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Cultural Conflict in Northern Ireland: Explaining the Failure of the Haass Talks

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MATTHEW WHITING, FEB 18 2014

As 2013 came to a close in Northern Ireland, there was a reminder that while widespread violent conflict may be a thing of the past, there is still the potential for ongoing animosity and localised outbreaks of minor violence. Last July after a series of violent clashes in Belfast following the decision to restrict the number of days the Union Jack flag would be flown over Belfast City Hall, Northern Ireland's political leaders invited Richard Haass to come to the province to help them address three ongoing sources of tension: when, if ever, should the Union Jack flag (or any other flags) be flown from public buildings; what rules should govern partisan parades that celebrate nationalist or unionist history but which are often seen by the other community as attempts to assert control over a particular territory; and, how should Northern Ireland deal with violent crimes committed during the conflict.

Haass seemed well placed to help with these issues having previously served as an envoy to Northern Ireland under George W. Bush, playing an important role in moving the IRA closer to decommissioning. This time round however, US mediation was to prove less successful. In the early hours of 31st December, after months of meetings with community groups and political leaders and after producing seven different drafts, Haass's final proposals were criticised by all sides and rejected outright by the two biggest Unionist parties and the Alliance Party (although the nationalist parties of Sinn Féin and the SDLP stated they could reluctantly live with them). Prior to his return to the US, a frustrated Haass made it clear that he did not think there were legitimate grounds for their rejection and that Unionist leaders needed to justify their rejectionist position.

The Ongoing Intractability of the Symbolic Conflict

Haass's proposals had the potential to be the final accord in the prolonged Northern Irish peace process, a process which ended one of the most intractable post-World War II conflicts in the developed world: a 25-year ethno-national war between Irish republicans (the IRA and Sinn Féin) fighting to unify Ireland on the one side, and the British army fighting to quell the rebellion along with British loyalists fighting to remain part of the United Kingdom on the other side.[1] The violence was ended with the Belfast Agreement (1998), which established a power-sharing settlement in Northern Ireland, and by the St Andrews Agreement (2006), which helped to consolidate the process. The two most formerly radical parties on each side of the community divide, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, are now the two largest parties in the province and hold the First Minister and deputy First Minister posts respectively.

It appears a real puzzle as to why, 15 years after the Belfast Agreement and following 6 years of stable power-sharing, cultural and symbolic issues like flags, parades and history have become so difficult to resolve. That is not to suggest that these are unimportant issues but rather given that the former warring adversaries of Northern Ireland have already accepted extensive constraints upon their behaviour and learnt how to pursue and sell difficult compromises over the last 15 years, why are they refusing to concede ground on these outstanding symbolic issues? Militants from both communities have forsaken violence and decommissioned weapons, political leaders have compromised on institutional design and now share power with formerly sworn enemies, and there has been an acceptance by both sides of the right of the opposing community to pursue a constitutional future for Northern Ireland that they themselves reject. Given the depth of compromise already displayed to date, why would disagreement over essentially symbolic politics prove to be so intractable? Two explanations illuminate this puzzle.

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Power-Sharing and Rewarding the Former Radicals

Firstly, the nature of the power-sharing settlement is such that it creates an incentive for the electorate to reward parties who are seen as offering the greatest protection of their interests against possible encroachment from the opposing community provided they endorse exclusively peaceful politics that does not damage the prosperity of Northern Ireland (Mitchell, Evans & O'Leary, 2009). While there were big incentives to end violence, participate exclusively within politics, and endorse power-sharing, such incentives do not hold for moderating identity stances. Once Irish republicans forsook violence and agreed to participate in the reformed power-sharing institutions to pursue their goal of a united Ireland, their institutionally radical history became somewhat of an asset and allowed them to be seen as the best placed party to protect nationalist interests, eclipsing their traditionally more moderate nationalist rivals in the Social Democratic and Labour Party. Similarly, the Democratic Unionist Party was able to utilise its traditional rejectionist policy to overtake the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party within the electorate.

Additionally, the peace process did not entail either side giving up core ethno-national goals. The main goal of the Belfast Agreement was to establish peaceful power-sharing and many other thorny issues, including those political identity issues that Haass aimed to tackle, were put to the side to be dealt with at a later stage. Peace came through both sides accepting that the people of Northern Ireland should decide its constitutional future. In this context, both the pursuit of a united Ireland and the desire to remain part of the United Kingdom are accepted as legitimate aspirations as long as they are pursued peacefully. Nor did the peace process attempt to extract explicit concessions from either side that their use of violence in the past was illegitimate. For example, when the IRA made the announcement that they would decommission their weapons, they also stated that 'we reiterate our view that the armed struggle was entirely legitimate'. Republicans entered the peace process as a way of exploring new routes to old goals, rather than weakening their desire for a united Ireland. In other words, the peace process did not require that either side changed their long-term aspirations or distanced themselves from the radical pasts.

That is certainly not to imply that Sinn Féin and the DUP remain radicals who don sheep's clothing in order to gain power. There can be little doubt that the changes within both these parties has been profound, albeit there are limits to the extent to which they are willing to compromise on their ideological core. However, they are certainly better thought of today as sheep who occasionally don wolves' clothing to gain an electoral boost at the hands of an electorate anxious about the insecurities of power-sharing.

