

# Crisis in the North: Twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement

Shaun Harkin

**T**he Good Friday Agreement (GFA), also known as the Belfast Agreement, is viewed as marking the end of the violent conflict often referred to as ‘the Troubles’ in the North of Ireland, that left more than 3,600 dead and more than 50,000 injured. The aim of the GFA was to create the conditions to ensure there would be no return to the grinding conflict of the preceding three decades. The northern state would transition to a functioning ‘normal’ modern democratic state much like Britain or the Republic of Ireland. Peace and prosperity were the prominent themes. Sectarian division would gradually disappear. However, twenty years on, Northern Ireland is still very much between war and peace. Much, minus the intensity of violence, has changed but far too much remains the same. The collapse of the Stormont Assembly in January 2017, the centrepiece of power sharing, and the present sharp political polarisation between Nationalism and Unionism is a stark reminder of the dysfunctional character of the northern state.

As expected, the anniversary received global attention. For many, the prospect of a peaceful resolution in Northern Ireland seemed impossible. The issues that gave rise to ‘the Troubles’ were presented as intractable. The ‘Irish problem’ was hundreds of years old; Protestants and Catholics locked in contention over the past. The ‘peace process’ or transitioning ‘post-conflict’ society is, therefore, supposedly a model for other places locked in strife and division. Movers and shakers, especially those of the international political establishment from Tony Blair, former US Senator George Mitchell, to Bill and Hillary Clinton, who played some role in helping to shape and deliver ‘peace’, have never been shy about taking credit or accepting praise for bringing, almost saviour-like through ‘daring diplomacy’, the bit-

terly divided Protestant and Catholic people together. This has always been a profoundly condescending view. The self-agency of the vast majority of people living in the North doesn’t much come into it. Nevertheless, since the main institution, the deadlocked Stormont parliament tasked with ensuring the transition to peace is presently in crisis, celebrations had to be more muted.

The fact that Stormont has been without an executive, initially over a DUP initiated financial scandal but now over more fundamental issues, for closing in on two years points to the fundamental limitations of the GFA and the North’s peace process. The political division between the North’s two main communities, Nationalist and Unionist, has once again risen to the surface. This has left many distraught. So sharp is the polarisation, some conclude further political progress is once again impossible. However, rather than blaming the supposedly angry bitter people of the Shankill and Falls Road or in the Bogside or Fountain, the fault lies with the framework and institutions created by the GFA itself. The vast majority of people in the North want to move beyond sectarian division and segregation but the GFA actually reinforces and entrenches communal divisions between Nationalism and Unionism, rather than challenging them. Therefore, while there is much potential for class based politics to emerge in response to the crisis of people’s daily lives; so too is there potential for a sectarian resurgence.

Sectarianism, the architects of the GFA proposed, would wither away as politics and the people in the North focused on developing a prosperous and inclusive society. However, sectarianism has not withered away. The vast majority of people wish never to return to the violence of the Troubles, but they are yet to experience any kind of prosperity. With relentless austerity, the

lives of many people have not improved but have become more impoverished. The GFA actively avoided dealing with sectarianism and the roots of the violence in the North.

The GFA sought to ‘park’ the issue of partition. The question of the Irish border would be solved at a later date, it was argued, by constitutional means. Ambiguity was built into the GFA in order for it to be interpreted in multiple ways. If you wish to see partition ended; there is a basis for this in the commitments of the GFA. If you believe in the union with Britain and want to see partition maintained; the GFA can be viewed to guarantee the status quo. After decades of war, a majority of people were willing to accept this ambiguity.

### **Partition and the establishment of Northern Ireland**

Partition led to the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1921. Following on from the 1916 Rising and the end of the First World War a revolutionary upheaval challenged the social order and British rule across Ireland. Partition, along with Black and Tan violence, was part of a counter-revolutionary backlash supported by conservative Nationalist elites in the South, Unionist elites in the North and the British government. Unable to force all of Ireland to remain under its dominance the British establishment, with its Unionist allies, fought to keep the most industrially developed region under its control.

