

Opportunities for Transatlantic Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland

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Overview

In the spring of 2023, the international community gathered together to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, a diplomatic triumph that resolved decades of conflict in Northern Ireland. The agreement put an end to significant sectarian violence by establishing a power-sharing system, and installing a commitment to political and social equality for all of the region's inhabitants. However, Brexit and recent political events have significantly threatened the political stability established by the Good Friday Agreement, and have caused substantial socio-economic friction in the region. This friction has alarmed political leaders in Northern Ireland, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and in the region's strongest partner, the United States.

As evidenced by President Biden's trip to the island of Ireland in early April 2023 and the appointment of Joe Kennedy, III as Special Envoy, the U.S. remains as committed as ever to Northern Ireland's peace and stability. The recent 25th anniversary celebratory events with its significant American participation serves as a reminder of the special relationship that the U.S. has with Northern Ireland and its people. As a New York based non-governmental organization, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) upholds this commitment, and has been focused on peacebuilding initiatives in Northern Ireland since 2020. In March of this year, the organization held its own commemorative event, including a daylong conference titled *Looking Back and Moving Forward: Celebrating 25 Years of the Good Friday Agreement*, which recognized the monumental peace deal while creating a platform for political leaders and grassroots community members to share their concerns for the region.

In light of the momentum following these Good Friday Agreement anniversary events, the organization visited Northern Ireland in April 2023 to meet with political leaders and grassroots peacebuilding organizations and hear about their concerns in the post-Brexit political landscape. The following report lays out its findings, as well as policy recommendations for the U.S.-Ireland-U.K. relationship.

Disparate Communities, Shared Grievances

For a decision rooted in separation and withdrawal, Brexit can ironically be seen as a unifier in Northern Ireland; its disruption to the region's political and economic institutions caused significant challenges to nearly every community, disregarding traditional sectarian divisions. The suspension of Stormont has affected the operation of governmental institutions and social service organizations, causing the people of Northern Ireland to feel the political vacuum in nearly every aspect of life. During its visit, the NCAFP asked a range of community representatives and grassroots leaders to highlight the most pressing issues

they currently face in their professional and personal lives. Though these voices reflect different political, religious, and geographical identities, they overwhelmingly shared the same concerns.

First, feelings of political disenfranchisement and *left-behindism* are at an all-time high. The majority of participants emphasized that the people of Northern Ireland feel abandoned by the political system, and that opportunities for economic growth and advancement appear out of reach. The precarious combination of political frustration and economic immobility in a region like Northern Ireland has had implications on civic society, and a conflict once seen through the lens of flags and identity is now one defined along economic lines. This increasing *left-behindism* has caused a brain drain across the region, with many from the middle class seeking opportunities, from education to careers, outside of the country. Emigration, however, is an act only for those with the financial flexibility while many in the working class do not have the same privilege. Paramilitary groups and dissident groups have taken advantage of a trapped working class, using economic and political disenfranchisement to garner support in place of traditionally sectarian divisions. Most of the participants connected the growing drug trade in Northern Ireland to paramilitary groups, who use the trafficking of narcotics as a remedy to disenfranchised communities with limited economic mobility. By providing temporary financial relief, paramilitaries and other dissident groups are able to garner greater support in communities otherwise left behind in the current political vacuum.

Second, representatives of every grassroots organization spoke of institutional financial insecurity as a result of budget cuts and interrupted access to the EU's European Social Fund as a result of Brexit. These budget cuts have caused organizations to reduce their staff as well as decrease programming, services, and initiatives that are vital to financially marginalized communities. The surveyed organizations work across the sectarian divide, providing a range of programs including career development, mental health support, and cross-community cultural activities. Many of these organizations provide crucial support to families and communities in need. Limited programming may likely lead to increased levels of isolation, untreated mental health issues, and diminished economic opportunity. One community organizer noted that these budget cuts could bring about social instability, which given Northern Ireland's history, will likely affect the tourism industry and foreign investment.