This shouldn't be taken as an automatic criticism of the consociational agreement. Critics of the peace settlement who argue that it reinforces division and fails to pursue integration fail to offer any viable alternatives (Taylor, 2006). What is more, recent emerging evidence is beginning to suggest that enshrining and recognising the boundaries between the two communities does not prevent them being overcome (Evans and Tonge, 2013). Creating conditions that continue to allow political elites to act tough over identity politics is one thing, but this is very far removed from a position of active conflict throughout the whole province.

Unionists Losers and Nationalist Winners

The second reason explains why the unionist community was more resistant to accept the Haass proposals than their nationalist counterparts. This lies in the Unionist perception that the peace process has cost them more and benefitted them less, whereas nationalists are more likely to view it as having benefitted both communities equally.

This finding is hardly surprising. It is well established that the democratisation of power leads to a redistribution of wealth and resources away from the elite group and their supporters throughout society as a whole (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005). Very few apart from the most ardent republicans would think of the Northern Irish peace process as a typical process of democratising an outright hitherto autocratic regime, but there can be little doubt that it represented a fundamental redistribution of power. From its foundation, the territory was set up in a way that was highly favourable to Protestant unionists at the expense of Catholic nationalists. Between 1921 and 1972 (at which point the British government abolished devolved rule in response to the conflict in favour of direct rule from Westminster), the Ulster Unionist Party composed the entire cabinet of every government in the devolved parliament and only one cabinet appointment in this time was not a Protestant.

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The conflict was in part derived from underlying nationalist discontent at inequalities in areas such as voting in local elections, public housing provision, and the labour market. Over the next twenty years the British government passed a range of policies aimed at eradicating or reducing these inequalities, which in hindsight can be seen as a programme of preference shaping by the British government, introducing a series of policies that aimed to undermine support for radicalism within the nationalist community by showing that reform was possible and revolution was unnecessary. When the Belfast Agreement and St Andrews Agreement were passed, this further enshrined the redistribution of power.

Nationalists are now guaranteed executive representation, the Republic of Ireland has a formally recognised say in the affairs of the Northern Irish Executive, public bodies are expected to include the minority proportionally, and a Northern Irish Human Rights Commission was established to reassure nationalists they would be protected. In short, in order to be successful and acceptable to nationalists, any negotiated settlement necessarily had to embody a redistribution of political power away from its pre-existing over-concentration within Unionism.

It is against this backdrop of the perception that they have already made enough sacrifices to Irish nationalists, and republicans in particular, that Unionist leaders are reluctant to compromise further on symbolic issues relating to their identity and tradition. Unionists compromised on those issues that were necessary to extract a ceasefire from the IRA and persuade Sinn Féin to accept the need to gain the population's consent for a united Ireland. However, compromising on flags, parades and the investigation of historical violence, may seem less necessary now than these other sacrifices were in 1998. Additionally, the ability for Unionist leaders to make the compromises demanded by Haass is hampered even further by the looming local and European elections coming up in May. The elections have ensured that the two main Unionist parties (and indeed the more neutral Alliance Party) have not been willing to compromise for fear of outflanking and losing more votes, something that has already had a brutalising effect upon the Ulster Unionist Party's vote share since 2003.

The Future of the Peace Process

Little ground is likely to be conceded prior to the upcoming elections in May but that certainly doesn't mean that the overall peace process is in trouble. Also rioting over parades and flags today tends to be localised to working class areas of North and East Belfast, which is very different from the widespread violence that permeated the province as a whole prior to 1998. Aware of the lack of appetite for escalating the tensions between Protestants and Catholics within the population, Peter Robinson, First Minister and leader of the Democratic Unionists, stated that his party accepted the 'broad architecture' of the deal and that it could serve as a framework going forward. While the power-sharing settlement may reward those leaders who are viewed by the electorate as the best protectors of their ethnic identity, this is only conditional upon their doing so within the confines of peaceful politics. This certainly did not stop him and Martin McGuinness, former IRA commander and current deputy First Minister, verbally attacking each other over the failure to gain agreement. But again, given these are former sworn enemies who currently share power, this only serves to highlight the awareness of political leaders to protect rigorously their community identity (in the zero-sum politics of Northern Ireland this is often most effectively done by attacking the opposing identity) while still remaining committed to the successful operation of the power-sharing institutions.

Significantly, while the British and Irish governments have to date refused to get directly involved, the British government has told Northern Ireland that it must be resolved within its existing budget and no additional funds to supplement the already generous block grant from Westminster will be forthcoming. Threats to prosperity often have an impressive ability to focus politicians' minds, and the electorate of Northern Ireland is unlikely to entertain any stances that may jeopardise the rise in prosperity it has seen in recent years.

Therefore rather than seeing the failure of the Haass talks as an aberration or a signal of a return to conflict, it is perhaps best seen as business as usual and to be entirely expected in the 'new' Northern Ireland. The ability of identity politics to shock and inspire localised tension remains, but the extent to which it can, or will be allowed to, destabilise the whole peace process is surely limited.

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[1] Northern Ireland has been historically divided into two communities. On one side is the nationalist community, who are culturally Catholic and with greater affiliation for an Irish identity, although it is certainly not a given that they homogenously aspire for a United Ireland. 'Republicanism' is the historically violent and radical expression of Irish nationalism. On the other side is the unionist community, who are culturally Protestant and with greater affiliation for a British identity and generally desire to maintain Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. 'Loyalism' is the historically violent and radical expression of unionism.

About the author:

Matthew Whiting completed his PhD at the LSE, where he examined the moderation of Sinn Féin and the IRA over the course of the conflict in Northern Ireland. He currently teaches courses in British government at the LSE and is a lecturer in British politics for the Hansard Society.