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From Constructive Ambiguities to Structural Contradictions: The Twilight of the Good Friday Agreement?

CHRIS Ó RÁLAIGH

The Good Friday Agreement contained a series of constructive ambiguities which were critical to ensuring that it received broad cross-political support. These ambiguities were reflective of the balance of political power of the time. Once institutionalized, they contained an immanent potential to morph in to structural contradictions as the re-balancing of demographic and political power in Ireland moved from latent to manifest status. As the Agreement reaches its 25ᵗʰ anniversary, three outstanding structural contradictions are manifesting, prompted by Brexit and the re-introduction of the 'Irish question' in to Irish-British relations. The constitutional status of the North of Ireland, the *raison d'etre* of statelet, and the inability of the governing institutions to function representationally or effectively have co-joined with a new balance of political power favoring Irish nationalism over Ulster unionism. Consequently, whether or not we are witnessing the twilight of the Good Friday Agreement will be contingent upon the short-medium term political decisions of key political actors, most notably, Ulster unionism. Three probable future developments will be further stasis, institutional reform, or (r)evolutionary constitutional change.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) has not enjoyed a high degree of success on its annual birthdays, with the key institutions of the

Agreement operating on only 13 of its 25 annual anniversaries. While not seeking to make light of the most profound political agreement in Ireland since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, these figures do add a dose of necessary contextualization to the significant challenges associated with the Agreement, alongside the many benefits which have accrued to the people of Ireland and Britain since 1998. The most obvious and important of these benefits has been the absence of large-scale violence: it has been estimated that close to two-and-a-half-thousand lives have been saved as a result of the cessation of violence by state and non-state actors (McCaffrey 2018). However, it is widely acknowledged (Coulter et al. 2021; O'Leary 2022, 25; Kelly and Tannam 2023, 1) that neither the Agreement nor the broader peace process have been completely successful.

A key sub-text to the successes and failures of the Agreement was the design of its original architecture, with O'Leary noting presciently, that 'it rests on a bargain derived from diametrically conflicting hopes about its likely long-term outcome (O'Leary 1999, 2). The Agreement could at once be considered by Ulster unionists as a mechanism to copper-fasten the union with Britain, by Irish nationalists as a stepping-stone to Irish freedom, and to the Irish and British governments as an end of Irish history moment (Ruane 1999, 164), in which the 'Irish question' could be fully and finally removed from relations between the two nations. The Agreement's trifurcated structures focused upon relations internal to the northern state, relations between the northern and southern polities, and relations between Ireland and Britain, and broadly reflected the existing balance of political power of 1998. However, it was noted from an early stage that the Agreement contained constructive ambiguities which were variously identified as helpful (Guelke 2000, 28) and problematic (Stevenson 2000, 5; Ruane and Todd 2001, 23; Mitchell 2009, 327). While ambiguities are an acknowledged feature of most peace agreements (Strömbom, Bramsen, and Lene Stein 2022, 689–694), once institutionalized they contain an immanent potential to develop in to structural contradictions, if and when the balance of political power shifts. Throughout the lifetime of the Agreement, the balance of demographic and political power has continued to seep from Ulster unionism to Irish nationalism, with the consequence that the key ambiguities relating to the *raison d'etre* of the post-Agreement state and the constitutional status of that state have morphed in to structural contradictions. These two contradictions have been joined by a third, in which the governing institutions which were established to reflect a bifurcated polity, now encounter a trifurcated polity containing a third emergent political identity. Consequently, the existing architecture may not be able to contain these contradictions. The focus of this article is to offer a comparative analysis of the structural

contradictions identified in 1998 and those manifest on the Agreement's 25th anniversary, and the manner in which the shifting balance of power over this period re-creates the contradictions and crises of the present. The article concludes with an examination of the implications of these changes for potential future developments.