Unionist violence against the Catholic minority buttressed by the British government and military was central to the state’s foundation. Northern Ireland was designed to have an in-built Protestant majority to ensure Unionist rule and maintain participation in the United Kingdom. Sectarian discrimination against Catholics and Nationalists in all spheres—political, economic and security structures—of the Northern state were intrinsic from the outset. The Catholic population was viewed by the Unionist political and economic establishment as a mortal threat to the existence of Northern Ireland as a Protestant dominated and pro-British state. The need to demoralise and marginalise the Catholic population was blatant and celebrated. Catholics needed to know their place and the Protestant working class was linked to the Unionist project through a combination of fear, the ideology of the Orange Order and relatively better access to employment and housing

than their Catholic counterparts. Though, for much of the Protestant working class, poverty was widespread.

From the beginning, the strength of the sectarian Unionist state was built on the back of Belfast’s industrial power and Britain’s global power. By the 1950s and early 1960s both were weakened and in decline. Firstly, industrial Belfast, along with cities such as Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester, was in permanent contraction. Belfast lost out to global shifts in production and advancing technology. Secondly, the power of the British Empire, long in retreat, further waned as it was forced out of former colonies all around the world in the post-Second World War era. While the Unionist establishment was forced to cast around for new economic partners, among whom included its Southern neighbour, a space opened up for political reform.

### **Challenging the Unionist State: From Civil Rights to ‘the Troubles’**

Inspired by and modelled upon the Black Civil Rights movement in the US, a Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement took shape and challenged systematic discrimination directed at the minority Catholic population in the 1960s. As occurred in many other places across the world, struggle erupted across the North in 1968. The Civil Rights Movement demanded equal voting rights, the end of electoral gerrymandering, housing and employment equality and the redistribution of state resources and investment. The Unionist political establishment responded initially with less than half-hearted attempts at reform and then with full-on violence—exposing the sectarian nature of the northern state. The Unionist state, now in a much weaker position than during the era of partition, was forced to make concessions by a mass movement in areas of voting rights, gerrymandering, housing and more.

In response to growing demands and action for reforms and fundamental change, Westminster sent British troops into the North in 1969 with many believing they were there to protect the Catholic population from out of control Unionist state violence, led by the RUC. A central demand of the Civil Rights Movement was for Catholics to be treated in the same way as all other UK citizens. This clearly was not the case in the North. Consecutive British governments since partition had let

Unionism run the Northern state without interference even though discrimination was widespread. Part of the Civil Rights movement's strategy, lifted from the Black struggle in the US, was to embarrass the British government into pressuring Unionism towards reform. However, while the British government was willing to press for moderate changes, the British Army was sent to the North to shore up the threat of insurgency from below presented to the Northern state. Before long, it was clear to most Catholics and Nationalists which side the British Army was on. Internment, the imprisonment of thousands of Nationalists and Catholics without charge, the Ballymurphy massacre in Belfast and Bloody Sunday in Derry led many young Nationalists to believe reform was impossible.

As the conflict escalated, it became increasingly militarised. British state violence, collusion with loyalist paramilitary death squads and repression increased dramatically. In the aftermath of Bloody Sunday and other incidents, support for the campaign of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) grew enormously. The peaceful mass disobedience approach of the Civil Rights Movement was pushed off the streets through state violence and repression. In 1968 socialists organised inside the Civil Rights Movement around an appeal to 'Class not Creed'. There was certainly an opening for socialist class struggle politics, however, in the context of rising violence this space narrowed while political divisions based on Unionism and Nationalism hardened. Unionism has always been adept at beating the Orange drum to instill fear within the Protestant lower orders whenever a class based challenge emerged. The leadership of the reborn PIRA was hostile to socialism and focused on developing the armed struggle against the British Army.

