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ABSTRACT

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Settlement of protracted conflict involves actors changing their strategies and their aims. Why they change, and why seemingly subtle shifts in opportunities or a slight adaptation of a settlement package that failed in the past allows such change, is often difficult to understand and explain. This article situates the series of settlement initiatives in Northern Ireland between 1972-1998 in a longer time frame which shows historically entrenched state- institutional biases, deep-set communal power imbalances, and conflict-generating repertoires of response that are only now being undone. It argues that what changed minds in Northern Ireland was not, primarily, leadership, or techniques of mediation, or even good institutional design, but real-world change in the major power source in the region. That shift in British state structures and practices was what made the difference between settlement failure and settlement success.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, conflict, settlement, historical patterns, institutions, actors and structures, state change

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INTRODUCTION

Settlement of protracted conflict involves actors changing their strategies and their aims. Nationalist revolutionaries decide to participate in the parliamentary process. Those unhappy with the turn of events privatise rather than protest. Why they change, and why seemingly subtle shifts in opportunities or a slight adaptation of a settlement package that failed in the past allows such change, is often difficult to understand and explain. Some theorists argue it is a function of power shift towards a hurting stalemate (Zartman, 1989), some that it is a function of information (Fearon, 1998), some that it is a matter of credible and costly commitments on the part of the state (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2007; World Bank, 2011: 105-112). In Northern Ireland there is some evidence for each of these positions but none adequately explains the turn to or timing of settlement (Ruane and Todd, 2007). We argue that a longer historical perspective allows us to see how seemingly small institutional shifts are taken as indicative of credible change in major historically-based structural trends to which actors—populations and politicians as well as paramilitaries—respond with new strategies and changed beliefs. If we focus solely on short-term processes of negotiation, techniques of information sharing and on the detail of institutional design we miss the more important point that what changed minds in Northern Ireland was not techniques but real-world change in the major power source in the region. That shift in British state structures and practices was what made the difference between settlement failure and settlement success.

This article takes the case-study of Northern Ireland; a region of the United Kingdom composed of the six North-Eastern counties of the island of Ireland, with a population of close to 1.7 million in the 2001 census 53% Protestant and 44% Catholic.[1] Deep-set conflict reaching back to "plantation" and dispossession in the seventeenth century surrounded the foundation of the polity in 1921 and a quarter century of violent conflict caused over 3,000 deaths between 1969 and 1998. An agreed settlement was reached in 1998 that put in place devolved consociational governance with strong equality and rights guarantees and weak but expandable cross-border institutions (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004: 260-293). After the 2011 elections, the agreement appears stable for the middle term.

The questions posed in this article are simple. Why did it take so long to find a settlement? Why did a formally similar settlement initiative put in place in 1973-4 fail and the 1998 initiative succeed? Why were republicans who had previously rejected compromise with the British state, and unionists who had previously rejected powersharing and an Irish dimension now willing to accept them? To answer these questions we need to take a longer time frame which situates the present in a historical process where state- institutional biases, deep-set communal power imbalances, and conflict-generating repertoires of response were deeply entrenched and are only now being undone. The analysis below provides a

historical-structural explanation of conflict and settlement, illustrating some of the general points made in the introductory article: that spoilers are endemic in conflict situations, but that structural changes can render them ineffective; that state-change, and in particular change towards inclusion, is central to the process of settlement; that this may be neither simply endogenous nor a product of exogenous shocks, but rather be produced through transnational linkages and neighbour state influence; that populations as well as politicians and paramilitaries are central actors in conflict and settlement.

In Part One below, we trace the historical patterns of conflict in Northern Ireland. In Part two we trace successive settlement attempts since 1972. In part three , we argue that what made the difference between failure and success was an evident change in the role of the British state, historically a key factor in constituting and reproducing conflict.

PART ONE: PATTERNS OF CONFLICT

The introductory article in this volume argues that distinctive historical patterns of conflict may exist in a particular society, embedded in structural relations of power and resource distribution and generating interests which give rise to a reproduction of conflict over time. Precisely this occurred in Ireland, where a divisive, crisis ridden but stubbornly persistent system of rule was early established. It involved dominance and inequality between two ethno-religiously distinct populations, underwritten by the British state which depended on the locally dominant population to maintain stable governance and administration. This system of dominance, dependence and inequality continued in Northern Ireland until the end of the twentieth century. It generated a set of social and political consequences: a depth of structural "horizontal" inequality between the culturally distinct populations (Stewart, 2008); a tendency for heterogeneous populations to form into mobilised politicised ethno-religious communities; a tendency for the ruling group to coerce rather than conciliate the subordinated population, who achieved reform only by mobilisation, violence and threat; and a tendency of the British state to underwrite the dominance of one community by delegating administration to it, departing from this mode of territorial management only under strong pressure.

