

# The Agreed Truth & The Real Truth: The New Northern Ireland

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The 'historic' restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland, on 8 May 2007, has been hailed by the media as marking the symbolic end of the conflict there.<sup>1</sup> Like most aspects of the peace process, the opening of the Assembly was "carefully stage managed to present a positive and progressive image."<sup>2</sup> This is in line with news reports about the North being dominated by the 'success story' of the 'New Northern Ireland'. "There is an optimism and realism in Northern Ireland today that is dissolving ancient prejudices and boosting business confidence, the essential underpinning for growth and prosperity. Belfast and Londonderry have been transformed by peace: business parks are springing up in place of derelict shipyards, while restaurants and cafés cater to a more relaxed public culture, and the walls of Derry are attracting tourists who no longer have need to be nervous."<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland has been tipped by Lonely Planet as one of the must-see countries to visit in 2007. "There is no better time to see Northern Ireland than now. Freed from the spectre of the gun by cease-fires and political agreement; it's abuzz with life: the cities are pulsating, the economy is thriving and the people...are in good spirits." Belfast is also mentioned in another part of the book as one of the top ten "Cities on the Rise."<sup>4</sup> "Many UK cities have been regenerated in recent years but it is doubtful whether any have been transformed as dramatically as Belfast. Its image in the 1970s was of a city dominated by the threat of terrorism; its streets at best bleak and grey, and at worst reduced to rubble after another bomb attack. Today, however, Belfast is emerging as a shiny new metropolis of head-turning galleries, museums, restaurants, luxury hotels – and exciting new property developments."<sup>5</sup> The Belfast skyline is now dominated by schemes such as Lanyon Place, with its £20m Hilton Hotel; £35m BT Tower and £30m Fujitsu building; and the Odyssey Complex, a £91m entertainment, leisure and education centre; alongside such massive regeneration projects as Europe's largest commercial and residential waterfront development, the Titanic Quarter. The 'Troubles', as they were known, seem to be over. The IRA has destroyed all its arms. The UVF has stated its intention to go out of business. With a few exceptions, so-called 'paramilitary prisoners' have all been released on licence between 1998 and 2000, and HMP Maze is being demolished. The security landscape in Belfast, Derry and South Armagh has changed. By 1 August 2007, British troops will be reduced to 5,000 and the number of sites where they are stationed will be reduced from 64 to 14, while most watchtowers will be demolished, bringing the 35-year-old Operation Banner – the longest in British Army history – to an end. "The moves are part of the government's security normalisation plans."<sup>6</sup> But is Northern Ireland really "reaping the dividend of peace, stability and, it is to be hoped, impending prosperity" as the media is assuring us?<sup>7</sup> And if so is it going to last?

## Economic Performance

Impending prosperity is unlikely as the state of the economy is poor and unsustainable on all indicators. Northern Ireland has the lowest household incomes in the UK, with GDP per head of population almost 20% below the UK average. As to economic performance, the province scores 80 in terms of productivity for a

