The implementation of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement has been marked by recurring crises. While each of these has its specific causes, they are symptomatic of contradictions in the underlying conditions of conflict. These made the Belfast Agreement possible, but they also create difficulties in its implementation. The Agreement echoes – not least in its ambiguities – the underlying contradictions, reconstituting the political terrain in terms of them. This has reproduced the tendency toward conflict even among the supporters of the Agreement, whose different responses and ends-in-view reflect the objective uncertainties in the situation. Political crises are likely to continue even after the full implementation of the Agreement.
We argue that the structural conditions which in past generated conflict have now taken a more contradictory form. They at once open the possibility of a settlement and reproduce the tendency toward conflict. The textual ambiguities of the Agreement echo these contradictions: they made possible the Agreement, but they invite opposing political projects from its supporters, and increase anxiety about the future among its opponents. The crises in the implementation of the Agreement are a symptom of these contradictions and it is likely that crises will continue within the framework of the new institutions.

The Structural Conditions of Conflict: a Theoretical Model

To analyse the changing structural conditions of conflict in the contemporary period we develop further a theoretical model designed to explain the evolution of the conflict over the *longue durée*. We provide a brief overview of the model in order to clarify the extent of the changes in the recent period. The model is grounded in two key concepts which refer to processes deeply rooted in the history of the island of Ireland and of British-Irish relations: the concept of a ‘system of relationships’, and that of a ‘dynamic of power’ (for fuller analysis, see Ruane and Todd, 1996, Chapter 2).

In contrast to Scotland and Wales, the integration of Ireland into the British state was secured by a policy of conquest and colonization by English and Scottish Protestants. The outcome of that policy was a distinctive and enduring system of relationships constituting two communities in Ireland in uneven relationship to the British state. It had three components. The first was a set of overlapping cultural distinctions: religion (Catholic vs. Protestant – a category that further subdivided into Anglican and Presbyterian), ethnic origin (Gaelic-Irish and Old English vs. New English and Ulster Scots), native-settler status, cultural stereotype (barbarous vs. civil, backward vs. progressive), and, later, national allegiance (Irish vs. British). The second consisted of a structure of dominance, dependence and inequality which enabled the British state to control Ireland: British control was secured through the loyalty of the Protestant settler minority whose loyalty rested in turn on the British government’s underwriting of their dominant position over Irish Catholics. The third component in the system of relationships was a tendency toward communal polarization in Ireland around conflicts of identity, interests and power.

The effect of this system of relationships was to constitute the British state as the major power-holder in Ireland, and Irish Catholics and Protestants as culturally distinct communities with sharply opposed interests and identities. The system had self-reproducing tendencies. The inscription of cultural and religious differences in differential relations of power and inequality tended to elaborate and consolidate those differences; competition for resources and mutual threat encouraged each community to downplay its internal differences and to form a solidary bloc in opposition to the other; the perception of the other community as at once different and threatening intensified the concern with power. Those in possession of power – the British state and Irish Protestants – had a compelling interest in the status quo. These self-reproducing tendencies enabled the system to survive, despite changes
in the content of the identities, in the nature of the power resources, in the form and closeness of the British-Protestant alliance, in Catholic goals and strategies and in the territorial distribution of the communities (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 290–5).

The second key concept in the model is that of a ‘dynamic of power’ which itself has two aspects. The first aspect is the overall balance of power between the communities in Ireland and between Britain and Ireland. This balance changed over time. The British and Protestant victory in the seventeenth century struggle was hard-won and they used their new power to try to ensure that Catholics would never again mount a similar challenge. The measures they put in place were formidable but insufficient to block all possibility of a Catholic recovery. From the middle of the eighteenth century, such a recovery was in train (Bartlett, 1992). It arose initially from the British government’s need for Catholic recruits for its army and navy, but it had deeper structural roots. Modernization from the late eighteenth century would redistribute power and resources down the social scale where Catholics were demographically preponderant.

The Catholic position initially was very weak, the pace of change was slow and there were reverses as well as advances. There were also regional counter-currents, notably in Ulster where proto-industrialization and later the industrial revolution strengthened the Protestant hand (Hepburn, 1996, Chapters 3–7). But outside Ulster and at the level of the island as a whole, the nineteenth century pattern was one of growing Catholic power and self-confidence and of relative Protestant decline (Boyce, 1992). For a time the British strategy of reform and co-option of the higher Catholic strata, including the Catholic church, appeared to succeed, but it was progressively undermined by economic crisis, the extension of the franchise and an intensifying cultural nationalism. The demand for Home Rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries turned after 1916 to a demand for outright independence. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which confirmed the 1920 partition of the island, faithfully respected the power-balance between the communities and between the two islands: it gave Catholics control over that part of the island in which they were the overwhelming majority; it enabled Northern Protestants to reconsolidate and to strengthen their position within Northern Ireland; and it secured continuing British security interests in the island.

