# The lights are flashing red in Northern Ireland

*Northern Ireland politics has been brought to a standstill by a combination of geopolitics (Brexit) the novel (a crisis in the Executive over alleged corruption) and the permanent (sectarianism).* **Duncan Morrow (Ulster University)** *says little is now propping up Northern Ireland's institutions. Without a Brexit agreement and commitment to institutional reform, the current impasse already has done real damage to the relationships that keep Northern Ireland afloat.*

After 1920, Northern Ireland functioned something like a 'bad bank' for the rest of Britain and Ireland. The original British government plan to manage both sides in Ireland by sub-dividing Ireland within the UK fell at the first skirmish with Irish nationalism. But its unintended consequence was to fix an administrative boundary as an international frontier. Northern Ireland unexpectedly emerged as a 'unique region', separated within Ireland and at arm's length from Westminster through devolution. Independence removed most Irish issues from everyday British politics and created an unusually monocultural 26-county Free State. But Northern Ireland was effectively isolated as a miniature interface of British-Irish hostility, more of a threat than an interest to its neighbouring capitals.
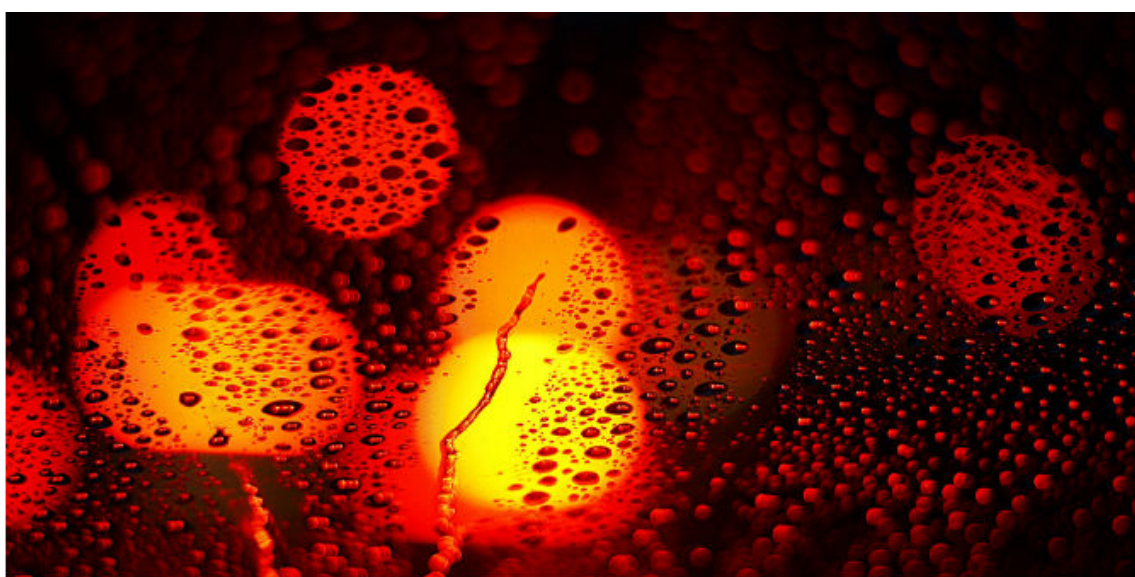


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In both senses Northern Ireland's tiny six counties 'contained' conflict: violence was the risk which lurked around every political corner, anticipated before it was visible – but for as long as violence was contained within Northern Ireland's physical and jurisdictional boundaries, its wider impact was limited, and past tense. Republicans and others might protest against the 'failed statelet', but a bad bank which parked active British-Irish hostility in six counties rather than two islands was an outcome that both governments accepted as 'a price worth paying'. While Britain and Ireland gradually charted a path to a 'new normal' freed from everyday hostility, antagonism in Northern Ireland festered and regenerated.

Containment limits risk but does not eliminate it at source. When divisions over civil rights led to open confrontation between the Unionist state and protesters, the most striking aspect was the shockingly rapid escalation to antagonism along ethno-nationalist lines. The archaic language of Catholic-Protestant sectarianism and the extremity of Northern Ireland's rival nationalisms allowed both Britain and Ireland to blame the crisis on the locals, but the potential of toxic relationships in Northern Ireland to reinfect the life of two states was dramatically obvious in internment, Bloody Sunday, Birmingham and Dublin. Alarmed at the risk of being dragged back into older confrontations – and with shared ambitions to enter the Common Market – Britain and Ireland co-operated to promote internal power-sharing over ethnonational supremacy.

Efforts to 'bring peace' to Northern Ireland took a quarter of a century. British state attempts to enforce order through security and criminalisation strained any residual legitimacy among nationalists, while Ireland's constitutional claim to legitimacy in Northern Ireland and residual popular support for anti-imperial violence enraged Unionists.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 proved to be the watershed. Dublin and London concluded that legitimacy in Northern Ireland required their active partnership. Implicitly, containing violence would fail unless the poison of zero-sum nationalism within was reduced. 'Reconciliation' – meaning an agreement on the need for a permanent 'plural identity environment' in Northern Ireland underpinned by an international framework of values – was the prerequisite for legitimacy and any meaningful exercise of sovereignty.

As an effort at a comprehensive inclusive framework to end conflict, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has no parallels in British-Irish relations. Over more than a decade, the governments, with active partners in Europe and America, first confronted active opposition from Unionists and republicans in Northern Ireland and then sponsored drawn-out detailed negotiations now known as the 'peace process.' The language of reconciliation and fresh start, commitments to the rule of law and the highest international standards of human rights, mutual acknowledgement of tragic suffering and mutually equal citizenship stand in stark contrast to everything that went before.

