Consent, not victory

Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement and the long maintenance of peace, 1998-2024

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ABSTRACT

On 10 April 1998, after almost two years of negotiations and a conflict that had killed more than 3,400 people since 1969, Northern Ireland's parties and two governments reached the Good Friday Agreement. Its restraint: neither side renounced its aim - a united Ireland or the Union - only the method, under a consent principle ratified in twin referendums that May, 71 percent in the North and 94 in the South. Implementation was slower than the signing: 428 paramilitary prisoners released on licence by 2000, policing rebuilt to 30 percent Catholic officers by 2011, the IRA's arsenal verifiably decommissioned in 2005, and in 2007 power shared by parties that had refused to meet. The institutions have since stopped - four breakdowns, plus two one-day suspensions - and been rebuilt each time. This case study examines the machinery of a maintained peace, and what a post-war Sri Lanka can conditionally use.

WHY THIS CASE FOR SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka's war ended the other way. The 26-year conflict between the government and the LTTE killed an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people on United Nations figures before ending in military victory in May 2009 - not in a negotiated settlement. The most recent negotiating process, the Norwegian-facilitated ceasefire of 22 February 2002 - after earlier Indian-brokered and direct rounds in the 1980s and 1990s - broke down without ever being put to a public vote, and the devolution framework that predated it - the 13th Amendment of November 1987, which created provincial councils - was never implemented with its full police and land powers; the first Northern Provincial Council election was held only in September 2013, four years after the war. Northern Ireland is the documented modern record of the road not taken: a communal conflict brought to a negotiated close, with institutions deliberately built to keep it closed. Its record also shows what that road costs - repeated suspensions, deadlines and repairs - which matters for judging it honestly.

THE STARTING POINT: A CONFLICT WITH TWO IRRECONCILABLE MANDATES

The Troubles killed 3,532 people between 1969 and 2001 on the Sutton Index maintained by Ulster University's CAIN project; 1972 alone cost 480 lives. The constitutional question underneath - whether Northern Ireland belonged in the United Kingdom or a united Ireland - had defeated earlier initiatives because any settlement that resolved it lost one community. The 1994 paramilitary ceasefires opened a window: in June 1996 multi-party talks began under US Senator George Mitchell, serving as President Clinton's special adviser, with Sinn Féin admitted only after the IRA restored its ceasefire in 1997. Mitchell set a deadline of 9 April 1998. The parties, with prime ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern in the room, missed it by hours and reached agreement on the afternoon of 10 April, Good Friday.

THE DECISIONS: DEFER THE QUESTION, DESIGN THE PEACE

The agreement's first decision was to not decide. The consent principle recognised Northern Ireland's status in the United Kingdom as resting on majority consent, made any change valid only through concurrent majorities North and South, and bound both governments to legislate for a united Ireland if that wish ever emerged. Ireland replaced the territorial claim in Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution with an aspiration exercisable only by consent; Britain accepted the binding obligation. The second decision was mandatory power-sharing: a 108-member Assembly elected proportionally, ministers allocated by party strength, and a joint First Minister and deputy First Minister requiring cross-community support - majority rule was deliberately unavailable. The third made disarmament a process rather than an event: an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning would verify weapons put beyond use, checked against security-force estimates. The fourth tied prisoner releases to ceasefires: early release on licence, reviewed case by case, revocable, with no amnesty for unprosecuted crimes. The fifth rebuilt the police through an independent commission under Chris Patten. And the whole was locked in twice - by the twin referendums of 22 May 1998 (71.1 percent yes in the North on 81 percent turnout, 94.4 percent in the Republic) and by a UK-Ireland treaty - with the European Union funding peace programmes and the United States as standing sponsor.

THE DECISION CHAIN: DATES

31 August 1994	IRA ceasefire; loyalist ceasefires follow in October, opening the talks window
10 June 1996	Multi-party talks open under Senator George Mitchell; Sinn Féin admitted after the 1997 IRA ceasefire
10 April 1998	Agreement reached on Good Friday, hours past Mitchell's deadline; the DUP walks out and campaigns against it
22 May 1998	Referendums: 71.1 percent yes in Northern Ireland (81 percent turnout), 94.4 percent in the Republic
25 June 1998	Assembly election: UUP 28, SDLP 24, DUP 20, Sinn Féin 18 of 108 seats; Trimble and Mallon to lead
15 August 1998	Omagh bomb by the dissident Real IRA kills 29 - the worst single atrocity of the Troubles
9 September 1999	Patten report: 175 recommendations, including 50:50 Catholic-Protestant recruitment
2 December 1999	Power devolved to the new Executive; the first suspension follows in February 2000
28 July 2000	Prisoner releases complete: 428 freed early on licence, including 143 life-sentence prisoners
August-September 2001	Two one-day suspensions announced (10 August, 21 September) buy time in the decommissioning standoff
4 November 2001	The RUC is replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland
14 October 2002	Assembly suspended; direct rule lasts four and a half years
26 September 2005	Decommissioning body verifies the totality of the IRA's arsenal destroyed, witnessed by two clergymen
13 October 2006	St Andrews Agreement maps restoration; on 28 January 2007 Sinn Féin votes to support the PSNI - a republican first
8 May 2007	Devolution restored; Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness sworn in as First and deputy First Ministers
2017-2024	Two collapses (January 2017 heating scandal; February 2022 post-Brexit trade) and two restorations (January 2020; 3 February 2024, first nationalist First Minister)

