

Has peace in Northern Ireland now become more or less likely in your view and how can it be achieved?

For hundreds of years Roman Catholics and Protestants have fought against and killed each other in Ireland. However, the conflict as it presents itself today goes back to the island's division in the 20th century. Since the late 1960's the situation in Northern Ireland has come more and more to a head, and for over thirty years now a whole generation of politicians and policy makers has tried to find a settlement to the political crisis. More than 3,000 people were killed in the course of the violence that marked these years.¹ With the Stormont Agreement signed in 1998, people have placed their hopes in a final ending to the hostilities.

This essay will try to explain the conflict and introduce the different parties involved in it, in order to then proceed to a description and analysis of the political development in Northern Ireland during the late 20th century. Lastly it will discuss the question of whether, and if so, how the wish of peace in Ulster² could be fulfilled.

The whole of Ireland had been part of the United Kingdom for 120 years when, in 1919, the British Parliament saw itself put under pressure by a guerrilla war that had been unleashed by the Irish Republican Army. The IRA demanded Ireland's independence. The struggles led to the Government of Ireland Act which created two separate political units, Northern Ireland (6 counties) and the Free Irish State (26 counties), with limited powers of self-government.³ The Free Irish State declared itself independent in 1937 and changed its name into the Republic of Ireland or Eire (in Gaelic). However, the new status was not officially accepted until 1949.

¹ <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/farren00.htm>

² Ulster is another name used for Northern Ireland, even though part of the actual Ulster belongs to the Republic of Ireland

This division is, in fact, where lie the roots of today's conflict. While the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland accepted the act and appreciated the union with the United Kingdom, as they would have been a minority in a united Irish state, the Roman Catholics opposed it. They were a minority in Northern Ireland and from the very beginning saw themselves suppressed and kept out of control by the Protestants. The Irish Free State also expressed its dislike of the splitting. It wished to establish one single independent Ireland and therefore included in its constitution a claim to Northern Ireland.

Under the participation of various political and religious groups, some of them official, some of them not, the hostilities between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Ulster started right after the division. It has to be understood that this struggle, which has developed into a political and military confrontation, is, in fact, not about religion but about social equality. Over the decades Protestantism and Catholicism have turned into synonyms for the classification of the Northern Irish into Unionists who have favoured being part of the United Kingdom and Nationalists who have stood up for the idea of Irish reunification.⁴

Among the groups involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland are several historical organisations. In order to avoid going beyond this essay's scope, only the three most internationally well-known are to be shortly presented here. They are the Irish Republican Party (IRA), Sinn Fein and the Orange Order.

The IRA formed in 1919 as an unofficial military force, and has since then experienced various splits over ideals and strategies. It has traditionally been supported by Catholics and aimed to unite Northern Ireland with the independent country of Ireland. The party Sinn Fein (Gaelic for "We Ourselves"), which is said to be the IRA's political wing, was formed in 1905. It has been the subject of controversy, mainly because of its evident connection to terrorists, but it is

³ Darby, John, Conflict in Northern Ireland, p.9

understood that without its co-operation, peace will not be possible in Ulster. The Orange Order, founded about 200 years ago and named for William of Orange, a former king of England, is a Protestant organisation that has worked to keep the power in Northern Ireland with the Protestants and to preserve its union with Britain. Every year in July several thousand “Orangemen” march through Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods in Ulster to celebrate Protestant victories, regularly causing riots and street violence as a result.⁵

The IRA had only periodically carried out terrorist attacks until, in the late 1960's, Catholics in Northern Ireland began to protest openly against discrimination by the Protestant government. Fighting broke out between the Catholics, the IRA and the armed Protestant-unionist groups such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UDF) or the Red Hand Commandos. ‘From 1969 till 1994 3168 people, 2224 of them civilians were the victims of terror and anti-terror and distrust, hate, violence and wrath determined life in Northern Ireland.’⁶ The ongoing conflict led the British government to suspend Northern Ireland's government in 1972 and to take over its direct administration. The troubles continued. In 1973 and 1982, the United Kingdom set up assemblies in Northern Ireland, but both of them were dissolved since Protestants and Catholics declined co-operation. During the late 1980's and early 1990's, terrorist bombings by the IRA and other groups intensified in Northern Ireland and Britain.

