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The European Dimension of the ‘talks process’ in Northern Ireland

Abstract

Analysis of efforts to develop peace in Northern Ireland often attributes the foundation of the peace process to the dialogue between the then Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party’s (SDLP) former leader, John Hume, in the late 1980s. However, it has been recognized that attempts to forge peace have a longer timeline, involving the interplay of several national and international historical contexts in which the European Community (EC) / European Union (EU) dimension and the role of the EU institutions in restoring peace and reconciliation has been generally neglected. The objective of this article is therefore to examine the European dimension of the Northern Ireland talks process, addressing the whole range of relationships affecting the political stalemate in the years preceding the signing of Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Drawing on never-before-seen United Kingdom (UK) government and EC/EU archival documents and semi-structured elite interviews, this article highlights how the original dialogue on power-sharing and devolution in Northern Ireland included a much stronger EU dimension than it is publicly acknowledged. This article constitutes an emblematic case-study on the ‘Europeanisation’ of British politics in Northern Ireland, with findings uncovering a new and subtle dimension of the EC/EU role in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of scholars and political commentators have recently become interested in how the normalization of British–Irish relations over the past few decades has occurred in the international setting dominated

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by joint membership of the European Community/European Union (EC/EU).¹ EC/EU membership found the UK, for the first time, having to deal with Ireland as an equal partner in a wider multilateral setting.² The political processes spelt out in the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA)³ reflected the thrust of EU cross-border regionalism⁴ and the necessary spatial public diplomacy involved in the construction of strategic governance plans aimed at improving policy coordination, political stability, and cross-border working between and across the UK and the Island of Ireland.⁵ These mechanisms are also tangible proof of how the Northern Ireland conflict and the peace process were a central factor in the transformation of British–Irish relations: often top of the interstate agenda and with a strong European dimension.⁶

The path of dialogue and compromise that culminated in the GFA was initiated in the early 1990s by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke.⁷ This set of negotiations is commonly named by scholars, politicians, and civil servants as the ‘talks process’, ‘the Talks’,

¹ This article will employ the term ‘EC’ to refer to the European Community, ‘EU’ to refer to the European Union, and EC/EU to refer to the overall project of European integration or where both of the two main phases in its development are relevant to the point being made. For studies on British–Irish relations and the EC/EU, please see: Clodagh Harris, ‘Anglo-Irish Elite Cooperation and the Peace Process: the Impact of the EEC/EU’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 12 (2001), 203–14; Paul Gillespie, ‘From Anglo-Irish to British–Irish Relations’, in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds, *A Farewell to Arms?: Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (Manchester, 2006); Paul Gillespie, ‘The Complexity of British–Irish Interdependence’, *Irish Political Studies*, 29 (2014), 37–57; John Coakley, ‘The British–Irish Relationship in the Twenty-first Century’, *Ethnopolitics*, 17 (2018), 1–19; Mary C. Murphy, ‘The Brexit Crisis, Ireland and British–Irish Relations: Europeanisation and/or de-Europeanisation?’, *Irish Political Studies*, 34 (2019), 530–50.

² Elizabeth Meehan, ‘Europe and the Europeanisation of the Irish Question’, in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds, *A Farewell to Arms? Beyond the Good Friday Agreement* (2nd edn, Manchester, 2006).

³ Through the British–Irish Council bringing together the three devolved governments, three crown dependencies and the two sovereign governments, the British–Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, and the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

⁴ John Coakley, ‘Resolving International Border Disputes: The Irish Experience’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52 (2017), 377–98; Lagana Giada, ‘A Preliminary Investigation on the Genesis of EU Cross-border Cooperation on the Island of Ireland’, *Space and Polity*, 21 (2017), 298–302.

⁵ Arend Lijphart, ‘The Framework Document on Northern Ireland and the Theory of Power-Sharing’, *Government and Opposition*, 31 (2014), 267–74.

⁶ For an extensive analysis of the EC/EU role in the Northern Ireland peace process please see Giada Lagana, *The European Union and the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Basingstoke, 2021).

⁷ The designation ‘talks process’, ‘the Talks’, or ‘talks about talks’ have been used interchangeably in the existing literature to refer to the 1990–1998 timeframe and to indicate the discussions and negotiations leading to the signing of the GFA. These names will also be used interchangeably throughout this article, to refer to the same period. Daniel Wincott, ‘Interpreting the Brooke Initiative: Progress towards Power-sharing in Northern Ireland’, *Leicester University Discussion Papers in Politics*, P92/4 (1992), 1–28; Stephen Kelly, *Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Party and the Northern Ireland Conflict, 1975–1990* (London, 2021).

or 'the talks about talks'.⁸ The Talks had the objective of addressing the whole range of relationships affecting the political stalemate on the island of Ireland. They laid the groundwork for bringing paramilitarism to an end through legitimizing the development of paramilitary politics.⁹ They prepared the participants for later multi-party dialogue by structurally setting out the agenda for negotiations enabling the political actors involved to gain experience about bargaining with governments and others.¹⁰ The framework concentrated on reinforcing and strengthening relations through three strands: improving relations within Northern Ireland; facilitating closer relations North and South of the Irish border through a series of cross-border institutions; and developing tighter links between London and Dublin. This formulation later provided the architecture underpinning the GFA.

Never-before-seen documentary evidence suggests that the EC/EU framework was an essential element of the dynamics of negotiations mapped out by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) during the Talks. Archival documents reveal how the EC/EU dimension subtly contributed to the shape that future negotiations would take and helped to highlight the key North-South and East-West issues that needed to be addressed if conflict in Northern Ireland was to be ended. This facet of the Talks has never been investigated before.

Accordingly, this article draws on these extensive and never-before-seen UK and European Parliament (EP) archival documents, triangulated with semi-structured elite interviews with UK, Northern Irish and Irish civil servants and politicians. It demonstrates that, even if the EC/EU did not act as a direct negotiator in any of the Talks' strands, it was an integral element all through. It contributed to subtly embed and lock all the political actors involved, regardless of their political background or preference, and the new institutions into a new cooperative system in which the costs of exit would be very high.

⁸ The designation 'talks process', 'the Talks', or 'talks about talks' have been used interchangeably in the existing literature to refer to the 1990–1998 timeframe and to indicate the discussions and negotiations leading to the signing of the GFA. These names will also be used interchangeably throughout this article, to refer to the same period.

⁹ Please see: Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London, 2013); Graham Spencer, *From Armed Struggle to Political Struggle: Republican Tradition and Transformation in Northern Ireland* (London, 2015); Thomas Leahy, 'The Influence of Informers and Agents on Provisional Irish Republican Army Military Strategy and British Counter-Insurgency Strategy, 1976–94', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 122–46; Thomas Leahy, *The Intelligence War against the IRA* (Cambridge, 2020); Niall O'Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact: Back-Channel Negotiation in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 2021).

¹⁰ David Bloomfield, *Political Dialogue in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 1998); Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement without Giving in* (London, 2011).

