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#AGREEMENT20

'We Shall Overcome'? The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the Memory of the Civil Rights Movement

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While 2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Northern Ireland, it also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the civil rights movement and the protests of 1968. One of the key innovations of the Agreement is that it makes issues of rights central to the broader consociational framework, with the entirety of section 6 devoted to 'Rights, Safeguards and Equality of opportunity.' This reinforces a perception that the GFA is a culmination of the civil rights movement and its aims; and that the conflict itself was based on issues of rights. The civil rights movement continues to be an enduring collective memory for the nationalist community in post-Agreement Northern Ireland, but since 1998 it has become a site of contested memory. This article considers the civil rights movement's reputational trajectory since 1998, questioning why this is so, and why it is so ripe for appropriation. It will also examine how different memories of the movement have been mobilized to serve various and sometimes competing agendas. In doing so, it will explore the cultural and political power the memory of 'rights' had in the Agreement and in the two decades since.

Inequality was, and still is, a potent issue in our divided society – indeed, it was historic inequality which give rise to the Civil Rights Movement. The equality issues that we are debating today, and which form a central part of the Good Friday Agreement, are really the unfinished business of the Civil Rights Movement.

Alban Maginness (2000: 73)

It is...worth restating the potentially revolutionary significance of the civil rights agenda at the core of the Good Friday deal ... The original civil rights campaign foundered after the onset of the armed IRA conflict against the British state. It would take 30 years and 3,500 deaths before the Good Friday Agreement, essentially a continuation of the civil rights agenda, resumed where the activists of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) had left off ...

David Granville (2004)

It is memory that counts, that controls the rich mastery of the story, impels it along...

Jorge Semprun (qtd in Eyerman, 2001: 1)

While 2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), it also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement and the protests of 1968. As the above quotes demonstrate, the GFA is oftentimes seen as a culmination, or indeed a vindication, of the civil rights movement and its aims. While the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland only came to national and international attention at the march in Derry on 5 October 1968, it began in the early 1960s as an attempt to draw attention to grievances felt by the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. The main goals of the movement were to address housing inequality, electoral reform, employment discrimination, and brutality by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (Hewitt, 1981: 363). It had its origins at a local level in the housing crisis, which was particularly acute in Northern Ireland,¹ and early activism revolved around this issue. It became a mass movement

¹ In 1971, only 63 percent of Catholic homes in Northern Ireland had hot water, a fixed bath or shower, and an inside WC, as opposed to 72 percent of Protestant homes. Fionnuala McKenna, 'Background

when it adopted civil disobedience and marching as a repertoire of action in 1968, responding to the inaction of the Unionist government to reform the discriminatory practices of the Northern Irish state. These marches made Catholic disaffection and grievances visible in a way that previous activities had not. They attracted counter-demonstrations by unionist and loyalist opposition groups who viewed the campaign as a republican plot, which escalated into violent confrontation. As the security situation deteriorated in 1969, the British government made the decision to deploy troops on the streets of Northern Ireland, as well as to pressure the Unionist government to introduce reforms. By this point, the movement's original demands had been overtaken by new demands, and increasing violence led the British government and Stormont to introduce internment in 1971. Internment was added to the growing list of grievances felt in the Catholic community and at one of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) demonstrations against the policy in Derry in January 1972 the British Army shot dead 13 unarmed demonstrators in what became known as 'Bloody Sunday'. This effectively brought an end to mass street demonstrations as a means of achieving civil rights, and the movement reverted to a pressure group in the same vein as the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL).

For the nationalist community in particular, the movement is central to their collective identity, and rights – whether civil, political, or economic – are fundamental to their contemporary understanding of politics and the peace process. Indeed, both nationalist parties in Northern Ireland – the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin – regularly appeal to an understanding that explains both the past and the future of the conflict in terms of rights. As Jennifer Curtis (2014: 10) suggests, the political power of this narrative lies in its encapsulation of ordinary understandings of the conflict, bolstered with references to historical facts, and, I would argue, collective memory. While many groups and organisations claim to be the 'true' successors of the civil rights movement, today there exists what we might call a consensus memory; a dominant narrative of the movement's goals, practices, victories, and, of course, its most lasting legacies (see Romano & Raiford [2006] for similar experiences with the US civil rights movement). This consensus memory was

information on Northern Ireland society – Housing', Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/ni/housing.htm> (Last accessed 4 December 2017).