Partition did not, however, arrest the long-term tendency for power to shift in the Catholic favour at the level of the island as a whole. By the 1960s it had reached a point at which Northern Catholics – organizationally strengthened, with increasing international moral capital and the support of the Republic of Ireland – could successfully challenge the Northern Protestant monopoly of power and bring to bear multi-faceted pressure which would eventually lead to radical social and political re-structuring

Within this dynamic unfolding of the overall balance of power there was a further sub-dynamic: a complex interaction between two different forms of power, structural and institutional. Structural power arises from control over demographic, military, cultural, economic and organizational resources; institutional power arises from access to positions within the state apparatus and political system. The relation between these two forms of power is interactive: each can be used to defend or advance the other. The effect is a tendency for both to be brought into line,
although the multiple sources of structural power, beyond direct political control, mean that imbalances constantly re-emerge. The changing relationship between the two forms of power goes far to explain the sequencing of Catholic-Protestant conflict in Ireland, and in particular the cyclical nature of the periods of intense conflict. At any given moment in the unfolding power dynamic, the intensity of conflict has depended upon movements in the relationship between structural and institutional power. An increase in Catholic structural power would lead sooner or later to pressure to bring institutional power into line; Protestants would resist; Catholics would intensify their demands until at least some had been granted. At this point institutions would once again have been brought into relation with structural power and conflict would (temporarily) subside (see Ruane, 1999, pp. 158–60).

The model provides an explanation of the origins of the conflict, its persistence over time and the alternation within it of phases of low and high intensity conflict. Most important for present purposes, it offers a way of assessing what has and what has not changed in the recent period in Northern Ireland at the level of the system of relationships and in the dynamics of power. To what extent have changes here made the Agreement possible, and to what extent are they setting limits to its success?

The Contemporary Conjuncture: Contradictory Structural Tendencies

In the recent period the impact of global and international forces on Northern Ireland has intensified (Ruane and Todd, 2001), British government policy has changed from internal conflict management to a more egalitarian and bi-national emphasis (O’Leary and McGarry, 1993), the reform programme of the last decades has led to changes in structural relations and in the balance of communal power (Cormack et al., 1993; Ruane and Todd, 1996, Chapters 5–7). The Belfast Agreement marks an intensification of the reform programme and a new constitutional balance (O’Leary, 1999; McCrudden, 1999).

Is it conceivable that the historic conflict – now more than four centuries old – is coming to an end? For many the Belfast Agreement is evidence of this (see Ruane, 1999). Within the terms of the model this would mean that the system of relationships is in process of dissolution. This is certainly possible. It was set in place in the specific conditions of early modern Europe – during the initial phase of capitalist development, imperial expansion, state- and nation-building, reformation and counter-reformation. If modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries left the system intact, contemporary processes of globalization, post-nationalism and post-modernization could have a very different effect. Even if they did not erode the system of relationships, they could affect its power dynamic in ways that reduced the intensity of conflict. As we will see such tendencies are present; but there are also countervailing ones. What characterizes the present situation is above all its contradictory nature.

The System of Relationships

From its inception the system of relationships has undergone change in its specific forms while retaining its overall structure. The impact of contemporary changes
may be more radical. Precisely because it is a system, it can be dismantled, with a resultant disaggregation of the totalizing communal conflict of the past. Moreover even with the system still in place, change at crucial points within it might lessen, or increase, the level and communally-representative character of conflict.

Some contemporary changes are weakening the tendency of the system to produce conflict; taken further, they might dissolve it altogether. For example, contemporary global processes have problematized the cultural and ideological distinctions on which communal opposition has been constructed. The spread of secularism and liberalism internationally has super-imposed new distinctions – secular vs. religious and liberal vs. conservative – on the traditional Catholic vs. Protestant dichotomy (Boal et al., 1997). Not just secularists but liberal Catholics and liberal Protestants are now closer to each other theologically than they are to conservatives of their own faith (see Boal et al., 1997, pp. 24ff, 45ff). The ideologies of pluralism, post-nationalism and regionalism, and the practical realities of multi-national industry and European integration, have challenged traditional national narratives and projects (Pollak, 1993). Individualistic consumerism, the dominant value system of the age, has made deep inroads into the culture of both communities.

There have also been far-reaching changes in the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality. In a dramatically changed international security system, the British government no longer needs Irish Protestant loyalty to secure its national interests. It disclaims any ‘selfish strategic or economic interests’ for being in Ireland, declares its willingness to withdraw if a majority of the population of Northern Ireland so decides, and defines its role as one of facilitating agreement between the traditions on the island and securing rights and equality within Northern Ireland (Downing Street Declaration, para. 4; Framework, para. 20). The shift in the British position has far-reaching implications for Catholic-Protestant relations: on the one hand it encourages Protestants to engage seriously with Catholics to bring about consensual politics within Northern Ireland; on the other hand it opens up to nationalists the possibility of achieving Irish unity with Protestant consent.