UK national average of 100.<sup>8</sup> The province is on life support from the British government: in a recent editorial, *The Economist* characterised the North as a "subsidy junkie" that receives every year from Westminster £5bn more than is raised locally in taxation.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the 720,000 at work, there are 530,000 'economically inactive' in the workforce (the term 'economically inactive' covers anyone neither employed nor receiving unemployment-related benefits, including the long-term sick and disabled, students, carers and the retired. In Northern Ireland, only 8% of the economically inactive claim to want work). The proportion of people of working age who are economically inactive is 26.9% – the highest percentage of the 12 UK regions, and well above the UK average of 21.2%, which makes a mockery of the 'historically low' unemployment figure of 4%.<sup>10</sup> About 36% of the workforce are employed in the public sector and the state is responsible for 68% of economic output – figures double that south of the border and substantially higher than the rest of the UK.<sup>11</sup> No wonder that we find Lord Trevor Smith of Clinton remarking that the North has "an economy more collectivized than Stalin's Russia, more corporatist than Mussolini's, and more quangoized than Wilson and Heath's United Kingdom governments."<sup>12</sup> The performance of private enterprise is dismal. More than 95% of the North's private sector is made of small businesses. 90% of companies employ fewer than ten people and only 0.5% have a workforce of more than 200. There are fewer than ten PLCs; the largest is the privatised electricity board. Entrepreneurial spirit is low. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of VAT-registered companies in the six counties rose by 10% while the south swelled by 76%.<sup>13</sup> The North has the second-lowest level of business start ups in the UK. Inward investment is negligible. A third of *Fortune 500* companies have a base in the south, but none have one in the North, and less than 800 of the 90,000 companies conducting business in the six counties are foreign owned.<sup>14</sup> The North's infrastructure is woeful. The two main cities are not even connected by a motorway and experts calculate that the province has a £14 billion infrastructure deficit.<sup>15</sup> With few quality jobs being created, the province still suffers from a brain drain. Nigel Smyth of the CBI in the North says that despite having some of the best A-level results in the UK, the province loses a third of its students every year to universities elsewhere with only a quarter of those returning. "We have not been able to create enough high quality jobs," he says. Graham Gudgin, who has acted as economic advisor to the Northern Ireland Assembly and to David Trimble, has pointed out that job creation in the North has predominantly been in the public sector and in low skilled private sectors such as retail, call centres and tourism.<sup>16</sup> On top of that, private sector wages are around 80% of the UK average, substantially lower than down south, and have been slipping further behind.<sup>17</sup> For all those reasons, we find Conservative writer Alan Ruddock concluding in a *Management Today* article that almost ten years after the Belfast Agreement, "the much-longed-for dividends of peace remain an elusive dream for the province."<sup>18</sup> As a recent *Belfast Telegraph* editorial puts it: "Peter Hain long ago observed that the Northern Ireland economy is unsustainable as presently constituted. We lag behind Britain in terms of economic activity, productivity and wealth. With public sector cutbacks taking effect, it has been

## Notes

- 1 Gerry Moriarty and Deaglán de Bréadún, 'Stormont ceremony marks end of Northern conflict', *Irish Times*, 8 May 2007
- 2 Colm Heatley, 'United Fronts as parties vie for success', *Sunday Business Post*, 6 May 2007
- 3 Editorial, 'Ulster moves forward', *The Times*, 5 October 2006. See also Editorial, 'A sign of rising confidence', *The Independent*, 3 February 2007
- 4 Lonely Planet Blue List: The Best in Travel 2007, pp.150-151
- 5 Ben West, 'Belfast's ship comes in', *The Observer*, 8 October 2006
- 6 'Troop withdrawal plan published', BBC 28 March 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4853472.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4853472.stm) Normalisation has been a British state strategy since the mid-1970s. Today is less a post-conflict situation than a successful normalisation. From a Republican perspective, this is hardly a gain. As an IRA leader concluded as early as 1975: "Suppose we get the release of all detainees, an amnesty and withdrawal of troops to barracks, we are still back where we started in 1969." Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, *The British State and the Ulster Crisis*, London: Verso, 1985, p.84
- 7 Editorial, 'A province on the move', *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 April 2007
- 8 Oliver Morgan, 'From bombs and bullets to boom towns', *The Observer*, 1 April 2007
- 9 Leader, 'Northern Ireland's Peace Settlement', *The Economist*, 29 March 2007
- 10 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for Northern Ireland, 'Monthly Labour Market Report, April 2007', <http://www.detini.gov.uk/cgi-bin/downdoc?id=2885>; John Murray Brown, 'Finance issues will face N Ireland', *Financial Times*, 26 March 2007; Editorial, 'Northern Ireland now needs to promote the private sector', *Financial Times*, 9 May 2007
- 11 Colm Heatley, 'Bread and butter on the North's doorsteps', *Sunday Business Post*, 4 March 2007
- 12 Lord Trevor Smith of Clifton, Hansard, 20 July 2004 c.152. Quoted in Jonathan Tonge, *Northern Ireland*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006 p.213.
- 13 Laura Noonan, 'Creating a strong economy is goal for our future leaders', *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 March 2007
- 14 Colm Heatley, op.cit.
- 15 John Murray Brown, op.cit.
- 16 Oliver Morgan op.cit.
- 17 Laura Noonan, op.cit.
- 18 Alan Ruddock, 'Northern Ireland - Where is the bright new future?', *Management Today*, 23 March 2006, <http://www.managementtoday.co.uk/article/542849/>
- 19 Editorial, 'Business tax cut is the key to prosperity', *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 March 2007
- 20 'Financial Future "could be bleak"', BBC 20 March 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/6469011.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6469011.stm)