MEASURED OUTCOMES I: THE GUNS, THE PRISONERS, THE POLICE

The security change is the strongest finding. Conflict deaths on the Sutton Index, 88 in 1993 and 64 in 1994, fell to 55 in 1998 - 29 of them at Omagh - and to 8 in 1999, and they have remained low ever since. Decommissioning, the issue that had collapsed the first Executive, was completed on 26 September 2005, when the commission reported it had verified the destruction of what it judged to be the totality of the IRA's arsenal, checked against both governments' security estimates and witnessed by a Catholic priest and a Methodist minister. General de Chastelain was precise about the verb: the IRA had not surrendered - it had put weapons beyond use under supervision, and that distinction was part of what made the act possible. Prisoner release, the provision that nearly sank the referendum, was finished by 28 July 2000: 428 prisoners freed early on licence, 143 of them serving life sentences, each case reviewed individually and conditional on their organisations maintaining ceasefires. And policing, the daily interface of the state, was rebuilt on the Patten design: the PSNI replaced the RUC in November 2001, and ten years of 50:50 recruitment raised the Catholic share of officers from 8.2 percent in 2001 to 30.4 percent in 2011, when the special measure lapsed as planned. In January 2007 Sinn Féin voted to endorse the police - a step its base had rejected for decades - removing the DUP's final precondition for sharing power.

MEASURED OUTCOMES II: THE POLITICS AND THE PEACE DIVIDEND

Politically, the design held and kept failing at the same time. The DUP, which had campaigned against the agreement in 1998, entered government with Sinn Féin in 2007, and the institutions ran uninterrupted for a decade. They then collapsed for three years from 2017 and for two more from 2022 - over a heating-subsidy scandal and post-Brexit trade rules rather than the constitutional question - and were rebuilt both times, in February 2024 with Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill as the first nationalist First Minister, an outcome the 1998 design made administrative rather than revolutionary. The economic peace dividend was real but modest, and the assessments closest to the data say so. Research for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Economics Observatory records that unemployment, which averaged 11.0 percent between 1992 and 1997 against a UK figure of 8.9, fell below the UK rate for the first time in 2005, and that employment grew 22.7 percent between 1998 and 2022 - the strongest of any UK region outside London. But productivity remained the lowest of the UK regions, and the public sector still carried 27 percent of jobs in 2022 against a UK share of 18. The EU's PEACE programmes spent about 2.3 billion euros on some 22,500 community projects between 1995 and 2020 - money that bought contact and time, not convergence.

TRANSFER LIMITS: WHAT NORTHERN IRELAND DOES NOT PROVE

First, the external architecture has no Sri Lankan equivalent: two sovereign governments as co-guarantors bound by treaty, the United States as an engaged sponsor with no territorial stake, and the European Union paying for peacebuilding. Sri Lanka's facilitator, Norway, could monitor but not bind, and the regional power, India, carried its own history inside the conflict rather than standing above it. Second, the agreement worked by not settling the final-status question; it made the constitutional dispute survivable. Sri Lanka's peace track made that question - unitary state versus deeper devolution - the item to be settled, and it was the item on which successive rounds failed: even the 2002-03 rounds that agreed at Oslo to explore a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka deadlocked over the interim administration. Third, the LTTE's founding demand was an independent state, not compatible with a consent-based retention of Sri Lanka's unity, while the IRA's aim could be deferred without being renounced - and was. Fourth, Northern Ireland's transition ran on a permanent UK fiscal subvention and British security guarantees that no debt-stressed sovereign can reproduce. Fifth, the sources behind this record - government texts, official inquiries, the CAIN database, EU and Assembly research - were largely produced by parties to, and beneficiaries of, the process; every figure here is dated and attributed for that reason.

CONDITIONAL LESSONS FOR SRI LANKA

These are design observations, not prescriptions.

1. Make the final-status question survivable rather than settled. The consent principle let unionists and republicans sign without renouncing their aims: aims were parked, methods surrendered. Sri Lanka's peace rounds repeatedly demanded that the devolution question be answered before politics could proceed; the Northern Ireland design ran the sequence the other way.

2. Verification beats trust, and witnesses beat assertions. The decommissioning commission destroyed nothing on paper: it counted weapons against both governments' intelligence estimates and put two clergymen in the room to say what they saw. Sri Lanka's 2002 ceasefire text contains no decommissioning provision at all - the monitoring mission's mandate was violation reporting - so the arms question, and the suspicion around it, stayed live until the war returned.

3. Prisoners and police are the daily currency of peace. Releases in Northern Ireland were licensed, conditional and case-by-case - no blanket amnesty and no impunity for unprosecuted crimes - and policing was rebuilt toward 30 percent Catholic officers on a published timetable with a sunset clause. Sri Lanka's post-2009 releases and rehabilitation went ahead, but outside any framework both sides had ratified in advance.

4. Ratify peace publicly. The twin referendums of May 1998 made the agreement the property of two electorates; no later government in London or Dublin has attempted to abandon it, and ratification is the plausible reason (desk interpretation). Sri Lanka's 2002 ceasefire was never put to any vote - it was never ratified beyond its signatories; the government that signed it fell in 2004, and the successor government formally withdrew in January 2008.

5. Expect maintenance, not completion. The institutions stopped in 2000, twice for a day in 2001, from 2002 to 2007, from 2017 to 2020 and from 2022 to 2024 - and each time the parties rebuilt them: in 2000 after an IRA arms commitment and a Unionist Council vote, and later under restoration deals negotiated for the purpose - St Andrews in 2006, New Decade, New Approach in January 2020, and the February 2024 deal. A settlement that requires permanent harmony fails at the first scandal; one that expects breakdown can survive it.

The agreement's real claim is narrow: deaths that ran at 88 in 1993 fell to 8 by 1999 and have stayed low in the quarter-century since, and the constitutional question is now argued in a legislature rather than contested by force. For Sri Lanka, whose war ended without such machinery, the case is a map of the road not taken - with its tolls marked.

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