

THE BELFAST AGREEMENT - 20 YEARS ON



The promise versus the reality

Anyone in 1998 who dared to question the hype and promise of the Belfast Agreement was treated as a pariah. This new dawn, we were told, would bring stability and normality to Northern Ireland.

So, how has it worked out? Badly: Northern Ireland is more divided than ever, and as for political normality, the parties can't even form a government.

The fact that the Belfast Agreement itself is the cause and source of such failure is an uncomfortable reality many try to avoid. Facing up to the need for radical change to the core institutional structures of the 1998 Agreement is the path to progress.



Why Belfast Agreement devolution will never work

Mandatory coalition ensures there can be no government without Sinn Fein (and the DUP) -- and this has created the politics of ransom that Sinn Fein has practised for the past year. With Sinn Fein having no interest in making Northern Ireland work - quite the opposite, it is no surprise that a system dependent on their favour has collapsed.

Only a coalition of the willing stands any chance of success; merely attempting again to patch together a system that will never work is utter folly.



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The sad irony

Far from reducing division, the Belfast Agreement has sectarianised it further. Tribal voting is guaranteed because the prize of First Minister is awarded to the biggest party's headcount rather than through coalition negotiations.

The perverse legacy of the Belfast Agreement

The Belfast Agreement not only imposed a perverse and unworkable system of government, it corrupted the judicial process. Its obscene release of hundreds of convicted terrorists (428), who had been rightly given long sentences, made a mockery of both the legal process and their innocent victims. The ascendancy afforded by the Agreement to terrorists continued both in their passage into government and in the infamous 'On the Run' letters, as serial concessions became the order of the day.

Deception at its heart

Unionists persuaded to vote for the Belfast Agreement did so in the belief that it represented a settlement and in return for the compromises made all would pull together to make Northern Ireland work. They bought into its sales pitch of "a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning".



For republicans it was never a settlement but a stepping stone in a process towards Irish unity - a process which requires to be fed by constant concessions, and, when opportune, the collapsing of the institutions to wring out those concessions.

Confirmation that the republican interpretation of the Belfast Agreement is correct is found in the fact that under it the only Question which voters in Northern Ireland can be asked in a constitutional referendum is to the effect 'Are you yet ready to join the Irish Republic?' Its direction of travel is clear.



Time to ask questions

With the promises of the Belfast Agreement in tatters, it is time to reflect on where Northern Ireland is going? Unionists, in particular, need to ask where will we be after another 20 years under this process?

It's time to face the reality that the Belfast Agreement never worked because it cannot work. It's time to recognise that it is poisonous to the Union. Continuing to vote for those happy to again operate the failed Belfast Agreement structures, indifferent to where it is leading us, will take you there. **You get what you vote for!**

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