These relationships and repertoires were recognised by the actors themselves and interpreted ideologically in nationalist origin myths and unionist myths of besiegement and massacre. They were promulgated by ethnic entrepreneurs who increased communal tensions, and by extremists ("spoilers") who tried to bring down every cross-community achievement and stop all conciliation (for a range of 19th century examples, see Wright, 1996 383-431). These individuals did not, however, create conflict: the relationships and repertoires were rooted in socio-political structures. These did not fully determine popular behaviour or attitudes. In everyday life, understandings and perceptions varied enormously, some local communities intermingled and individuals intermarried. But the structural basis remained, and at times of change, crisis or challenge, the older responses of Protestant dominance underpinned by British power and challenged by Catholic violence were the typical ones, although never the only ones. Unlike Bosnia (as

analysed by Gagnon, 2004), conflict in Northern Ireland was not generated by outside actors and conservative elites but conflictual interests were continually regenerated from the structures of state and economy.

The historic patterns: state and populations

The origins of Ireland's ethno-religious conflicts lie in the manner in which it was attached to the English Crown in the late medieval and early modern periods. Invasion, conquest and colonisation in the 12th and 13th centuries ended the process of autonomous Irish state-building. Re-conquest and renewed colonisation by English and Scottish Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries led to a system of quasi-colonial rule in which a minority of ethnically and religiously distinct settlers ruled over a displaced native Catholic population, while depending for their security and survival on the support of the English crown to which they were both loyal and subject. The English intent was not to alienate the Catholic Irish, but rather politically to integrate and culturally to assimilate them. Initially a strategy of persuasion was used, but when it made slow progress, coercion—in the form of conquest and colonial plantation—replaced it: settlers were to secure the territory for the Crown and act as centres of cultural diffusion (Canny, 2001). However colonisation created a new dynamic, one in which the settlers sought to expand at the expense of the native population who in consequence were all the more likely to rebel. The process reached its apogee in the exceptional conditions of the 1640s when the rebellion of the Ulster Irish triggered an island-wide religious war that ended in a comprehensive conquest and dispossession.

To secure its position, the Protestant Ascendancy of the late seventeenth century faced a choice: to integrate Catholics into the state (buttressing their own numbers by converting them to Protestantism or if that failed by granting them substantial rights); or to keep Catholics as weak as possible to minimise their threat. It chose the latter option, and penal laws were passed that severely restricted Catholic political, economic, religious, and educational rights (Barnard, 2004; McBride, 2009). Their success was short-lived; by the 1760s, the Catholic position was strengthening and in subsequent decades divisions emerged in the wider Protestant population about the concessions that should be made to them. In the 1790s Protestant and Catholic radicals made common cause and rebelled in an effort to establish Ireland as an independent republic. The rebellion in 1798 was quickly defeated, but it convinced the British government that only an Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland would ensure stability in Ireland and secure it for the Crown in a permanent way (Bartlett, 1992).

Though initially ambivalent about the Union of 1801, Protestants soon accommodated themselves to it, seeing in it the guarantee of their long-term security and dominant position. Catholics expected it to bring full political rights and greater equality with Protestants. But it took until 1829 to gain Catholic emancipation and even then it required mass mobilisation and huge political pressure. Reconciling the conflicting interests of Protestants and Catholics would have been difficult even for a government committed to the task: the British government lacked any such commitment. It also showed itself indifferent to

Ireland's endemic economic difficulties which were heavily concentrated in the Catholic-majority parts of the country. The effect was a growing political radicalism among Catholics to which the state responded with reform. One by one the bulwarks of Protestant ascendancy were dismantled. The (Anglican) Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869; a series of land reforms (1870, 1881, 1885, 1891, 1903, 1909) ended Protestant landed power; the extension of the franchise and the democratisation of local government in 1898 ended their political power; more Catholics were brought into the central administration (Boyce, 1992). Even with all this, Protestant advantage remained (Paseta, 1999; Campbell, 2009).

