

The Good Friday Agreement

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On April 10, 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement) was signed. To travel around Northern Ireland, you would have to pass through checkpoints. The Good Friday document changed that. The Good Friday Agreement is basically a political deal designed to end ‘the Troubles’ – thirty years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland which claimed more than 3,600 lives and injured 47,000 people.

What were ‘the Troubles’?

In 1921, Ireland was partitioned into a six-county region creating a new state called Northern Ireland. While the rest of Ireland became an independent “Free State.” This created a split among the general population. Nationalists wanted the whole of the island of Ireland to be unified. While the Unionists wanted things to stay the same, to keep the union with the rest of the U.K. The Catholic minority experienced discrimination in jobs, housing and other areas in the Protestant-dominated state. By the 1960’s, a Catholic civil rights movement demanded change, but faced a harsh response from the government and police, so tensions exploded into violence. The situation deteriorated into a conflict involving armed groups on both sides, in particular the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the British Army. We are all familiar with the British Army’s murder operation in Ballymurphy and Derry’s Bloody Sunday. Tens of thousands of people still bear the physical and mental scars to this day. It is hard to find a family who was not touched by ‘the Troubles’ in some way.

What led to the peace deal?

By the early 1990’s, the armed conflict had reached a “hurting stalemate.” There was a recognition on the part of the British government and army, and on the Irish republican side as well, that there was never going to be an outright victory. The Irish Republican Army called a cease-fire in 1994, allowing its allied party, Sinn Féin, to join other nationalist and unionist parties in peace talks co-sponsored by the British and Irish governments. The United States played a key role – former Senator George Mitchell chaired the talks, spending 22 months in Belfast overseeing the delicate multi-party negotiations. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) did not participate in protest at the inclusion of Sinn Fein.

The talks came close to collapse several times. But after a marathon weeklong negotiating session that stretched long past deadline, agreement was reached on April 10, 1998 – Good Friday.

What does the Good Friday Agreement say?

The agreement focuses on cooperation between both protestant and catholic communities. It created a new government for Northern Ireland with Nationalists and Unionists sharing power. It says that Northern Ireland will remain part of the U.K. until a majority of people in Northern Ireland decide to join the rest of Ireland. If you were born in Northern Ireland, you can decide to be British or Irish or both. Armed groups agreed to give up weapons. Controversially, people involved in violence were released from prison. The U.K. government agreed to aim for peacetime security arrangements which meant scaling back the British army presence and getting rid of those border checkpoints. People and goods could flow freely across the all-but-invisible border between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Has the Good Friday Agreement worked out?

Northern Ireland has mostly enjoyed peace for the past 25 years. Only a small number of splinter groups have been involved in sporadic attacks. But their document is vague in parts which means it can be hard to implement. Power sharing has broken down a few times because some political parties could not agree on how to work together. It broke down again last year due to post Brexit trade rules. The Belfast government remains suspended. And it is not back up and running yet. For the 25th year anniversary there were a series of high-profile events. This is not just a historical document; it shapes the future of Northern Ireland.

On a final note - the impetus behind getting the parties to agree to sit down for The Good Friday Agreement led to a joint 1998 Nobel peace prize for David Trimble and John Hume, leaders of the Ulster Unionist party (UUP) and Social Democratic and Labor party (SDLP). Hume also received the Gandhi Peace Prize and the Martin Luther King Award. He is the only person to receive the three major peace awards.