The Agreed Truth & The Real Truth: The New Northern Ireland

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The ‘historic’ restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland, on 8 May 2007, has been hailed by the media as marking the symbolic end of the conflict there.1 Like most aspects of the peace process, the opening of the Assembly was “carefully stage managed to present a positive and progressive image.”2 This is in line with news reports about the North being dominated by the ‘success story’ of the ‘New Northern Ireland’.3 There is an optimism and realism in Northern Ireland today that is surprising its leaders. “Cities are pulsating, the economy is thriving and political agreement; it’s abuzz with life: the people...are in good spirits.” Belfast is also one of the must-see countries to visit in 2007. “There is no better time to see Northern Ireland than now. Freed from the spectre of the gun by cease-fires Operation Banner – the longest in British Army history – will be demolished, bringing the 35-year-old war in the six counties are foreign owned.14 The Belfast skyline is now dominated by the threat of terrorism; its streets at best bleak and grey, and at worst reduced to rubble after another bomb attack. Today, however, Belfast is emerging as a shiny new metropolis of head-turning galleries, museums, restaurants, luxury hotels – and exciting new property developments.” The Belfast skyline is now dominated by schemes such as Lanyon Place, with its £20m Hilton Hotel; £35m BT Tower and £30m Fujitsu building; and the Odyssey Complex, a £114m government, leisure and education centre; alongside such massive regeneration projects as Europe’s largest commercial and residential development, The Titanic Quarter. The ‘Troubles’, as they were known, seem to be over. The IRA has destroyed all its arms. The UVF has stated its intention to go out of business. With a few exceptions, so-called ‘paramilitary prisoners’ have all been released on licence between 1998 and 2000, and HMP Maze is being emptied. The security landscape in Belfast, Derry and South Armagh has changed. By 1 August 2007, British troops will be reduced to 5,000 and the number of sites where they are stationed will be reduced from 64 to 14, while most watchtowers will be demolished, bringing the 35-year-old Operation Banner – the longest in British Army history – to an end. “The moves are part of the government’s security normalisation plans.” But is Northern Ireland really “reaping the dividend of peace, stability and...” as the media is assuring us?4 “There is no performance” as the media is assuring us?5 The performance of the North’s private sector is made of small businesses. The North has the second-lowest level of business start ups in the UK. Inward investment is negligible. A third of Fortune 500 companies have a base in the south, but none have one in the North, and less than 800 of the 90,000 companies conducting business in the six counties are foreign owned.5 The North’s infrastructure is woeful. The two main cities are not even connected by a motorway and experts calculate that the province has a £14 billion infrastructure deficit.8 With few quality jobs being created, the province still suffers from a brain drain. Nigel Smyth of the CBI in the North says that despite having some of the best A-Level results in the UK, the province loses a third of its students every year to universities elsewhere with only a quarter of those returning. “We have not been able to create enough high quality jobs,” he says. Graham Gudgin, who has acted as economic advisor to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to Trevor Smith of Clifton, has “an economy more collectivized than Stalin’s Russia, more corporatist than Mussolini’s, and more quangozied than Wilson and Health’s United Kingdom government.” Entrepreneurial spirit is low. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of VAT-registered companies in the six counties rose by 10% while the south swelled by 76%.10 The North’s private sector is made of small businesses. 90% of companies employ fewer than ten people and only 0.5% have a workforce of more than 200. There are fewer than ten PLCs; the largest is the privatised electricity board. Entrepreneurial spirit is low. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of VAT-registered companies in the six counties rose by 10% while the south swelled by 76%.10

Notes
1 Gerry Moriarty and Dougall de Bruidin, ‘Stormont seeks end of Northern conflict’, Irish Times, 8 May 2007
4 Lonely Planet Blue List: The Best in Travel 2007, pp.150-151
5 Ben West, ‘Belfast’s ship comes in’, The Observer, 4 October 2007
7 And if so...
8 Oliver Morgan, ‘From bombs and bullets to boom towns’, The Observer, 1 April 2007
9 Leader, ‘Northern Ireland’s Peace Settlement’, The Economist, 29 March 2007
11 Colm Healey, ‘Bread and butter on the North’s doorstep’, Sunday Business Post, 4 March 2007
13 Laura Noonan, ‘Creating a strong economy is goal for our future leaders’, Belfast Telegraph, 30 March 2007
14 Colm Healey, op.cit.
15 John Murray Brown, op.cit.
16 Oliver Morgan op.cit.
17 Laura Noonan, op.cit.
19 Editorial, ‘Business tax cut is the key to prosperity’, Belfast Telegraph, 12 March 2007
estimated that a total of 140,000 new jobs will be needed in the next 10 years. Constrained as it is, the Northern Ireland economy could provide the growth in new economic boost which is required.20 And with government plans to slow down public spending over the coming years, economists have warned that Northern Ireland's financial future could be even bleaker.21

