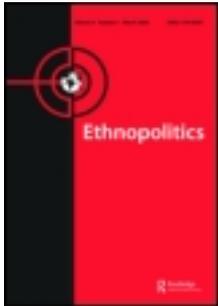


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### From Transition to Transformation in Ethnonational Conflict: Some Lessons from Northern Ireland

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# From Transition to Transformation in Ethnonational Conflict: Some Lessons from Northern Ireland

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on an often undervalued area of academic research between ‘war’ at one extreme and ‘peace’ at the other, namely the transitional period between the two. (The terms ‘war’ and ‘peace’ are used here, and throughout the article, in the knowledge that a substantial body of literature exists that seeks to define the boundaries and conditions of both. It is not the intention to engage directly with these debates, but the words war and peace are used throughout in the understanding that these are complex and multifaceted terms.) The article argues that more emphasis needs to be placed on the *process of transition* in the period after an agreement has been negotiated but before new structures have transformed conflict relationships. It is argued that this transitional phase is critical to the success or failure of the wider political engineering of such negotiated agreements. The article uses the case of Northern Ireland to examine this transitional moment in the wider architecture of conflict transformation within an ethnonational dispute. It is argued that the key to the success of such a fragile peace is to be found in the capacity of the transitional process itself to reduce the political logic of violence among the direct actors and their supporters. It is also argued that we need to be sensitive to the differential pace of this transitional process across both the formal and informal political spheres and to the possibility that these can take multiple or even contradictory paths.

## Introduction

On 27 August 2010 the Australian government issued a travel advisory warning to its citizens about the dangers of visiting Northern Ireland as a result of the rising levels of sectarian violence in the region. This was accompanied by MI5’s decision to raise the threat level of a possible dissident IRA attack in Great Britain from ‘moderate’ to ‘substantial’ (Frampton, 2010, p. 2). On 2 April 2011, Catholic police officer Ronan Kerr was killed by a car bomb in Omagh, responsibility for which was later claimed by a group believed to be composed of experienced members of the Provisional IRA rather than the new wave of ‘dissident’ republicans active since 1998. On 20 June 2011, several nights of rioting took place at the interface between the predominantly Protestant Newtownards Road area of East Belfast and the mainly Catholic Short Strand district. This was orchestrated

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by the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and was met with retaliation by republican dissidents who shot two people, including a press cameraman. In scenes reminiscent of the 1980s, around 400 people engaged in pitched street battles with each other and with the police amid flurries of petrol bombs and plastic bullets.

Such episodes encapsulate the conundrum presented by Northern Ireland today. It was *supposed* to have had a ‘peace process’<sup>1</sup> during the 1990s, which had brought to an end a phase of politically motivated violence that had killed around 4,000 people since 1969 and injured thousands more. This was supposed to have delivered a political alternative to violence, with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998<sup>2</sup> and, following a lot of discussion and argument between (and within) the two main ethnonational blocs, this was supposed to have resulted in the paramilitary factions renouncing their campaigns of violence and joining the democratic process.

Of course real peace in Northern Ireland has been elusive and a nagging question remains to be answered. Why, despite all of the new political engineering put in place during the peace process, does politically motivated violence still exist and why has a peaceful transition proved to be so problematic in the region? This article examines these questions and explains how the transitional phase of the peace process has produced new democratic political structures *at the same time as* generating renewed waves of sectarian violence.

At a conceptual level, the article seeks to add nuance to a number of conflict resolution/transformation orthodoxies that have developed over recent years. There is general agreement that conflict actors who are involved in the architecture of negotiated ‘settlements’ have a greater vested interest in building the peace during the difficult implementation phase and that such negotiations should be as inclusive as is practically possible without tipping the process into chaos by including groups who are not committed to the process (Lederach, 1995; Hampson, 1996; Kriesberg, 2007). Much of this recent scholarship is sensibly accompanied by numerous caveats concerning the complex interplay of the direct and indirect factors required to convert the chance for non-violence into the realization of a workable and sustainable settlement (Miall, 2004, pp. 6–10).

Notwithstanding some sophisticated modelling and theorizations of conflict transformation (Lederach, 1995; Rupesinghe, 1995; Clements, 1997; Mitchell, 2002; Reimann, 2003; Wallensteen, 2007), less attention is given in the literature to the specific process of *transition* in the ‘post-conflict’ environment. Where this is discussed, it tends to be at the level of liberal institutionalism and state-building, namely the lag between reforming the old order and providing new political and economic bodies that can command either internal or external support (or both) (Paris, 2004; Paris & Sisk, 2009). Although most scholars note the importance of seeing conflict transformation as an organic and evolving process, much of the emphasis is placed on efforts to engineer cessations of violence, political negotiations and subsequent post-conflict reconciliation strategies.

All of these areas are important and deserving of the attention they have been given, though rather less emphasis has been placed on the fact that in many cases the process of transition occurs at different speeds both within and across traditional ethnonational blocs. This article seeks to add nuance to conflict transformation debates by illustrating how the transitional process has functioned in Northern Ireland. This case provides a close exploration of transitional issues, and demonstrates that while consociational political structures are capable of providing self-interest for the accommodation of political elites, which can smooth ethnonational tensions and apparent incompatibilities, this is

more difficult at the grass-roots level, especially in the context of ending paramilitary violence.

It is argued that in the transitional phase of conflict transformation, elite political accommodation often sits uncomfortably alongside new forms of conflict, where the political logic of violence can remain viable for some sections of the population. The case study of Northern Ireland provides lessons for other ethnonational contexts, the key one being that the process of transition evolves differentially (and at times paradoxically) within and across the range of actors involved.

### **Conflict Transformation: Boundaries, Limits and Utility**

The conceptual language used to define conflict, peace and intersections between the two is contested, fluid and perhaps a little tedious given the circular discussions and variable starting points that have populated the discussion in recent years. Mitchell (2001, p. 1) suggests that the phrase conflict transformation emerged as a result of the dilution, abuse and over-use of its more popular cousin, conflict resolution. Terms such as conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation are often used interchangeably, even though they convey different meanings or emphases. One flows into the other and the boundaries between them are rarely observed beyond those active at the sharp end of theoretical enquiry. John Burton argued that 'by the resolution of conflict, we mean the transformation of relationships in a particular case by the solution of the problems which led to the conflictual behaviour in the first place' (Burton, 1990, pp. 2–3). There are good reasons to maintain some flexibility given the complexity of the processes and issues they seek to explain, and there is a lot to be said for providing some conceptual room for manoeuvre rather than presenting artificial distinctions that fail to cope with the multidimensional aspects of contemporary conflict and peace-building (Reimann, 2003, p. 7).

Finally, 'conflict transformation' can make a reasonable claim to conceptual clarity when set against a number of other theoretical debates of recent years, such as those relating to 'conflict prevention', 'civil society' or, at the more nebulous end, 'failed states' and 'good governance'.