With the North spiraling into deeper crisis, the British government suspended the Stormont Parliament in March 1972 and introduced Direct Rule from London. Fifty years of unchallenged Unionist rule of the North was ended. The 1973 Sunningdale Agreement attempted to reopen Stormont but Unionists refused to accept power-sharing and any arrangements involving the Republic of Ireland. Further efforts to revive devolved government were made in the 1980s but collapsed. Efforts by the British government, the Irish government and moderate political parties in the North to end political violence through the 1970s and 1980s failed.

For the vast majority of Nationalists and Catholics, it was clear equality in the Northern state wasn't on the agenda.

### **The new global order & the North of Ireland**

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed massive changes internationally. The USSR collapsed. The Berlin Wall was sledgehammered. Apartheid ended in South Africa. In 1993 the Oslo Accords were signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The United States emerged from the Cold War as the uncontested global power. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the US, movements such as the PIRA and the PLO that posed a challenge to the political status quo were left isolated. The US seized the opportunity to broker solutions to seemingly intractable conflicts, but on its own terms. South Africa ended minority white rule but capitalism was firmly entrenched. The 'free market' was spread with disastrous implications for the vast majority of people in the former USSR and Eastern European states.

Reaganism and Thatcherism were firmly entrenched as the guiding economic philosophies of the US and UK. The US led the aggressive push for a new global neoliberal capitalist order. Welfare states, trade unions, regulation of the market and financial centres were burned through. The state would retreat from the delivery of public services to be replaced by private companies delivering 'products' to 'consumers' with the goal of maximising profit instead of maximising social well-being. What this meant, whether in South Africa, Israel-Palestine or the North of Ireland, was that the resolutions to conflicts would not pose a threat to the existing economic order. Economic assistance from major powers to regions scarred with violence and conflict would come with strings attached. Self-styled liberation movements accepted that radical demands for fundamental social change and socialism needed to be ditched in exchange for the participation of the US and other major international players.

### **Towards a peace settlement**

In this context, the 1990s witnessed renewed attempts to end the conflict in the North. Working class areas, both Catholic and Protestant, which bore the brunt of political violence, deaths, repression, imprisonment and deprivation, were exhausted. Despite being worn down

by infiltration and containment, the PIRA's campaign to end British rule appeared to be capable of continuing but not winning. The demand for an end to violence coming from areas where its support was based, coupled with the acknowledgement armed struggle could not defeat the far more powerful British army, pushed its political wing, Sinn Féin, to work towards finding a way to bring about a settlement. The British government helped this along with a declaration it had no 'selfish strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland. The statement indicated the British government would not stand in the way of Irish unity if a majority of people in the North consented to it.

In 1993 the British government was forced to acknowledge it had maintained communications with the PIRA for the best part of a decade. The following December talks between British Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds led to the Downing Street Declaration. This document stated: "The British government agree that it is for the people of the island alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish." In January 1994, sensing Sinn Féin were serious about the 'drive for peace' US President Bill Clinton, with the backing of sections of the American political establishment, agreed to provide Gerry Adams with a visa to visit the US. This was viewed as a major victory for Sinn Féin and confirmation that they could depend on further US intervention to secure a settlement.

The PIRA announced a ceasefire on August 31, 1994. Loyalist paramilitaries then declared their own ceasefire the following October. Bill Clinton followed this with a visit to encourage talks involving the North's political parties towards a peaceful resolution and in doing so put the US stamp on further developments. Tony Blair's election in 1997 galvanised the push towards a peace agreement. Another PIRA ceasefire followed and Sinn Féin were included in talks despite a DUP boycott. By now, despite many setbacks, the direction of travel towards an agreement involving the main political players in the North, the British and Irish governments and supported by the US was clear.

