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# From Good Friday to Good Relations: sectarianism, racism and the Northern Ireland state

ROBBIE McVEIGH and BILL ROLSTON

*Abstract:* This article addresses the nature of contemporary racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland in the context of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and its outworking. It responds to the increasing dominance of the 'good relations' model for understanding and addressing race and sectarian division in Northern Ireland. It debunks the gathering support for the notion that Northern Ireland is somehow 'post-sectarian' – finding instead a state formation that hides its incapacity to address rising racism and sectarianism under the fig leaf of 'good relations'. It locates these key developments in the specific new formation of the statelet which has emerged from the GFA.

*Keywords:* Good Friday Agreement, IRA, Irish nationalism, Unionism, Sinn Féin

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## Introduction

To first appearances all seems to be changed utterly in the North of Ireland. Since Secretary of State Peter Brooke stated on 9 November 1990 that Britain had no 'strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland and would accept unification of Ireland if that were the wish of the people of Northern Ireland,<sup>1</sup> the British government, especially under Tony Blair, has presented itself as the dispassionate arbiter of the ancient squabble between Ireland's two tribes. There has also been a major change in the approach of Irish nationalism in the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. The traditionalist sentiments of former Taoiseach Charles Haughey<sup>2</sup> are a long way from the current role of Taoiseach Bertie Ahern alongside the British government working to establish a power-sharing devolved government in the North. In addition, signing up to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998 led to the Republic abandoning its claim to the whole island of Ireland by dropping Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution.

Most interesting/confusing of all is that the peace process that brought these changes about also led to cataclysmic changes in republicanism. Sinn Féin, supported by the IRA, which has been traditionally implacably opposed to British involvement in Ireland and to the 'Northern Ireland statelet', signed up to the GFA. Admittedly, the belief that this is only an interim measure, pending the demise of the state if and when a majority desired (as agreed in the GFA), undoubtedly made that decision possible. Yet few could have foreseen in 1998 that by 2005 the IRA would state: 'The leadership of Óglaigh na hÉireann has formally ordered an end to the armed campaign. All IRA units have been ordered to dump arms. All volunteers have been instructed to assist the development of purely political and democratic programmes through exclusively peaceful means.'<sup>3</sup>

Such events are a radical challenge to those who seek to analyse the nature of the Northern Ireland state. Traditionally, nationalists have seen the state as unnatural, imposed on the Irish people by British imperialism underwriting the British/unionist minority on the island, and inevitably destined to discriminate against the large nationalist minority trapped within the boundaries of a state to which they did not choose to belong. Unionists, on the other hand, have represented the partition of Ireland as an inevitable consequence of two distinct peoples on the island of Ireland with fundamentally incompatible political identities and aspirations. Repression was needed against the nationalist minority only because of their recalcitrance and disloyalty, represented most obviously in the periodic armed rebellions of the IRA, aided and abetted by the logistical and ideological support of the state on the other side of the Irish border.

There is a similar challenge in relation to the characterisation of sectarianism. The Northern Ireland state was established as a sectarian entity and preserved through sectarian policies and institutions. The civil rights campaign of the late 1960s was a popular challenge to that sectarianism. But, as one reading of the history has it, the intervention of the British state from 1969 onwards was the beginning of the death knell for the sectarian state. The British succeeded in reforming the worst aspects of institutionalised sectarianism, not least in relation to employment practices. That they did not progress further, it could be argued, was not just because of unionist resistance to reform but the major diversionary task of combating republican terrorism. In this reading, the GFA represents the final chapter of that reform programme begun over three decades earlier. The sectarian state is now in terminal mode. Even the upsurge of sectarianism in everyday practice and attitudes since the GFA does not undermine the optimism of this conclusion; this is just a final kick of a dying phenomenon.

A more complex explanation of sectarianism is possible, one which views it as integral to both the process of British colonialism in Ireland and the existence of the state in Northern Ireland. This approach begins with the premise that the state's role in the reproduction of sectarianism has mutated a number of times in history, before and during the existence of the Northern Ireland state. The ultimate purpose of this article is to examine how this mutation has occurred to accommodate the fact that the post-GFA state is currently emerging from an accentuated reform mode. It seeks to discover whether sectarianism is indeed in terminal mode or has merely been reconstituted to fit the new times.

### **Sectarianism is a racism**

But first it is necessary to attempt to overcome the under-theorisation of sectarianism<sup>4</sup> by naming it as what it in fact is, a form of racism. Sectarianism is rooted firmly in the process of British imperialism in Ireland. The British conquest of Ireland led to a specific power structure linked to the imperial project. This was evident in the dispossession of land, the subordination of Irish administration, laws preventing economic development, and so on. All of this was justified and advanced by a racial ideology that suppressed the indigenous population on account of their supposed moral, intellectual and other failings.

The main signifier of the racialisation of the Irish was that of religion: the native Irish were Catholic and the colonisers Protestant. This has served to muddy the waters of analysis, leading many commentators to see the Irish case as unique and ensuring that it not be characterised as a case of racism. But the distinctiveness on which

this denial rests is dubious. The interplay of race and religion was a defining feature of every colonial interface. From Australia through Africa to the Americas, British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and other colonialisms made sense of colonised peoples through the prism of their own religious beliefs. There were of course differences. Spanish and Portuguese colonialism required religious conversion as a gateway to acceptance as a subject, while the French notion of egalitarianism was so central that one became a citizen through the act of subjugation, religious conversion or not. So, the most which can be said about the Irish situation in terms of difference was that religion, rather than some other feature, became the *dominant* signifier.

