



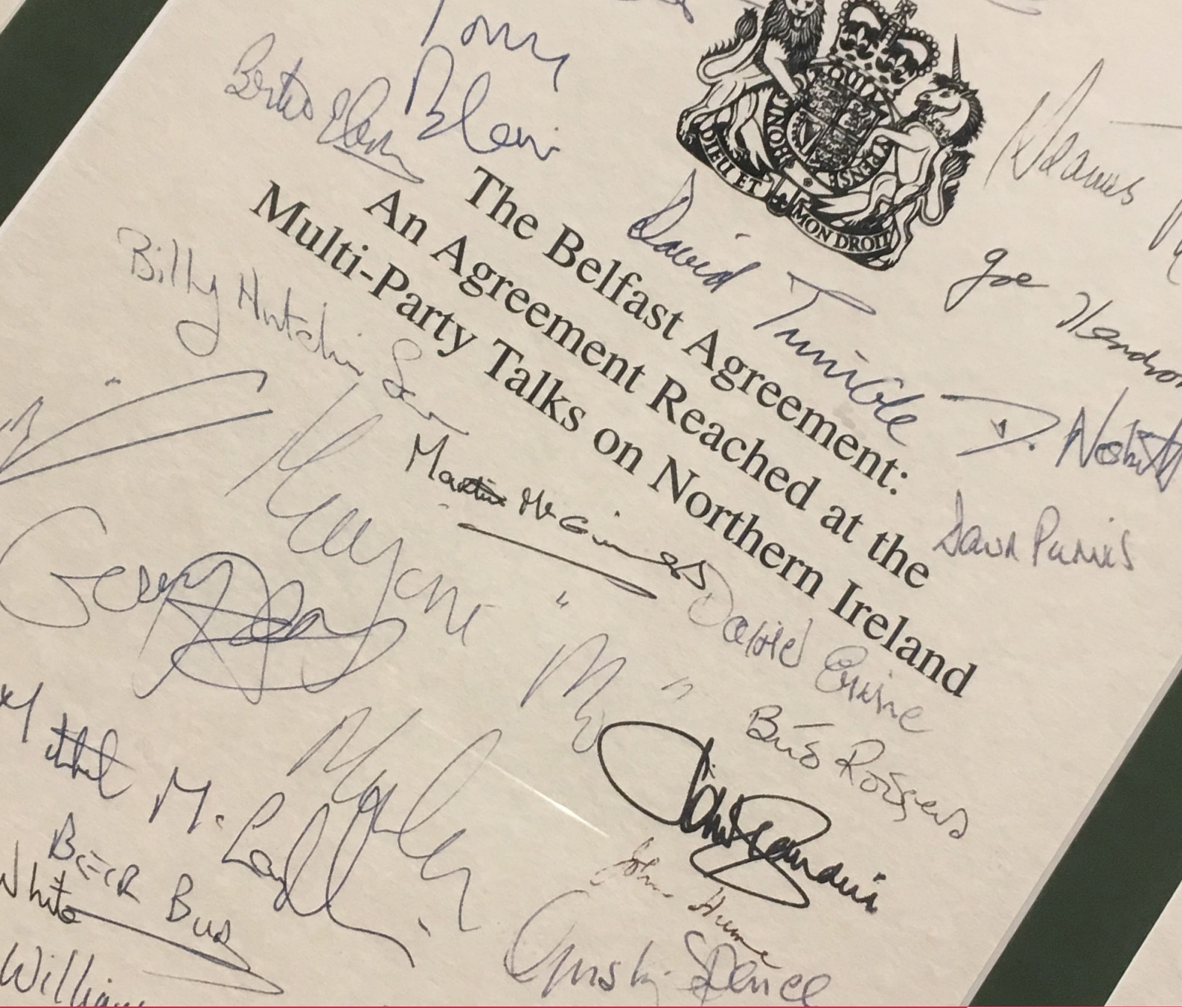
**PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT**

**FIGHTING FOR WORKERS & ECO-SOCIALISM**

**25 years of the  
Belfast / Good Friday  
Agreement**

**MAKE  
POVERTY AND  
SECTARIANISM  
HISTORY**





## MAKE POVERTY AND SECTARIANISM HISTORY

In 1998, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement promised not just an end to the ongoing violence but a framework for bringing progress on equality for women and on a wide range of other issues.

This rosy view was rooted in the Human Rights section of the Agreement: This promised “the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity”.

But a quarter of a century on, the lack of progress on this expanse of issues is self-evident.

## Lives Saved – and Lost

The GFA ended the worst of the armed conflict. In the most deadly year of the Troubles, 1972, there were 480 deaths - more than in the last 25 years put together. Most people now report feeling safe or very safe in their communities. There is a lot more mixing of young people without regard to which community they come from.

