

It secured Northern Ireland's self-determination, brought us almost completely out of a violent hell which had spanned multiple generations, convinced Republicans not only to accept but to work in a Northern Ireland Government, and gave unprecedented global acknowledgement to Ulster-Scots traditions as well as a world stage to political Loyalism... *So why do so many Loyalists continue to hate the Good Friday Agreement?*

The referendum of 1998 was my first vote and I had my decision made! It would be a resounding NO! No to *"terrorists in government!"* Because at the age of eighteen, this apprentice electrician from East Belfast didn't care what the question was, Ian Paisley was the answer. The huge bombs which had made my community's life hell had been the alpha and omega of my politicisation and Paisley had been the one thunderous voice which consistently drowned out the oratory of the bomber's *apologists*. So in this, his brightest spotlight since '85, Paisley had my vote in the bag.

I voted no, and would one day grow to feel very foolish for having done so.

In this article, I will break down why I now firmly believe that the Belfast Agreement (BA)/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was and remains a good deal for Unionists and Nationalists, Loyalists and Republicans alike. I will rely quite heavily on direct quotation from both the BA as well as other relevant documents.

I shall begin by dealing with the arguments I have heard made against the Belfast Agreement

#### ***Criticism 1- It 'dilutes our Britishness'***

This is literally inaccurate.

*"There will be no derogation from the sovereignty of either government" (Strand three, GFA, 1998)*  
*"(i) Recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland" (Sub-heading 2 'constitutional issues' GFA, 1998)*

In addition to this, its implementation since 1998 has not appeared to affect the population as might be suggested by one presenting such an argument. *"The growth of the catholic population has not translated into the growth of Irish Identity" (Nolan, 2014)*

It is no more un-Loyalist to acknowledge that not every Northern Irish person *wants* a British Identity than it is to be a Loyalist who enjoys an Irish one. This agreement facilitates diversity, and what could be more British than that?

#### ***Criticism 2- it allows 'terrorists in government'***

This is an unworkable argument because the definition of a 'terrorist,' even if it could be agreed upon in the Northern Ireland context, would be unlikely to supersede the democratic system by which our MLA's are elected, and rightly so. Neither Gerry Kelly nor David Ervine (both of whom had been described as *terrorists*) acquired seats in the NI assembly due to their prior paramilitary actions but because sufficient people voted for them. One is not obliged to respect Sinn Fein; one is obliged merely to respect the polling cards of their voters.

#### ***Criticism 3- the agreement was part of an anti-Loyalist cultural war and therefore its implementation is a Republican victory.***

The continued disputes with regard to Orange parades pre-date the BA and the Parades Commission, which remains unelected, unrepresentative and unaccountable is a product of the British Government and not the GFA. Yet the OO parades are not the only means by which the Loyalist community can express itself culturally and there are less publicised examples of this...

*“These small events often appear below the line of public visibility: the Shankill womens centre and the women from the Falls Culterlann centre have collaborated over the past year and a half on an interface walk and a community festival to celebrate international peace day.” (Nolan, 2014)*



***Criticism 4- the Stormont system of Government has no official opposition.***

The D'Hont form of electing a government produces the best possible means of inclusion. Exclusion of communities in the past led to the poverty, pain and conflict from which we are now trying to emerge. Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain are all economically damaged countries which gained no shelter from the traditional *punch and Judy* system of parliament. *Representative* government instead of *majority* government makes absolute sense in a country emerging from conflict, as it denies 51% the opportunity to bully a powerless 49%. Those Unionists who demand a return to majority rule ought to consider the likely policies of a Sinn Fein/SDLP/GREEN/Alliance coalition Government free to exclude Unionism from its cabinet.

***Criticism 5-Sinn Fein are getting loads of funding!***

The expenditure claims/expenses system is no different for Sinn Fein than it is for any other party. The DUP also do very nicely. If their constituents don't see the benefit it raises questions of their assembly members' performance.

*“The DUP therefore had a party allowance of £138,000 from the assembly in 2007/8, plus other smaller allowances adding up to £29,776... This funding is spent on subsidising the now sizeable party backroom teams...” (Gordon, 2010)*

***Criticism 6- The Assembly is too big!***

I disagree with this point for many of the same reasons that I disagree with criticism 4. The greater the number of MLA's returned by each constituency the smaller the chance of exclusion at a time when our country, peoples and peace-process can afford exclusion the least. If the expense of paying these assemblymen/women is too great, which has been argued by big house Unionists as well as others, then they had better explain their awarding themselves an 11% pay rise last year!

I believe the real reason the apex of Unionism would like the assembly made smaller is two-fold... Firstly one must remind oneself what a legislative branch of Government is for. Passing laws, and holding the executive branch of government to account. The smaller the assembly the less stringently those at the top are held to account and those at the leather armchair end of Unionism will forever be drawn toward less accountability. Secondly, a smaller assembly would solidify the *themuns vs. ussuns* reality of election battle here, which those at the top utilise so well.

***Criticism 7- They might get an Irish Language Act!***

The Irish language is not *theirs* any more than it's *ours*. Added to that, the BA does not make any mention of an 'Irish language act', it merely pledges support to the Irish language, the institutions used to champion such an act could be utilised to oppose it too. The Good Friday Agreement has copper fastened Northern Ireland's self determination, it has brought Republicans to acknowledge Northern Ireland, and has brought a horrific cycle of violence and killings almost to an end. There is now a political scene. A multitude of parties, movements, activists and debates spurred on through protest and social media.