Nor did reform bring political stability. It rather augmented the political resources of an increasingly nationalist Catholic population, focussed on the need to redeem historic grievances and redress new ones (the perceived destructive role of British rule on Ireland's economic interests). Yet through the late nineteenth century, nationalist politics remained moderate and constitutional, aiming for Home Rule within the Union and the Empire, a policy adopted by the governing British Liberal Party from 1886. Some Protestants supported Home Rule; most opposed it as a threat to their economic interests and religious liberties. British Conservatives opposed it as a threat to the empire. By a combination of military and political threat, the two groups blocked it (Boyce, 1990; Lustick, 1993). After repeated delays, and in the teeth of Ulster unionist threats of armed opposition, a Home Rule bill was passed in 1914, but suspended for the duration of the war. This gave the minority of radicals in the nationalist movement their chance. Through rebellion (1916), state repression and a guerrilla war of independence (1919-1921) they won mass support and partial success: the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 gave dominion status rather than a republic to a 26-county Irish state and confirmed the partition of the island. The period also confirmed violent nationalist rebellion as the foundation of the Irish state and as the only way to force British action against unionist resistance.

Northern Ireland was created by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act. Its Unionist government, backed by the majority Protestant population, faced the same choice as did an earlier generation: to reconcile Catholics to their political defeat by according them a valued position within the state; or to contain them and marginalise their dissent. They chose the latter option, establishing their control - legally, practically, forcibly—over government, parliament and local authorities, employment, housing, and the public culture (Whyte, 1983; Ruane and Todd, 1996: 117-122). The British government—unwilling to re-open an Irish question which had so recently threatened state stability—chose to underwrite the unionist position. In every sector, and at every social level, Catholics were worse off than Protestants (Aungier, 1975).

By the early 1960s, in a period of post-war modernisation, there were expectations on all sides that the older patterns could and would be changed (Mulholland, 2000). But unionist openness to reform was limited at best (Gailey, 1995). As a broadly based, largely Catholic, "civil rights" movement began a series of protest marches to secure reforms, it sharpened the division between modernising liberal and pragmatic unionists on the one hand, and hard-line ethno-loyalists on the other

(Walker, 2004, 165-174). A weakened government was able to control neither marchers nor counter-demonstrators and Protestant and security force attacks on marchers and on Catholic areas triggered rioting, a rearming of the IRA, and a parallel recruitment to the loyalist paramilitaries. Reform of immediate grievances and democratic abuses proceeded slowly, insisted upon by the British government, but structural inequality was untouched. The reform process was overshadowed by the communal and paramilitary violence and the security response. In August 1969 the British sent the army onto the streets in aid of the unionist government. Increasingly strong and misjudged security measures targeted primarily against Catholics and nationalists (in particular internment without trial) positioned the British government on the side of the unionists and increased IRA support and violence (Bew and Gillespie, 1993: 37). Concluding that order could not be restored by the devolved government, the British government in March 1972 established direct rule from London.

Patterns of conflict in the contemporary period

The parties to the Northern Ireland conflict accurately (if selectively) recognised the historic patterns in the present. The populations remained divided by a plurality of overlapping distinctions—ethno-communal, religious, national loyalty, political principle—and by deep-rooted inequality in all fields (see Table One, below). Again consistent with the historical pattern, although for very different reasons (economic restructuring, education, communications), Catholic resources were slowly increasing and with them their demands. The existence of Northern Ireland—with its built in Protestant demographic majority—was a new element in the conflict, and one that made sovereignty and challenges to it all the more important to both populations. The British state, for its part, continued to rely on local administrators, and continued to be slow to respond to Catholic grievances, and even slower when organised Protestants opposed reform. But only highly politicised republicans and loyalists took the patterns as deterministic. Ordinary people, together with liberals and pragmatists in the main political parties, believed that there was enough good will and enough opportunity for change to occur. Until 1974, moderate nationalists believed that unionists guided by the British state would come to recognise the need for reform (McLoughlin, 2010).

The underlying structural relations determined the issues in conflict:

- The political position of Catholics/nationalists: not simply specific grievances (an end to unionist gerrymandering and to job discrimination in the public service, for the right to display nationalist symbols) but the fact that they lacked any real influence on politics or on the direction of social affairs or on the forms of cultural capital, or on the modes of interaction in public space (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 179-186).

- Constitutional questions: the legitimacy of Northern Ireland as a political entity, the right of the Protestant majority to exercise power as a majority, the right of Irish nationalists on the island to self-determination as a nation, the

right of the unionists of Northern Ireland to exercise a right self-determination as a historic community.

