peace in Northern Ireland with the multi-party signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA).<sup>1</sup> Just over six weeks later, following a contentious campaigning period, the B/GFA was approved by Northern and Southern Irish voters, officially ushering in an end to direct violence of the 30-years Troubles and the beginning of a post-peace accord Northern Ireland (Belloni 2010). The B/GFA marked a critical juncture in negative peace or ending the physical violence as consociationalism, and power-sharing became the political *modus operandi* across Northern Ireland (McGarry & O'Leary 2017).

In the intervening years, the B/GFA has been the subject of scrutiny as Northern Ireland travels along its peacebuilding sojourn. With two and a half decades in the history books, time and experience has revealed much about

the B/GFA successes and challenges and the impact on the people of Northern Ireland. For many peacebuilders working at the social level to build positive peace or social justice and reconciliation, these lessons are hard reminders of the tenuous peace that exists in post-agreement Northern Ireland (Thiessen et al. 2010; White 2014).

This special issue commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the B/GFA takes a critical eye to explore the social-economic, cultural, and political impact. Ten insightful essays survey critical issues like the nature of powersharing, the impact of the B/GFA and the peace process on marginalized communities (women, disabled people, youth, LGBTQIA+ citizens, dissidents, the very poor, and survivors of the physical violence), gender inclusion, reconciliation, legacy and remembrance, contested spaces and everyday peace politics, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

## 2. A Cold and Frosty Peace by Pieces

Northern Ireland's peacebuilding processes include several critical ingredients like large-scale social-economic restructuring aimed at reducing horizontal inequalities, a reorganized police force, and an institutionalized consociational powersharing government (Clark 2022). However, despite significant political progress in terms of addressing negative peace or the absence of direct violence, Northern Ireland's urban areas and their communities continue to remain divided by peace walls, peace lines, and interfaces, many of whom were built after the B/GFA (Grattan 2020; O'Neill 2023). In the wake of the Brexit and Northern Ireland Protocol debacle, Northern Ireland's non-functioning and dysfunctional powersharing government, increased unemployment, a resurgence of dissident violence, and reconciliation challenges due to the ongoing culture war that has fragmented working class communities continue to plague the people of Northern Ireland (Holland 2022; McGlinchey 2019).

For example, the Union Flag had flown every day at city hall, yet controversy arose from Belfast City Council's ruling on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, to restrict and reduce the time the flag would be flown. Immediately following this decision, protests emerged outside city hall every Saturday that escalated into violence that lasted into 2013 (Bryan 2015). Abandonment and exploitation claims from the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (PUL) community have intensified since the B/GFA. The flag controversy heightened divisions in the PUL community between political Unionism and working class PUL community members' complete rejection of these political elites (Hearty 2015). There are tensions, therefore, between those who adhere to a more contemporary and more moderate Loyalism that is connected to retaining and re-energizing culture, and more adversarial and anti-Republican forms of Loyalism that are embedded in historical legacies and traditions (Long 2018).

In addition, the border issue became a central component of post-Brexit negotiations because Britain and Northern Ireland wished to negotiate a similar deal and ensure similar conditions. Alternatively, the Catholic Nationalist Republicans (CNR community), the Irish government, and the European Union (E.U.) wanted to prevent a hard border emerging on the island and to maintain the peace process so that Brexit in Northern Ireland was characterized more by its impacts on the peace process than it was on immigration and sovereignty (Doyle & Connolly 2019). In the 2017 elections, for the first time in history, the anti-unity parties received less than the majority of seats, as Scotland and Northern Ireland also voted to remain in the E.U. A border was created on the Irish Sea to prevent the island's land border from being closed. That said, the PUL community perceives itself as left behind discerning the sea border as further separating the community from Britain.

Political parties aligned along sectarian lines on the Brexit issue with Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) favoring remaining in the E.U., while the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) supporting leaving the single market (McCann & Hainsworth 2017). A consent mechanism in relation to the hard border was part of Britain's withdrawal agreement, so that by 2024, Northern Ireland's Assembly could vote by simple majority to choose to continue or not with Northern Ireland Protocol's arrangements concerning goods and customs relating to the border (Harvey 2020).