Property & Housing

Despite these structural problems, there are claims that Northern Ireland's business growth is booming and employment is rising at a record rate, according to research from the Ulster Bank. The bank found that business activity has gone up for 46 months in a row.22 The reason for this apparent growth is construction and the housing market. The construction industry is now the driving force of the Northern Ireland economy, according to a report from the Ulster Bank.23 Figures from the Nationwide Building Society show that average house prices rose by 58% in the last year, the fastest rate of growth seen in any region of the UK since the Nationwide started compiling figures in 1973. The average price of a house in the North is now £203,815, which compares with a UK average of £175,554. The North, which used to be one of the cheapest places to buy property is now the third most expensive region in the UK behind London and the south-east of England. Fionnuala Earley, Nationwide's chief economist said: "House prices have increased by 281% since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, compared to the UK average of 179%.24 This is especially true of areas once synonymous with the conflict, which are now home to expensive properties. For example, a property on Alliance Avenue in north Belfast – a street on which 14 people were murdered between 1971 and 1998 – went on the market for £285,000 in early March and sold for over £800,000.46 Malone Road prices on a notorious North Belfast interface are a sure sign that the Troubles are over and peace can be felt. A number of properties in the area have been bought up by third parties, crippled by property investment returns, the number of landlords in Northern Ireland has jumped as banks have offered rental property investment loans, or "buy to let" mortgages. 47 48% of private landlords in Northern Ireland acquired their properties in the past five years, according to a 2005 Housing Executive survey. The number of homes they own has more than doubled since 1991.25 A study by the University of Ulster revealed that the buy-to-let sector has grown by 120% over the past 15 years.26 With the rise in house prices, homeowners have built up £58bn in equities in their properties over the last ten years. The average homeowner has made £134 000 and many people have become millionaires.27 This accounts for the growing numbers of new bars, cafes, restaurants, shops and car dealerships. But the property boom is unsustainable and leads young people and first-time buyers into debt and danger. According to Sir John Seiple, who was appointed by the Government to look into the housing crisis: "The very sharp rise in house prices in Northern Ireland has created a new situation here. The market here has changed from a relatively stable one to one where house prices in some areas are ahead of the UK – in a province where earnings are 20% lower.28 He said the latest Council of Mortgage Lenders' figures show the number of first-time buyers has halved from 60% to 30%. First-time buyers are being outbid by investors – 70% of new homes are bought by investors.29 Rising interest rates and spiralling house prices have already left thousands of homeowners struggling to make repayments with the number of home repossessions hitting record highs last year. Almost 3,000 people were served with writs for unpaid mortgages in 2006. Since 2003 the number of homeowners evicted from their property has more than doubled. Meanwhile nearly 10,000 of the 127,000 housing debt problems brought to Citizens Advice Bureaus last year concerned threatened repossession, while 2,000 related to actual repossession.30 The negative effects of the housing boom reinforce research that proves that "the process of Northern Ireland" is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world.31 If people further up the social ladder have done well out of the peace, the gap between rich and poor is even larger than in the rest of Britain.32 The poorest members of society in Northern Ireland, both Catholics and Protestants, are worse off now than ten years ago.33