A debate is ongoing within conflict studies on the differences between these terms (not to mention others not considered here, such as conflict regulation). Whereas some scholars see conflict transformation as 'the deepest level' within conflict resolution (Ramsbotham *et al.*, 2011, p. 9), others see it as being distinct and separate (Lederach, 1995; Rupesinge, 1995; Vayrynen, 1991). Final judgements on this matter are less important for the argument here than the processes and dynamics they seek to describe.

This article accepts that the boundaries of conflict transformation are loose, untidy and opaque, but takes the view that given the scenarios it is trying to explain, this is relatively unproblematic and allows for a certain theoretical 'give', to account for the specific dynamics in real-world situations. From this perspective, more is to be gained from demonstrating how conflict transformation can provide a set of useful and sympathetic tools through which to understand complex and evolving conflict relationships. As Miall argues, conflict transformation 'is best viewed not as a wholly new approach, but rather as a reconceptualization of the field in order to make it more relevant to contemporary conflicts' (Miall, 2004, p. 3).

The argument is that as a conceptual tool conflict transformation is more precisely tuned to the nature of multidimensional, multi-actor forms of ethnonational violence in the twenty-first century, which allows us a better grip on the complex dynamics of cases such as Northern Ireland. This also facilitates a more proactive engagement in the process of post-agreement peace-building and a discourse that is acceptable to the majority of people who live within the region.

Conflict management contains an inherent conservative and statist bias that renders it problematic as a conceptual tool in the case of Northern Ireland (and arguably many others), where the state itself was one of the protagonists within the conflict. The term tends to underplay structural causations of conflict and thus state responsibility, highlighting instead agency triggers such as dysfunctional actor relationships or simply unreasonable or criminal behaviour. As a consequence, conflict management strategies often take a limited view of the need for structural change and at its harder edge focus on security measures such as counter-insurgency techniques, coercive policing and legislation to regulate behaviour within the conflict zone. Such a contextual backdrop makes the concept of conflict management problematic in the case of Northern Ireland as the causes of conflict and the meaning of 'security' and 'justice' remain contested and highly politicized issues. In other words, it sets the bar low in efforts to address ethnonational violence, adopting a negative rather than positive peace perspective, with a general view that conflicts are generated by the existence of mutually exclusive interests and the realization of this incompatibility by the conflict actors.

Conflict resolution finds more purchase in Northern Ireland and is less encumbered with the negative imagery of the previous phrase. However, this too can lack a little dynamism in its more traditional usage, which has at times taken a technocratic and external 'problem-solving' approach to political violence. Thus, conflict resolution tends to be done *to* us, rather than *by* us, with the result that such policies and strategies can appear peripheral or patronizing to those on the receiving end and disempowering to people who have to buy into them over the long term.

Furthermore, the idea that conflict needs 'resolving' can mutate unhelpfully into the desire to airbrush divisions or even sectarianism out of society and force people into artificial centrist positions that underplay (or even deny) issues relating to political identity, cultural difference and heritage. This can often engender suspicions among direct actors that external manipulation and diplomatic sleight of hand are at work, which can produce counter-productive outcomes. Conflict resolution approaches can lack the necessary contextual empathy or understanding, and fail to appreciate the role that emotion and memory play in the transition out of a culture of violence (Vayrynen, 1991, p. 4). This does not attempt to reify elements of personal agency above structural causations, but suggests, rather, that conflict resolution approaches can at times lack the flexibility to accommodate the intersection of both of these conflict dynamics to the same degree. There are of course many theorists and practitioners who conceive of conflict resolution in a more holistic manner, and it is important not to caricature the field (Ramsbotham *et al.*, 2011, p. 9).

Notwithstanding these caveats, the emphasis placed by some advocates of conflict resolution on the rational-actor model, and the need to convert zero-sum equations into positive sum outcomes through the reframing of issues into mutually understood problems, frequently fails to cope with the visceral realities of places such as Northern Ireland. Not everything has a positive-sum outcome, at least not for all parties concerned. In the messy aftermath of multi-party negotiations, not everyone will be ready to accept

common understandings of the ‘problem’ that needs resolving. From this perspective, conflict resolution risks taking the human element out of the equation too readily (and this should not be taken as a denial of structural causations of political violence). Some conflict resolution modelling and problem-solving exercises find it difficult to adapt easily to such diverse reactions and is perhaps better suited to more traditional forms of conflict than the patterns of ethnonationalist violence experienced in the twenty-first century. ‘The complexity of these situations contrasts starkly with the relative simplicity of the core theories we can find in conflict resolution, especially those advocating win–win outcomes in two-party contests’ (Miall, 2004, p. 3). Thus, although conflict resolution approaches can be very effective in developing strategies for non-violence and engineering dialogue, negotiations and elite accommodation, they are not as nimble in determining why such agreements fail to transform the underlying conflict relationships, or why the transitional process that follows such agreements conforms to such idiosyncratic patterns.

A conflict transformation approach (although not wholly unproblematic) helps to explain why the post-agreement transitional patterns in Northern Ireland have fluctuated so dramatically. If we can get past the fact that its meaning is potentially ambiguous and neutral (e.g. it could mean a transformation towards violent as well as peaceful interactions), it can be seen as a useful means of understanding the complex interplay of the various factors that operate during the transitional phase of a conflict after a negotiated agreement has been reached.<sup>3</sup>

Conflict transformation overlaps with the other approaches, but tends to make the communities themselves, and their political elites, active creators rather than passive recipients of the political process. ‘By placing its primary emphasis on the question of social justice, the conflict transformation approach rejects the traditional aim of conflict management to restore the *status quo ante* and, instead, elaborates on the notion of conflict as a positive agent for social change. Conflict transformation is an open-ended, long-term, multi-track and dynamic process, which significantly widens the scope of actors involved’ (Reimann, 2003, p. 13).

At a fundamental level, we are dealing with more than linguistic semantics, as Kriesberg highlights in his observation that ‘... conflict resolution means solving the problems that led to the conflict, and transformation means changing the relationships between the parties to the conflict’ Kriesberg (2007, p. 64). The argument here therefore is that the widened and deepened canvas provided by the conceptual orientation of conflict transformation allows us a clearer picture of the complex dynamics of post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

### **Bench-marking Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland**

At this stage it is worth giving some thought to what successful conflict transformation might encompass, before looking at the extent to which such factors have been apparent in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. This is not done so much to audit or quantify the ‘amount’ of conflict transformation that has taken place, as this would be overly mechanistic and lack any nuanced interpretation of events or processes. The purpose, rather, is to outline what general trends we might expect to see from a successful conflict transformation process and then to determine the extent to which these are visible in the context of political change in Northern Ireland since 1998.