Again, the growing individualization of contemporary society under late modern/post-modern conditions, which is weakening tendencies everywhere to form solidary communities, is moderating in some degree the tendency toward communal polarization in Northern Ireland. On the Protestant side, post-industrialism has eroded the class structure and economic basis that underlay Protestant solidarity, at a time when consumerism is proliferating new social identities (Coulter, 1997). For Catholics (now more regionally dispersed than Protestants), tendencies towards individuation are augmented by fragmentation on the basis of locality as centre-periphery relations within Northern Ireland are transformed by new economic investment and political linkages. The emergence of numerous single-issue groups with cross-community support (for example the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition) and the enthusiasm for the Civic Forum show a broadening of the concept of politics beyond the communal and constitutional divide.

There are, however, countervailing tendencies which are reproducing the system of relationships and its tendency to produce conflict. While secularism is weakening the religious commitment of some in Northern Ireland, fundamentalist
currents are strengthening the religious convictions of others (Boal et al., 1997, p. 97). The resurgence in ethno-national sentiment internationally has reinforced the emphasis on the ethno-national dimension of conflict in Northern Ireland, and with it the belief that conflict of some kind is inevitable. Practical day-to-day cultural differences and oppositions between the two Northern communities may be decreasing, but differences at the level of national identity and assertion appear to be increasing (see Hayes and McAllister, 1999). The borders of nation-states are becoming more porous, but nation-states are not disappearing; the more measured assessments of the future of the nation-state give it a long life yet (Smith, 1995).

Other developments are reproducing the structure of dominance, dependence and inequality. Wider British security interests have indeed changed and the British state has now more interest in resolving than in manipulating communal divisions. But there is a continuing British interest in, and commitment to, the integrity of the UK. In a period when Scottish nationalism poses a threat to the unity of the state, the union with Northern Ireland has the quality of a first line of defence. In the shorter term, if the next elections fail to return a government with a decisive majority, the new government may again offer Ulster Unionists concessions in return for political support.

Finally, tendencies towards individualization within both communities have yet to undermine the tendency towards communal opposition. Indeed opinion poll data over a ten-year period suggest that communal opposition is growing rather than declining (Hayes and McAllister, 1999). Numerous studies have shown how wider social trends – in youth culture, in sport, in music – have taken on a communalist character in Northern Ireland (Bell, 1990; McCarley, 1994; Rolston, 1999). Ironically, the Belfast Agreement has strengthened this tendency since it is predicated on the existence of two solidary communal blocs. Meanwhile, the political middle ground has become extremely narrow: the cross-community parties totalled less than 9 per cent of first preference votes in the 1998 Assembly elections.

This points to a situation of sharply contradictory tendencies – at once toward the dissolution and the reproduction of the system of relationships. One or other of these tendencies may eventually win out, but this is not inevitable. They could coexist for the indefinite future.

The Dynamics of Power

Conflict in Ireland, and more recently in Northern Ireland, has been at its most intense when the balance of power was changing and opening up an imbalance between structural and institutional power. The Belfast Agreement is of particular interest as a means of regulating this source of conflict. We may see it as an attempt to tackle the conflict in two ways. On the first count it seeks to bring to an end the current intense phase of conflict by bringing the structural and institutional power of each community into line, and by doing so in a manner that reassures both communities about their immediate future. It respects the right of the majority to determine the constitutional status of Northern Ireland but provides elaborate safeguards for the rights and interests of the minority, guaranteeing proportionality of representation and participation at all levels of decision-making.
On the second count, it establishes a framework that lessens the salience of and motivation for power-struggle while ensuring that future shifts in the power-balance do not precipitate a new phase of violent conflict. The Agreement’s consociational structures and egalitarian legislation (O’Leary, 1999; McCrudden, 1999), together with its promise of strong equality and rights legislation in both Irish jurisdictions, are designed to ensure that future changes in communal power resources do not produce new injustices and grievances. This will remove much of the motivation for power-struggle. But if the power-balance – and in particular the demographic balance – continues to change in the Catholic favour, the Agreement affirms the legitimacy of constitutional change and provides a mechanism for bringing it about. This will prevent the build-up of tension around the imbalance between structural and institutional power that in the past produced intense and violent conflict.