The devolution of Northern Ireland's powersharing government that restricts any one party's capacity to make decisions alone has need of the political party's consensus to form a somewhat fragile government that was suspended on a few occasions between 2000 and 2007. This brittle dynamic represents and is impacted by a lack of conflicting objects, different interpretations of agreements, policy differences, and a lack of trust and political maturity. The 2017 collapse of the executive occurred with the late Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness resignation in protest of former First Minister Arlene Foster's handling of an energy scheme, and with votes of no confidence. Ms. Foster resigned in April 2021 (Heenan & Birrell 2021). Thus, the post-Brexit February 27, 2023, Windsor Framework, developed to address the movement of goods between the E.U. and the U.K. and approved by London's parliament, is meant to assuage DUP fears, and to restart the powersharing executive. However, at this time of writing, the DUP continues to reject the Framework and refuses to participate in the powersharing executive at Stormont.

Thus, the peace is not sacrosanct as Northern Ireland continues to experience ongoing political tensions contributed by Brexit including disputes over culture and identity politics, the exclusion of marginalized communities, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenges of reconciliation and the Border poll that have estranged working class Loyalists and the DUP over the potential reunification of the island as a result of the Brexit fiasco (Byrne et al. 2022).

For example, a recent LucidTalk polling for the *Belfast Telegraph* found that the majority of PUL participants would vote against the 1998 B/GFA today clearly highlighting the fragility of Northern Ireland's peace process (Breen 2023). Only 35 % of PUL participants would vote in favor of the B/GFA, compared to 95 % of CNR, 96 % of Alliance Party voters, and 97 % of Green Party voters (Breen 2023). The poll also found that most participants believed the DUP should re-enter Stormont's powersharing Executive regardless of ongoing talks between the U.K. and the E.U. over the Northern Ireland Protocol, and the Windsor Framework and Stormont brake.

Both the U.K. and the E.U. agreed to protect the B/GFA as part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement preventing a hard border on the island in effect allowing Northern Ireland access to both the E.U. and U.K. markets (Edgington & Kovacevic 2023). As a result, the DUP continues to refuse entering Northern Ireland's power-sharing government unless its seven non-negotiable criteria are addressed so that a political vacuum and sectarian divisions remain with little political stability that continues to negatively impact day-to-day politics (Edgington & Kovacevic 2023; McCormack 2023). As a result, the Northern Ireland Assembly elections are postponed to January 18, 2024, while the DUP desires further E.U. concessions before a new deal can be struck and the devolved institutions restored while the Northern Ireland protocol bill is on hold in the House of Lords (O'Carroll 2023).

That said, President Joe Biden's April 11, 2023 "do no harm bi-latte visit" to Northern Ireland to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the B/GFA promised economic investment from United States (U.S.) companies while gently persuading and encouraging the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive's functioning powersharing government that was met with a cool reception by British mainland Unionists and the DUP who feel under siege (Balz 2023). Prime Minister Rishi Sunak also met with President Biden during his trip to Belfast as well as with Northern Ireland's political parties emphasizing that Northern Ireland's place in the union is safe while outlining the benefits of being able to access U.K. and E.U. markets (Dennison 2023).

### 3. Organization of the Special Issue

The essays in this special issue offer critical reflections on the B/GFA, providing key perspectives on a wide range of issues influencing peace in Northern Ireland. Tim White approaches the question of Irish unity, examining the realities of the consociational powersharing arrangement birthed from the GFA, in the article titled, *The Challenges of Powersharing in Implementing the Good Friday Agreement: Twenty-Five Years of Intermittent Shared Governance*. Highlighting the struggles of Stormont and the full implementation of true consociational frameworks as well as the constructive ambiguity of the Agreement, White con-

nects past challenges with present challenges spawned from the 2020 Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. With the Brexit fate of Northern Ireland continuing to be in flux, CNR leaders are eyeing a more robust shift towards Irish unity in their approach to governance. Yet, as Brendan O’Leary (2022) succinctly points out PUL and CNR politicians as well as the British and Irish governments need to get behind the political 8-ball working in tandem with the U.S. and the E.U. to plan for the immediate need to reimagine Irish reunification in terms of a political prism that accommodates PUL citizens into a new Ireland with four devolved provinces as the PUL community maintains their cultural, social-economic, and political links to Britain.