In general terms, we would expect to see some restoration of pre-conflict relationships as well as wider contextual transformation of the conflict and the main issues that underpin it (Boege, 2006, p. 7). Miall puts some flesh on these bones by commenting on the way in which conflict transformation is a multidimensional, multi-actor approach that focuses as much on the process of progressive peaceful change over time as it does on the end point envisaged (Miall, 2004, p. 6). He goes on to identify five points of transformation that provide a useful template for assessing real-world situations.<sup>4</sup> First, *context* transformation or changes in the external environment beyond the conflict zone can have an impact on how issues and interests are understood. This can particularly affect issues relating to external political or economic support, with the end of the Cold War being an obvious example. Second, *structural* transformations can reduce the rational basis for conflict by altering the balance of forces or reconfiguring central grievances. Obvious examples here would include the removal of political or economic discrimination within an asymmetric conflict, which were a dynamic factor in the rise of militant violence. Third, *actor* transformation relates to the arrival or replacement of key personnel who play a role in facilitating or entering into dialogue with enemy factions, or convincing their constituencies to pursue peaceful methods. Fourth, *issue* transformation relates to the way in which central policies are reframed in response to other changes taking place. An obvious example of issue transformation in the context of Northern Ireland was provided by the acceptance of power-sharing ‘with an Irish dimension’ by unionists in 1998 when this was unacceptable in the 1970s (Wolff, 2001).<sup>5</sup> Finally, *personal/small group* transformations can take place at crucial points that enable other aspects of political change to operate more easily, or that function to overcome particular sticking points in the wider system of political change.

Transformation along these various planes may occur at different rates across different time-frames, e.g. context changes may take place towards the early stages in a manner that enables dialogue to commence, all of which may lead to eventual issue and personal transformation taking place at a later date.

Whereas conflict management and even traditional approaches to conflict resolution may operate within quite limited time-frames with relatively narrow sets of actors, conflict transformation envisages multidimensional change from micro- to macro-levels across an open-ended time-frame. Another key signifier of the process of conflict transformation relates to the participation across all levels of society (typically cast as Track I, II and III engagements). This connects into the argument that peace-building needs to be a proactive endeavour and one that connects grass-roots communities through civil society representatives to the political elites.

The obvious question that follows is how do these ideas and expectations map on to the experience of political change in Northern Ireland since 1998? The picture as viewed across the five components of transformation outlined above is mixed, but there is clear evidence of transitional change taking place, even if the pace is slow and uneven.

More specific context transformations arrived in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA and subsequent ‘global war on terror’ pursued by the Bush administration and its allies. The international context associated with these events encouraged a tactical reassessment within paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and for their prospective supporters in countries such as America (Cunningham, 2009, p. 287). This had a cumulative impact along with other factors, leading to other issue transformations (most obviously acts of weapons decommissioning by the Provisional IRA). It would be

unwise to exaggerate the importance of any one particular context change, and substantiating any direct cause-and-effect linkage is extremely difficult. However, it is reasonable to argue that context transformations have had an impact on the structure of the conflict in Northern Ireland and on issue and actor transformations over time (Arthur, 2000; Dumbrell, 2006; Cochrane, 2007; Cox *et al.*, 2006).

Other *context* changes have led to *issue* transformations, one of the more obvious being the decision of the Irish Republic to remove its territorial claim to Northern Ireland by reforming Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution following the GFA and subsequent referendums. These changes in the wider context allowed many of the conflict issues to be reframed in less zero-sum terms (Ni Aolain & Campbell, 2005, p. 190).

The *structure* of the conflict has also transformed substantially, in that although economic disparities and social exclusion remain (especially within urban working-class areas), few nationalists would argue today that the political system is designed to exclude them from effective citizenship. Notwithstanding the analysis of republican dissidents (see below), the vast majority of nationalists now accepts that the political system is more representative than it was in the past and that democratic methods can deliver political change.

In addition, the sinews of violence no longer pertain as they did from 1969 to 1994, despite the persistence of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, while the ‘security forces’ (British Army, MI5, RUC Special Branch, etc.) play a much less invasive role today. The tit-for-tat nature of violence and the arms race that accompanied it on all sides has also been transformed, though it would be unwise to exaggerate the extent of this, as ethnonational sectarianism remains.

In terms of *actor* transformation, the most obvious changes here since 1998 came after the 2003 Assembly election when the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin were returned as the two largest parties (Tonge, 2006b, p. 70) and eventually brokered a deal that led to Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness becoming First and Deputy First Ministers in 2007. The second element of this actor transformation arrived when Peter Robinson replaced Paisley as DUP leader and First Minister and established a cordial working relationship with McGuinness (detailed below). This actor transformation was strengthened rather than weakened by the continuation of dissident violence and led eventually to the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland.

In qualitative terms there has been a further actor transformation in that the rise in both Sinn Féin and DUP electoral support has been assisted by their increasing policy moderation and movement towards more centrist positions (Mitchell, 2001, p. 34; Tonge, 2006a, pp. 186–187). The DUP moved from outright rejection of the Good Friday Agreement, through a grudging toleration, into a wholehearted defence of its devolved institutions (Ganiel, 2007, p. 303). Sinn Féin, meanwhile, transformed themselves from an abstentionist protest party that eschewed the constitutional process in favour of the Provisional IRA’s ‘armed struggle’ to an organization that has embraced the structures and institutions of devolved government.

In some key areas *issue* transformation has moved from being of manifest to latent importance. For the moment the central underlying issue of the conflict relating to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland has been parked rather than resolved—it has therefore been neutralized rather than transformed (Bell *et al.*, 2004, p. 12; Ni Aolain & Campbell, 2005, p. 193). For the majority of unionists (including the vast majority of former loyalist paramilitaries) the political position of Northern Ireland within the UK is secure. For the

majority of nationalists (including the vast majority of former members of the Provisional IRA), they now live within a Northern Ireland that recognizes their Irish identity. While identity-based issues remain potent (and continue to divide people), the constitutional issue concerning whether Northern Ireland is British or Irish (or some hybrid of the two) is less central than it used to be. One reason for this is the fact that the ‘national’ question was transformed after the 1998 negotiations into an ‘identity’ question, where people could identify themselves as being British, Irish or both. ‘This formulation provides satisfaction to both Nationalists and Unionists, or to neither, depending on how it is interpreted’ (Gilligan, 2008, p. 7). During the negotiations in the 1990s this was often referred to as ‘constructive ambiguity’, the basic premise being to allow a permissive elasticity within the process to the point where opposing sides could interpret agreements differently. This subsequently led to recriminations when the different sides accused each other of not living up to their promises and obligations (Mitchell, 2009, pp. 328–332).

The transformation here relates to the fact that while unionists and nationalists today may still disagree on their final constitutional destination, most are united in the view that these political goals should be pursued through peaceful and democratic methods. While identity-based tensions remain simmering under the surface in Northern Ireland (bubbling up during sensitive periods and when issues related to victims and commemorations are raised), the core issues have been transformed to the point that few people contest the basic political geometry of the region. Power-sharing with an Irish dimension has cross-party support; the relationships between Northern Ireland, the Irish Republic and Great Britain are relatively uncontentious—policing and justice issues have been transformed to the degree that the vast majority of people (including Sinn Féin) now fully support the police and the criminal justice system, and most reject the use of violence for political ends.

*Personal/small group* transformation is more apparent within the political elites than it is across the wider community in Northern Ireland and is assessed in greater detail below. While several signs of transformation are apparent, they are far from complete in terms of the restoration of relationships envisaged by theorists such as Lederach (1997) or Rupe-singhe (1995).