originally proffered by the Cameron Report (1969), which was tasked with exploring the causes of the disturbances in 1968. The report argues that the civil rights movement began when the newly educated Catholic middle class was no longer willing to acquiesce in the discrimination of the unionist state, but was derailed by extremist elements in the student movement, as well as other republican forces, resulting in violence, which ultimately started the 35-year long conflict. This consensus memory is one that has been driven by the SDLP in particular since the 1970s but has been challenged by Sinn Féin, among others, since the GFA was signed in 1998. As McGrattan and Hopkins (2017: 490–3) suggest, a somewhat under-researched area relates to the issue of how memory battles also occur within communal groups and ethno-nationalist blocs. They argue that viewing in-group or intra-bloc dissensus as framed by or set within the parameters of what they call 'between-group' relations means paying close attention to the changing salience and meaning of concepts that are core to the group's ideological and normative coherence. This article, therefore, considers the civil rights movement's reputational trajectory since 1998; questioning why it has become a contested site of memory, and why it is so ripe for appropriation by both Sinn Féin and the SDLP, by exploring the role of collective memory and identity in post-Agreement Northern Ireland. It will then examine how different memories of the movement have been mobilised to serve various agendas, particularly in republicanism. In doing so, the article will explore the cultural and political power the memory of 'rights' had in the Agreement and in the two decades since.

Collective Memory, Collective Identity, and Post-Agreement Politics

Simon Prince argues that the 'mythologising' of the movement began 'as the events themselves were taking place'; and that newspaper articles, television interviews, inquiry reports, self-published memoirs, summer schools, and general histories have repeated the same claims so many times that the legend has become fact (2008: 26). The 'memory boom' in historiography has been embraced by scholars working on the Northern Ireland conflict (Brown & Grant, 2016; Dawson, 2007; McBride, 2001; McDowell & Braniff, 2014; McLaughlin, 2016; McGrattan, 2013; Smyth, 2017;

Viggiani, 2014), although most scholars tend to focus on paramilitary or state violence during the conflict (Bloody Sunday, hunger strikes, Enniskillen bombing, for example). There is little scholarship on how the civil rights movement is being remembered, despite the implication that issues of rights are both the cause and cure of the conflict. Prince suggests that the general reluctance to tackle the subject in any depth was partly based on the recognition of the moral foundations of the civil rights movement and the absence of important sources (2007, 2008: 27). Yet, while he is keen to expel the communal 'myths' of the movement, he echoes key establishment figures by suggesting that Northern Ireland's '68 happened in part because the radical left protagonists successfully managed to provoke police forces into repressive actions (2007, 2011). While he rightly identifies that the 30-year rule and the opening of the archives allows us to scrutinise this period more fully, he perhaps gives too much emphasis to British state myths seen through government records (see Finn, 2013, for an excellent critique of the Cameron Report, for example); and not enough recognition to the motivations and sometimes contradictions of the civil rights movement at grassroots level. Some of this heterogeneity of the movement is evident in the intra-community struggle over the movement's legacy and memory.

Memory refers to the process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and represent the past. Whether individual, collective, or official, memories of the past are not static. Hodgkin and Radstone contend that 'the past is not fixed, but it is subject to change: both narratives of events and the meanings given to them are in a constant state of transformation' (2012: 23). Individuals and collectives are constantly reshaping memory, renewing and retying, and sometimes undoing, in Pierre Nora's words, our 'bond to the eternal present' (qtd in Romano & Raiford, 2006: xiii). Collective memory, understood as memory shared by a group (resulting, for example, in national, ethnic, working class, or generational memories) is the *representation* of the past in the present. Thus, the notion of collective memory refers to a past that is both commonly shared and collectively commemorated (Schwartz, 2000: 9). Collective memories are partial and constructed experiences of the past, inevitably shaped by a standpoint in the present, and also often a vision of the future (Lee & Guobin, 2007: 2). Collective memory, therefore, not only reflects

the past but also shapes present reality by providing people with understandings and symbolic frameworks that enable them to make sense of the world (Misztal, 2011: 6).