## **The Belfast Agreement**

The Belfast Agreement was announced on Good Friday, April 10, 1998. The overall agreement, including its various strands and provisions, was ratified by the British and Irish governments along with eight political parties, led by the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), in the North. Referendums were held in the North and the South of Ireland to cement support for the new departure. In the North there was an 81 per cent electoral turnout and 71 per cent vote in favour of the agreement. Simultaneously, 94 per cent in the South voted in favour of removing the state's constitutional territorial claim to the North. Therefore, a majority of people on the island of Ireland ratified the plan for peace. Whatever the limitations of the GFA, the vast majority of people were relieved and prepared to be optimistic about the future. Those in the Republican movement who planned to continue with armed struggle were a marginalised minority.

Politically, the agreement acknowledged a majority of people wanted the North to remain as part of the United Kingdom and, also, that a substantial section of people in the North, and a majority of people across Ireland, wished to see a united Ireland. Therefore, the political meaning of the agreement was left open to interpretation. For Unionism, the link with Britain was guaranteed. The Irish government agreed to amend the Irish Constitution to end the territorial claim to the North. For those in favour of ending partition and Irish reunification, a constitutional road opened to this outcome. Meaning, that the British government would not stand in the way of a united Ireland.

Beyond the issue of the constitutional status of the North, other elements within the Agreement were designed to give everyone what they needed to sell it to 'their' communities: demilitarisation of the British Army's presence, paramilitary decommissioning, police reform, the 'normalisation' of Northern Ireland, respect for all identities, communities and traditions encapsulated in the term 'parity of esteem'. People living in the North would have the right to Irish citizenship, British citizenship, both or none. Prisoners involved in the conflict would be given early release. Close to 300 border crossings across the 310 mile border would be reopened and checkpoints removed. The Common Travel Area, already in existence since the 1920s, would

continue to guarantee free movement across Ireland and the UK. The legacy of discrimination would be addressed, it was suggested, through the creation of the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Along with structures incorporating the involvement of the UK and Irish governments, the Agreement created two new main institutions, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. The Assembly is a devolved legislature with mandatory cross-community voting. The Executive created power-sharing with ministerial portfolios proportionally allocated between the largest Assembly parties using the D'Hondt method (proportional representation in the allocation of ministries). This 'consociationalist' arrangement, meaning regulated power-sharing, was geared toward creating a finely tuned balance between Unionism and Nationalism to create political stability, constitutional democracy and to avoid a return to violence.

The Petition of Concern was included in order to protect equality and prevent discrimination against minorities. This mechanism would allow legislation to be vetoed or blocked if 30 members of the Assembly signed a petition in opposition. Where controversial legislation existed a simple majority would not be enough to pass it. Majority support would be required from both Unionist and Nationalists in the Assembly.

### **Stormont: From Crisis to Crisis**

Despite the meticulously detailed language and provisions to ensure power-sharing and stability Stormont appears regularly on the brink of crisis or in full blown crisis. Direct Rule was re-imposed from 2002 until 2007. The Assembly could only be reopened following the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006. Obviously, however, this new agreement and provisions did nothing to counteract the tendency towards instability, impasse and stalemate. The emergence of Sinn Féin and the DUP as the two largest political parties in the North, eclipsing the SDLP and UUP, intensified communal standoffs. The DUP had initially opposed the GFA on the basis of Sinn Féin's inclusion.

Trenchant political enemies, Sinn Féin and the DUP concluded power-sharing was the only game in town. Power-sharing also meant actual power over the areas devolved to Stormont governance. Such is the nature

of Stormont and the GFA, Sinn Féin and the DUP were often bitterly at odds over the direction of policy and spending, with the entrance of the fundamental issue of the Union versus a united Ireland always looming in a debate, but were more than willing to collaborate in areas that would reinforce their dominance of their community. For many, Stormont power appeared no more than a corrupt sectarian carve-up of rackets and undemocratic funding channels between the two main parties.

### **How the GFA entrenches sectarianism and dysfunction**

Politicians elected to the Stormont Assembly must declare themselves Nationalist, Unionist or Other. As such, it's taken for granted that there are two communities in the North and the largest political parties in the chamber represent their wishes. When legislation is contested, as described above, those who are 'Other' do not count in the vote since what matters is majority support from both Unionists and Nationalists.

