

**Vague in Northern Ireland:  
Examining Perceptions of Victimhood and Lasting Animosity in Northern Ireland**

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## Abstract

In 1998, the violent Troubles in Northern Ireland came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Many in the world would believe that today, Northern Ireland exists in a state of peace. That idea, however, is far from true. Today, Northern Ireland exists in a state of negative peace with isolated incidents of violence occurring between Catholic Republicans and Protestant Loyalists. These groups continue to disagree on who is a true victim of the Troubles, creating a hierarchy of victimhood. With the collapse of the government in 2017, many wonder what will happen in the future between these two groups. This paper looks at the existing perceptions of victimhood between Catholic Nationalist Republicans and Protestant Unionist Loyalists, as well as the role of the media and international funding. Through examining these perceptions, it becomes clear that full peace in Northern Ireland may be far off if the two communities cannot come together to form one definition of victimhood.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, Victimhood, The Troubles, Catholics, Protestants, Nationalist, Unionists, Republicans, Loyalists.

Even though the Troubles of Northern Ireland are long over, its legacy is still prevalent in pop culture and society, manifest in the well-known U2 song, “Bloody Sunday,” and countless memories and stories of the IRA walking through the streets of Belfast. Today, the conflict is widely assumed to be over but, in reality, Northern Ireland is still fighting this war, and differing perceptions of victimhood have perpetuated divisions in society.

After the Troubles officially ended in 1998, definitions of victimhood became difficult to attain. Nowadays, victimhood has had different perceptions depending which group a victim belongs to. While official government documentation includes that all participants physically and psychologically influenced by the violence as victims, irrespective of whether they were combatants or simple civilians, some individuals dispute whether a definitional hierarchy should exist distinguishing who truly qualifies as a victim. This semantic dispute and differing perceptions of victimhood has allowed for further animosity and polarization to continue between the two parties, preventing any form of reconciliation from occurring and promoting polarization within the nation’s political institutions. Furthermore, without a comprehensive examination of what victimhood means and how it affects the peace process, Northern Ireland will continue to live out lasting animosities between groups. Thus, differing perceptions of victimhood, specifically those regarding the inclusion of a definitional hierarchy, have perpetuated the sectarianism seen during the Troubles and prevented positive peace, reconciliation and societal reformation from being achieved.

The following paper examines perceptions of victimhood from Nationalist and Unionist perspectives, as well as the role of the media and outside funding to explain why lasting animosities between groups have lasted for the past twenty years and into the present. First, the background to the Troubles will be introduced followed by a theoretical framework for

victimhood. Then, Nationalist and Unionist perceptions of victimhood will be investigated along with how the media has presented victims of the conflict and what role outside funding has played in group sectarianism. Finally, policy recommendations will be added in order to further the conversation on what can be feasibly done in Northern Ireland for positive peace to be achieved.

### **Background of the Conflict:**

From 1969 to 1998, the Troubles embroiled Northern Ireland in nationalist violence. In total, 3,700 people were killed and between 40,000-50,000 were injured in Northern Ireland. The two groups, Catholic Nationalists Republicans (CNR) and Protestant Unionists Loyalists (PUL), suffered losses on both sides which fueled lasting animosities. CNRs made up 45% of the population; PULs consisted 48% of the population (Archick). When speaking of Catholics, these are the people born into the Holy Roman Church; Nationalists wish for the reunification of Ireland and; Republicans support the idea of a republic over a monarchy and gives “tacit or actual support to the use of physical force by paramilitary groups with Republican aims” (CAIN). Protestants are part of the three Protestant churches in Northern Ireland: Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist (CAIN); Unionists wish to maintain the union with the United Kingdom and; Loyalists are those loyal to the British crown and “support the use of force by paramilitary groups to ‘defend the union’ with Britain” (CAIN).

The Troubles saw a high amount of suffering and death on both sides. When breaking down the number of people killed and those causing the most deaths, many perceive that the Catholic community suffered the most while Republicans were the single greatest killers. The IRA killed 1696 people (49% of deaths), which breaks down to 790 Protestants and 338 Catholics ([www.wesleyjohnston.com](http://www.wesleyjohnston.com)). However, the Ulster Volunteer Force, British Army,

Ulster Defense Force, Ulster Freedom Fighters and unknown loyalist groups caused 925 Catholic and 290 Protestant deaths ([www.wesleyjohnston.com](http://www.wesleyjohnston.com)). Thus, when defining victimhood and who are the perpetrators of the conflict, it becomes difficult to determine which group suffered the most based off of the numbers alone. Is the IRA singularly responsible for the Troubles due to the high amount of killings or are the different PUL groups responsible because of their determinate targeting of the Catholic population? This question remains unanswered and has influenced current definitions of victimhood in Northern Irish orders. Additionally, in “The Cost of the Troubles,” a survey distributed throughout Northern Ireland after the Troubles, 49% respondents stated that Loyalist paramilitaries in general were responsible for the Troubles while only 35% of respondents held Republican paramilitaries in general responsible (Smyth). The general public consequently would have it that the Loyalists could be considered perpetrators while the CNR population were the victims. It becomes difficult to understand if the numbers in the surveys and the number of those dead or injured influenced victimhood definitions.

While the Good Friday Agreement did not define victimhood, the Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner, “We Will Remember Them,” left a vague definition. Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, the commissioner, wrote, “Who were ‘those who have become victims in the last thirty years as a consequence of events in Northern Ireland?’ The definition of the length of what has been euphemistically described as ‘the troubles’ is necessarily an arbitrary one... A definition of ‘victims’ for the purpose of the Commission’s work...that it is difficult in some cases to draw an absolutely clear line between categories” (Bloomfield). From this definition, it is unclear who a victim is and what makes them a victim. Therefore, ex-combatants, those killed, injured or lost a loved one in the violence became victims. There is no demarcation of which

group was the most responsible leading for members of CNR and PUL groups to be considered equal in their victimhood.

