Foreword

The ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland are doubtlessly among the most widely covered and analysed conflicts. They have been featured in popular film, fiction and music, in electronic and print media, in reports by think tanks and NGOs, and in the academic literature on conflict and conflict settlement. For more than three decades, the questions asked were about the causes and consequences of the conflicts in, and over, Northern Ireland and how best to address them. Settlement initiatives were proposed and regularly failed to make a lasting impact. Peace seemed as elusive in Northern Ireland as in the Middle East, Cyprus or Kashmir.

All this changed fundamentally in the course of the 1990s. Initiatives by the British and Irish governments were followed by ceasefires announced by the main paramilitary organisations – republican and loyalist alike. Eventually, a complex institutional bargain for power-sharing in Northern Ireland, cooperation between the governments in Belfast and Dublin, and arrangements for the whole of the British Isles was negotiated among the local political parties and the two governments, aided significantly by the skilled, sustained, and high-level commitment of the Clinton administration. The agreement of 1998 led to two of its principal architects – John Hume and David Trimble – winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Referendums north and south of the border overwhelmingly endorsed the agreement.

Yet, not all was well. Implementation of the agreement was slow and stalled frequently over a myriad of issues, which in their majority were related to the decommissioning of the IRA’s deadly arsenal of weapons. As Northern Ireland went off the news headlines and radar screens of policy-makers, the institutions established under the 1998 agreement were suspended frequently and for increasingly longer periods. Alleged ‘hard-liners’ became ever more powerful in electoral terms, and while nobody seriously considered a resurgence of large-scale violence to result from this, Northern Ireland had lost much of its glamour as an ‘example’ of successful conflict settlement.

Foreword

More change, and this time for the better, was under way, though. In 2006 the leaders of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, by then the dominant political forces in their respective communities, and the two governments in London and Dublin reached an agreement at St Andrews that enabled a restoration of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, albeit with significant modifications. This new agreement ushered in a period of unprecedented political stability and progress in Northern Ireland. While not everything may be perfect and flawless, there was still a well-founded sense of real achievement, especially among those political elites intimately tied to the St Andrews Agreement in Belfast, London and Dublin.

This sense of success after so many failures has given rise to a trend to see Northern Ireland as a hallmark of successful conflict settlement, a model for export to other troubled regions. However, is this enthusiasm justified? Robin Wilson's study *The Northern Ireland Experience of Conflict and Agreement* asks precisely this all-important question, focusing on its two crucial aspects – the process of achieving agreement and the institutional 'content' of the compromise that the parties agreed. These are hard and necessary questions to consider if political science is to have an impact on the 'real world' of policy formulation and implementation in the area of conflict settlement. Too often lessons are learned selectively and out of context, applied elsewhere without the necessary sensitivity to specific conditions and often without consideration of the likely consequences of, and possible alternatives to, a specific set of institutions designed to help manage conflict by peaceful and democratic means.

Drawing on his own extensive experience in Northern Ireland, Wilson considers international efforts in the western Balkans as well – another laboratory of international conflict management. He engages thoroughly with the theory and practice of power-sharing, acknowledging its usefulness and shortcomings, and draws important conclusions that inform this most enduring debate in the field of conflict resolution. This leads him to a set of far-reaching proposals as to how Northern Ireland might be able to move from the uneasy peace established since the late 1990s to genuine reconciliation between the communities and the political elites that lead them. Once this has been comprehensively achieved, the peace process in Northern Ireland and its negotiated outcome(s) may truly be a model for export.

Stefan Wolff

Stefan Wolff is Professor of Political Science at the University of Nottingham where he also directs the Centre for International Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution. He has widely written on ethnic conflict and conflict resolution, and is frequently advising governments and international organisations in peace negotiations and on questions of institutional design.