Before the recollected past can structure individual or collective actions and opinions on a large scale, Griffin and Bollen (2009: 595) argue that it must be memorable, consensually understood, and imbued by cultural and political elites with such resonance that people regard it as useful in interpreting and acting on questions important to them in the present. Pennebaker and Banasik (1997: 17) suggest that historical events help form and maintain collective memories if they exert a collective psychological impact, and represent significant long-term changes to people's lives. I would argue that the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland has acted in such a capacity since 1998. The generation that came of age in the 1960s and played a key role in the civil rights movement was also the generation that dominated politics and community politics in the decades after, and crucially, represented leading figures in the peace process of the 1990s and in the negotiations leading to the Agreement reached in 1998.

Issues of civil rights past and present remain vital to the contested political culture in Northern Ireland. The movement has become iconic in nationalist political culture for the righteousness of its cause, its non-violent tactics, and its recognition of fifty years of unionist misrule between 1921 and 1972 (see Cameron Report [1969] for criticisms of, among other things, the Special Powers Act, discrimination in housing and employment, and reactions of the unionist government). Similarly, Larry Griffin argues that collective memories perform some form of culture work for those in the present (2004: 844). The past, he asserts, seems especially salient, as both memory and historical significance, to people whose identities and social awareness were crystallized during and because of sweeping events. In 1968, a wave of protest over civil rights engulfed Northern Ireland, forcing the Westminster government to implement a series of reforms (to access to housing, voting, and disbanding the B-Specials an entirely Protestant part-time auxiliary unit of the Ulster Special Constabulary used on patrols and checkpoints, viewed with distrust and fear by Catholics in Northern Ireland.), which in turn toppled the local government and

instigated almost thirty years of direct rule. In a few short years, expansive changes took place in Northern Ireland, ensuring that 1968 had both immediate and long-term impacts on the movement's participants in the North. These impacts are deep and complex: deep because they transformed a generation of people and complex because in the long run they were compounded by other historical factors, such as changing political conditions. Furthermore, the use of historically based collective identities is more significant in deeply divided societies. A defining feature of ethnonationalism is an emphasis on collective memories, shared grievances, and communal claims-making (McGrattan, 2013).

Therefore, similar to the US, the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland circulates through Northern Irish memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested (Dowd Hall, 2005: 1233). Debate continues on how much discrimination existed in Northern Ireland during the Stormont regime (1921–1972) as well as the movement's relationship to the subsequent violence of the 1970s and the 1980s (Hewitt, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1987; O'Hearn, 1983, 1985; Whyte, 1983). Yet, as Dowd Hall (2005: 1233) argues about the US, remembrance is also a form of forgetting; and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement – distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in museums, murals, public rituals, and textbooks – distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals. Current realities (the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 that enshrined civil rights at its core, the ongoing issues over how to deal with the past since then, and austerity policies implemented since 2009 that impact on living standards) combine and influence the ways in which people relate to and integrate the dimensions of past and present experience. The effectiveness and accessibility of the civil rights movement for the nationalist community has provided many with cognitive, emotional, and rhetorical resources in their battle against continued real or imagined discrimination since the GFA was signed despite the important gains that have been made (Griffin & Bollen, 2009: 600). The Agreement reinforced a perception that rights, and issues of rights, are unfinished business that must be addressed in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

Gerry Adams and 'Djangogate' – The Battle for Civil Rights Memory

Historical memory is a form of social memory in which a group constructs a selective representation of its own imagined past (Boyd, 2008: 134), and usually has a social or political purpose. Politicians and the media frequently make use of mythologised understandings of the past to mobilise memory as an instrument of politics in the present (Campbell, 2017b). As Verovsek (2016: 529) argues, collective memory exerts its influence in politics both from the bottom up, as interpretations of the past affect the identities and understandings of political elites, as well as from the top down, as statements by public figures place certain events into the national consciousness while silencing or forgetting others. The civil rights movement is commonly referred to as 'the start of the "troubles"' and as such, garners a particular resonance with both communities in Northern Ireland.

