

# Where are we Now?

## Options, Consequences & Possibilities

### A Community Dialogue Leaflet Exploring The Current Political Impasse

#### THE AGREEMENT

The Agreement was to end politically motivated violence by creating structures in which opposing political aspirations could be resolved non violently. The absence of violence was to provide a breathing space in which a lasting settlement could be reached. The 3 years & 4 months since its signing have seen the majority of its clauses implemented but no agreement on difficult outstanding issues like decommissioning, demilitarisation & policing. We've reached another impasse. It may be the last big hurdle but can we- do we- want to get over it?

#### THIS LEAFLET

This leaflet raises questions for you to explore. Is the possible collapse of the Agreement good or bad? What are the likely consequences of this? What went wrong? What should we do? We include a range of common perceptions to illustrate issues at the heart of the problem. You won't agree with all you read, that's ok, this leaflet doesn't set out to be 'the truth', it's meant to encourage you to consider other views, to reconsider your own in that light & to engage in dialogue on these issues.

#### WHAT IS COMMUNITY DIALOGUE?

We're community workers from across the divide. As a group we don't take party political positions, but encourage people to engage in dialogue involving listening to others, questioning ourselves & trying genuinely to see a new way forward. Political society depends on civic society. What do you want them to do? Be heard. Discuss these issues with others. If you wish, we can facilitate or provide you with an opportunity to join other discussions.

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## **What's Gone Wrong? *Some Perceptions***

- The Agreement was worded ambiguously allowing different interpretations. This is common to the wording of peace agreements around the world. Without 'constructive ambiguity' there might be no deal. But it leaves us with suspicion & confusion over who agreed what & a series of unresolved issues which may destroy the process.
- Politicians don't own the process, peace can't be imposed on us, it must be owned by the people.
- The Agreement isn't the problem, the failure to fully implement it is.
- The process is corrupt, the spirit of the Agreement forgotten.

### ***Questions***

- Did the Agreement's ambiguity lead to overly high expectations & a belief that the other side failed in its obligations?
- What is your vision for the future, is it big enough to accommodate the needs of those you don't agree with? How can you own the peace process?
- Are you disillusioned with the Agreement, what is the alternative that offers more hope?
- Most people recognise that other conflicts [e.g. Yugoslavia] involve conflicting rights & perceptions. Is ours so black & white that its all *their* fault?

## **Was The Price Too High To Pay? *Some Perceptions***

- Where's the promised "peace" when sectarian murder, bombing, rioting, & intimidation continue?
- Accepting the Principle of Consent & losing Articles II & III is too high a price for a Republican role in government- it feels like defeat.
- The Agreement has no credibility when ceasefires are counted as held & sectarian murder continues.
- A majority supported the Agreement in the referendum, but Unionist support dwindles as perceptions of the Agreement's impact become increasingly negative.

### ***Questions***

- What are the components of peace for you & your community? What price would you pay for peace?
- Can we build peace if the Agreement isn't supported by a majority in both communities?
- How can we have peace without addressing the fears, perceptions & needs of other communities?

## **The Erosion of Unionist Support For The Agreement: *Some Unionist Perceptions***

- "The longer the Agreement unfolds the less support there is among Unionism. Each step forward is a Republican gain. Even Human Rights legislation which should be a gain for all is often viewed as a Republican gain."
- "Some Unionists fear the Agreement as a process where the shoe ends up on the other foot, they see nothing from Republicans to reassure them."
- "Whether the past was good or bad it provided a secure framework for Protestant identity & a sense of belonging. This has eroded through 30 years of conflict & the Agreement. Many Protestants feel a sense of loss, of insecurity, a fear of the future."
- "A key to building Unionist trust is a Republican statement that the war is over. The point of decommissioning too is building trust, not to clarify who won, but to indicate partnership in building a better future without the threat of returning violence."

### ***Questions for the Nationalist Community***

- It's obvious that fewer Unionists now support the Agreement, why do you think this is?
- Is Republicanism experiencing a sense of loss, moving out of conflict & not knowing what the outcome will be?