No improvement of the situation was in sight until 1993, when Britain and the Republic of Ireland were able to reach a consensus on main points of a peace process. Britain declared that it had no strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, and Dublin announced it would drop

⁴ Informationen zur politischen Bildung: Sturm, Roland, ‘Nordirlands langer Weg zum Frieden’, p.45,

⁵ Gray, Tony, *The Orange Order*, p.9

⁶ Informationen zur politischen Bildung: Sturm, Roland, ‘Nordirlands langer Weg zum Frieden’, p.47

its claim to Northern Ireland if there were an overall settlement.⁷ For the first time Sinn Fein was to be included in the peace negotiations and in order to make this possible, the IRA announced a complete cease-fire on 31 August 1994. The process, however, only moved slowly.

Sinn Fein said problems in Northern Ireland would not be solved until Britain pulled out of the region. Britain argued that the IRA must deliver its weapons before Sinn Fein would be allowed to negotiate on the same basis as the other parties. This position was gradually changed, and on 10 May 1995, the first official talks in 20 years between a British minister and Sinn Fein took place.⁸ The British and Irish governments made a framework agreement about the future peace regulations which stated that they wished to introduce all-party talks on the future of Northern Ireland and joint Irish and Northern Irish institutions. But on 9 February 1996 the IRA declared the end of the cease-fire, as it apparently did not have faith in a positive outcome of the negotiations.

A new chance for talks wasn't seen until the change of government in Britain. In May 1997, Britain's newly elected Prime Minister Tony Blair invited Sinn Fein to participate in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations if the IRA renewed its declaration of a cease-fire. This occurred on 19 July 1997. The still contentious question about the disarmament of nationalist and unionist groups was to be dealt with by an impartial international commission parallel to the peace negotiations. In September 1997, formal peace talks, which aimed to end the violence over Northern Ireland, began. They were the first to include all the different parties in the conflict and concluded after nearly 2 years on Good Friday in April 1998 with the signing of the Stormont Agreement.

In the referendum held on 22 May 1998, the citizens of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic overwhelmingly approved the agreement. In Northern Ireland it was supported by 71.12% of the

⁷ <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/farren00.htm>

participants whereas 28.88% were against it. (Republic of Ireland: Yes 94.39%, No 5.61%; Ireland overall: Yes 85.46%, No 14.54%).⁹ Nevertheless, a strong Protestant minority in Northern Ireland regarded the agreement as a betrayal of their interests and as capitulation. They believed that they were the actual victims of a 30 year-old terror campaign by Catholic terrorists, who were even granted early release. The Catholics saw the accord as a definite end to the Protestant sovereignty in the province.¹⁰

The accord offers the possibility of a change of Northern Ireland's status as a part of the United Kingdom, if a decision is found in a peaceful way. In order to improve the equality it also provides for a National Assembly in which Catholics and Protestants are to govern jointly. The North-South Council, council of ministers of the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, is to be established to play the role of an advising body and to protect nationalist interests. Unionist interests are taken into consideration by the establishment of the Council of the Isles, whose members are part of the British and the Irish governments as well as regional representatives of Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and others. Furthermore the accord includes the erasure of the territorial claim on Northern Ireland in Eire's constitution, the release of some of the imprisoned terrorists and the disarmament of the paramilitary groups within 2 years after the ratification of the accord by the British and Irish parliaments.¹¹ The paramilitary groups' disarmament and the traditional protestant marching through Catholic districts every year in July now appear to be the main obstacles on the path towards peace.

On 10 September 1998, the first meeting between Sinn Fein and a Unionist leader since the formation of Northern Ireland took place and several points that had been agreed on Good Friday were put into practice. Six new cross-border administrative bodies were formed, the first

⁸ The Guardian, 10 May 95, p. 2

⁹ The Guardian, 25 May 98, p. 2

¹⁰ 'Auf zum letzten Gefecht', Der Spiegel (29)1998

paramilitary prisoners released, and the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) was the first group to voluntarily hand over its weapons.