Parity of Esteem & Identity Politics

One of the most visible signs of the 'new Northern Ireland' has been the radical change that has taken place within areas which suffered most from the conflict; Republican areas in particular. David McKitterick describes this transformation: "These days, the Jeeps on the Falls Road no longer contain helmeted British troops swilling their rifles in the direction of potential IRA sniper hides: instead, as in any other major city, the 4x4s are driven by motorists ferrying children to school. Where once military surveillance installations were perched on top of flats, now modern apartment blocks with hefty price tags are going up everywhere. The massive army barracks, for decades a target of bombs and bullets, are gone. No longer do youngsters indulge in that west- Belfast sport of hijacking buses and setting them ablaze. An hour on the Falls, one of Europe's most notorious districts, is enough to confirm it: the Troubles are over. Welcome to the new Belfast, and a transformed Northern Ireland. The middle classes are richer than ever. And this time, the Catholic community is benefiting strongly.34 The last sentence is particularly significant. To a large extent, British counter-insurgency strategy, by creating a new Catholic middle class dependent upon public sector jobs and state subsidies for the 'community sector', has 'killed Republicanism with kindness'35 Rising house prices have also significantly contributed to the creation of a whole class of owners, who are property owners and small shopkeepers. There is currently an average of eight people bidding on each available property in Nationalist West Belfast. Houses that for £40,000 fifteen years ago are now for over £200,000.36 The Andersonstown News, a large-circulation community newspaper in the Sinn Féin heartland of west Belfast, originally the official voice of the Andersonstown Central Civil Rights Committee, now celebrates the local entrepreneurial spirit and has an extensive property supplement. Such a shift reflects the transformation of material conditions in the Nationalist community. Relying on a revisionist account of the history of the last 30 years, where the IRA campaign becomes one for civil rights and equality rather than for traditional Republican objectives, apologists for the Provisional strategy, such as Laurence McKeown and Jim Gibney, argue that the peace process has made life better for Nationalists in the North, and that the struggle was successful to the extent that never again will Nationalists be second-class citizens, young people in particular.37 It is significant that at a public meeting in January 2007, "the Sinn Féin president relied heavily on the post-ceasefire, feel-good factor for Nationalists. Things had changed, he said: it was wonderful to see young folk 'wearing their county ganseys, speaking as alert as Gaeltacht'. Just because the previous generations had it rough, didn't mean their children and grandchildren had to.38 It is undeniable that the educational, economic and cultural indices of the newly emerging Catholic population are rising. For example, in the early 1970s, 70% of QUB students were Protestants, whereas today some 60% of Queen's University undergraduates and 55% of University of Ulster undergraduates are Catholics.39 The 1998 Good Friday Agreement cooperminated partition, yet it also involved the advancing of Nationalist communal interest in the North itself. As Suzanne Breen points out: "There has been undeniable advancement..."
in many areas for Catholics in the North, but within existing constitutional arrangements.\textsuperscript{41} The Nationalist community may be dynamic, however, and should be noted that the celebration of a community spirit is not discouraged by the British government. It is part of the process of transforming political aspirations into cultural ones.\textsuperscript{42} In the shift towards identity politics, a collapse of political consciousness is most evident. Politics are now about the recognition of the Nationalist ‘identity’ and securing its ‘parity of esteem’ within the North.\textsuperscript{43} With the principle of consent accepted and Republicanism defeated, Nationalists have concentrated their attention on cultural, social and symbolic matters. For example, Sinn Féin calls for equality at Stormont, no longer for its abolition: statues of Irish Republican icons should be placed at Stormont to make it more welcoming for Nationalists, the party has stated. Assembliesman Paul Butler said there needed to be Irish cultural symbols at the devolved parliament to help make the building more attractive to all sides of the community: “It is Sinn Féin’s view that where British cultural symbols are involved in public life, equivalent symbols should be given equal prominence. The display of the Union flag at Stormont and other emblems wholly associated with Unionism do not promote mutual respect and understanding, he said.”\textsuperscript{44}

Sinn Féin feels that they are given equal worth. Sectarianism and racism are not a relic of the 20th century that will die with memories of the civil war. As Laver and on-going peace have turned out to be false. The idea that the conflict in Ireland is between ‘two traditions’ and ‘ethno-national’ in nature, rather than about the British state’s denial of the right of the people of Ireland to self determination as a unit is currently the dominant paradigm in academic. \textsuperscript{45}


41 Bean passim. See also: Mark McGovern, ‘Irish republicans and the potential pitfalls of pressure’, Capital and Class, 17(2), 133-162 and ‘The old days are over: Irish republicans and the modern concept and process of equality’, Terrorism and Political Violence, 16(3): pp.622-645.


44 Cllr Mark Langhammer, ‘State Funded Sectarianism and Pandering to Paramilitarism’, http://www.qub.ac.uk/cose/docs/Langhammer.pdf

45 Note that despite all the reforms, Catholics still experience substantially higher unemployment and poverty rates than Protestants. While Catholics enjoy 48.1% of the total population of working age, they make up 55.7% of economically inactive population of working age. Equally, while Protestants make up 34.4% of the total working age population, they make up only 44.5% of those economic activities involved in working age. Based on NISRE figures, Catholics are spending on average almost one and a half times as long as housing waiting list as Protestants. While the absolute numbers of those on the waiting list has risen for both communities, the increase for Catholics has been almost double that for the Protestant community. See CAJ report ‘Equality in Housing’ in Northern Ireland: The Rhetoric and the Reality (September 2006). The ‘Indicators of Social Need for Northern Ireland’ published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (http://www.economist.com/briefing/observer) show that Catholic disadvantage. See also: Jim Smyth, ‘Towards Equality of Misery?’, Fortnight, November 2006

46 Danny McNally, ‘Loyalists linked to 90% of race crime’, The Observer, 22 October 2000

47 Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, ‘Entrenching Sectarian Goals’, Fortnight, September 2006. The idea that the conflict in Ireland is between ‘two traditions’ and ‘ethno-national’ in nature, rather than about the British state’s denial of the right of the people of Ireland to self determination as a unit is currently the dominant paradigm in academic.