The dynamic at Stormont is two communal blocks, Nationalist and Unionist, competing for 'their' community against the rights and demands of the other community. Therefore, gains for one community appear to come at the expense of the other main community. This is a recipe for constantly heating up communal divisions within broader society. It should hardly come as a surprise then when people on the ground reflect sectarian debates and attitudes expressed constantly in the Assembly.

The Petition of Concern, designed to be a bulwark against discrimination, has been systematically used, primarily by the DUP, to block equality. This has been the case regarding marriage equality for LGBTQ communities and also rights for Irish speakers. And the communal nature of Stormont means that every equality issue, or issues involving cuts and financial scandals, becomes sectarianised. The representatives of one community are for it while the other is against. The specific details of power-sharing actually encourage and enshrine sectarian bigotry and anti-equality practices. This is how sectarianism becomes built into the fabric of the political system and is then encouraged throughout broader society. Resulting from this, the space for those who seek to promote the politics of Other or neither is constantly narrowed.

Not only does this mean sectarian divisions are promoted but it also means Stormont is a site of dysfunction. Even though a majority of people support changing legislation to allow marriage equality or abortion law reform, Stormont is incapable of delivering.

### **A Failed State**

Despite the ‘peace process’, Northern Irish society is not integrating. In fact, since the political institutions are based on communal division the GFA is an obstacle to integration. Therefore, people on the ground in both communities working towards integration face a tremendous challenge. 90 per cent of social housing estates are single identity, meaning they are either Catholic or Protestant. Hundreds of so-called Peace Walls constructed during the conflict to divide Catholic and Protestant areas remain in place and have no prospect of coming down. 90 per cent of children are educated in Protestant or Catholic schools. A mere 10 per cent of relationships in the North are ‘mixed’, involving a Catholic and Protestant.

The legacy of the Troubles haunts society. Paramilitarism, in the form of shootings or beatings for so-called ‘anti-social’ behaviour or through stifling political control, still blights working class areas. Ulster University research estimates 30 per cent of people living in the North suffer with a mental health issue. Devastatingly, suicide rates are higher in the North than in the rest of the UK. Alarmingly, over 4,500 people, more than those killed during the years of conflict, have committed suicide since the GFA.

When it comes to dealing with issues related to the Troubles, Stormont and the GFA have also failed. Little progress has been made on resolving legacy issues. Family members and victims of atrocities and deaths during the Troubles have received little in the form of justice. For example, decades of campaigning by the relatives of the Bloody Sunday victims forced the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, to admit all who were killed were innocent, but no one, from the soldiers who pulled triggers to the top military brass and ministers who ordered and organised the slaughter, have been held to account. The same goes for the Ballymurphy massacre and many other injustices committed through the conflict. The British state is against opening the books on its ‘dirty war’ in the North. This includes collusion with loyalist death

squads and the running of a vast network of informers. The DUP is determined to protect security forces that were involved in state violence. Sinn Féin back inquest campaigns for justice but have appeared willing in the past to cut a deal over the past with Unionism. The GFA plan appears to be to drag out legacy inquest demands through a combination of funding delay and obstruction but hope that the passage of time leads to very limited resolutions, if any at all. In other words, the unspoken plan is to bury injustice inquiries so no one is held to account and so that new injustices can occur.

Women suffered disproportionately during the Troubles also. Poverty and violence is a toxic mix that led to increased levels of domestic abuse. A new women’s rights movement is asserting itself in the North, and across Ireland, but it has done so in spite of the GFA. Domestic abuse levels here continue to be at unacceptable levels and the pressure of poverty and reduced services can lead to a toxic environment where it can rise further.

In a context where sectarian hatred is normalised and where the denial of equality for the LGBTQ community and women is institutionalised in the fabric of the state—it should come as no surprise that the number of racially motivated hate crimes have risen, as have those directed against the LGBTQ community.

