

Torkel Opsahl and Peace in Northern Ireland

By Andy J. Pollak

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1. The ‘Troubles’

The Northern Ireland conflict – or the ‘Troubles’, as it is called in Ireland – lasted for 30 years from 1968 to 1998. It arose from the repression of a civil rights movement in the 1960s aimed at removing discrimination against its Catholic nationalist community by Northern Ireland’s Protestant unionist rulers. Members of this community had been treated as second-class citizens (in employment and political representation) by the unionists ever since Ireland was partitioned after a guerrilla war against its British rulers in 1919–1921 into an independent, Catholic majority state in the South (later to become the Republic of Ireland) and a Protestant majority province of the United Kingdom in the North.

For those 30 years, Northern Ireland was caught in a three-way conflict involving the British and Northern Irish police and security forces, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (‘IRA’), which was demanding a British withdrawal and a united Ireland, and pro-British loyalist (that is, extreme unionist) paramilitary groups, in which more than 3,600 people died. Because of the impossibility of the IRA’s demands (the British to leave Northern Ireland unilaterally in the near future), the terrorism of their methods and the uncompromising South African-style ‘laager mentality’ of the pro-British unionist majority community and their leaders, it was believed for many years that this was an insoluble, if low-level conflict which first the British government – and from the mid-1980s the British government in consultation with the Irish government – would have to be satisfied with containing.

However, in the 1990s a more politically minded IRA leadership, and mediation by a far-sighted constitutional nationalist leader, John Hume, along with the Irish, British and United States governments, opened up new possibilities of compromise. The result was the complex and internationally acclaimed 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, which laid the foundations for the end of the conflict. This had three ‘strands’: an internal Northern Ireland strand, which brought Sinn Féin, the political party of the IRA, into a regional power-sharing government with their ancient adversaries, the Unionists; a North-South strand, which set up inter-governmental institutions to oversee greater co-operation across a range of fields between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and an East-West strand, which institutionalized relationships between Britain and the two parts of Ireland.

It is often forgotten that in the early 1990s, the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ was counted as one of the most intractable small conflicts in Europe, and perhaps the world. The early 1990s was a particularly dark period, as IRA violence continued and pro-

British loyalist violence intensified. In this atmosphere a group of ‘civil society’ actors came together to set up the independent ‘citizens’ inquiry’ which became known as the Opsahl Commission (after the eminent Norwegian international lawyer, Torkel Opsahl, who agreed to chair it).

Torkel Opsahl was the first in a series of leading international figures to engage with the Northern Ireland ‘peace process’ over the next decade and a half. United States President Clinton played a key role in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement. Political and military leaders from Canada, South Africa, Finland and the European Commission were also heavily involved. The Good Friday Agreement came to be seen as a model for other conflict areas in the world on how to achieve compromise between groups with often violently clashing concepts of self-determination. It is highly unlikely that this obscure and remote European province and its peace process will ever attract anything like that kind of international interest and engagement in the foreseeable future. In Opsahl’s words: “This project has been an unprecedented, forward-looking experiment in public participation in political debate in a region that is usually characterised as politically rigid, undemocratic and backward”.

2. A Citizens’ Inquiry: The Opsahl Commission

The summer of 2023 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the report of that now largely forgotten ‘citizens’ inquiry’ into the future of Northern Ireland, headed by an international commission chaired by Torkel Opsahl. This landmark report,¹ based on the views of around 3,000 people in over 550 written submissions, and the opinions expressed at 19 public hearings about ways forward for Northern Ireland during a period of particular deadlock and despair, has been seen as one of the early seeds of the Northern Ireland peace process.

The 1992–1993 Opsahl Commission’s uniqueness was that it collected and highlighted the views of civil society in Northern Ireland: community and voluntary sector groups, women’s groups, churches, business groups and trade unions, cross-community dialogue groups, and a wide range of individuals from prelates to paramilitaries, taxi drivers to bankers, prisoners to schoolchildren to academics. It was itself a venture that came out of the idealism of a group of 200 people active in civil society who called themselves ‘Initiative ‘92’. Many prominent people contributed submissions: people like the twentieth century’s most influential

¹ Andy Pollak (ed.), *A Citizens’ Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, Second Edition, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1993.