Ironically, perhaps, while the political structures have survived and bedded down—March 2011 witnessed the first full term of devolved government in 4 years—sectarianism has stubbornly remained and the desire of some groups to continue militant campaigns of violence has grown.

Although the political system has not functioned smoothly since 1998, there have nevertheless been transformative moments that have helped the transition from political conflict into a form of democratic governance. The chronology of events that followed the GFA was painfully slow and characterized more by setbacks than by breakthroughs. Despite this fractious beginning (the devolved political structures were suspended four times between 1999 and 2002), the gap between militant republicanism and the police was eventually transformed, which then led to the establishment of a working relationship between Sinn Féin and the DUP. After a series of reforms to make the police more acceptable to the nationalist community, Sinn Féin endorsed the reconstituted Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and accepted its legitimacy.

This was the latest stage in the political transformation of Sinn Féin and its movement away from the physical force tradition into constitutional politics. This led to disagreements within the republican community, with some people resigning from Sinn Féin

either to take an independent stance or to align themselves with other republican groups critical of Sinn Féin's position. This pattern fits relatively neatly with academic scholarship surrounding the spoiler debate (Stedman, 1997, pp. 5–6; Newman & Richmond, 2006, p. 3). The next section examines some of these themes in more detail (especially in relation to the difficult transition within republican politics at both the political and paramilitary levels).

### **Transition and Transformation in Republican Violence**

On 7 August 2010 a female police officer in Northern Ireland narrowly escaped serious injury along with her baby daughter when a bomb attached to her car failed to explode. The intended victim was a Catholic from an Irish nationalist background who had joined a reformed policing service that was now supported by all of the main political parties in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin. The bomb was planted by dissident republican group *Óglaigh na hÉireann*, who saw this policewoman as a 'legitimate target', guilty of helping to perpetuate British rule in Ireland. Rather than seeing her participation in the reformed policing system as a new beginning for accountable and representative government, these dissident republicans view such 'collaboration' as being part of a larger political lie, namely that British rule in Ireland can be ended through democratic methods.

In the summer of 2010, Sinn Féin politicians and former Provisional IRA stalwarts struggled to control rioting in Belfast during unrest that accompanied an Orange parade in Ardoyne during the July 'Marching Season'. These parades are an annual event in Northern Ireland and have frequently become a site for sectarian rivalry since the peace process began in the 1990s. The disdainful treatment of former militants by younger elements within the republican community illustrated two wider themes. First, senior figures within the old-guard of the Provisional IRA are no longer feared the way they once were, 12 years after the Good Friday Agreement and 16 years after the first IRA ceasefire in 1994. The phrase 'they haven't gone away you know', uttered by Gerry Adams at a rally in Belfast in 1995 as an unscripted response to a shout from the crowd to 'bring back the IRA', is now redundant. Fifteen years after this remark was made, it is clear that they *have* gone away, people on the ground know that they have done so, and as a consequence their coercive control and ability to maintain discipline at the local level have diminished.

More ominously, while the Provisional IRA may have gone away, others have arrived, eager to occupy the spaces vacated by those who decided to embrace the democratic process after 1998. Evidence also emerged in 2009 that dissident republican groups were using new technologies to attract younger recruits and tap into a constituency that felt socially excluded and disconnected from Sinn Féin, or the new structures of government that they represented. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Bebo had a number of Real IRA support groups, which were investigated by the police in April 2009 following an upsurge in violence by dissident republicans the previous month. One group on Bebo, called 'Support the Dissidents', had a membership of 117 people in April 2009.<sup>6</sup> Interviewed by the republican newspaper *An Phoblacht* shortly before rioting took place in the Ardoyne area of Belfast in July 2010, former Provisional IRA commander Bobby Storey criticized the dissident activists and their supporters for having no support and no strategic alternative to Sinn Féin's policies.

These groups openly admit that they have no chance of achieving an end to partition by their armed actions. Their stated goal is to ‘prevent normalisation’ in the Six Counties . . . This is no justification for any loss of life, and for the destruction of other lives through imprisonment. It is a huge price to be paid for such a narrow, dead-end goal. (*An Phoblacht*, 10 September 2010, p. 5)

This article makes interesting reading given the previous attitude of militant republicans towards the need for popular support and their antipathy towards the capacity of the democratic process to deliver political change.

The economic downturn has aided and abetted the dissident critique, and although poverty and unemployment are not causal factors in the rise of dissident republican violence, the recession experienced since 2009 has made it easier for such groups to argue that the peace process has done little to transform the lives of urban working-class Catholics in Northern Ireland. Some of the statistics indicate the scale of youth unemployment and explain their disaffection with the political status quo. The youth unemployment rate in Northern Ireland stands at 16%, while nearly 43% of those unemployed have been without a job for more than a year. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government plans to reduce the UK budget deficit also look set to have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland as compared with other regions within the UK. The public sector employs 31% of the workforce in Northern Ireland compared with a UK average of 19%, so cuts in this area are likely to hit the region particularly hard and further increase disaffection among disadvantaged groups, which can be exploited by dissident republican factions.

It is also important to recognize that there is a constituency within Irish republicanism that agrees with much of the ‘dissident’ critique, but is unwilling to support a return to violence. One of the most prominent over the last few years is McIntyre (2009), who has presented a relentless attack on current Sinn Féin policy and the manner in which the leadership of that organization had betrayed the republican memory. ‘The republican struggle is over . . . Republicans without republicanism are little different than constitutional nationalists. The blood spilt was a costly fuel with which to power the ambitions of self-proclaimed establishment politicians. The ends corrupted the means’ (McIntyre, 2009, p. 29).

The sustained intellectual critique of republicans like McIntyre, together with evidence of bolder operations by militant dissidents and the lower level skirmishing of young nationalists within interface areas, indicate that the political credibility and authority of the Sinn Féin leadership, which has so far prevented a major split in the movement from taking place (at the level of the 1969 schism), is increasingly under strain. The fact that the Ronan Kerr murder referred to above was claimed by former members of the Provisional IRA rather than ‘dissident’ republicans suggests that the leakage towards militant republicanism continues to increase.

These episodes signal that the political system in Northern Ireland remains fragile and the transition from a culture of violence to a culture of peace is still at a relatively early stage. Whereas at the periphery this is ‘recreational’ violence carried out by bored and frustrated teenagers, its militant centre is carefully orchestrated, directed and strategic. Much of the purpose is to embarrass Sinn Féin politically, draw the police on to the streets in a public order capacity and force a sustained British military response to violent unrest,

which would in turn require Sinn Féin to choose between supporting the police or supporting nationalist communities in Ardoyne, the Short Strand and elsewhere.

This would put Sinn Féin in a difficult position as they would risk either offending their core political constituency within key republican and nationalist areas, or alienating their partners in government within the unionist community, many of whom are still getting used to the idea that the IRA and Sinn Féin actually support the police and the rule of law. Peter Robinson, the DUP leader and First Minister of Northern Ireland, would find it difficult to resist unionist allegations that he was in government with 'terrorist sympathizers' if Sinn Féin did not support a security response to serious dissident violence.