### **Austerity and privatisation**

Relentless austerity has compounded the challenges facing people in the North — eating away at the optimism created in 1998. British governments, from Labour under Tony Blair’s leadership to Tory rule beginning in 2010, have implemented austerity in the form of cuts to public services and the promotion of privatisation. The Tories have systematically reduced the size of the block spending grant to the North since 2010 by more than £10 billion. These cuts—mirrored across the UK—have put an enormous strain on the North’s public services. Without doubt, the devolution of powers in the UK has been used as vehicle by Westminster to transfer the administration of austerity to local authorities. The approach has been to transfer control of the budget to Stormont, but then continually reduce the amount in the budget.

The political establishment that played a role in underwriting the GFA, the US, EU, the British and Irish governments, promised prosperity but all were committed to neoliberalism. The notion that the

North's public sector was too large was taken as a given in the shaping of the peace process. The North's economy needed to be 'rebalanced'. This mantra was accepted by all the main political parties in the North, both Nationalist and Unionist. Rebalancing is code for reducing the public sector by encouraging privatisation. The North needed a 'vibrant' and 'dynamic' private sector to become a 'normal democracy'. Neoliberal privatisation would produce employment and new wealth. Global corporations would be enticed to the North by low wages, an extremely friendly business environment, tax breaks and subsidies.

Reducing the role of the state and increasing the dominance of the private sector is the Thatcherite and Reaganite theory for creating wealth that would then trickle down to the rest of the society. However, for the North, as well as the US, UK, EU and the South of Ireland, this has led to increased inequality and the reduction of access to public services. It has led to a race to the bottom for wages and incomes for most people. Wealth is created by plundering public services, slashing benefits and reducing wages. This process has happened slower in the North than elsewhere but it has occurred.

### **The Stormont House Agreement**

Consecutive British governments committed to neoliberalism and austerity are very much responsible for increasing inequality in the North. However, the Stormont Executive and Assembly were willing participants in this agenda, with many of their policies exacerbating the damage caused by Westminster.

For example, all of the major Unionist and Nationalist parties, and the Alliance Party, accepted the notion that the size of the North's public sector is a problem. The 'new Northern Ireland' needed to prioritise the private sector. This logic has led to disastrous local policy decisions and spending. For example, Private Finance Initiatives (PFI), supported by both the DUP and Sinn Féin, are deals signed by Stormont with private businesses for capital building projects such as office blocks or hospitals. Today they cost taxpayers £1 million a day and £375 million a year until 2030. These massive handouts to businesses are central to the rebalancing the North's economy to favour private business. Similarly, the NHS funding crisis in the North has been compounded by the privatisation and

outsourcing of services to private companies promoted by the Stormont Executive.

In 2015, the Sinn Féin and DUP Executive supported the Stormont House Agreement (SHA). This represented a watershed moment because it contained a full blown neoliberal 'Structural Adjustment Programme' for the North. The SHA included support for cutting Corporation Tax (a hand out to big business); welfare reforms that would slash benefits for claimants across the North; the selling of public assets to private interests for development; and the laying off of 20,000 public sector workers in a voluntary exit scheme based on borrowing £700 million. The SHA was austerity on steroids for the North. Sinn Féin's aggressive promotion of the SHA, on the basis that it was the best that could be achieved, did tremendous damage to the party's claim to being the most effective opponent of Tory austerity, champion of workers' rights and protector of the most vulnerable.

So widespread was the opposition to the SHA that it had to be scrapped. But its replacement, the Fresh Start Agreement, was a mirror copy minus Stormont taking responsibility for welfare reform. Instead of out-rightly opposing what would become a bruising attack on the most vulnerable in the North, Sinn Féin and DUP agreed to hand welfare powers back to the Tories so they could implement cuts. The results of this were predictable and have come to pass with thousands losing their benefits or seeing them reduced. Stormont had once again failed to act in the best interests of the people from all communities across the North.