In May 2016, Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin, was at the centre of a significant backlash when he controversially used the N-word in a tweet comparing the plight of African-American slaves in America to the civil rights struggle in Northern Ireland. While Adams apologised for using the word, he stood over 'the context and main point of my tweet', which were 'the parallels of people in struggle' (Adams, 2016). The controversy surrounding the tweet was not just Adams' choice of word, but also that he described himself as a 'founding member' of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in follow-up explanations. Ivan Cooper, a well-known civil rights activist and founding member of the SDLP, branded Adams' claims as a 'shameless attempt to revise the proud history' of the movement. Cooper was especially angry at what he went on to describe as a Sinn Féin rewriting of the recent history of Northern Ireland:

People like Gerry Adams threatened to extinguish the ideas of the civil rights movement by waging a conflict which claimed the lives of innocent Catholics, Protestants and others who yearned for an end to violence. They set the cause of equality back by decades in the narrow pursuit of vengeance and destruction. In doing so, *they long ago sacrificed any claim to the civil rights movement*. I will not allow him to revise our history. I will not allow him to degrade and debase our movement. (Hughes, 2016: emphasis added)

Austin Currie, another key figure in both the civil rights movement and the SDLP, also weighed in on the debate, stating that '[t]he campaign to force "Brits Out" was such a disastrous result that they're trying to claim...the successes of the civil rights movement' (Hughes, 2016). These comments were aimed at reinforcing a particular narrative about the conflict and the meta-conflict, which placed Sinn Féin as aggressors who prolonged the conflict. Journalist Ed Moloney, who could not be described as an advocate of Sinn Féin, commented on the nature of the contention that existed between Adams' account and that of Cooper and Currie. He wrote that Adams' account of his involvement in the formation of NICRA is published in Michael Farrell's edited collection *Twenty Years On* (1988), almost thirty years before the controversial tweet and explanation. Moloney remarked:

When someone makes a claim about an issue or event that is not a matter of controversy or dispute at the time of writing or publication, it tends, in my view, to make that account a pretty powerful piece of evidence if, thirty years later, as in this case, the issue does become contentious. (Moloney, 2016)

There is much debate on the role of republicans in the civil rights movement. While Purdie acknowledges that republicans were centrally involved in the civil rights movement (1990: 150), he rejects the assertion that republicans were in control of NICRA, and that republicans did not see the movement as a means to prepare the ground for an armed campaign by the IRA (129–130). Gregory Maney's research identifies that republicans were perhaps more active in the movement than had previously been acknowledged. His analysis of more than 200 civil rights events establishes that republicans were involved in organising almost 80 percent of them (2007: 20).

So while Adams' account of his role in the movement was not an issue of dispute in 1988, ten years later, this version of history came under scrutiny. I would argue that the reputational trajectory of the civil rights movement shifted in the years after the GFA, setting the terrain for these later moments of contestation. The reasons for the shift can be seen along three axes: its salience in society, its valence, and its imputed ownership (see: Jansen, 2007: 961–963). As is noted above, because of the linking of civil rights to the cause and cure of conflict, the importance of the civil

rights – or equality – agenda increased during the peace talks and after the signing of the Agreement. Similarly, the reputation of the civil rights movement solidified as almost entirely positive. This was seen notably during the fortieth commemorations in 2008, where key figures, such as then president Mary McAleese and former president Mary Robinson, spoke at commemorative events praising the efforts of civil rights activists and their success in overseeing key anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland (McKay, 2008). In contrast, the civil rights commemorations in 1988 were a much more pessimistic and divided affair. Much was made of the lack of progress in Northern Ireland on issues of rights, and a lot of the criticism focused on economic rights. Jeff Dudgeon, a gay rights activist, claimed in 1988:

The level of basic civil rights is now lower than in 1968. The few real reforms – as opposed to the amelioration of this or that oppressive government tactic brought into being by nearly 20 years of war – are quite trivial. I can think of nothing of lasting value in the myriad changes caused by the civil rights movement ... Stormont and its legislature have permanently disappeared and a generation has grown up with no memory of, nor concern for, a devolved parliament. (Dudgeon, 1988: 10)