2. THE CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITIES OF THE GFA

The constructive ambiguities contained within the GFA were critical in garnering requisite support from the various political actors. While Mitchell (2009) identified two such ambiguities – the continued existence of paramilitary weaponry, and the constitutional status of the North of Ireland - this paper argues that a third, and equally important constructive ambiguity was that concerning the *raison d'etre* of the post-Agreement northern state. Throughout, it was the relationship between these original ambiguities and the evolving balance of power which determined the resolution to each of the periods of crisis, as once the Agreement moved from the abstract in to concretized institutional form, the more tangible constructive ambiguities morphed in to structural contradictions. The pace at which this metamorphosis took place was determined by the immanency of the contradictions themselves: hence the issue of the continued existence of large amounts of weaponry held by non-state paramilitary actors - specifically, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) - became an immediate structural contradiction, as their political allies, Sinn Féin, sat in the newly-formed governing institutions. The resultant rolling crises which persisted from 1998 – 2005, witnessed the repeated suspension of the Stormont governing institutions, until the 2005 IRA declaration of an end to its war and complete decommissioning of its armory.

The second contradiction pivoted on one of the key undercurrents for the conflict itself: the constitutional status of the northern state. While the Agreement made explicit the requirement for all parties to confirm their consent to British jurisdiction, this was counter-posed by a mechanism for achieving the dissolution of the union. This was a simultaneous legitimation of both nationalist and unionist objectives, one which Shirlow (2005, 196) described as a 'political illusion' in which the border was presented as at once, more fixed and more permeable. Yet this constructive ambiguity did not metamorphosise in to a concrete structural condition in a similar manner to the issue of weaponry, as the constitutional status of the northern state was not under question in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement. Irish nationalism, north and south, had

conceded to the unionist veto, and that veto was robust, holding a comfortable demographic and political majority.

The third contradiction was inextricably intertwined with the second and related to the *raison d'etre* of the newly reformulated statelet. Coulter et al. (2021) remind us that whereas in 'normal' democratic societies, legitimacy and stability are conferred on governing institutions by a shared civic culture, no such shared civic culture existed, nor was it the aim of the Agreement to attempt to establish such a shared culture: parity of esteem was the chosen leit motif. Yet this formula ensured that no new *raison d'etre* could be identified to fit the post-Agreement polity. This was of course related to the divergent interpretations of the purpose and final destination of the Agreement itself. The obvious ideational focus for a post-conflict society should have been reconciliation, however despite omnipotent discursive nods, there was a notable absence – beyond consociational governance – of any firm institutional or societal architecture to develop such a common goal. Instead, the Agreement contained a series of well-intentioned but ambiguous directives, referencing commitments to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust; the protection and vindication of the human rights; partnership, equality and mutual respect; prevention of discrimination (Agreement 1998), which collectively, fell under the unofficially adopted moniker of a 'good relations' state (McVeigh and Rolston 2007). This constructive ambiguity lay latent in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement, as no institutional mechanism - a Peace and Reconciliation Commission for instance - was provided from within which the ambiguities of the statelets *raison d'etre* would be laid bare and manifest as structural contradiction.

3. POWER BALANCE OF 1998

The presence of constructive ambiguities within any negotiated settlement tend to be a reflection of the political realities of the given era (Mitchell 2009, 323), and so it was with the GFA, which focused on management of the precarious balance, as opposed to transformative political change (Diamond and Colfer 2022, 3). Power was essentially bifurcated between the Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist communities. Whilst still broadly entrenched within a subordinate social, political, economic and cultural position in 1998, the nationalist minority had begun to make in-roads in to former unionist bastions within the broader political economy and culture. Yet Catholics rates of unemployment were still approximately twice that of their Protestant counterparts (O'Hearn 2008,

104) and Catholics were critically under-represented in the criminal justice system. Politically, there was a general alignment of the political strategies of broader nationalist Ireland along with support from the Irish American lobby, with the collective nationalist vote within the six counties sitting at approximately 39% and 93% support for the Agreement.