Irish civil servant, Thomas K. Whitaker; distinguished former senior British civil servants Sir Kenneth Bloomfield and Sir Oliver Wright; the Church of Ireland primate Archbishop Robin Eames, the poet Michael Longley, and the broadcaster Robin Day.

There is no room here to list in detail its many conclusions and recommendations. Among the latter were at least four that would find their way in some form into the 1998 Good Friday Agreement: an equal voice for the two communities in the government of Northern Ireland; the legal recognition of such ‘parity of esteem’ between the two communities; the necessary involvement of Sinn Féin, the political party of the IRA, in any settlement (although the IRA would have to renounce its justification of the use of violence first); and a Bill of Rights (still to be implemented).

Other recommendations included: the IRA and the British security forces to make unilateral, exploratory moves towards reducing violence, based on a local and secret pilot initiative the Commission heard about in Derry; a much higher level of economic co-operation with the Republic of Ireland; schemes to incentivize more women to enter politics in Northern Ireland (some of the most powerful submissions at the public hearings came from women’s groups); and a common Irish history course to be introduced in schools throughout the island (still to be implemented).

The Opsahl Commission’s distinctiveness was in the fact that it gathered the views of ‘ordinary’ people rather than politicians (although the political parties, with the exception of the Democratic Unionist Party, were persuaded to take part). In the following, I will take five submissions from those ‘ordinary’ people which particularly impressed the Opsahl Commissioners, and ask if in the past 30 years there have been any significant improvements that represent real progress in Northern Ireland on the issues they raised. The quotations below are taken from the Opsahl Report itself, except for one paragraph from Dr. Brian Gaffney, which is from a conversation in 2023.

2.1. Brian Gaffney

Dr. Brian Gaffney, a medical doctor from County Down, started his 1992 submission by saying: “I feel, as a Catholic, no sense of belonging to the fabric of society that makes up the official state of Northern Ireland”.² He said that “as a person of liberal and left-wing political leanings, I have no means of expressing my views and feelings in a public forum”. He stressed that he abhorred violence.

He noted that the British government insisted that it was perfectly legitimate for someone like him to aspire to a united Ireland, “so long as this is deferred to the far distant future and not pursued by violent means”. Also, that “such unity could come about if a majority in Northern Ireland so wishes. This indeed makes this issue a respectable political aim for anyone to hold”. However, he felt that many of the important structures of Northern Ireland society (the police, the district councils, Queen’s University Belfast) “discriminate against this viewpoint by emphasising the relative ‘superiority’ of holding the similarly legitimate wish to maintain the link to Britain”.

I would like to play a role in our society. I would like to feel at home in the city hall of my home city. I would like to assume that my local police constable had my safety and security as high on his or her agenda as my Protestant neighbour’s. Indeed, why should I not feel these things are so? I am a respectable member of the community, I wish no one ill, I pay my taxes and so on. But I would like to do all these things and still hold my ‘legitimate’ aspiration, still feel my Irish identity. Yet if I express these feelings, am I not assumed to be a closet ‘Provo’ [a Provisional IRA

supporter]? Am I not forbidden open access to officialdom? These are feelings which I believe prevent a sizeable proportion of the Catholic community from playing a proper role in Northern Irish life. It is my belief also that both sides lose in this situation: we are frustrated in our wish to take part; Northern Ireland is denied the benefit of using our talents and diverse abilities.

I met Dr. Gaffney in 2023 at an Irish government’s reception to mark the thirtieth anniversary and he was pessimistic. He said some things had changed for the better in the North: violence is now an “anomaly” and nationalists like him can support Irish unity without harm to their job or education prospects. “However,” he continued, “no one could argue that the North has become a normal European society whose concerns are the typical bread and butter issues of political and civic life. Yes, of course, we too are facing the consequences of economic austerity, globalisation and climate change. We too have issues around gender identity and ethnic discrimination. But always in the background and frequently in the foreground our political leadership and priorities are still based on ‘orange’ and ‘green’. Sectarianism would appear to be the only effective way to engage the wider population, young and old”.