The true definition of victimhood in Northern Ireland came around eight years later in the 2006 Victims and Survivors Order. It follows, “(a) someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident; (b) someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); or (c) someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident” (Victims and Survivors Order 2006). In order to better explain a victim who has been psychologically injured the VSO added a clause stating “(a) witnessing a conflict-related incident or the consequences of such an incident; or (b) providing medical or other emergency assistance to an individual in connection with a conflict-related incident” (VSO, 2006). These clauses make it difficult to discern if perpetrators should be treated as victims if they were injured during the Troubles or if there should be a separate agreement concerning perpetrators. As previously discussed however, there have been no such agreements concerning perpetrators of the conflict as well as no acknowledgement on which group is responsible for the Troubles. Therefore, the VSO classifies all those affected by the Troubles as victims or survivors.

In order to assure the post-conflict transition was successful, a number of piecemeal transitional justice mechanisms were put into place in order to benefit both sides. The mechanisms, based in the criminal justice system include, the Historical Enquiries Team, the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland as well as public inquiries, which review miscarriages of justice carried out by the RUC (Lawther, 2015). Additionally, there have been different commemoration projects with the goal of building a collective truth about events that

occurred during the Troubles. These “truth-telling” projects were considered to be bottom-top mechanisms which would create genuine dialogue and grassroots ownership, allowing the people to feel listened to and heeded (Lundy & McGovern, 2008). The hope was to allow both sides to come together and begin the path towards reconciliation and peace.

Today, Northern Ireland doesn't face nearly the amount of violence that it did during the Troubles; rather, the violence that still occurs is largely related to gang warfare. However, there are still many indicators of Northern Ireland's conflicted past that remain. Most notably, Northern Ireland's devolved government collapsed in January of 2017 when the late Martin McGuinness resigned as Deputy First Minister and Sinn Fein withdrew from a coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). According to the Good Friday Agreement, Unionists and Nationalists must work together in a power-sharing executive. With the executive collapsed and no agreement in sight, Northern Ireland has no working government and is functioning via civil servants on diminishing resources (Kelly, 2018). Since the collapse, McGuinness died in March of 2017, there has been a round of new elections in Northern Ireland, and many attempts at negotiations trying to restore power, with no success to date (thejournal.ie). As a result of the collapse, Northern Ireland's economy has suffered greatly. Because the civil servants must act out the decisions made by the government during the last fiscal year, they cannot adjust their budgets for inflation. Furthermore, this has led to both economic stasis and cuts to jobs and services. This has adversely affected Northern Ireland's healthcare system and, in one case, an intensive support program for at-risk youth (Kingsley 2017). Polarization between groups has grown, and the new issue of Brexit has only increased the difficulties in forming a working government.

### **Framing the Influence of Collective Memory and Perceived Victimhood:**

Above all, collective, culturally-centered memories serve as the foundation for group identities, providing the lens through which members can understand and perceive their position in the world. Cultural historian Graham Dawson defines shared memory as, “the representation by a social group of processes, events or experiences that have taken place or are believed to have taken place in its past; that articulates its sense of a lived connection between past and present, and the meanings it makes of that connection” (Dawson, 2010) In other words, collective memory creates the “ideological repertoire of a society,” which outlines the definitive qualities of a group, constructs their beliefs, and details future courses of action on a shared history of experiences and several “remembered reference points encapsulating their key values” (Dawson, 2010). Thus, it provides meaning to different events and helps members formulate a greater understanding of their environment. More importantly, memory then additionally serves as a resource of collective identity and sense of belonging among those who share in this common narrative (Dawson, 2010). Sharing in a greater knowledge of who they are and what they believe grants individuals a connection within the community, formulating solidarity and local pride (Rolston 2010).

While then critical to creating stability within an area, this solidarity also enhances conflict between different groups by emphasizing the differences and threats presented by the “Other” within the framework of a collective memory of the events transpiring. In times of crisis, the shared narratives and connectivity of community offers a shelter from outside threats and a source of strength for members. To sustain this community, the group will continue developing its “living memory” of the events transpiring, often perpetuating ideas of its resiliency and self-righteousness in the face of destruction (Rolston, 2010). Primarily, this creates a distorted collective understanding of the violence, whereby the other side holds the sole responsibility for



conflict (Aiken, 2010). Each new attack against the “victimized” group only provides further justification for conducting similarly violent acts as a means of “defense” (Aiken, 2010). The exchange of atrocities and accusations then only become further sources of contention between opposing parties, developing a never-ending cycle of brutality and self-vindication.

The influence of collective memory in shaping identity and conflict remains no different in the case of the reigning disputes within Northern Ireland. In fact, for several scholars, the separation in narratives in perceiving the rightful “occupants” of the territory provided the necessary fodder to allow conflict between the two parties to persist. CNRs began to develop their own image of Irish historiography during the turn of twentieth-century, emphasizing the perpetual suffering and bloodshed against the native peoples at the hands of the British (Rolston, 2010). Moreover, many viewed the current PUL occupants as “the descendants of illegitimate settlers and an expression of British dominance” and the imperialist desire to destroy Irish cultural identity (Goalwin, 2013). Their perceptions were further supported by the restricted economic opportunities available to Catholics during the mid-20th century, including discriminatory employment trends and housing developments, as well as Protestant’s predominant control over national and local political institutions (Hancock, 1998). It became imperative then for the “true” residents of Northern Ireland to overcome these structural impediments, defend their birth-right, and prevent further annihilation. Alternatively, PULs viewed these sentiments as pure myths centered on a sectarian, pseudo-religious understanding of history (Rolston, 2010). They reacted in defense of their own right to maintain residency of their homeland, as determined by Protestant King William III (Goalwin, 2013). Thus, a separation in collective memories regarding the true membership of the Northern Irish territory allowed for violence and disputes to continue, unrelenting, for decades.

