

An Outsider's Attempt to Reconcile Northern Ireland's Conflicting Communities in the Post-Troubles Era

Adnan Yaman¹

Abstract

Two decades have passed since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and yet peace has not settled in Northern Ireland. It was not anticipated from the agreement that it would produce peace, but signing sides and the majority of the population who voted yes in the referendum knew that further efforts needed to be undertaken to have peace in the country. Even though NGOs and the civil society from all sides of the spectrum have been active in Northern Ireland to help people move beyond the Troubles' mindset and reflexes, a political will to move beyond the conflict mentality is missing in Northern Ireland. There is an urgent need to have political parties as well as the British government executives to work together to address post-conflict era traumas and disorders in order to ensure a formidable reconciliation process to take place.

“Asking for forgiveness is more about the needs of the perpetrator than the needs of the victim or of the family who have lost a loved one.”

Alistair Little²

Introduction

Many people around the world believe the Northern Ireland conflict called the Troubles ended, conflict resolution had been achieved and a long reconciliation has begun. Dr. Richard Haass, a diplomat from the US who was assigned to chair multiparty talks in Northern Ireland in 2013 admitted that he had to explain to people in the US that political troubles have not changed much since 1998 Belfast Agreement. There are initiatives working on the ground to bring about peace and reconciliation on both the nationalist and unionist sides for two decades, nevertheless their efforts are overshadowed by political reluctance and paramilitary groups' stealthy and harmful activities. Due to unresolved political issues communities keep their own truths and their own territories. While the situation drags on in this fashion people become more and more disinterested in coming to terms with the other communities. There is a tendency to forget or deny all the violence faced during the Troubles, yet it keeps surfacing and coming back and shapes the lives of even the new generations who were born in the post-Troubles era.³ The youth are the most vulnerable, for they neither know how to tackle with this prevalent violence in their lives, nor do they know how to survive in a conflict free society.⁴ The male-dominated society of Northern Ireland puts the young men at risk by expecting them to be tough and belligerent.

¹The author can be reached at al380141@uji.es

² Alistair Little is a former member of a paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland. He was recruited at the age of 14 and served a 13-year prison sentence. He is currently working with the communities to promote peace and understanding. The quote is from the Forgiveness Project.

³ Manktelow, R., 2007. The needs of victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: The social work contribution. *Journal of Social Work*, 7(1), pp.31-50.

⁴ Boraine, A., 1999. All Truth is Bitter: A Report of the Visit of Doctor Alec Boraine, Deputy Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to Northern Ireland. *Belfast: Healing through remembering*.

Women are the silent sufferers who live with the fear that their loved ones might leave but never return, or arrive but never depart. Violence is mostly observed in low-income neighborhoods, thus also indicating economic and educational aspects of the conflict. Drawing on Turkish-Kurdish, South African-Afrikaans, and Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian, and Pakistani-Indian conflicts and partial solutions, this paper attempts to shed light on the weak areas of the Northern Ireland's reconciliation process.

The Post-Troubles Era

Northern Ireland remains a divided community. It cannot be held up as a model of conflict resolution because of divided neighborhoods and schools.⁵ There has been an increase in harassment cases in workplaces. There has been a very sharp drop in Catholics and Protestants expressing a preference for mixed-religion workplaces and neighborhoods, especially among young people.⁶ Over 90% of all primary school children receive education in segregated schools.⁷ There are 108 security barriers in Northern Ireland to separate the interface neighborhoods. The numbers tripled after the peace agreement.⁸ Once Northern Ireland had the lowest suicide rate in the UK. However, over the thirty years suicide rate has doubled. The increase in suicide rate is linked to the legacy of the Troubles.⁹ Approximately 90% of the public housing is segregated and 40% of the total Northern Ireland populations live in single identity communities.¹⁰ From 2013 to the end of 2017 the number of shootings and assaults from paramilitary organizations increased 60%.¹¹ There is a common distrust for one another between the Protestant and Catholic communities, and in general for the police, the Stormont government, and the British government. The trauma caused by the Troubles are tried to be forgotten by the victims and their relatives using antidepressant pills, alcohol, and drugs.¹² The violence consumed the society in such a way that the fundamental unit of the society, the family has eroded. The children are reared by aggressive and lone mothers who have been traumatized by the violence of the paramilitaries.¹³ The situation gets even worse when the current political stalemate in the Stormont government and the Brexit issue are added up.