2.2. Raymond Ferguson

Raymond Ferguson is a former Enniskillen solicitor and liberal Ulster Unionist councillor in County Fermanagh.³ He wrote in his submission that since the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, British policy had been “to try to weary unionists, in particular, into a state of mind where they eventually accept what Whitehall policy-makers conceive to be the inevitable – that their political future lies on this island and not on the British mainland, and that they really have to make the best of it”.

He also looked at the inevitable consequences of Northern Irish business expanding into the all-Ireland market as part of the removal of European Community trade barriers: “to the vast majority of Northern Ireland businessmen, this market is much more readily accessible and understood than the markets of Britain and the rest of Europe”. This was just before the 1993 Single European Market opened and six years before the Good Friday Agreement.

It is to this new commercial situation that unionist politicians must address their minds ... Because of the greater facility with which business can be transacted on the same land mass rather than over sea journeys of 30–300 miles and longer, it is entirely foreseeable that, regardless of what attitude is adopted by politicians North and South, commerce will develop and grow between the North and South of Ireland. This will inevitably give rise to the need for political direction and structures to deal with the demands and problems created. It is difficult to see how the Unionist Party [this was before the more extreme Democratic Unionist Party became a power in the land] could sensibly ignore these developments. Of necessity, political representatives of the North will become involved in dealing with representatives of the government of the Republic. To date unionists have fought shy of acknowledging any entitlement of the Republic’s government to input into Northern Ireland affairs ... but as time passes it will become clear that this position is no longer tenable.

2.3. Paul Sweeney

Paul Sweeney (who was then director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, and would go on to head several Northern Irish government departments) agreed.⁴ He believed it was only a matter of

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 165–167.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–217.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 360–361.

time before the political structures on the island of Ireland would give greater expression to its “economic and social coherence”. He went on: “I am convinced that terms such as ‘united Ireland’ are redundant and delay any sophisticated discussion of pan-Ireland issues”. He urged that “the maximisation of cross-border co-operation in the island of Ireland and between the island of Ireland and Britain should be a central plank of British government policy”. Parallel with this, “every effort should be made in the Republic of Ireland to convince a besieged unionist community in Northern Ireland that their welfare can be advanced by the forging of closer relationships with the South”.

He also emphasized the direct correlation between deprivation and political violence in both Northern communities: “to remain indifferent to these levels of deprivation is to remain indifferent to peace”. In particular, he said that a major anti-poverty programme would have to be aimed at young people: “Our young people, whose lives have been blighted by the sins of their fathers, need major compensatory programmes and life opportunities if they are to become the leaders, parents and citizens of tomorrow”.

2.4. May Blood, Kathleen Kelly and Geraldine O’Regan

Three women active in deprived Catholic and Protestant areas of west Belfast – May Blood (later Baroness Blood), Kathleen Kelly and Geraldine O’Regan – called for the establishment of Community Development Trusts in local neighbourhoods.⁵ These would help to eliminate the sense of powerlessness felt by local working-class people and offer a focus for “new and emerging leadership which ultimately could bring new energy to Northern Ireland’s political structures”.

They went on: “In our experience many local people in west Belfast work long hours, all day, every day, to provide the basic care that supports the needs of their neighbourhood. This activity is often in support of young people, unemployed, disabled, women and children. In all these areas of activity local leadership and activity has developed. Those of us who have experienced this growth of confidence feel buoyant and confident about the future of our communities”. Yet these people felt that their involvement was of “peripheral interest” to officialdom. “They have little opportunity to effect change and there is no local accountability concerning the aspects of government policy and resources which are directed towards their communities”.

