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**#AGREEMENT20**

# French Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement

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Although the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement is often described as the peace accord which ended thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland, it was one of many on the path to peace. This article proposes to return to the negotiations for peace from a transnational perspective, exploring how the peace process which culminated in the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was reported in France. It focuses on the four main national daily newspapers: the conservative paper, *Le Figaro*, the organ of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*, the left-wing daily, *Libération*, and the newspaper of record, *Le Monde*.

As this study shows, not all French daily newspapers supported the first peace attempts in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the two left-wing publications, *L'Humanité* and *Libération*, showed a clear antipathy towards the different reconciliation projects until the early 1990s. These newspapers appeared to be prisoners of their own ideology: *Libération* defended the idea of a fight for freedom, and supported the Republicans rather than peace, considering that any initiative that did not include the Republicans would fail. *L'Humanité*, which always saw the Northern Irish conflict as a colonial war, would only support the withdrawal of the British government from Northern Ireland. From the moment Sinn Féin was allowed to participate in the peace process and the British government stated it did not have any strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, both newspapers supported the British initiatives to find a solution to the conflict. All French publications reported on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998 and welcomed the 'historical accord'.

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April 2018 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement,<sup>1</sup> often described as the peace accord which ended thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland. However, it was one of many on the path to peace. This article proposes to return to the negotiations for peace, and explore how the peace process which culminated in the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was reported in France.<sup>2</sup>

Different narratives of the Northern Irish conflict and its peace process were conveyed in the French media, which for most of the French public were the only sources of information. This article focuses on the four main national daily newspapers in France (the conservative daily, *Le Figaro*,<sup>3</sup> the organ of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*,<sup>4</sup> the left-wing daily, *Libération*,<sup>5</sup> and the newspaper of record, *Le Monde*),<sup>6</sup> which give a representative sample of the range of French opinions and reactions to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Very few foreign newspapers had permanent correspondents in Northern Ireland. Among those selected for this study, only *Libération* and *Le Monde* had permanent reporters based in Belfast; *Le Monde* also had one based in Dublin. *Le Figaro* relied on its London-based correspondents to cover the events in Northern Ireland and *L'Humanité* depended entirely on world news agencies, British and Irish media, or

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<sup>1</sup> The nomenclature of the Agreement is used differently by the two communities: the CNR (Catholics, Nationalists, Republicans) prefer the Good Friday terminology relating to the day of its signing, while the PUL (Protestants, Unionists, Loyalists) refer to it as the Belfast Agreement.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations in this article have been translated from French into English by the author.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Figaro* is the oldest national daily newspaper. It was founded as a weekly in 1826 but became a daily in 1866. It has an average circulation of 330,000 copies per issue.

<sup>4</sup> *L'Humanité* was founded by the socialist Jean Jaurès in 1904, became a communist paper in 1920 and has been published by the French Communist Party ever since. With the decline of communism in France, its circulation went from 400,000 after World War Two to under 70,000 today.

<sup>5</sup> *Libération* was founded in 1973 out of the ideas of the May 1968 revolutionary events, by a group of young far-left militants led by Jean-Paul Sartre and Serge July. The latter remained the director of the publication until 2006. Its circulation has fluctuated from 40,000 copies at the start, reaching 195,000 in 1988 to around 100,000 today.

<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde*, one of the most respected newspapers in the world, was created in December 1944 at the request of General Charles de Gaulle by Hubert Beuve-Méry, who demanded total editorial independence. It started with a circulation of 147,000 copies to reach 407,000 copies in 2002.

governmental agencies. However, they would all send special reporters for a short period of time to cover specific events.

This article aims to show the evolving French perception of the Northern Irish peace process, starting with the reporting of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973, followed by the New Ireland Forum in 1983/84, the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, the Hume-Adams dialogue, the Brooke-Mayhew talks, the Downing Street Declaration in 1993, the Framework Documents in 1995, and finally the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The aim is to demonstrate how the perception of the peace process depends on each newspaper's—or on their correspondents'—interpretation of the 'Troubles'.

The first peace attempts did not elicit much interest in the French daily press, especially in the left-wing newspapers. The Sunningdale Agreement was the first attempt to establish a power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive and a cross-border Council of Ireland, which is why Seamus Mallon famously described the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 as 'the Sunningdale Agreement for slow learners' (McLoughlin, 2012).<sup>7</sup> The Agreement was signed at Sunningdale, Berkshire, on 9 December 1973 after tripartite talks between the British and Irish governments and the leaders of the moderate Unionist and Nationalist political parties.<sup>8</sup> At the time, the French press preferred to concentrate their reporting on the oil crisis, which was then a major global concern. Only *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* mentioned the Agreement. The left-wing publications reported it only five months later, in May 1974, during the Loyalist strike which triggered the collapse of the power-sharing administration and the repeal of the Agreement (see Fisk, 1975).

When they did converge on this story, the French daily publications found themselves divided on the accord: whereas *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* indicated some cautious optimism and clear support for it (Wetz, 1973; Bernheim, 1973; Mulholland,

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<sup>7</sup> Seamus Mallon was the Deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party from 1979 to 2001 and the first Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2001. He was one of the architects of the Good Friday Agreement. See McLoughlin (2012), chapter 10: Sunningdale for Slow Learners.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Sunningdale Agreement*. Belfast: HMSO, December 1973.