This intent of the Agreement may not, however, be realized. The dynamic of power and its implications for conflict are very difficult to predict for the coming period. There are two reasons for this:

- the contradictory forces which are presently operating at once to stabilize and to destabilize the power-balance;
- the possibility that the Agreement may have given one of the communities a ‘power bonus’, that is, substantially more institutional power than its structural power strictly ‘merited’.

The processes (modernization, democratization, industrialization) that in the past affected power relations on the island of Ireland are now of decreasing relevance, but new forces and processes are coming on stream and working in opposite directions. On the one side are developments that appear to stabilize the balance of power, perhaps around the point of communal equality. For example, there is evidence that convergence in family-planning practices is beginning to stabilize the demographic balance (Compton et al., 1985). The equality and rights provisions of the Agreement are available to both communities. The reform of the police should – if carried to fruition – help equalize the coercive capacities of the two communities. The Agreement contains elaborate checks and balances to guarantee each community a central role in policy making and the means to defend its vital interests. The principles underlying the Agreement are those of equality and respect for difference: the effect could be an end to, or at least a radical moderation of, the struggle for power. International forces are stabilizing the Agreement: its provisions have been guaranteed by international agreement between the Irish and British governments; the two most important international actors in Northern Ireland – the European Union and the USA – have strong interests in upholding the Agreement and the USA in particular can apply strong pressure against those who breach its rules or spirit. These trends suggest at most a gradual shift in the balance of power that the institutions of the Agreement should be well able to accommodate.

However there are also contrary tendencies. In a globalizing world, new resources – communications, inward investment, new discourses giving access to international audiences and allies – are constantly coming on-stream, providing new arenas and resources for struggle and opening the possibility of a significant shift in the balance of power. Birth rates may be converging but the differential will benefit
Catholics for some time yet (Courbage, 1997) and the birth rate is not the only determinant of the demographic balance; emigration and return-migration are also important. Once – (if) demographic parity is reached, any further substantial shift in favour of Catholics would have major and irreversible effects on the balance of institutional – and thereby structural – power on the island. The ‘public’ culture of the Agreement stresses equality and parity of esteem; but, for the moment at least, private meanings and intention are very different. Certainly the scope for power struggle remains considerable: over equality of access to education (and therefore cultural capital), jobs (and therefore wealth, emigration and return-migration), cultural rights (and therefore the sense of belonging of each community in Northern Ireland). Already, since the Agreement was signed, there has been a series of cultural skirmishes over marches, flags, and language. The Agreement has established elaborate checks and balances, but how the new institutions will function and what their respective powers will be remain to be worked out in practice. One cannot rule out the possibility of a series of small victories by one community with a major cumulative effect. Finally, there is the instability of the international context and the uncertain future of US interest in and prioritization of the Irish question. These trends raise the possibility of major and perhaps sudden changes in the balance of power that might well undermine the conflict-regulating capacity of the institutions of the Agreement.

Moreover, these contradictory forces are working in a situation where the achievements of the Agreement itself are uncertain and contested. The benign view, that it brought institutional and structural power into line, may not be accurate. One or other community could have secured a power bonus in the negotiations and may now enjoy an excess of institutional power. If so, that power will be available to it to maintain or to advance its structural power, and the temptation will be to use it. It is presently the judgement of about half of the unionist community that nationalists gained such a power bonus. This may prove not to be the case; indeed the opposite may be true. But the possibility that it may have happened encourages both communities to use the institutions of the Agreement to advance their case, in short to continue the old struggle within the framework of the new institutions. If, eventually, it emerges that one community has gained a decisive power bonus, the pressure within the other community to collapse the Agreement will be intense.

The overall impact of these factors on the conflict-regulating capacity of the institutions of the Agreement remains uncertain. It remains unclear whether the Agreement has brought structural and institutional power into line (which would tend to reduce conflict) or whether one community has received a power bonus (which would tend to aggravate it): whether the overall power balance is stabilizing or changing too rapidly to be contained within the new institutions.

The Structural Conditions of Conflict Today

We have pointed to the contradictory tendencies that now surround both the system of relationships and the dynamic of power. On the one hand we have structural tendencies working to undermine the system of relationships coexisting with tendencies working to reproduce it. On the other hand we have structural tendencies stabilizing the communal power balance with structural and institutional
power more or less in line coexisting with other structural tendencies threatening to de-stabilize the power balance and to re-open the gap between the two forms of power.

The system of relationships is inherently conflictual in that it constitutes Catholics and Protestants as distinct communities with opposed interests and values. A dissolution of that system would bring the conflict completely to an end. Such a dissolution could take place through revolutionary change; it is, however, much more likely to be a process in which the progressive moderation of the structural and cultural oppositions leads to a moderation of the level of communal conflict and allows an increase in the extent and salience of non-communal forms of politics.