estimated that a total of 140,000 new jobs will be needed in the next 10 years. Constrained as it is, the private sector is unable to provide the sort of economic boost which is required.<sup>19</sup> And with government plans to slow down public spending over the coming years, economists have warned that Northern Ireland's financial future could be even bleaker.<sup>20</sup>

## Property & Housing

Despite these structural problems, there are claims that Northern Ireland's business growth is booming and employment is rising at a record rate, according to research from the Ulster Bank. The bank found that business activity has gone up for 46 months in a row.<sup>21</sup> The reason for this apparent growth is construction and the housing market. The construction industry is now the driving force of the Northern Ireland economy, according to a report from the Ulster Bank.<sup>22</sup> Figures from the Nationwide Building Society show that average house prices rose by 58% in the last year, the fastest rate of growth seen in any region of the UK since the Nationwide started compiling figures in 1973. The average price of a house in the North is now £203,815, which compares with a UK average of £175,554. The North, which used to be one of the cheapest places to buy property is now the third most expensive region in the UK behind London and the south-east of England. Fionnuala Earley, Nationwide's chief economist said: "House prices have increased by 281% since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, compared to the UK average of 179%."<sup>23</sup> This is especially true of areas once synonymous with the conflict, which are now becoming property hotspots. For example, a property on Alliance Avenue in north Belfast – a street on which 14 people were murdered between 1971 and 1998 – went on the market for £285,000 in early March and sold for over £800,000. "Malone Road prices on a notorious North Belfast interface are a sure sign that the Troubles are over and peace is taking hold."<sup>24</sup> Spurred by property investment returns, the number of landlords in Northern Ireland has jumped as banks have offered rental property investment loans, or 'buy to let' mortgages. 48% of private landlords in Northern Ireland acquired their properties in the past five years, according to a 2005 Housing Executive study, and the number of homes they own has more than doubled since 1991.<sup>25</sup> A study by the University of Ulster revealed that the buy-to-let sector has grown by 120% over the past 15 years.<sup>26</sup> With the rise in house prices, homeowners have built up over £58bn in equities in their properties over the last ten years. The average homeowner has made £134,000 and many people have become millionaires.<sup>27</sup> This accounts for the growing numbers of new bars, cafes, restaurants, shops and car dealerships. But the property boom is unsustainable and leads young people and first-time buyers into debt and danger. According to Sir John Semple, who was appointed by the Government to look into the housing crisis: "The very sharp rise in house prices in Northern Ireland has created a new situation here. The market here has changed from a relatively stable one to one where house prices in some areas are ahead of the UK – in a province where earnings are 20% lower." He said the latest Council of Mortgage Lenders' figures show the number of first-time buyers has halved from 60% to 30%. First-time buyers are being outbid by investors – 70% of new homes are now bought by investors.<sup>28</sup> Rising interest rates and spiralling house prices have already left thousands of homeowners struggling to make repayments with the number of home repossessions hitting record highs last year. Almost 3,000 people were served with writs for unpaid mortgages in 2006. Since 2003 the number of homeowners forcibly evicted from their property has more than doubled. Meanwhile nearly 10,000 of the 127,000 housing debt problems brought to Citizens Advice Bureaus last year concerned threatened repossession, while 2,000 related to

actual repossession.<sup>29</sup> The negative effects of the housing boom reinforce research that proves that Northern Ireland "is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world."<sup>30</sup> If people further up the social ladder have done well out of the peace, the gap between rich and poor is even larger than in the rest of Britain.<sup>31</sup> The poorest members of society in Northern Ireland, both Catholics and Protestants, are worse off now than ten years ago.<sup>32</sup>