Third, until a comprehensive transitional justice process is fully implemented, Northern Ireland will continue to suffer from the trauma of the conflict. Though the Good Friday Agreement ended the violence of the conflict, it lacked a transitional justice process that is often instituted in other post-conflict societies around the globe. This lack of total peace has left communities susceptible to resurgent paramilitary and dissident activity and control, and diminished hope that victims of the conflict will find justice for crimes committed during the Troubles. Multiple participants stressed the far reaching role that these groups continue to play in everyday life, from enforcing housing segregation to waging intimidation campaigns against politically diverse viewpoints. Transitional justice seems even more out of reach with the United Kingdom's recent Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, a piece of legislation that many see as an impediment to human rights and victims' rights. The overwhelming consensus among participants is that the passing of such a bill will further entrench divisions in a society that has not yet healed from the conflict that ended 25 years ago.

Fourth, the lack of integrated education in Northern Ireland has significant economic and social ramifications. It has been more than two decades since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, yet 92%¹ of school children study in institutions that are divided along sectarian lines. Segregated education is immensely costly to Northern Ireland, creating a trend where numerous divided schools in the same district compete for limited funding despite the financial security that comes with a larger, unified system. Maintaining a divided education system costs Northern Ireland £226 million² each year, a significant amount for a region that struggles with immense budget challenges. The more difficult number to quantify is this system's cost on society; children are often separated at the age of four, setting a precedent for a lifetime of division where meaningful cross-community interaction is unfeasible. Northern Ireland's youth are frequently denied opportunities to learn their neighbor's language or athletic traditions, a significant loss for cultural immersion for both students and greater society.

Finally, the traditional orange-green binary is an outdated division that leads to exclusionary systems. The issues bringing voters to the polls are less along Unionist and Republican lines, and instead on bread and butter concerns that affect the entirety of Northern Ireland's population, regardless of political identity. For many middle class voters, inflation, disruptions in health services care, and housing costs are the central issues, along with frustration over limited social services as a result of Stormont's suspension. The people of Northern Ireland are led to the polls by a desire to see a fully functional government and the restoration of its institutions, rather than the political divisions that once mobilized previous generations. Additionally, due to a steady increase of immigration, Northern Ireland is demographically changing, and many of these new arrivals participate in the political arena without the historical bipartisan baggage.

The Transatlantic Partnership

In nearly every conversation, participants highlighted the importance of U.S. engagement and interest in Northern Ireland given local growing disillusionment with the Good Friday Agreement and increasing feelings of disenfranchisement within society. These sentiments were also expressed throughout the NCAFP's Good Friday Agreement anniversary conference held in March, when it gathered four out of the five party leaders in New York for daylong discussions on regional challenges and transatlantic solutions. As a nonpartisan organization, the NCAFP created a neutral environment which gave all the party leaders a platform to candidly express their concerns. The rich and fulfilling conversations held during the event serve as a reminder that the U.S. can facilitate dialogue on sensitive issues so long as participants feel they can have a dialogue and share grievances in a trusted, neutral space. The NCAFP believes that the U.S. must continue to act as a partner to the region, while simultaneously recognizing that the future of Northern Ireland is ultimately in the hands of its citizens.

¹ Ulster University, [The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland](#)

² Ulster University, [The Cost of Division in Northern Ireland](#)

Policy Recommendations

In order to achieve the strongest transatlantic partnership, the NCAFP has put forth the following policy recommendations:

The U.S. should push for a binational review of the Good Friday Agreement to ensure its full implementation.

