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Northern Ireland

Still troubled

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Northern Ireland staggers toward normality

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THE "peace wall" that separates the Catholic residents of Madrid Street from their Protestant neighbours is more than 20 feet high. That is not quite high enough, which is why houses close to the wall are fitted with bullet-proof glass and roof tiles thick enough to withstand the blast from a small bomb. In the middle of the road is a gate, which is often closed these days. On the gate is an injunction: "Love thy neighbour".

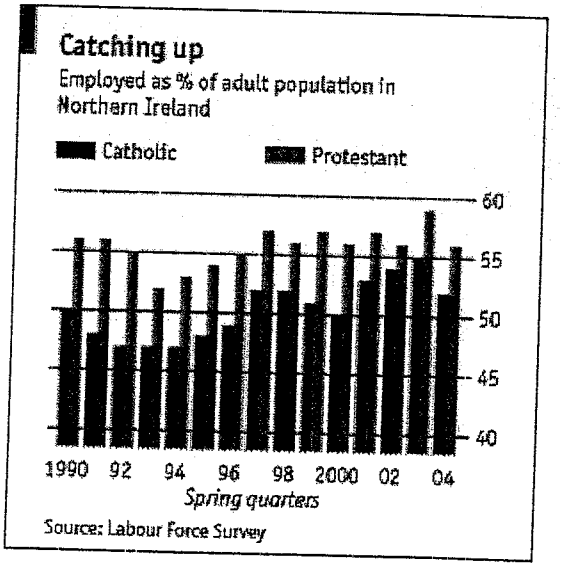
Belfast was not a walled city when it was settled by English and Scottish Protestants in the 17th century. It is now, although the barriers do not separate the town from the countryside in the normal fashion; rather, they divide neighbours. Eight years ago, when the Good Friday Agreement brought devolved government to Northern Ireland, north Belfast had 12 peace walls. It now has 15, and some of the walls are longer and higher than before. They are broadly popular with local people, who respond with puzzlement to questions about when the barriers are likely to come down.

Less evident to outsiders, but just as obvious to those who live there, are the invisible walls that run down the middle of some streets in Belfast, including the ironically-named Alliance Avenue. These barriers are reinforced by habit—the same route home from the bus stop, pausing at the same shops each time—and by memories of attacks. Were a Catholic or a Protestant to stray into the other's territory, he would be less likely to meet with violence than 10 or 20 years ago, says Rab McCallum, a republican ex-prisoner who is now a community worker. Provided, of course, that the wanderer did not do something provocative. Like what? Like wearing a Celtic shirt in a Protestant neighbourhood, Mr McCallum suggests.

The war is over in Northern Ireland, but normality is proving elusive. Part of the problem is that the province has never been normal. In the 19th century it saw some of the worst communal rioting of any city in the country. From the 1920s to the early 1970s, it was run by the Protestant majority, who resorted to ever more elaborate means of holding on to power as their numerical advantage waned: Londonderry, for example, was heroically gerrymandered. There followed a civil-rights movement that gradually gave way to a terrorist campaign, and a virtual civil war in which some 3,500 people died. Things are better these days, but only in comparison with Northern Ireland's peculiar past. Sir Hugh Orde, the head of the police force, boasts that officers in South Armagh, a mostly Catholic area, now occasionally drive cars rather than armoured jeeps.

Politics is especially dysfunctional, and reveals the same mistrust on the other side. Unionists (who believe Northern Ireland ought to stay part of the United Kingdom, and are mostly Protestant) gave most of their votes to the mainstream Ulster Unionist Party in 1998, when the first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were held. Nationalists (who are mostly Catholic, and believe, more or less fervently, in a united Ireland) preferred to support the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party.

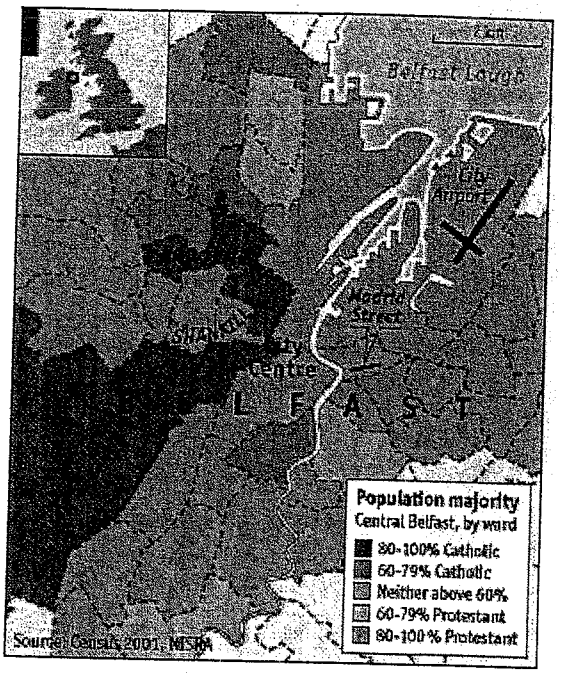
In the past few years, though, both parties have lost votes to extremists. In last year's general election, they were humbled by the Democratic Unionist Party, which opposed the Good Friday Agreement, and by Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA. The result is gridlock. The Northern Ireland Assembly has been suspended since 2002, when allegations of spying by Sinn Fein brought it down. The fact that it is still closed is often blamed on events such as last week's killing, probably by militant republican nationalists, of Denis Donaldson, an IRA man turned British informer. But voting habits suggest that ordinary people do not want dialogue with the other side.