- Structural inequalities between Catholics and Protestants in life-chances, self-esteem, social status, access to arms, and political capacity (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 146-8; 175-77; 200-203).

- Increasingly conflict was also about violence and legitimacy, of the state and of the republican paramilitaries, and about the appropriate response to each.

The issues were interconnected: the nationalist rejection of the Northern state and aspiration to unity rested in part on a view of it as irreformable; the unionist resistance to equality with nationalists rested in part on a view that this would undermine their position and their state; the disputed legitimacy and uncertain future of the state meant that the communal balance of power was of key strategic significance. The result was that engagement on any issue quickly led to engagement on all, and tended towards a zero-sum conception of conflict. Underlying these interrelations was a configuration of state and economy that none of the Northern Ireland parties had the power to change. The open question was whether the British state was capable of restructuring relations, and whether it was willing to undertake the risks involved.

Those issues constituted the ongoing political struggles waged by the Northern Ireland parties, supported by the mass public, for another thirty years. Where the parties failed, the campaign of violence waged by the IRA, and the Protestant paramilitary targeting of Catholic civilians, kept the issues on the political agenda.

PART TWO: SEQUENCES OF SETTLEMENT 1972-2010

Political stability was not restored by Direct Rule in 1972. Indeed the British government initially saw it as a way of opening a political space on which new devolved institutions could be built. In the event it would take 26 years for a devolved power-sharing government to be agreed and a further decade for its institutions to be fully functioning. But it is striking that the first attempt at such a settlement—the Sunningdale initiative of 1973—came close to succeeding. Like the later Agreement, it involved proportional representation, a devolved power-sharing government and a Council linking the two parts of Ireland. Why did it fail? Why did it take so long to reach settlement?

The Sunningdale Experiment of 1973-4.:

The first power-sharing initiative was proposed by the British government which, after exploratory discussions, invited the two main parties, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) together with the cross community Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI) to talks. The more extreme Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was not invited nor was Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, at the time a tiny party, nor was either interested in forming a

power-sharing government. Despite continuing violence, the context was in many respects favourable. The demands of the SDLP were moderate and the unionist public and the UUP were open to power-sharing in principle. Negotiations on the make-up of the executive were successfully concluded in November 1973 (Dixon,, 2001: 135-144) and the second stage of negotiations, to address North-South issues including security cooperation, extradition and the formation of a Council of Ireland, was held at Sunningdale in December, chaired by the British government, with the Irish government participating with the power-sharing parties. A Council of Ireland was agreed, to be composed of seven ministers from each jurisdiction and to function by consensus (unionists would therefore have a veto on its decisions), with a remit to be decided at a planned future conference that never took place. A constitutional formula was agreed by British and Irish governments, which acknowledged the present status of Northern Ireland without defining that status: in practice (but not in constitutional law) it meant nationalist acceptance of British sovereignty so long as a majority so desired. No agreement was reached on security.

Most of those involved in the negotiations expected the power-sharing experiment to succeed (Farren, 2010: 88-9). The SDLP were happy with the outcome. It confirmed the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom as long as this was the wish of the majority of the population, but they had neither the opportunity nor desire to press towards Irish unity in the medium term. Its equality measures were very weak, but the SDLP at this time prioritised inward investment over socio-economic equalisation and the parties assumed that as issues arose compromise would be reached (McLoughlin, 2010: 54-8). Security was a contentious issue, in particular internment, but SDLP politicians privately disagreed among themselves about what should be done about it.[2] The key benefit from an SDLP point of view—and it represented huge change from the system that had preceded it—was that it gave nationalists a place in government. Nationalist public opinion supported the initiative (Whyte, 1991: 82).

Unionists were divided. In the elections of June 1973, the pro-power-sharing UUP had only half of the overall unionist seats. By January 1974, the Ulster Unionist Council (the governing body of the UUP) rejected the Sunningdale communiqué and anti-Sunningdale unionists took over the party machine just in time for the February 1974 British general election. Reflecting ordinary unionists' worries about the initiative, and not least about the Irish government's intentions, anti-power-sharing unionists won all the unionist seats in Westminster.[3] But it was the Ulster Workers Council (UWC), a loose amalgam of paramilitaries, trades unionists and DUP politicians, who organised against Sunningdale and their industrial strike of May 1974 that finally destroyed the executive.