The analysis proceeds in four steps. It starts by contextualizing the role of the EC in the Northern Ireland conflict, examining how this got 'Europeanised', thus legitimizing an EC/EU role in fostering peace in the region. Secondly, the investigation explores the first strand of the Brooke initiative, where the idea that the EC could play a role in a devolved Northern Ireland was introduced by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Even if the form in which it was presented was dismissed, the evidence shows that numerous discussions on the EC/EU swayed the direction of the Talks towards the 1995 Framework Documents. These are consequently the object of the third section of this article. The analysis subsequently focuses on how the EU's support for the GFA validated the achievement internationally.

Findings uncover a new and subtle¹¹ dimension of the EC/EU role in the Northern Ireland peace process, challenging scholarly and public views that do not count it as a player in fostering peace in the region or that relegate it to the backbenches, as the mere provider of economic support to Northern Ireland civil society organizations.¹² While the actors in the conflict themselves, alongside the Dublin and London governments,¹³ with the assistance of the US administration,¹⁴ were central to the peace process, the EU also played an important role in guiding the negotiations on arrangements for devolution in Northern Ireland and North–South cooperation on the island. The case of the Talks process illustrates the importance of the gradual process of 'Europeanisation' of UK politics on Northern Ireland, which helped to shape the path of dialogue that eventually led to the peace process. The EC/EU had itself provided a vital test for the primacy of politics instead of war as a means of advancing positions and constructing possibilities. This constituted a force for good by encouraging the UK and Irish governments to engage in positive-sum politics in Northern Ireland.

¹¹ Katy Hayward and Mary Murphy, 'The (Soft) Power of Commitment: The EU and Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland', *Ethnopolitics*, 11 (2012), 439–52.

¹² See e.g. Thomas Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process* (Dublin, 2000); Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland: the Politics of War and Peace* (Basingstoke, 2001); Paul Dixon, 'Political Skills or Lying and Manipulation? The Choreography of the Northern Ireland Peace Process', *Political Studies*, 50 (2002), 725–41; Graham Spencer, 'Containing Dialogue: The British Government and Early Talks in the Northern Ireland Peace Process', *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 10 (2008), 452–71.

¹³ For details: Adrian Guelke, 'British Policy and International Dimensions of the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Regional Politics and Policy*, 1 (1991), 140–60; Eamonn O'Kane, 'The Republic of Ireland's Policy towards Northern Ireland: The International Dimension as a Policy Tool', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 13 (2002), 121–33.

¹⁴ For studies on the role of the USA government during the nascent stage of the Northern Ireland peace process: Roger MacGinty, 'American Influences on the Northern Ireland Peace Process', *The journal of conflict studies*, 17, (1997), 31–50; Feargal Cochrane, 'Irish-America, the end of the IRA's Armed Struggle and the Utility of "soft power"', *Journal of Peace Research*, *The journal of conflict studies* 44 (2007), 215–31.

The European Community and the Northern Ireland conflict

Violent conflict broke out in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. Socio-economic disparities reinforced the differences between the two communities, as the unionist, and mainly Protestant, majority used their dominant position to discriminate against the nationalist, and mainly Catholic, minority.¹⁵ Although the UK government remained responsible for Northern Ireland, the Irish government supported the minority's claims. While wary of antagonizing London by openly lobbying international opinion in support of this end, Dublin hoped that Ireland's joining the EC alongside the UK in 1973 would decrease the relevance of the Irish border and facilitate the path towards reunification.¹⁶

Back in the 1970s, the Irish government's outlook on the EC was supported by most nationalists in Northern Ireland, but it naturally alienated unionists. The division of the two communities over the EC's role was made manifest when they had the first opportunity to directly elect representatives to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979. The passionately pro-European Hume, then deputy and later leader of the SDLP, was roundly endorsed by the nationalist electorate. Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), won the majority of unionist votes by articulating a very different stance: 'I'm going to get all I can for Ulster, every grant we can possibly get our hands on. Then when we have milked the cow dry, we are going to shoot the cow'.¹⁷

Subsequently, the republican hunger strikes constituted a watershed moment in the perception of the Northern Ireland conflict in Europe.¹⁸ In 1980, and again in 1981, republicans incarcerated in Northern Ireland went on hunger strike in an effort to gain recognition from the UK government as political prisoners. True to her reputation, the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, refused to grant any concessions made under duress. As a result, ten republican prisoners fasted to death, causing an upsurge of violence.¹⁹ Irish MEPs tabled several resolutions in the EP criticizing British policy in Northern Ireland.²⁰ These were defeated by

¹⁵ For the most comprehensive overview of the Northern Ireland conflict and its historical origins, see Brendan O'Leary's three volume study, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁶ Brigid Laffan, 'The European Context: A New Political Dimension in Ireland, North and South', in John Coakley, Brigid Laffan and Jennifer Todd, eds, *Renovation or Revolution? New Territorial Politics in Ireland and the United Kingdom* (Dublin, 2005), 173.

¹⁷ Lagana Giada, 'Northern Ireland', in David Harley and Dianne Hayter, *The Forgotten Tribe: British MEPs, 1979-2020* (London, 2022).

¹⁸ Adrian Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective* (Dublin, 1988), 158–9.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive narrative on the hunger strikes and the dynamic of negotiations between the republican prisoners and the UK government, please see: O'Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*, 165–187.

²⁰ Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP), Cardoc-Luxembourg, Luxembourg, PE 1-756/80, 'Motion for a Resolution tabled by Mr Hume, Mr Kavanagh, Mr Desmond, Mr O'Leary, Mr O'Connell, Mr Blaney and Mr Balfe pursuant to Rule 25 of the

an amendment from the European Democratic Group, which however expressed concern over the situation.²¹ The very fact that the hunger strikes had triggered a debate within the European institutions was significant, as it heightened international interest in Northern Ireland and it gave nationalists an opportunity to challenge British narratives, with MEPs from other member states willing to listen. Indeed, members of the EP Socialist group²² officially asked ‘our Irish colleagues’²³ to historicize the Northern Ireland conflict for the benefit of the EP. The outcome was the 1983 Haagerup Report.²⁴

The EP commissioned what has become known as the Haagerup Report on the 24 February 1983, with a support vote of 124 to 7²⁵ and with the explicit objective to ‘explain a terribly complicated situation of conflict . . . to non-British and non-Irish members of the Parliament’.²⁶ The former Danish journalist Niels Haagerup, spokesperson of the EP Political Affairs Committee, was tasked with holding hearings in Belfast, London, and Dublin. He was an MEP with a considerable reputation as a moderate and well informed commentator on international political issues.²⁷ The report needed to be compiled by someone who was not too close to the Irish or the Northern Irish MEPs, which could have otherwise jeopardized the balance of the final text. By nominating Haagerup, the EP attempted to avoid any deterioration of relationships between Brussels and the UK government, on a matter that they considered a threat to Western European security. Hence, the report also had the potential to raise the profile of the Parliament internationally. The conclusion called on the EC to assume greater responsibility for economic and social development, and for improved intergovernmental cooperation on the island of Ireland, and between the UK and Irish governments.