To many people, this is less striking than the social transformation of Northern Ireland. For members of the rapidly-growing Catholic middle class, in particular, life has never been better. Their success is evident in the universities, where Catholic students now outnumber Protestants four to three. It is clear from the broadly shrinking employment gap between the two communities (see chart). It can even be read on the city's doors. "Twenty years ago, solicitors in Belfast had names like William, Bruce and Trevor," says one Catholic businessman, citing some typically Protestant names. "They are still there, but now they have been joined by Seamus, Malachy and Deirdre."

As Catholics have become more upwardly-mobile, they have spilled over into middle-class Protestant neighbourhoods. Some muttering ensued, but, in general, the new arrivals are tolerated. (Northern Irish people are expert at concealing their prejudices; as one saying goes,

"whatever you say, say nothing.") Middle-class Protestants have even begun to marry Catholics—at present, just one in ten marriages is "mixed", but the proportion is higher in the tidy streets off Malone Road, in south Belfast. The city's growing number of black and Asian immigrants settle nearby, if they can afford to.



Catholics have been helped into the middle class by the state. Fully 30% of workers in Northern Ireland are employed in the public sector, compared with 24% in Scotland and 20% in England. Civil service jobs are lucrative because they are subject to the same pay scales as in England, where the cost of living is much higher. And hiring policies are equal to a fault.

The swelling of the state was, at least implicitly, designed to salve sectarian wounds: create a middle class, ran the thinking, and a middle ground will emerge. The trouble is that many middle-class folk, both Protestant and Catholic, have given up on politics. In the 2005 British general election, turnout in mixed, comfortable South Belfast was below average. "Much of the middle ground that does exist consists of people who have switched off," says Pete Shirlow, a University of Ulster sociologist.

Such nonchalance might be welcome in the Protestant and Catholic ghettos of east and west Belfast, and in the "interface" areas in the northern part of the city. Opinions there are much hotter. In the loyalist (ie, militant unionist) Shankill, the extent of hatred for Catholics shocks even Tom Roberts, a former member of the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force. Resentment has increased, he says, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which is seen to have benefited republicans—particularly violent republicans—at the expense of unionists.

Out of the mouths of babes

Lady (May) Blood, who works with children in north Belfast, says that sectarian sentiments are voiced at an ever-younger age. One reason, she suggests, has to do with the ending of the Troubles. For all its terrible effects, that was at least a proxy battle--"a war going on, often somewhere else, in their names". Now the war is over, but the resentments and the memories of murdered kin remain, without the armed bands to act on their behalf. In a 2004 survey, fully a quarter of people asked said that a close relative had died in the Troubles. In working-class areas, that proportion is probably much higher.

The result is mutual mistrust and a crude enthusiasm for fighting, which is often blamed on paramilitaries but in fact needs little encouragement from them. Sir Hugh Orde, the police chief, says that the paramilitaries are much less troublesome than they were. But there is still plenty of "disorganised crime" and violence, which is hard to predict, hence dangerous.

Another, more obvious reason for mistrust is that poor Protestants and Catholics are less likely to live next door to one another. Geographers who study segregation in Northern Ireland say that the pattern during the past century has been one of speedy separation during periods of sectarian violence (the 1920s, 1930s and 1970s-1980s), followed by much more gradual integration during peaceful eras that never reaches the degree of mixing that existed before the violence.

The trend is thus a ratchet. The last census, in 2001, revealed that Belfast was marginally less

segregated than in 1991, but still much more segregated than it had been in 1971, shortly after the Troubles began. It is also more divided by religion than any English city is divided by race (see map). Ardoyne is 1% Protestant; Shankill is 3% Catholic. Blurring the boundaries will be hard, if not impossible. An eye-opening 2004 survey of 16-year-olds throughout Northern Ireland found that 52% of Catholics and just 47% of Protestants would prefer to live in an area of mixed religions. They were less keen on mixing than their elders, and Catholics were less keen even than their predecessors the year before.