The Good Friday Agreement has been largely successful in bringing peace to Northern Ireland, however, there are still some areas where it has not been fully implemented. Therefore, the NCAFP recommends a binational review, conducted by representatives from the British, Irish, and U.S. governments, as well as representatives from the political parties in Northern Ireland, to identify any areas where the agreement has not been fully implemented and to make recommendations for how to address these issues. A binational review of the Good Friday Agreement would be an important step in ensuring that the agreement is fully implemented and that the peace process in Northern Ireland continues to progress. The review would also be an opportunity to build on the positive momentum that has been achieved in the peace process and to ensure that the agreement remains a living document that can be adapted to meet the changing needs of Northern Ireland. We believe that a binational review of the Good Friday Agreement is the best way to ensure that the agreement is fully implemented and that the peace process in Northern Ireland continues to progress, and urge the British and Irish governments to take this important step.

Due to drastic budget constraints, the U.S. should advocate for supplemental funding for grassroots community organizations.

Investments in grassroots community work are crucial for Northern Ireland's most marginalized communities. The loss of funding could have devastating effects on the ground, with long-term consequences for greater political and social stability. The NCAFP strongly believes that the U.S. must advocate for these organizations, and press the U.K. government to replace the funding lost from the European Social Fund so that much needed social programs can continue. Furthermore, the U.S. can play a more direct role by helping community organizations access American financial investment to directly support grassroots work. Special Envoy Kennedy's appointment is an opportunity for U.S. investment to have lasting socio-economic impact for community organizers who have been the backbone of peacebuilding.

The U.S. must implore the U.K. government to reverse its Legacy and Reconciliation Bill.

Resilient diplomatic relationships depend on honesty and the ability to voice concerns. The U.S. should emphasize the detrimental effects of the Legacy and Reconciliation Bill, and strongly encourage the U.K. government to withdraw the legislation. The bill has been widely rejected by many communities, political leaders, and institutions in Northern Ireland across the Republican and Unionist political spectrum for its disregard of justice and victims' rights. There is an international implication to the bill, for the U.K. government's disregard of its own human rights and justice obligations sets a dangerous precedent for countries around the globe. The U.S.-U.K. partnership thrives because of its shared values, and the U.S. cannot let its friend and ally continue with such a counterproductive piece of legislation.

The U.S. should advocate for Northern Ireland to adopt an integrated education policy across the region.

The current costs of maintaining a divided education system are too high, and implementing integrated education across Northern Ireland would have significant financial and social benefits to society as a whole. Integrated education would allow for greater social cohesion, giving Northern Ireland's youth the opportunity to interact with one another from an early age. The U.S. must implore partners in the region to reevaluate their approach to educating the next generation, and ought to touch on its own legacy with segregation in education to bolster its emphasis. There is plenty of room in the classroom for a diverse religious traditions, languages, and histories, and a system that refutes such an idea pays a great price in the long-term.

The U.S. must be an equal partner for all of Northern Ireland's communities.

An effective partner is one that listens to every voice, and respects every political identity. The U.S. must build relationships with all of Northern Ireland's political communities and ensure that political engagement does not fall along party lines. Unionist voices tend to see the U.S. as a biased ally that does not engage nearly enough with its own parties and political leaders. There must be greater efforts made within the U.S. so that all of Northern Ireland's political voices feel heard, regardless of affiliation or ideology. The NCAFP recommends that the U.S. government and American organizations working in the region commit to amplifying voices across the green and orange spectrum, and ensuring that the concerns of every Northern Ireland citizen are heard and respected.

Moving Forward

For the past twenty-five years, the international community has been able to explore and appreciate Northern Ireland's natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and entrepreneurial spirit. The region once known for decades of conflict has transformed into a hub for tourism and foreign investment, becoming a leading example of the possibilities in a post-conflict society. Prosperity and peace rely on one another; for Northern Ireland to continue down the path of economic growth, its institutions and political leaders must create a society where every citizen feels welcome and that they have a place. Having been involved in Northern Ireland since 1994, the NCAFP feels optimistic that today's political challenges are only temporary obstacles in the long-term.

The NCAFP would like to thank the following organizations for supporting its work on Northern Ireland:

Mutual of America
The Reconciliation Fund
The Ireland Funds
Invest Northern Ireland
The Consulate General of Ireland in New York