The report was motivated by a specific willingness to look into Northern Ireland’s political situation,²⁸ for several reasons. First, Hume’s

Rules of Procedure on the situation in Northern Ireland’, 18 December 1980; HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-532/81, ‘Motion for a Resolution tabled by Mr Vandemeulebroucke and Mr Blaney pursuant to Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure on abolition of the “Diplock” courts in Northern Ireland’, 24 September 1980.

²¹ Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective*, 159.

²² Originally known as the ‘Party of European Socialists’ (PES), the group changed its name in 2009 and it is now called the ‘Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats’ (S&D).

²³ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-755/80, ‘Debates of the European Parliament: hunger strikes of prisoners in the Long Kesh and Armagh prisons’, 18 December 1980, 23.

²⁴ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-88.265, ‘Report drawn up on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the situation in Northern Ireland’, 19 March 1984.

²⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4293, ‘European Parliament and Northern Ireland’, 7 March 1983.

²⁶ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-88.256, 13.

²⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, Foreign Office, FCO 87/1551, ‘The European Parliament and Northern Ireland: The Haagerup Report’, 12 December 1983.

²⁸ Katy Hayward, ‘Reiterating National Identities: The European Union Conception of Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 41 (2006), 261–284.

vision and his persistent lobbying efforts were crucial in both educating EC actors on Northern Ireland and in initiating action to address problems within member states' borders. As recalled by Drik Toornstra, who served as Secretary General of the Socialist Group and Chief of Staff of the EP President Piet Dankert (who commissioned the Haagerup report):

It was easier to get involved with a problem in Africa or Asia ... than to focus on something which was happening within [the EC]. John was the first ... to ... accelerate the thinking ... if we really want to bring the Protestants, the Catholics, the Irelanders [nationalists] and unionists together through some kind of an umbrella format, then the umbrella format should be Europe.²⁹

Secondly, the EP was going through a renewal and saw the Haagerup report as an opportunity to produce political change:

'We were looking for ways of increasing the standing of the EP. ... Dankert was someone whose main interest was defence, security, Atlantic relations, NATO, Western Europe. ... So, when we took over, we had the majority and we wanted to give a genuine follow-up to policy initiatives. ... One of the things that Dankert and Haagerup shared, was that the EU should have also a role to play in this concept of Western security. The Haagerup report ... was seen by us as one of our big reports.'³⁰

The decision to undertake the inquiry met with fierce resistance in Belfast and London.³¹ Unionists suspected a conspiracy devised in Brussels to push Northern Ireland closer to the Republic of Ireland, as the rapporteur had expressed his intentions to have conversations with government's members, political leaders, and civil society groups also south of the Irish border, and all major constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland.³² The direct participation of the Irish government was considered unacceptable. On the UK side, the inquiry was declared 'unhelpful'³³ by Thatcher. Any external 'meddling' into what was considered a domestic affair was an open challenge to traditional British supremacy in this area.³⁴ Consequently, as highlighted by a NIO civil servant, at the time working in the Security and International Affairs Division, everyone was instructed not to cooperate with Haagerup.³⁵

²⁹ Interview with Drik Toornstra, 22 February 2021.

³⁰ Interview with Drik Toornstra, 22 February 2021.

³¹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4291, 'National Government appearances before European Parliament "hearings"', 10 November 1982.

³² HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-88.256, 14.

³³ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4291, 'National Government appearances before European Parliament "hearings"', 10 November 1982, 3.

³⁴ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4294, 'Putting the Euronose out of Joint', Article published on *the Irish Times*, 15 March 1983.

³⁵ Interview with anonymous 1, 22 April 2022.

Nonetheless, dissenting voices existed within the Conservative Party in this regard, particularly coming from British MEPs (although they eventually abstained at the plenary vote).³⁶ Baroness Diana Louise Elles, elected to the EP in 1979, attempted to neutralize criticisms towards the inquiry. In her opinion, the government had nothing to hide.³⁷ She then took the initiative to meet with people in the NIO, encouraging cooperation with Haagerup:

Elles told me that Haagerup was a sensible guy and that I should help him. I briefed the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Jim Prior ... and I sent papers to Haagerup via our Embassy in Copenhagen. The outcome was indeed a helpful report.³⁸

The NIO received the first draft of the report on 6 December 1983.³⁹ The text provided a detailed historicization of the Northern Ireland conflict which, while avoiding explicit political recommendations, strongly supported closer British–Irish cooperation as a means to political progress. The UK administration chose to be very discreet in their support for Haagerup’s views, not least because of the necessity of maintaining coherence with their initial public position. This is evidenced by the following statement:

There is a lot of value in the report to us, but equally, we must not be too forthcoming; we will also consider whether others might be approached We will consider further whether a more formal response is required and, if it is, in what terms, to not contradict the previous press line.⁴⁰

A detailed investigation of the documentary evidence available shows how, despite its relative political weakness in the 1980s, the EP provided a forum for the internationalization of the Northern Ireland conflict. The fact that politicians from different member states were debating UK policy in the region was a source of embarrassment to Thatcher’s government, which argued that the conflict was a strictly internal matter.⁴¹ However, the existing literature suggests that such developments eroded the idea that a sharp distinction existed between foreign and domestic affairs within member states of the Community or ‘between Community

³⁶ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 1-1526/83, ‘Motion for a Resolution on the situation in Northern Ireland’, 16 March 1983.

³⁷ Lagana, *The EU and the peace process*, 80–81.

³⁸ Anonymous 1, 2022.

³⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4298, ‘The Haagerup Report—Telegram number 262’, 7 December 1983.

⁴⁰ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/4299, ‘Haagerup’, 2 December 1983.

⁴¹ Peter Dorey, *British Politics since 1945* (Cambridge, 1995).

affairs and political questions that were the responsibility of individual states'.⁴² What put Northern Ireland at the centre of this process was 'the belief of many MEPs, reinforced by the hunger strikes, that the conflict in Northern Ireland constituted a blot on the EC's developing political image in the outside world'.⁴³

This was the context in which Haagerup operated. His recommendations also echoed those of the New Ireland Forum, a convention of constitutional nationalist parties from both parts of Ireland that the Irish government had established at the same time as the EP's investigation. A key-commonality between the report's conclusion and the forum's rationale was the idea that the political identities of both communities in Northern Ireland 'must have equally satisfactory, political, administrative and symbolic expression',⁴⁴ suggesting that the British and Irish governments should jointly work to create such arrangements.