Furthermore, even after a conflict resolves, the influence of collective memory in shaping perceptions of the past and present contribute to continued animosity and contention in determining the “true victim.” Even when violence subsides and both sides attempt to form a peaceful resolution through discourse, participants still maintain a slanted perception of what occurred as a residual effect of the prior narratives created in justifying their participation in the atrocities. Northern Irish sociologist Cheryl Lawther describes how the perceptions of victimhood further shelters groups from facing the reality of their “own side’s complicity in acts of violence,” locking themselves further into a shelter of “self-righteous” victimization (Lawther, 2015). Moreover, perceptions of victimhood extend the rhetoric of moral legitimacy outside the limits of a group’s collective memory, particularly when a transitional nation determines a shared history of the past. Determining the true victim carries further implications regarding the rationality of each side’s collective memory, while initiating present and future discernments regarding “who is good and who is evil” (Lawther, 2015). Thus, the very identity of the group lies in the balance of this debate, leading to further assertions of victimization by all parties involved.

Alongside the implications of gaining official recognition of one’s collective memory and participation in the conflict, there is greater degrees of power and political influence associated with the identity of victim. As Northern Irish researcher Marie Breen Smyth explains,

“Discourses of victimhood play a central role in the propaganda war in the determining of which side in a conflict is deserving of sympathy, which is the most profligate in inflicting harm...The propaganda war – the war for hearts and minds – is of central importance in reinforcing the political and moral strength of each party to the conflict.”  
(Smyth, 2007)

Associated with this sympathy and characterizations of moral resiliency underlies a societal recognition in the rationality of the group's actions and belief that "they are devoid of volition or intent" (Lawther, 2015). Maintaining the identity of victim legitimizes all past, present, and future actions by the group, in contrast to the reciprocal negative influence on the proclaimed culprits, granting it far greater agency and control over political institutions. Even within an international sphere, the narrative of true victimhood contributes to superior support and sympathy from external actors, further intensifying the groups influence over their nation's transition (Smyth, 2007). Politicians associated with previously involved groups and parties will persistently assert their position as the true victim of conflict, potentially leading to mass polarization, internalized biases, and furthering animosity.

This societally polarizing feud to define the "true victims" is just as influential in shaping and destabilizing the political sphere of Northern Ireland; however, this partially derives from the vague definition of "victim" within all official documents created during the transitional process. In order to broker peace between the opposing sides, the formation of the GFA centered on the idea of promoting inclusivity while refraining from allocating any particular blame for the conflict on one specific party. As a result, while the Agreement states, "it is essential to acknowledge and address the suffering of the victims of violence as a necessary element of reconciliation" (The Agreement, 1998), it does not identify any one specific participant as the victim. The VSO, similar to the GFA, then established a very inclusive perception towards defining who suffered the most as the "legitimate victim" of the Troubles (Ferguson, 2018). More importantly, not only do these documents indicate that the transitional government officially recognizes both sides as equal victims of conflict within the official narrative, but

additionally considers previous combatants and paramilitary officials as equivalent moral agents to innocent civilians who died in the crossfires of combat.

This lack of definitional hierarchy of victimhood acts as one of the primary sources of political contention between CNR and PUL parties, contributing to the mass polarization discussed by Smyth. Predominantly, this dispute implies an underlying conflict in determining the “true” collective memory of the past. Deciding if a hierarchy of victimhood exists equally determines whether the Troubles consisted of a justified rebellion against social inequalities enforced by the state or an unwarranted act of terrorism against an otherwise equalized society (Lawther, 2015). In other words, whether CNR or PUL deserves the identity of victim and all power associated. Consequently, the Northern Ireland political institutions features an unyielding gridlock. As neither political party can agree as to whether combatants should be considered true victims, their ability to compromise on transitional justice mechanisms, including deciding who deserves memorialization, reparations, and punishment, is severely inhibited (Belfast Telegraph, 2018). The political inefficiency created by this gridlock consequently leads many civilians to believe the government holds little regard for their previous and current suffering, contributing to a rising popular distrust in the governing institutions. Overall, this dispute then not only shapes politicians’ ability to effectively collaborate in formulating policy, but further permeates into the social consciousness of their respective constituents, forever influencing the perceptions and lives of the Northern Irish people.

### **Understanding Perceptions of CNRs:**

Within the CNR community, many do not see a hierarchy of victimhood. These perceptions range from politicians to the general public. The perceptions of victimhood within the CNR community lead to an understanding that the past is still at play currently and positive

peace will not be able to be achieved until the past is settled. From this, it can leave the CNR community feeling left behind by their politicians, who wish to debate the struggles from twenty years ago, while the community wishes to move forward.

In general the CNR community believes that there is no hierarchy of victimhood and instead, everyone is equally a victim because they have equally suffered. This can be seen in the 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times survey where 69% of Catholics strongly agreed and agreed that all those people who were killed or injured as a result of the conflict should be seen as victims equally whether they were paramilitaries or members of the security forces (NILT 2004). Since a majority of the Catholic population agrees that all who were killed or injured in the Troubles are victims, this then shows that the Catholic community would be satisfied with the victimhood definition given in the 2006 VSO. Further studies have also found that a minority of the population (43%) agreed that the whole population had been victimized to some extent (Ferguson et al. 2010). Therefore, the CNR view plays a small role in Northern Irish perceptions of victimhood and if a hierarchy does exist. This view, however, does not stop politicians and the public from speaking out against the hierarchy of victimhood.

The two main Nationalist political parties, the Socialist Democratic Labour Party and Sinn Fein, have both argued that everyone is a victim of the Troubles and that the hierarchy of victimhood must be dismantled in order for positive peace to be achieved. In 1999, SDLP stated, “a victim is any individual ‘whose life has altered its course as a result of the bitterness and division in our society and who believes that the alteration was negative, [including] individuals who might be perceived by some to have brought suffering upon themselves’” (Graham 2014). This alludes to former paramilitaries and ex-combatants who were injured in the conflict. Thus, the SDLP views former paramilitaries as equal victims to those who might be perceived as

innocent victims. Additionally in 2001, Sinn Fein stated, “A person may be considered a victim or survivor regardless of whether the perpetrator is identified, apprehended, prosecuted or convicted, regardless of the familial relationship between the perpetrator and the victim or survivor and regardless of any action they may have been committing at the time they suffered harm” (Graham 2014). Sinn Fein defines three types of victims in their statement; a) a regular victim/survivor; b) a victim who was a perpetrator who was punished for their actions and; c) a victim regardless of the action they were committing even if it was a bombing or a shooting. These early definitions of the equality of victimhood are important to understand. Both parties viewed the hierarchy of victimhood with skepticism even though the CNR population suffered the most losses. By stating all were victims, it reduces the blame on one party over another and allows for inclusivity of victimhood since most of Northern Irish society was impacted by the conflict.

