



Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

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TEN KEY POINTS

1. The absence of a functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland (NI) since January 2017 has resulted in legislative and political paralysis. Decisions requiring ministerial accountability have ground to a halt in the absence of willingness on the part of central government to impose direct rule, despite the persistent failure of talks to revive the devolved government.

The NI Executive ceased to function at 5.00 pm on Monday 9 January 2017. Elected ministers ceased to hold their offices on 2 March 2017, the date of the NI Assembly election. Since that date there has been no devolved government in the region. Instead, civil servants have taken decisions based on previous policy and budgets, and two Secretaries of State have acted at Westminster to ensure that a new budget was put in place in 2017 and 2018. In a legal challenge, the High Court ruled that a civil servant did not have the power to give the go-ahead to a major infrastructure project and thus called into question a range of significant decisions taken since March 2017. The backlog of issues requiring ministerial decisions continues to grow as the British government has continued to show itself reluctant to impose direct rule.

2. The implications of the impact of Brexit on the Northern Ireland peace process remain uncertain but are likely to prove far-reaching.

While the Brexit negotiations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) have progressed in 2018, many issues remained unresolved and it is clear that the UK's decision to leave the EU will have significant and far-reaching implications for Ireland, north and south. Even before the final agreement is known, Brexit has already placed additional strains on the relationship between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF), and soured that between the British and Irish governments. This in turn has made the task of restoring Stormont more difficult and placed further stress on the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement. There is some evidence that Brexit has increased the support among the nationalist community for a united Ireland. The potential date of a future referendum on Irish re-unification may be sooner than might otherwise have been anticipated. All parties, both inside and outside the Brexit negotiations, have indicated that there is no appetite for the return of a hard border on the island of Ireland. The implications of any new border infrastructure on the NI economy and trade relations with the EU remain uncertain.

3. Inter-governmental relations, which have been crucial to the peace process, are weakening.

It has proven difficult for the three-stranded approach of the 1998 Agreement – based on the importance of relations within NI, between North and South as well as East and West - to operate in the prevailing political conditions. Relationships between the British and Irish governments have become strained by the Brexit referendum result, which has damaged their roles as joint upholders of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement. In addition, Brexiteers and elements of the British media have criticised the

attitude and response of the Irish government to the Brexit negotiations. Similarly, cross-border relationships have been tested as the DUP and the authorities in Dublin have traded verbal blows over Brexit. The 'confidence and supply' arrangement between the DUP and the Conservative Party has called in to question the neutrality of the British government in the ongoing attempts to restore devolved government in NI. The reversal of previous US administrations' active engagement in the NI peace process by the Trump administration has left a noticeable gap in terms of external support and leverage to encourage the political parties back to the negotiating table.

4. The lack of progress on everyday social policy issues is permeating every aspect of life and is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable people in the society.

There are persistent, and in some cases, growing inequalities in relation to socio-economic conditions, educational attainment and health status in NI. There has been little change in poverty rates over the past decade and economic projections indicate that the welfare reforms currently being rolled out will have a negative impact on the most vulnerable households and will result in increasing child poverty and destitution rates. Despite general improvements in the health of the population, across a wide range of indicators stark differences in health outcomes between the least and most deprived areas remain. Housing costs in NI compare favourably to many other regions of the UK but housing tenure has changed dramatically in recent years. Of particular note is the substantial increase in private renting, particularly among those in lower age groups. Just over 50 per cent of 18-34 year olds are renting from private landlords, almost double the number doing so a decade ago. Such changes have implications for social policy, particularly in light of evidence that housing costs are impacting significantly on the living standards of low-income households in the private rented sector. Successive governments have failed to address some substantive areas of social policy over the long term and so lack of progress cannot wholly be attributed to the collapse of the Executive in January 2017.

5. The Economy: stronger performance but significant challenges persist.

Current conditions in the NI economy remain largely positive. Unemployment is at an historic low and compares favourably to UK, Ireland and EU averages. Employment rates are at a record high. The tourism sector has significantly benefited from peace with the number of trips to NI increasing by 80 per cent over the past two decades and contributing over £2.0Bn of output and 52,000 jobs in the local economy. However, significant economic challenges persist including high and increasing levels of economic inactivity (compared to a decline in the rest of the UK), lower average wages and levels of productivity compared to UK and Ireland and a high long term unemployment rate (more than double the UK average). Economic growth has slowed in recent months, attributed, at least in part, to the uncertainty generated by the Brexit referendum. Brexit may also have implications for NI's labour market as the migrant workforce has been a major factor in supporting the increase in employment levels in recent years. Sectors such as manufacturing and hospitality may face recruitment challenges as labour shortages are beginning to emerge.