I attended several of the recent anti-racism protests and found myself frequently locked in sunshine bleached discussion with members of the Socialist party, the TUV, the Alliance Party, NI21, the Workers Party, as well as a multitude of bloggers of every conceivable politic. Upon telling a friend of this (she happens to be of an older generation) she appeared quite teary. I pressed her on why this had evoked in her such a reaction, she said, "...because that's how it *used* to be here, before all the *nonsense*." This is a peace-based political scene and because of the work put into its creation by political Loyalism in the 1990's we are absolutely entitled to a place at this table!

The GFA brought us local accountability. If the minister responsible for your local hospital is aloof, or just plain inadequate you are merely a short drive from his office were he or she can be subjected to your merciless retribution on a weekly basis pending those glorious 2-3 weeks when he or she shall be begging for your vote. Because when properly applied, this is how our young post conflict democracy can work. Northern Ireland has its own peoples, problems and quirks and devolution allows for this. Devolution allows for the diversities of the UK here, in Scotland and in Wales too.

Northern Ireland receives £11 billion pounds of a budget which is far over and above what we could ever hope to raise by ourselves, thanks to the Barnett formula, deployed via the GFA.

*"Stormont's annual budget consists of about £10bn in departmental spending and £1bn in infrastructure spending." (BBC NEWS, 2014)*

Every Northern Irish person can now access free medical prescriptions which are a massive help to those on low wages, this legislation was made possible by devolution thanks to the GFA.

Northern Irish people now have direct access to the European convention on human rights (ECHR) act, which will go a long way to ensuring so many of our country's past mistakes do not get repeated, thanks to the GFA.

To appeal to our more prominent Unionist sensitivities the GFA has removed Articles 2 and 3 from the Irish constitution thus re-aligning the whole relationship between Northern Ireland and its neighbour. The Republic is now constitutionally prepared for a thirty-two county state *only* if and when the people of Northern Ireland want it too. This differs massively from its prior outright demand dispensed of by the GFA! The Republic of Ireland could not be more respectful of Northern Ireland's right to exist as a neighbouring member country of the United Kingdom.

The Good Friday Agreement also laid waste to the undemocratic and politically sinister Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA). Replaced wholesale by the GFA which would *not* be delivered over the heads of the Northern Irish people for the purpose of cutting the legs from under Unionism. And so gone was the betrayal which had *made* Paisley and given him his platform to terrify a generation of Ulster Protestants from entering *actual* politics.

*"This agreement shall replace the agreement between the British and Irish governments done at Hillsborough on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1985 which shall cease to have effect on entry into force of this agreement." (Article 3, GFA, 1998)* So what remains for the sceptic yet? Is it a genuine concern of what a Northern Ireland Assembly may bring into law? If so allow me to abate your fears. You will have heard of the dastardly *petition of concern*...

*"Key decisions requiring cross community support will be designated in advance... by a petition of concern brought by a significant minority of assembly members (30/108)" (Strand one, GFA, 1998)*

Indeed an objection by just thirty MLA's is enough to demand that *only* a special dual mandate (which means both Nationalists and Unionists must approve) or weighted majority (meaning 60% is needed to pass the legislation, not a simple majority) can pass a given bill into law. This is a safeguard against legislative bullying of which I am particularly proud. Each time it is deployed to scupper something I favour I of course hate it, for half an hour. Then I remember that the next time it may be deployed in my favour.

So why do so many PUL's still hate the GFA? Because cursing *that stupid sell-out agreement* insulates many politicians from the reality of their underperformance. Blaming the GFA for Unionism receiving consistent political defeats is akin to blaming the laws of football for your team having a bad season. It's like the always comical excuse tendered by football managers 'unfortunately the pitch tonight was in terrible condition!' Am I the only one who thinks 'sure, but weren't the other team playing on the same one?' Nationalist politicians are elected by the same electoral system; sit in the same seats with the same resources and the same access to the same committees as do Unionist ones.

Many Big-house Unionist politicians encourage anti-GFA sentiment because the alternative would be their being held to account. It makes questions such as '*with the continued failure of Protestant working class boys at school why don't Unionists agree to secure the education ministry, even for one term?*' less likely to crop up. Now please don't misunderstand, the academic failure of a child from any community is unacceptable, but my point is that many find cursing their lot due to *that beastly agreement* more convenient than dealing with such issues at all.

*"Protestant boys with free school meal entitlement achieve less than any of the other main social groups in Northern Ireland and hover near the bottom when compared with groups in England"* (Nolan, 2014)

The above quotation is taken from a document under the sub-heading...

*"Failure lies in wait for young working class Protestant males"* (Nolan, 2014)

Encouragement of anti-agreement Loyalism helps shield big-house Unionist politicians from questions such as '*Catholic communities have all the same problems we have, so how come their politicians inspire them into political activity yet you can't do that for young Protestants?*'

*"Catholics still experience more economic and social disadvantage than Protestants. According to the Labour force survey they are more likely to be unemployed, according to the census they are more likely to be in poor health."* (Nolan, 2014)

Allowing a pattern of anti-agreement self-pity to fester prevents those who buy into it from asking questions such as '*If people are getting their homes vandalised because they are of a different race or speak a different language than the rest of us, why is the guy I elected to Stormont last May doing nothing about it? For that matter, why haven't I?*'

As poorly performing Unionist politicians continue to drift out of touch with our population as it is, preferring instead to imagine it as they would like it to be, they will have to grasp at more and more embittered and dramatic excuses for the declining living standards, hope, and reputation of those they are failing to represent.

Let's stop this from happening. I'm tired of hearing excuses.

William Ennis