Jansen argues that specific symbols or historic moments become battlegrounds for groups attempting to gain supremacy by naturalising the association between that historic moment and their systems of meaning (2007: 963). One common way in which this often plays out, he argues, is in battles over the *ownership* of certain symbols or events. The battles for ownership of the legacy of the civil rights movement began during the peace process of the 1990s and intensified after the 1998 Agreement was signed when political elites and commentators were linking it to the civil rights agenda of the 1960s. Deaglán de Bréadún, writing for the *Irish Times*, for example, drew comparisons between the Hume-Adams pact and the 'New Departure' of 1879: 'For land reform, in the context of today's Northern Ireland, read equality agenda'. More importantly for future invocation of memory, de Bréadún (1998) commented that '[t]he equality agenda can be seen as the linear descendant of the original civil rights demands in Northern Ireland'.

What is perhaps ironic about 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland is not only the continued polarisation between rival communities, but the increased levels of intra-group hostilities. Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and McDermott (2006) describe how identity consists of content and contestation – meanings about identity, what it does, what it looks like and why it is important are broadly shared within groups; but those meanings can often be subject to differences of emphasis and interpretation. Given this fluidity, particular aspects of group belonging and identification become salient when they are triggered by changing circumstances (Chandra, 2006; McGrattan & Hopkins, 2017: 489). Among the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, for example, although reaching a broad consensus on the peace process and the Agreement, the SDLP and Sinn Féin are largely polarised on a number of issues. Much of the disagreement lies with the different interpretations of the conflict, and more importantly, with legacies – particularly the civil rights legacy.

Agents of memory often participate in 'mnemonic battles' over how to interpret the past, who or what should be remembered, and the form that a historical narrative ought to take (Zerubavel, 1996: 295–7). As Jansen (2007: 961) suggests, political struggle over historical events is a mnemonic struggle. In the decade after the GFA, there was a concerted effort, particularly by those in the SDLP, to sell the elements of the Agreement as part of a long civil rights movement, of which they are the direct inheritors. Until recently, the party described themselves as 'the party of civil rights' on their website (see: Campbell, 2015), and this has been augmented in the Assembly by SDLP MLAs on numerous occasions.² On the fortieth anniversary of the 5 October (1968) march, Mark Durkan, then leader of the SDLP, stated the links between the two:

Civil rights are part of our DNA ... Championing civil liberties was one dimension of the Civil Rights cause. Asserting democratic rights was another. The rallying cry of "one man – one vote" started a journey that took a community from grievance to governance ... The Civil Rights Movement

² For example see Assembly Hansard: Sean Farren, 18 January 1999: 312; Dolores Kelly, 5 February 2008: 224; 16 September 2008: 83; 10 March 2014: 9.

did not just challenge the old order but tried to open a vista of equality, inclusion and healthy democracy. That is the promise that finally became a democratic covenant of honour when the people of Ireland overwhelmingly endorsed the Good Friday Agreement. (Durkan, 2008)

He finished the speech by reciting the civil rights anthem 'We shall overcome' and adapting it for post-1998 Northern Ireland.

This teleological reading of the GFA was further strengthened by then Irish president Mary McAleese, who said the foundations of the civil rights movement had provided the framework for the structures that existed in Northern Ireland at the time (McAleese, 2008). Even Martin McGuinness, then deputy First Minister in the power-sharing executive and deputy leader of Sinn Féin, made reference to a *long* civil rights movement, one that was started in 1968 but continued throughout the conflict and into what has been termed post-conflict Northern Ireland. He declared:

Forty years ago we marched along Duke Street and along many other roads and country lanes across the northern state, as we demanded change and demanded civil rights. That march for civil rights and national rights continues. It isn't over and there is no turning back. There can be no return to the bad old days. We must also be the guarantors of that. (McGuinness, 2008)