It is also within this challenging economic context that welfare reforms imposing greater conditionality and stronger sanctions are being introduced.

6. Northern Ireland is increasingly out of step with other parts of the islands on key equality issues.

Since the 2016 Peace Monitoring Report there has been increased attention focused on equality issues, particularly around reform of abortion law and equal marriage. The absence of policy and legislative change by the NI devolved Assembly means that NI is increasingly out of step with other parts of these islands and has come under criticism from international human rights bodies. Evidence from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey and opinion polls show that the majority of the population in NI support liberalising the law on these issues. It also suggests that the stances of some political parties are at odds with those of voters. In both these areas it is now being argued that change is being further hindered by the lack of a functioning Assembly and pressure has been mounting on the Westminster government to take action. On both subjects it is clear that while under the devolution settlement the UK government could intervene and legislate, it is reluctant to move, arguing that both issues are devolved matters for the NI Assembly- a contestable point given that responsibility for human rights and the implementation of international conventions rests with the Westminster government.

7. The culture war continues as the issues of contention evolve and mutate, and are exploited for political purposes.

While there has been a noticeable lack of direct confrontation around parading issues in recent years, there still remains considerable unease, particularly within the unionist/loyalist community, as to how the issue has been dealt with. Elsewhere problems remain around the public display of official flags and those of proscribed organisations, and their more recent appearance in the vicinity of explicitly mixed housing estates. Similarly, issues surrounding paramilitary control of bonfires, their location, and what is being burned on them, continues to create intra- and inter-communal tensions. In turn, this has posed a challenge for public agencies tasked with dealing with bonfires and flag-flying, with uncertainty over their roles and responsibilities. The debate around the recognition and status of the Irish language in NI has become central to the ongoing political stalemate between Sinn Féin and the DUP. Across this whole spectrum the search for solutions has not been helped by the delays to the work of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

8 . The patterns of educational under-achievement within specific sections of the society remain unchanged.

The *unchanging* patterns of educational under-achievement, with marked inequalities in education attainment persisting or getting worse, is worthy of particular note. The greatest inequality in educational attainment is the difference between the achievement levels of children who attend grammar schools and those who do not. While there is under-achievement among

working class pupils generally - and this is worse among boys - working class Protestant boys continue to have lower educational attainment than Catholic boys. Traveller children have exceptionally poor educational outcomes. Data on educational outcomes discussed in this report are not new and their persistence is an outcome of the failure of the NI government to tackle fundamental problems regarding the structure of education in NI, including the inability to agree a system for post-primary transfer and to tackle the underlying issue of poverty.

9. Catholic recruitment to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has levelled out following the ending of the 50:50 recruitment process. Catholic police officers currently represent 32 per cent of the total.

A stated aim of the PSNI is to have a workforce that is representative of the community it serves. This means representative in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. In the context of NI's recent conflict, the most politically-sensitive marker has been that of Catholic representation in the police service. In the years prior to the Patten reforms, Catholics made up eight per cent of PSNI police officers. The policy of 50:50 (Catholic : Protestant) recruitment saw this figure increase to 30 per cent. Following the ending of equal recruitment in March 2011 the figure has marginally increased to 32 per cent in 2018. There have been slight improvements in the composition of the service in terms of gender and ethnic minorities. However, at current rates of change it could be decades before the PSNI truly reflects the society it polices.

10. Twenty years on from the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland appears no closer to finding an acceptable way of dealing with the past.

The failure to address the legacy of the past continues to manifest itself in many areas. The campaign to secure a pension for those survivors injured as a direct result of the conflict continues to be held up by an on-going debate over the statutory definition of a 'victim' and thereby included in any scheme. Further problems have arisen over the need to implement a fully-funded programme to complete many of the legacy-related inquests that are still waiting to be dealt with. Alongside this has been the discussion as to whether the time has come for some form of amnesty to be granted to halt the prosecution of individuals suspected of being involved in conflict-related incidents. One aspect of these has been the call for the British government to introduce a statute of limitations for those members of the security forces who served in Northern Ireland. That question largely dominated the headlines in June 2018 when the British government finally established a consultation process on the legacy proposals first set out in the Stormont House Agreement (2014) and Fresh Start Agreement (2015).