The dissidents know that by raising the security threat in Northern Ireland they will squeeze the political space available to Sinn Féin and their room to manoeuvre, eventually forcing them closer to the DUP. In doing so, Sinn Féin's official narrative that they are pursuing republican goals through the democratic system will look increasingly at odds with reality, and the dissident argument that Sinn Féin had been co-opted into oppressive British rule in Ireland will appear more coherent. Sinn Féin, the police and unionist political leaders all know that this is the logic behind dissident violence and are trying to make sure that they do not inflame it further by over-reacting at the local level.

Events at the beginning of October 2010 provided another illustration of the way in which dissident republican violence is intertwined with the surrounding political environment. On 4 October the Real IRA detonated a 200 lb bomb in Derry, which caused substantial damage to surrounding properties. This was timed to coincide with the appearance of Martin McGuinness at the Conservative Party Annual Conference in Birmingham. While McGuinness condemned the Real IRA as 'conflict junkies', it shone a light on their argument that Sinn Féin had been co-opted into the British political establishment. More broadly, it provided an unfortunate political symmetry for many former members and supporters of the IRA, some of whom had helped to plan an attack on Margaret Thatcher at the 1984 Conservative Party Conference, which nearly killed the former Prime Minister and several members of her government.

On 2 April 2011, meanwhile, the murder of PSNI constable Ronan Kerr in Omagh was condemned by the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), of which Kerr was a member. Attacking the objectives behind the murder, Martin McGuinness demonstrated the transition that Sinn Féin has made in its relationship with the police. 'They have betrayed the community and set themselves against the will of the people of Ireland ... While those behind this act seek to promote division and conflict let us state clearly, they will fail. The process of peace building will continue and the community is united in rejection of them.'<sup>7</sup>

While there has been an attempt not to over-react to such attacks, it is clear that the attention of the police and other elements of the British security apparatus is being inexorably drawn back to Northern Ireland owing to the low-level, but sustained activity of dissident groups. According to PSNI figures (compiled for the financial year 1 April 2009–31 March 2010), there were 127 victims of paramilitary-style attacks during the year, which was more than double the total of recorded attacks for the previous year. However, over a longer term perspective the levels of paramilitary violence, although serious and sustained, are not yet increasing in severity. PSNI figures record two conflict-related fatalities in 2009/10, compared with 18 in 2000/01, 17 in 2001/02 and 15 in 2002/03.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, while the figures for victims of 'paramilitary-style attacks' rose

dramatically from 61 casualties in 2008/09 to 127 in 2009/10, the corresponding figures for 2000/01 and 2001/02 were 323 and 302, respectively (*ibid.*).

In September 2010 the head of MI5 took the unusual step of speaking out publicly about the threat posed by dissident republican violence. Jonathan Evans commented that when his organization assumed lead responsibility for intelligence gathering in Northern Ireland in 2007, the working assumption within MI5 had been that the security risk was low and would fade away as devolution bedded down and the democratic structures gained momentum.

Sadly that has not proved to be the case. On the contrary we have seen a persistent rise in terrorist activity and ambition in Northern Ireland over the last three years . . . Therefore, while we do not face the scale of problems caused by the Provisional IRA at the height of the Troubles, there is a real and increasing security challenge in Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup>

While the record of MI5 itself in the history of political violence in Northern Ireland is not an unblemished one (Ellison & Smyth, 2000; Ni Aolain, 2000), the above comments represent a future marker being put down by those Sinn Féin used to refer to as the ‘Securocrats’.<sup>10</sup> The clear signal was that dissident violence was getting worse and that a significant security response may be necessary in the future in the interests of protecting the civilian population.

This view was supported by survey evidence in October 2010, which suggested that one person in seven within the nationalist community (14%) had ‘some sympathy for the reasons’ why dissidents wanted to maintain their violent campaign. Although this is not the same as saying that they actually ‘supported’ violence, it illustrates that some potential exists for the dissident critique of the political status quo.<sup>11</sup> The other striking finding of this research was that such sympathy came overwhelmingly from male young people under the age of 35. This suggests that the more militant elements are people with little knowledge of the phase of conflict that took place from 1968 to 1998.<sup>12</sup>

### **Transition and Transformation in Loyalist Violence**

While republican paramilitary groups such as the Provisional IRA have tended to dominate media coverage, violent factions have also been active within loyalist communities of Northern Ireland. Groups such as the UVF were active at the beginning of the twentieth century and were formed as a unionist militia prior to the outbreak of World War I.

The UVF was revived in 1966 in response to the perceived threat from the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland and became increasingly active in response to the birth of the Provisional IRA in 1969. There were a plethora of loyalist paramilitary factions apart from the UVF (and its alter ego the Red Hand Commandos), the main ones being the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and its ‘sister’ group the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), which was used when accepting responsibility for violent attacks (Steenkamp, 2008, p. 160). Loyalist paramilitaries tended to see themselves as being counter-revolutionaries and their violence as being targeted at protecting the interests of the unionist community and preserving the political status quo, specifically, Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the UK. Most of these groups cast their violence as being an unfortunate necessity caused by the failure of British security policies.

While all paramilitary factions would provide a rationale for their violence and rarely claim that they were targeting innocent people, what resulted was a vicious circle of tit-for-tat killings, which in themselves became self-sustaining (English, 2009, pp. 71–72). This sectarian cycle was aided and abetted by state violence and by the misdirected and at times calamitous security policies and operations of the British state (Ellison & Smyth, 2000; Ni Aolain, 2000).

While the structures within loyalist paramilitary groups masked a diverse mix of individual motivations, from dedicated political activists to criminal opportunists—with one or two psychopaths such as ‘Shankill butcher’ Lenny Murphy (Dillon, 1990) and paedophiles such as John McKeague (McKay, 2000, p. 48) hiding in their midst—they evolved during the 1970s and 1980s into well-structured and disciplined organizations committed to a violent political strategy.

The transformation of loyalist paramilitaries during the period has not mirrored that within the republican community and there has not been an upsurge of ‘dissident loyalist’ violence. There are a number of reasons for this, the most important being that when the Provisional IRA left the stage and as Sinn Féin became ‘inextricably linked’ to the democratic political process, loyalist paramilitaries found it difficult to find a target and turned in on themselves with a number of significant internal feuds (Tonge, 2006a, p. 166). Second, many loyalists felt that the GFA had significant benefits for them (such as prisoner releases) and in political terms it did not signify a threat to Northern Ireland’s constitutional position within the UK.

In addition, after 1998 the energies of loyalist paramilitary factions were directed at themselves rather than at the nationalist/republican community. On one level the political battle continued between those who supported the peace process and those who opposed it and wanted to continue fighting. This crossed paramilitary factions (e.g. between the UVF and newly formed Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF)) but also caused fractures within groups themselves, mostly notably within the UDA.

The alphabet soup of loyalist organizations entered a phase of internal feuding after 1998, which was partly political but was mainly a turf war between organizations and personalities for control of the war economy. The conflict had created personal fiefdoms for a number of people at the top of loyalist paramilitary organizations, several of whom had lined their pockets through extortion rackets and drug-dealing in urban working-class areas (Steenkamp, 2008, pp. 169–170).