In contrast, Siobhan Byrne and Allison McCulloch, in their article *Stories of Gender Inclusion, Power-Sharing, and the Good Friday Agreement*, bring to light feminist considerations when examining the influences of the B/GFA. Specifically, the authors note a significantly mixed legacy of gender equity. Despite the initial powerful influence of the Women’s Coalition early in the peacemaking efforts (Hancock et al. 2010), women’s voices have been increasingly sidelined in the peace process.

That said, Duncan Morrow’s article titled *Transformation or Truce: Tracing the Decline of ‘Reconciliation’ and Its Consequences for Northern Ireland Since 1998* outlines the depth of the post-peace accord reconciliation challenges in Northern Ireland. While the B/GFA included several frameworks and opportunities for genuine cross-community reconciliation to flourish, the reality of the last 25 years has proved to be frustrating. Despite the opportunities, key components and reconciliation practices have still failed to be realized, infusing doubt into the prospects of positive peace truly taking hold.

In addition, Curtis Holland’s article titled *Class, Identity, Integration, and the Two-Tiered Peace Process*, identifies further community level challenges to building a cross-community, inclusive peace in Northern Ireland. Highlighting the persistent ethnopolitical identity clash involving very poor PUL and CNR communities, Holland calls attention to the plight of economically deprived areas. It is within these marginalized zones, where the peace dividend has been all but absent, that ethnonational identity issues are most prominent in providing some kind of connection and hope for marginalized and alienated youth left behind by the peace process, and peacebuilding becomes most challenging.

In the midst of shifting demographics in Northern Ireland, Marisa McGlinchey reflects on the attitudes across the CNR community in the essay titled, *Irish Nationalist and Republican Attitudes to the Good Friday Agreement: Sell-Out or Stepping Stone? Pulling from in-depth interviews over the past decade*, McGlinchey’s empirical data offers critical perspectives on the evolving views of CNR politicians, civil society leaders, and dissident Republicans, culminating in a reflection on the possibilities of future Irish unity or the re-emergence of political violence.

Consequently, measuring successes of the B/GFA in terms of peace can be challenging, particularly when considered against the backdrop of flashpoint interface areas and contested spaces in Northern Ireland. For example, Seán Brennan and Branka Marijan emphasize these realities in their essay titled, *Contested Spaces and Everyday Peace Politics in Northern Ireland*. While much has been accomplished in terms of de-escalating active conflict levels, the everyday nature of peace, rooted in grassroots communities, still leaves much to be desired. Brennan and Marijan note the importance of embracing everyday peacebuilding opportunities and practices in progressing Northern Ireland further along down the road of peace.

At the same time, however, legacy and remembrance aspects of the Troubles continue to impede and plague political and reconciliation progress, as Joe Robinson discusses in his article titled *Derry, Bloody Sunday, and the ‘Great-Sea Change’*. The battle over conflict and peace narratives in Northern Ireland continues to split communities and emotions as the traumas of the past continue to impact most people as they still ring painfully present in the minds of many throughout Northern Ireland. As official inquiries grind along slowly and begrudgingly (or fail to ever start in the first place), legacy issues like Derry’s 1972 Bloody Sunday remain intricately tied to the possibility of peace and progress in Northern Ireland.

Similarly, Robert Mizzi, Seán Byrne, Tara Sheppard-Luangkhot, and Nancy Hansen in their essay titled *Marginalized Voices and the Good Friday Agreement: Inclusion and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* highlight other marginalized voices, including those within the LGBTQIA+ and disability communities. The selective inclusion, or perhaps more aptly, the broad exclusion of many marginalized groups in Northern Ireland’s peace process has isolated important voices within communities, prevented them from active participation in policy-making, and separated them entirely from any locally owned version of peacebuilding.

