



# Research Update

## Good Bargains?

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*Since two can't gain in the bargain, Then who shall bear the loss?*

Patrick MacGill, Good Bargains

Ideas of balance, mutuality and reciprocity are common themes in peacemaking. Peacemaking, so the theory goes, should take the form of balanced bargaining, with concessions and gains by one side being matched by concessions and gains by the other. A seventeenth century French diplomat noted that 'The great secret of negotiation is to bring out prominently the common advantage to both parties of any proposal, and so to link these advantages that they may appear equally balanced to both parties.'<sup>1</sup> The 1997 Hebron Accord between Israel and the Palestinians institutionalised the 'principle of reciprocity' in an attempt to link concessions by each side. Closer to home, the need to equalise 'relative group status' between Northern Ireland's main stakeholding communities - Protestant-unionist and Catholic-nationalist - has been a goal of the British and Irish governments. As architects and co-guarantors of the peace process, they hoped that any peace accord

could address the grievances and aspirations of both the main groups in a balanced manner and deliver a rough equivalence of gains and concessions.<sup>2</sup>

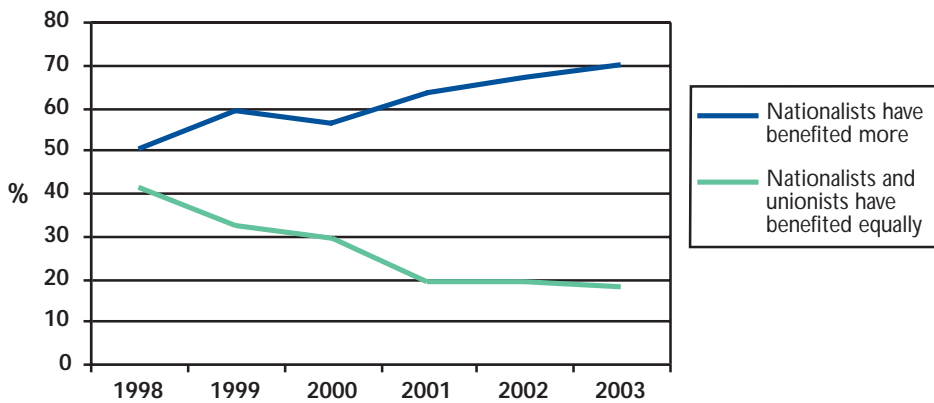
Thus Northern Ireland's peace process and subsequent Belfast Agreement – via a complex set of constitutional amendments, legal guarantees, security sector reforms, symbolic gestures and new governing institutions – revolved around the notion of an inter-communal balance of gains. On the day the Belfast Agreement was reached, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair stressed the importance of a balanced equivalence of gains for both communities: 'The essence of what we have agreed is a choice: we are all winners or losers. It is mutually assured benefit or mutually assured destruction. This is because the package is based on balanced principles. Put this agreement into practice and we all do win.'<sup>3</sup>

Post-Agreement Northern Ireland Secretaries of State have repeated the importance of transcending zero-sum politics and maintaining a mutual balance of gains. Yet, was the inter-governmental desire for a transparent equivalence of gains and concessions through the Belfast Agreement realised by Northern Ireland's citizens? The gap between elite-level intentions and grassroots reception has bedevilled many peace accords; Bosnia and Cambodia come to mind. As results from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** show, Northern Ireland reflects this international experience. The survey results help us gauge inter-communal perceptions of the balance of post-Agreement gains and losses. The picture that emerges is one of an entrenched sectarian differential in relation to perceptions of the Agreement and its implementation. Yet on one of the fundamental tenets of the Agreement – the need for both communities to share power – there is strong support.

## The Agreement's perceived beneficiaries

Rather than the hoped-for equivalence of benefit for both the main communities, public attitudes towards who 'won' and 'lost' from the Belfast Agreement show declining Protestant faith in the ability of the Agreement to benefit equally unionists and nationalists. In 1998, 41% of Protestant respondents believed that the Agreement benefited nationalists and unionists equally (see Figure 1). By 2001, this figure had more than halved to 19% and has shown no sign of recovery in subsequent years. In tandem, the Protestant perception that nationalists have been the chief beneficiaries of the Agreement has increased markedly. In 1998, 50% of Protestants believed that the Agreement benefited nationalists either a little or a lot more than unionists, with this figure increasing to about 70% by 2003. Indeed, by 2003 a majority of Protestants (53%) believed that nationalists benefited a lot more. It is clear, therefore, that the peace

Figure 1: Protestant perceptions of benefit from the Belfast Agreement



accord that was recommended as benefiting both sides equally has failed to convince the majority community that this is the case. In fact, the perception of asymmetry of benefit has been reinforced in the post-Agreement period.