The power dynamic complicates the picture. A stable power balance, with structural and institutional power in line, is conducive to a low intensity of conflict; a changing power balance that opens a gap between structural and institutional power generates intense conflict.

We present these structurally-based possibilities and their implications for conflict in the form of a simple $2 \times 2$ diagram (Figure 1).¹

In the case of A, the level of conflict is initially low and is set to disappear when the system of relationships finally dissolves. In the case of B, the unevenness and instability of the power dynamic generate intense conflict, which will fade as the system of relationships dissolves. In the case of C and D conflict persists, but at a different level of intensity in each case. Note that the condition that the two forms of power are in line usually holds only temporarily: the historical pattern has been one of alternation between C and D.

The emphasis that the model places on the contradictory nature of the present situation is particularly appropriate to analysing political developments during the 1990s. The search for a settlement witnessed a seemingly unending series of advances, reversals and about-turns, each accompanied by alternating swings between optimism and pessimism. The structural basis of this oscillation is now

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**Figure 1: Structural conditions of conflict**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power tendencies</th>
<th>System tendencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>balance of power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stable, structural/institutional</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power in line</td>
<td>low intensity conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gradually decreasing to zero-conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>system dissolving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conflict persisting at low intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balance of power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unstable, structural/institutional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power out of line</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>temporary period of intense conflict then end to conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>system reproducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intense and persistent conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
clear: while one set of structural conditions made for a reduction in the intensity of conflict and encouraged hope in the possibility of a peaceful settlement, another set worked to undermine a settlement and pushed for a return to outright conflict. This also explains the importance of the ideas of ‘process’, ‘momentum’, and the emphasis governments and parties placed on ‘moving the process forward’. In a situation where new openings for agreement are constantly generated and then closed off, only a process in which new issues and resources are constantly brought into play can keep open the potential for agreement.

To draw attention to the idea of a ‘process’ and the discourse of ‘moving the process forward’ is to highlight the role of political actors. Their role is critical, for how they interpret their situation and choose to respond to it is a formative aspect of the development of the structures themselves.

The Contemporary Conjuncture: the Role of Political Actors

The contradictory nature of the current situation amplifies the role of political actors. The contradictory tendencies leave open different possible futures and allow action to make a difference; they also radically increase uncertainty and risk, and the possibility that one-time allies will come to radically opposed political judgements. The situation requires leaders and parties to make strategic choices of an unprecedented kind and to justify those choices to a community that is divided and uncertain about the nature and direction of the process. It makes for a condition of cognitive uncertainty and ambiguity, of tension and division, of the possibility that current allies may soon change their position, and that the entire field might suddenly be recomposed. The key issues on which judgements must be made, where uncertainty is endemic, and where radically different futures are held open, concern the conditions of conflict and the relations of power. Figure 2 shows the positions of the main political groupings on these questions.2

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**Figure 2: Actor assumptions about the underlying causes of conflict and the balance of power**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power tendencies</th>
<th>Dissolving</th>
<th>Reproducing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>balance of power stable, structural/institutional</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power in line</td>
<td>SDLP leadership</td>
<td>pro-Agreement Unionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>anti-Agreement republicans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unionist liberals</td>
<td>‘war weary’ pro-Agreement SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SDLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balance of power unstable, structural/institutional</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power out of line</td>
<td>SF leadership</td>
<td>militant pro-Agreement SF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SDLP</td>
<td>anti-Agreement Unionists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2. JOSEPH RUANE, JENNIFER TODD
One of the striking features of the current situation is the extent of difference within each of the political parties on these issues. As the diagram shows, nationalists and republicans are to be found in all four groups. Those in A are convinced that in a post-imperial, post-national age of European integration the historic conditions of conflict are coming to an end. For them, the Agreement represents a fair and balanced compromise and provides the means through which a ‘healing process’ can occur: much of what John Hume says fits easily into this category (Hume, 1996). Those in B are optimistic about the longer term, but have a more conflictual view of the present. The underlying conditions of conflict are being eroded, but they will take time to disappear – for some, not until Irish reunification is achieved (McLaughlin, 1998). In the meantime the changing power-balance will produce a period of intense Protestant reaction. This category includes many in the SDLP and the more reconciliatory strand within the republican leadership.

Those in categories C and D believe that the causes of conflict remain in essence unchanged. Category C includes republicans for whom the Agreement is a major defeat, a sell-out by the leadership and a dismal outcome to 30 years of struggle: the only option now is to renew the struggle through alternative non-violent means (see Irish Republican Writers’ Group (web site at http://rwg.phoblacht.net/index.html)) or through a new phase of armed struggle (the Real IRA). For other republicans the Agreement is not a victory for unionism; it is a compromise and a holding operation. This generation of republicans has ‘done enough’: the next generation will take the struggle further when conditions become more propitious. This category also includes many within the SDLP who, while opposed to republican violence, did not differ greatly in their political analysis. It also includes SDLP moderates who believe that the conflict is continuing, but at a level which will allow it to be managed and maintained more or less indefinitely at a low intensity.