- How can we address the sense of loss in the Protestant community?
- In order to build peace do Unionists need to feel secure? Do Nationalists have a role in this– how?
- Do alleged Republican associations with groups like FARC reassure Unionists, encourage trust?

### **Nationalist Frustrations: *Some Nationalist Perceptions***

- “Unionism demands a statement that the war is over, but they refuse to recognise the huge step we took & how the silence of our guns reflects our commitment to the peace process.”
- “The grudging Unionist approach to implementation reinforces our sense of second class status & speaks volume about their commitment to power sharing.”
- “Unionism has no leadership & no confidence in their leaders. They see change as loss. Their resistance to change is resistance to power sharing, it’s why they ‘shift the goalposts’ & set pre-conditions.”
- “SF has a electoral mandate but is excluded from full democratic participation until the IRA decommission. Isn’t Unionism backed by military & paramilitary arsenals?”

#### ***Questions for the Unionist Community***

- Is Republicanism experiencing a sense of loss, moving out of conflict & not knowing what the outcome will be.
- Is Unionist leadership lacking - Why?
- What is or could be a Unionist vision for the future & how would you buy Nationalists into it?
- What are the consequences for NI of accepting SF’s electoral mandate without IRA decommissioning?

## **Consequences Of A Collapsed Agreement**

### **Possible Implications Of A Return To Direct Rule**

- Direct rule will involve the ongoing implementation of policing reform, human rights legislation, judicial reform & demilitarisation.
- It may leave NI in a political vacuum.
- Many fear that direct rule will signal a return to violence.

#### ***Questions***

- What are the benefits of direct rule - how do they out-way benefits under the Agreement?
- Who will be responsible for creating the political vacuum - why?
- How could violence offer a viable alternative? Could one side defeat the other and build a settlement the survivors would be happy with?

### **Possible Implications Of An Election**

- SF & the DUP are likely to top the polls.
- Apathy & frustration may stop many from voting & the results could be unrepresentative.
- Without political progress we could go into social & economic decline & the outside world is already sick of us.

#### ***Questions***

- Can a stable DUP/SF government be formed?
- Is there an alternative or middle voice after a polarising election - do we need one?
- Without political progress towards agreement how can we address our social & economic issues?

## **Possible Implications Of A Full Formal Review**

- This could be a more inclusive process involving the smaller parties & the DUP.
- It may lead to a new, better Agreement.
- It could be a time of great uncertainty where violence thrives.

### **Questions**

- ?s a Full Review against the wishes of referendum voters who said Yes?
- Is it likely to achieve wider, more inclusive support than the current Agreement?
- Could it achieve something which the full implementation of the Agreement couldn't?

## **What's Missing From The Process?**

- Should anyone be excluded from the peace process - why?
- Do we need an implementation timetable overseen by an Implementation body which monitors & reports openly?
- We use 'democracy' as a club to batter our opponents but don't agree on what it is. How would we build our Agreement on a shared understanding of democracy?
- Neither Britain nor the Republic want us, few highlight this amid talk of a 'new Ireland' or Union. How would this change the way we negotiate & for what outcome?
- When most people are asked what is important to them they don't say national identity or devolved power sharing. They say holiday, child care provision, freedom from fear, a job. Does the peace process focus on what is really important to people?

## **Do we need a Dialogue Centred Process?**

We understand dialogue to be a process different from negotiation:

- It starts with stating positions on an issue, e.g., policing or decommissioning.
- It moves to a sharing of the experiences, perceptions & needs which underpin the positions we hold. This sharing can generate a common understanding of our underlying needs. Put another way- participants can get a sense of each other's humanity by seeing the world through each other's eyes. This generates trust- the building block of peace.

### **Question**

- Should our peace process be supported by wider dialogues throughout society - how would this work?

## **Conclusion**

Many people are settling into blame mode- how will this help overcome our differences?

Do most Unionists want devolved government & accept that they can't have it without Nationalists?

Do most Nationalists want devolved government & accept that they can't have it without Unionists?

Do they need each other? They can veto each other. Is *together* the only way we can go forward.

**Without dialogue there is no mutual understanding**

**Without mutual understanding there is no trust**

**Without trust there can be no agreement**

**Without agreement there is no peace**