Part of the reluctance to name the exclusion of the Irish as racism rests on the belief, itself fundamentally racist, that the Irish could not have been racialised because they are not black. Admittedly, there is a marked difference between the colonisation of (white) Ireland by (white) Britain and that of, say, (black) Congo by (white) Belgium. However, we know enough about racism now to realise that it is not a natural outcome of skin colour differences, but a social process that selects skin colour or some other real, exaggerated or imaginary characteristic as the mark of difference. As a racial indicator, religion in Ireland acquired the rigidity which skin colour has had elsewhere. Catholics were deemed to be inherently lesser – lazy, unintelligent, violent and rebellious – while the coloniser bore none of these characteristics. Because these assumed traits were ultimately racial, they could not be changed by the apparently simple act of conversion: Catholicism was not just a belief system or even a way of life, but an ontological condition. The native Irish could no more change their nature than Africans their skin colour.

Naming sectarianism a racism has not been common in recent analysis of the Irish conflict. Early race relations theorist Robert Moore insisted that ‘the Northern Ireland conflict is truly race conflict’,<sup>5</sup> and, for *Race & Class*, conflict in the north of Ireland has consistently been understood within the paradigm of Black and Third World liberation struggles. But, while anti-Irish racism is generally accepted as a by-product of British imperialism in Ireland, relationships between Protestants and Catholics are generally regarded as sitting somewhere else, as ‘different’. That difference is because of religion.

Yet the analysis should not be that difficult. Anti-Semitism is firmly rooted in the religious (and other) identity of its victims and yet is easily accepted as a racism. More recently, the rise of Islamophobia has been easily recognised as a racism albeit defined in terms of religion. In fact, sectarianism in Ireland now looks *more* like other contemporary racisms than ever. In truth, the religious element in sectarianism in Ireland is much *less* definitive than in much anti-Muslim activity, for

example. Thus, what we are proposing is nothing more or less than an extension of such an analysis to include sectarianism as a specific form of racism, one which characterises social relations between Protestants and Catholics in, or with some relationship to, the interface between Irishness and Britishness. There is no longer any point or function in regarding sectarianism as somehow different from racism.

One possible retort is that, from the position of people of colour in Northern Ireland – already vulnerable and under attack – there is logic to avoiding the collapsing of the terms racism and sectarianism. Arguably, this prevents them being dragged into a continuing conflict between two predominantly white groups, both capable of racism against people of colour. This reason, however, is largely redundant given the loyalist assault on black people in Northern Ireland over recent years. The fact that the loyalist paramilitaries responsible for so much sectarian violence have been central to new forms of racist violence demolishes the notion that black people can be shielded from the dynamics of sectarianism.<sup>6</sup> In practical terms, it is no longer possible to separate racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland even if it were tactically sensible to do this.

Moreover, acknowledging sectarianism as a racism frees us to apply insight from the analysis of racism elsewhere to an understanding of the north of Ireland. Foremost among such wisdom are the following two generalisations; first, not only is the state not above racism, but the survival and replication of racism in its most fundamental and structural sense is entirely dependent on the state; second, the state's role in the reproduction of racism is neither constant nor fixed, but mutates to suit wider geopolitical and economic developments. Specifically, the general question of the extent to which the racist state can be anti-racist has particular relevance in relation to the reformism of the Northern Ireland state in the aftermath of the GFA.

### **The Northern Ireland state: the consolidation of sectarianism**

It is impossible to understand the post-GFA state without some understanding of the origins of the state itself. It is by now axiomatic that the decision to draw the border between the two states of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State in 1921 was based solely on the unionists' concern to guarantee 'the largest possible area within which the Protestants could expect to maintain a safe majority'.<sup>7</sup> Ronald McNeill, a leading unionist, put it clearly at the time:

[T]he inexorable index of statistics demonstrated that, although unionists were a majority when geographical Ulster was considered as a unit, yet the distribution of population made it certain that a separate parliament for the whole province would have a precarious

existence, while its administration of purely nationalist districts would mean unending conflict'.<sup>8</sup>

The establishment of the state was thus the first and overarching sectarian act from which the other sectarian institutions, relations and practices flowed. The state formation itself was gerrymandered – and this is the state formation that obtains in the post-GFA era. Two consequences followed: first, partition ensured that the 'administration of purely nationalist districts' would produce unending suffering for nationalists trapped in the new state. Thus, gerrymandering was necessary to ensure unionist electoral majorities. The emigration of nationalists was also an essential tactic in ensuring a continuing unionist majority. And of course naked repression – whether in terms of a police force which was in effect an armed militia for the unionist government, or 'emergency' laws which were in fact permanent (a powerful signifier of the potential precariousness of the state) – was never far from the nationalist experience.

Secondly, sectarianism was rewarded in many ways, large and small, in the sectarian state. Firms which practised unfair employment practices flourished. Orange marches could dominate the streets of towns and cities while nationalist cultural or political expression was confined to private spaces or exercised furtively. Even newly arrived institutions such as the BBC were quickly sectarianised and 'unionised'.<sup>9</sup>

It bears emphasis that this new state formation was a uniquely different entity from what went before. The Six Counties wasn't just the bit of the British state in Ireland that continued as before while the rest disappeared off into the Free State. The whole reconfiguration of the legitimacy of the state involved a radical reworking of class and political forces – with disastrously negative consequences for Catholics and nationalists who shifted overnight from being part of a growing and confident Irish majority to a disempowered and brutally repressed minority.

In short, the racial inclusion/exclusion dynamic was radically reworked. Arguably from Catholic Emancipation (1839) onwards, the imperial state had accepted the possibility and even the desirability of the use/co-option of Irish Catholics by the state in Ireland. Catholic recruitment to the British army and Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) are classic examples. In 1881, when the Irish constituted 15 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom, 21 per cent of the British army throughout the Empire was Irish.<sup>10</sup> In a century, Irish Catholics had clearly come a long way from a time when seventeenth century Penal Laws forbade their carrying weapons, to the point where they were armed and disproportionately involved in running someone else's empire.

