# DAVID STEVENS: ALL SORTS OF PEACE

In my reflection on where we currently are in Northern Ireland I want to draw on the work[1] of the political scientist Frank Wright who died tragically young in 1994. Frank seems to me to have had the only original idea in 30 years of analysis of the Northern Ireland situation. He developed the idea of the ethnic frontier zone and applied it not only to Northern Ireland but also to parts of Central Europe and further field.

An ethnic frontier zone is where two groups with different national allegiances share the same territory. Obviously Northern Ireland is such an ethnic frontier zone.

There are three key aspects to highlight in relation to ethnic frontier zones:

- The relationship with the metropolitan power or powers; in Northern Ireland these are London and Dublin.
- How the law and justice system operates.
- How democracy operates.

Frank Wright argued that an ethnic frontier zone enables us to understand what a nation state is. He says that a nation state is where internal disturbers of the state can be effectively isolated, i.e. criminalised. Reciprocal violence and vengeance attacks can be controlled by the legal system. The legal system monopolises punishment and no one has a legitimate reason for taking the law into their own hands. In such a situation people more or less routinely trust each other; there is freedom from fear. The legal system is ‘above’ its citizens, it is a ‘transcendent’.

A key mark of a nation state is that the rules of democracy allow power to shift from one group to another, because we are all part of the one nation-state – a state which is ‘above’ its citizens and where the ‘non-nationals’ are outside the state.

In ethnic frontier zones, by contrast, “the law relates differently to one community than to the other” and “democratic rules are mere procedures in a battle whose results are never accepted” because the context is always being argued about. Elections are competitions between ethnic groups and within ethnic groups between those who espouse ‘extreme’ or ‘moderate’ positions. Crucially there is also little trust in ethnic frontier zones.

Frank Wright’s statement that in ethnic frontier zones “the law relates differently to one community than to the other” is crucially important. And the reason is that the metropolitan power finds itself in a position of having to support one community over against the other. Thus, in Ireland, Britain has

[1] The references to Frank Wright’s work are from two articles:
“Reconciling the History of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland” and “Northern Ireland and the British-Irish Relationship” in Eds Alan D Falconer and Joseph Leichty, Reconciling Memories, Columba Press (2nd Edition 1998).

historically found itself supporting the position of Ulster unionists over against Irish nationalists. Wright has gone into great detail as to how this increasingly happened in 19th century Ulster, particularly over Orange marches.

What I want to highlight is that when the law loses its transcendence, its 'aboveness', beyond all its citizens; it becomes aligned with one section of its citizens. Thus, it is no accident that issues of policing, decommissioning and criminal justice have been some of the most difficult in Northern Ireland.

Frank Wright says:

> *In national conflicts, law, order and justice are not just some of the issues that happen to arise from other causes. National conflicts, once they are fully developed, revolve round these matters.*

It should also be highlighted that the churches in Ireland also found themselves taking sides – the Protestant Churches on the side of Unionism and the Roman Catholic Church on the side of Nationalism. Churches also lost their transcendent dimension – witnessing to tribal gods.

**The Peace of Deterrence**

Wright has highlighted the importance of deterrence relationships in ethnic frontier zones, i.e. a community has the power or seeks to have the power to deter the weaker community from doing something about the situation. What 'peace' there is is really a truce based on the power of deterrence, and thus force. A change in the balance of power, or whatever, can end the truce and set off a new cycle of conflict (e.g. 1969 in Northern Ireland). So the conflict can easily regenerate itself.

Once conflict starts again reciprocal violence becomes very difficult to suppress. Violence can spread from one incident in a chain reaction. For this process to work it is not necessary for people to agree with the violence done by their own community. They only have to understand what is happening and be frightened by it. Then, however much they dislike the violence done by their own people to others, the other side's violence is seen to be more dangerous. The process can develop until communities end up accepting the protection of violent people in their own group, even if they know that they played a big part in starting the situation. Thus we see how difficult it is to remove paramilitary and confrontationalist groups from conflict situations; people fear them but they also need them for protection.[2]

Wright reaches the bleak conclusion that

> *National conflicts [i.e. conflicts in ethnic frontier zones] do not, by and large, end up with reconciliation of antagonists. More commonly they are concluded by victories or mutual separation.*

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[2] We may, hopefully, be in the end-game of this in Northern Ireland. Removal of such groups is a measure of emergence of a 'normal' society. If so, it will be a major achievement.

