

The Good Friday Agreement – is it still intact?

KEY:

CG: Cathy Gormley-Heenan

RW: Rick Wilford

(MUSIC)

CG: Well, it is and it isn't; I mean, it's still intact in the sense that we still have a consociational arrangement, we still have North-South bodies and a North-South Ministerial Council, and we still have the East-West relations through the British-Irish Council. It has been modified or, at least, some of the architectural structure that helped to hold up the Good Friday Agreement has started to be taken away. Not least with the establishment of an Official Opposition, and that's one thing that was not in the original Good Friday Agreement, but that has come to pass now, and the political parties have different views on that. Certainly, Sinn Féin see the introduction of an Official Opposition as some kind of Frankenstein version of the Good Friday Agreement and are quite unhappy about that.

But it is also different and, Rick has pointed this out, it's not consociationalism in the sense of a grand coalition. It's a coalition of the two largest parties, the two largest ethnic blocks, with the smaller parties from those ethnic blocks moving to form an Opposition. So it's consociationalism, but it's a different type of consociationalism than that which has preceded it. In terms of the North-South relationships in the North-South Ministerial Council and the cross-sectoral bodies and so on, well, with the referendum debate on the European Union I think what has happened there that it has put the spotlight back onto the issue of North-South relations.

It doesn't matter what the outcome of the EU referendum is, or was. The point is that the EU referendum has put the question of the Irish border back onto the table of politics again here, in a way that doesn't actually suit either unionists or nationalists. Unionists don't want to be reminded of the fact that as part of the Good Friday Agreement, they have signed up to North-South Ministerial Council and relationships and so on... And nationalists don't want to be reminded of the fact that there is actually still a border and that these North-South relations are part of a broader set of relations and that the Good Friday Agreement was about the totality of those relations rather than just an all island dimension. So it's the same in many ways, but it has started to look a bit different.

RW: I'd say that, yeah, I agree with that in the sense that I think the Agreement has been modified and, I think in some respects, you could argue even that it may have been enhanced. If we're talking about reform, or we will be talking about reform, the most significant reform is Opposition, obviously. But if you think back to '98 and some of the changes which have been wrought in earlier mandates. For example, initially the First and Deputy First Minister, when

they were nominated they were subject to a ratifying vote in the Assembly that had to be taken on a cross-community basis.

Now we have the coronation. There is no vote. So that was a change. When the DUP and Sinn Féin agreed to change the procedure for appointing a minister, mainly the Justice Minister, that wasn't subject to the d'Hondt procedure. That became subject to a cross-community vote in the Chamber. So it's not as if, I don't think that the architects of the Good Friday Agreement, they were mainly the UUP and the SDLP, I don't think that they ever intended that the Institutions would be cast in marble. You know, that they were cast more in aspect I think, in the sense that they were changeable, they could be modified, and indeed they have been modified and they have been modified further now with the advent of Opposition.

The Civic Forum was suspended in 2002 and that was an integral part of the architecture, as intended in 1998. It's never been resurrected. It's the one Institutional expression of the Agreement that has disappeared off the map altogether. Now, there's talk about bringing back the Civic Advisory Panel which is very small compared to what the Civic Forum of sixty members, I think they're talking about... But no more than a dozen, I think, on a Panel, rather than a Forum, as if you were a kind of mini-Assembly. On a purely advisory capacity. So, I think we don't, we shouldn't be... We shouldn't be, I think, annoyed or upset that in some respects the original template has been amended. I think when Mark Durkan said back in the early 2000s, you know, mid-2000s, there is ugly scaffolding that needs to be, as it were, removed.

Some of that ugly scaffolding, I suppose, has gone. There have been Annexes to the Institutional and Administrative Arrangements since 1998/9 when devolution was first triggered. But that I think, demonstrates a certain suppleness amongst our politicians that they are not utterly kind of stuck with the original model and absolutely, you know, that anything to change the operating procedures is heretical. I don't think it is.

CG: Another sort of part of the Good Friday Agreement that has been amended slightly is in terms of scale and size and numbers... The original Agreement referred to an Assembly of 108 members. Now we know that come the next election that that will be reduced to 5-member constituencies instead of 6-member constituencies which will take you down to 90 MLAs, but of course there is also the Boundary Commission Reforms which are talking about a reduction in the number of constituencies themselves, alongside a reduced number of Departments, as you have mentioned earlier on. So the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement is still intact but the architecture has started to change.

RW: Yeah. It's still inclusive in a wider sense, I think, but in terms of the out working, you know, I don't think we should feel in any way that we... What we voted for in 1990, or those who voted for the Agreement, have been somehow betrayed by the changes that have taken place. I think the changes in themselves reflect perhaps political necessity but also, maybe, efficiency and effectiveness of the way in which the Institutions themselves work.

CG: Now of course, the big question is what will happen to the 'Other,' in terms of community designation, given that in this last election we have seen a growth in those that designate themselves as 'Other', but the terms of the original Good Friday Agreement make very limited provision for those who are 'Other'. That's a question yet to be broached.

RW: We've talked about the changes and whether the 1998 was intact and, of course, the fact that Departments have been reconfigured. So that's another change. But in addition, the Executive Office now has been really hollowed out compared to what it was prior to 2016, and a lot of functions taken away and redistributed across other Departments.

That makes it a leaner outfit. It also makes it become much more strategic in its operation, and I think having shed loads of functions, about half altogether, it would give both Nesbitt and Eastwood rather more focused approach to scrutinizing what the First and Deputy First Minister in particular are up to, along with their Junior Ministers in the now renamed Executive Office.

(MUSIC)