

The Northern Ireland Peace Process: From Armed Conflict to Brexit, by Eamonn O'Kane

Description

Editor's Note: This article is a book review of *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: From Armed Conflict to Brexit* by Eamonn O'Kane, examining the author's analysis of how peace in Northern Ireland has evolved long after the Good Friday Agreement.

When did the conflict in Northern Ireland end?

By one measure, it concluded in April 1998, when the Good Friday Agreement, also called the Belfast Agreement, was signed. By another, it ended over the following years, as weapons were decommissioned, the governing structures established by the agreement were implemented, and power over various policy areas was devolved from London to Belfast. By a third measure, the conflict still goes on.

The Good Friday Agreement did not end the dispute at the root of decades of discord: whether Northern Ireland should remain in the United Kingdom or join a united Ireland. Rather, it moved this dispute from the realm of violence to the realm of politics.

Eamonn O'Kane's [The Northern Ireland Peace Process: From Armed Conflict to Brexit](#) adeptly illustrates this reality. The book's very title suggests what has occurred. The process of securing peace in Northern Ireland did not end with an agreement. It has endured for more than 25 years since the agreement was signed.

Fundamentally, O'Kane's domain is diplomatic and political history. He examines the dealings among two states, the United Kingdom and Ireland; several political party leaders; and a handful of paramilitary groups. As such, this is not primarily a book on irregular warfare. Instead, it is a book about what is required to end irregular warfare and help those who fought it to live and govern together—a process of reconciliation after irregularity that is both complex and politically fraught.

O'Kane devotes time at the start of his work to defining the "peace process," noting that the term is not universally agreed. This is no surprise. Terminology has long reflected the region's divisions.

When I served on an American team¹ led by Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan² that sought to advance negotiations among the political parties in Belfast on divisive issues in 2013, I found that the term "Northern Ireland"³ itself sparked differences. Unionists, who seek to keep Northern Ireland in the UK, use it readily. Republicans and nationalists, who seek a united Ireland, consider the island a single entity; they thus prefer the "North of Ireland."⁴ Happily, in an example of linguistic ambiguity, "NI"⁵ works for both.

Throughout his volume, O'Kane's pace is often plodding. A relatively short book, it contains long chapters immersed in detail that offer historical value but sacrifice accessibility to the general reader. More frequent references to overall conclusions might help, because there are compelling takeaways. Perhaps the foremost lesson is that progress in ending conflict is not inevitable, a point O'Kane illustrates with careful attention to the decisions that made it possible in this case.

As one example, O'Kane writes that in the mid-1990s, the government of UK Prime Minister John Major held that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) must decommission its arms before talks among all political parties in Northern Ireland could proceed. This position was supported by unionists but opposed by Sinn Fein (seen as the IRA's political wing) and others, who accused Major of moving the goalposts after the IRA had maintained a ceasefire.

Amid the impasse, the IRA renewed its deadly bombing campaign. Tony Blair, after succeeding Major in May 1997, agreed to address decommissioning while peace talks proceeded. This led⁶ albeit after further violence⁷ to another IRA ceasefire and to the Good Friday Agreement less than one year later.

The upshot, as O'Kane does well to convey, is that a peace process lauded as a great success could easily have gone awry before it really began.

O'Kane also identifies and analyzes important throughlines that marked Northern Ireland's⁸ conflict and peace process⁹ throughlines that endure into the present.

One such phenomenon, well chronicled by O'Kane, is the centering in Northern Ireland's¹⁰ politics of what were once the extremes. In 2003, harder-edged parties supplanted more moderate ones as the leading voices on each side of the territory's¹¹ divide. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) overtook the Ulster Unionists (UUP); the republicans of Sinn Fein overtook the nationalist Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP). As O'Kane writes of the UUP and SDLP, "their willingness to take significant political risks for peace was instrumental in ending the violence and securing a deal in 1998, but the electorate turned to other parties when the process lurched from crisis to crisis."¹² (page 154).

The dominant positions of the DUP and Sinn Fein continue today. If the Good Friday Agreement was a landmark achievement, it is perhaps no less remarkable that these parties came to share power in the aftermath. Northern Ireland's power-sharing arrangements have remained fractious; often, they have been suspended. The need to navigate continuing tensions is what underlies the premise of O'Kane's book: a "peace process" lasting decades after a peace accord. But the critical fact that questions are decided by politics, not guns, has generally endured.

Another throughline of O'Kane's narrative is unionist grievance. Unionists played a crucial role in achieving peace. Under the formidable leadership of David Trimble, the UUP served as the primary unionist representative in the Good Friday Agreement negotiations and ultimately signed the accord. Without its assent, no agreement was possible.

As O'Kane writes, "There were clearly gains for Unionism from the GFA and the peace process." Yet, he notes, "the gains they had secured were ones which either they felt no concessions should have been given for anyway or were not really gains at all" (page 139). To unionists and to many others besides Irish Republican paramilitarism, far from a justified resistance, was terrorism. The idea of responding with concessions was bitter.

The irony which O'Kane might have highlighted more forthrightly is that more than two decades on, the union has not slipped away. Northern Ireland remains in the United Kingdom. The Good Friday Agreement entrenched the principle of consent, which holds that no change in its status can be made without the consent of a majority of its people. As O'Kane describes, amid the flexibility of the UK government's positions during the peace process, this was one principle to which London held fast.

So far, neither the increased prosperity of the Irish Republic, nor the upheaval of Brexit, nor the [emergence of a Catholic plurality](#) in Northern Ireland, nor the popularity of Sinn Fein in Belfast and Dublin, has caused a clear majority in favor of a united Ireland to emerge.

Yet the question of constitutional change has grown more prominent in recent years. Sinn Fein, along with other voices in Ireland north and south, now argue that the time for a referendum is coming.

Calling such a poll, according to the Good Friday Agreement, is the province of the UK government. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, [says the agreement](#), "shall exercise [this] power" if at any time it appears likely to him that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a United Ireland. The evidence required is unstated.

We do not know if, or when, constitutional change may arrive. As this prospect comes to the fore, however, managing the delicate balance of interests in Northern Ireland will take on new urgency. Unionist concern in particular may intensify. Perpetuating the peace will require nuance, courage, and the accommodation of differing perspectives—precisely the qualities that led to the successes recounted by O’Kane.

The Northern Ireland peace process, an endeavor of more than three decades, seems destined to go on.

Charles Landow is senior adviser and director of special initiatives at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School. In 2013, he served as research director for the chair and vice chair of the Panel of Parties in the Northern Ireland Executive.

Image credit: Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair at a Co-operation Ireland event commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, Belfast, April 10, 2018. [Photo](#) by Titanic Belfast (CC BY 2.0).

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