A final group of republicans and nationalists can best be located in category D. They see little or no change in the conditions of conflict. However they see the Agreement as marking a major advance for their community giving them access for the first time to the levers of power. The politics of this group show much less of the reconciliatory attitudes of republicans in category B: the Agreement is an advance, but further progress will not happen automatically; unionists will continue to resist reform and subvert republican gains; the new institutions will have to be used assertively and strategically to advance the republican position. Republicans in this category are committed to the use of non-violent means, but they expect conflict and struggle to continue within the new institutions. Moreover, their continued commitment to non-violence depends upon evidence of progress towards the achievement of republican goals.

Unionists are also spread across the categories. Liberals in category A see the conflict in its recent form as the result of inadequacies and unresolved issues in the settlement of 1921 and subsequent excesses in the policies of governments in Stormont, London and Dublin. Those problems have now been resolved: the government of the Republic has recognized the legitimacy of Northern Ireland, power in Northern Ireland is being shared and Catholics are free to express their religious and cultural identity as they wish. At this point the benefits of the union will become increasingly evident and Irish unity will lose its appeal to most
Northern Catholics; the conflict will thus be over. Category B unionists are less optimistic about the immediate future: in their view the issue of power, and the use to which the Agreement will be put is by no means settled. If they see the conditions of conflict finally coming to a close, they are divided as to the constitutional structure in which this will happen. Whatever the final outcome – a united Ireland or a newly stabilized union – the transition is likely to be difficult.

A much larger group of unionists – around half of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) – occupy category C. They do not believe that the underlying conditions of conflict are disappearing or will disappear, but they are committed to the view that the Agreement will contain the tendencies toward conflict. It legitimizes British sovereignty in Northern Ireland, stabilizes the power relationship between the communities for a long time to come and establishes fully functioning devolved institutions (see Bew, 1998). It gives unionists back control over their destiny and the means to prevent further decline; there is also a good possibility that the Catholic demographic advance will soon slow down and – given the benefits of the union and the ambivalence of many Northern Catholics toward Irish unity – the likelihood is very low that a Northern majority will ever vote for Irish unity. (It is, of course, precisely this analysis which drives some republicans to reject the Agreement.)

Finally, a large group of unionists (represented politically by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) and a section of the UUP) occupy category D. As far as they are concerned nothing at all has changed at the level of the underlying conditions of conflict. But the power-balance has shifted again. The Agreement is favourable to republicans – their ‘reward’ for a campaign of violence – and a defeat for unionists. The Catholic/nationalist advance continues and only resolute unionist action (and in the view of a small minority, violence) can contain it. Their strategy is to undermine the support of a majority of unionists for the Agreement; failing that their intention is to make it unworkable or, at the very least, to counter republican attempts to use it to further their agenda.

It is clear that the same basic stance on the two issues – the conditions of conflict and the relations of power – may be held by political opponents (unionists and nationalists in category A), in some cases for exactly the same reasons (unionists and republicans in categories C and D) but drawing very different implications for action. This highly complex political field is also unstable. As the Agreement is implemented and its full consequences become clear, at least some groups will find that events have proven them wrong and shift ground. Unionists who initially believed that the Agreement would stabilize the union may become convinced that the opposite is the case and move from C to D. Republicans who once saw the Agreement as delivering Irish unity in a generation, without the need for further struggle, may become convinced that it is stabilizing the union and move from B to C or D. For the same reasons militant but non-violent republicans now in D may throw in their lot with republican dissidents in C.

It is also possible that the direction of change will remain unclear for some considerable time, that political opinions will remain open and that the whole situation will remain fluid. Individuals may hold contradictory positions simultaneously and
move between one and another depending on events, the statements of the opposition, or simply mood. Indeed in a situation of such uncertainty and ambiguity, it is rational for political actors to hold open several possibilities and to move between positions depending on the needs of the political conjuncture. (For an analysis of republican handling of this issue, see Todd (1999).) However this makes for a crisis-prone political environment.

It also places the Agreement itself in danger. At present, the greatest danger comes from the unionist side. There is already a solid bloc of anti-Agreement unionists (in D). For the moment it is balanced by the bloc of pro-Agreement unionists in C; but this bloc is less solid, committed on the basis of a promise of peace and prosperity which may not be delivered (Evans and O’Leary, 2000, pp. 93–97). The danger is of a significant shift from C to D, either within the main unionist party (UUP) or by the unionist electorate. The threat on the republican side is different in magnitude and in time scale. Only a minority of republicans is presently opposed to the Agreement. While they pose a threat of renewed republican violence and loyalist retaliation, this should be containable as long as the majority of republicans maintains its faith in the Agreement. The greater danger lies in the longer term if republican expectations about the Agreement are not fulfilled.