He might also have added: ethnic cleansing.  And we can instance all sorts of places in Europe where this has happened, most recently in the former Yugoslavia.  It suggests why progress in Northern Ireland is very difficult, and why reconciliation remains elusive.

**Escaping the Vortex of Violence to a Peace of Agreed Political Arrangements and Stable Law and Order**
Is there any possibility of escape then?

Wright argued that the British and Irish governments must work together to provide a transcendence under which the two communities can come together.  He saw the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 as moving in this direction and it can be argued that the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brings this sort of approach to fruition.

What has happened in the Agreement is that the nationalist community and the unionist community have become equal in Northern Ireland and that both communities are upheld by British and Irish guarantees, and by the two governments working together (a sort of joint authority).  The big new fact in Northern Irish politics is that since the early 1980s the two governments work together closely.  What normally happens in ethnic frontier conflicts is that the metropolitan powers get drawn into supporting 'their' community (e.g. Cyprus where Greece supports Greek Cypriots and Turkey supports Turkish Cypriots).

The new arrangements of the Good Friday Agreement were much more painful for unionists (at least at the beginning).  These arrangements assumed communal equality and they provided confirmation that a British government would no longer support them over and against the nationalist community, although without abandoning them.  Northern nationalists lost the 'support' of Articles II and III of the Irish Constitution but gained a closer involvement of the Irish government in Northern Ireland.  The Good Friday Agreement was an ambitious attempt to re-balance relationships between the two main communities where the two governments provide a context for unionists and nationalists to work together.  It is not surprising, in retrospect, that it ran into difficulties.

There were big implications for policing brought about by the Good Friday Agreement.  Remember I said that law and order is one of the key issues in ethnic frontier zones.  Implicit in the Patton Commission recommendations was that the police no longer supported one community, i.e. the majority, over and against the other, i.e. the minority, nor would members of one community police another.  Policing becomes neutral as between the two main communities.  And the minority are required to take responsibility for policing – and this brought a lot of pain, for it is an historic shift.  It is not, therefore, surprising that Sinn Fein found it very difficult to reach the stage of joining the Policing Board (which occurred after the Executive was formed).  And the fact is policing has been transformed with the implementation of the Patton recommendations.

**From Antagonism to Trust? A Weary and Wary Peace**
A society which has been governed by a history of antagonism, and which has had a law and order system that has supported one community, is not easily going to move into a situation of trust. Fear of the 'other' is always lurking around. And so it has proven. And unionist failure to work the Good Friday Agreement institutions has symbolised distrust for nationalists and republicans. Republican failure to decommission and consign the IRA to history symbolised distrust for unionists. In a situation of distrust people still feel they need protection. Unionists increasingly vote for the DUP to protect their interests and to stand up to Sinn Fein. Nationalists increasingly vote Sinn Fein to protect their interests and to stand up to the DUP. Another way to see it is in the terms of the depressing bigots and bastards scenario: given a choice between your bigots and our bastards we vote for our bastards (nationalists). And given a choice between our bigots and your bastards we vote for our bigots (unionists). The positive in the situation is that protection no longer requires the overt threat (or actuality) of physical violence. At the same time the diminishing threat (and use) of physical violence has allowed large sections of the middle classes to opt out of politics and any civic responsibility. The conflict has mutated into less violent forms: cultural wars and fights about victims and the past – but the conflict has not disappeared. And the nationalist and unionist middle classes can ignore each other: 'benign' apartheid, the peace of the suburbs. Apathy, weariness, wariness and avoidance rule OK.

Given this history of distrust how did Sinn Fein and the DUP find themselves sharing power on May 8, 2007. The Republican leadership had discovered in the 1980s that they couldn't win through violence and started to make a long transition into politics. The DUP, or perhaps better Ian Paisley, belatedly came to the conclusion that nationalists could no longer be dominated and power had to be shared. Paisley's 'story' was: "I have been forced into this and this is a working arrangement". This is not reconciliation – at least not this stage. Of course, it may become more than a working arrangement as time goes on.

One of the problems is that people vote Sinn Fein or DUP because they distrust the other community. Sinn Fein and the DUP are dependent for their votes on distrust, but they have to work together – be partners – if they want to share power – and working together involves some level of trust. This is a difficult balancing act, and the choreography around the non-handshake of the First and Deputy First Minister needs to be understood in this context. And, of course, given our history, we have a sense of fragility and precariousness, that it could all collapse. Violence as a mode to political change is not yet unthinkable and, while daily life is no longer defined by the daily fear of open violence about to happen at any moment, forty years of violence casts a long shadow. There is still not yet a feeling of solid ground.

