

Lord Alderdice on his role in the Good Friday Agreement and reflecting on the evolution of the Agreement 25 years on.

As a teenager I was puzzled by why my community appeared to behave in a self-destructive way. Political science said that people acted in their own rational best self-interest, but this seemed to be contradicted by the evidence I saw around me. To better understand harmful, non-rational, community attitudes, I trained in psychoanalytical psychiatry and took those ideas into political life, becoming the Leader of the Alliance Party in 1987 at the age of 32. The Belfast Telegraph assessment was that I was a decent chap but who would want such an impossible job – they could have added, ‘impossible unpaid job’. I set up a group of the brightest of the ‘young Turks’ in the party and in 1988 we published *‘Governing with Consent’* which was largely a restatement of the policies of power-sharing, and North-South cooperation, while Northern Ireland remained within the United Kingdom for as long as the people of the North wanted it. My own commitment was to work to end the violence, and the received wisdom was that the violent groups would not negotiate realistically but a compromise between the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland would marginalize extremists, who could be dealt with by a more united community. I engaged with the various political and civil society leaders and with Margaret Thatcher and successive British Prime Ministers, as well as Charles Haughey and those who succeeded him as Taoiseach. John Hume was also working to develop a Talks Process, but though we got it under way, it moved slowly and did not stop the violence. When we seemed particularly stuck the four Northern Ireland party leaders would meet alone without the British and Irish governments, civil servants, advisors, or anyone else. I remember at one such meeting John Hume said, *“I don’t believe we’re going to get anywhere without me engaging with the IRA”*. I will always remember looking at Jim Molyneaux, sitting on my right. The blood drained from his face, and he said, *“Well that’s it, there’s no hope then.”* I went home downhearted that power-sharing had been dealt a mortal blow. What could I do? I knew John well enough to realise that he would not easily be persuaded to change his mind, so we would have to test his idea to destruction. We could continue to argue about it politically, but we were going to have to go along with him and see what happened.

This required a fundamentally different political analysis which went as follows. You can have a political process without engaging with the violent groups, but you cannot have a peace process without them since you need to persuade them to give up violence. They will not abandon their political dreams and so they need to be persuaded that the non-violent democratic political path is a better way of achieving them.

This was the road that led to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There is little in the Agreement that had not been prefigured in *‘Governing with Consent’* or any number of other documents over the years. The difference was the understanding that the problem was not a failed political system but **disturbed historic relationships** between the various communities. We identified the three key sets of relationships as between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland; between North and South; and between Britain and Ireland. The Peace Process required three strands that would involve the political representatives of those three sets of relationships, and the outcome was three sets of

interlocking institutions – the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly; the North-South Executive bodies; and the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Council.

The GFA was however a divergent agreement. Unionists agreed to it on the basis that it was a **settlement** through which the IRA would give up violence in return for guaranteed nationalist participation in the government of Northern Ireland at the highest level. Nationalists saw it as another step in a **process** that could lead ultimately to a United Ireland. This divergent understanding did not need to be a problem if there was a continued focus on building the three sets of relationships, but that is not what happened. In the Talks Process I had proposed that the Northern Ireland Executive should be formed by a coalition that was required to reach 67% support in the Assembly - in this way promoting cross-community engagement. It seemed to me that John Hume's proposal of a majority of unionists, majority of nationalists and majority of the whole was doomed to deepen polarization. I also believed that prisoner releases should be predicated on dealing with the weapons – a demonstration of their commitment to democracy. I lost the argument on both issues, and both came back to bite us.

When the GFA did not have the mechanisms to ensure the implementation of the latter issue the British and Irish Governments put the Independent Monitoring Commission in place, and we spent seven years working, with some success, on getting rid of the weapons and the paramilitary organizations. However, that still left the vulnerability to political polarization unless there was a constant focus on the three sets of relationships and that did not happen.

For years the British Irish Inter-Governmental Council did not meet at the highest levels, leading to problems on Northern Ireland, but also contributing to the Brexit problem. A new generation of Northern Ireland politicians also failed to understand that the Unionist/Nationalist and North/South relationships needed to be constantly nourished through respect and engagement. Now all three sets of relationships are in poor shape.

Twenty-five years on the context has also changed. Instead of joint EU membership facilitating British-Irish relations, the EU now backs Ireland against the post-Brexit UK. Similarly, the United States, which has long-standing but different relationships with Britain and Ireland is now siding with one against the other. In addition, there are profound post-Brexit changes in political demography, and all of this requires a re-casting of our understanding of the three sets of relationships. The Peace Process is long over, and we are now in a complex Political Process which requires a greater degree of commitment, effort, and creativity than we have seen for some time.

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