Unionism, meanwhile, found itself in a contradictory economic, cultural and political position. The Orange Order was a significant cultural force, unionist symbolism was omnipotent, the police force and wider criminal justice sector were overwhelmingly Protestant. Within the broader political economy Protestants experienced unemployment at half the rate of Catholics (O'Hearn 2008, 104). Politically, unionism held a comfortable electoral majority of 58 seats to 42 seats in the 1998 Assembly elections, reflecting the relatively comfortable demographic majority of Protestants, dictating that a border poll in even the medium-term was implausible. This reality was reflected in the NILTS (1998) poll showing a 2.5:1 majority in favor of maintaining the union. A significant political victory had been secured through Irish nationalism's historical concession of the unionist veto over constitutional change in the North and the removal of the South's revanchist constitutional clauses. Yet there was a keen aware that a collective erosion of its historically dominant structural and institutional position was an inevitable outworking of the peace process (Ruane and Todd 1999). Collectively, the shifting balance within the domination-decline dialectic was a key contributory factor in only 57% of Protestants supporting the Agreement.

A third relatively amorphous political grouping also existed, including the Alliance Party, the Women's Coalition and smaller nonaligned political parties. This collective vote while totaling approximately 9% of the electorate, was politically insignificant, yet there was growing evidence of a nonaligned political identity within broader civic society, with 21% of Protestants and 25% of Catholics identifying as 'Other' in 1998 (Hayes and McAllister 1999, 37).

Within strand 2 of the Agreement, the 1990s were seen as an 'end of Irish history' moment (Coulter 2005), in which many of the shibboleths of traditional Irish national dynamics were to be discarded. The southern state embraced a neo-liberal political economy alongside a post-nationalist ideological consensus and a newly-found politically assertiveness, culminating in a referendum abolishing the constitutional claim over the six northern counties. A future of infinite economic growth and the establishment of a pluralist liberal hegemony seemed assured, complemented by the promise of peace. In contrast, the northern polity was undergoing its greatest political renovation since its inception, with the Agreement establishing a new, and untested set of governing institutions set within an

infant and fragile peace. While the economy was growing and employ-
ment increasing (Gudgin 1999, 251), the latter was mainly in the area of
low-paid service sector roles (O'Hearn 2008), whilst the former was
propped up by a considerable subvention from the British government.
Meanwhile, the north-south elements of the Agreement were reformist,
rather than transformative (Teague 2019, 694) and consequently, the insti-
tutional links between the two polities were relatively minimalist.

    Within strand 3, the power dynamic while reflective of the broad
asymmetries in power between the Irish and British states, also reflected
the southern states growing political importance. Internationally, both
states were significant economic players for global capital flows, both
were members of an expanding EU, and both held an important political
relationship with the American global hegemon. Having broadly aligned
their strategies toward the 'Irish question' from approximately 1985
onwards (McLoughlin 2014), both polities were led by political parties
and personalities who were not only conducive to negotiations, but were
sufficiently powerful and actively sought to bring about a defining 'hand
of history' moment to Irish-British relations. Critically, both polities
shared an overwhelming desire to politically insulate their respective
states from the North, with the GFA crafted in such a way to make this a
potential reality (Teague 2019), while the discursive architecture of the
Agreement largely absented Britain