Aside from the politicians, the CNR community does not recognize a hierarchy of victimhood as well. They see the root of the Troubles in the socio-economic problems that plagued Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1969. Lawther describes, “the nationalist and republican perspective on victimhood corresponds to the argument that republicans and loyalist paramilitaries and the British state were parties to the conflict and that rather than being propagated by irredentist ‘men of violence,’ the conflict had its origins in political and socio-economic discrimination” (Lawther, 2015). CNR historically had been discriminated against in society and the Troubles came out of built up tensions based on civil rights. Therefore, all those who were discriminated against and lost their lives are equal victims, including IRA and loyalist paramilitary members. By placing the blame on societal conditions, it allows those involved in the conflict the sense of fighting for their rights and becoming victims of the state. They may

have not been naturally violent but due to imperfect conditions, these parties became violent. Nowadays, since discrimination has not been as prevalent in society, the CNR community believes it is time to move on.

Due to not recognizing a hierarchy of victimhood, many in the CNR community wish to move towards a future of forgiveness and reconciliation with the PUL community. Richard Moore, a Nationalist who was blinded as a child by the British Army, has spoken very seriously about forgiveness. In *My Dad, The Peace Deal and Me*, Moore said, “If I keep banging that drum ‘you blinded me’ that’s not going to progress anything. Forgiveness allows you to let go. It’s about yourself” (Kielty, 2018). Moore finds that forgiveness allows the person to let go of the lasting animosities towards the other. Instead of the traditional thought of forgiveness is about the other person, Moore turns the idea on its head and states that forgiveness is much more personal. By bring in the personal side of forgiveness, society may be able to heal and people may be able to forgive those who hurt them. This is the first step towards lasting reconciliation between groups and allows for positive peace to be set.

Contributing to the CNR views of victimhood are the results in which the community has benefited from the commemoration projects of truth-telling. The Ardoyne Commemoration project set forth a truth-telling project in Ardoyne, North Belfast. Ardoyne is primarily Catholic, republican working class area with a population of 7,500. It also had one of the highest rates of deaths during the Troubles with 99 people killed in thirty years. The project would produce a book in which the testimonies of victims, their families and their friends in order to “provide recognition to those who had been killed and (particularly in terms of state violence) to challenge what was seen as a ‘hierarchy of victims’” (Lundy & McGovern, 2008). Thus, the testimonies provided would bring forth a sense of inclusivity for victims, which has been seen by statements

made by Sinn Fein, and put all those who had suffered from the Troubles on an equal playing field. This project would be positively received by members of the Ardoyne and CNR communities.

Members of both communities found the hierarchy of victimhood to be addressed in the commemoration project. Since the project was inclusive, meaning that those who were killed for being alleged informers were seen as victims as well, their families were able to have an opportunity to speak (Lundy & McGovern, 2005). One interviewee in the CAIN report on the commemoration project said, “inclusion of informers [was] one of the really interesting things, an important step. Their [informers and alleged informers] families are still members of our community and live in our areas. They need to be made to feel as welcome as any former prisoner or IRA man” (Lundy & McGovern, 2005). Through this quote, it can be seen that informers and former republican paramilitaries are equal in their victimhood. No victim is therefore censored and their stories can be told in public by their families. These stories add to the collective memory of what the CNR community endured during the Troubles and have the potential to influence how these acts will be talked about in the future. Thus, when addressing the hierarchy of victimhood, truth-telling is seen as one solution to the problem (Lundy and McGovern, 2005).

However, reconciliation has been difficult to achieve because while the public may view that there is no hierarchy of victimhood, they still blame the politicians for bringing up the past every chance they get. Two women when asked about the past in Belfast City Centre during *My Dad, The Peace Deal and Me* responded, “It seems the politicians can’t get their heads out of the past. We want to move forward with everyday life. They’re so caught up in the past that they’re not living in the present and not giving us a chance to have a future” (Kielty, 2018). As the DUP and



Sinn Fein continue to fight over what should be done for victims, it is as if they are still living in 1998. The former government was not keeping up with the economic conditions and from it seems that the two women felt a disconnect with their representatives. With the collapse of the government, it seems almost impossible for the politicians and the public to reconcile their differences on victimhood. As the past is continually brought up, the divisions based on victimhood remain and the possibility to come together shrinks.

The CNR population must have contact with their politicians and with the PUL side in order for a mutual understanding of victimhood to arise. Furthermore, because of the discord between the two groups in the government a sense of failure on behalf of the people comes forward. Patrick Kielty says on the Good Friday Agreement, “these people have been failed by the politicians. The politicians should have grabbed that fresh start and taken this society somewhere else” (Kielty, 2018). Therefore, does the blame rest with the politicians who twenty years ago could not come up with how best to serve the people other than a power-sharing government? Does the blame also rest on the failure of the GFA and the Victims and Survivors commission to come up with a comprehensive definition of victimhood instead of a definition ten years later? While the CNR response to victimhood definitions have been positive, some are still left dissatisfied twenty years on, including politicians on both sides of the aisle as well as republican groups.