The similarity of ideas between the New Ireland Forum and the Haagerup report is no coincidence. Hume was a major figure in shaping the Forum's conclusions,⁴⁵ and his persistent lobbying of the EP undoubtedly transmitted similar thinking to the Haagerup investigation. Also, he was now strongly supported in his efforts by the Irish Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald. Upon his election in 1981, FitzGerald had stated that his government's primary focus would be to end the Northern Ireland conflict,⁴⁶ and he convened the New Ireland Forum with that aim. He was also an ardent Europhile, and had often argued the part the EC might play in helping to resolve the Northern Ireland problem.⁴⁷ It is therefore unsurprising that FitzGerald later suggested that the Haagerup inquiry 'was initiated with some encouragement from us at a top level, but not officially', and admitted that his government had 'various contacts with the rapporteur'.⁴⁸

A year after the report's publication, Thatcher signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA). There is no direct link between Haagerup and the AIA, and the credit for the latter is primarily attributable to FitzGerald's persuasive efforts to convince Thatcher to sign such an accord.⁴⁹ The Taoiseach was also supported by Hume in this, who was made privy to the secret talks between London and Dublin, advising the latter

⁴² Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective*, 159.

⁴³ Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective*, 159.

⁴⁴ Dublin Stationary Office, *New Ireland Forum Report*, article 5.2 (4).

⁴⁵ P. J. McLoughlin, *John Hume and the Revision of Irish Nationalism* (Manchester, 2010), 116–25.

⁴⁶ *Dáil Éireann Debate*, 30 June 1981, vol. 329, no. 1.

⁴⁷ Garret FitzGerald, *Towards a New Ireland* (London, 1972).

⁴⁸ Quoted in Katy Hayward, 'Reiterating National Identities: The European Union Conception of Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 41 (2006), 268–79.

⁴⁹ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume One: Not For Turning* (Bristol, 2013), 756–790.

throughout.⁵⁰ If other outside actors deserve credit, Washington would come ahead of Brussels, as FitzGerald and Hume both lobbied the Reagan administration to use its influence with Thatcher to encourage her to compromise.⁵¹ Nonetheless, scholars like Guelke and Lagana, who have examined both US and EC/EU influences on Northern Ireland, argue that the Haagerup report similarly helped nudge Thatcher towards a deal with Dublin.⁵²

The Early Stages of the Northern Ireland Talks (1990–1993)

The 1985 AIA reflected the conclusions of the Haagerup report by establishing a British–Irish framework for dealing with Northern Ireland. The British and Irish governments now endorsed an avowedly EC-style, cross-border approach to conflict resolution,⁵³ promising to ‘consider the possibility of securing international support for this work’.⁵⁴ The message was clear: they would welcome further EC support towards cross-border efforts and peacebuilding.

However, by late 1989, the absence of significant security benefits arising from the AIA, and continued unionist’s intransigence towards it, pushed Thatcher to authorize Peter Brooke to initiate the Talks,⁵⁵ against a background of increased confidence between the SDLP and the NIO.⁵⁶ ‘Essentially the purpose was to talk about talks and the NIO was granted a great deal of freedom in directing the process’⁵⁷ to be presented, at first, as a series of exchanges on the form that a devolution of government in Northern Ireland could take. This formula emphasized dialogue rather than negotiation, since the idea of negotiations had been largely

⁵⁰ Brendan O’Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland*. Volume III, 103. For more detail on these talks, see John Coakley and Jennifer Todd, *Negotiating a Settlement in Northern Ireland, 1969–2019* (Oxford, 2020).

⁵¹ FitzGerald, *All in a Life*, 527; McLoughlin, *John Hume*, 127; Paul Arthur, ‘American Intervention in the Anglo–Irish Peace Process: Incrementalism or Interference?’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 11 (1997), 46–64; Stephen Kelly, ‘The Anglo–Irish Agreement put us on Side with the Americans’: Margaret Thatcher, Anglo–American relations and the path to the Anglo–Irish Agreement, 1979–1985’, *Contemporary British History*, 34 (2020), 433–57.

⁵² Guelke, *Northern Ireland: the International Perspective*, 160; Lagana, *The EU and the Peace Process*, 98–103.

⁵³ Jennifer Todd, ‘Institutional Change and Conflict Regulation: The Anglo–Irish Agreement (1985) and the Mechanisms of Change in Northern Ireland’, *West European politics*, 34 (2011), 838–58; John Coakley, ‘The Organisational Evolution of Political Science: The International Dimension’, *International Social Science Journal*, 56 (2004), 174.

⁵⁴ The Anglo–Irish Agreement (1985) between the Government of Ireland and the Government of the UK, Article 10, <www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/eventaia/aiadoc.htm> accessed 10 December 2021.

⁵⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, Prime Minister’s Office, PREM 19/4776, ‘Background note on current political situation’, 15 May 1991.

⁵⁶ Wincott, ‘The Brooke Initiative’, 17; Kelly, *Margaret Thatcher*, 380–405.

⁵⁷ Anonymous 1, 2022.

conceived by the UK government as a process which would require the presence of all parties.⁵⁸

By May 1990, unionist leaders had agreed to participate.⁵⁹ However, the Republic of Ireland was concerned at being marginalized and considerable effort went on bargaining with the Irish government to relax its insistence on participating in the Talks from the very beginning.⁶⁰ Such easing was aided by the NIO's assurance that Irish officials would be briefed regularly.⁶¹

The Talks were set to start at the end of April 1991 and, on 25 April, the matter of the EC dimension was introduced for the first time by the NIO, in correspondence with the Prime Minister's Office in London:

I flagged my concern that this was a dimension of the process where we were relatively poorly prepared and risked losing the initiative. . . . My sense is that our attitude in the political development context to the whole range of issues – particularly the more political discussions – is rather narrowly focused and this may leave us wrong-footed in the course of the Talks. I think we all share a suspicion that both Irish and SDLP ideas will have a European element. . . . I think Northern Ireland has certain identifiable interests, and that the way the Community is evolving is one of the significant ways in which the political landscape has improved for the better This suggests to me that there is a good deal of truth in the Taoiseach's argument that the Community framework is one of the things which ought to be drawing the two halves of the island together. All of this also contributes to the process of building new relationships so that people have an increasing sense that the way ahead lies in working together rather than in isolation or worse.⁶²

This quotation highlights two essential points, which characterized the NIO's positioning towards the EC all through the Talks. First, concern was expressed over the capability of officials to direct the discussions, should these take a European turn. This could become a divisive issue between the SDLP and the Unionist parties and accordingly the minute ended by asking for more in-depth analysis of the EC

⁵⁸ Niall ÓDochartaigh and Isak Svensson, 'The Exit Option: Mediation and the Termination of Negotiations in the Northern Ireland Conflict', *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 24 (2013), 42–43.

⁵⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Prime Minister's Office, PREM 19/4776, 'Exploratory dialogue', 18 May 1991.

⁶⁰ TNA: PRO, Kew, Prime Minister's Office, PREM 19/4776, 'Political Talks: summary of Michael Ancram's bilaterals with the Alliance Party, the SDLP and UUP', 24 March 1991.

⁶¹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 9448, 'Forthcoming Political Talks in Northern Ireland', 26 April 1991.