With the formation of the Northern Ireland state, the trend towards

Catholic incorporation was reversed with apartheid-like totality. The state reappeared in hyper-sectarian forms. One sign of this was the famous two-thirds Protestant, one-third Catholic quotient for the newly formed police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). This is usually read as a kind of pre-echo of the system put in place after the GFA as a result of the Patten Report, positive discrimination for Catholics that was never delivered because of IRA perfidy. In reality, it was designed to sectarianise policing in a completely new way and prevent members of the overwhelmingly Catholic RIC dominating the new force.

In other words, despite continuities in colonial relations, there is a stark break between the situation in Ireland before and after the establishment of the Northern Ireland state. The newly formed state lent a new and radically different specificity to sectarianism. After 1920 the Northern Ireland state formation became the key defining structural context. Similar state formations emerged in South Africa and Israel in the twentieth century; there, two forms of exclusive *herrenvolk* 'democracy' created new, more brutal, settler-colonial state regimes, dependent on but also relatively autonomous of British and US imperialisms. The 'state' – as much as broader phenomena like colonialism or imperialism – became the defining element of racism.

In the case of Northern Ireland, therefore, we see a continuity in relation to sectarianism that is attributable to the nature of the state itself rather than the politics it contains. This was maintained through massive changes in the methodologies employed by the British state both to maintain and contain Northern Ireland: through fifty years of hyper-sectarian unionist hegemony at Stormont (1920–72) and twenty-five years of reformist 'direct rule' from Westminster (1972–1997). More importantly in terms of our present discussion, it obtains in the post-GFA 'reformed' Northern Ireland.

### **The Good Friday Agreement as the 'end of history'**

This reading of the *continuity* of the Northern Ireland state pre- and post-GFA sits uneasily with the optimism that accompanied the Agreement. For pro-Agreement unionists and anti-Agreement republicans, the GFA was a final stabilisation of the state; for anti-Agreement unionists and pro-Agreement republicans it was a stepping-stone to dismantling the state and reunification. The GFA was sold to both constituencies on the basis of 'constructive ambiguity'. The substance behind the spin is elusive and requires careful scrutiny and unpacking.

There are opposing views specifically on Sinn Féin's involvement in developments. For dissident republicans, Sinn Féin has sold out and is now administering British rule in the occupied part of Ireland. For Sinn Féin itself, the GFA allows it the space to advance its goal of a unified

Ireland; committed to the long view, it sees it as a stepping-stone to later advances. Whichever view one takes, there is one clear conclusion: for the British state, republicanism is no longer the problem.

Consequently, we have a range of developments in the post-Agreement statelet that were unthinkable under direct rule. A whole new cast of Catholic-nationalist-republican actors has been brought into the machinery of the state – not just Sinn Féin (briefly) in government.<sup>11</sup> Permanent secretaries of Stormont departments, the police ombudsman, the vice-chair of the Policing Board – where unionism formerly could not tolerate a Catholic about the place, clearly now they are getting in everywhere. Nor are these people token nationalists in otherwise unionist institutions. People like Denis Bradley, former vice-chair of the Policing Board, and Father Alex Reid, a key link person in the peace process (as indeed he was during the republican hunger strike of 1980), have been centrally involved in political developments, with the blessing of the British state. Bradley is called on almost daily by the media and others to pontificate on a wide range of issues far beyond his role in the Policing Board, while Reid was one of two independent witnesses called on to attest to the world that the IRA had disposed of its weapons in September 2005. How bizarre it would have been thirty years ago to imagine that a Catholic priest would be seen as the appropriate person to sell republican decommissioning to a *Protestant and unionist* audience!

Where the direct-rule state was reformist, albeit rooted in a counter-insurgency rationale, the post-GFA state is post-reformist. Where the direct-rule state sought to manage republican resistance, the post-GFA state is in itself seen as the solution to republican resistance. It is Northern Ireland's own version of the end of history. Now the key project for the state is to sell that solution to unionists and Protestants. This is to be done in a number of ways: suppressing republican and nationalist enthusiasm for change, blunting the harder edges of the human rights and equality agendas so as to soften the blow for unionists, and enticing unionists and loyalists through special funding initiatives.

If the unionist state was hyper-sectarian and the direct-rule state reformist, the post-GFA state is now post-reformist. New Labour 'hit the ground running' no less surely in Northern Ireland than it did in Britain. And for a brief *and transitional* moment it intensified the reformist interventions of direct rule. It reactivated a peace process that had ground to a halt under John Major. And even before the GFA, it set about the reform of a range of institutions, from policing to human rights and criminal justice. Within a short time, it became clear that the British state believed that it had matters under control; many of the old grievances of the past – such as employment discrimination – were presented as solved. 'The imbalance between Protestant

and Roman Catholic participation in the overall workforce, which was evident in the early nineties, has largely disappeared', announced Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, at the launch of the Commission's fifteenth annual monitoring report in December 2005.<sup>12</sup>

In this scenario, those grievances that are still in existence are seen to be in the process of being solved. However, the available evidence flies in the face of this wishful thinking. The GFA did not usher in an era of instant peace. It is not merely that sectarian division and practices live on; the apparent paradox is that both have been exacerbated in peacetime. There is more residential segregation now than there was a decade ago<sup>13</sup> and, although it ebbs and flows, interface violence in key areas of Belfast and Derry is frequent. New, euphemistically named, 'peace walls' have been built or built higher since the GFA was signed. The captain of the Northern Ireland football team has been death-threatened into international retirement because he is a Portadown Catholic who once played for Celtic.<sup>14</sup> Children travelling to their Catholic girls' primary school in a predominantly Protestant area have been subject to mass protests involving sectarian abuse and assault with bags of urine and faeces and blast bombs.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, sectarian murders persist. Thus, on 8 May 2006, a 15-year-old Catholic boy, Michael McIlveen, died in hospital after having been beaten with baseball bats when cornered by a group of Protestant youths in his home town of Ballymena the previous evening. Such high profile incidents are the tip of an iceberg of everyday sectarian violence in many parts of Northern Ireland.