4. POWER BALANCE OF 2023

The power balances have shifted since 1998 with the most pronounced
change internal to the northern state. Unionist socio-cultural, eco-
nomic and political supremacy has been eroded: Orange culture is weak-
ened, the RUC disbanded, public displays of unionist symbolism
restricted, while the long-anticipated demographic eclipse of Protestants
by Catholics was confirmed in the 2021 census. Each of these contributed
to a sense of politico-cultural loss (McKay 2021). The political economy
of the post-GFA state promised much but delivered little of a 'peace divi-
dend' for working-class unionists (Knox 2016). Politically, the unionist
popular vote has whittled to 39.50% with 2017 marking unionism histor-
ical loss of its electoral majority, 2022 witnessed an additional historical
first, with unionism replaced – by Sinn Féin – as the largest political
party. The two main unionist parties are split on a variety of policy issues,
including same-sex marriage and abortion, Brexit has destabilized the
already precarious Protestant cohesion (Bell 2022, 28) leaving barely one-

third of unionist voters still supporting the Agreement (LucidTalk 2023). The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC), which represents Loyalist paramilitary organizations, withdrew its support for the GFA in 2021. Brexit and the subsequent Northern Ireland Protocol Bill meanwhile, have created a degree of separation between the statelet and Britain through a customs-related 'sea border', which unionist have identified as an existential threat to the northern polity. These collective divisions have been compounded by the growing political cleavage between unionism and the nonaligned political parties, leaving unionism more politically isolated than at any other time in its history and without a clear political strategy to advance their position.

Coterminous to this decline has been the rise of two political and cultural blocs: the nationalist and the nonaligned. The prominence of Catholics and nationalists within public institutions has increased significantly and has now reached or surpassed parity within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, third-level education and the upper levels of the justice system, a historical Irish language Act is now operative while those from a Catholic background form a historic demographic majority. The political economy of the post-Agreement state eventually contributed to a broad equivalising of the Protestant-Catholic unemployment differential (Rowland, McVicar, and Shuttleworth 2022, 1) and a rising Catholic middle-class, however poverty remains endemic within many working-class nationalist areas. Politically, the challenge of no substantive increase in the aggregate nationalist vote, has been overcome by a significantly re-balanced the nationalist seat allocation, which now holds parity with unionism.

The third political project vying to secure a hegemonic foothold is centered on the Alliance Party. Nonaligned on the constitutional question, plural in regards national identity and liberal in political economy, the party has captured the support of a section of the youth vote along with liberal, middle-class unionists and former DUP supporters (Tonge 2020, 462). Alliance polled 13.5% of the first preference vote in the 2022 Assembly elections, building on its previous leap in popularity in the 2017 poll. At present Alliance holds 17 seats in the Northern Assembly, sitting just 8 seats behind the largest unionist party, and the combined size of the Alliance plus others vote stands at 16.5%. This has led to an emerging consensus that the northern polity can increasingly understood as one containing three primary political blocs (Murphy 2023).

The contemporary strengths of the northern and southern polities remain broadly similar to that in 1998. The northern state displays contradictory trends: the absence of large-scale violence, the generalized commitment to the maintenance of the current constitutional order and the

governing institutions and the wide-spread acceptance of the justice sys-
tem stand as pillars of relative stability. These contrast with the persist-
ence of sectarian segregation in labor, housing and education, the leading
political party's commitment to the dissolution of the state itself, the
states ambiguous position vis-a-vis the European Union, the inability of
governing institutions to continuously function, coterminous health and
housing crises and the position of the statelet at the bottom of the UK's
Human Development Index (HDI) regional base (Global Data Lab 2022).
In contrast, the Southern polity sits just inside the top third of EU coun-
tries by GNI and ninth in global Human Development Index (HDI) rank-
ings (Honohan 2021), although similar health and housing crises present
as key social problems. Politically, the South remains institutionally sta-
ble, however a noticeable leftward political shift has taken place from
circa 2011 onwards, culminating in Sinn Féin becoming the most popular
political party by first-preference vote. Their popularity has been a con-
tributory factor to the re-appearance of the constitutional question in to
southern Irish politics, while at the same time, the more overtly all-
Ireland/island political initiatives, have re-awakened lines of confrontation
between political unionism and southern nationalism, which had lain dor-
mant pre-Brexit. 156 official points of north-south co-operation
(UKGOV. 2018) now exist, contributing toward the fostering of a new
social-psychological community between the north and south of Ireland
(Teague 2019, 691), while Brexit has contributed to a re-orientation of
trade along all-Ireland lines (Horan 2021).