⁶² TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 94/48, 'Political Talks: The European Community dimension', 25 April 1991.

dimension,⁶³ looking at where Northern Ireland's practical interests could be made to work in connection with the EC. More than twenty background notes were exchanged on the topic among NIO's civil servants during the first year of the Talks.⁶⁴ Secondly, the quotation highlights how the NIO recognized the instrumental importance of the EC in the process lying ahead, aiming at building new positive relations within Northern Ireland, and North and South of the Irish border.⁶⁵ The NIO thus supported the speech given by the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, to the Fianna Fail Ard Fheis on 9 March 1991, where he declared that the EC experience could provide an answer to the problems of Northern Ireland.⁶⁶

Suspensions were confirmed when, in August 1991, the four parties participating to the Talks were asked to table papers on options for institutions.⁶⁷ While the Alliance and the Unionist parties had tabled plans envisaging devolution on conventional lines, the SDLP proposed that Northern Ireland should be run on a novel basis with elements of joint authority to be shared with Ireland and the EC.⁶⁸ While unionists reacted strongly, this step showed just how far the SDLP was ready to go on the European dimension.

The exchanges on the topic circulating between the NIO, the Cabinet Office, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Unionists increased in number,⁶⁹ and they all had in common the view that the EC was of vital importance to Northern Ireland and therefore to any future devolved administration.⁷⁰ Among the advantages presented were the possibility of finding an alternative formula, inspired by the direction that the European Integration process was taking, to offer to the Irish and the nationalists that would not be inconsistent with aspirations for a united Ireland, but without having to spell them out in full.⁷¹ Furthermore, on a

⁶³ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 94/48, 'Political Talks: The European Community dimension', 25 April 1991.

⁶⁴ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 4111, 'Political Development: Background briefing request from Mr Molyneaux – A local Administration and the European Community', 14 January 1992.

⁶⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 94/48, 'Political Talks', 3.

⁶⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 93/77, 'Political Developments in Northern Ireland: Relevance of the EC to North-South relations' 27 April 1991.

⁶⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10411, 'Cabinet: Political Talks', 14 August 1991.

⁶⁸ Anonymous 1, 2022.

⁶⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 4111, 'Political Development: Background briefing Request from Mr Molyneaux – A local Administration and the European Community', 14 January 1992.

⁷⁰ For example: TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 4111, 'A local administration and the European Community', 14 January 1992; TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4 93/77, 'Political Development in Northern Ireland: relevance of the Community on North/South relations', 23 May 1991; TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 93/77, 'European Community in Northern Ireland: Institutional Issues', 17 July 1991; TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11253, 'Northern Ireland as a regional player in Europe', 11 November 1993.

⁷¹ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 4111, 'A local administration and the European Community', 2.

political level, the EC was viewed as a less contentious actor than others and, consequently, it constituted the easiest route to agreement on all-Ireland consultations for increased trade and cooperative action in a community context.⁷²

Several disadvantages were also highlighted, especially the fact that a joint North–South approach in the European context could still be too much for unionists to swallow,⁷³ even if no 'Euro-rhetoric'⁷⁴ could dilute the guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK as far as a majority wished for it. Moreover, expectations of pooled sovereignty were considered by the NIO 'hardly a threat',⁷⁵ given Ireland's own hesitations about loss of sovereignty. The only significant issue highlighted in the correspondence was that potentially a local administration in Northern Ireland would wish to deal directly with Brussels to maximize the share of European funds for cross-border and 'peace-making' projects.⁷⁶

This point was also made in relation to the Maastricht Treaty and the Cohesion Fund, in a letter sent by Hume to the Prime Minister.⁷⁷ Hume complained that, during the Maastricht Treaty's negotiations, the UK failed to ensure that Northern Ireland was included as a beneficiary region from the Cohesion Fund. Access to it would have, for example, underpinned the planning of an integrated transport infrastructure on the island. This apparently created 'widespread disappointment in the province'.⁷⁸ The Prime Minister's Office urged the preparation of a 'sympathetic reply' to Hume and 'a careful defensive briefing' for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland related to the Talks, particularly minimizing the 'clear advantages of an all-Ireland EC regime'.⁷⁹

Investigating the European dimension of strand one of the Talks reveals that, from a very early stage, the NIO recognized the importance of the EC for Northern Ireland and they communicated it regularly to the UK government in London. A future devolved administration should have been included, for economic and political reasons, within an all-Ireland framework to develop in relation to the EC, involving consultations and cooperation of Ministers, officials, and elected members. This viewpoint uncovered wholly new ground, since the last time Northern Ireland had a devolved administration pre-dated UK's membership of

⁷² TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 93/77, 'Relevance of the Community on North/South relations', 3.

⁷³ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 93/77, 'Relevance of the Community on North/South relations', 4.

⁷⁴ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 93/77, 'Relevance of the Community on North/South relations', 5.

⁷⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 93/77, 'Relevance of the Community on North/South relations', 3.

⁷⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4 4111, 'A local administration and the European Community', 4.

⁷⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10405, 'Letter to the Prime Minister', 12 October 1992.

⁷⁸ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10405, 'A letter from John Hume: the EC Cohesion Fund', 14 October 1992.

⁷⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, 'A letter from John Hume', 1–2.

the EC.⁸⁰ Moreover, the evidence⁸¹ shows how it was recognized by civil servants that more advantages were offered by an all-island dimension if Northern Ireland was granted its own representation in Europe. This was to be maintained confidential, to avoid unionists' anger.⁸² The UK central government mostly discussed the language employed, but it did not question the contents.

This first phase of exploratory and ministerial dialogue was particularly important in setting out the path for achieving agreement.⁸³ In parallel with what has been examined so far, the UK government started meetings with republicans and loyalists paramilitary groups in 1994 (although confidential contacts had taken place before)⁸⁴ with the aim of persuading them to implement and observe a ceasefire: a first step towards their involvement.⁸⁵ The Irish and British governments subsequently negotiated a text that would provide the background enabling Sinn Féin's participation, whilst not losing the unionists. Among other things, this required the two governments to reiterate the positions already reflected in the AIA, balanced with a formal commitment by both governments to the principle of 'constitutional guarantee'.⁸⁶ This text became known as the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) of 15 December 1993. It provided common principles, and abandoned previous hopes of manoeuvring the UK government into becoming persuaders for a united Ireland.⁸⁷ Article 3 of the DSD stated:

They also consider that the development of Europe will, of itself, require new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of the island of Ireland, and to Ireland and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union.⁸⁸

This statement bore the imprint of the European dimension of strand one of the Talks.

⁸⁰ Peter J. McLoughlin, "'Dublin is Just a Sunningdale Away'? The SDLP and the Failure of Northern Ireland's Sunningdale Experiment', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), 74–96; Noel Dorr, *Sunningdale: The Search for Peace in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2017).

⁸¹ Interview with the former Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, 14 March 2022.

⁸² Interview with Prof. Chris Maccabe, former private secretary to the Chief Minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner; former private secretary to the Deputy Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from 1975 to 1977; former Director of Regimes in the Northern Ireland Prison Service; former Head of the Political Affairs Division in the NIO, and subsequently Political Director of the NIO (an appointment coupled with the role of British Joint Secretary of the British–Irish Intergovernmental Conference), 16 May 2022.