The British government had informally turned a blind eye to this low-level criminality for three reasons. First, they were more concerned with the bigger picture, namely the level of sectarian violence and the possibility of getting loyalist support for the wider peace process. Second, there tended to be a bigger security focus on republican violence and the threat posed by the Provisional IRA. Third, the security services such as MI5 and the police Special Branch put up with (and at times enabled) drug-dealing and other forms of criminal activity in exchange for intelligence from informers.

The UVF activity in Short Strand during the June 2011 riots demonstrates that these loyalist paramilitary groups have not disintegrated and can re-emerge in response to community tensions. However, they lack internal cohesion and any sustained political *raison d’être*, as a result of which their violence may remain sporadic, though none the less periodically potent. In addition, the police now have time to turn their attention more directly to loyalist criminal networks and have less reason to put up with the racketeering and extortion of the past.

Finally, there are several loyalist ex-paramilitaries working at the grass-roots level to support the peace process and convince those who are wavering to do likewise.

This brings us back once again to Miall's five-point typology with a practical example of *personal/small group* transformation at the micro-level. Mitchell has explained the importance of this role in the wider transitional process towards conflict transformation in Northern Ireland. 'Former combatants play a vitally important role mediating with active paramilitaries and mediating with the most vulnerable parts of their communities. If they did not do this job, no statutory body—by their own account—could replace them. This would leave a volatile loyalist constituency without progressive leadership—a factor that would inevitably damage the peace process in Northern Ireland' (Mitchell, 2008, p. 13).

Notwithstanding the evolution of loyalist paramilitary factions since 1998, this transition remains a fragile one, and although there has been a degree of ideological transformation, the organizational structures remain intact at the community level. The difference today is that most of these energies are directed intra-ethnically at other members of the loyalist community. The murder of Bobby Moffett by the UVF in May 2010 shocked the local community but was the result of internal feuding rather than traditional ethnonational sectarianism. Moffett was a well-known loyalist himself, with connections to the Red Hand Commandos (RHC), and while his murder was carried out in broad daylight on one of Belfast's busiest roads, no eye witnesses came forward to the police with information. This demonstrates that the UVF is still capable of exercising discipline over elements of the wider community, but this is also at a transitional point, as local opposition to the attack resulted in the UVF having to resort to threatening text messages (which were largely ignored) warning people not to attend Moffett's funeral. The behaviour of the UVF resulted in intra-ethnic fracturing rather than an increase of inter-ethnic sectarianism between unionists and nationalists. As a direct consequence, Dawn Purvis resigned as leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), citing her disillusionment that the UVF was not committed to a conflict transformation agenda.

### **The Remaining Challenges for Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland**

Beyond the activities of the paramilitary communities, some positive signs of conflict transformation are apparent. Despite the obstacles to peaceful transition that remain, Northern Ireland is slowly transforming from a society ravaged by the day-to-day visceral reality of violent conflict to a place that is now struggling to cope with pockets of sporadic but persistent violence. The argument here is that while this transitional process is slow and difficult, the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland are gradually emerging into a new set of political relationships dominated by the activities (positive and negative) of devolved government. Although these structures are imperfect, the political vacuum that had sucked the air out of public debate on social and economic policy since the 1970s has been replaced with a new set of political institutions.

It is true that these are not yet functioning effectively and some may be highly flawed or unnecessary altogether. The Executive and Assembly have been suspended on several occasions, including a long hiatus between 2002 and 2007. The Civic Forum remains in limbo (though this seems to be of little concern to either the main political parties or the wider community). While the Executive and Assembly have had some notable achievements (the devolution of policing and justice being the most obvious), it has

failed in other areas. Towards the end of its last term in 2011, the Executive lost any semblance of collective responsibility, with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) refusing to support the budget, while other flagship policies such as the 'Programme for Government' either faltered or stalled altogether, as in the case of the 'review of public administration'.

The consociational logic at the centre of government, with its mandatory coalition and parallel consent across the two ethnonational blocs, held out the possibility of interdependence and cooperation on the one hand, or stagnation and gridlock on the other. Both of these have featured at different times, with the latter being particularly apparent over contentious issues such as the future of the Maze prison and selection tests (11+) in post-primary education. Some have suggested that the system's reification of traditional ethnonational divisions within government precludes any real conflict transformation process from developing as sectarian apartheid is hard-wired into the political system. In order to preserve ethnonational power-sharing and proportionality, each elected representative is required to identify themselves in the Assembly as being 'unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other', which has been seen by some critics as perpetuating rather than transforming the old sectarian order and providing few incentives for post-conflict ethnic integration. Critics point to the way in which the flagship policy on community relations, *A Shared Future* (2005), morphed into *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (2010), in a manner that promoted separation and mutual accommodation, rather than integration or reconciliation (Todd & Ruane, 2010, p. 3).

It can be argued, however, that despite the problems that remain, the structures of government are not doomed to fail as a result of the theoretical shortcomings of consociational democracy. Whereas some believed that the structures of the GFA had unhelpfully cast sectarian divisions in 'marble' (Wilford & Wilson, 2001, pp. 70–71; see also Taylor, 2001, p. 46; Taylor, 2009), others argued that this form of power-sharing between unionist and nationalist ethnonational blocs is the most viable of the options available to the political elites (McGarry, 2001, p. 122; McGarry & O'Leary, 2006).

Northern Ireland presents an interesting example of the way in which practice can evade theory in conflict transformation, as the prescriptions of neither the GFA's supporters nor its opponents have fully materialized. In the months preceding the dissolution of the Assembly before the 5 May election, it was clear that the political system had begun to evolve on the basis of individual party interests rather than being defined by communal ethnonational gridlock. Of course there have always been tensions and competition between the UUP/DUP and SDLP/Sinn Féin groupings, but this became much clearer during 2011, with the UUP looking seriously at the prospect of leaving the Executive government altogether and forming an opposition. The SDLP took a more cautious approach, denying it was going to become an opposition party, while casting the Executive as a DUP/Sinn Féin coalition (despite the fact that both the SDLP and the UUP were also members of it). SDLP leader Margaret Ritchie epitomized this critique at the party's annual conference in November 2010, when she appealed for cooperation across traditional ethnonational lines with centrist unionists.

I say there is scope for the centre ground to regain the centre of government, and I want to say to the Unionist Parties that we are ready to work with them to move on to the next horizon . . . So when will some of our unionist friends step up and meet the SDLP on the centre ground? I honestly believe that the SDLP and fair-minded

unionists could resolve the many issues that were too much for the DUP and Sinn Féin.<sup>13</sup>

Most of this speech was a critique of the performance of the Northern Ireland Executive rather than a defence of its record and—notwithstanding the proximity of the May 2011 Assembly election—provides some evidence that the consociational waters are beginning to muddy a little as the devolved structures evolve. The fact that this goes a little deeper than short-term electioneering is demonstrated by the fact that before becoming SDLP leader Ritchie attended the 2007 Ulster Unionist Party Annual Conference in her capacity as Minister for Social Development, where she explicitly put forward the idea of cooperation between the two parties.