The official response to sectarian attacks is usually one of sympathy and condemnation – although not always. Thus, Roy Gillespie, a DUP councillor from Michael McIlveen's home town of Ballymena, offered the following opinion: 'As a Catholic, he won't be going to heaven unless he has been saved. If he did not repent before he died and asked the Lord into his heart, he will not get to heaven. Catholics are not accepted into heaven.'<sup>16</sup> Such sentiments are not aired publicly as frequently as they once were. Much more common is the rush of politicians to condemn sectarian murders. Yet there is little in such a reaction that helps explain why such attacks continue in peacetime, much less a serious attempt to suggest viable policy responses. Thus, after Michael McIlveen's murder, Ulster Unionist Party leader Sir Reg Empey said the killing illustrated 'the distance we have still to travel as a society to what could be described as normality'. Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain said it was 'a sickening sectarian attack' which dragged Northern Ireland 'back to the dark days of the past'. Conservative Shadow Northern Ireland Secretary David Lidington said 'such naked sectarianism and savagery can have no place in any civilised society'. What all these sound bites fail to acknowledge is

that sectarian attacks are a product of a sectarian *present* rather than a blighted past, that they are in fact an integral part of the *normality* that is Northern Ireland, and that they can happily coexist with all the other aspects of Northern Ireland society which make it as *civilised* as any other advanced society. Sectarianism is alive and well in the post-GFA era; it is that fact which requires explanation and which forceful policy initiatives must address.

### Reconstituting sectarianism

Much of what passes as official comment and indeed policy in relation to sectarianism is based fundamentally on a denial of the magnitude of the problem. Representing sectarianism as ‘mindless’, inexplicable or atavistic is a form of denial. Sometimes denial is more direct. Thus, during a series of sectarian attacks on nationalists in the County Antrim village of Ahoghill in August 1995, Deputy Chief Constable of the PSNI Paul Leighton, reduced the campaign of attacks to the level of a village squabble. In a confused press briefing, he denied that loyalists were involved in a campaign of ‘ethnic cleansing’; something ‘much more serious’ was afoot, he said. While there was an element of sectarianism involved, he added, the trouble was due to ‘people not getting on with each other’. He later retracted, writing to a local councillor: ‘There is no question the attacks are all of a sectarian nature and only in some do other, lesser factors, feature.’<sup>17</sup> But it is telling that his first reaction was to deny the occurrence of ‘attacks’, which involve an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim, in favour of an explanation based on mutual and reciprocal antagonism.

The GFA promised citizens the ‘right to freedom from sectarian harassment’. In reality, however, the GFA and, more particularly, the new state formation that emerged from it, was a reworking rather than a transcending of sectarianism. It engendered not so much a society ‘free’ from sectarianism as one in which sectarianism is *institutionalised in new forms*. At the same time the state seemed to take responsibility for directly confronting sectarianism. But in reality, what appeared as confrontation often ended up as institutionalisation.

Take the arrangements for voting in the Assembly elected after the GFA. Each political party must designate itself as either nationalist or unionist and no vote can be passed by the Assembly unless a majority of *each* ‘camp’ is in agreement. The move is a clear attempt to avoid any return to the days of unionist majoritarianism, with its concomitant hyper-sectarianism, by ensuring that no party can derive policies without the backing of the minority. Worthy as this approach may appear in terms of combating sectarianism, it represents simultaneously a formalisation of sectarian relations at the heart of democratic politics which is entirely new.

The reform of policing provides another example. There were many reasons to reform the old police force, the RUC, not least the fact that when the GFA was signed 92 per cent of its members were Protestant.<sup>18</sup> Concerned that 'natural wastage' and recruitment for the new PSNI would not lead quickly enough to balance, the Patten Report<sup>19</sup> advised government to establish a rigid sectarian headcount in relation to recruitment. Much to the chagrin of the unionists, particularly the DUP, the government agreed, so that from the establishment of the PSNI in 2001 and for a decade thereafter, recruitment is on a strict 50:50 basis: equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics must be recruited. Again the move to reform has led to a formal embedding of sectarianism that was new to the state.

In short, it is untenable to suggest that the post-GFA state is 'post-sectarian'. On the contrary, it has reconfigured sectarianism – institutionalising and constitutionalising it in new forms. Again there is an immediate comparison with post-liberation South Africa; it seems unlikely that anyone would contest the argument that state racism was transformed in the transition from apartheid to the post-apartheid state formation. Insofar as the current South African state continues to reproduce inequality between whites and blacks, however, it remains racist. Of course, the Northern Ireland state has never had a liberatory moment like that in South Africa – the state formation was less reformed and less transformed by the peace process and the GFA. Even in a *prima facie* sense, we would be more than surprised to find that sectarianism has disappeared instantaneously in a context which had, for so long, been defined by sectarian violence. It would therefore seem bizarre to suggest that there is no sectarianism at all in Northern Ireland since the GFA and only slightly less bizarre to suggest that there is no sectarian inequality. Yet this is precisely what the state has begun to do. Most dishonestly of all, it has begun to suggest that racism has 'replaced' sectarianism in terms of 'significance'.<sup>20</sup> This developing analysis does nothing positive in the struggle against either racism or sectarianism.

### **The rise of racism in Northern Ireland**

Racism has risen exponentially in Northern Ireland in the years since the GFA. It is now common for academics, journalists and others to uncritically refer to Belfast as 'the race-hate capital of Europe'.<sup>21</sup> While some of this commentary smacks of hyperbole, it does speak to the grim new reality for people of colour, refugees and migrant workers in Northern Ireland.

