

Brexit, Northern Ireland and learning the lessons of conflict and ‘otherness’

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Events over the Easter weekend demonstrate the propensity of humanity to inflict pain and suffering on each other. News from Sri Lanka and the murder of a journalist Lyra McKee, a former student of Birmingham City University, covering disturbances in Derry in Northern Ireland remind us that conflict is ever present and its causes not ignored or forgotten.

Sri Lanka, like, Northern Ireland, experienced a long period in which, in a population of just over 20 million it's estimated that between 70-80,000 people were killed and many others terribly injured. In Northern Ireland, with a population of almost 1.6 million, 3,532 people were killed and 47,500 injured.

As far as the civil war in Sri Lanka was concerned, like many conflicts overseas, there was a probably sense that it was, to quote Neville Chamberlain during a radio broadcast made in 1938 after meeting Hitler to attempt to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Sudetenland dispute, a “quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing”. Northern Ireland, a place many who live outside Ireland may not have visited, is not a faraway place, but an integral part of the UK.

What were known as ‘The troubles’ were caused by conflict between two distinct two groups, Loyalists and Irish Republicans about allegiance and culture. Religion played a role in that, historically, being Catholic or Protestant in Ireland tended to influence any desire to be part of the ‘union’ with the rest of Great Britain.

Prior to the early seventeenth century, all of Ireland was Catholic. However, following reformation large parts of Ulster were given to Protestant ‘planters’. The following three hundred years of history of Ireland is punctuated by occasional uprisings based on a belief by some that subjugation by the conquering English could only be

resolved by self-determination; government for the Irish by the Irish. However, the 'home rule' question was complicated by the fact that a very large number of those living in Ulster considered themselves to be British and vowed to die defending their right to be so.

Northern Ireland emerged from the partition of Ireland in 1922 following The Government of Ireland Act 1920 that created an Irish 'Free State'. Northern Ireland consisted of six of the nine counties of Ulster in which there was an in-built majority of Protestants considered to be loyal to remaining part of the UK. The convention that had existed prior to 1922 of the large employers, usually Protestant, not employing those considered seditious, Catholics whose fidelity was primarily to the Pope and government in Dublin, continued without sanction.

The corollary of lack of employment opportunities coupled with lack of access to housing was to sow the seeds of resentment that led to the civil rights marches that, indirectly led to the troubles. Outsiders looked on in horror as the predominantly Protestant police force acted in concert with loyalists in attacking marches intended to draw attention to embedded disparities of a system in which, as well as lack of decent employment and housing, landlords were able to vote in proportion to the number of properties they owned but their tenants had no such right.

Riots in Belfast saw Catholics being forced to flee their homes located in areas in which they were a minority. Before the depravity and merciless killing that characterised the troubles, it is frequently forgotten that troops were originally deployed in Northern Ireland to restore order and protect families who believed that their lives were in danger.

Incidentally, the cover of Birmingham-based band Dexy's Midnight Runners' first album, 'Searching for the Young Soul Rebels', released in 1980 is a photo taken in 1971 in Belfast of such a scene. A curious and somewhat eerie footnote to this photo, if true, is though the photo predominantly features a thirteen year old, Anthony O'Shaughnessy, who is carrying a large holdall in one arm and suitcase under the other, just behind him is a much younger boy reputed to be Robert Bates.

Robert Bates was a member of a group called the 'Shankill Butchers', were responsible for 23 barbaric and, largely sectarian, murders between 1975 and 1982. This group achieved infamy due to the fact that among the enormous number of dreadful murders that took place in Northern Ireland during the height worst period of the troubles, their *modus operandi* involved random kidnapping of Catholics who were beaten and tortured and were killed using butchers' knives to cut their throats.

The utter horror of the troubles has been, it was thought, consigned to history by the signing of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement 21 years ago. This agreement, a textbook example of what is known as 'Constructive Ambiguity' was explicitly intended to achieve an environment in which there was accommodation of the other side.

There is little doubt that the most contentious element of the Belfast Agreement was the release of prisoners from both sides of the conflict. Had he not been cleared for release in October 1996, Robert Bates, and who'd renounced violence, would have likely been included.

In the case of the civil war in Sri Lanka, between the government and 'Tamil Tigers' (LTTE Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) who wished to create an independent Tamil state, Tamil Eelam, in the north and the east of the island, the end came in May 2009 by surrender of the latter. However, there was no negotiated settlement. Instead, the Tamil Tigers and their supporters, having been surrounded were effectively wiped in what were regarded by international observers as war crimes.