Within strand 3, the Irish-British governmental relationship is
weaker than at any stage since the 1980s (Kearney, Shirlow, and Tannam
2022, 14), precipitated by Brexit, 'a geo-political shock which exposes
unresolved contradictions and ambiguities in the 1998 B/GFA (Colfer and
Diamond 2023, 1). Following Brexit, successive Conservative-led British
governments adopted a neo-colonial approach to the Irish element of
Brexit, endangering the peace process (O'Neill, 2021, 163) and in-turn
forcing all of the major actors in both states to reengage with the 'Irish
question', and enunciate their constitutional preferences for maintenance
of the union or Irish re-unification. Brexit simultaneously weakened
Britain politically vis-a-vis its relationship with the EU, while strengthen-
ing the Irish state's broader political position as the EU aligned with the
Irish states position relating to Brexit and the GFA. The recently adopted
Windsor Framework seeks to redress this relational breakdown and conse-
quently re-balance the drift toward the Irish state's growing political
importance.

5. STRUCTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF THE PRESENT CONJUNCTURE

So, how are the constructive ambiguities-cum-structural contradictions of 2023 reflective of the contemporary balance of political power? Irish nationalism has begun to leverage its evolving structural and institutional power against demands for a re-opening of the constitutional status of the North of Ireland, thanks, in the main to Brexit (O'Leary 2022, 27). This leveraging has taken place coterminous to the weakening and isolating of both unionist and British political power. Unionisms inability to stop the 'sea border' element of Brexit is a clear reflection of this weakness, as has been the UK states inability to progress many of its political demands in the UK-EU negotiations. So instead of the purity of the pre-Brexit constitutional status of the North, the statelet is now located with one foot in and one foot out of both the EU and the UK, a 'hybrid state', with no territorial equivalent within the EU (Colfer and Diamond 2023, 2). A tiered, cocoon-like structure is developing in which the north's increasingly ambiguous future within the UK state is complemented by a new ambiguous position within the EU supra-state. So, the overall re-balancing of power, complemented by the turbo-boosted political opportunity of Brexit, has helped the initial constructive ambiguity regarding the constitutional question to metamorphosise in to a structural contradiction, whereby the potential for constitutional change dominates the political agenda.

The second structural contradiction remains the unresolved issue of the *raison d'etre* of the northern state, as despite the evolution of identities and some evidence of a certain softening of the traditional politico-ethnic divide (Coulter and Shirlow 2019), there has been no structural advance toward the common culture so notably absent in 1998. This unresolved issue has been the sub-text to the multiple points of political disagreement from 1998-present, from policing, to parades, bonfires and political symbols, and the Irish language. While campaigns supportive of LGBTQ, abortion, women's and environmental rights have attracted cross-community support, these are insufficient to suggest that the post-Agreement state has managed to resolve the issue of its own identity. More precisely, it is unclear how the ill-defined, and only ever partially-embedded logic of the 'good relations' state can continue to define a set of civic relations further confused by Brexit and the emergent constitutional question. Instead, we see in place of the original bi-furcation of identity and culture, a generalized tri-furcation. This third 'Other' grouping includes a heterogenous political identity encompassing a hybrid

Northern Irish/Irish-British nationality, alongside a largely nonaligned set
of ethnic minority groupings. In short, we now have a three-way stand-
off, which we might roughly reduce to groupings who identify the *raison
d'etre* of the northern state as a transitionary vehicle toward it own polit-
ical extinction, a second grouping identifying the northern states *raison
d'etre* as a final bastion of cultural identity, and a third grouping seem-
ingly alienated from past and present iterations of the state, and holding
on to a vision of a plural, liberal future-state.