Dissatisfaction with the GFA and victimhood has also had the chance to develop into violent conflict that still plagues Northern Ireland today. Dissident republican groups, offshoots of the PIRA, have threatened peace with their attacks on members of the police as well as members of the general public. These groups reject the GFA and view it as a betrayal of a united Ireland for a “consolidation of partition, merely allowing Sinn Fein a share of sectarian spoils via

ministerial offices in a Northern Ireland whose status is no longer seriously contested” (Evan & Tonge, 2011). Instead, these groups will continue the fight that the PIRA and Sinn Fein gave up during the 1990s with the ceasefires and peace agreement. The people who join the dissident groups are “an eclectic, heterogeneous collection of personnel, ranging from anti-violence intellectuals to fundamentalist violent diehards. Ideologically and tactically, dissident groups have been diverse. They are also amorphous, beset by fluctuating memberships, defections and splits, existing amid a perpetual fear of ‘informers’” (Tonge, 2014). These groups have a mix of republican members, some of whom wish for violence while others only join for a short period of time. Overall, there are ten active republican dissident groups in Northern Ireland. Some, like ONH, are under ceasefire (as of January 2018) while others view ceasefires as treason to the cause. Still, many of the dissident groups have former members of the PIRA and CIRA, thus posing a danger to civil society. Additionally, these groups base their violence off a mandate from the dead which showcases their relationship with victimhood and taking revenge for those who lost their lives. One member of Na Fianna Eireann stated, “We’d be classed as dissident republicans and probably ‘junior terrorists,’ or whatever they [the British] want to call us. But if they studied the history of Ireland, they’d know that there’s only one way you can get the Brits to leave Ireland, and that is through a physical force campaign. As long as the Brits remain here, they are going to shoot more innocent civilians.” (VICE, 2015). The member shows a complete dissatisfaction with the power-sharing part of the GFA and believes that the Brits must leave Ireland. To Dissidents, the only way to have the PUL communities leave Ireland is through violent conflict as was seen during the Troubles. As of 2014, there were ten active dissident groups in Northern Ireland who had caused 662 bombing and shooting incidents between 2006 and 2012 (Tonge, 2014). The MI5 has classified these groups as the most serious terrorist threat

to Northern Irish security and stability (2015). Due to the violence these groups encourage, victimhood becomes ever more complicated.

Dissident groups attack Catholic and Protestant civilians which leaves open the question if these victims should be considered victims of Troubles related violence. The dissidents remain “capable of disrupting the ‘normalization of life’ in Northern Ireland” (Bean). Therefore, their attacks have the capacity to stop any sort of movement towards a peace process. In these attacks, victims are created and the dialogue surrounding the hierarchy of victimhood becomes more complicated. This might explain why Nationalists are so set upon agreeing there is no hierarchy of victimhood in order to create space for those who have been discriminately targeted by dissident Republican groups. For example, The Guardian reported 80% of people shot by the New IRA from 2007-2015 were Catholics; 15% were police officers (McDonald, 2017). These groups have sought to “achieve power and control. Through their actions and statements they are aiming to portray that both Sinn Fein and the police have abandoned the protection of these communities” (McDonald, 2017). Therefore, while victims are created, the CNR population may feel more separated from their representatives and may not feel safe. Low trust in police could result in punishment shooting carried out by Dissident groups such as what occurred during the Troubles. Through power and control, this would allow for further separation from PUL groups and may influence the hierarchy of victimhood in the future.

While splits between Nationalist and Republican perceptions have the potential to drive the two groups farther apart, there still seems to be consensus that all victims are equal. In providing equality to victims, definitions of victimhood become more inclusive and future efforts at reconciliation can be supported throughout the CNR community.

### **Understanding Perceptions of PULs:**

Unlike their CNR counterparts, several within the PUL party reject inclusive definitions of victimhood, claiming a clear hierarchy exists between the “innocent” victims of the conflict and the “terrorists” who committed mass acts of atrocity. Within this discourse, “true” victims exclusively include civilians and state officials who were physically or psychologically harmed during the Troubles, while removing mention of paramilitary members, particularly those belonging to the IRA (Lawther, 2015). Over 76% of the PUL population involved in the Troubles perceive that definitions of victimhood should only apply to “innocent victims,” while the rest are viewed as terrorists and the predominant culprits of the conflict (Brewer and Hayes, 2014). Many PUL, therefore, discredit the reputation and inclusive attempts of the GFA to broker peace, seeing it rather as an attempt to establish an immoral perception of the past.

Yet, as many insist that promoting alternative definitions “morally repugnant,” the PUL hierarchical classification conveys an underlying narrative supporting Protestant innocence throughout this period. By placing the IRA as the perpetrators, and refraining to address paramilitary victimization during the period, PULs maintain a collective memory of the ‘disproportionate’ suffering “inflicted on the Protestant community” (Lawther, 2015). These perceptions first only consider the larger number of deaths committed by the IRA, despite the fact that more Catholics were additionally killed. Moreover, this narrative overlooks the previous social-inequalities that contributed to Republican uprisings, while portraying atrocities committed by state security forces as justified defense. Establishing a hierarchy of victimhood hence reaffirms perceptions of the past through the collective memory of the PUL, placing Unionists as the predominant victims despite their participation in committing equally unjustified and criminal atrocities (Simpson, 2012).

Several members of the PUL therefore view the attempt to center the peace process on the foundation of inclusive definitions of victimhood as indicative of Republican control over the process and that the associated transitional justice mechanisms serve as tools to enforce a Republican narrative. As Unionist Iris Alexander explained when describing her perceptions towards the Good Friday Agreement, “I cannot stomach the glorification of the terrorists who tainted my childhood and the frankly bizarre rewriting of history” (Belfast Telegraph, 2018). Others, such as Iris, perceive that attempts to victimize the terrorists who committed atrocities, has glorified their actions, establishing a precedent of impunity and distorted perception of the past. Moreover, refraining to hold combatants accountable not only excuses the IRA’s horrendous actions, but implicitly justifies their insurrection, implying that the state and those who defended its laws were morally tainted. By following their legal and nationalistic duty as loyal citizens, these individuals are viewed as culprits of war. This consequently creates an unequally representative system that blames the PUL and state for initiating crimes started by illegally armed groups (Lawther, 2015).