While the street riots during marching season in July 1998 showed how weak the newly won peace still was, one year later the parades passed off rather peacefully and without significant incidents. On 2 December 1999, Britain's direct rule of Northern Ireland came officially to an end and powers were devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly. The North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Ministerial Council, as arranged in the Good Friday Agreement, took effect.¹²

Even though the peace process seems to be slowly making headway, it has always been jeopardised, especially by radical splinter groups of the IRA. Also the IRA's refusal to disarm in February 2000, breaking off contact to the international disarmament commission in Northern Ireland, made the people lose hope again. In May, however, the Irish Republican Army engaged to peace in the clearest manner to date: 'Our weapons will keep still and the peace process will not be endangered by the IRA'.¹³ Since British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed to reinstall the Northern Irish regional government and to pull out of Ulster most of the British troops, it declared its willingness to disarm entirely. The ultimatum for the total disarmament was prolonged to June 2001.

It is more than difficult to say if there will ever be peace in Northern Ireland. The separation of Catholics and Protestants in day-to-day life has been upheld for centuries and has become so ingrained in people's minds that the 'tradition' of avoiding contact with the opposing group has been passed down through generations. All students of Northern Irish origin (both Catholics and Protestants) who were interviewed at the University of Northumbria said that from early

¹¹ The Guardian, 25 May 98, p. 2

¹² <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/pp9899.htm>

¹³ <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,75660,00.html>, 6 May 2000

childhood on they had only ever had friends who were of same religious faith. 80% of the subjects who were questioned shared the opinion that one of the most difficult obstacles on the way to a life without fear in Ulster, is the perpetually bad relationship between the two groups. This is not only a result of Northern Ireland's tradition of separation but also due to the fact that during terrorist actions and other acts of violence, thousands of people have been killed by members of the opposite faith. The victims left families and friends who might not be able or willing to forgive.

Furthermore, Northern Ireland's unemployment rate is still one of the highest in the British Isles and it can therefore be assumed that dissatisfaction is high mainly among the less educated population. It is common knowledge that bad social conditions and poverty can lead to violence against any group considered an opponent. In the case of Northern Ireland this means that as long as the economic situation doesn't improve there will always be rivalry between Protestants and Catholics that might lead to hate and violence. Also, 32% of the students who were interviewed stated that they believed Protestants were better treated in Ulster than Catholics. Even though the majority said that they thought everybody was treated the same, this indicates that the population is still convinced of the lack of equality among people with different ideals and the need to fight for it. One source of danger, for example, is the new IRA splinter group called rIRA, that is the 'real IRA', that emerged in the beginning of 1998.

However, it has to be acknowledged that the peace process has had its successes. All the parties involved, particularly the main 'troublemaker' the IRA, seem to be ready to negotiate and evidently to keep their words, when it comes to putting the agreement into practice. The newly formed councils ensure that every ideal, religious or political, is represented adequately. And with the reorganisation of political responsibilities, Roman Catholics will gain more rights in Ulster, which will make paramilitary groups lose support within the population.

According to a survey carried out by the Universities of Belfast and Ulster, 50 % of Northern Ireland's population says that the relations between Protestants and Catholics in Ulster are better, 41% say they are about the same and 7% think that they are worse than 5 years ago. And when asked about their prognosis for the future, 56% say the relations will become better, 32% say they will stay the same and 4% say they will worsen.¹⁴ Also, when asked their opinion of the statement "The more people that are willing to compromise, the better of everyone will be", 80% agreed. These results indicate that the relations between the two groups are improving and that the people are ready to make an effort in order to support this positive development.

The industrial investment in Northern Ireland, which the United States, who have been strongly involved in the peace development, have called for, could bring economic opportunities to the region which would improve the people's financial and social situations and make a resort to violence less likely. Nevertheless, a long way still lies ahead until life without fear in Ulster can really come within reach. As mentioned above, it has to be ensured that all parties involved in the process hold to their promises and that no new room is given to inequalities. Protestants and Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists do not only have to learn more about tolerance and acceptance but also have to open themselves up to the other groups. Perhaps it would be helpful to avoid, or even to gradually abolish, the cumulation of members of only one group in town districts and to so stimulate a mixing. Events like the marching season parades, that affront and provoke other groups, and thus only foment hostilities, should be forbidden. A tradition of intolerance and humiliation is not worth keeping.

An agreement on whether Northern Ireland should belong to the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland may never be reached. But if true peace is ever to be sustained, Roman Catholics and Protestants must accept their differences and regard each other as equal. Only then can the bloodshed end and, and a new history begin.

¹⁴ http://www.qub.ac.uk/nilt/1999/Community_Relations/