

## THE RISE (AND FALL?) OF RECONCILIATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Northern Ireland emerged in the 1920s as a society whose democratic veneer was consistently undermined by an antagonistic political core. Following collapse in the 1970s, the Northern Ireland peace process deployed huge political effort to bring violence to an end and to promote reconciliation over antagonism. Although the 1998 Good Friday Agreement promoted reconciliation as a central dimension of peace-building, failure to establish stable political relationships led the sponsoring governments to set aside the goal of reconciliation in pursuit of a more prosaic accord whose priorities were containment and the establishment of consociational political cooperation between suspicious antagonists. The consequence has been to cement social division and a latent antagonism which remains at risk of future instability.

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Violence in inter-state disputes about territory and nationality has an almost unlimited potential to escalate. The outbreak of both World Wars in Europe and the implosion of Yugoslavia into massacre and expulsion in the 1990s were both triggered by the powerful vortex of “ethnic” claims in the frontier and the competition of external sponsors. Resolving nationality crises is thus of far greater importance than the limited size of these interfaces initially suggests.<sup>1</sup>

Because events in Northern Ireland did not entirely conform to this pattern, the achievements of the peace process have continued to draw international attention. The bond of nationality, which characteristically