Ian McBride suggests that the republican movement is by far the most dynamic manipulator of collective memory on the island of Ireland, and that in the years since 1998, Sinn Féin has successfully repositioned itself as the most effective guarantor of equality for nationalists while simultaneously protecting its monopoly over the memory of republican armed struggle (2017: 11). Stephen Hopkins (2016) has also convincingly analysed the role of memory in republican identity and the complex process of intra-community contests over the 1981 hunger strike memory in particular. He suggests that these battles for the historical and mythical 'symbolic capital' of the memory are important as they create a justification for past action

and future trajectory. The same can be suggested for the memory of the civil rights movement. Even before the GFA was signed, Sinn Féin recognised the potential influence the memory of civil rights could have. In 1996, after the Northern Ireland election, in which Sinn Féin won 17 seats, the party resurrected the civil rights demand of 'one man, one vote' to bolster its claim to enter all-party negotiations as of right. Adams commented on the fact that 'a sizeable number of people had voted for Sinn Féin, for negotiations and for a peace settlement', saying, '[T]he "one person, one vote" demand triggered 25 years of conflict. I'm sitting now today, 30 years later, in the middle of Andersonstown, still seeking to get respect for one person, one vote' (Grogan, 1996). Sinn Féin's most recent election campaign for the Northern Ireland Assembly in March 2017 contained hues of the civil rights movement, promising recognition of the Irish language and marriage equality to bring Northern Ireland in line with civil rights in the Republic of Ireland (Sinn Féin, 2017).

This appropriation of the civil rights movement by Sinn Féin remains a key concern for the SDLP given the fundamental role the movement plays in the party's origin narrative, as SDLP's current leader, Colum Eastwood, noted when he remarked that '[t]he civil rights movement belongs to no one person and no one party (2017). But it undeniably played a role in the history of the SDLP'. At the party's annual conference in 1999, an SDLP member complained that 'Sinn Féin was wearing the SDLP's clothes' (*Irish Times*, 1999), whilst the *Irish Times*' report of the conference suggested that the subliminal message was that if the SDLP was to maintain its role in Northern Irish politics, it would need 'a transfusion of young, red-blooded politicians to rekindle the civil rights spirit of its founding members' (*Irish Times*, 1999). The SDLP was determined to maintain the mantle of the primary heirs of the civil rights memory in the face of Sinn Féin's encroachment on what the SDLP viewed as their history. In September 2008, in a debate on the lack of progress in the Executive, which had not met since June, Dolores Kelly (SDLP) admonished Sinn Féin for its shortcomings in leadership, claiming that it was the SDLP who was the true visionary of peace and architects of power-sharing, and this was bound to its links with the civil rights movement:

For the record, the SDLP, as a party of non-violence and social justice that was born out of the civil rights movement – and whose leaders John Hume, Seamus Mallon and Mark Durkan were the architects of power sharing, inclusivity, partnership and equality and ensured that those principles were enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement – will not take lectures today, or any other day from Sinn Féin on any of those matters. (Assembly Hansard, 16 September 2008: 83)

In October 2010, Pat Ramsey (SDLP MLA) condemned the Culmore Road bombing in Derry by who he termed the 'born-again Provos', in what could be seen as an attempt to associate the dissident republicans with memories of the Provisional IRA and any links they may have had with Sinn Féin. He ended his condemnation with a reference to the civil rights movement, saying, 'Finally, I evoke the civil rights anthem of 5 October 1968. The message in the city then was "We Shall Overcome". The message today is that those who are responsible will not succeed, and the people of Derry will overcome' (Assembly Hansard, 5 October 2010: 39). The strongest condemnation of Sinn Féin's attempt to claim the civil rights legacy came from Colum Eastwood in 2016 when he criticised the cuts to education, in which Sinn Féin was complicit as a member of government. Eastwood stated:

The attack on education is particularly significant in Northern Ireland. Ever since the 1947 Act, education has played a massive role in the story of the North. History records its role in creating the civil rights generation. This is something that obviously runs deep in the hearts and minds of the nationalist community ... For Sinn Féin to acquiesce today in stripping that progress away, piece by piece, student place by student place, for them to be helping to remove that access to education for this generation is nothing short of a disgrace. They are walking on very dangerous ground. Let them be warned: the Nationalist community in the North – this generation – will not forgive them for it. (Assembly Hansard, 19 January 2016: 211)