⁸³ Dixon, 'The Choreography of the Northern Ireland Peace Process', 732; Spencer, 'Containing Dialogue', 454.

⁸⁴ O'Dochartaigh, *Deniable Contact*, 235–65.

⁸⁵ Interview with Prof. Chris Maccabe, 16 May 2022.

⁸⁶ Interview with the former Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, 14 March 2022.

⁸⁷ Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 81.

⁸⁸ The Downing Street Declaration is available at <<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/dsd151293.htm>> accessed 10 December 2022.

The 1995 Framework Documents: the North–South dimension and the EU

Strand two of the Talks lasted until November 1994,⁸⁹ leading to the publication of the Framework Documents on 17 February 1995.⁹⁰ This strand included the Irish government among the other participants,⁹¹ but the DUP chose not to attend.⁹² Negotiations on the creation of a North/South body⁹³ undertaking cross-border functions⁹⁴ had a significant European dimension, adjudged by the NIO as 'a constitutionally neutral and benign base'⁹⁵ for North–South relations.

Dialogue around all-Ireland cross-border cooperation first focused on finding new and imaginative arrangements that would nurture and incorporate consent in the new North–South body, which was essential to avoid the mistakes of the past.⁹⁶ North/South cooperation was viewed as 'worthwhile ... as it is potentially able to foster stability'.⁹⁷ It was believed by NIO and Irish officials that 'the pull of economics is towards all-Ireland approaches and the political attraction of it is also crucially important'.⁹⁸ The interest of the island in the EU dimension was therefore considered 'enormous'⁹⁹ and both, the UK and the Irish governments, agreed that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland's interests often aligned in Brussels in a way that was distinct from the UK.¹⁰⁰

A similar argument had been made by the Haagerup report, when it suggested that interdependence was more significant than impenetrable borders, and that this could lead to new administrative frameworks for cross-border cooperation.¹⁰¹ In the words of the rapporteur, greater

⁸⁹ Graham Spencer, *The British and Peace in Northern Ireland: The Process and Practice of Reaching Agreement* (Cambridge, 2015), XIV.

⁹⁰ Lijphart, 'The Framework Document on Northern Ireland and the Theory of Power-Sharing', 2014, 267–74.

⁹¹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'Cabinet: Official Committee on Northern Ireland questions', 3 October 1994.

⁹² Spencer, *The British and peace in Northern Ireland*, XIV.

⁹³ The terms 'North/South body' and 'the Body' will be interchangeably employed to refer to this entity.

⁹⁴ Joanne McEvoy, *The Politics of Northern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 2022), 86–90.

⁹⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, Prime Minister's Office, PREM/1053, 'North/South Institutions', 24 February 1995.

⁹⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'Discussions on North/South structures and competences between senior NI and Irish officials, Louvain, 7 October 1994', 9 November 1994; Interview with Dr Noel Dorr, a former Irish diplomat who served, among other roles, as Irish ambassador to the UN and was Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs, 27 April 2022; McLoughlin, "'Dublin is Just a Sunningdale Away'", 78; Noel Dorr, *Sunningdale* (Dublin, 2017).

⁹⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/11356, 'Discussions on North/South structures', 3–4.

⁹⁸ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/11356, 'Discussions on North/South structures', 3–4.

⁹⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'North-South Structures: Assessment of Possibilities', 26 October 1994.

¹⁰⁰ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'Cabinet: Northern Ireland questions', 2.

¹⁰¹ Historical Archives EP, PE 1-88.265, 'Report drawn up on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the situation in Northern Ireland', 44.

integration across the Irish border could lead to increased wealth and employment, consequently taking people off the streets, so that violence and conflict would no longer be a desirable option.¹⁰² In developing this point, the Haagerup report had taken an original approach, as it included consultations with local actors, both North and South, recommending that everyone should be involved in efforts to build a more comprehensive peace in Northern Ireland.¹⁰³ This view was shared by officials in the NIO.¹⁰⁴

The element that was significantly delaying agreement on the North/South body was the scope of discussions to be happening within the new structures and, particularly, the language in which the categories of competence were to be expressed.¹⁰⁵ The body was designed to involve political Heads of Department from North and South and had to be responsible for all forms of functional cooperation on the island.¹⁰⁶ The Irish government sought the inclusion in the Body of a North/South Parliamentary Forum, comprising elected representatives from the Republic of Ireland and the 'new Northern Ireland institutions'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the Irish government was adamant for the new body to be able to raise discussions and considerations of any matter of interest to either side of the island falling within the competence of either administration,¹⁰⁸ and to be granted provisions to designate the areas where it would exercise 'consultative, harmonising or delegated'¹⁰⁹ executive functions.

The reference to 'harmonising' was particularly controversial for the UK government, as the UK wanted to retain the role of sole representer of Northern Ireland in EU *fora* and in the domain of EU policies. Both the Foreign and the Cabinet Office communicated this to the NIO.¹¹⁰ As confirmed by Sir John Chilcot, who was at that time serving as Permanent Under Secretary of State at the NIO, language was fundamental:

Between the Irish written culture and the British bureaucratic culture, both rely very much on the choice of word, the syllable, even the tense

¹⁰² Historical Archives EP, PE 1-88.265, 'Report drawn up on behalf of the Political Affairs Committee on the situation in Northern Ireland', 46.

¹⁰³ Hayward, 'Reiterating National Identities', 270-79.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Chris Maccabe, 16 May 2022; Anonymous 1, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'Agreement close on North/South Body', *The Sunday Independent*, 19 October 1994.

¹⁰⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10988, 'Draft Proposal for a Joint Memorandum of the British and Irish governments on North/South Institutions', 31 October 1994.

¹⁰⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/10988, 'Draft Proposal on North/South Institutions', 3.

¹⁰⁸ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'NI: Framework Document and EU Aspects', 26 November 1994.

¹⁰⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/10988, 'Draft Proposal on North/South Institutions', 4.

¹¹⁰ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11357, 'NI: Framework Document and EU Aspects: a response from the Cabinet', 28 November 1994.

and mood, and they can speak to each other in a way that, for example, you cannot with the Americans.¹¹¹

Concerns over phrasing were also raised by the UK Representative in Brussels, Sir John Kerr. It was feared that the North/South body could marginalize the UK government's role in financing and implementing EU legislation in Northern Ireland and that unionists could interpret the arrangements as the first step towards a united Ireland. Furthermore, the Foreign Office wished to retain control of what EU issues connected to cross-border cooperation could be discussed within the Body.¹¹²

The response of the NIO to the Cabinet Office's and to the Foreign Office's concerns are noteworthy in their contents.¹¹³ First, an EU role for the North/South body was considered by the NIO 'politically important'¹¹⁴ and it was defined as of symbolic significance for nationalists, but one that had practical benefits for both unionists and nationalists since 'the EU is one of the few areas in which there is already cooperation between the two communities'.¹¹⁵ Secondly, the NIO highlighted how the proposal did not contemplate joint-authority in any form, which should be enough to reassure Unionism.¹¹⁶ Thirdly, the idea that the British government should not be bound by decisions taken in the North/South body was supported, but it was also believed that the body could not be stopped talking about any EU issues that participants saw fit. Nor could participants be stopped reaching agreement if they wanted to:¹¹⁷ 'the only possibility is to protect the role of the UK in representing Northern Ireland within the EU, which has been done and also agreed by the Republic of Ireland government'.¹¹⁸

A final structure of the North/South Body was approved in January 1995. Participants agreed on the final range of responsibilities that the Body would have and would be able to discuss—particularly in relation to EU policies—where the UK government retained full representation. However, the UK committed to taking into account what was discussed and agreed upon in the framework of the new North/South structures.

