

LACK OF PROGRESS: Recent analysis of where we are two decades after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement is fairly pessimistic

The change we have is good but not so good that we can talk about a united society



Alex KANE

"THE greatest fear of those in Northern Ireland is that the future will mean a return to the distrust, polarisation and violence of the past. The peace we have come to assume in Northern Ireland is far from a perfect peace. It is ragged at the edges and torn in the middle. It allows flags celebrating paramilitary organisations to fly from lampposts in front of shops and playgrounds. It expects mothers to bring their sons to be crippled by the shots of masked vigilante gunmen to their teenage knees and elbows. It accommodates the high walls topped by barbed wire that serve to shield neighbour from neighbour in the capital city of the new Northern Ireland.

"It sees families lose all their sons to suicide because they see no other way out. It sweeps up the ashes from yet another sectarian arson attack, in the full knowledge that the flames will soon be lit again. All these conditions can persist and yet we may still call this peace; the Troubles are behind us, but conflict remains both a sullen presence and an insidious threat as Northern Ireland enters its second century."

That's pretty grim stuff: a rung or two above my own level of epic pessimism. They are the closing words of a new book, *Northern Ireland A Generation After Good Friday*, co-authored by Colin Coulter, Niall Gilmartin, Katy Hayward and Peter Shirlow. The analysis is as grim as that of Prof James Waller's recent book *A Troubled Sleep* and represents an increasingly downbeat example of a trend in newish assessment of where we are 20 or so years after the Good Friday Agreement.

On the surface – and sometimes a little deeper down – Northern Ireland does appear to have left behind the worst of itself; but at the same time the dust of exploded hope and belief that now shrouds the agreement suggests that the gravitational pull of the past continues to exert enormous pressure. We can't even seek comfort in Newton – that to each action there is an equal and opposite reaction – because it often seems that the force of the reaction (embedded pessimism) is much stronger than the force of optimism and progress.

Unless there is a massive recovery in unionism's electoral performance (the sort of recovery which would cause alarm bells to ring in the offices of Sinn Féin's senior strategists) the border poll question – the latest manifestation of the constitutional question – will continue to hover over every aspect of politics here. And as it does it will help to expand and magnify the pessimism about genuine cooperation and consensus developing at the heart of the executive.

Yes, Northern Ireland has changed and for that we must be grateful. But a formerly conflicted and divided society can only fully change when there is a genuinely new and collectively agreed way of 'doing' politics differently and doing it together. That remains the stumbling block. The change we have is good but not so good that we can talk about a united society.

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The continuing and seemingly unbridgeable divisions, propped up by the prospect of a border poll sooner rather than later, will fuel polarisation and spread it to the younger generation. Our baggage is already cluttering up their hallways. Even the 'others', the constitutional neutrals and agnostics, will be forced into taking a side at some point: and that's because a border poll doesn't offer a neutral, shrug-of-the-shoulder option.

Competing nationalisms – unionism and republicanism – aren't disappearing and unless an electoral surge of constitutional agnostics sweeps in and eclipses the present 80 per cent support for clearly signposted unionist and nationalist parties then nothing will change. And I'm not expecting change.

The source of the conflict remains as it was in 1921, 1968, 1972, 1985, 1998 and 2016: one community wants to remain in the United Kingdom and another wants a united Ireland. All of the evidence suggests that choice will continue to eclipse and predominate every other issue when it comes to voting. It doesn't mean that health, employment, the economy et al aren't everyday priorities for them; but it does mean they will gravitate towards those parties which have a specific position on the constitution.

I acknowledge and understand the arguments of those who support some sort of middle-ground approach to politics in Northern Ireland and there is clearly a market – as Alliance, in particular, has demonstrated.

But I don't foresee the circumstances in which that market will eventually dwarf the constitutional market.

The opposite in fact; I think the middle ground will gradually shrink as demographics continue to shift.

As Prof Waller concludes his book: "Northern Ireland finds itself in a shallow, troubled sleep, and its future, moving more quickly each day, is trending in a darker and more dangerous direction. How it awakes from that troubled sleep will determine whether it is on the edge of a new beginning or a painfully familiar old precipice.'

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 12 1921

Peace in the Balance

THE meeting between Mr Lloyd George and the Orange Cabinet was postponed until today at the PM's request. Last evening a prolonged meeting of the British Cabinet was held. As a result, Sir James Craig and his colleagues are now in possession of the British government's proposals in detail. It is thought probable that the meeting of the two Cabinets today will not be the final one but that if the Belfast Cabinet refuses the proposals, it will either be asked to reconsider them or to consider alternative proposals and possibly a return to Belfast and a meeting of the Belfast Parliament to decide the question.

In reply to Mr Joseph Devlin (Nationalist, Falls] Mr Lloyd George said the 'powers' transfer to Belfast under the 1920 Act by yesterday's Order in Council were granted in deference to the wish of the House of Commons. There was no idea of taking them away and it was unfair that the Northern Parliament should be paralysed for the lack of them.

A portion of King George V's speech to Parliament referred directly to Ireland: 'The situation in Ireland still causes me great anxiety. I earnestly exhort the leaders of all parties in Ireland … to exercise patience and moderation with the object of establishing friendship and loyal cooperation between my people of that country. It is my firm belief, as it is my earnest prayer, that with forbearance and goodwill …an enduring peace will finally be achieved.'

Mr Bonar Law [Conservative leader] is stated to be hesitating as to his course of action, but there appears to be no doubt that he will put himself at the head of a Tory revolt at the signal from the Orange party. Mr Austen Chamberlain [Tory leader at Westminster] commented: 'I understand how real and widespread is the anxiety felt in Unionist circles as to the course and outcome of the present Irish negotiations. … I believe that there exists… an earnest desire for peace if peace can be obtained in safe and honourable terms. …'

IT WAS clear by mid-November 1921 that Craig, confident of Tory 'diehard' support, would reject any attempt by Lloyd George to force him to accept an all-Ireland parliament. It was at this point that the wily British PM first floated his idea of a Boundary Commission with Sinn Féin. In a skilful diplomatic move, Lloyd George's agent, Tom Jones, persuaded Griffith to accept his boundary proposal. This would make it impossible for Sinn Féin to 'break on Ulster' in the final session of the Treaty negotiations on December 5-6 1921.

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