Fuelling the Equality Agenda

Discrimination was, and continues to be, a very contentious and emotive issue in Northern Ireland. The role it played in creating the conditions for the civil rights movement and the subsequent 35 years of violence ensures any allegation of it will reinforce certain meta-narratives of the conflict. Issues of housing and employment remain the principal grievances that are most regularly referenced along with the memory of civil rights. In 2007, Dolores Kelly (SDLP) stated that Catholics were still 1.7 times more likely to experience unemployment in Northern Ireland (Assembly Hansard, 22 January 2007: 376), a disparity that the GFA had committed to eliminating to ensure equality for all. Catriona Ruane (Sinn Féin) was more forceful on the issue, claiming:

The days when Catholics were denied the right to vote, to housing and employment are over, There can be no more second-class citizens ... The problem of discrimination against Irish nationalists and Catholics in the North of Ireland has not gone away. It demands affirmative action ... More than 35 years after the civil rights movement launched its campaign to highlight the nature of the state's structural discrimination in housing, voting, and jobs, those issues remain at the core of sustained inequalities, which, in the main, continue to detrimentally affect the nationalist community (Assembly Hansard, 22 January 2007: 379–80).

Also in 2007, almost a decade after the GFA was signed, the *New Statesman* (Campbell, 2007) reported a startling statistic: that 60 percent of housing applicants were Catholic and 40 were Protestant, yet 60 percent of allocations were Protestant and only 40 percent Catholic. In north Belfast the waiting list was 83 percent Catholic. A report entitled *Waiting for Equality* found that:

The Housing Executive has publicly identified with Unionism's political goal by stating that in Unionist areas it wants to **attract people back** while its

advice for Catholics is to become more mobile and move to areas outside Belfast. (Rooney, 2005)

Further, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (which was set up to address the crisis of institutionalised sectarianism that deprived some of access to public housing during the Stormont era) refused to redraw community boundaries to reflect housing need citing political sensitivities. Sinn Féin MLA Mickey Brady underlined the importance of the housing issue to northern nationalists, explaining explaining that '[t]he provision of and access to housing has particular historical significance in the North and is closely associated with the struggle for civil rights' (Assembly Hansard, 22 May 2012: 88). Similarly, Martina Anderson (Sinn Féin) linked the housing crisis of 2007 to that to the pre-civil rights era, using the language and rhetoric of civil rights to draw direct comparisons:

The number of people who are on housing lists is at its highest level for 30 years. I find it incredible that Members are in the Chamber today to demand one of the same rights that brought people on to the streets during the civil rights campaign ... that is, the rights to a decent home (Assembly Hansard, 6 November 2007: 77).

While levels of unemployment and insufficient housing affect many working-class communities across Northern Ireland, regardless of religion, the evocation of the civil rights memory allows the political elites using it (namely Sinn Féin and the SDLP) to mobilise a community to support them. Further, the association between the civil rights movement and the start of the conflict provides both parties with a lever in the Assembly – there is an implication that if issues of disparity in employment and housing are not resolved adequately there could be a return to the streets, similar to that of the 1960s.

Yet, while the concept of rights played a central role in the Agreement document, and was adopted by political elites, it did not resonate with the general public to the same extent, particularly in the years immediately after the Agreement was signed. Almost half the respondents surveyed for the Life and Times Survey in 2000 said

they had not heard of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, despite the Commission being formed in October 1999. The Human Rights Commission, however, made more of an impact, with 75 percent of respondents in the same survey saying they had heard of it. The issue of equality between the two communities continued to pose discernible problems in the years after the GFA was ratified. Thirty-one percent of those surveyed in 2000 disagreed that Catholics and Protestants were treated equally. Significantly, there still was a strong perception among the Catholic population that Protestants were treated more favourably in areas of employment (73 percent), treatment by the police (72 percent) and expressing their own culture (47 percent). However, 57 percent of Protestants thought that there was always talk about the rights of Catholics but never about the rights of Protestants. The main contention seemed to be the right to march, which was viewed as an important freedom, with 81 percent of Protestants surveyed agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, compared to 34 percent of Catholics (Life and Times Survey, 2000). This was not surprising given the protests at Drumcree and the surrounding press coverage just a year before. The protests centred around the Orange Order's right to march to Drumcree Church via their traditional route along the mainly nationalist Garvaghy Road, to commemorate the Battle of the Boyne (1690). The Parades Commission re-routed the march away from the Garvaghy Road from 1998 onwards, which resulted in a long-standing protest by unionist groups at Drumcree. Thirty-five percent of Protestants surveyed in 2003 believed that equality laws protected Catholics at the expense of Protestants (Life and Times Survey, 2003).