The 1998 Belfast Agreement: A Ceasefire or Peace Agreement

The Belfast Agreement has produced a fragile and incomplete peace in Northern Ireland.¹⁴ It was sold to different people on very different forms. As admitted by Senator George Mitchell, the US special envoy for Northern Ireland who had a key role in the peace process, the agreement lacked the structure to ensure peace and reconciliation. The paramilitaries put their weapons down and the conflicting unionist and nationalist party members came together and agreed to share power and usher Northern Ireland into a new non-violent era. There were promises made by the British and Irish governments to facilitate Northern Ireland in this new era of peace.

⁵ Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report. The quote belongs to Dr. Richard Haass, the US special envoy for Northern Ireland in late 2013 who chaired inter-party talks aimed at addressing some of the unresolved issues from the peace process.

⁶ Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.

⁷ Northern Ireland Department of Education 2014-15 Report. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/integrated-schools> Accessed on 05/05/2018

⁸ McAlister, S., Haydon, D. and Scraton, P., 2013. Violence in the lives of children and youth in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland. *Children Youth and Environments*, 23(1), pp.1-22.

⁹ Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.

¹⁰ McAlister, S., Haydon, D. and Scraton, P., 2013. Violence in the lives of children and youth in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland. *Children Youth and Environments*, 23(1), pp.1-22.

¹¹ McDonald, H., 2018. The Guardian, Northern Ireland 'punishment' attacks rise 60% in four years (online) Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/12/northern-ireland-punishment-attacks-rise-60-in-four-years>

¹² Manktelow, R., 2007. The needs of victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: The social work contribution. *Journal of Social Work*, 7(1), pp.31-50.

¹³ McKay, S., 2014. Easter in Ardoyne. *The Dublin Review*, Vol. 55, (online) Available at: <https://thedublinreview.com/article/easter-in-ardoyne/>

¹⁴ Connolly, C.K., 2006. Living on the Past: The Role of Truth Commissions in Post-Conflict Societies and the Case Study of Northern Ireland. *Cornell Int'l LJ*, 39, p.401.

The British troops were withdrawn to major extent to ease the minds of local populace. Nonetheless, the political stakeholders have not taken out their skeletons from the closets. In this regard, there are still conflicting stories told regarding what really happened during the Troubles.¹⁵ The victims and their relatives are not able to move on without getting the truth from the officials. Due to the varying accounts on the Troubles there is a hierarchy of victims, innocent victims and guilty victims, depending on the standpoint.

The British Government

The British government has not apologized from the Irish masses for its colonial policies and wrongdoings yet. It has not admitted colluding with and turning a blind eye to the 1921-1972 Unionist supremacist rule.¹⁶ The British government has also failed to open the channels to let fair investigations take place for the British army units' engagement in violent acts during the Troubles. The British government is the major obstacle on the road to reconciliation in Northern Ireland. It cannot be denied that the historic responsibility rests on Britain for the deeper roots of the crisis in Northern Ireland.¹⁷ None of the communities trusts Britain, because Britain would not declare itself, no one knows where it stands. This lack of trust and unclear disposition of the strong player in the conflict lead the local communities feel unsafe to open up their truth in order to really understand what happened to whom.¹⁸ This polarization of views on the Troubles can be eliminated with the British initiative by bringing everything to the table and playing fair. The British government is subsidizing the Northern Ireland budget and the British citizens are viewing this as a burden onto themselves. The British government along with the European Union is funding many NGOs that work in Northern Ireland to reconcile both communities.