**The Peace of Truce or the Peace of Transformation?**
One of the key issues is whether this is the peace of truce – and truces are perfectly compatible with continuing segregation and the 'normal' way of doing things – or is it a peace that leads to a transformation of relationships in

Northern Ireland? Truces are working arrangements that manage conflict, but they have to lead in some positive direction, otherwise they are always at risk of breakdown. So, May $8^{th}$ was an historic moment but it was only a sort of peace, certainly not a full peace. And nothing much has happened after May $8^{th}$. There has been no legislation: everything agreed by the Direct Rule Administration is being reviewed. We still do not know what these people can actually do together, particularly on the contentious issues that will have to be dealt with at some point e.g. on housing in North Belfast. Perhaps the only way it will work is through deals, trade-offs and sharing things out on a sectarian basis. This will not be a pretty picture. But perhaps over time things will evolve.

**The Peace of Prosperity**
The Northern Ireland Executive published its draft Programme for Government in the autumn. What is interesting is the lack of mention of the words 'Shared Future' or 'Community Relations'. Seemingly the common project is the creation of prosperity. But let us not talk about the past and let us not talk about the change in relationships necessary to make Northern Irish society really work. Nor let us talk about the duplication of services and the cost of division as long as regional rates are frozen and water charges restricted.

Of course, the creation of prosperity is not to be despised and we need a much more entrepreneurial society and a smaller public sector. But can we have a prosperous society without the transformation of relationships and a positive dealing with diversity? Are we not to talk about the cost of division which constantly drags this society down. Research commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on the costs of division had to be dragged out into the public domain – and was promptly rubbished by some parties and ignored by others. The research estimated that the cost of division could be as high as £1.5 billion per year.

**Separation and Segregation: The Peace of Apartheid**
At the local level there is certainly evidence of peace of truce, where conflict is managed but there is little evidence (yet) of the peace of transformation. There continues to be lots of low level sectarian incidents (particularly at interfaces). Contested parades can set off tensions and fears. There is little evidence of significant cultural and attitudinal change. Of course, it is early days yet. There are now 46 officially recognised 'peace walls' (plus 11 'gates'). Since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, more new barriers have been built in Belfast and 11 strengthened or extended. Just after the return of power in Stormont it was revealed that a further 25 foot fence was to be built in North Belfast – of all places, along the playground of an integrated primary school. There are also the hidden, less visible, interfaces in rural areas. Residential segregation shows no signs of diminishing. 92.5% of public housing is segregated with Belfast almost completely segregate.

**The Claims of Truth and Peace**
Last June the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced the formation of an independent consultative group co-chaired by Lord Eames and Denis

Bradley to seek consensus across the community in Northern Ireland on the best way forward to deal with the legacy of the past. How does this community face the claims of truth about the past? Do we want the liberating and cleansing, and possibly disruptive, voice of truth? On May 8 a new Executive was established and, hopefully, a new era of peace has come into existence. Peace is a powerful claimant after over 30 years of conflict. But can we have both truth and peace?

***The Claim of Truth***

It has been shown in many situations that it is important for a public account to be rendered of what happened and who was responsible. Wrongdoing and injustice are publicly acknowledged. Building a trustworthy peace, it has been argued, requires honest discourse about the past. Thus Truth Commissions have been established in such countries as South Africa, El Salvador and Guatemala. Of central importance is that these are official attempts at truth telling. They arise from, or are part of, a peace process and often incorporate political compromises involving amnesties.

Thus, in South Africa, amnesty was given to perpetrators in return for public disclosure. The perpetrators were held to account but they were not punished if they disclosed what they had done. Signs of contrition or apologies were not required, even though they did take place on some occasions. The victims were able to publicly tell their story, and for the families of victims there was the possibility of finding out what happened to their loved one. The victims and their families were given respect. The aim was the restoration of personal and civil dignity. A process such as this may be sufficient for many people to put the past behind them. What was given up, however, was the possibility of punitive justice against the perpetrators. And this is an explosive issue whenever it has emerged in Northern Ireland.