The threat to the Agreement does not, however, come solely from its political opponents. It comes also from its supporters, who support it for radically opposed reasons, with contradictory expectations and with conflicting ends in view. As the discussion above makes clear there is no possibility of building a solid alliance of supporters of the Agreement: they are far too divided. Nor is their support guaranteed in the long term: any clear-cut victory for one of these groups is likely to change other one-time strong supporters of the Agreement into bitter opponents.

The Ambiguities of the Belfast Agreement and the Crises of Implementation

The intensely contradictory form of the conditions of conflict and the opposed party strategies to which they give rise are not resolved by the terms of the Agreement itself. Rather the contradictions are echoed in it and the oppositions encouraged by it. The British and Irish governments, responsible for the draft outlines of the Agreement, had dual goals: on the one hand to reconcile the conflicting demands of both communities by a ‘historic compromise’, on the other hand to initiate a transformative process, a ‘new beginning’ which could in time lead beyond conflict (Mansergh, 1998, p. 5; Downing Street Declaration, para. 1; Framework, paras 12, 13). The first of these goals was a condition of the second: a historic compromise would bring the peace that would allow a transformative process to get underway. The Agreement represents a bold and imaginative attempt to realize these goals. But it was achieved at a price in terms of the ambiguity of the text and its potential for reproducing division.

We can see this most clearly in respect of sovereignty. In the view of many, the major achievement of the Agreement was to have resolved the question of sovereignty. It established for the first time a principle for determining sovereignty that had cross-community acceptance. Sovereignty is to depend on the will of the majority of the population of Northern Ireland (Constitutional Issues, 1.i, ii, I).
Since the wish of the majority currently is to remain part of the UK, British sovereignty and the union are legitimate and this is now accepted by Northern nationalists and republicans and the Irish government. In return – the other side of the ‘historic compromise’ – nationalists have been granted recognition of their aspiration to Irish unity and the right to pursue unity by peaceful means, as well as guarantees of equality within the new Northern institutions and links with the Republic.

Does the Agreement then settle the issue of sovereignty? As one moves from the formal-legal to the political-substantive level the issue becomes less clear. While arguing that the union is not put in question by any provision of the Agreement, Hadfield (1998) notes that the North-South Ministerial Council, the implementation bodies and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference ‘may be perceived as diluting the union’ and that ‘much indeed will depend upon the ways in which they develop’ (Hadfield, 1998, p. 616, see also p. 607). Others take this point much farther. In their view, such provisions as the requirement that the British government make ‘determined efforts’ to reach agreement with the Irish government on policy issues in the intergovernmental conference (Strand 3, British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, 4), the North-South Council and implementation bodies, and the international status of the British-Irish Agreement establish a division of powers between British, Northern Irish, North-South and British-Irish institutions (see O’Leary, 1999; Doyle, 1999; Ruane and Todd, 2000). This means that the nature of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland has radically changed (O’Leary, 1999). The Agreement, on this view, formally acknowledges British sovereignty, while implicitly emptying it of much of its political and cultural substance. It disaggregates the functions of the state so that policy making and administration are given to different (British, Northern Irish, North-South and British-Irish) agencies and affirms the legitimacy of different and opposing forms of culture and national belonging.

The view that British sovereignty has been qualified, transformed, and in varying degrees emptied of cultural substance is, however, one that appeals much more to nationalists and republicans than to unionists. Indeed unionists who supported the Agreement did so on the understanding that it confirmed British sovereignty (understood in the traditional sense) and the British character of Northern Ireland, and that nationalists and republicans had now formally assented to this. It was in that context that the sharing of power and responsibility, cross-border links and reform could be considered (Trimble, 2000). Nationalists and republicans had a different view. For them the Agreement’s provisions on sovereignty were a distasteful part of the package, acceptable (if at all) only on the understanding that British sovereignty was now heavily qualified by the role of the Irish government and would be emptied of much of its cultural trappings. In short, if the Agreement resolved the issue of sovereignty at the formal-legal level, it did not do so at the political-substantive level, nor has it removed it from the terrain of active political struggle.