*Awareness* of racism has also risen markedly over this period, not least at the level of the state which had previously resisted acknowledging the evidence of racism against people of colour and Travellers in

the north. Up to the 1990s, the state denied the existence of racism and the need for anti-racist legislation.<sup>22</sup> It was 1997 before the Race Relations Order (broadly parallel to the 1976 Race Relations Act in Britain) was made law in Northern Ireland and only then as a result of sustained politicking from the human rights and community sectors. But once discovered, the phenomenon has been seized upon with gusto by the state.

It would be wrong to completely 'blame' the GFA for this rise in racism but it did help create the context in which new levels of racism were to flourish. A number of factors were significant. First, 'peace' made Northern Ireland a more attractive place to live and work for people of colour as much as anyone else. Second, peace enabled a level of economic growth and labour shortages that began to be filled by migrant workers. Third, these new migrants, as well as refugees and asylum seekers, tended to move into the cheapest available housing stock which is disproportionately in loyalist working-class areas. (This results from the fact that nationalist working-class areas are overcrowded partly because of loyalist pogroms in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the subsequent assassination campaigns of loyalist paramilitary groups, while the population in unionist working-class areas has been depleted as a result of deindustrialisation.) Fourth, the Agreement created a degree of loyalist 'alienation'. The political gains of republicanism were not matched by loyalist political parties. Whatever the reality, there was an undoubted perception that loyalists had somehow been sold out by the Agreement. Finally, the peace process involved a constant attempt to bring loyalists 'in from the cold'. In this context, there was a reluctance to address anything that might further alienate loyalists – even their involvement in the racist violence. So post-GFA, new communities of colour found themselves situated in the midst of this volatile situation and became key targets for loyalist rage.

It was to this new reality that the state turned with its 'good relations' paradigm. Racism became seen as the 'close ally' of sectarianism and both were condemned as the products of 'ugly minds'. The conjoining of sectarianism and racism would seem to be a progressive move and one entirely in line with the theoretical analysis we presented earlier. But the state's purpose here is not to radicalise analyses of sectarianism with a necessary shot of anti-racist praxis, but rather to de-radicalise both anti-racism and anti-sectarianism. For example, despite the 'race hate capital of Europe' sobriquet, the state has, to date, failed to prosecute or convict *anyone* for racially aggravated violence.<sup>23</sup> Belfast is, of course, not – or not yet – Paris or Bradford. Yet the focus on the city as leaping suddenly from fourth to first division in relation to racism fits a facile but superficially enticing logic which goes thus: there is a finite amount of hatred in Northern Ireland

and now, given the dying throes of sectarianism in the wake of the GFA, racism has increased. There are numerous errors in this assumption. For a start, people are perfectly capable of being both sectarian and racist. Moreover, as the concentration of racist attacks in loyalist areas reveals, being sectarian is an advantage in being racist. But the state's approach to racism fails to name the problem, avoiding the obvious and problematic correlation between loyalism and racism to focus on the problem being that of two generic camps: 'them' and 'us'.

### **From Community Relations to 'Good Relations'**

In 1969, the British government responded to the emerging violent conflict with the establishment in Northern Ireland of a Community Relations Commission. Its prime aim was to bring Protestants and Catholics together. Overall it was a rather bland and, considering the magnitude of its task, remarkably under-funded institution, marked only by a relatively imaginative programme to encourage community development. One of the first acts of the brief power-sharing government of 1974 was to disband the Commission.

Community relations was removed from mothballs by the Thatcher government (at the same time as it ratcheted up its 'shoot to kill' policy) and integrated into government with the establishment of the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU) at Stormont in 1987. A Community Relations Council was also established in 1990. Despite work with community-based groups and other organisations, the Council did not have the same focus on community development which the Commission once had. Instead, its purpose was to 'assist the people of Northern Ireland to recognise and counter the effects of communal division'. This paradigm played no role whatsoever in the negotiations around the GFA and was not mentioned in the Agreement itself – which was dominated by commitments on security, equality and human rights. We might have expected, therefore, in the post-GFA era, that community relations would be consigned to the dustbin of history as a failed strategy of the direct-rule state.

Instead, community relations was rebranded as 'good relations'. The ground was prepared by Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: 'a public authority shall in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.'

Thus 'race' was very firmly inserted into a paradigm from which it had been almost totally missing before. The key distinguishing shift therefore was that while community relations had been about sectarianism, good relations was about sectarianism *and racism*. The new 'good relations' paradigm very consciously and deliberately colonised

anti-racism. This also, however, *excluded* most of the other Section 75 categories that had entered the GFA equality agenda discussions – such as gender, disability and sexual orientation.<sup>24</sup> By default, therefore, the state regards equality as something that is needed for a whole range of constituencies but ‘good relations’ as only relevant to ‘religious belief, political opinion and racial group’.

The pre-GFA Community Relations Commission had said and done almost nothing on racism. The CCRU did slightly more work with minority ethnic groups although it continued to support the government line that the existence of racism was not proven. Certainly neither organisation was part of the coalition of forces that finally brought anti-racist legislation into force in 1997. Neither offered any positive contribution in the tortured ‘community relations’ between Travellers and other communities that had defined early manifestations of racism in Northern Ireland.

