

## **Northern Ireland: The Unhappy Ending Europe's Story Must Avoid**

**Article by Robin Wilson**

May 5, 2021

**The resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland should set alarm bells ringing for Europe. The power-sharing system of government in Northern Ireland was devised to halt violent conflict but its focus on the rights of communities rather than of individuals serves to freeze divisions and entrench sectarianism. Outside of the EU, Northern Ireland's future remains uncertain, but it highlights the importance of creating a European space, citizenship, and identity beyond the national to foster reconciliation.**

Not many across Europe would feel they had much to learn from the tiny region of Northern Ireland after its latest outburst of rioting. Yet Mark Mazower did not title his history of 20th-century Europe *Dark Continent* flippantly and Northern Ireland provides a perennial dark warning to Europe not to look the other way, but to travel in the opposite direction.

That, 23 years on from the “historic” Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement), the region has failed to consign to history its troubled past suggests that profound underlying frailties remain. And there are three – each stretching way out from the petrol bombs and “peace walls” of Belfast to gnaw at the fragile Europe of postwar reconstruction.

### **Universal norms**

The first is apparent from the map. Before the wars of the Yugoslav succession, there were four violent conflicts defined by ethnic markers, worked up into nationalist antagonism, going clockwise around Europe: Cyprus, Corsica, the Basque country, and Northern Ireland.

All were at the periphery of a continent which had emerged from its darkest period to say “never again” in the name of human dignity, most manifest in the establishment in 1949 of the Council of Europe to promote the universal norms that entailed: democracy, human rights, the rule of law. And in all four cases those norms failed to take root – notoriously, in Northern Ireland, with its one-party Protestant rule, systemic discrimination against the Catholic minority and repressive Special Powers Act.

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The civil-rights movement of the late 1960s challenged those injustices. But while it did set in train structural reforms towards equality across the sectarian divide, the collapse of the Protestant-monopoly government at Stormont saw violence fill the void and a cycle of paramilitarism and state repression ensue – at huge human cost.

The “solution” eventually found by the British state was defined by its simplistic “men of violence” explanation for the conflict: in the 1990s, the paramilitaries were no longer to be repressed but appeased. The resulting creation of an obvious “moral hazard” in terms of the rule of law went unrecognised.

Nor did the 1998 agreement add to the human-rights agenda: a “bill of rights”, long demanded by the ‘68ers, was stymied by being conceived in the identity-politics language of “parity of esteem” for the “two communities”. All rights conventions in this arena, such as the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, recognise that the individual can be the only rights-bearer in a democratic society, yet this too went unappreciated.

And nor did democracy emerge recognisably from the hastily cobbled-together agreement, with a compromise including all parties together in government yet with no collective responsibility and no opposition. It is little wonder the institutions have collapsed so often in the intervening years and may do so again.

What makes this relevant beyond Northern Ireland is that the evidence of recent decades has been of declining support for universal norms among successive European cohorts. That’s no surprise: as the horror of the Holocaust has receded, the siren songs of the populists have once more acquired traction. Every generation needs to be socialised via universal public education geared to engendering mature adult citizens – not just labour-market fodder – if vigilance is to be rekindled.

## **Sectarian mindsets**

The second challenge which Northern Ireland highlights, but is now recognised as universal, is that of managing cultural diversity in a globalising context. The Belfast Agreement requires all members of the assembly it established at Stormont to “designate” as “unionist” or “nationalist” (or “other”), to allow for a Bosnia-style exercise of mutual communal veto. With virtually all of the former category Protestant and the latter Catholic, this has inevitably entrenched sectarian mindsets rather than fostering reconciliation.

In that sense, the agreement represented a throwback to the old “multiculturalist” model for the management of cultural diversity, developed by Britain and the Netherlands out of colonial experiences. Stereotypes of ethnic “communities” and their “difference” were carried over into the metropoles to manage the migrants who moved, with the predictable outcome of ghettoisation and mutual incomprehension. A Dutch political scientist developed the power-sharing model, founded on social segregation, which Britain applied to Northern Ireland.

That is why there are more than 100 “peace walls” and other barriers in the region dividing “communities” one from another – far more than at the time of the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994. Far from moving on to an enlightenment political axis of left *versus* right, these

socially-embedded divisions condemn each new generation to fight its sectarian battles.