## Parity of Esteem & Identity Politics

One of the most visible signs of the 'new Northern Ireland' has been the radical change that has taken place within areas which suffered most from the conflict; Republican areas in particular. David McKittrick describes this transformation: "These days, the Jeeps on the Falls Road no longer contain helmeted British troops swivelling their rifles in the direction of potential IRA sniper hides: instead, as in any other major city, the 4x4s are driven by mothers ferrying children to school. Where once military surveillance installations were perched on top of flats, now modern apartment blocks with hefty price tags are going up everywhere. The massive army barracks, for decades a target of bombs and bullets, are gone. No longer do youngsters indulge in that west-Belfast sport of hijacking buses and setting them ablaze. An hour on the Falls, once one of Europe's most notorious districts, is enough to confirm it: the Troubles are over. Welcome to the new Belfast, and a transformed Northern Ireland. The middle classes are richer than ever. And this time, the Catholic community is benefiting strongly."<sup>33</sup> The last sentence is particularly significant. To a large extent, British counter-insurgency strategy, by creating a new Catholic middle class dependent upon public sector jobs and state subsidies for the 'community sector', has 'killed Republicanism with kindness'.<sup>34</sup> Rising house prices have also significantly contributed to the creation of a whole class of conservative property owners and small shopkeepers. There is currently an average of eight people bidding on each available property in Nationalist West Belfast. Houses that sold for £40,000 fifteen years ago are now going for over £200,000.<sup>35</sup> The *Andersonstown News*, a large-circulation community newspaper in the Sinn Féin heartland of west Belfast, originally the official voice of the Andersonstown Central Civil Resistance Committee, now celebrates the local entrepreneurial spirit and has an extensive property supplement. Such a shift reflects the transformation of material conditions in the Nationalist community. Relying on a revisionist account of the history of the last 30 years, where the IRA campaign becomes one for civil rights and equality rather than for traditional Republican objectives, apologists for the Provisional strategy, such as Laurence McKeown and Jim Gibney, argue that the peace process has made life better for Nationalists in the North, and that the struggle was successful to the extent that never again will Nationalists be second-class citizens, young people in particular.<sup>36</sup> It is significant that at a public meeting in January 2007, "the Sinn Féin president relied heavily on the post-ceasefire, feel-good factor for Nationalists. Things had changed, he said: it was wonderful to see young folk 'wearing their county ganzies, speaking an Gaelige'. Just because the previous generations had it rough, didn't mean their children and grandchildren had to."<sup>37</sup> It is undeniable that the educational, economic and cultural indices for the newly emergent Catholic population are rising. For example, in the early 1970s, 70% of QUB students were Protestants, whereas today some 60% of Queen's University undergraduates and 55% of University of Ulster undergraduates are Catholics.<sup>38</sup> The 1998 Belfast Agreement copperfastened partition, yet it also involved the advancing of Nationalist communal interest within the North itself. As Suzanne Breen points out: "There has been undeniable advancement