Despite this, the Community Relations Council (CRC) managed to position itself with a key responsibility for addressing the rising levels of racism in Northern Ireland.<sup>25</sup> In 2004, for the first time, it announced its integration of anti-racism and anti-sectarianism with evangelical zeal:

Promoting *Good Relations* is about pursuing the vision of a new society. This involves going beyond the legal requirements and asks fundamental questions about the way we manage and run our organisations and services . . . Northern Ireland has suffered the impact of sectarianism for many years and racism has fast become its close ally. These are uncomfortable realities for everyone to face, but the promotion of good relations gives us an opportunity to confront them in a strategic way.<sup>26</sup>

Disturbingly for those who might have seen this as a useful intervention in the context of rising racist and sectarian violence, the document began with the admission that: ‘*An agreed definition for the promotion of good relations does not currently exist.*’<sup>27</sup> Despite the lack of any intellectual coherence, however, the promotion of good relations proceeded apace. When the state’s good relations strategy appeared fully-fledged in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) document, *A Shared Future: policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland*, in 2005, racism and sectarianism appeared in tandem throughout and the good relations synthesis was complete.

This document marked a key point in the state’s articulation of its new-found purpose. If ‘community relations’ was definitive of the British state reformism of the direct-rule state, ‘good relations’ emerged as the dominant theme in the lexicon of the post-GFA state. There was

a straightforward continuity in some of this intervention. Thus 'good relations' adopts much of the fairly shallow analysis of the community relations industry.<sup>28</sup> The watchwords – diversity, equity, interdependence – did not change at all. While the concepts of interdependence and diversity are fairly innocuous, the reference to *equity* is far more problematic. 'Equality' is regarded as too radical; it was bad for 'community relations' and it is now bad for 'good relations'. Tellingly, a word which was central to the GFA is excised from the lexicon of 'good relations' in the post-GFA state. Moreover, this term is now imposed upon anti-racism; people of colour, like Catholics, can now only ask for equity because to demand equality might somehow generate 'bad relations'.

'Good relations' and 'diversity' breathed new life into the community relations industry. The CRC was given core responsibilities in relation to conflict transformation not envisaged in the GFA. It became one of the key funding bodies dispersing millions of pounds of peace money from the European Union from 1995 on. The 'good relations' paradigm enabled the state to import policies learnt in relation to 'race relations' on the home front without any attempt to tailor them to local needs. Metropolitan discourse has been uncritically overlaid on the existing social formation. Northern Ireland has suddenly discovered 'multiculturalism', 'diversity' and race awareness training. The belief is that 'them' and 'us' as negative can be transformed into a positive.

There are of course scathing criticisms of this approach in Britain made by Sivanandan<sup>29</sup> and others which are no less relevant to Northern Ireland: the focus on interpersonal relationships rather than structural inequality, the presumption that racism is confined to the working class and the failure to derive a robust programme of anti-racism rather than its more bland cousin, tolerance. But the approach has added negativity in Ireland. Most obviously, it is a way to ignore the more established, in the Irish context, phenomenon of sectarianism. Thus, there are now countless seminars and conferences on 'diversity' where the focus is solely on minority ethnic groups and the issue of sectarianism is never raised. This approach both derives from and contributes to the assertion that racism is the real problem because sectarianism is on its way out and therefore needs no explanation. Sectarianism has become the elephant in the living room.

By 2005 this had gone so far that it was possible for research commissioned by the OFMDFM to ask if sectarian violence was 'no longer a problem'.<sup>30</sup> Increasingly, state intervention moves away from the subject at all. To even mention sectarianism or inequality or injustice becomes anathema to 'good relations'. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland corporate plan 2003–6 mentions sectarianism

once and good relations four times; the *Shared Future* strategy mentions good relations 120 times and sectarianism twelve times and anti-sectarianism not at all. This is the post-GFA, post-reformist, 'good relations' statelet in action. It is a state formation that repudiates racism and sectarianism as 'evil' but is completely unwilling to acknowledge either as an endemic part of the post-GFA statelet.

### **Sectarianism: the elephant in the living room**

The reality bears emphasis. There is no area of social life in Northern Ireland which is not sectarianised, or structured in some way by sectarianism. The correlation between political party and 'perceived religion' is as absolute as it ever was. Sectarianism continues to profoundly structure where people are born, where they go to school, where they live, where they work, where they socialise, what sports teams they support and where they are buried.

In relation to employment, a few statistics reveal continuing division. The Secretary of State for Defence employs 3,288 Protestants and 155 Catholics (or 95.5 per cent and 4.5 per cent) while the Northern Ireland Policing Board employs 1,372 Protestants and 296 Catholics (82.3 per cent and 17.7 per cent) and the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland 8,319 Protestants and 1,168 Catholics (87.7 per cent and 12.3 per cent).<sup>31</sup> We are not suggesting that these outcomes persist simply because these institutions refuse to employ Catholics, as some of them did in the past, but the fact that they persist in some of the most contested areas of state employment is clear evidence of the ridiculousness of the claim that employment patterns in the north are very fair and of the implication that sectarian inequality in 'no longer a problem'.

The GFA deal held the promise that the state actually would (and could) become 'post-sectarian'. In reality, little has been delivered. Rather, the state project has shifted away from acknowledgement, often reluctantly conceded, of profound sectarian inequalities. State discourse has changed from the pre-GFA insistence that it was *capable of reform* to the post-GFA insistence that it has been *reformed*. The target of intervention consequently shifted from structural inequalities that can be measured – unemployment differentials, relative poverty between communities, incidence of hate crime – towards the unquantifiable straw people of the 'twin evils of racism and sectarianism', confined, incidentally, to an unreconstructed working class. All critical and structural analysis flies out the window since these 'twin evils' are only explicable as the product of 'destructive and ugly mindsets'. This has involved a bold finesse by the state. It means that people need to be persuaded that almost all injustice and inequality have been removed and, more importantly, that state culpability for any

inequality and injustice, which is by definition residual, has been completely removed.