To everyone here I say, you are a proud Party with a proud tradition and you still have so much to offer the people of Northern Ireland. I also believe our two Parties should be better friends. We should try to get to know each other better. I believe we should also be exploring areas where there is scope for practical cooperation. Cooperation to our mutual benefit.<sup>14</sup>

The final point worth making here is that the consociational structures of devolution will come up for review in 2015 after the end of the next term of government. While Sinn Féin are likely to veto any shift away from the current mandatory coalition arrangements between unionists and nationalists, it may suit smaller parties (such as the UUP and SDLP) to pursue alternatives to this, such as the idea of some form of voluntary coalition (though this would have to reassure nationalists that it would not revert to unionist majority rule). The idea to reconsider mandatory coalition has already been put forward by former SDLP leader Mark Durkan in a speech to the British-Irish Association at Oxford in 2008, when he addressed the theme of the GFA 10 years on.<sup>15</sup>

I remember, at the time, saying that the system of designation was necessary because of what we were coming from but should not be necessary where we were going. I argued that such measures with their arguably sectarian or sectional undertones should be bio-degradable, dissolving in the future as the environment changed. Most, if not all of us, had such future adjustments in mind when we wrote the review mechanisms into the Agreement. As we move towards a fully sealed and settled process we should be preparing to think about how and when to remove some of the ugly scaffolding needed during the construction of the new edifice.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that the SDLP are thinking about a future beyond the existing consociational arithmetic of a mandatory coalition between unionism and nationalism might be taken as evidence that the transition to conflict transformation is at least underway (if not yet achieved). This again brings us back to Miall's five-point conflict transformation typology in that this vision of institutional evolution represents an example of an *issue transformation* (at least within some elements of the political elite). Once the wider context alters (nationalist fears of unionist domination), then issues that were once static can become looser and more malleable.

The political system may not be functioning in quite the way that was intended in 1998, but it does have the capacity to lumber forwards and evolve in a manner that secures the support of the majority of people who live in the region.

Quantitative evidence suggests that while the wider community in Northern Ireland has not yet transformed its conflict relationships, they are driven by pragmatic interests rather than ideological beliefs. An opinion poll conducted in March 2010 produced some reasonable evidence of public support for the work of the Northern Ireland Executive and for devolution more generally.<sup>17</sup>

This once again connects into the concept of *structural transformation* (Miall, 2004, p. 10), as such survey evidence suggests that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland support the idea of devolution, even if they disagree on how effectively this is dealing with their problems and grievances. This does not mean that ethnonational identities have weakened, but suggests that the political system has managed to accommodate both to the point that they can be set aside on a day-to-day basis.

In response to the question about whether Northern Ireland was going in the right or wrong direction, 65% of respondents opted for the former, while only 19% opted for the latter view. When asked if it was a good thing that the Northern Ireland Executive existed, 82% of respondents agreed and only 6% disagreed—this was similar across nationalist and unionist communities (89 and 83%, respectively). When asked whether it was a good thing that Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness had to work together for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland, an overwhelming 90% agreed, with only 4% disagreeing. When asked whether the Executive was helping to bring peace and stability to Northern Ireland, 75% agreed, with 10% disagreeing. In terms of *issue transformation*, the survey found that the three biggest issues of concern for both communities were jobs, health and education, which again suggests that most people are focusing on public policy and service-delivery issues rather than on themes relating to ethnonational dogma.

There is evidence that this focus on pragmatic issues has been sustained over time and is connected to public support for devolution. When the 2007 *Northern Ireland Life and Times* (NILT) survey asked respondents whether the Assembly should focus on ‘constitutional’ or ‘policy’ issues, only 12% opted for the former, with 65% of people saying that the latter should have priority (Wilson & Meehan, 2008, p. 4). The implication of this response was strengthened further by two other questions in the 2007 NILT survey. First, when the ‘constitutional’ issue was broken down further and people were asked about the most significant priority that the Assembly needed to address in this area, a significant majority (53%) opted for ‘the devolution of policing and justice’, with only 9% saying that a ‘United Ireland’ was the most significant priority. While 26% said that ‘securing Northern Ireland’s position in the United Kingdom’ was the most significant issue, this was still well below the figure for policing and justice, which has now of course been achieved. Second, a broader identity-based question asked by the 2007 NILT survey underlines this general picture. When respondents were asked whether they regarded themselves as ‘unionist’, ‘nationalist’ or ‘neither’, the responses were 36, 24 and 40%, respectively, with the ‘neither’ figure being chosen by nearly half of those under 45 years of age (Wilson & Meehan, 2008, p. 3).

While relations between the political elites and wider communities remain tense in the transitional period, there is some evidence of periodic movement out of traditional sectarian attitudes based on the pragmatic concerns highlighted above. An example of this was provided in a *Belfast Telegraph* opinion poll in 2009, where Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness was rated as Northern Ireland’s most effective minister in the devolved government, which included significant support from within the unionist community.

Incredibly, McGuinness received the same amount of unionist support (11%) as did Sir Reg Empey, the then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. The paper's editor, Mike Gibson, declared that the poll results 'suggest that we are maybe moving into a different phase in which politicians are judged as much on their performance in the here and now as on their history. If so, that has to be seen as a positive step'.<sup>18</sup>

Such evidence inevitably hides a greater complexity and subtlety within political attitudes in Northern Ireland, but has nevertheless been mirrored by a transformation in human relations at the elite level. This brings us to the final element of Miall's five-point conflict transformation model (Miall, 2004, p. 10), namely *personal/small group transformation*.

Few cases have been as dramatic as the political makeover of Rev. Ian Paisley, former leader of the DUP and Moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. Paisley spent most of his political career undermining unionist leaders such as Terence O'Neill in the 1960s, Brian Faulkner in the 1970s and David Trimble in the 1990s. Ethnic-outbidding rather than transformative bridge-building was his stock in trade for over 30 years. None of this history suggested that Paisley would eventually transform into an ardent supporter of the peace process and the GFA. Having denounced the Agreement and its structures, he went on to become First Minister of Northern Ireland and established a relationship with Martin McGuinness that was so close they became popularly known as the 'Chuckle Brothers'. Maurice Hayes, a former leading civil servant in Northern Ireland, commented in his memoirs that there were at least six Ian Paisleys: 'Two were very nice people, two were awful and the other two could go either way' (Hayes, 1995, p. 98). By May 2007, when the DUP and Sinn Féin announced their agreement to restore devolved government, the other two had clearly decided which way to jump. 'From the depths of my heart I can say to you today that I believe Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace, a time when hate will no longer rule. How good it will be to be part of a wonderful healing in this province' (Cochrane, 2008, p. 183).

Although this transformation is clearly in a transitional phase rather than an achieved fact, it suggests that conflict relationships are evolving at the elite level even if the pace of change is slower at the grass-roots level (Gilligan, 2008, p. 16). While the political elites produce strategy documents such as *A Shared Future* and *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, the number of physical barriers euphemistically known as the 'peaceline' that divide interface urban areas has trebled since the original paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, as unionists and nationalists continue to live in fear of one another.