These overall perceptions of an imbalance of benefits from the Agreement are reinforced by perceptions of the implementation of parts of the Agreement. Attitudes to police reform, for example, display a distinct sectarian differential. There is little sense of shared advantage on this issue (see Table 1).

elements of the Agreement is repeated throughout the survey, with Protestant respondents consistently showing a higher level of dissatisfaction than that shown by their Catholic counterparts. On the question of the achievements of the devolved Assembly, while majorities in both communities felt that the Assembly had achieved either a lot or a little, Protestant political negativity outstripped that of Catholics (see Table 2). Thirty nine percent of Protestants believed that the Assembly had achieved 'nothing at all' when asked in 2003, as against 24% of Catholics sharing this perception. That 54%

British and Irish governments' hopes for an equivalence of gains between Northern Ireland's two main communities. The extent of Protestant-unionist disaffection with the Agreement and its consequences jeopardises the legitimacy of the peace accord. The strategy of 'quid pro quo peacemaking' or balancing inter-communal gains and losses was always going to be difficult, not least because Catholic-nationalists and Protestant-unionists had very different grievances and aspirations. As a result, Catholic-nationalist and Protestant-unionist gains and concessions stemming from the Belfast Agreement were often of a very different order. While 'Protestant-unionist concessions' such as police reform, early prisoner releases and the inclusion of Sinn Féin in government were highly visible, 'Catholic-nationalist concessions' were often academic: the republican acceptance of the state of Northern Ireland (a political entity that was in existence anyway) and the amendment of the Irish constitution's unrealised claim to Irish unity. In a sense, the British and Irish government's reciprocal concessions method of peacemaking encouraged the local parties to strike a bargain in which each side uses its own currency without agreed-upon exchange rates. Moreover, and as in the financial world, the exchange rates didn't stay the same, with Protestant-unionist disenchantment deepening in the post-Agreement period.

Table 1: Do you think that the reform of the police in Northern Ireland has gone too far, has not gone far enough, or is about right?

	%			
	2001		2003	
	Catholic	Protestant	Catholic	Protestant
Too far	3	59	4	58
Not gone far enough	44	4	42	7
About right	38	27	37	23
Other	1	1	1	0
Don't know	15	11	17	11

In 2001 and 2003, almost 60% of Protestant respondents believed that police reform had gone too far, yet only a tiny proportion of Catholics (3-4%) shared this view. Similarly, while 44% of Catholics believed that police reform had not gone far enough in 2001, only 4% of Protestants thought likewise. Minorities in both communities (37% of Catholics and 23% of Protestants in 2003) judged police reform to be 'about right'.

This sectarian differential in terms of the reception of the implementation of

of Protestant respondents believed that the devolved Assembly had achieved either a lot or a little is no small achievement given the depth of political disenchantment recorded elsewhere in the survey and as reflected in post-Agreement unionist political discourse. It also cautions against over-homogenised views of unionism as being necessarily negatively disposed to all political issues.

The picture thus far is of a sectarian imbalance in the reception of the Belfast Agreement and a strong rebuttal of the

## The Agreement: implement, renegotiate or scrap?

Responses to one survey question were particularly revealing in illustrating the inter-communal chasm in terms of reception of the Agreement. Respondents were asked to judge if the Agreement was *basically right* but either needed to be implemented in full or the specifics renegotiated, or to judge if the Agreement was *basically wrong* and either needed to be renegotiated or abandoned (see Table 3). Until the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) electoral triumph in November 2003, the position of both governments was that the Agreement was basically right but that it needed implementation. In an attempt to engage with the ascendant DUP,

Table 2: Overall, do you think that the Northern Ireland Assembly achieved...?<sup>4</sup>

	%			
	2002		2003	
	Catholic	Protestant	Catholic	Protestant
A lot	36	17	21	6
A little	50	53	47	48
Nothing at all	10	25	24	39
Don't know	5	5	7	7

the governments seem to be open to the idea of re-examining parts of the Agreement but they have identified 'fundamentals' that they regard as non-negotiable. But what do people in Northern Ireland think?

The vast majority of Catholics (77%) agreed that the Agreement was basically sound and they were fairly evenly split as to whether it just required full implementation (41%) or a renegotiation of the specifics (36%). Protestant responses reveal a community genuinely split on the merits and potential of the Agreement. A total of 43% of Protestant survey respondents felt that the Agreement is basically right (but requiring either implementation or renegotiation of its specific provisions), and 41% believed that the Agreement is wrong (requiring either full renegotiation or abandonment). Only 10% of Protestant respondents believed that the basic problem lay in the failure to implement fully the Agreement. In other words, Protestant disaffection with the Agreement extends far beyond the failure of republicans to decommission (the major implementation sticking point for many unionists) and a resolution of this single issue is unlikely to revolutionise Protestant attitudes towards the Agreement.