2.5. Bob Curran

From commerce and community development to culture: Dr. Bob Curran, a teacher and folklorist from Portrush in north Antrim (and from a Presbyterian family), believed that the Northern Ireland problem lay not with politics, but with something more fundamental: “our *perception* of ourselves as having two distinct cultures and traditions”.⁶ He argued that “there may be more to unite both cultures than to separate them”, and much of this could be discovered in a common musical and folklore tradition. “Rather than there being two cultures to be accommodated, there is a single tradition – that of Northern Irishness – from which certain sections of the community, either by accident or design, choose to exclude themselves”.

In his studies, Dr Curran had found stories, tunes and traditions in Northern Protestant communities with counterparts in Catholic communities in the Republic, even though most Northern Protestants dismissed these common traditions as ‘nonsense’ and not worth passing on. He believed this could be overcome by educating children to value their culture and traditions. He did not see this as a cultural process of ‘Irishisation’ in a narrow sectarian

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 307–308.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 341–343.

or religious sense, but as “a celebration of our common heritage – both as Catholics and Protestants – within our respective communities and upon the island of Ireland”.

He proposed a Northern Irish version of a schools-based 1950s folklore collection project in the Republic, in which children were encouraged to collect songs, stories and sayings from their parents, grandparents and relatives. Such a project could “provide the basis for a shared community experience and could open the eyes of those who are going to form the next generation in Northern Ireland to the wide and rich spread of tradition which exists in Ireland”.

He went on:

Protestants have constantly struggled with (or have been hostile to) any concept of an ‘Irish identity’ because they perceive it as being different and alien to their own. It was almost as if Ulster was not a province of Ireland, but rather one of the English shires. All talk of ancient Irish heroes and study of localised folk tales has been heretofore viewed (by Protestants and Catholics alike) as exclusively Catholic in tone. Such a view must be effectively challenged within the classroom. Such a perspective must also be challenged within the Catholic population – folklore, Irish myths and legends must not simply be seen by Catholics as their exclusive province, but rather as having roots within the Protestant tradition as well.

3. The Contribution of Torkel Opsahl

In his introduction to the report which bears his name, Torkel Opsahl called for a “pragmatic approach” to ending the conflict in Northern Ireland. “The distinction between conflict and violence is crucial”, he said, quoting the South African human rights lawyer, Professor Claire Palley, that “the only people entitled to talk about solutions are chemists”. He also stressed the European dimension of conflicts like that in Northern Ireland:

The clear, long-term trend is towards the reduction of the importance of national sovereignty, state borders and territorial jurisdiction, and the increased significance of European institutions and political, economic and cultural cooperation. This offers new ways and a new atmosphere for the handling of old and enduring problems, such as the Irish conflict [...]. In future, the nation-state will become only one among many levels of authority in the international political, constitutional and legal order [...]. The concept of national self-determination, which is the design behind so much death and destruction in the former Yugoslavia at the moment, is not a helpful one, particularly in a divided society like Northern Ireland.

And so it turned out with the Good Friday Agreement and its immediate aftermath. The institutions set up by that seminal agreement – inside Northern Ireland, between North and South on the island and between Britain and Ireland – were to a large extent modelled on the multi-layered relations between member states of the EU. Relations between the Irish and British governments – as fellow members of that European Community of nations – were never better in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. Then the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum, and the convoluted departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union (‘EU’), with its threat of a ‘hard’ border on the island of Ireland, once again threw those relations into turmoil and mutual recrimination.

In my preface to the Second Edition of the Opsahl Report, which was published shortly after Torkel Opsahl’s untimely death in September 1993 (the First Edition was a bestseller in Ireland), I wrote:

Without him the project could never have succeeded. His deep empathy with ordinary people; his huge integrity;

above all, his gentle, patient willingness to listen, to consider, to treat all ideas – and those putting them forward – as worthy of respect, touched everyone who had the privilege of working with him or appearing before him at hearings of the Opsahl Commission. He was a true internationalist, who brought to Northern Ireland the promise – based on his immense experience of conflicts in Eastern Europe and elsewhere – that it was possible to find honourable compromises in regions where groups of people were fighting to the death over their clashing concepts of national self-determination.