Our argument is that sectarianism continues to pervade the post-GFA state and wider society. It is *everywhere* in contemporary Northern Ireland and it is a function of the present post-GFA state, not a 'throwback' to anything that has gone before. Thus, there are real possibilities for policy initiatives that could challenge sectarianism, but many of these are missed by the state or only half-heartedly pursued because of the 'good relations' paradigm. For example, such is the segregation in education that the vast majority of schoolchildren are educated in classes where all or most of their classmates are of the same religious/ethnic background as themselves. A popular movement for integrated education began in the early 1980s and eventually achieved state support. For a while it was relatively easy for groups of parents to set up an integrated school and within two years receive full state funding. To date, fourteen primary schools and four second-level schools have transformed. In addition, there are currently fifty-eight integrated schools catering for approximately 5 per cent of the north's pupils.<sup>32</sup>

But a falling school population has meant that occasionally new integrated schools were being built in areas where established state schools (where the vast bulk of pupils and staff are Protestant) were starved of funding for repairs or new-build. The state's response to this pressure has been a policy shift based on persuading existing schools to transform into integrated status rather than to fund new integrated schools. There are two problems. First, given the opposition of the Catholic Church to integrated education, the only schools which have transformed or are likely to in future are in the state sector. Second, the threshold for integrated status in the transformed sector is lower than in the integrated sector. The Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the independent body advocating and supporting integrated education, urges schools to work on a 40:40:20 basis – 40 per cent of children from each of the two main traditions and 20 per cent of others. The state's threshold is lower, with questions being asked if the number of pupils enrolled in a school from whichever is the minority group (Catholic or Protestant) falls below 30 per cent. For the transformed sector that threshold starts at 10 per cent of the first year intake; given that an annual intake of primary one students is less than 30, fewer than three pupils in the class, and by extension in the whole school in its first year, need to be from whichever is the minority tradition to enable the school to be considered integrated. It is expected that overall the transformed school reach the same threshold as the integrated school – 30 per cent of pupils from whichever is the minority tradition – within a decade. The least that can be said is that there is a relative lack of urgency in the policy overall.

The lack of urgency is even more stark in relation to teacher training. There are two separate teacher training colleges in Northern Ireland, with the bulk of students at Stranmillis being Protestant and those at St Mary's Catholic. Although there were suggestions in the 1980s that it would make sense, not least in financial terms, to amalgamate the two,<sup>33</sup> the state has never faced down the opposition of the established churches to amalgamation. A Catholic or Protestant can thus be schooled at primary and secondary level, attend training college and get a job as a teacher for life without having left the comfortable company of their own religious affiliates.

### **Bringing loyalism in from the cold?**

As stated earlier, one of the key successes of the GFA has been the fact that republicans have gone along with political developments. The small number of dissident republicans opposed to the GFA have not, or at least not yet, come up with an alternative politics which can win widespread support in the republican community. For the state, the major problem in selling the GFA derives from unionism, which has been at best ambivalent about political developments, and its militant partner loyalism, which has an inbuilt propensity to equate progress with surrender. Selling the GFA to loyalists in particular is problematic.

Nationalists, relegated by partition to living in a state they neither sought nor freely accepted, and expecting, with endless evidence that their expectations were realistic, that the state would do little to help them, learned to rely on themselves. The growth, strength and confidence of the community sector in nationalist areas during the three decades of the conflict are proof of how successful they were in this regard. For their part, loyalists came to see their communities as the state writ small. The state supported, tolerated or turned a blind eye to what loyalists did in their community, whether it was painting murals, marching, intimidating nationalists out of loyalist workplaces or residential areas, or organising defence groups. Loyalists saw these practices as not only their right but a vital part of maintaining the state. Thus, loyalist paramilitaries viewed themselves as an extension of the state's security forces, able to target nationalists in ways which state forces, their hands allegedly tied by laws and political niceties, were unable to do. Given the extent of collusion between state forces during direct rule, that view was far from unrealistic.<sup>34</sup>

In short, nationalist and republican communities were 'communities of resistance',<sup>35</sup> while loyalist communities were locked into a relationship with the state which gave them little independence. That differential relationship has continued and been transformed in the post-GFA state. Nationalists continue to organise for themselves, the difference

now being that they tend eventually to be supported, especially in financial terms, by the state. True, developments such as Irish language schools, and major cultural events, such as Féile an Phobail, the West Belfast Festival, succeed in organising impressive services and events which have been consequently denied state funding on the grounds that the services and events are 'narrow', 'non-inclusive' and 'sectarian'. But there is nothing in their rationale or constitutions which makes them exclusive to the nationalist community, with the result that the state eventually reneges and funds them. This tends to incorporate the groups in many ways into a state-determined agenda. At the same time, the groups continue to have a healthy scepticism of the state and carry on making demands of it.

Unionists, used to and expecting the state to act on their behalf, are less adept at community development. As the state no longer needs loyalists as shock troops as it once did, loyalism has now neither state nor community on which to rely. This has led to official concern about the marginalisation of unionist communities. Take former Secretary of State John Reid's concerns: 'The Catholic community today breathes confidence, coherence and dynamism . . . At the same time the unionist community's confidence has declined . . . Northern Ireland must not become a cold place for Protestants.'<sup>36</sup> He seems to miss the profound irony involved in seeing the majority as beleaguered while those who have borne the brunt of discrimination are viewed as victors.

The solution is for the state to step in and, as in the past, do it for the loyalists. Where loyalists in Belfast seem impervious to requests that they desist from burning countless car tyres on the night before the July 12th celebrations of the Battle of the Boyne, thus polluting the city for days afterwards, the city council steps in with a grant of £100,000 for family-friendly bonfires.<sup>37</sup> The Northern Ireland Office supplies a further £100,000 to the Orange Order to allow them to explore turning the annual July 12th parades into a cultural festival, 'Orangefest'.<sup>38</sup> And the Department for Social Development makes £3.3 million available to the Arts Council for a community arts scheme, £1 million of which is for a programme of painting over loyalist paramilitary murals.<sup>39</sup>

Grant-aiding loyalist culture is not the same as engaging loyalism in a dialogue about where it can fit in the new political dispensation and what needs to change for it to do so. Rather than confront loyalism on its reticence, the state has preferred to entice it into the peace process in various ways. The rationale is that loyalism is to be killed with kindness. In counter-insurgency terms, a killing by any means is acceptable. However, this choice of method avoids confronting loyalism head on. This is not to suggest the pursuit of a solely military response, such as was tried and failed in relation to republican insurgency; this would be a recipe for abuses and denial of human rights on a large scale. Rather,

there is a need to name loyalism for what it is, a need to confront its innate sectarianism (and, more recently, racism). The state does not do so.