- 21 [http://www.ulsterbank.com/content/group/economy/ni\\_indicators/downloads/PMI/NI\\_UB\\_PMI\\_JAN\\_07.pdf](http://www.ulsterbank.com/content/group/economy/ni_indicators/downloads/PMI/NI_UB_PMI_JAN_07.pdf)
- 22 'Construction "driving NI economy"', BBC 16 April 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/6557975.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6557975.stm)
- 23 James Stinson, 'Average price now above £200,000', *The Irish News*, 5 April 2007
- 24 Bimpe Fatogun, 'Once bloody street now at centre of a property boom', *The Irish News*, 29 March 2007
- 25 Simon Packard, 'Northern Ireland Housing Market Booms as Era of Violence Ends', <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=206011102&sid=aUGS2r6YqqgQ&refer=uk>
- 26 University of Ulster News Release, 'Rental Sector Booms, But Vacancies Grow', 13th February 2007, <http://news.ulster.ac.uk/releases/2007/2992.html>
- 27 Yvette Shapiro, 'NI homeowners "paper millionaires"', BBC 13 February 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/6357637.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6357637.stm)
- 28 Helen Carson, 'Overhaul is only way to solve Ulster House crisis', *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 February 2007
- 29 Bimpe Fatogun, 'Price-boom hike fear over launch of 40-year mortgage', *The Irish News*, 28 March 2007
- 30 'Third of children "live in poverty"', BBC 13 October 2003, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/3185348.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3185348.stm); 'Report highlights NI poverty rate', BBC 4 May 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4972346.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4972346.stm)
- 31 Mary O Hara, 'False Dawn', *The Guardian*, 24 November 2004
- 32 'Poor "worse off now than in 1996"', BBC 14 September 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/5347392.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/5347392.stm)
- 33 David McKittrick, 'From the gun to the school run – the new Belfast', *Independent on Sunday*, 4 March 2007
- 34 Kevin Bean, *The New Politics of Sinn Féin 1985-2007*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007. This is an allusion to the British state's strategy to kill home rule with kindness by means of agrarian reforms at the turn of the century.
- 35 Roisin McManus, 'West house prices soar', *The Andersonstown News*, 08 February 2007
- 36 Jim Gibney, 'Spirit of '69 still hindered by obstacles', *The Irish News*, 21 July 2005
- 37 Suzanne Breen, 'Militant republicans shout surrender but unionists should say "well done Gerry"', *Sunday Tribune*, 28 January 2007
- 38 Tom McGurk, 'Power-sharing in North must not be stopped by minority', *The Sunday Business Post*, 25 February 2007
- 39 Suzanne Breen, "'I'll jail McGuinness any day soon", jokes Paisley', *Sunday Tribune*, 6 May 2007

in many areas for Catholics in the North, but within existing constitutional arrangements.<sup>39</sup> The Nationalist community may be dynamic, however “it should be noted that the celebration of a community spirit is not discouraged by the British government. It is part of the process of transforming political aspirations into cultural ones.”<sup>40</sup> It is in the shift towards identity politics that a collapse of political consciousness is most evident. Politics are now about the recognition of the Nationalist ‘identity’ and ensuring its ‘parity of esteem’ within the North.<sup>41</sup> With the principle of consent accepted and Republicanism defeated, Nationalists have concentrated their attention on culture, marches, flags and symbols. For example, Sinn Féin calls for equality at Stormont, no longer for its abolition: statues of Irish Republican icons should be placed at Stormont to make it more welcoming for Nationalists, the party has stated. Assemblyman Paul Butler said there needed to be Irish cultural symbols at the devolved parliament to help make the building more attractive to all sides of the community: “It is Sinn Féin’s view that where British cultural symbols are involved in public life, equivalent symbols should be given equal prominence. The display of the Union flag at Stormont and other emblems wholly associated with Unionism do not promote mutual respect for both traditions,” Mr Butler added.<sup>42</sup> “It’s because some Nationalists are uneasy at their own acceptance of Northern Ireland that they feel they have to make a show of rhetorical opposition to it. It is because, in practical terms, they have endorsed the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland State that they denounce symbolic representations of it all the more loudly. The campaign to obliterate Northern Ireland having halted, they turn to battle on who’ll rule the roost within it.”<sup>43</sup> This does not fit well with Republicanism, but chimes with the Provisionals’ Defenderist roots. Loyalism has also found new legitimacy thanks to the shift towards identity politics.<sup>44</sup> It is now a legitimate identity which needs ‘parity of esteem’ rather than a form of political supremacism that needs to be fought. Orange marches can now be rebranded as an aesthetics of percussion rather than sectarian intimidation. The twelfth of July is allegedly the largest carnival in Europe. Rebranded in the language of cultural studies, Loyalism has even proved to be very popular with ex-leftwing publishers in Britain like Pluto Press. Paradoxically, those who have been politically defeated think that they are winning, while those who have won are convinced that they are losing everything. Republicanism has been defeated but Nationalists are growing in confidence. The Belfast and St. Andrews Agreements have strengthened the Union, but levels of unemployment and social deprivation in Unionist working class areas are higher than any time since the Second World War, and figures for working-class Protestant involvement in third level education suggest that they are now lower than they have ever been.<sup>45</sup> Many feel treated worse now than the Catholic working-class, and if looking for somebody to hit out at, the only people below them are ethnic minorities. It is estimated that Loyalist death squads are behind 90% of hate crime.<sup>46</sup>