As a result of the Troubles, the North has traditionally suffered from lower wages, higher levels of unemployment and larger numbers of people who are considered economically inactive. Pockets of working class areas, both Nationalist and Unionist, have higher levels of deprivation than the rest of the UK. These areas are the same areas where the conflict had the greatest impact and where mental health issues are most widespread. Combined with the running down of public services, these areas have remained impoverished. The growing number of food banks across the North is a sure sign poverty has deepened while the number of millionaires in the North has increased.

In terms of tackling poverty and deprivation, the GFA has failed. But, not only that, increasing deprivation in the North is mediated through the sectarian character of the North. Meaning, one community will believe they

have lost out because the other community has gained. This narrative is promoted by Unionist politicians to explain why Protestant working class areas have become worse off over the last twenty years. This toxic explanation can easily inflame sectarian tensions and lead to violence. Indeed, the great danger in the North is that austerity, combined with the GFA's naturalisation of communal division and difference, can lead to sectarian violence.

### **RHI and Stormont Dysfunction**

The former leader of Sinn Féin, Martin McGuinness, announced he was stepping down as deputy First Minister in January 2017. This led directly to the collapse of Stormont. McGuinness cited the DUP's intransigence over taking responsibility for the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) financial scandal and their continued lack of respect for equality over the preceding decade. This came only years after Sinn Féin and the DUP's declaration of intent to make "Northern Ireland work", through the neo-liberal and austerity ridden SHA.

RHI was designed to move the North towards sustainable energy use. Instead, as a result of whistleblowing and public outrage, a shocking financial scandal overseen by the former DUP First Minister Arlene Foster was revealed. Piloted in Britain, RHI was introduced to the North without spending caps. This created an incentive for businesses to use heaters that burned wood pellets to create energy. The more wood pellets burned the more profit could be turned. Large and small businesses connected to the inner circle of the DUP latched on to the scheme creating a potential cost to the taxpayer of more than £500 million. Facing an intense outcry from all communities across the North, the DUP scrambled to shift the focus away from themselves by cutting a small grant for Irish language speakers in Donegal. It was toxic sectarianism at its worse, but effectively reframed the discussion along the lines of the North's two divided communities. The DUP's corruption and sectarianism was laid bare. Under tremendous pressure to hold its Executive partners to account, Sinn Féin was forced to act. This was not a given because the DUP had managed to avoid accountability for a long list of financial scandals, from Red Sky to the NAMA property portfolio in the North.

The RHI crisis, amidst Tory driven austerity implemented by Stormont, revealed to many the

ineffectual and corrupt nature of the North's political institutions. The DUP's culpability in this corruption, which has since been further focused on in the RHI inquiry, alongside its use of the Petition of Concern to deny equality, means going back to Stormont without fundamental change is not something a large segment of the population in the North can stomach.

Elections following the collapse of the Executive rewarded Sinn Féin for standing up to the DUP, but they also polarised along Nationalist and Unionist lines. As a result of a reduction in the number of Assembly seats and a fall in the DUP's vote Unionists lost their overall majority in Stormont for the first time. However, the DUP recovered ground in the 2017 UK General Election winning 10 seats.

Despite the present political stasis, it is very possible Stormont will be up and running once again soon. All the major parties are eager for a deal to get the Assembly started again. What's contentious is the content of the deal. All the parties have appeared willing to restart Stormont without any changes to austerity, privatisation and the implementation of benefit cuts. Sinn Féin has so far refused to reenter Stormont without some social movement demands being met, which means concessions from the DUP. Many across the North would be dismayed if Arlene Foster and the crooks behind the RHI crisis were able to waltz back into Stormont without being held accountable for RHI or without shifting on their opposition to equality. What will determine what happens going forward is not Sinn Féin's willingness to uphold red lines, many already know this is not likely, but the strength of the social movements making their demands heard. Passivity as always breeds arrogance from tyrants. Action forces concessions and change.