If the proximate cause of Sunningdale's failure was the UWC strike, that it was so effective requires further explanation. The strikers began as a minority, a group of extremists, although strategically placed in the key electricity industry. The political opposition of the much of the unionist population to Sunningdale gave the strikers some claim to legitimacy, but unionist public support was far from assured. Mainstream unionists have tended at once to be traditionalist and also law-abiding,

even "deferential" (Kaufmann, 2007). They might have been expected to wait until the next Assembly election to bring down the government, and by that time much would have changed in Northern Ireland and in public expectations. They only gradually came to support the strike days into it and after it became clear that the new British Labour government was not going to intervene to support the Agreement (Kerr, 2006: 50-72). Why did the British refuse to adapt government priorities (the timing of the election) or governing practices (refusal to use the army to deal with strikes) to the needs of settlement? Why did they refuse to "persuade" (i.e. incentivise, pressure) the dominant community to compromise? In part it reflects an unwillingness to contemplate a war on two fronts with loyalist as well as republican paramilitaries. More deeply, it shows an unwillingness to govern without the support of the dominant community (Rees, 1985: 90; Callaghan, 1973: 78-9). The underlying cause of the failure of Sunningdale is not to be found in government miscalculations, lack of leadership, spoiling tactics or even unionist popular recalcitrance: it was the imbalance of structural and institutional power between the communities and the unwillingness of the British state to begin to reshape it.

Attempts at an "internal solution": the Constitutional Convention (1975), the Atkins Conference (1980), Rolling Devolution (1981-)

The British government took due note of the power relations revealed by the UWC strike and during the following 9 years it alternated between "no initiatives" and "internal initiatives". The former rested on the assumption that "good government" on the British model (Rees, 1985: 283) would allow some measure of progress to be achieved, and tough security policies would end republican violence. The latter assumed that only an internal settlement would win unionist support and that nationalists as the weaker party would prefer any input into government to none. In the meantime, the weakness of the Labour government led to an informal parliamentary alliance with unionists in Westminster that further strengthened the unionist position, including Protestant control of the security forces (Rowthorn and Wayne, 1988).

The attempts at an "internal settlement" failed. In 1975 the Labour government set up a Convention to debate proposals for governance, but since only a small minority of unionists were willing to consider power-sharing and the SDLP were unwilling to consider anything less, its report was not acted on (Cunningham 1991: 97-99). In 1980, the new Conservative government convened a Conference to discuss a new form of devolution but the   vast majority of unionist delegates remained unwilling to contemplate powersharing, and the SDLP to forego it, while the DUP refused to attend the "Irish dimension" meetings. In 1982, the British government instituted a form of "rolling devolution", without guaranteed power-sharing but with the "weighted majority" requirement that proposals had to have 70% support and with some potential for building an Irish dimension (Cunningham, 1991: 146-50). The SDLP after considerable debate were unwilling to participate in institutions which offered them less than in 1973 (Farren, 2010: 154; McLoughlin, 2010: 92-97).

Nor did "good government" deliver stability. The IRA campaign continued and republicans massively increased their popular basis through a hunger strike campaign against the prison regime: by 1982 they took over a third of the nationalist vote in the Assembly elections.

The shift to interstate conflict regulation and the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985

The Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) of 1985 was a radical new turn. This was an inter-state agreement to institutionalise Irish government participation (without power) in policy making in Northern Ireland in return for cooperation on security (Boyle and Hadden, 1989).   The British looked forward to greatly enhanced security cooperation; the Irish saw it as a way to change the logic of British policy making, leading to substantive reform and perhaps to joint authority (Lillis and Goodall, 2010). Both shared the hope that it would incentivise power-sharing devolution among the middle-ground parties (O'Leary and McGarry, 1996; Aughey and Gormley-Heenan, 2011).The AIA's impact was different. It introduced a nationalist perspective into policy making, marking a change in information flows and implicit alliances: the state no longer relied on unionists' advice in guiding their decisions but on the Irish government's advice (and they were in close contact with the SDLP); British-Irish strategic collaboration on conflict management quickly increased (Todd, 2011). Most evident of all, the AIA contributed to a process of reform that up to then had been progressing at a snail's pace. A new Fair Employment Act in 1989 had a very positive effect on employment ratios (Gallagher et al, 1995). Through the Irish input, more Catholics and nationalist were nominated onto public bodies, and an Irish and nationalist presence became more evident in the Northern Ireland public sphere than ever before.