The third structural contradiction is the inability of the governing
institutions to operate effectively. The consociational structure and the
significant communal veto powers of the GFA's governing institutions,
empowered either unionist or nationalist parties with the ability to col-
lapse the institutions. At time of writing the institutions remain suspended
at the behest of the DUP, the sixth such suspension since their inception.
Publicly this is solely related to the Northern Ireland Protocol, however
the sub-text to their disengagement was their electoral eclipse by Sinn
Féin. This action provides continuity with unionisms historical oscillation
between a minority quasi-pluralist and majority, intransigent, ethnic/parti-
cularist ideological path (Todd 2020, 342). The current manifestation of
unionist politics is one of an assertive, threatening nature, the traditional
position adopted by unionism when facing a political crisis, hence their
move to withdraw from governance. Until very recently, this has not had
electoral or political implications: this has now changed following Brexit
and the growth and consolidation of the Alliance party vote, for failing to
ensure the governing institutions operate no longer simply denies their
traditional opponents, but now excludes the politically significant 'Other'
grouping. This approach risks an unlikely – but not entirely implausible –
scenario in which Alliance overtake the DUP in the next Assembly elec-
tions. Should this manifest, the contradictions within the entire edifice of
governance in the northern state would move from latent to manifest sta-
tus, as unionism would find itself institutionally marginalized.

6. THREE ROADS AHEAD

S o, what can we expect for the Good Friday Agreement as it reaches
its 25th anniversary? At time of writing, the EU and the UK have
reached a political agreement which seems to present as the final act of
post-Brexit negotiations. Crucially, it offers the potential to re-set nation-
alist-unionist, north-south and Irish-British relations back toward a level
of pre-Brexit co-operation. Yet a re-set to what exactly? Throughout the

past 25 years, there have been three fairly distinct periods: 1998-2007 witnessed stop-start governance; 2007-2017 witnessed continuous governance; while 2017-2023 has witnessed a return to stop-start governance. So, instead of identifying the 2007-2017 period as the normality, an alternative reading identifies it as the anomaly, one which was only maintained by unionism retaining a relatively comfortable electoral majority. This is now gone, and unionism faces a decision of long-term existential significance, in which the reenter mainstream political life or continue down a path of isolationism. This in-turn will determine which of three broad roads lay ahead for the Agreement: stasis, reform or revolution.

6.1. Stasis

There is a very real possibility that the governing institutions of the GFA will experience a period of continued stasis, in which devolution and direct rule interchange with one another. Politically isolated, and electorally weakened, unionism's one remaining trump card is remaining outside of the institutions, and hence the potential for stasis is entirely dependent upon political unionisms attitude toward a fuller embrace of the emerging balance of political power. Unionisms traditional response when faced with such a political conjuncture is to either split or to turn to militant and often violent protest (Dixon 2004, 134-150). However, the present historical juncture is different, as historically whenever the largest unionist political actor has split, it has been the largest political force, whereas in 2023, the whole is less than one-quarter of the electorate and largely ally-less (Bell 2022, 7-29). Any such unionist split is likely to see seepage toward the right-wing Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), and toward the center-ground Alliance Party. The forms of extra-parliamentary support to which unionism has turned in the recent past, namely violent street protest, has only been able to muster minority support in recent times, though that is not to say that it will not be used again as mechanism for leverage. Yet leverage for what end? The Brexit period appears to be drawing to a close. Any obfuscation, delay and/or internal re-alignment will only galvanize both the Sinn Féin and Alliance Party support base, while further strengthening the demand for institutional reform. Whichever way it turns, should paralytic political unionism opt for stasis in the short-medium term, it will ultimately prove significantly politically damaging and a mere temporal blip on the road toward reform or (r)evolution.