The failure of multiculturalism in Europe has led conservative politicians to favour a return to the other discredited model for the management of diversity: French-style assimilationism, especially in France with the proposed law against “separatism”. But this only leads to the alienation of members of minority communities.

The alternative is remarkably little understood in Europe, purely because of the institutional separation of the Council of Europe, from which it emerged, and the European Union. But, building on its moral foundations, the Council of Europe set out in its *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* in 2008 (which I helped draft) a new paradigm of “intercultural integration”.

The new paradigm is in the best enlightenment tradition. It treats the individual citizen, not the “community”, as the unit of society. It embraces well-managed diversity as a source of innovation rather than a threat. It treats integration as a two-sided process from which both “host” and newcomer individuals can benefit. And it expects impartiality from public authorities in resolving residual contending claims.

It has been successfully trialled in the Intercultural Cities network, which has mushroomed to nearly 150 cities around the world. Unless European progressives appreciate and endorse this approach, they will always find themselves on the back foot against the populists, who can then use “immigration” as a wedge issue to divide their natural constituency of support.

## National containers

The last lesson from Northern Ireland is also a message against the populists, who are determined to put the multi-level governance of contemporary Europe back into national containers, posing as the friends of “the people” (their particular one) against the “bureaucrats” in Brussels. While during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign few of the “Leave” advocates gave the region a moment’s thought, the former prime ministers Tony Blair and John Major warned in Northern Ireland of the consequences there of a Leave vote.

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A UK outside the customs union and single market had to meet an EU boundary somewhere and the only question was whether that would be that between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland or in the Irish Sea. No one would admit that the moral hazard of the “peace process” had made the former unconscionable because of the licence it would give to Catholic paramilitaries, so instead licence has been given to the more “amateur” Protestant ones to froth over their separation from the “mainland”.

And this is why the current situation is serious. “Peace” did not come to Northern Ireland, as in the received wisdom, because of the “peace process”: when that emerged from

secrecy in September 1993 its polarising effect led to the most lethal month of sectarian killings since the 1970s. It came from the huge peace marches organised by the trade unions that November calling for a “unifying peace”, which were followed by an immediate fall-off in deaths and by the paramilitary ceasefires less than a year later. Nor did the “peace agreement” turn the trick: the number of bombings and shootings rose after the agreement and only fell after the post-agreement institutions collapsed in 2002, over IRA spying at Stormont (Northern Irish Parliament), in the subsequent years of renewed Westminster rule.

More important than the agreement was joint membership of the EU by the UK and the Republic of Ireland from 1973. That brought together regularly in the EU capitals ministers and officials from the UK and the republic, easing tensions over Northern Ireland. It allowed of a blurring of identities inside the region, with the possibility of individuals enjoying normal, complex, unique combinations of identity, including European citizenship, thus dampening sectarian antagonism. It led to a special PEACE programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties of the republic, including a focus on reconciliation. And the absence of customs or market-regulatory barriers enabled the proliferation of more than 140 areas of north-south co-operation in Ireland, developed by the agreement, across its now to-all-intents invisible border.

No one worries that yet another collapse of the post-agreement institutions would bring a resurgence of violence. But Britain’s retreat into post-imperial nationalistic nostalgia, during the very same half-century which saw the republic emerge into a post-nationalist European embrace, has raised real fears about Northern Ireland’s future, as what Ulrich Beck called the politics of “either/or” replaces once more what he hoped was the emerging politics of “and”.

The Scottish National Party continues to demand a further referendum on secession from the UK. This in turn reinforces demands from Sinn Féin for a poll in Northern Ireland on Irish reunification, sure to add fuel to the sectarian fire. And no one can see a good ending to that.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has thus to be bold in envisaging a Europe beyond the national container. Why not endorse the idea of a European republic, as envisaged by Ulrike Guerot, as a goal, so that a genuine European political community emerges? And why not involve fully the citizenry of Europe, via a citizens’ assembly or assemblies, as modelled in Ireland and France, to shape that goal more vividly?

*This article was originally published on Social Europe.*

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**GREEN  
EUROPEAN  
JOURNAL**

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Published May 5, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/northern-ireland-the-unhappy-ending-europes-story-must-avoid/>

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