The Devolved Stormont Government

One unionist and one nationalist party that share power since the Belfast Agreement have represented the current government. The lack of political maturity and willingness to resolve outstanding issues led to deadlocks and several outsiders' –British, Irish, and US- interventions were required. The current government promised to turn all the public primary schools that are segregated into integrated schools and yet failed to do so. The political parties in the government failed to unite their forces to put pressure on the British government to shed light on the killings, bombings, and disappearances during the Troubles in order to set the people of Northern Ireland's minds in peace. This failure to work together brought naturally another failure, the failure to break the cycles of violence. The political executives do not seem to have the will to break these cycles, instead want to keep the status quo. These cycles reinforce one another and the trauma and the suffering are not treated but forgotten. Currently there are around 107 groups in Northern Ireland that work with Troubles' related issues.¹⁹ The communities are working hard promoting understanding, reconciliation, and forgiveness; nevertheless, due to the lack of political will there are no holistic solutions in Northern Ireland. The political executive also failed to implement rule of law and security, thus leaving the space for the traces of the paramilitaries to operate. Due to the mistrust to the political executive and the law enforcement bodies, the people have recourse to the paramilitaries for protecting their neighborhoods. The paramilitaries have become over the years the informal police enforcing their own brutal forms of justice.²⁰ The political parties have had close ties with the paramilitaries; this in turn precluded the political executive to enforce the paramilitary leaders to disband their organizations and start contributing in reconciliation. Some paramilitary leaders do engage in community service.

¹⁵Hamber, B., 2002. Rights and reasons: Challenges for truth recovery in South Africa and Northern Ireland. *Fordham Int'l LJ*, 26, p.1074.

¹⁶Duffy, A., 2010. A truth commission for Northern Ireland?. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4(1), pp.26-46.

¹⁷ Whyte, J., 1991. *Interpreting Northern Ireland*. Clarendon Press. It is worth quoting the former Bishop of Salisbury's self criticism here: "No British government ought ever to forget that this perilous moment like many before it is the outworking of a history for which our country is primarily responsible."

¹⁸Jeong, H.W., 2005. *Peacebuilding in postconflict societies: Strategy and process* (p. 124). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

¹⁹Manktelow, R., 2007. The needs of victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: The social work contribution. *Journal of Social Work*, 7(1), pp.31-50.

²⁰ Harland, K., 2011. Violent youth culture in Northern Ireland: Young men, violence, and the challenges of peacebuilding. *Youth & Society*, 43(2), pp.414-432.

Wilson, R., 2016. Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report.

Nevertheless, some of them use these activities as disguises and are still engaged in illegal activities. The people of Northern Ireland do not trust the Stormont Assembly in uncovering the past.²¹ The Stormont executive has failed to work together with the communities to reach to an officially legitimized and validated version of the Troubles.²² The Belfast Agreement put in place a system of mutual vetoes to ensure that no community could dominate the other one. The use of this vetoing has brought the assembly to silting up the legislation. Parties started to use this right to veto as a means to make other parties come to their terms.²³ The government could not introduce changes in economy to boost local businesses and trade. Tourism could provide one of the ways to come out of economic troubles in Northern Ireland if the government implements necessary changes.

The Protestant/Unionist Community

The Protestant Community of Northern Ireland has made up the majority. Their roots go back to the English and Scottish settlers who arrived to the Island of Ireland in the 17th century. Even though they are ethnically distinct from the rest of the Irish, they are not culturally different. The clash with the Catholic community forced them to overplay the differences, such as Britishness, and Protestant particularities. It is important to note that the Protestant community of Northern Ireland considered themselves Irish before the partition in 1921.²⁴ This reminds the Pakistani-Indian divide in language. The Indians call their language Hindi, while the Pakistanis call their language Urdu. Both nations try to justify the distinctness of their languages by employing and emphasizing the religious terms that differ. The Protestant community considers the British as an unreliable friend and does not trust the British government in solving the Troubles oriented problems of Northern Ireland.²⁵ Even though it makes up the majority in Northern Ireland it does not feel secure. One reason for this insecurity is that it is a minority in the island as a whole. Another reason for this insecurity is that the Protestant community of Northern Ireland is also a minority within the greater British community, and is worried the British executive does not understand their needs as a community and one day may give in to the demands of the Irish to unite the south and the north of the island.