### Process of Peace & Partition

But is the current political set up likely to bring peace and stability? Central to the peace process is the idea that the conflict is one ‘internal’ to Northern Ireland the state should recognise and respect the ‘identities’ of the ‘two traditions’, and ensure parity of esteem between them; politics should be a sectarian balancing act to ensure that they are given equal worth. Sectarianism is supposed to be solved by a system that institutionalises it.<sup>47</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that research has shown that the North is more segregated, polarised and sectarian since the start of the ‘peace process’. A report issued in 2002 by the Royal Geographical Society found that

sectarian divisions have worsened since the peace process began in Northern Ireland.<sup>48</sup> Prompted in part by the Northern Ireland Office’s denials that sectarianism was on the increase, Dr Peter Shirlow of the University of Ulster interviewed 4,800 people in 12 Belfast estates, six Catholic and six Protestant. The results are damning. Believing the hype about the peace process many, mostly Catholics, moved house to areas not dominated by their own religious denomination. The Housing Executive report that 3,000 moved between 1994 and 1996 but sectarian intimidation forced a reverse movement of 6,000 in the following five years. Two-thirds of the population now live in areas which are either 90% Catholic or 90% Protestant. In predominantly Protestant areas companies have a Catholic workforce of only 5% while in Catholic areas only 8% of the workforce is Protestant. Only one in five people would take a job on the other side of the peace line. 62% in areas separated by a peace line think community relations have got worse. 68% of young people between the ages of 18 and 25 claim never to have had a meaningful conversation with someone from the other religious denomination, and 62% say they have been the victim of physical or verbal sectarian abuse since the 1994 IRA ceasefire. Of those surveyed, 88% said they would not enter an area dominated by the other denomination, even by car, and 58% would not use shopping or leisure facilities in areas controlled by the other religion, even if they were better. “Such attitudes are not a relic of the 20th century that will die as memories of the civil war fade, but a dynamic force,” argues Nick Cohen. “A bus ride through Belfast should convince doubters that the Good Friday Agreement created partition and called it peace.”<sup>49</sup> Another official report based on statistics from the PSNI, Housing Executive and other research shows that levels of low-level sectarian violence are higher than before the ceasefires.<sup>50</sup> An average of 1,378 people a year seek rehousing because of sectarian intimidation. About 500 people a year formally complain of religious discrimination at work. 19% of Catholic and 10% of Protestant workers say they experience sectarian graffiti, jokes, songs, ostracisation or threatened or actual violence. Up to 60% of complaints are not formally reported. There are 37 peace walls across the North; none have been removed since the ceasefires, while 18 new ones have actually been built. 42% of Protestants and 33% of Catholics prefer to live in unmixed religious areas, while 48% of young Catholics and 42% of Protestants want separate schools. The financial costs of segregation are high: public spending alone is £1.5bn more per year in the Province than in Wales because of the additional problems caused by sectarian conflict, such as duplication of services.<sup>51</sup> If sectarian attacks continue, many fear the Troubles may reignite. Peter Shirlow has predicted as much. “I don’t think we have the circumstances to take us back to conflict yet,” he says, “but in 20 to 30 years’ time, with constitutional uncertainty, the same pattern could emerge.”<sup>52</sup> This is why we find *The Independent* recently concluding that despite all the hype about the ‘historical’ deal between Adams and Paisley, there is ‘a structural problem’ with the peace process: “While our politicians have been patiently mending Northern Ireland’s ceiling, the foundations have been cracking even further. The classic liberal assumptions – that the sectarian divide would slowly close up with rising prosperity and on-going peace have turned out to be false. Things are getting worse.”<sup>53</sup>

