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The Long History of Hard-Won Agreements

A RESPONSE TO ETAIN TANNAM, ‘THE BRITISH-IRISH
RELATIONSHIP AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE BRITISH-IRISH
INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONFERENCE’

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One of the unanticipated consequences of the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union has been a renewed focus on the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement has been subjected to a variety of interpretations, by different political actors, to support their positions on Brexit and on British-Irish relations. Etain Tannam’s paper concentrates on Strand 3 in the Agreement, the British-Irish relationship, and specifically the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (B-IIGC). This relationship has become more crucial, given the practical implications of Brexit for many aspects of north-south and British-Irish relations, and the fact that Irish and British ministers and officials are no longer meeting regularly in the course of EU gatherings. There is a consensus that the relationship is fragile, but Tannam is correct in emphasising that Brexit is not the cause of that fragility, it has exposed

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underlying weaknesses. Despite the expectations set in the Agreement, the B-IIGC has met infrequently over the past twenty-plus years.

The infrequent meetings reflect the longer history of British-Irish governmental relations, especially as they relate to Northern Ireland. When violence broke out in 1969, Britain rebuffed Irish government efforts to play a role, reiterating that Northern Ireland was a domestic matter. Despite the short-lived triumph of the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, this attitude persisted. British negotiation with the IRA in the 1970s—to which the Irish government was not privy—indicates a determination to resolve the Northern Ireland question within a United Kingdom framework. Cross-border security was often Britain's main, even sole interest in negotiations with the Irish government. Margaret Thatcher was persuaded to sign the 1985 Anglo-Irish (Hillsborough) Agreement, providing for twice-yearly meetings between British and Irish ministers, and a physical presence and consultative role for Irish officials in Northern Ireland, in the expectation that improved security cooperation and a reduction in violence would follow. The Hillsborough Agreement was bitterly resented by Northern unionists, and one of the factors motivating Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble to sign the Good Friday Agreement was a promise that the role of the Dublin government under Hillsborough would end.

Irish ministers continue to name-check the Good Friday Agreement and its centrality to the British-Irish relationship, but the close working partnerships between Albert Reynolds and John Major and Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair were probably unique. Northern Ireland has not been a major priority for Blair's successors, because violence has ended. Their primary concern has been to create, re-establish and sustain the Northern Ireland executive. The pattern of meetings and non-meetings of the B-IIGC suggests that Britain has seen their meetings to be of some value, when the Northern Ireland executive was suspended, but superfluous when the executive is sitting.

Strands 2 and 3 of the Good Friday Agreement, relating to north-south relations, and east-west relations, can be interpreted as a dilution, however minimal, of UK sovereignty. Given that Brexit has been trumpeted as a re-assertion of UK sovereignty, the prospect of a regular schedule of meaningful meetings for the B-IIGC appears slight. The gains that Ireland secured at Hillsborough and again in the 1998 Agreement were hard-won and they required years of patient diplomacy and persuasion, bolstered by US involvement. There would appear to be a need for yet another iteration of this exercise. There may have been some complacency about the state of British-Irish

relations, in the years before the 2016 referendum, but as Tannam notes, royal visits are no substitute for ministerial meetings.

The B-IIGC could be valuable in ameliorating the impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol, but its use for this purpose could present some risks for Ireland's relationship with the EU and given Ulster Unionism's visceral opposition to the Protocol, any impression that Ireland is acting as an intermediary on that issue could serve to further worsen relations between the Irish government and Ulster Unionism. Indeed the initiation of more regular meetings of the B-I IGC will be seen by Ulster Unionists as a threat. When we consider the potential demographic and electoral changes in Northern Ireland that may herald a formal end to Ulster Unionism's position as the largest political and ethno/political community, and the prospect—however distant—of a border poll, the issue becomes even more precarious. Faced with this bleak assessment it may be valuable to reflect that violence has not returned, and that in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, hard-working and committed politicians and officials managed to secure agreements on the future of Northern Ireland. However it does appear that it may be time for some revision/refreshing of core aspects of the 1998 Agreement.