Unionists immediately and accurately saw the AIA as a major change in the structure of relationships with serious implications for the direction of state strategy and they tried to bring it down. But the British government was committed to hold firm, and the AIA was designed to be veto-proof. Meanwhile, the Catholic share of the Northern Ireland population was increasing rapidly, as was the nationalist/republican share of the overall vote showing not just that they were fielding more candidates but also that the nationalist public were finding it worthwhile to participate in democratic politics. That nationalist public was also more assertive, more likely to vote Sinn Féin, more demanding of full equality and, after 1989, significantly more likely to achieve it. On all dimensions, the imbalance of communal power was changing. Through the AIA the British state hoped to counter the increasing strength of republicanism, and it did so by strengthening a wider process of reform—indeed equalisation—in Northern Ireland against the will of the organised unionist community. This was a change in the historic pattern, and it encouraged those within Sinn Fein who were reassessing the value of the armed campaign (see Mallie and McKittrick, 2001; Moloney, 2002).

1991-1998 Peace and settlement processes

Unionists were also re-thinking their position, willing to do a deal with the SDLP in order to get rid of the AIA. New sets of talks in 1991-2 ended in failure, but they marked a changed agenda: inclusion of the DUP as well as the UUP, SDLP, APNI and the two governments; a three-stranded format where the Irish input was central to North-South and British-Irish strands; and unionist implicit acceptance of the principle of power-sharing and a Council of Ireland. Nationalists in the SDLP needed still more: a credible guarantee that the unionist veto would not (or could not) be restored.

Meanwhile the balance of political forces was shifting with the emergence of the Sinn Féin-driven "peace process". Once the British government decided to engage, encouraged by and in close collaboration with the Irish government, the parameters of possible change shifted. The task became one of mapping out an institutional structure that would meet the interests of and be acceptable to all parties, including the republican and unionist extremes: a thorough restructuring of Northern Ireland. The first step, completed by the two governments in December 1993, was the elaboration of the basic principles that would frame agreement, incorporating both the republican aim of national self-determination, and the unionist and British insistence on majority consent to constitutional change. This was the British-Irish "Downing Street Declaration" of 1993 which (i) holds open the way to a united Ireland, dependent on the agreement of a majority in Northern Ireland (para 4, 5) (ii) redefines the role of the British state as one of facilitating agreement on the island (para 4) (iii) commits the Irish state to change those aspects of its society and state that are a threat to the way of life or ethos of unionists and Protestants (para 6) and (iv) guarantees full political participation—in the event of paramilitary ceasefires and commitment to exclusively peaceful means—to democratically elected parties which once supported paramilitary violence (para 10). The US became involved in support of the broad British-Irish strategy, functioning as an informal guarantor for republicans of British good faith (Dumbrell, 2000). Republican and loyalist ceasefires followed in late summer and early autumn, 1994.

The British-Irish "Frameworks documents" of February 1995 mapped the broad structure of a future settlement. It went beyond previous government strategy by balancing the principle of majority consent to constitutional change (which for the immediate future favours the unionist position) by a process of island-wide institution-building which was open to incremental change as far as functional institutional integration, North and South, in areas from education to the economy. The shape of an agreement was emerging. It would respect majority constitutional will in Northern Ireland, while beginning an incremental and potentially radical process of change of internal and cross-border institutions. It would institute a devolved consociational form of governance, within British sovereignty, with conflict regulation overseen by the British-Irish partnership. This would open opportunities for both nationalists and unionists to participate in and change Northern Irish and North-South institutions, subject only to constraints of rights and mutual agreement, while leaving constitutional change until such time as a majority in Northern Ireland might wish for a united Ireland.

The difficult task was to persuade the parties to accept such a framework, indeed to persuade unionists to negotiate with Sinn Féin at all while the IRA remained in existence and retained its weapons. Progress was so slow that the IRA recommenced its campaign of violence in February 1996. It took the landslide victory of New Labour in the 1997 UK elections to give Prime Minister Tony Blair the political resources to pressure and persuade to agreement (Powell, 2008). In July 1997 the IRA declared a new ceasefire and in September 1997, Sinn Féin entered the multi-party talks while the DUP and the small United Kingdom Unionist Party left the talks in protest.