6.2. Reform

At the beginning of the end of the seven-year Brexit crisis, the calls for reform of the GFA have transitioned from minority to mainstream political opinion, as the governing institutions are increasingly idealized not as the solution to the problem of an emergent new politics, but increasingly as the fetters which prevent that new politics from emerging (Coulter et al. 2021, 31). Whilst this line of argumentation is in itself reformist – largely emanating from those who adopt the position that the northern states problems are endogenously shaped, as opposed to exogenously determined by Britain's jurisdictional claim – they nevertheless contain a clear logic in the world of *realpolitik* and are endorsed by a growing list of political actors. The Alliance Party, SDLP, DUP have each called for different levels of reform, while the Irish and British governments have also expressed support for some future-dated reform (The Journal 2022; Manley 2022). Sinn Féin remains the only key political actor who remain publicly opposed to a reforming of the institutions.

The degree of enthusiasm with which each of the political actors supports the reform directly agenda relates to their perceived political advantage. As was the case in 1998, both governments hold an overwhelming desire for the 'Irish question' to disappear once more; the Alliance Party – beyond their obvious ideological commitment - support reform as a maneuver which can only increase the power of their party and their electorate; unionists see reform as potential tool to divide Irish nationalism and republicanism. Sinn Féin, meanwhile, face the issue knowing there remains a fundamental tension between utilizing stable governing institutions as a vehicle for political change, yet realizing that this very stability can strengthen support for the status quo, thereby damaging their longer-term goal of the political liquidation of the northern state.

So, is reform the likely way forward for the Agreement? Yes. There is sufficient political support for reform from the key actors, while public opinion polls indicate that there is sufficient cross-community support for such a reform process (Hayward and Rosher 2020, 2). Even those actors who remain ambiguous (in the case of unionism) and opposed (in the case of Sinn Féin), the rise of the Alliance Party ensures that refusal to consider reform will have electoral and political consequences. Yet any reform process is only likely to be relatively limited in scope, as whatever form any potential reform agenda takes, a political tight-rope must be walked. Too comprehensive a reform agenda in which many of the communal veto powers are removed runs the risk of the institutional exclusion of key political actors and the consequent potential for a return to some

level of political violence. Too narrow a reform agenda, in which significant veto powers remain, runs the risk of a perpetuation of on-again off-again governance, and growing disillusionment with the Agreement *in summa.*

As for when any reform process might occur, while the two governments have indicated their willingness to support reform, a period of quiet will be required before any such moves take place. A typically ambiguous GFAesque call for a future-dated review may be the best that the reformistas can hope for in the short-term. The intervening period therefore takes on a particular relevance, within which the emerging alignment between Irish nationalism and the Alliance Party-led 'Other' grouping will either continue, or a re-alignment between a newly-progressive Project Unionism (Todd 2020) and the 'Other' grouping will take hold. As pro-union authors (Nesbitt 2021; Neill 2021) have argued, political unionism faces a decision: to either thoroughly engage with the reconciliation and equality themes of the Agreement and thereby align itself with the emergent Alliance-dominated political grouping, or 'prepare to leave the historical stage' (Neill 2021, 373). This analysis leads to an obvious conclusion: that the political permutations within any reform scenario will dictate whether the third scenario – (r)evolutionary change – sees the light of day.

6.3. (R)evolution

So, *an bhfuil anois ar theacht an tSamraidh*? Is the summer coming (of complete Irish independence from Britain) as McVeigh and Rolston (2021) argue? The existing contradictions of the Agreement relating to the constitutional question are intimately tied-in with the longer-term historical trends of a growing nationalist demographic majority and growing nationalist political power. While the growth in demography has not been matched by a proportionate growth in the overall nationalist vote, there has been a steady increase in support for Irish unity: aggregate data over the past five years reveals of a pro-union majority of between 8%-13%, with a significant 11.5% undecided (CAIN 2023), though the gap is significantly large to suggest that there is no imminent threat to the union. As noted above, the 'Other' political/identity grouping will swing any future constitutional referendum toward or against unity. It is at this point that the first, second and third contradictions meet: were the support for constitutional change to continue to increase modestly, in tandem with further unionist-inspired suspensions of the governing institutions, and the *raison d'etre* of the northern state remaining ambiguous and unappealing