The Protestant community is the most vulnerable group in the island. Firstly, it is about to lose its majority status and become a minority even in Northern Ireland according to the 2011 Census. Secondly, the Protestant population is made up of middle aged and old people while the Catholics are made up of mostly people under the age of thirty. Thirdly, the Catholics predominate the academia; this meritocratic advance is rebalancing the communal shares of professions and managerial occupations.²⁶ Fourthly, while the Catholic girls are doing extremely well in primary and secondary schools compared to their peers in the UK, the Protestant boys are doing very poorly in primary and secondary schools compared to other groups in the UK. Fifthly, the unemployment rates among the Protestant men are almost two times higher than the unemployment rate among the Catholic men.²⁷ Some of the members of the Protestant community have not admitted the discrimination against the Catholics under the unionist government during the years 1921 and 1972.²⁸ The Protestant community is worried that one day a union between the north and south of Ireland would take place. Even though their concerns are not unfounded, there is the reality that even if the union takes place between Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Protestants of the Republic of Ireland are not discriminated there.

²¹ Duffy, A., 2010. A truth commission for Northern Ireland?. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4(1), pp.26-46. The Consultative Group on the Past conducted the survey and 89.2% of the surveyed expressed that they would not trust the Stormont Assembly to direct a truth commission. 91.5% of the surveyed indicated that they would not trust the British government to direct a truth commission.

²² Murlon, F., 2012. Official Responses to Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: Between Remembering and Forgetting. *E-rea. Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, (10.1).

²³ Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.

²⁴ Whyte, J., 1991. *Interpreting Northern Ireland*. Clarendon Press.

²⁵ Kumar, R. ed., 2009. *Negotiating peace in deeply divided societies: a set of simulations*. Sage Publications India.

²⁶ Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.

²⁷ 27% of Protestants aged 16 to 24 are unemployed whereas 17% of the Catholics are unemployed. Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.

²⁸ Hamber, B., 2002. Rights and reasons: Challenges for truth recovery in South Africa and Northern Ireland. *Fordham Int'l LJ*, 26, p.1074.

Imposing the continuation of the union with Britain and defying the Republic of Ireland and the Irish identity would not bring any gain to the Protestant community. Nor does the denial of the atrocities committed to the Catholic minority for decades by the Protestant/unionist governments bring any profit to the Protestant community. The Protestant community needs to force their political parties to come to terms with the nationalist parties and the Catholic community and acknowledge the wrongdoings by the unionist governments in order to secure a better future for a united Northern Ireland.

The Catholic/Nationalist Community

The Catholic community has been the main victims in the island of Ireland for centuries. They have become aliens in their own country under the colonial policies of the British. They were discriminated and denied basic rights under the unionist regime for half a century. Like the Kurdish people of Turkey, they were denied the fundamental right to receive education in their native languages. They were forced to hide their identities in order to find jobs or to stay away from troubles. They were stigmatized as ruddy, poor, uneducated, and backward. They worked hard to come out of these perceptions. They are the natives of Ireland with a secure identity. The heaviest task in the truth recovery and reconciliation process rests with the Catholics for various reasons. They have the well-educated dynamic young population whom they can easily mobilize to promote understanding, peace, and forgiveness. They would know what it means to be a minority and discriminated and can ensure that the Catholic youth would be conscious in not harming the feelings of others let alone causing physical damage to others. They can also understand that even the offenders might have been -in one way or another- victimized. In order to have a strong and shared future with the Protestants they need to realize that as soon as the perpetrators admitted their wrongdoings they need to forget all the injustices and never entertain any idea in their minds to avenge the future minority.