On the other hand, more people have died by suicide since 1998 than were killed in the entire course of the conflict. There are more peace walls now than before the Agreement.

In 2012, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister set a target of removing all walls by 2023 and some have indeed been pulled down or at least lowered. But still, the Belfast Interface Project identified a total of 97 barriers across Belfast in 2017. And those working with communities living in the shadow of the peace walls say it is hard to build a sense of security when Stormont cannot even provide a stable government.

The numbers taking their own lives reflect the absence of proper mental health services and the dashing of hopes that an end to the Troubles would bring prosperity – or at least lessen poverty.

People have seen a peace built not on increasing prosperity for the majority but on the promise of cheap labour to multinationals, leaving workers in the North today earning on average 10% less than their counterparts in Britain and less again than people in the South.

There is a clear, established link between poverty and Troubles-related mental ill health. Poverty in the North is highly concentrated, as was the conflict, and the areas where most deaths occurred are also the poorest parts of the region. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is endemic in these areas and PTSD is linked to more severe mental illness. In spite of this well-documented fact, mental health services in the North are poorly funded, with just 5.2% of the health budget in 2016–17 spent on mental health, compared to 13% in England, 11% in Wales and 7.6% in Scotland.

It's small wonder, then, that mental ill-health is now the leading cause of long-term illness in the North and the main reason that there are so many people dependent on benefits, despite relatively low levels of unemployment.

## What happened the promise of prosperity?

Certainly, some in the North have found prosperity since the Agreement came into force.

Barclay's Bank Prosperity Index places Northern Ireland fourth among the most prosperous regions of the UK, lower only than London, the South East and Eastern England. There was a 40% rise in the number of millionaires in Northern Ireland between 2010 and the present. The millionaire population grew by 8.7% between 2016 and 2017, bringing the total to 12,500 – although it's worth noting that the North's overall share of the total UK millionaire population remains consistent at 2%.

But the majority of people haven't shared in this supposed bonanza. Real wages in 2023 have not returned to pre-2008 levels. Meanwhile, welfare reform has ensured that those living on low wages or who are unable to work have seen their living standards fall considerably. When the DUP, Sinn Féin and Alliance voted to give Westminster 'legislative consent' to introduce welfare reform to the North, they knew that this would take hundreds of millions every year out of the pockets of the poorest people.

The 'mitigations' they brought in to soften the blow have helped. As in Scotland, the Bedroom Tax is paid by the government so there isn't the eviction crisis seen in England and Wales. And the fact that families hit by the Benefit Cap, mainly those with three or more children, have their benefits topped up has helped to keep child poverty here from going through the roof.

In spite of this, families with children, especially lone-parent families, have seen their incomes cut and one in four children is growing up in poverty. Women generally have suffered most from welfare reform because they are more likely to be receiving benefits and tax credits than men.

Disabled people have had a double whammy, losing income because of welfare reform, and losing support services due to cuts in health and social care budgets.

Advice centres tell us that those living on benefits or low wages simply could not make ends meet, even before the cost-of-living crisis. There were no food banks in the North in 2011; twelve years later, there are at least 41 food banks which, between April and September last year provided 1.3 million emergency food parcels to people in crisis.

It is against this background that we say that after 25 years there is little peace dividend for working-class people.

## INSTITUTIONALISED SECTARIANISM

The 25th anniversary of the Agreement has been marked by praise for the negotiators who pieced the text together.

John Hume, David Trimble, Tony Blair, Mo Mowlam, Gerry Adams, the Clintons, George Mitchell - indeed everybody associated with the making of the agreement, even Bertie Ahern – have had their roles celebrated. Joe Biden has come to Ireland to preside over the celebrations.

But when the historical record is examined, it will appear that the architects of peace were not just politicians. The demand for an end to all violence came from mobilisations from organised labour. In 1992, thousands joined a rally organised by the Belfast Trades Council after the murder of five people in a bookie's shop on the Ormeau Road. In 1993, 7,000 people gathered outside Belfast City Hall for a rally called by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to express opposition to the Shankill Road bombing and a massacre in Greysteel. In Derry, another 5,000 people gathered. In 1994, 2,000 workers from Harland and Wolf walked out of their jobs after a 50-year-old Catholic welder, was murdered by the UVF. The demand for peace came from below and acted as a pressure point on paramilitaries. Ownership of that peace cannot, therefore, be appropriated by any one group of elite politicians.

But sectarian attitudes haven't gone away. A quarter of a century on, voting patterns remain much more closely aligned to communal background than to class. Part of the reason for this is to be found in the Agreement itself.