But this is neither here nor there in the state's consolidation of its legitimacy in the north of Ireland. It now takes responsibility for 'sanitising' spaces that once belonged quintessentially to non-state or anti-state actors. The 'good relations' paradigm has allowed the state to attempt to colonise a whole series of areas that were formally 'free' – loyalist murals, loyalist bonfires, Orange parades, republican prison protests, *féileanna*, *fleádhanna*, Irish-medium education – as it has other aspects of society – human rights, equality, political parties. This is the characterisation of the new state formation; it has penetrated all these spaces, communities, politics that were unreachable in the state formations of Stormont and direct rule. Internationally, the Six Counties has shifted from being a key symbol of anti-imperialist struggle to one of the success stories of the new Anglo-American imperial orthodoxy. It was no accident that Hillsborough castle provided the backdrop to the cynical attempt to spin the war against Iraq in the Bush/Blair 'war and peace' summit in 2003.<sup>40</sup> The stabilisation of Northern Ireland had become a shining example of the new imperialism – a foretaste of what was to be achieved in Iraq and proof that Bush and Blair were not 'warmongers' but rather peacemakers. While the peace and democracy for Iraq that were promised at Hillsborough have disappeared off the radar, it is likely that the 'good relations' model will soon figure as the Blairite solution to the 'sectarianism' in Iraq that was unleashed by the occupation.

## Conclusion

We have characterised the new post-GFA Northern Ireland formation as the 'good relations' statelet. This suggests that the way the new state has chosen to manage racism and sectarianism is its *defining* feature. Its response – and more importantly its *non-response* – to racism and sectarianism is cloaked by the good relations paradigm. This is the way that it distinguishes itself from its previous incarnations; this is the era of the 'shared future' which has replaced that of a 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant people'. Equally, however, the promotion of good relations is the way in which we trace the continuity in the state management of conflict.

Ostensibly the recent moves by the state to integrate its response to racism and sectarianism are a breakthrough. Fifteen years ago we would have been delighted to have recognition by the state that racism was a problem at all. Moreover, as we have seen, anti-imperialist analyses have long insisted that sectarianism should be integrated into broader analyses of colonialism rather than dismissed in terms of reli-

gious extremism or Irish intractability. But this new good relations synthesis is good for neither Catholics nor people of colour. It offers nothing in the analysis of why racism and sectarianism exist in contemporary Northern Ireland and nothing to the struggle against racist and sectarian violence. We have no analysis of institutional racism or state racism or the police or the criminal justice system, just endless appeals for the need for good relations between communities. Put simply, good relations gets the colonial state off the hook.

The state must be put back at the very heart of the equation if we are to engage seriously with racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland. While we have traced the dynamics of sectarianism through the history of British colonial engagement with Ireland, this analysis has emphasised the continued need to focus on the analysis of the Northern Ireland state formation that emerged in 1920. As with the Israeli state and apartheid South Africa, the novel state formation that emerged out of centuries of colonisation and racism in 1920–22 assumed specific new forms. In all three formations the establishment of the racist state generated forms of hyper-racism where other social forces, including, crucially, capitalism, were profoundly structured by racism. For all the hyperbole associated with the ‘peace process’, the Northern Ireland statelet did not escape this legacy with the GFA. A formation definitively based on racist and sectarian demography cannot escape this birthright so easily.

The Northern Ireland statelet cannot be but sectarian – and this holds even for the shiny post-GFA edition that currently obtains. Moreover, the new racisms that have emerged and intensified in Northern Ireland over recent years are also intimately connected to this state formation. A core part of the struggle against racism and sectarianism in Northern Ireland therefore involves recognising the need to dismantle the racist and sectarian state. This is not, of course, to suggest that there are simple solutions in a United Ireland context – older anti-imperialist and republican orthodoxies have dissolved in the context of an expanding European Union and a globalising world. But the vexed question of how to share space between different religious and ethnic and race groups can only *begin* to be definitively answered once the sectarian state is dismantled. As with apartheid South Africa and the current Israeli state, reconciliation between peoples is impossible in the context of a state formation that has as its defining logic the reproduction of inequality between those peoples.

The *raison d'être* of the Irish Republic was the commitment to ‘cherish the children of the nation equally’. Of course, it is easy to pay lip service to an aspiration like this and equally easy to debase it in practice. This has been confirmed by the recent performance of the Irish state in its racist denial of citizenship to ‘children of the nation’

whose parents happen to be asylum seekers. Nevertheless, in the Irish context, post-GFA, a stark choice still remains between an anti-imperialist space and an imperialist one. There is little elbow room for anti-racism and anti-sectarianism in a state formation that continues to have as its *raison d'être* 'the largest possible area within which the Protestants could expect to maintain a safe majority'. Catholics and minority ethnic people continue to pose a genuine threat to this founding principle and the state has responded accordingly. Instead of the promised post-GFA future 'free from racist and sectarian harassment' and grounded in human rights and equality, we find a state formation responsible for – and incapable of dealing with – frightening levels of racism and sectarianism. In terms of both racism and sectarianism, the Northern Ireland state, despite all its post-GFA gloss, remains part of the problem, not part of the solution.

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