Beyond political rhetoric, this targeting of PUL is perceived to permeate throughout the many piecemeal initiatives conducted after the signing of the GFA. For example, many believe the information released by media and truth-telling initiatives, which attempt to uncover the realities of the past, simply offer additional means for Republicans to spread their false accounts. These individuals view investigative projects, including the Ardoyne Commemorative Project, as incomplete in selectively detailing victims’ experiences (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Despite these initiatives’ attempts to remain unbiased in their perceptions of the past, PULs believe they still favor narratives from the CNR. Very few are consequently willing to even participate in truth telling processes, arguing “no one is interested in listening to us anyway.” (Lundy and

McGovern, 2008). In many ways this exhibits a lack of mutual trust that leads to necessary discourses between parties to ensure reconciliation. Thus, the conflict in remains unresolved. The ideas reflect an underlying notion that the victimization of unionist members, at the hands of republican hostility, continues even after the “resolution” of the conflict, while their opinions and feelings remain unrecognized.

Beyond feeling ostracized from peace initiatives though, several PULs additionally view the release of paramilitary members, as part of the GFA, as a clear sign of inhibited justice and unfair peace initiatives. By recognizing a clear hierarchy that refuses to acknowledge ex-combatants as victims of conflict, PULs see the reintegration of these individuals into society as a disgrace to the memory of the innocent victims killed by these deemed terrorists. Within their election pamphlets and platforms, the DUP, explains, “Victims of terrorism endure a life sentence of grief and pain yet terrorists walk out of jail early” (DUP, 2001). Other statements assert, “To argue that everyone is a victim is to facilitate those who would minimize their own role in contributing to the terror and to the consequences of their actions. This is skewed thinking and it establishes a false foundation for a new beginning” (DUP, 2003). The release of ex-combatants not only implies a deep disregard for the emotional concerns of the PUL community and its desire for retributive justice, but additionally indicates to Unionists a reigning trend of impunity, especially by allowing previous members of the IRA and terrorists to participate in shaping the transitioning, political institutions. Once again, this only perpetuated to many within the PUL party an idea of Republican hegemonic influence over the peace process and the political institutions shaping the transformation of Northern Ireland.

Consequently, many Loyalists view the peace process as disproportionately in favor of the CNR community, ensuring its socio-economic progression over that of PULs. In 2003, a

survey conducted by Northern Ireland Life and Times indicated that 74 percent of Protestants believe Catholics benefited more from peace negotiations, while none believe Protestants gained more. (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Particularly, many associate the rising economic instability within Northern Ireland's working class as evidence of these zero-sum gains, particularly as the number of high-income Catholic households currently far exceeds those of Protestants (Gallahar, 2007). PUL communities' now face declining urban redevelopment, perpetually increasing unemployment, and the lowest levels of education within the entire population (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Additionally, while CNR neighborhoods in the working class face similar instances of socio-economic instability and any perceived progression is more the result of the anti-discrimination policies enacted during the peace process, Loyalists believe they have now reached the epitome of political alienation and social exclusion as the direct result of Republican growth and political manipulation.

Yet, Loyalists equivalently blame their Unionist representatives and political parties for their social deprivation by allowing Republicans to take advantage of the political institutions. These individuals claim the peace negotiations served merely as politicians' uncritical acceptance of Republican hegemony and "signaled the start of the Sinn Fein appeasement policy with continued dismissive attitudes towards unionist values and traditions." (Belfast Telegraph, 2018). As the key institution responsible for the political, economic, and social progression of the nation, Loyalists believe the British government has sold out its people, allowing them to reach an uncertain state of progressing economic destitution, while refusing to stand up for PUL rights and beliefs (The News Letter, 2018). Beyond a consequential distrust of their political institutions though, these beliefs contribute to underlying sentiments of abandonment and betrayal. Despite their profound loyalty to and defense of the state through thirty years of

conflict, at the cost of continued devastation to their homes and families, Loyalists now feel their sacrifices remains unrecognized and uncompensated. They “now feel that they are giving everything and getting nothing in return” (McAuley, 2004). In other words, these individuals perceive themselves the victims of the state they once forfeited their lives for.

Although, Loyalists additionally refrain from publicly dissenting the state, for to do so would consequently translate into dissension of themselves. As their very name suggests, loyalty to the state serves as a critical cornerstone in defining the identity and symbolic collective memory that unites them against the horrors of the past (Southern, 2007). Therefore, as David Ervine of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) explains, “to maintain this ideal, and thus the principle of consent, is an atavistic tendency to be defended at considerable cost. The historical calling for Loyalists strengthens their desire to remain within the United Kingdom whilst the choice to do so remains sacrosanct” (Ervine, 2000). To stand at odds with the state and Unionist politicians undermines the very foundational security of these people and the primary defense for their own perceived victimhood. This internalized conflict between the desire to fight for the idea of their human rights and belief in maintaining devotion to the political institutions inhibiting them results in a described “culture of complacency” within Unionism, whereby populations restrain their disapproval within a shroud of perceived silence (Lundy and McGovern, 2007). Instead of vocalizing distrust in their governing institutions, many Loyalists merely take a stance of self-reliance and security.

These sentiments of conflicted identity appear even more among several Loyalist ex-combatants who feel ostracized by their community for their participation in paramilitaries. While the anti-terrorist rhetoric of the Unionist, hierarchical stance on victimhood primarily intends to vilify the IRA, this discourse does not exclude members of Loyalist paramilitaries.



Through their investigations, Northern Irish Scholars Lundy and McGovern found many previous, and current members, of these organizations consequently felt estranged from their own communities as they deemed “non-respectable” combatants (Lundy and McGovern, 2008). Aside from Loyalists’ shared perceptions of abandonment, paramilitary estrangement only resonates more deeply as an act of heedless persecution. During the Troubles, these individuals viewed the conflict as an unjustified rebellion against the state and near genocidal attack on Protestants, which exceeded the capacity for state security forces to manage. “Only Loyalist organization, vigilance, and militancy could defend the Protestant population,” leading to the rise of paramilitary organizations (McAuley, 2004). Due to their consequent demonization then, loyalist members feel their victimhood remains unrecognized and their loyalty unreciprocated, promoting an even deeper sentimental distrust of governing institutions and demand for self-resiliency (Lundy and McGovern, 2008).