The main obstacle to establishing trust and equality between the two communities in this early post-Agreement phase was perceptions of the Agreement itself. While the Agreement was 'overwhelmingly endorsed' by over 70 percent of the population in 1998, Protestant and unionist attitudes were more split and conflicted than Catholic/nationalist ones. By 2001, 63 percent of Protestants surveyed agreed that nationalists benefitted more from the Agreement than unionists did.³ More concerning, perhaps, was the fact that 49 percent of Protestants surveyed said that if

³ 67 percent in 2002, 70 percent in 2003, 68 percent in 2005.

there was another vote on the Agreement, they would either vote No or not vote at all, compared to 14 percent of Catholics. Only 26 percent of Protestants surveyed were happy that progress towards peace had been made between 1998 and 2001, while 20 percent felt disappointed, and 14 percent felt betrayed (Life and Times Survey, 2001). In 2003, almost a quarter of the Protestants surveyed thought the GFA was wrong and should be renegotiated (Life and Times Survey, 2003).⁴ While in recent years around 50 percent of those surveyed agreed that relations between the two communities had improved (Life and Times Survey, 2014, 2015, 2016), it is alarming that there is a strong perception that there is a lot more racial prejudice in Northern Ireland than five years ago (Life and Times Survey 2016: 49 percent agreed there was more now; 2015: 40 percent agreed more now; 2014: 52 percent agreed more now). It could be that while identification with religious affiliation is decreasing, racism is increasing, creating new rationales for civil rights than existed in the 1960s.

Conclusion

While the presentation of the GFA as the 'end' of the conflict has been rightly exposed in the past two decades, one of the main problems that remains in Northern Ireland is how to deal with the past and the legacies of conflict effectively. These issues continue to polarise the two communities, but significantly, there are also intra-group divisions emerging. Collective memories help bring the past into the present, and create responsibilities for those who came before. Further, collective memory links a sense of the past to present day injustices (Campbell, 2017b: 106). This is seen most noticeably with the battle for 'ownership' of the civil rights movement, and this will become more important as the fiftieth anniversary of 1968 approaches. The reputational trajectory of the movement has expanded during the peace process of the 1990s and since 1998. This is due to a number of factors: those who were most impacted by the movement in the 1960s (the '1968' generation and those who came of age in the 1960s) were also the leading figures in the negotiations. Issues of

⁴ The Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys do not repeat the same questions every year, although there some attitudinal data that can be compared from 1998 until 2016 (which, at time of writing, is the last survey data to be released).

rights were prioritised in the agreement as rights were seen as both the cause and the cure of the conflict. But as Curtis very effectively argues: 'Over a long period ... basic rights have been appropriated, even diminished, to fit the local conflict. As such, they have been frequently transformed into resources for conflict' (2014: 215). Memories of the movement are selectively chosen and highlighted to fit the needs of a particular social group. In the nationalist community, this tends to reveal itself in clashes between Sinn Féin and the SDLP over who 'owns' the legacy of the movement. The collective memories are also oftentimes used to highlight injustices in present day Northern Ireland. Using civil rights memory can allow other groups to more easily present themselves in sympathetic terms as citizens who are being denied full political rights by an oppressive system. The movement provides not only a model for civil disobedience but a legitimating language for their own battles (Romano & Raiford, 2006: 313). However, this is usually presented in terms of Catholic versus Protestant, despite the fact that racist and homophobic incidents are as big a problem as sectarianism in post-conflict Northern Ireland, and yet they are barely making their way into the critical debate (Campbell, 2017a). The focus on the collective memory of rights, and the civil rights movement, therefore, demonstrates the enduring nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, despite the GFA; but also that society there has, in a way, paused in 1998, and has not yet addressed some of the larger issues beyond the conflict, such as racism, homophobia, and gender discrimination.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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