The signing of the Agreement also represented the moment when responsibility for progress shifted from governments and international sponsors, with their strategic but time-limited interest in reconciliation, to parties in Northern Ireland and their deep suspicions, hostilities and memories. The key political instrument was a 'mandatory coalition' based on guaranteed proportional access to government. While the governments moved to complete their reforms, including radical proposals on policing, the Northern Ireland Assembly fell apart before it got started on the question of decommissioning IRA weapons.

Reconciliation appeared out of reach. Desperate to escape further entanglement, Devolution 2.0 was rebuilt to incentivise devolution as a means to stabilise violence But expectations of further reconciliation were reduced. Rhetoric was used to hide the bottom line that containment had once again become the only essential. Reconciliation remained desirable – but optional. State visits outside Northern Ireland symbolised progress everywhere. Devolution was presented not simply as a road to reconciliation – but AS reconciliation.

Except that it wasn't. The DUP/Sinn Fein-led executive showed little sustained interest in transformational change. Integrated education was largely ignored, residential segregation remained intact and the peace-walls still stood. In their turn, contentious issues from policing to flags to language polarised or paralysed the Executive.

Now under different political management and facing their own massive economic challenges, the single goal of British and Irish governments was to ensure that they were not dragged back into direct responsibility for the interminable sectarianism of Northern Ireland. For as long as the DUP and Sinn Fein shared power and violence was reduced, containment was paramount. The task was to reinforce the façade rather than fix the rotting timber, even if that required eleventh-hour injections of increased finance to avert collapse. With the mayhem of 1972 rather than the promise of 1998 as the baseline, progress could ALWAYS be demonstrated. Drawing attention to risks and weaknesses remained deeply unpopular. Despite disappointing progress in moderating sectarian divisions, Northern Ireland was 'job done'.

Certainly almost nobody appeared prepared for the seismic consequences of Brexit especially when it interacted with endemic sectarianism and emergent nepotism. Initially the impact appeared limited. Voting took place with what now looks like remarkable serenity and complacency. The collapse of the Executive was not triggered by Brexit but by a furore over political responsibility for maladministration in a Renewable Heating Initiative (RHI). But the rapidity with which these allegations were escalated by the parties first into a crisis for the cross-community institutions and then into bitter sectarian division over the Irish language was a warning sign. Sinn Fein's withdrawal from the Executive in protest against DUP 'arrogance' was the Rubicon. The scale of Sinn Fein gains in the resulting elections March 2017 shocked the Unionist electorate to the core.

Talks to restore devolution remained gridlocked over an Irish Language Act. But there was unexpected replay for the DUP in June, when they found themselves holding the balance of power in Westminster. With Sinn Fein absent, the DUP was gifted an opportunity to block 'special status' for Northern Ireland in the EU negotiations, limiting the British government's capacity to reach accommodation with Ireland. In the battle between the Belfast Agreement and hard Brexit, the DUP came out decisively for Brexit.

Clearly, the party valued this opportunity above any commitment to renewing power-sharing, deepening the rift between Unionism and all other parties in Northern Ireland. Relations strained further when the DUP rejected a compromise on an Irish Language Act and talks on restoring devolution came to screeching halt. In the aftermath, emboldened by shifting demographics and the electoral consequences of Brexit, Sinn Fein profoundly alarmed Unionists by shifting their priority to a United Ireland.

For more than 600 days, Northern Ireland has had no effective government other than the depleting asset of past administrative precedent and the thankfully deep-rooted consensus in Northern Ireland that violence offers no answers. In the absence of an Executive a judicial inquiry into the RHI scandal has filled the vacuum. Every day, the inquiry has painstakingly revealed political incompetence, cultural corruption and lack of accountability in the Stormont system. If Brexit undermined the peace process from outside, the RHI drowned popular demand to restore the previous institutions in a sea of cynicism and despair. Northern Ireland has not so much exploded as slowly and visibly dissolved.

After 2003, the governments settled for devolution and containment without reconciliation, as preferable to urging reconciliation without settled devolution. Any dangers that the container might break and unleash polarisation, at best or violence, at worst were to be managed by inter-governmental partnership. It is now obvious that Brexit has damaged all of the structural safeguards that upheld the Good Friday institutions: power-sharing, inter-governmental co-operation and international solidarity. The consequences of a hard border for peace built on a soft border increasingly came to dominate international debate. The resentment of Brexit supporters over the implications of an Irish backstop led to increasingly vitriolic exchanges and the re-emergence of old prejudices.

None of the key players seems to have either a route-map or commitment to a 'shared society', without which Northern Ireland returns inevitably to the politics of ethnic domination. The form of Brexit as it effects Northern Ireland has still not been resolved, but real damage has already been done. ANY settlement may now be seen by one side as a strategic defeat with future consequences for the stability of devolution. But the Brexit that is finally achieved will determine only the starting point for another wrangle over the future.

RHI has revealed a cancer of unaccountability within devolution. The devolved political structures will have to be revisited if they are to function with credibility. Both the DUP and Sinn Fein have radically different interpretations of the Agreement and have demonstrated that they regard a shared outcome in Northern Ireland as a goal to be set aside at the first opportunity. The last two years have left a legacy.

Yet there is little evidence of anything plausible to replace devolution. The direct alignment of the British Government with one Northern Ireland party has made any claim to neutral management through Direct Rule untenable, while Brexit has so weakened partnership between Dublin and London that joint solutions seem implausible. The task of rebuilding relationships starts from a lower level than at any time since 1985. For fear that the house of cards might collapse in recrimination, the government has adopted a strategy of 'masterly inactivity' marked by statements of startling banality from the Secretary of State, which might be comic were they not negligent.

Without reconciliation or government there is no guarantee of containment: both Britain and Ireland and the parties in Northern Ireland will be entangled long after 29 March.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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