The 43% of Protestants who believed that the Agreement is basically wrong present the co-guarantors of the Agreement - the British and Irish governments - with a significant problem since both governments are agreed on the 'fundamentals' of any accord for Northern Ireland. These fundamentals include an end to paramilitary violence, the principle of consent, interlocking institutions and power sharing. Another 'fundamental', certainly for the Irish government and

Northern Ireland's nationalists, is the continued involvement of the government of the Republic of Ireland in managing Northern Ireland's problems. The survey shows, however, that a majority of Protestants (62%) believed that the Irish government should not be involved in Northern Ireland at all, despite the institutionalisation of this role from the 1986 Anglo-Irish Agreement; a response which is bound to disappoint Dublin policy-makers.

The survey does however bring some encouraging news in relation to public attitudes on power sharing. Although partnership government in Northern Ireland has proved unsustainable in practice, mainly due to chronic distrust between nationalists and unionists, the principle of power sharing finds support in the main both communities. In 2003, 92% of Catholics and 78% of Protestants either agreed or strongly agreed that any Northern Ireland government should ensure that Catholics and Protestants

share power. While Protestant respondents were somewhat more reticent than their Catholic counterparts, only 8% disagreed with the principle of power sharing. So public support for one of the fundamental foundation stones of the peace process remains strong. The survey shows that both the main communities in Northern Ireland have internalised that the fundamentally bi-ethnic character of Northern Ireland and that any governing dispensation must represent both communities. Given Northern Ireland's past in which two ethno-sectarian groups have competed to exclude the other, that's quite an achievement.

## Conclusion

Clearly the hoped-for symmetry of benefit arising from the Belfast Agreement has not materialised. The Agreement suffers from severe legitimacy problems among Protestant-unionists yet satisfies many Catholic-nationalists. It is difficult to see how an equivalence of gains and concessions can be calculated given the differing aspirations and grievances of the two main politico-sectarian blocs. Yet if there is little agreement on common advantage from the Agreement, there is cross-community support for common destiny, in the form of a recognition that Northern Ireland's future lies in power sharing. So perhaps the strategy pursued by the governments (to maintain the fundamentals of the Agreement but to get tougher on ceasefire breaches) is the correct one.

Table 3: Views on the Agreement: Which statement is closest to your own view?

	%	
	Catholic	Protestant
The Agreement is basically right and just needs to be implemented in full	41	10
The Agreement is basically right but the specifics need to be renegotiated	36	33
The Agreement is basically wrong and should be renegotiated	4	24
The Agreement is basically wrong and should be abandoned	2	17
Don't know	17	16

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> F. de Callières, *On the manner of negotiating among princes*, South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963, p. 110, cited in I.W. Zartman, 'Toward the resolution of international conflicts', in I.W. Zartman and J.L. Rasmussen, *Peacemaking in International Conflict: methods and techniques*, Washington, D.C.: USIP Press, 1997, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> See the speech by the Prime Minister Tony Blair at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Show, 16 May 1997 for the attention given to reassuring both nationalists and unionists <[www.nio.gov.uk](http://www.nio.gov.uk)>.

<sup>3</sup> Speech made by Prime Minister Tony Blair at Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast, 10 April 1998 following the conclusion of the multi-party talks <[www.nio.gov.uk](http://www.nio.gov.uk)>.

<sup>4</sup> In 2002 the question read, 'Overall, do you think that the Northern Ireland Assembly has achieved...?' In 2003, to reflect the long-term collapse of the Assembly, the question read, 'Overall, do you think the last Northern Ireland Assembly achieved...?'

## Key Points

- In 1998, 41% of Protestants believed that the Agreement had benefited nationalists and unionists equally, but by 2001 this had dropped to 19% and there has been no recovery over the last two years.
- In 2003, 58% of Protestants thought that police reform had gone too far, in contrast with 42% of Catholics who thought it had not gone far enough.
- 54% of Protestants and 68% of Catholics believed that the Assembly had achieved 'a lot' or 'a little'.
- 43% of Protestants believed that the Agreement was basically right but required either implementation or renegotiation of the specifics.
- 41% of Protestants believed that the Agreement was basically wrong, requiring either full renegotiation or abandonment.
- 62% of Protestants believed that the Irish government should not be involved in Northern Ireland at all.
- 78% of Protestants and 92% of Catholics endorsed power sharing.

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The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2003, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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