Upon the publication of the final agreement, Michael Ancram, at the time serving within the NIO (he later became deputy leader of the Conservative party), stated that the whole purpose of the EU related

¹¹¹ Sir John Chilcot, quoted in Spencer, *The British and peace in Northern Ireland*, 82.

¹¹² TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/11357, 'a response from the Cabinet', 4.

¹¹³ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/11356, 'North/South Body: EU Dimension', 28 November 1994.

¹¹⁴ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/11356, 'EU Dimension', 2.

¹¹⁵ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/11356, 'EU Dimension', 3.

¹¹⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10988, 'North/South Body and the EU', 9 December 1994.

¹¹⁷ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10988, 'Memorandum by the Northern Ireland Office', 7 December 1994.

¹¹⁸ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/10988, 'Memorandum', 1.

discussions was not simply to provide something to which all parties would be able to agree.¹¹⁹ The aim was instead to get people around the table and ensure that any final decisions represented a joint effort and was approved by the majority of both communities in Northern Ireland.¹²⁰ Ancram stressed how, in talking to unionists, he had identified a number of key conditions that he could summarize as: first, no joint-authority. Secondly, no slippery slope towards a united Ireland. Thirdly, clear lines of accountability for the North/South body. In looking to the final document from this perspective, Ancram stated:

Even unionists could be bought to recognise the benefits of North/South cooperation. What was more difficult for them was accepting the principle. We helped them by diverting cooperation and the EU dimension into a relative benign area and, especially, by including them into the important objective of getting the Talks going.¹²¹

First, this statement confirms that the NIO saw EU membership as an instrument giving an impetus to cross-border cooperation on the island, because such measures held out the prospect of positive sum politics in the North, which were outward looking and capable of revealing existing and new areas of common interest between the two parts of the island. Subsequent scholarly analysis has confirmed this viewpoint.¹²² Secondly, the quotation emphasizes that one of the main merits of the EU dimension was to keep the Talks going, regardless of the outcome of the process. The importance of the EU, in financial and political terms, was never doubted by any of the participants or by the UK government. The emphasis was not on the outcome, but on the process:

There is not a distinction between the deal and the process. . . . I do not think that there was a fag paper between us and the Irish civil servants on this. The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs had a very strong dogmatic inheritance to its culture and in that sense is much more like the British Home Office, which is about just keeping the thing dampened down, making sure justice is being served and limiting the number of people being killed. At the end of the day, the deal was, if you like, a reconciliation reached by curving routes and different starting and end points.¹²³

¹¹⁹ TNA: PRO, Kew, Cabinet Office, CJ4/10989, 'Ministerial meeting to discuss the final draft of the Joint Framework Document', 14 January 1995.

¹²⁰ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/10989, 'Final draft of the Joint Framework Document', 2.

¹²¹ TNA: PRO, Kew, CJ4/10989, 'Final draft of the Joint Framework Document', 2.

¹²² John Coakley and Liam O'Dowd, 'The Transformation of the Irish Border', *Political Geography*, 26 (2007), 878; Lagana, 'A Preliminary Investigation', 293.

¹²³ Sir John Chilcot, quoted in Spencer, *The British and peace in Northern Ireland*, 83.

The window of opportunity for the EU to implement a more comprehensive programme for peace in Northern Ireland arose in this same period, in the aftermath of the DSD and the 1994 ceasefires when, after 25 years of violent conflict and uncertainty, the paramilitaries finally called an end to their violent campaign. In 1995, the European Commission approved the allocation of £351 million for the programme PEACE I.¹²⁴ This was designed to respond positively to the cessation of violence and to have a real impact on the livelihood of Northern Ireland citizens.

The road to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

In 1996, it was clear that the vehicle for achieving an overall settlement was a process of political dialogue built on progress made during the Talks.¹²⁵ The UK government required demonstrable commitment to exclusively peaceful methods as the price for Sinn Féin's participation in future discussions.¹²⁶ When this was assured, the stage was set for the multiparty negotiations, which ran from the 'entry to negotiations' elections of 1996 through to the signing of the GFA. This led to the creation of a new set of political institutions within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between the UK and the island of Ireland. Its constitutional template reflected the three interlocking strands of the Talks.¹²⁷

The EU did not sit around the GFA's table in the negotiations, but several references to the EU framework and to EU institutions appeared in the final text.¹²⁸ The former Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who was one of the GFA negotiators, stated:

I think the EU had a very helpful involvement . . . Unionist politicians were never over-enthusiastic, but community-groups . . . were. So, politicians had to go along. Plus, EU leaders were important in supporting our cause and Blair and I have always made sure that they were all kept informed on what we were trying to do. . . . We were very conscious that . . . we would need assistance and support from the European Parliament and the Commission for the Agreement, which we got. We knew we would need financial resources to underpin it and we particularly needed Europe for economic regeneration. In the context of the detail, the EU was not involved. But in the context of

¹²⁴ Lagana, *The EU and the Peace Process*, 159–84.

¹²⁵ Feargal Cochrane, *Northern Ireland: The Reluctant Peace* (New Haven; London, 2013).

¹²⁶ TNA: PRO, Kew, Prime Minister's Office, PREM 19/5302, 'Options for All-Party Talks', 25 March 1995.

¹²⁷ Cochrane, *Northern Ireland: The Reluctant Peace*, 140–42.

¹²⁸ The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998, 42). <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf> accessed 5 May 2022.

how we could agree on this and how we could make it work ... Yes, they were involved.¹²⁹

This statement highlights how the EU provided the context for close cooperation between the UK and the Republic of Ireland to flourish, which laid the platform for a joint approach to the GFA.¹³⁰ The EU was not involved in setting the details, but the new institutions carried the European imprint, demonstrating how influential its mechanisms of support were. Moreover, the quote highlights how EU funds for peacebuilding were welcomed by the communities on the ground, including within unionist networks. This is evidence of how the dynamics of compromise at the highest political level were translating into the societal level, inspired by what has been defined as the EU bottom-up approach to peacebuilding.¹³¹

The GFA was discussed in the EP plenary sessions of the 29 and 30 April 1998, with the aim of exploring how the EU could underpin the achievement.¹³² The session was attended by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Marjory Mowlam; the Irish Foreign Affairs Minister, David Andrews; and the President of the EU Commission, Jacques Santer. The President of the EP, José María Gil-Robles, opened the session indicating that he had been in Belfast, London, and Dublin to 'understand and observe the enormous determination with which both governments committed themselves to the peace process'.¹³³ Subsequently Mowlam, in her speech, highlighted the importance of the financial support provided by the EU to peace initiatives:

The support given to us by individual Members of the Parliament, individual Commissioners, and the Presidents of both the Parliament and the Commission over the past years is just as important. The money is most welcome ... but it also makes a difference when individuals give of their time and energy to support what is happening in Northern Ireland.¹³⁴

This statement acknowledged the work of EU commissioners and senior officials, who were directing the operations related to the PEACE package

¹²⁹ Interview with Bertie Ahern, 14 March 2022.