Attitudes are hardest in loyalist areas. Prospects there are grim: of the 15 electoral wards in Northern Ireland with the worst educational attainment, 13 are mostly Protestant. And working-class loyalists feel less kinship with their social betters than do poor Catholics, in part because the Catholic middle class emerged only recently. That feeling is mutual: one Londonderry Protestant businessman says he feels more kinship with his Catholic neighbours than with many of his co-religionists. The widening social and cultural gulf between the hotheads and those who might act as a moderating force can be seen in two Protestant institutions.

The first of these is the church. Northern Ireland is still by far the most religiously observant part of Britain, but churchgoing is nonetheless in decline. Fewer than four in ten Protestants claim to attend church at least once a week, compared with six out of ten Catholics. Perhaps more importantly, the three largest Protestant churches—the Anglican Church of Ireland, the Methodists and the Presbyterians—have gradually lost members to smaller, mostly evangelical churches.

Unity, which Protestants never find easy to achieve, is thus becoming still more elusive. David Porter, an evangelical who runs the Centre for Contemporary Christianity, in Belfast, says he is sometimes approached by liberal Protestants who want to open a dialogue with a Catholic congregation. He says they would do more to alleviate tensions by talking to their co-religionists in a working-class loyalist area.

The other decaying Protestant institution is the Orange Order. This is associated, in the minds of most Britons, with riots that break out in July, when Orangemen celebrating the military triumph of the Protestant King William III try to march through Catholic neighbourhoods and are blocked when they do so. That is unfair. The Orange Order is certainly hardline when it comes to constitutional matters. Yet, for much of the 20th century, it tried to restrain violent impulses among loyalists, together with their other sins (Orangeism was, and is, linked to the temperance movement). In many rural areas, Orange marches are respectable affairs. But the order's complexion is changing in the cities, largely as the result of desperation.

Between 1964 and 2004, Orange membership in Belfast fell from about 14,000 to fewer than 4,000. In Londonderry, it went from more than 2,000 to barely 800. To stay alive, the order has become less picky. Brian Kennaway, a former member of the Grand Lodge, says that middle-class members have been replaced by young hotheads, paramilitary men and martial-music outfits known as "kick the pope" bands. Last September, orange sashes were spotted at riots where guns were fired. Some think this summer's marching season will be particularly violent.

He who shouts loudest

To anybody who has seen the vast slums of south London, let alone the "projects" of the South Bronx, the housing estates of north Belfast seem astonishingly decent. The Shankill neighbourhood, which produced the Shankill Butchers, perhaps the worst of a dismal bunch of sectarian murder squads, has green spaces and generously-proportioned housing. That is, in itself, a clue to how much money has been poured into the province. It is also a reflection of the harsh political calculation that operates in Northern Ireland.

The Troubles were expensive to police; at their height, one in ten Protestants who had a job worked for the security services. Peace is less costly, but it is still not cheap. Public expenditure per head in Northern Ireland is 30% higher than the national average. Since the guns fell silent, Northern Ireland has also been lavishly supported by the European Union (which has spent €1.2 billion—$1.5 billion—so far) and by the American-backed International Fund for Northern Ireland.

Not all of this money has been spent wisely, and some has found its way into paramilitary hands. Community work, elsewhere the preserve of hand-wringing liberals, is in Northern Ireland often dominated by hard men. That is notoriously true of restorative-justice programmes, which have supplemented (and, in some cases, virtually replaced) the mainstream criminal-justice system in many poor areas. Mr McCallum, the former prisoner, says this is not surprising. Law and order was for so long the preserve of the IRA, which administered beatings and blew off kneecaps, that ordinary people regard it as none of their business.

The fact that current and former paramilitary men are now engaged in good works is good, but it is not an unqualified good. It means that they are less likely to seek regular jobs (though some say no employer would look at them) and, more seriously, it gives them a vested interest in abnormality. If the walls tumbled, and the hatred dissipated, what would they do?

Others have learned to turn trouble to their advantage, too. The annual negotiations over Orange marching routes have become auctions in which both sides claim that greater disorder will ensue if their demands are not met. Nationalists suspect that loyalists have become adept at using violence to defend what few advantages they have, and in one sense they are right. Catholic housing estates in north Belfast are more crowded than the gradually depopulating Protestant ones, with less green space and houses abutting the peace walls. Yet the walls cannot be moved to reflect demographic changes; that would be inflammatory.

Northern Ireland has been so peculiar for so long that normality would come as a shock. Its inhabitants' way of life has been shaped by centuries of sectarian violence, their identities by the struggle to survive it.

During the past 15 years, though, those who live near the border with the Republic of Ireland have become increasingly aware of the advantages of peace and proper government. Once the island Cinderella, Ireland is now the third-richest country in Europe. In Londonderry, it is said, you used to be able to spot cars from the south without looking at their number plates, they were so decrepit. Now the cars coming over the border are BMWs.