Another key demographic, youth, is the focus of Cadhla O’Sullivan’s empirical qualitative essay titled, *Artesanos de Paz: Promoting Everyday Peacebuilding Among Children and Youth Through Participatory Theatre-Based Intervention in Colombia: Lessons for Northern Ireland*. Drawing upon experiences from participatory arts-based peacebuilding mechanisms employed with youth in Colombia, O’Sullivan offers critical reflections on the importance of embracing the inclusion of youth within Northern Ireland’s peacebuilding processes. Specifically, O’Sullivan offers innovative approaches in the use of art-based methods to encompass youth within the everyday peacebuilding framework.

That said, Seán Byrne, Brett Mallon, and Mehmet Yavuz’s longitudinal qualitative essay titled, *Civil Society Organizations, the Good Friday Agreement, and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, explore the specific experiences of civil society leaders and their successes and challenges building peace in the shadow

of the B/GFA. Tracing the experiences and perceptions of civil society leaders over the last decade, it becomes clear many grassroots peacebuilders and civil society leaders have become frustrated with the pace of peace and the intransigence of some political leaders that continue to play the sectarian political card, with many also lamenting design flaws and implementation shortcomings in the implementation of B/GFA and its translation into effective policies as well as the inclusion of local grassroots communities. Patience, optimism, and future hope are running lean for those most responsible for maintaining the thin veil between peace and conflict.

Consequently, an enduring theme throughout this special issue is the call for increasingly turning toward local everyday peacebuilding efforts in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. In other words, “Internationally supported peacebuilding as an everyday encounter between people in a specific local context,” essentially consists of cross-cultural interactions with local and international actors (Boege & Rinck 2019, 217). Local actors are those directly impacted by or involved in a protracted ethno-political conflict in some way. They have wisdom and local peacebuilding practices to resolve local conflicts, and that local wisdom, epistemologies, and know-how allows local people to effectively engage in cross-cultural communication and effective conflict transformation (Byrne 2023; Stanton & Kelly 2015). Local wisdom refers to “knowledge, philosophy, and a set of values possessed and shared by particular members of a given society as a result of interactions with their surroundings, natural, and social alike” (Eko & Putranto 2019, 347).

Alternatively, Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) take “local” to mean the range of local agents that are aimed at identifying and creating necessary peace processes. Thus, a local peace is built around an emancipatory and everyday framework that is an expansion of the representational capacity of a more formalized peace architecture (Autesserre 2014). In other words, the local shift brings into focus the local voices and practices that are typically suppressed in the overtly bureaucratic, hierarchical, and technocratic processes like the universal liberal peace framework (Marijan 2017).

Embracing a bottom-up peacebuilding approach assists in ensuring that local needs are not only recognized, but more importantly, are genuinely understood and met (Hilhorst & Van Leeuwen 2005; Kanol & Kanol 2013). This practice assists in creating an organic peacebuilding form rather than the highly formatted and structural Western/liberal process (Stroschein 2013). There is certainly complexity in shifting between the international and the local (Mitchell 2011), yet the opportunity for unique understandings and methods from a dialogical standpoint (Oloke et al. 2018) and a methodological perspective (Mac Ginty et al. 2019) drive home the flexibility of the hybrid approach (Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013). Yet Paffenholz (2015) warns against the bifurcation of the local and the international that comprise a myriad of multi-modal actors,

processes, ideas, and contentions at multiple levels. It is also important to deconstruct, interrogate, and examine the impact of liberal thinking on peacebuilding (Randazzo 2021).

## 4. Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the B/GFA ushered in a new peace era in Northern Ireland; there is no question in that regard (Ahmed et al. 2012). And yet, Northern Ireland's peace process has not fully failed, as much as it has been unable, after decades of vigorous mainstream grassroots support, to genuinely succeed. This special issue, marking the quarter century birthday of the B/GFA, offers some significant critical reflections on the successes enjoyed over the last two and a half decades, and the continuing frustrating challenges everyday peacebuilders face daily in their noteworthy peacebuilding efforts in local grassroots communities to build the social peace.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The (1998) Agreement is typically called the Agreement, the Belfast Agreement (BA), the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA), the Belfast Good Friday Agreement (BGFA), and the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and the authors will use these terms throughout their essays.