¹³⁰ Mary C. Murphy and Jonathan Evershed, *A Troubled Constitutional Future* (Newcastle, 2022).

¹³¹ John-Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC, 1997), 26; Giada Lagana and Timothy J. White, 'Cross-Border Cultural Cooperation in European Border Regions Sites and Senses of "Place" across the Irish Border', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 30 (2021), 153–62.

¹³² HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate of the European Parliament', 29 April 1998.

¹³³ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 1.

¹³⁴ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 2.

on the ground¹³⁵ and recognized the endorsement provided by the European Council to the GFA.¹³⁶

The debate continued by highlighting the new institutions created with a specific European remit.¹³⁷ First, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), seeking to build greater cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland.¹³⁸ This would bring together members of the Irish government and members of the new Northern Ireland administration, with bodies below the ministerial level tasked with implementing decisions. Secondly, the GFA set-up the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) designed to bring together new devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to consider matters of mutual interest, taking advantage of the UK 'radical constitutional changes'.¹³⁹

These provisions changed the way EU funds were managed. These were 'not handed anymore by us in central government'¹⁴⁰ but they were now administrated by local networks, made of local organization, politicians, trade unions, and business people. This approach showed how the Commission built upon previous efforts, like the Haagerup's inquiry, which had consulted with civil society actors, arguing that their mobilization was essential to any peacebuilding role the EC/EU might play in the region. Thus, while the EU involvement with Northern Ireland increased in the 1990s, also because it was included in the Talks, it developed from and drew upon the more tentative engagements seen in the previous decade, which helped shape the EU funding package that followed the cease-fires of 1994. A statement made by the unionist MEP, Jim Nicolson, in the same 1998 EP plenary session, further confirms this analysis:

The European Union has been very constructive in the support it has provided in recent years. We will require more sustained and positive action . . . in the future to ensure that we can rebuild our divided communities and restore confidence.¹⁴¹

On the 16 December 1998 the EU Commission approved a substantial increase in its contribution to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, through the PEACE package.¹⁴² So successful was this that the

¹³⁵ These were, e.g. Carlo Trojan and Monika Wulf-Mathies, quoted in Lagana, *The European Union and the Northern Ireland Peace Process*.

¹³⁶ HAEP, Luxembourg, C 152/33, 'Official Journal of the European Communities', 18 April 1998.

¹³⁷ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 2.

¹³⁸ The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998, 12). <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf> accessed 5 May 2022.

¹³⁹ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 3.

¹⁴⁰ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 4.

¹⁴¹ HAEP, Luxembourg, PE 4-518/3, 'Debate', 5.

¹⁴² HAEP, Luxembourg, No 4-530/206, 'Practical Support for the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement', 16 December 1998.

EU decided to extend the package, making only minor changes to the collaborative and locally led delivery mechanisms used in the first round. In total, there were three more iterations of the programme (labelled PEACE II-IV) running right through to 2020. Even when the UK voted to leave the EU during the fifth round of the PEACE programme, agreement was made to continue funding until 2027.¹⁴³ This whole process has become a powerful reminder of the ongoing role of the EU in peacebuilding and of the very philosophy of the integrationist project, with intergovernmental and cross-border dimensions manifest in all the PEACE programmes.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

This article contributes to existing knowledge by demonstrating how, through original archival evidence and semi-structured elites interviews, EC/EU focused discussions were instrumentalized by the NIO to keep the Talks alive. The EC/EU dimension contributed subtly to shape the form that a devolution of government to replace the AIA in Northern Ireland should take; to set the direction of negotiations on new structures for North-South and cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland; and to eventually help to embed and lock all participants and the new institutions into a new consociational system, internationally supported. In parallel, the EU financially underpinned the Northern Ireland peace process, providing civil society groups from both communities with the means to build peace ‘from below’.

The article started by demonstrating how EP lobbying and other debates occurring in the 1980s, such as those devoted to the republican hunger strikes, established the basis and the legitimation for the more active engagement and visible support of the EU for Northern Ireland during the 1990s. By detailing these activities, the article highlights how the EC/EU did not simply react to change in the region, but played a proactive role in its occurrence. Moreover, it was the EP, rather than the Commission, that was most important for these early European efforts, particularly through the Haagerup report and the part it played—albeit indirect—in nudging the Thatcher government towards the AIA. Various scholars have noted how this accord, and the increasing role played by Dublin in the affairs of Northern Ireland thereafter, helped trigger the changes that led to the peace process.

Subsequently the article examined the emergence, the development, and the contents of the EC/EU dimension during various strands of the Talks. These are reflected in parallel with the emergence of a more regional and cross-border approach to politics and policies developing as a

¹⁴³ Please visit: <<https://www.seupb.eu/PEACEPLUS>> accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Cathal McCall, *The European Union and Peacebuilding: The Cross-Border Dimension* (Basingstoke, 2014).

result of the direction taken by the European integration process. These conditions all interacted favourably with developments such as the AIA and the background of developing confidence between the SDLP and the NIO. Considerable effort was thus devoted by civil servants in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to find an acceptable formula to institutionalize an all-island dimension. Such a formula was eventually found in relation to the EU and the new institutions created by the GFA, which find their genesis in these early negotiations.

A variety of political forces were involved in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. Early efforts of the FitzGerald government and sympathetic British officials helped to persuade Thatcher that enhanced British-Irish cooperation was the way forward for Northern Ireland. The USA, for example under Reagan, also encouraged this course of action, with the Clinton administration becoming later a guarantor of the GFA. However, this article demonstrates that the EC's increased engagement with the region, prompted by the hunger strikes, the lobbying of Hume, the Haagerup report and the EC/EU dimension of the Talks, were one of the many factors helping to internationalize the problem and push the British government towards a more progressive policy for the region. The fact that Thatcher's shift in policy would also involve another EC member, the Republic of Ireland, was fortunate. Joint membership of the EC/EU was crucial in drawing London and Dublin together in their understanding and cooperation over a common problem. Moreover, the evidence presented in this article demonstrates how the case of the Talks process illustrates the importance of the gradual process of 'Europeanisation' of UK politics on Northern Ireland. The thrust of EU cross-border regionalism and developments in cross-border cooperation, EU laws and structural mechanisms all contributed to positively develop socio-spatial governance arrangements, policies and politics sustaining negotiations, keeping the Talks alive and ultimately helping to shape the Northern Ireland peace process.