49 Nick Cohen, ‘Stop this drift into educational apartheid’, The Observer, 13 May 2007

50 Noel Jerman, ‘No longer a problem? Sectarian Violence in Northern Ireland’, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2 July 2005

51 Ben Lowry, ‘Sectarian divisions are unifying the Ulster billions’, Belfast
media and through spin and choreography, peace has been bought by “perjury, fraud, corruption, cheating and lying.”54 The 1998 Belfast Agreement was a prime example of what Chomsky would call the ‘manufacturing of consent’: promoting the idea that a ‘No’ vote was a vote for violence, while a ‘Yes’ was a vote for peace, while manipulating opinion polls and relegating dissenting voices to the margins; many of whom agreed with the peace but not with the process. Information Strategy, a British government document written by Tom Kelly, formerly of the BBC and Director of Communications at the Northern Ireland Office at the time of the Agreement, outlines the government’s strategy for getting the right result through a campaign of blatant media manipulation designed to flood Northern Ireland with positive stories about the peace deal.55 The ‘Yes’ Campaign also called in the assistance of top advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, who designed their billboard campaign free of charge. Government spin has been reinforced by the reluctance of the media to ask critical questions. The media has been accused by award-winning journalist Ed Moloney of covering up the truth to protect the peace process and being reluctant to report events unhelpful to the peace process.56 Reporters and editors sympathetic to New Sinn Féin strategy branded journalists who asked awkward questions (such as Ed Moloney or Suzanne Breen) ‘JAPPS – Journalists Against the Peace Process’. It would be more accurate to say that the peace process has in fact produced Journalists Against Journalism. More generally, former hunger striker Brendan Hughes is on solid ground when lamenting the fact that “the process has created a class of professional liars.”57 At a recent conference, both McAliskey and award-winning playwright Gary Mitchell (who was forced to leave Belfast with his extended family due to Loyalist hostility at his plays) expressed strong criticism of the media’s coverage of the peace process. In Mitchell’s view there is a ‘real truth’ and an ‘agreed truth’, and when the “agreed truth becomes accepted, the real truth becomes a lie.” The media is reporting the agreed truth and the real truth “doesn’t get a look in” he argued.58 The agreed truth of the ‘New Northern Ireland’ has been actively promoted by the Blair administration in order that he might go down in history as the one who brought peace to Ireland rather than war to Iraq. The real truth, however, is that Blair is no Gladstone. “Some would suggest a more appropriate comparison would be with Lloyd George, who brokered the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 by telling lies to both sides and who left office in a scandal about the sale of peerages.”59 And whether Blair has succeeded in bringing peace is open to question. Recent political agreements were in essence “a triumph of top-down politics, not bottom-up social change.” The majority of the population “certainly wanted peace, but they do not appear to have sought reconciliation.”60 With people today being divided as ever, the evident conclusion is that Northern Ireland remains a fundamentally dysfunctional entity.
Northern Ireland was created in 1921, when Ireland was partitioned between Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland by the Government of Ireland Act 1920. Unlike Southern Ireland, which would become the Irish Free State in 1922, the majority of Northern Ireland's population were unionists, who wanted to remain within the United Kingdom. Most of these were the Protestant descendants of colonists from Great Britain. The new state, formed in 1801, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, was governed from a single government and parliament based in London. Northern Ireland [1], division of the United Kingdom of [2]Great Britain [3] and Northern Ireland (2011 pop. 1,810,863), 5,462 sq mi (14,147 sq km), NE Ireland. Made up of six of the nine counties of the historic province of Ulster in NE Ireland, it is frequently called Ulster. The island of Ireland is known as Eire in Irish Gaelic. The name of the capital city, Belfast, derives from the city's Gaelic name, Beal Feirste, which means "mouth of the sandy ford," referring to a stream that joins the Lagan River. The state of conflict in Northern Ireland is manifested in the names by which the Northern Irish identify themselves. Ulsters or Ulster Unionists identify themselves by ethnicity, religion, and political bent. Next (Northern Mariana Islands). Northern Ireland (Irish: Tuaisceart Éireann) is a part of the United Kingdom lying in the northeast of the island of Ireland, and consists of six of the nine counties of the province of Ulster. The remainder of the island of Ireland is a sovereign state, the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland has been for many years the site of a violent and bitter ethno-political conflict between those claiming to represent Nationalists, who are predominantly Catholic, and those