The GFA and its implementation

The process and the agenda of the 1997-8 talks followed procedures of the 1991-2 talks and principles outlined in the 1993 and 1995 agreements. What was new was the inclusion of republicans and the intensity of the engagement of the British and Irish governments (for descriptions by participants, see Farren, 2010; Hennessey, 2001; Powell, 2008). Agreement was finally reached on April 10, 1998. It defined a multi-levelled configuration of governance: within Northern Ireland, between North and South, between Ireland and Britain, as well as between the British centre and Northern Ireland (see McGarry and O'Leary, 2004; the text is available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm accessed 17 June 2011). Within Northern Ireland, a proportionately elected assembly with an executive appointed proportionately to strength in the Assembly (by the D'Hondt method) was instituted, whose existence was to be co-dependent on that of the North-South Council which in turn would set up six North-South "implementation bodies". The British role was most important in terms of funding, but any of these layers of governance could grow in importance and strength, within the constraints of equality and rights guarantees and the need for majority consent in Northern Ireland for constitutional change. So, despite the very weak nature of North-South bodies (Coakley, 2005), these could in principle grow towards North South institutional harmonisation, subject to agreement of the North-South Council and ultimately of the Irish Dáil (parliament) and Northern Ireland Assembly. Equally, in the event of a definitive collapse of devolved institutions, British-Irish cooperation could increase towards joint authority. While these were significant gains for nationalists, unionists in turn gained input into the direction of change and formal guarantees from both Britain and Ireland that unity will only come about through majority vote in both parts of the island. It was not unrealistic in May 1998 to see the Agreement—in the words of its Preface—as a "new beginning" in Northern Ireland, opening up to a politics no longer reducible to ethnic power and ethnic parties.

The implementation of the GFA was crisis-ridden. The immediate issues which caused crises—formation of the executive, decommissioning, policing reform—were indicative of deeper unionist and nationalist worries that the implementation of the Agreement would give a power-bonus to the other side and weaken their position in the longer term (Ruane and Todd, 2001). Republicans feared it would

restore a unionist veto once guns were given up and the British government lost interest in Northern Ireland. Unionists feared it would treat their culture and interests as irrelevant and begin a momentum of change away from the Union. Both were right to worry about the credibility of state promises. Very intensive behind-scenes British-Irish negotiations with US input on the side of reform were necessary to ensure that nationalist concerns were catered for in policing, parades, demilitarisation and criminal justice.[4] But the changes were made. By 2010, the new Police Service of Northern Ireland had 27% of Catholics on its staff and was supported by all political parties and under the control of the Northern Ireland government. A nationalist cultural presence is now evident in the public sphere in Northern Ireland.[5] But, despite continuing unionist concerns about the content of the Union, there is no attempt by either state to persuade unionists into a united Ireland.

TABLE ONE: Catholic position 1970s-2000s[1]

	1970s	2000s
Catholic percentage of population	36.8%	44%
Catholic % of professional employment		
Catholic % of managerial employment (men)	16	39
Unemployment differential Catholic/Protestant	2.6	2.3
Catholic % of top 250 civil service jobs		31.8
Catholic % of those with degree qualification or higher	27.4	46.2
Catholic % of police and security services	10	27.7 (2009)
Belief (% of Catholic respondents) that Catholics are discriminated against	74	15[2]
Belief (% of Catholics) that their culture is unprotected	N/A	9
Catholic percentage in government	0	50%
Nationalist % of overall vote	22.7 (1969)	40.5 (2003)

Crises in the UUP, disillusionment with the Agreement among the wider unionist public, and the electoral victory of the anti-GFA DUP in 2003 prevented the Assembly from functioning for long periods between 1998 and 2003, and at all

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[1] The data summarised here in the first three columns are from the censuses of 1971 and 2001, the fourth from the 1971 census and 2005 Labour force survey, the sixth from Osborne and Shuttleworth, 2004, the seventh and eighth from Rose (1968) and Life and Times (2003).
[2] 2003 NILT figure of those Catholics who believe that Protestants and Catholics are not treated equally AND that Protestants are treated better than Catholics (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt).

between 2003 and 2007. However the British and Irish governments ensured that the other institutions of the GFA functioned, that the reform process continued and that parties and public were persuaded to change their minds.

The Agreement intensified ethnic politics, with the DUP and Sinn Féin replacing the more moderate UUP and SDLP as the largest parties in their blocs, and simultaneously moderating their own policies (Mitchell et al, 2009). The 2011 elections, with low public interest and turnout, gave the parties a clear mandate to continue in government and confirmed their capacity to hold off dissidents in their own camps. Meanwhile, despite the continued existence of armed dissident republican organisations, there is resistance in both communities to anything that might draw Northern Ireland back to the years of violent conflict.