### Journalists Against Journalism

If things are getting worse, why does the media keep hammering the message of ‘Northern Ireland reaping the dividend of peace, stability and, it is to be hoped, impending prosperity’? A major reason for this according to Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin) is that with the complicity of the

- 40 Mark Ryan, *War and Peace in Ireland*, London: Pluto Press, 1994, p.135
- 41 Bean passim. See also: Mark McGovern, ‘Irish republicans and the potential pitfalls of pluralism’, *Capital and Class*, 17(2), 133-162 and ‘The old days are over: Irish republicanism, the peace process and the concept of equality’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(3) pp.622-645.
- 42 ‘SF calls for equality at Stormont’, UTV 10 May 2007, <http://www.u.tv/newsroom/indepth.asp?pt=n&id=82142>
- 43 Eamonn McCann, ‘Rooting for England’, *Sunday Journal*, 11 September 2005
- 44 Cllr Mark Langhammer, ‘State Funded Sectarianism and Pandering to Paramilitarism’ <http://www.qub.ac.uk/csec/docs/Langhammer%20paper.pdf>
- 45 Note that despite all the reforms, Catholics still experience substantially higher unemployment and poverty rates than Protestants. While Catholics make up 48.1% of the total population of working age, they make up 55.7% of economically inactive population of working age. Equally, while Protestants make up 51.9% of the total working age population, they make up only 44.3% of those economically inactive population of working age. Based on NIHE figures, Catholics are spending on average almost one and a half times as long on the housing waiting list as Protestants. While the absolute numbers of those on the waiting list has increased for both communities, the increase for the Catholic community has been almost double that for the Protestant community. See: CAJ report ‘Equality in Northern Ireland: The Rhetoric and the Reality’ (September 2006). The ‘Indicators of Social Need for Northern Ireland’ published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (<http://www.research.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/publications.htm>) show as well that Catholics are still suffering considerable economic disadvantage. See also: Jim Smyth, ‘Towards Equality of Misery?’, *Fortnight*, November 2006
- 46 Henry McDonald, ‘Loyalists linked to 90% of race crime’, *The Observer*, 22 October 2006
- 47 Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, ‘Entrenching Sectarian Goals’, *Fortnight*, September 2006. The idea that the conflict in Ireland is between ‘two traditions’ and ‘ethno-national’ in nature, rather than about the British state’s denial of the right of the people of Ireland to self determination as a unit is currently the dominant paradigm in academia.
- 48 Paul Brown, ‘Peace but no love as Northern Ireland divide grows ever’, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2002. See also: Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City*, London: Pluto Press, 2006 and Sam Lister, ‘Divided by 57 peace lines: shocking extent of apartheid in Ulster’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 April 2007
- 49 Nick Cohen, ‘Stop this drift into educational apartheid’, *The Observer*, 13 May 2007
- 50 Neil Jarman, ‘No longer a problem? Sectarian Violence in Northern Ireland’, Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, August 2005. [http://www.community-relations.org.uk/document\\_uploads/OFMDFM\\_-\\_Sectarian\\_Violence.pdf](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/document_uploads/OFMDFM_-_Sectarian_Violence.pdf)
- 51 Ben Lowry, ‘Sectarian divisions are “costing Ulster billions”’, *Belfast*