Recommendations

Both the Catholic and Protestant communities need to distance themselves from the paramilitaries and their crimes. They need to put pressure on their political representatives,

- To strengthen the rule of law and security in the country.
- To settle the unsolved cases of killings, bombings, and disappearances.
- To make necessary changes in the education system to promote integrated schools.
- To ensure the curricula are modified in order to accommodate and empower every community.
- To include in the curricula the teaching of the history of the Troubles with a careful language in order not to repeat these mistakes.
- To organize seminars and workshops for public school teachers to raise awareness in embracing all.
- To become less dependent to the British subsidies by introducing changes to boost local economy.
- To remove the security barriers gradually in order to have integrated neighborhoods.
- To move beyond the victimized and oppressed mentality.
- To organize joint parades during the Protestant and Catholic festivities.
- To organize integrated summer camps for boys and girls.
- To work with Catholic and Protestant Churches to organize joint chaplaincy programs for the inmates to help them redeem themselves.
- To enforce an increase in women employment in public institutions.
- To reserve scholarships for the youth from working class areas.
- To sponsor the opening and running youth recreation centers in working class areas.
- To sponsor the establishment of multifunctional community centers –with sports facilities, theaters, movies, music clubs, arts and crafts learning and exhibition halls, and conference halls- in interface neighborhoods to bring the communities together.
- To employ former paramilitary organization members who have turned their backs to violence in reconciliation by organizing regular visits to meet children at school and the youth in community centers in order to share their journey from violence to peace.
- To fund a US type Big Brothers & Big Sisters program to recruit adult young volunteers to spend time with the children of single-parent families to become role models for these children.
- To have extracurricular activities in public schools to keep the children away from the streets idly moving about.

Conclusion

The people of Northern Ireland had reached a peace agreement after undergoing a long and turbulent period. However, to make the peace complete there is need to jointly deal with the past in order to look at the future with hope. All sides need to give up certain things to have a bright and united future. As a Kurdish scholar once said in an analogy if you want to have the entire body of water you need to give up the small piece of ice of yours. Sacrifices are needed from both the Catholic and Protestant communities as well as from the British government to reach a shared version of the Troubles in order to move on and start community building.

About the Author

Adnan Yaman is an educator and an interfaith and peace activist with a twenty-year work experience in the US, South Africa, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Kurdish Region of Iraq. He holds a BA in history and a master's degree in English.

Bibliography

- Boraine, A., 1999. All Truth is Bitter: A Report of the Visit of Doctor Alec Boraine, Deputy Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to Northern Ireland. *Belfast: Healing through remembering*.
- Connolly, C.K., 2006. Living on the Past: The Role of Truth Commissions in Post-Conflict Societies and the Case Study of Northern Ireland. *Cornell Int'l LJ*, 39, p.401.
- Northern Ireland Department of Education 2014-15 Report. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/integrated-schools> Accessed on 05/05/2018
- Duffy, A., 2010. A truth commission for Northern Ireland?. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4(1), pp.26-46.
- Harland, K., 2011. Violent youth culture in Northern Ireland: Young men, violence, and the challenges of peacebuilding. *Youth & Society*, 43(2), pp.414-432.
- Hamber, B., 2002. Rights and reasons: Challenges for truth recovery in South Africa and Northern Ireland. *Fordham Int'l LJ*, 26, p.1074.
- Jeong, H.W., 2005. *Peacebuilding in postconflict societies: Strategy and process* (p. 124). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Kumar, R. ed., 2009. *Negotiating peace in deeply divided societies: a set of simulations*. Sage Publications India.
- Manktelow, R., 2007. The needs of victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland: The social work contribution. *Journal of Social Work*, 7(1), pp.31-50.
- McAlister, S., Haydon, D. and Scraton, P., 2013. Violence in the lives of children and youth in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland. *Children Youth and Environments*, 23(1), pp.1-22.
- McDonald, H., 2018. The Guardian, Northern Ireland 'punishment' attacks rise 60% in four years(online) Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/12/northern-ireland-punishment-attacks-rise-60-in-four-years>
- McKay, S., 2014. Easter in Ardoyne. *The Dublin Review*, Vol. 55, (online) Available at: <https://thedublinreview.com/article/easter-in-ardoyne/>
- Mourlon, F., 2012. Official Responses to Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: Between Remembering and Forgetting. *E-rea. Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, (10.1).
- Whyte, J., 1991. *Interpreting Northern Ireland*. Clarendon Press.
- Nolan, P., 2014. Northern Ireland peace monitoring report.
- Whyte, J., 1991. *Interpreting Northern Ireland*. Clarendon Press.
- Wilson, R., 2016. Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report.