The hope in 1998 was that, with consensus having supposedly been reached on how to handle issues arising from sectarianism, communities would come together through working in harmony on practical, day-to-day matters. Mark Durkan, then leader of the SDLP, suggested that sectarian attitudes would now prove “politically biodegradable.”

In order to safeguard this new dispensation, “key decisions” would henceforth be made on a “cross-community” basis: either “parallel consent” (a majority of Nationalists and a majority of Unionists voting together), or a “weighted majority” (60% of the overall vote, including at least 40% of Unionists and 40% of Nationalists). “Others” didn't figure in this calculation.

The intention was that each of the two communities would democratically produce its own champions to make sure they weren't done down by “the other side.”. The basic question at every election was to be - which party or candidate would give the more strident, forceful representation to its own community vis-à-vis the other community. The underlying assumption that was there are two irreconcilable cultures and identities in the North which have equal validity and must be represented at governmental level.

So, Sinn Féin and the DUP have been able to consolidate their support at the expense of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. The guns may have gone relatively quiet, but the sectarian axis of politics remains.



## THE POLITICAL IMPASSE

Today this form of rule has led to a fundamental political impasse.

The sectarianism at the heart of the Northern state means that the DUP are using their communal veto to prevent the emergence of a Stormont Executive. They have manufactured a cause by focusing on the Protocol. With no shame about being in a minority when it came to a referendum, they are engaged in obstructionist policies that have only one motive – shoring up their political base against rivals like the TUV.

All this manoeuvring reveals that the DUP are so sectarian that they will not serve as a Deputy First Minister to a Sinn Féin First Minister. Although the titles are purely symbolic, the institutionalisation of sectarianism has magnified this as the key issue.

The Tories have pandered to the DUP at every step of the way. They introduced a Stormont break which provided a complicated process to allow Unionists to veto EU legislation. But far from appeasing the DUP, it has only encouraged them to seek more.

All of this is exposing the underlying problem of the Belfast agreement. We urge people not to wait on the formation of a Stormont Executive but to take action now to defend their wages from inflation or to force real investment in public services.

People Before Profit favours changes to stop the DUP exercising a near-permanent veto. But we also see their antics as part of a long-term crisis of Unionism.

We, therefore, boldly say that a border poll is urgently required so that people have an option of whether or not they wish to continue in a failed state. Such a referendum should be held across the island of Ireland and if successful, it should lead to a constituent assembly to develop proposals for a different country where sectarianism has been confined to the dustbin of history.

In such a referendum, People Before Profit will advance a clear socialist position, arguing for an end to the tax haven status that currently dominates the South and for the provision of quality public services. We shall campaign for the removal of all church control of schools and hospitals and the creation of a secular Ireland where all workers make gains and where the country becomes a leader, not a laggard in fighting climate change.

## Housing - How it has worsened

A good stock of decent public housing was one of the successes of the civil rights movement which even Maggie Thatcher did not dare try to privatise. As a result, the proportion of households renting privately dropped to just 5% at the start of the 1990s.

However, since the Belfast Agreement, there has been a huge revival of the Private Rented Sector so that by 2016 it was larger than the social housing sector. At the same time, the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) which had been set up to end sectarian practices in housing, was no longer allowed to build new homes. Instead, Housing Associations were to provide any new social housing stock.

In 2011, Price Waterhouse Cooper undertook a review of the NI Housing Executive and concluded that it “is one of the success stories from Northern Ireland’s recent history. Since its introduction nearly 40 years ago it has delivered significant social benefits throughout Northern Ireland with the quality of the housing stock having moved from one of the worst in Western Europe to what is now regarded as best quality stock.

Despite this glowing assessment, the NIHE has been under threat of privatisation periodically by Stormont since 2012, a threat which trade unions, tenants and socialists have organised to defeat every time.

However, the growth in the Private Rented Sector has been a disaster for those who cannot afford to buy their own homes and cannot access social housing. Lone parents, the majority of whom are stuck in private rentals, are hardest hit.

At the same time, the Local Housing Allowance (help with rent in the private rented sector through Housing Benefit) was capped at 30% of average local rent in January 2012. Since April 2016 the Local Housing Allowance has been frozen except for a few months during the pandemic. What this means is that in 2019 private tenants needed to find between £60 and £250 per month (with the average being £160 per month) to top up their Housing Benefit. For some families, this could amount to half their monthly income.

The answer to this situation is to let the Housing Executive build houses again and let it get back to being “a leading authority...on both housing management and community building”.

But the DUP and Sinn Féin have both shown no willingness to do this, leaving their voters at the mercy of private landlords.