to the post-Agreement generation, then an alignment between the nationalist and 'Other' political projects risks the development of a democratic or constitutional crisis. Conversely, the stability-change dialectic identified by Evershed and Murphy (2022) in which the desire of unity proponents to maintain the governing institutions of the northern state as a vehicle to continue to strengthen the political alliances forged by Brexit, whilst the very stability of these institutions renders the argument for unity as less-necessary. So, the contingencies are multiple, yet on balance, probably more surmountable for nationalism than unionism. Key again is the manner in which the contradictions of the Agreement meet with the longer-term historical trends in demography and political developments to produce a balance of political power at any given historical juncture.

So, what might these be? It is reasonable to presume that the republican political project will continue to strengthen and by early-2025 it is entirely possible that Sinn Féin will occupy a role in government in both jurisdictions. Whether broader pro-unity civil society movements such as Ireland's Future can continue to develop and capture a popular zeitgeist for Irish unity will be key, as a governance by no means guarantees the realization of Sinn Féin's ultimate political goal. On the opposing side, the ability of unionism to adapt to the evolving political terrain and to court political allies will determine whether it holds a political future. As unionist well know, they only have to lose once, and their ability to shift successfully and decisively toward the center ground – something which historically they have largely proven unable to do (Todd 2020; Bell 2022) – will determine whether or not this is indeed their period of twilight. The strength and make-up of the two governments will also be crucial: will a British polity increasingly driven by an English nationalist prerogative, and faced by a threat of a dissolution of the UK state through potential Scottish secession, identify Northern Ireland as either the first line in the defence of the Union, or as surplus to requirements within a re-constituted three-nation (or even two-nation) Union? The Irish government, along with southern political economic elites, will also be key, holding a certain power to act as either persuaders for unity or as a regressive gatekeeper to same. As for temporality, unity campaigners have identified 2030 as a goal, though this appears more as a campaign-type rallying call than a realistic, evidence-based achievable objective. Certainly, by then key variables such as continued demographic and political change will have further consolidated, however the requisite ideological shift within a critical mass of the 'Other' political grouping will almost certainly take longer to manifest.

7. CONCLUSION

The Good Friday Agreement contained a series of structural contradictions which were both a pre-requisite to its signing and a bulwark against its full delivery. The Agreement itself and its structural contradictions were reflective of the political balance of power of the day, and it was inevitable, that once this balance of political power began to shift, that these contradictions would manifest in to crises. The repeated crises to which the GFA and in particular its governing institutions have been subjected stand testament to this analysis. The sole period of continuous governance was only maintained through unionism retaining its historically dominant political position. The Ireland of 2023 - North and South - and the British state itself are not those of 1998: unionism is significantly weakened, Irish nationalism and republicanism is structurally and institutionally stronger, an alternative political project – and potential constitutional king-maker - has emerged, while the broader Irish-British balance of power has seen a certain re-balancing as a result of Brexit. It is this which has precipitated the current crisis, turbo-charged by the consequences of Brexit. Collectively, these political and demographic developments have seen growing calls for a re-negotiated Agreement. And it is almost certain that change to the architecture of the agreement will occur. As per the analysis adopted within this paper, any such changes are certain to contain a series of ambiguities and contradictions which will lead to future crises. While the future of the Agreement rests on a number of contingencies, some of which will only be revealed within any re-negotiation, the clearest way forward is the iterative process outlined within this article, in which a period of continued stasis gives way to irrepressible demands for reform, which in-turn set the stage for potential (r)evolutionary move toward some form of unitary Irish state and the final act of the Good Friday Agreement. The timing of each of these iterative moves is difficult to predict, though the evidence suggests that as the Good Friday Agreement stumbles toward its 25th year anniversary it will not last a further 25 years.

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