media and through spin and choreography, peace has been bought by “perjury, fraud, corruption, cheating and lying.”<sup>54</sup> The 1998 Belfast Agreement was a prime example of what Chomsky would call the ‘manufacturing of consent’: promoting the idea that a ‘No’ vote was a vote for violence, while a ‘Yes’ was a vote for peace, while manipulating opinion polls and relegating dissenting voices to the margins; many of whom agreed with the peace but not with the process. *Information Strategy*, a British government document written by Tom Kelly, formerly of the BBC and Director of Communications at the Northern Ireland Office at the time of the Agreement, outlines the government’s strategy for getting the right result through a campaign of blatant media manipulation designed to flood Northern Ireland with positive stories about the peace deal.<sup>55</sup> The ‘Yes’ Campaign also called in the assistance of top advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, who designed their billboard campaign free of charge. Government spin has been reinforced by the reluctance of the media to ask critical questions. The media has been accused by award-winning journalist Ed Moloney of covering up the truth to protect the peace process and being reluctant to report events unhelpful to the peace process.<sup>56</sup> Reporters and editors sympathetic to New Sinn Féin strategy branded journalists who asked awkward questions (such as Ed Moloney or Suzanne Breen) ‘JAPPS – Journalists Against the Peace Process’. It would be more accurate to say that the peace process has in fact produced Journalists Against Journalism. More generally, former hunger striker Brendan Hughes is on solid ground when lamenting the fact that “the process has created a class of professional liars.”<sup>57</sup> At a recent conference, both

McAliskey and award-winning playwright Gary Mitchell (who was forced to leave Belfast with his extended family due to Loyalist hostility at his plays) expressed strong criticism of the media’s coverage of the peace process. In Mitchell’s view there is a ‘real truth’ and an ‘agreed truth’, and when the “agreed truth becomes accepted, the real truth becomes a lie.” The media is reporting the agreed truth and the real truth “doesn’t get a look in” he argued.<sup>58</sup> The agreed truth of the ‘New Northern Ireland’ has been actively promoted by the Blair administration in order that he might go down in history as the one who brought peace to Ireland rather than war to Iraq. The real truth, however, is that Blair is no Gladstone. “Some would suggest a more appropriate comparison would be with Lloyd George, who brokered the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 by telling lies to both sides and who left office in a scandal about the sale of peerages.”<sup>59</sup> And whether Blair has succeeded in bringing peace is open to question. Recent political agreements were in essence “a triumph of top-down politics, not bottom-up social change.” The majority of the population “certainly wanted peace, but they do not appear to have sought reconciliation.”<sup>60</sup> With people today being divided as ever, the evident conclusion is that Northern Ireland remains a fundamentally dysfunctional entity.

*Telegraph*, 4 May 2007

- 52 Olga Craig, ‘Are the Troubles really over for Northern Ireland?’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 October 2006
- 53 Johann Hari, ‘Blair may have finally seduced Paisley - but that still leaves an Ulster as divided as eve’, *The Independent*, 26 March 2007
- 54 Lorna Siggins, ‘Peace in NI bought by “fraud and lying”’, says McAliskey’, *Irish Times*, 30 April 2007
- 55 Full text of the document: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/nio26398.htm>
- 56 Ed Moloney, *The Peace Process and Journalism, in Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined II*, London: The British Council, 2006. Jim Gibney criticises the media for asking “questions which are negative, which instil pessimism and could undermine the public’s hopeful mood” such as whether Republicanism has been defeated. (Jim Gibney, ‘BBC journalists have responsibility to the public’, *Irish News*, 3 May 2007
- 57 Interview with Brendan Hughes, *Fourthwrite*, Issue 1, Spring 2000
- 58 Lorna Siggins, op.cit.
- 59 Stephen Collins, ‘Prospect of deal in North dominates US celebrations’, *The Irish Times*, 17 March 2007
- 60 Adrian Hamilton, ‘We can learn from Stormont. So why don’t we?’, *The Independent*, 10 May 2007