Existing in a state of perceived isolation with a profound distrust of Northern Ireland’s institutions, many of these ex-combatants and paramilitary members seek to ensure their own economic and structural stability. Many of these individuals come from a lower, working class background, tend to be unemployed, hold criminal records, have minimal education and few marketable skills, limiting their access to alternative means of income outside of the illicit market (Gallahar, 2007). Through previous social networks of the paramilitary organization established during the Troubles, members engage in organized crime including drug dealing, extortion, smuggling, robbery, and fraud (MI5, 2015). As detailed in a report by MI5, these actions harm communities while damaging “the financial prosperity and reputation” of Northern Ireland (2015). Additionally, as a result of their distrust of the state police institutions, the paramilitaries utilize violence and intimidation to maintain control of their communities and to

protect their assets (MI5, 2015). This has led to a progressive increase in violence and disproportionate number of assaults in Northern Ireland. The PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) reported that Loyalists have committed nearly twice as many paramilitary-style assaults and shootings as Republicans between November 2016 and October 2017, while the total annual number of assaults has doubled in the last four years (Black, 2017). Overall, this implies dramatic increase of instability and violence, in addition to contributing to a sectarian divide within the region.

### **The Influence of International Funding**

The peace process in Northern Ireland has received no shortage of international involvement, particularly in economic assistance. According to European Parliament, the peace process in Northern Ireland has been receiving financial support from the European Union since 1989 through both regional EU policy and EU funding through the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and the EU PEACE program. The IFI, an agreement between the government of the United Kingdom and the government of Ireland, aims to “promote economic and social advance and to encourage contact, dialogue and reconciliation between Nationalists and Unionists throughout Ireland” and focuses its efforts in Northern Ireland and the southern border counties (International Fund for Ireland, 1987). The EU PEACE program was designed as a cross-border cooperation program between Ireland and the UK with the aim to promote “cohesion between communities involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland” and “economic and social stability.” There have been three PEACE programs implemented between 1995 and 2013, with a total financial contribution of EUR 1.3 billion. PEACE IV, launched in January 2016 for the 2014-2020 period, aims to build upon the efforts of the previous PEACE programs by emphasizing investment targeted at children and young people. PEACE IV is

funded primarily by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), but also receives funding from non-EU sources such as national, regional, and local governments, with a total value of EUR 270 million. According to EU Parliament, the PEACE programs have “provided opportunity for dialogue, and has brought decision-making and responsibility for community development closer to the people...It has funded a wide range of projects, including projects to support victims and survivors, young people, SMEs, infrastructure and urban regeneration projects, as well as projects in support of immigrants and of celebrating the ethnic diversity of society as a whole” (European Parliament).

However, community responses to international funding are not entirely positive, and there is an apparent bias in distribution of funding. A study conducted in 2006 after the PEACE II program, 98 participants were interviewed and a public opinion survey of 1,023 adults was conducted on the subject of the EU PEACE II program and the IFI with regards to community development, reconciliation, and sustainable peacebuilding. This study showed differing beliefs concerning the role of economic aid in Northern Ireland. While some of the respondents thought that international economic aid was critical for the establishment and continuation of peace and reconciliation, many voiced concerns about the funding’s efficacy, questioning its real contributions to development and its viability as far as reducing the ingrained sectarianism between PULs and CNRs. According to the study, there were three specific areas of concern with international aid. First, that international funding has failed to achieve its intended purposes, second, that there is existing dissonance between grassroots practitioners and funding agencies senior policymakers, and third, that the funding application process can be a significant barrier to pursuing development goals. Many community members expressed concerns over funding hierarchies, some Border Area community leaders suggesting that they “felt pressured

by funding criteria to conduct excessive development work in particular towns or villages while other deserving towns were left untouched.” Furthermore, some respondents felt that there was an inequality in funding levels, with Unionist groups having particular difficulties gaining access to funds. As one community leader from East Belfast stated, “I know that in some Protestant areas there has been a sense that we have not done as well, as it were, than Catholics in West Belfast, they have been given lots more money.” Additionally, the study suggests that “funds may have had an adverse impact as Unionists perceive that Nationalists are the net beneficiaries of the funding and they feel further alienated from the peace process” (Byrne, 2008).

Protestants, therefore, perceive the monetary gains for Catholics as a loss for the Protestant community and thus promoting sectarianism rather than cooperation. Ultimately, many respondents were concerned that the intrinsic short-term nature of economic aid will be incompatible with long-term development and community reconciliation in the post-conflict society in Northern Ireland.

### **The Role of the Media:**

Most media coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland occurred at the time of the Troubles. To date, there have been several documentaries and programs aired, but news coverage is especially lacking, and in recent years, the media typically only reports high profile events such as bombings and shootings. The fact that this ongoing conflict no longer makes headlines is indicative of the divisiveness left behind by the media during the Troubles. The media has not been neutral in framing the conflict and, even during the Troubles, media coverage was very selective and such biased reporting has only reinforced distrust between groups. The British media in particular has played a key role in how the Troubles have been portrayed, and has interpreted the conflict according to the British state.

The Broadcasting Act of 1981, an act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, was implemented to create a legal framework for electronic communication. However, under this Act was the broadcasting ban of 1988, which forbid media from “carrying interviews or direct statements from proscribed paramilitary groups in NI, from representatives of Sinn Féin, Republican Sinn Féin or the UDA and from those who 'support or invite support for these organisations” (Rolston, 1991). News stations were already voluntarily prohibiting interviews with proscribed paramilitary groups such as the IRA, but implementing political censorship on groups like Sinn Fein, which were completely legal and had elected representatives (Rolston, 1991) stifled debate between groups and further prevented any positive interaction or cooperation. Moreover, it put a direct connection between Republicans and paramilitary groups, and restricted Republicans from being able to publicly share their beliefs without being associated with groups such as the IRA.