I worked closely with Torkel Opsahl for 13 months. For me, as a young Irish journalist, it was an unforgettable experience. His intellectual brilliance and huge integrity made an indelible impression on me. Torkel was a shining example of a man who lived out the exhortation of the Old Testament prophet Micah to ‘do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God’. More than 30 years on, although his contribution to peace in Northern Ireland has been largely forgotten in that inward-looking province, those who had the privilege of working with him or appearing before him will always treasure that memory.

4. Northern Ireland Thirty Years Later

In the mid-2020s Northern Ireland is still a deeply divided society, with multiple social and economic problems. However, there is now relative peace: at the time of writing, there has not been a paramilitary killing for six years, although paramilitary groups still exercise significant social control – including through the use of violence – in some poor, working class areas of Belfast and Derry (from both loyalist groups and from ‘dissident’ republican groups who opposed the 1998 Good Friday Agreement). The new post-1998 police service, which replaced the overwhelmingly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary and has attracted a significant number of Catholic recruits (although not enough for a 50:50 balance), is reckoned for the most part to have behaved with fairness and impartiality.

The University of Ulster sociologist and former head of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, Professor Duncan Morrow, has summed up the present condition of Northern Ireland as follows:

Through an acknowledgement [in the Good Friday Agreement] that divisions over identity and borders had to be accommodated, that human rights and full equality had to prevail and that every effort had to be directed to reconciliation, we stumbled away from violence. Too slowly of course, so that governments basically dropped reconciliation from the agenda in favour of bringing the most hostile [Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party] into government – I suspect because that looked like the quicker way for them to get rid of direct responsibility for dealing with history. We have limped along in a kind of half-conflict, half-peace ever since.⁷

⁷ Duncan Morrow, shared *Facebook* post reproduced in Andy J. Pollak, “Listen to the wisdom of the man who was rejected by the voters of South Belfast”, *2 Irelands Together*, 9 February 2021.

After multiple suspensions of the power-sharing institutions, in 2025 there is once again an uneasy coalition between Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist Party and the middle-of-the-road Alliance Party in office in Belfast. Sinn Féin, formerly the party of the IRA, is now the largest party electorally in Northern Ireland at both regional and local level (as well as the second largest party in the Republic of Ireland). Its ultimate aim is a referendum on removing the Irish border and thus moving towards unity (a possibility which is provided for in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement), which over 80 percent of unionists say they will vote against. There are three squabbling unionist parties – two of whom have recently lost their leaders (the Democratic Unionist Party’s leader resigned after being accused of historic sexual abuse) – and morale is low in the unionist community. Popular discontent with the Northern Ireland regional government’s lack of real policy to address anything of substance (notably moving to end sectarianism and inequality and establishing a flourishing economy) is widespread. In 2017 there were still nearly a hundred ‘peace walls’ dividing the Protestant and Catholic communities, mainly in poorer parts of Belfast.

The 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum in the United Kingdom served to deepen divisions in Northern Ireland. The province as a whole voted 56 percent to 44 percent to stay in the EU, but this masked a large unionist majority in favour of leaving and an even larger nationalist majority in favour of remaining. Five years of complex negotiations led to an agreement called the Northern Ireland Protocol. The Protocol’s arrangements, under which Northern Ireland but not the rest of the United Kingdom remains in the EU single market for goods, allow the maintenance of the open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which was a key aspect of the Good Friday Agreement. The Protocol instead creates a *de facto* customs border in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. This is bitterly opposed by the majority of unionists who see it as a weakening of the constitutional link between Northern Ireland and Britain.

Andy J. Pollak, a long-time journalist focusing on cross-border co-operation in Ireland, was co-ordinator of the Opsahl Commission and editor of its report A Citizens’ Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland (Second Edition, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1993). He also served as Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and edited the Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland. He worked closely with late Professor Torkel Opsahl, in whose memory TOAEP is named.

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