PART 3: ANALYSIS OF WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE

What allowed a settlement to be reached in 1998 when previous settlement initiatives had failed? Why did leaders and parties who rejected a not dis-similar settlement in 1973 and helped bring it down now enter agreement? Could the cost of the intervening years have been avoided?

The question is frequently posed in media and political commentaries as well as in academic analysis. The answers tend focus on actors and accords. Actor explanations focus on hurting stalemates ("war-weariness" together with the penetration of the IRA by British security), the learning process (the Good Friday Agreement is "Sunningdale for slow learners"), the life cycle (ageing leaders thinking of their children and grandchildren). There are also arguments focussing on changes in popular attitudes stimulated by globalisation (a decline in nationalism and acceptance of the need to move "beyond the nation-state") (see variously Moloney, 2002; Tonge, 2005; Coulter and Murray, 2008; Wilson, 2010). We agree that there is evidence of these changes in public and political attitudes, perceptions and emotions by the 1990s: but we do not see an adequate explanation of this. Ageing is continuous: why a concern for grandchildren when children had not provoked the change? And there was evidence of stalemate and hurt at least since the early 1970s without it changing the determination of the protagonists (Ruane and Todd, 2007). We suggest that the structural changes outlined below made the underlying interests in conflict less intense, allowing other human emotions and concerns to come to prominence.

Accord arguments focus not simply on the better institutional design in 1998 but also on the constitutional clarity, the wider equality legislation, the provisions for ending the war (prisoner releases, demilitarisation) and policing reform and the much greater resolve and cooperation of the two governments at the time of the GFA (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004). At the level of formal institutional structure, there is a superficial resemblance between the GFA and Sunningdale but this is differently contextualised even in the agreements themselves. Indeed, as we argue below, the much greater range of issues covered in the GFA and its strong egalitarian thrust, backed by a British state that was now willing to restructure

Northern Ireland and reposition itself with respect to it, confirms and continues the trend of structural change that is the primary cause of settlement success.

The crucial change between 1973 and 1998 was in the structural relationships at the heart of the conflict. What made it possible for the IRA to pursue a peace process and for unionists to agree to a settlement were the continuing structural changes between the two dates. These changes concerned: (i) the balance of social structural power, as is shown in the continued relative Catholic improvement on socio-economic and demographic indicators (see Table One); (ii) the balance of coercive power: the survival capacity of the IRA is evidence of new coercive capacity on the Catholic side; (iii) the balance of geo-political power in Northern Ireland: a clear re-positioning by the British government in terms of its relationship with the majority and minority community and a shift not simply to a much more even-handed position but to actively intervening to create a more equal society; (iv) the balance of geo-political relations in the archipelago: a British Irish relationship which changed the logic of British policy making in Northern Ireland and opened a range of transnational political linkages and opportunities short of Irish unity. All of these gave Catholics a political leverage they never had in the past while institutionalising the key mechanisms for delivering equality (in particular fair employment legislation). By the same token, they removed from unionists the capacity to block change: now unionists had to participate in shared government to ensure that their interests were taken into account (Aughey, 2001). Crucially, however, the GFA did not put these changes in place; rather it confirmed them and consolidated them. The structural changes delivered the GFA, more than vice versa.

Nor were these simply changes that gave new incentives to the parties. Conflict was so intractable in the past because of the interlock between British state institutions and practices and Protestant dominance in Ireland/Northern Ireland. The British state remains the sovereign power in part of Ireland but this is because a local majority wills it so despite the fact it has been actively dismantling their inherited privileges and opening a path towards different possible futures. This is a real change in a long-term historical pattern. It allows both parties and public to change, without giving up on their identities, assumptions or aims.

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[1] An estimation involving the reallocation of 'no religion' entries in light of communal background, see http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/popul.htm accessed June 17 2011.

[2] Embargoed material from interviews and witness seminar, University College Dublin, 07.09.2005.

[3] The Irish government defended the Sunningdale communiqué against constitutional challenge by pointing out that it did not change the territorial claim to Northern Ireland, thus feeding unionist fears.

[4] Embargoed interviews with Irish and British officials, 19.09.08; 27.11.08; 15.07.10 ; 23.09.10

[5] For example, over half of respondents believed Northern Ireland was more nationalist than before, and less than ten percent believed it more unionist in the 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, www.ark.ac.uk/nilt, political attitudes module (identity).