In the early 2000's, the BBC released a series of three documentaries titled Facing the Truth, in which broadcasters not only reported on the ongoing resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but also indirectly attempted to contribute towards the resolution of group animosities. These programs were overseen by a panel consisting of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former Rwanda aid worker Leslie Bilinda, and Donna Hicks of Harvard University. Participants in this program were introduced and labeled as either a “perpetrator” or a “victim,” and were encouraged to have a conversation and ask each other questions with the expectation that these confrontations would conclude with both participants expressing either forgiveness or regret. In one case, at the end of an interview with labeled perpetrator Ronnie McCartney, a former IRA member, and labeled victim Malcolm Craig, a police officer shot by McCartney, Archbishop Tutu directly asks them if they would like to shake hands (Rolston, 2001), indicating that the

structure of the program was intentionally designed to move participants towards peace and forgiveness. Moreover, while all of the perpetrators in the program expressed that their views had changed since committing their crimes, many tended to resist expressing remorse. All advocated for nonviolent means to achieve political goals, but “most did not wish to disown their past and the causes to which they had devoted so much time and energy” (Rolston, 2001). The perpetrators, then, seem unsure of how to express desires for reconciliation while still remaining steadfast in their beliefs. Ultimately, this program undermines victims and the opportunity for reconciliation because it forces a desired outcome in an artificial setting. Moreover, by specifically labelling participants as “perpetrator” and “victim,” the BBC states that people who may have committed crimes in the past and are now looking for forgiveness are not able to claim victimhood in this conflict.

### **How Long Must We Sing This Song?:**

“And the battle’s just begun; There’s many lost, but tell me who has won” (U2). Sadly, the lyrics within the U2 pop-culture phenomenon and famous song about the Bloody Sunday affair still resonates truth regarding the condition of Northern Ireland today, displaying the potent influence of perceived victimhood and collective memory. Even twenty years after the signing the Good Friday Peace Agreement, the CNR and PUL communities assert their positions as the true victims of the conflict, although primarily under the guise of debating whether a hierarchy of victimhood should exist within the official definition of the peace agreements. While CNRs believe inclusivity ensures equal responsibility for the conflict and creates a strong foundation for mutual cooperation in the future, PULs view this as creating a misguided perception of the past and a foundation of impunity on which to progress the nation. In either case, these contrasting ideas reflect opposing perceptions regarding the reality of the past, creating a wedge

of animosity and otherization the inhibits proper reconciliation from occurring. Moreover, the unequal balance of funding from international parties only further drives these conceptions of the other, promoting greater sectarianism. Thus, the feud started during the Troubles continues as a silent war, while both sides attempt to find security within an animostic environment through the identity of victims.

Yet, among their differing perceptions lies an underlying distrust in the governing institutions within both sides, feelings of abandonment by the state, and displays of remaining perceptions of victimhood. The fight over the definition of a true victim represents a deeper ideological and political struggle among politicians, many of which carry the baggage and weight of the past in affirming their position. As this persisting feud creates a strong polarization between parties, leading to the eventual collapse of the government, the transitioning nation's government is incapable of addressing the still greater obstacles facing Northern Ireland. As best described by local Scott Hamilton to the Belfast Telegraph, "Unfortunately, our self-serving and, at best, stubborn representatives are too narrow-minded and selfish to realise how out of touch they are with mainstream society" (2018). As the government stays distracted over a semantic dispute, the population faces the troubles of economic decline and rising organized crime, all of which help contribute to the sectarian divide. More importantly, the people of Northern Ireland hold the belief that their voice and lives do not matter. They have become the victims of circumstance, left in a chaos still reminiscent of the past with minimal trust in their political institutions to lead them into a better future.

Additionally, with the rising sentiments of abandonment and betrayal comes an increase in terrorism, organized crime, and violence by the Republican Dissident groups and Loyalist paramilitaries. Not only do both parties stand as the greatest advocates for their respective

groups' innocence as the true victims of the other's cruelty, but additionally face stigma and alienation from their own sides and the media for their actions. While the governing definition of victimhood implies inclusivity, the experience of these individuals displays an inherent hierarchy within societal perceptions. Thus, through sentiments of treachery and isolation, members of these groups take on an even more powerful identity as victims. As such, paramilitary members and dissidents resort to defending their beliefs, positions in society, and personal stability through acts of violence, terrorism, and organized crime. The conflict started during the Troubles still resonates throughout the streets of Northern Ireland and will likely grow into another violent war unless something changes.

As this animosity persists, several policy changes should occur to alleviate some of this tension and ongoing perceptions of victimhood. Foremost, the power sharing government and society must reach a consensus on determining a resolute definition of victims. Only by doing so can it eventually overcome some of its underlying polarization and create a stable foundation from which to build a shared narrative to grow its society on. In order to accomplish this, however, will require an open discourse across party lines as well as consulting all influenced members of society, including state officials, innocent civilians, and ex-combatants all involved during the crisis. Hopefully, this will grant citizens the ability to take an active role in the transition of their society, while overcoming their perceptions of abandonment. Northern Ireland must also adapt its government to increase communication with its people and include more grassroots initiatives to help people feel like they are better represented and no longer victims of the state. Lastly, there must be better guidelines with the press to avoid labeling and alienating groups, especially with regards to ex-combatants and previous paramilitary officials. While the media cannot entirely censor its material, by spreading more open and inclusive perspectives of



events, it can offer additional alternative ideas that overcome the precedents of collective memory and prevailing views of victimhood.

Additionally, once the government reforms its system, it must work towards reforming their policies to overcome the prevailing socio-economic instability within Northern Ireland, which serves as fuel to the fire of prevailing conflict. So long as the economic progression of the nation continues to decline, leading to rising unemployment, the population will continue to feel estranged by the government, strengthening the power of sectarian paramilitaries and illicit markets as a source of lasting stability. This must additionally be supplemented by reformations in funding allocations that currently increase the divide between communities and overlook the programs in need of AID. This will require better coordination with the EU Peace Program, to better convey the ideals and needs of the people, as well as the creation of a distribution office to ensure both groups receive better and equalized funding.

While none of these recommendations will entirely overcome the conflict prevailing within Northern Ireland, they do offer a means to lessen the tension between groups and improve the overall environment of the nation. If the population, civilians and politicians alike, can then achieve a brighter outlook on their current condition, they will more likely look towards a unified future for security rather than their position as divided victims of the past.

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