### **Brexit, the Peace Process and Partition**

The GFA, according to its architects, was supposed to have put the national question on the long finger. However, Brexit has led to a renewed discussion about the future of the border and partition.

Firstly, Brexit potentially threatens a return to a hard border. This is opposed by the vast majority of people, North and South, and would clearly undermine the GFA. Secondly, a majority of people in the North voted to remain part of the EU. For many, this also involves the very basic issue of democracy. Ending partition would



become the logical way to avoid a hard border and break with the direction of the Tories. Brexit has already been a factor in reinforcing the division between Nationalism and Unionism in the North. The DUP support the Tories drive towards what's termed a hard Brexit, while all Nationalist parties backed remaining in the EU. People Before Profit in the North was unique in advancing a position of 'Neither London Nor Brussels'; arguing that the interests of working class people were neither served by Theresa May's vision of Brexit or an EU guilty of building its own hard racist border, promoting neoliberal policies in favour of bankers and corporations, and constructing a new European super-army.

Brexit, along with Stormont sectarianism and dysfunction, is an added factor in the case to end partition. The political right in the UK dream about a restored 'Global Britain' but Brexit has caused a crisis for the Tories that could lead to the break-up of the British Union. Added to this, is the belief that the North's demographics will show a shift to a Catholic majority in the coming years.

None of this makes the end of partition inevitable. However, political parties are preparing for the possibility of a border poll in the not too distant future. The end of partition and the establishment of a united Ireland would be, in and of itself, progress. But, the end of partition, if it did occur, would not automatically mean there would be improvement for the majority of people in Ireland, North or South. This would depend on the kind of united or new Ireland that is proposed. Indeed, the success of a vote to end partition would mean convincing a majority of people, Nationalist and Unionist and other, that their lives would be better in a unified state. It can be assumed that the establishment argument against ending partition would involve scaremongering about the loss of the NHS, pension turmoil and more, as well as appealing to long-held identities and sectarianism.

### **How to move forward now?**

Socialists and progressives should continue to campaign for social and economic justice in the North but with no illusions in the ability of the GFA and Stormont to deliver what the vast majority of people want and deserve.

Change can be delivered by pressure from below. In fact, it's possible we may be at a tipping point for reform of the North's abortion laws, LGBTQ marriage equality and for recognition and respect for the Irish language. Large mobilisations and strong campaigns mean these demands cannot be ignored by the large parties, or easily side-stepped by promises to deal with them in the future. Mass campaigns can also challenge austerity and fight for proper funding for mental health resources, the NHS, public transportation, education and all public services. The North's trade union movement is still relatively large, especially in the public sector, but is extremely passive. Much of the time the trade union leadership has been concerned with making sure the GFA institutions are protected lest we collapse back into the troubles. However, the all-out public sector strike against the SHA in 2015 demonstrated the continued potential power of the trade union movement and its capacity to mobilise workers from all communities. This mobilisation could have been built upon but wasn't. Nevertheless, it points towards the real potential to bring working class communities together in common struggle. Campaigns seeking to overcome the sectarian divide in the North will pose a fundamental challenge to the way the Unionist and Nationalist political order has been constructed in the Northern state

All these campaigns will become stronger if they are linked to similar campaigns in the South. The development of 32 county activism will strengthen the challenge to the North's political order but also the neoliberal economic order in the South. We live in turbulent and uncertain times. Global politics are polarised with the failure of the political establishment leading to gains for the far-right, and, also the growth of the left. This crisis in establishment politics is mediated here through the crisis in Stormont and the institutions of the GFA. Our local political order has failed. The North's long history of sectarian violence is a warning of what we all know is possible here. But the future is not written. Socialists have a crucial role to play in the construction of an alternative that can overcome sectarian division and fight for a society in which the interests of the entire working class, be it Belfast, Derry, Dublin or Cork, come before profit and the rule of unaccountable elites.