The ambiguities and tensions surrounding sovereignty lie at the heart of the recent crises in the implementation of the Agreement. They are very evident in the conflicts over police reform, in particular on the matter of symbols (see Hennessy,
The tensions surrounding sovereignty also surfaced in the succession of crises provoked by the resistance of the UUP first to enter, then to remain in the executive with Sinn Fein without IRA decommissioning. At a time of imminent breakdown of the institutions, with First Minister David Trimble on the brink of resignation, Secretary of State Peter Mandelson suspended devolved institutions in Northern Ireland on 12 February 2000. In doing this against Irish government and Northern nationalist wishes, he implicitly affirmed the unchanged and unqualified nature of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland. This reassured pro-Agreement unionists and (as intended) strengthened their political hand against anti-Agreement unionists. It provoked a crisis among nationalists whose understanding of the provisions of the Agreement precluded such a unilateral move. The issues for nationalists were both constitutional (in the context of the Agreement, they questioned the right of British government to take such action in a unilateral manner) and political (this was action on the basis of power, not dialogue) (see O’Leary, 2000). The reinstitution of the devolved institutions in May 2000 overcame the immediate political crisis occasioned by their suspension, but without resolving the ambiguities or the underlying constitutional and political divisions.

Nor can we attribute such ambiguities to poor draughtsmanship. They are rather constitutive of the Agreement itself. Its purpose was to gain the widest possible support in both communities. This would not have been possible without the ambiguities which are, in this sense, among its virtues. But they come with a price. Support for the Agreement has rested on a strategic convergence between those who saw an advantage in adopting new tactics in an apparently stale-mated conflict (category D), those ready for interim compromises within agreed institutions (category C), and those with a more idealistic vision of the undoing of the conditions of conflict (categories A and B). This convergence was conjunctural and depended on different interpretations of crucial sections of the Agreement. As the process of implementation began, the different expectations and interpretations became apparent, both within and between the parties. The leaders of each pro-Agreement party face contradictory imperatives: to hold together their own supporters while reaching agreement with the other parties. The governments face the problem that each step of implementation of the terms of the Agreement exposes the ambiguities and puts at risk the delicate balancing act on which the Agreement as a whole rests. It invites continuing struggle over each stage of implementation while promising continuing struggle within the new institutions. But if the Agreement fails to put in place a ‘historic compromise’, its capacity to achieve its second, even more ambitious, goal – to begin the transformative process that will bring the conflict completely to an end – also comes into question.

Conclusion

Are the crises in the implementation of the Belfast Agreement a transitional phase, or themselves the new form of politics in Northern Ireland? We have attempted to answer this question by focusing on the underlying conditions of conflict that we have analysed in terms of a system of relationships and a dynamic of power. Both of these factors have roots that go deep into the past; today they are subject to contradictory forces whose effect is in part to open up the possibility of political
progress toward an agreed settlement. But powerful structurally based tendencies towards conflict remain, while the uncertainty about the future produces new divisions within as well as between the political parties. This makes for a crisis-prone political environment. It follows that current political crises are not simply transitory but endemic within the new situation.

The contradictory nature of the current conditions of conflict makes for a new degree of openness for radical political initiatives. The Belfast Agreement represents just such an initiative. But it can succeed only if all parties are willing to participate in the transformative process that it has initiated (and even then its success cannot be guaranteed). In practice, even the supporters of the Agreement agree neither on the necessity nor the means of conflict regulation, much less conflict resolution. Our analysis shows that this is not a function of actor irrationality in the face of an Agreement that brings benefits to all, but of actor rationality in an objectively contradictory and indeterminate structural context whose contradictions are mirrored in the Agreement itself.

It is still not clear if the Agreement will survive. Anti-Agreement unionists have the best chance of paralysing the Agreement, or bringing it down altogether, by means of the ballot box. The bulk of republicans have given the institutions of the Agreement their critical support and are committed to working within them to pursue their ends. Barring radical changes in British and/or Irish government policy, this strategy is unlikely to be reassessed for some time, perhaps years. This does not of course rule out peripheral violence from fringe republican or loyalist opponents of the Agreement.

We are not arguing that the Agreement is irredeemably flawed, that it should be re-negotiated or even that a different kind of Agreement should have been negotiated. On the contrary, given the depth of division within and between the communities it is difficult to see any other way in which agreement could have been reached. That it has already brought tangible benefits to the people of Northern Ireland and that it promises to bring more are not in question. But its limitations must be understood: it is not the historic compromise – the balanced settlement that has been accepted once and for all – that some hoped for. It is ambiguous, it rests on contradictory foundations and it is unstable. The conflict is by no means over and if current crises are to give way to a new form of politics, the Agreement will have been the first, not the final, word in that transition.

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Notes

1 The model presented here is a more complex version of the original one which examined the implications of the system of relationships and the dynamics of power for conflict separately. Here the emphasis is on their simultaneity.
The actors do not work with the theoretical terms of Figure 1. Their views, however, can be categorized under a schema (Figure 2) which simplifies but does not essentially change the terms or relations of Figure 1.

References


Trimble, D. (2000) ‘It may be rocky, but Ulster has no other road to peace’, *Sunday Times*, 21 May.