Peace in Northern Ireland came about through a painstakingly slow process of secretive meetings with paramilitary groups, most particularly the Provisional IRA, over many years. This eventual process was carefully orchestrated to allow all involved to 'retreat' from conflict and, it was hoped, recognise that consensus building and sharing of identity would lead to a better future for all.

Since 1998, though the situation in Northern Ireland was far from perfect, peace largely pertained. Communities recognised the futility of conflict and, though so called 'peace walls' still existed to stop

missiles being thrown from one side as the other, same to accept co-existence.

Those behind the Good Friday Agreement rationalised, correctly, that the longer any peace, no matter how uneasy or 'fudged' through ambiguity would drain away the support that 'defenders' of communities – paramilitary groups – enjoyed.

As part of building that future, improvement in the prospects of the working classes was seen as essential through investment. After all, largely, it is young unemployed men with almost zero hope of employment who are usually those recruited by terrorist organisations.

Improvement has indeed been achieved in Northern Ireland through a combination of private and public investment; anyone who has been to Belfast in recent years will surely be impressed by the shiny new glass-covered office buildings, hotels and shopping centres.

Endemic and long-term disadvantage among communities resulted in investment from the European Social Fund (ESF) which improved facilities and road links that are essential to stimulating further investment, economic growth and opportunities for job creation. Up to the troubles Northern Ireland had been largely more prosperous than its neighbours south of the border. Though the troubles largely did not impact on the Republic, the effect in the North was to deter investment and undermine tourism.

A phenomenal change in the fortunes of the Republic of Ireland has been witnessed since the 1990s; the emergence of what is referred to as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Huge investment in infrastructure coupled with ensuring those leaving education possessed appropriate skills for the 21st century has meant that it is now North Ireland that is effectively the poorer neighbour.

One key reason for the Republic's spectacular success stymied, like many other countries by rapid deterioration in property values in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, was wholehearted support for EU membership. As analysts have concluded the Republic of Ireland has eagerly grasped all of the opportunities that benefits of the confer.

Such opportunities have had spin-off effects North of the Border. For example, the agri-food sector in counties either side of the effectively invisible border has been responsible for significant job creation. Both jurisdictions being members of the EU with consequential sharing of regulations made such cooperation relatively straightforward.

Many had concluded, even within the unionist community, close cooperation between the North and South of Ireland was demonstrating that the Island of Ireland operates most effectively as an integrated economic unit. The border between the North and Republic of Ireland, imposed in 1922 to ensure a majority of those loyal to the union has become largely irrelevant in terms of trade and travel.

Until the EU referendum in 2016 the notion of re-imposition of a border that can be visibly identified through, for instance, road blocks and security checks that existed during the troubles would have seemed utterly ludicrous. Why would you wish to destroy an arrangement that was bringing significant economic benefit to voters on both sides of the border?

However, as has been discussed ad nauseam since the outcome of the EU referendum almost three years ago, it is indeed quite possible that a discernible border between the north and south of Ireland, may re-emerge, especially in the event of a 'hard' Brexit. The requirements for checks on goods and people, possibly with the usual security paraphernalia, on what would be the only land-based frontier between the UK and the EU creates fear among all who believed the horror of the troubles were over for good.

It is well known that a disorderly Brexit with no deal will be likely to have a profound impact on the fortunes of various parts of the UK; most particularly those whose citizens suffer greatest from disadvantage and deprivation. The consequence of long-term conflict during the 30 year troubles means that Northern Ireland, still recovering economically from this period, is indeed likely to worst impacted should there be no deal.

What is profoundly depressing is that those who call for a 'hard' Brexit by the UK leaving the EU with immediate effect with no deal seem to ignore the suffering and heartache that was experienced in all parts of

Ireland and beyond during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Moreover, their willingness to make statements insensitive to the feelings of both communities undermines the hard work by peacemakers that went into creating the conditions for peace following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

The murder of Lyra McKee demonstrates that there are still elements within both communities in Northern Ireland intent on conflict to pursue objectives that are the antithesis of what the those behind the 1998 Good Friday Agreement intended. The logic of economic development and prosperity through job creation has no place in their warped ideology.

For the sake of the memory of Lyra McKee and all other victims of the troubles it behoves our politicians to ignore the claims of those arguing for a hard Brexit and to ensure that the fragile peace process continues to bring engender cooperation and mutual trust between all communities. Understanding the 'otherness' of communities we are not part of is an essential part of humanity and respect for their dignity.