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Paralysed by the past

In Northern Ireland, the legacy of a 30-year-long conflict remains an open wound. A new functioning government might offer reason for hope

Northern Ireland's government was recently restored, having been suspended since May 2022 as a result of a dispute over Brexit. This has only added to the issues around the North's constitutional position within the United Kingdom.

What does this political turmoil mean for the future of the peace process and for the people on both sides of the divide trying to deal with the legacy of the long-lasting conflict?

A paralysed state

The conflict in Northern Ireland known as 'the Troubles' was a period of intense sectarian violence, where society was divided between protestant unionists loyal to Britain and catholic nationalists who wished to unify with the Irish Republic. Beginning in 1968 and ending under the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement, over 3 500 people died, and almost 50 000 were physically injured. Since then, a brittle peace and dysfunctional power-sharing government has existed.

Today, the remains of the old Long Kesh internment camp consist of a desolate 350-acre site, with just one of the old H-blocks still standing. The once expansive maximum-security complex housed the paramilitaries responsible for the destruction of Northern Ireland. It was also the site of the Republican hunger strikes that dominated the media in early 1980s Ireland.

The remains of Long Kesh prison represent Northern Ireland as a whole.

Many plans for its use have been proposed through the years; from a sprawling shopping complex to a peace centre — neither of the North's two largest parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Irish republicans Sinn Féin, can agree on what should happen.

'We do enough talking about the terrible things that went on in this country, sometimes we just need to accept what happened and move on together', said the young security guard manning the site office where the prison entrance once stood.

The remains of Long Kesh prison represent Northern Ireland as a whole. A state that is paralysed by its past despite the appetite to move on and create a better future. Its failed regeneration is symptomatic of its dysfunction. A ghost of the past that continues to haunt people today with the horror of the violent conflict remaining visible for all to see.

A period of uncertainty

The conflict's trauma has only been worsened by Brexit. Many feel that Brexit has undone and reversed much of the work of the post-conflict peace process. This meant bringing the two communities together and finding common ground in Northern Ireland's constitutional position. Since Brexit, that common ground has been removed, and the two communities are divided along political lines once again.

Alex Wimberly, the leader of the Corymeela community, Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation society, sees the effects every day with the people that he works with: 'before Brexit, there was a landscape where we were all able to have conversations that were less threatening because the Good Friday Agreement was underpinned by this idea of European commonality', he said. 'Brexit has caused people to return to the questions of whether you are British or Irish.'

The issues of the conflict's legacy have only been further compounded without a functioning government.

Long Kesh and other shadows of the past have remained in a state of limbo, weighing heavily on the psyche of those who see them every day. Seventy per cent of adults in Northern Ireland have experienced mental health issues in the past year. This is compared with just 18 per cent in the Irish Republic. The driving factors behind this are the legacy of the violence, how it has been dealt with on a governmental level and the resulting high levels of economic deprivation.

The issues of the conflict's legacy have only been further compounded without a functioning government. The post-Brexit trading arrangements, in particular that of the border with the Republic have

been the stumbling block causing the 24-month hiatus of the Stormont power-sharing institutions until earlier this month, when a new arrangement was reached.

To prevent a hard border in the wake of Brexit between Northern Ireland and the Republic, an arrangement known initially as the Northern Ireland Protocol was agreed and implemented by the UK, the EU and the Irish Governments. This meant that goods between the North and the Republic flowed freely, but checks took place on those travelling to the UK. Whilst this has prevented a hard border, it was to the fury of unionists who viewed their place within the union as being undermined. A breakthrough was eventually reached when a redrafted agreement deemed suitable by the DUP simplified trade and reduced checks and barriers on goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Reason for hope

Post-conflict, the EU was a key player in the peace process. It aimed to build reconciliation on common economic interests. This allowed for the Irish Republicans Sinn Féin and the British Loyalists in the DUP to work together in government. With this foundation collapsed without the power-sharing institutions, Northern Ireland reverted to its divisive politics of old with the Irish Sea border proving too much for the DUP to share power any longer. The restoration of power-sharing is cause for hope that the process of bridge-building can be resumed again and the damage inflicted can begin to be repaired once more.

But the broader issues of the violent conflict legacy continue to bubble beneath the surface in Northern Ireland. Belfast remains a divided city, where civil disobedience and rioting happen routinely. It's still so clear to see each neighbourhood and street hoisting its colours, marking its territory and allegiances.

With a new assembly in government and the end of a two-year hiatus, people can only hope that it marks the beginning of a new era of peace, prosperity and cooperation.

Dealing with and interrogating the past is something that Northern Ireland has entirely failed to address. An unsurprising combination is its dysfunctional political structure coupled with a society as divided as ever. An alarming recent development from the British government is an example of how badly it has been dealt with; A Statute of Limitations bill giving unconditional amnesty to those involved in murders during the Troubles was first introduced by Boris Johnson in 2021. It was

later ratified by the House of Lords in September of this year to the fury of victims on all sides of the conflict.

The haphazard nature with which the British government has thought up this bill is reflective of how messy the legacy process has been. If successful, it will mean that no further convictions can be made holding victims of the conflict hostage by never allowing them closure justice.

It also further highlights the influence and impact, be it for better or worse, that decisions made in London can have over the lives of people living across Northern Ireland.

But with a new assembly in government and the end of a two-year hiatus, people can only hope that it marks the beginning of a new era of peace, prosperity and cooperation. The alternative is simply not a viable option.



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