An official Truth Commission may help to change public discourse and memory. The ‘facts’ of some events and the responsibility for them may be established. Particular lies may be nailed. The magnitude of the hurt and the pain may be exposed. All of this is important but the limitations of such Commissions need to be understood. There is no necessary link between ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’. The ‘truth’ may bring anger and further polarisation. There is a real issue of how much truth we can bear (as opposed to tribal vindication). The ‘truth’ proclaimed by a Commission may not be accepted. This is because there are competing ‘truths’ in a situation of conflict; what has happened is embedded in rival narratives of why it happened and who was responsible. Truth Commissions cannot bring the arguments of the past to a conclusion. New realities, critical and moral reflection, spiritual transformation, changed relationships and time may, however, open up the possibility of walking the past together and possibly of some ‘shared’ truth being established. But is that a possibility now?

In Northern Ireland the families of those who have disappeared without trace seek to find out what happened to them. There are the disputed deaths by the security forces in controversial circumstances. There are the unresolved murders which the Historical Enquiries Team are working on. People want to

know exactly what happened, and who did what. The families of the Bloody Sunday victims in Derry want the innocence of their loved ones established. And so on.

***The Claim of Peace***

Many people want answers. Will a Truth Commission mechanism in Northern Ireland provide some of them? Truth Commissions are grounded in a peace process and appear to work best when there is a powerful political consensus that 'truth' must be established. The Northern Ireland context of a fragile peace, where there have been no decisive endings, may be unpropitious. Do Sinn Fein and the DUP really want to face the truth? Do the British and Irish governments for that matter? Can peace survive the truth? Nevertheless the issues are not whether we need a Truth Commission, but how we are to deal with the past and when do we do it. Some reckoning has to take place. There has to be some encounter with the truth – which is not a form of tribal vindication. Therefore, love truth **and** peace, even though there may be a tension between the two. How the Eames-Bradley Commission negotiate the tension is going to be interesting – indeed that is true for us all. The instinct of most politicians – and of many others – will be avoidance and moving on, because it is too difficult an issue to deal with.

**An Historic Moment – the Peace to Achieve Peace**

May 8th was an historic moment. But it has to be seen as only another step in a long journey. It is not the end of the journey – reconciliation and a shared future have not arrived. And how devolution will work remains to be seen. The central challenge in Northern Ireland is to change the historic pattern of community relations – of distrust, fear, exclusion and violence – and to create a shared future of inclusiveness, tolerance, equity, diversity and inter-dependence. The antagonistic and fearful relationships of an ethnic frontier are not easily cast aside. We have a moment of opportunity – we hopefully have the peace to achieve peace (to misquote Michael Collins).

**Finding a Voice for a Fuller Peace**

In this strange new world that is opening up we need independent voices – voices that are not controlled by a DUP/Sinn Fein dominated political reality, and who witness to a fuller and transformative peace where new forms of relationships emerge. One candidate for an independent voice might be that of the churches.

What might the churches be saying and doing?

- They might affirm what has been achieved to date and recognise the continuing challenges faced by the politicians but point to the silences and evasions.

- They could point to the need for a change in the historic pattern of relating in Northern Ireland – we need to transform the peace of truce into the peace of transformed relationships. And this requires parishes and congregations to help build positive relationships at local level – this is the hard gospel.

- They will hear people in their hurt, pain and listen and help them move on.

- They will keep saying that dealing with the past is not going to go away – no pact of silence is possible on this issue. But authenticity on this issue may require the churches, jointly and separately, to look at their role during the Troubles.

- They will help church members to engage with the society that is emerging and encourage them to make a contribution.

- They need to affirm that Northern Ireland needs to be a more entrepreneurial society but significant numbers of people could be left behind. There are significant justice and equity issues and there are lots of excluded people. The churches need to remain committed to the inner-city and the outer-housing estates.

- They could acknowledge the more diverse society that is opening up and respond to it – the stranger could be welcomed in.

This is basically a task of critical solidarity and the 'trick' is to get the right mix of criticism and solidarity. This is not about 'baptising' a new political reality or of being in opposition to it, but being concerned for human flourishing.

While some thoughtful speeches have been made by Cardinal Sean Brady and Archbishop Alan Harper I have a predominant sense of churches going to sleep, of weariness and tiredness, and of creeping congregationalism. The Troubles have taken their toll on the churches too. Endings have to be acknowledged and grieved for. Seeking to rush into newness can be a mistake. And, nevertheless, the call is to newness. This newness will probably come at the civil society and community level – and then be reflected at the political level. Can churches be part of it?

What we are seeing in Northern Ireland are huge but incomplete transitions. There are no blue prints for finding positive ways forward in ethnic frontier zones. The task is highly difficult and we need to keep moving forward, always seeing the change perspective in decades.

David Stevens