While Peter Robinson (Paisley's replacement as First Minister) initially had a frostier relationship with Sinn Féin and Martin McGuinness, over recent years this has warmed considerably and it is clear that he is also keen to establish an effective working relationship. During a television interview in November 2010, Robinson was asked if he could work with McGuinness as Deputy First Minister and his response verged on the complimentary: 'I think we have developed a very strong working relationship. If Martin McGuinness tells me he is going to do something I know that it is going to be done. He hasn't broken his word on any of those issues and that's essential if you are going to be able to work together in government'. As a testament to this transition, Robinson and McGuinness jointly accepted a peace award on Armistice Day 2010 from the Glencree Reconciliation Centre, in recognition of the work that they had done for Northern Ireland.

I don't think anyone in the DUP found it difficult [to accept a joint award with Martin McGuinness]. We have recognised that we want to change Northern

Ireland, we want to move Northern Ireland forward. We can all stay in the trenches. That's easy to do, but if you want to make real progress in Northern Ireland then I think you've got to look forward to peace-time unionism.<sup>19</sup>

By way of reciprocation, McGuinness paid tribute to both Paisley and Robinson as partners in the political process during the final sitting of the Assembly on 23 March 2011 in advance of the 5 May election.

I think we showed that we are politicians who live for the here and now and for the future and for building a better future for all the people we represent. So I thank him [Paisley] and his good wife Eileen. I regard them as huge friends of the peace process and I regard them as friends of mine . . . I think [Peter Robinson] too is a huge friend of the peace process and made a massive contribution. I have been very honoured not just to work with Dr Paisley but with Peter Robinson through these momentous four years.<sup>20</sup>

This once again illustrates that despite the persistent sectarian culture that remains in Northern Ireland, significant signs of conflict transformation are apparent across traditional ethnonational lines, and the political debate in Northern Ireland today rotates mainly around social and economic policies and the management of the local economy, rather than identity-based issues.

### **Conclusion**

Northern Ireland is at a crucial transitional stage in the conflict transformation process. While violence persists, those engaged in it are numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands, and the context, structure and issues surrounding the conflict are in flux owing to the absence of concerted political violence and the presence of devolved structures of government that most people can agree on.

It is likely to be some time before conflict relationships transform to the point that people can embrace their less violent society more enthusiastically. It is also clear that the transition from a culture of violence to a culture of peace is taking place incrementally and at variable speeds between and within ethnonational blocs. This variation can produce apparently paradoxical attitudes and behaviour where both violence and peace can coexist and intersect in response to wider structural contexts and complex and dynamic conflict relationships.

The Northern Ireland case demonstrates that conflict transformation is an evolving and fluid process and that the transitional phase between politically motivated violence and the establishment of viable political institutions is a critical one in shaping longer term outcomes within the conflict zone.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the editors and the four anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

**Notes**

1. The phrase 'peace process' is used here for linguistic convenience and to connect with popular understandings of the period. The author is aware that this is a problematic and contested definition for many, but it will be used without caveats or quotation marks being entered on every occasion.
2. The Good Friday Agreement is also known as the Belfast Agreement. Its name derives from the fact that it was reached on Good Friday, 10 April 1998, and was the consequence of 2 years of multi-party negotiations.
3. While this might be seen as a conceptual weakness it is no more so than other terms that have entered the scholarly lexicon in recent years (e.g. 'civil society' can be quite uncivil, the 'democratic peace' can be quite undemocratic and 'good governance' can cover an array of political sleights of hand).
4. This is of course a general framing useful for highlighting broad trends. It is recognized that many of these five areas intersect and that the political processes surrounding violent conflicts contain complex and multifaceted dynamics that frequently spill over the boundaries of such categorization.
5. There are a number of nuances here that cannot be pursued due to space constraints, one of them being the complicated circumstances of unionism's partial support for the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973/74 and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. However, the broad point remains that *some* unionists were able to accept in the 1990s policy options that were unacceptable to many others during the 1970s (1973/74 in particular).
6. C. Corrigan, 'Real IRA, other dissidents use social nets to catch teenagers', available online at: [www.IrishCentral.com](http://www.IrishCentral.com)
7. 'Omagh bombing condemned across Northern Ireland', BBC News Online, 4 April 2011, available online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-12947646>
8. 'Statistics relating to the security situation', *Report No. 5. PSNI Annual Statistical Report*, 1 April 2009–31 March 2010, available online at: [http://www.psnipolice.uk/5\\_statistics\\_relating\\_to\\_the\\_security\\_situation\\_200910\\_final.pdf](http://www.psnipolice.uk/5_statistics_relating_to_the_security_situation_200910_final.pdf)
9. MI5 Director-General Jonathan Evans, 16 September 2010, available online at: <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/the-threat-to-national-security.html>
10. This phrase was used regularly by Sinn Féin during the 1980s and 1990s in an attempt to connect into the discourse of the ANC in South Africa, who used the word prior to the end of the apartheid system in relation to the security services.
11. This survey, carried out by Prof. Jon Tonge and the University of Liverpool, was published on 7 October 2010. It was widely covered by the media, who used the word 'support' rather than 'sympathy' in reporting of the story.
12. D. Keenan, 'Support for dissidents understated, report finds', *Irish Times*, 7 October 2010, available online at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2010/1007/1224280567750.html>
13. SDLP leader Margaret Ritchie, speech to 2010 Annual Conference, 6 November 2010, available online at: [http://www.sdlp.ie/index.php/newsroom\\_media/speech/a\\_new\\_ireland\\_for\\_all\\_-\\_leaders\\_speech\\_to\\_conference\\_2010/](http://www.sdlp.ie/index.php/newsroom_media/speech/a_new_ireland_for_all_-_leaders_speech_to_conference_2010/)
14. Margaret Ritchie, speech to UUP Annual Conference, 27 October 2007, available online at: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/sdlp/mr271007.htm>
15. While meetings of the British-Irish Association are normally held under 'Chatham House rules' of confidentiality and would not normally be cited, Durkan's speech was published on the SDLP website, as detailed in the note below, and the full text is widely available.
16. SDLP Mark Durkan's speech to the British-Irish Association, Oxford University, 5 September 2008. Full text is available on the SDLP website, available online at: [http://www.sdlp.ie/ga/index.php/newsroom\\_media/newsarticle/mark\\_durkan\\_s\\_speech\\_to\\_british\\_irish\\_association/](http://www.sdlp.ie/ga/index.php/newsroom_media/newsarticle/mark_durkan_s_speech_to_british_irish_association/)
17. This opinion poll was conducted on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister by the independent consultancy Red Circle Communications, available online at: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/opinion-poll.pdf>
18. N. McAdam & R. Black, 'Poll: Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness is Northern Ireland's top Minister', *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 November 2009, available online at: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/poll-sinn-feins-martin-mcguinness-is-northern-irelands-top-minister-14580892.html>
19. BBC *Hearts and Minds*, 25 November 2010.
20. BBC *Democracy Live*, available online at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/hi/northern\\_ireland/newsid\\_9431000/9431971.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/hi/northern_ireland/newsid_9431000/9431971.stm)

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