1974; Nirascou, 1973; Bertrand, 1973), *L'Humanité* refused to show any support but castigated the attitude of the Loyalists (Kroes, 1974a), who were even compared to the Nazis by the reporter (Kroes, 1974b).<sup>9</sup> *Libération* denounced it as a 'mockery'. Indeed, the libertarian newspaper adopted the Republican point of view: it published an interview with Seán O'Brádaigh, one of the leaders of Provisional Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, as well as the French translation of a leaflet entitled 'eight hundred years of colonial war', written by 'The Provisional Republican Movement' (A. J., 1974; Thomas, 1974a). The efforts of the British government to negotiate a settlement in the province, which were commended in the other French newspapers, were not mentioned in *Libération*. On the contrary, the newspaper's permanent correspondent in London, Marc Thomas, accused the British authorities of deliberately letting the Loyalists destroy the power-sharing Agreement (1974a, 1974b, 1974c). Thomas claimed that the IRA was not unhappy to see this Agreement collapse (1974d, 1974e). *Libération* was the only French publication which seemed to be pleased with the failure of the Sunningdale Agreement, as it did not include the Republicans. Its coverage therefore appeared to be biased.

Like the Sunningdale Agreement, the New Ireland Forum of 1983/84 was also ignored by the French daily press except for *Le Monde*. The conference of the four main Irish Nationalist parties—Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Irish Labour Party from the Republic of Ireland and the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) from Northern Ireland—had its initial meeting in May 1983 with the aim of working out an agreed approach to a settlement in Northern Ireland. It produced its report on 1 May 1984.<sup>10</sup> *L'Humanité* did not mention it at all. *Le Figaro* only published one article when the report came out (Bollaert, 1984). This can be explained by the lack of a permanent correspondent in Dublin and the conservative newspaper's preference for the British point of view. However, the article was quite optimistic. Baudouin Bollaert talked about 'a glimpse of hope for a peaceful solution in Northern Ireland' and asserted: 'the Irish conflict has already cost too much in terms of human lives

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<sup>9</sup> Claude Kroes compared the Loyalist parade in Belfast to the Nazi one in Nuremberg.

<sup>10</sup> See *New Ireland Forum*. Dublin: Stationery Office, May 1984.

and finance for such an initiative not to be carefully examined'. *Libération* also published one article (Chalandon, 1984). Once again, the left-wing daily immediately condemned this initiative because Sinn Féin was not invited, a feeling which the permanent correspondent in Belfast, Sorj Chalandon (1984: 2), openly expressed: 'Are all Catholics represented? No. ... Therefore it is not necessary to be a great scholar in the matter to guess that the Forum does not stand a chance of reaching its objectives'. Margaret Thatcher's rejection of the Forum report validated the newspaper's point of view: British intransigence was causing the political blockage, and the only solution to the conflict was the withdrawal of the British government from Northern Ireland.

Only *Le Monde* offered its readership a regular and substantial coverage of the Forum. This took the form of articles from its permanent correspondent in Dublin, Joe Mulholland (who was also the Editor of Current Affairs on the Irish television channel RTÉ), and its special reporter, Francis Cornu. They explained that the Forum's intention was to contain the threat of Sinn Féin, whose electoral successes were quite alarming for these Nationalist political parties (Sinn Féin is the only political party active in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland). However, both praised what they considered to be an 'original political initiative' that could have positive consequences (Mulholland, 1983: 6; Cornu, 1983: 5). In its leader column from 4 May 1984 entitled 'Hope for a new Ireland', the newspaper explained why it granted so much importance to the Forum: it was the first serious attempt to define Irish nationalism while taking into consideration the existence of a Protestant identity on the island. Joe Mulholland (1984: 4–5) acknowledged that this 'historical document' would not stop the conflict, but 'it proves how much public opinion in the South has evolved over the last ten years'. The fact that Mulholland was a local journalist, rather than a special reporter despatched from Paris, certainly helped the French daily newspaper to produce a comprehensive coverage. Only *Le Monde* understood the importance of this event in the peace process. The other French publications showed some disdain for an initiative they clearly considered to be unfruitful, given the fact that it involved neither the British government nor the Unionists nor Sinn Féin.

Like the previous peace attempts, the Anglo-Irish Agreement divided the French press. Signed at Hillsborough by the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the Irish Taoiseach, Garret FitzGerald, on 15 November 1985,<sup>11</sup> it was probably the most far-reaching political development since the creation of Northern Ireland in 1920, and it would prove to be of enormous importance in terms of the peace process. On the one hand, the British government agreed for Dublin to be consulted in matters affecting Northern Ireland. On the other hand, the Irish government acknowledged British sovereignty over Northern Ireland.

In comparison with previous initiatives, *Le Monde* showed some lukewarm optimism. Francis Cornu (1985a: 3) talked about 'timid hope', but he also feared a Loyalist backlash as in 1974 when the Sunningdale Agreement was brought to an end (1985c, 1985d, 1985e). The Anglo-Irish treaty was considered to be a 'political compromise', and the 'starting point of a long process' (LeMonde, 1985: leader) but not a peace agreement. The newspaper noted that the Agreement attracted large international support, especially from members of the European Community, something made apparent via the telegram France sent to both governments congratulating them (Cornu, 1985b: 3).<sup>12</sup>

*Le Figaro's* coverage was much more enthusiastic. Its London-based correspondent, Baudoin Bollaert (1985: 4), talked about a 'historical peace plan' and commended 'the first serious attempt in fifteen years to try to bring back some calm and reason in a Province that has been shaken by desperate sectarian passions'. The newspaper's special reporter in Belfast, Serge Chauvel, considered that two events had made this Agreement possible: the New Ireland Forum and the Brighton bombing.<sup>13</sup> It is surprising that the conservative publication, which had always condemned IRA violence, considering its members 'terrorists', admitted that the IRA had managed

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<sup>11</sup> See *The Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985, Agreement between the Government of Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO, November 1985.

<sup>12</sup> The Irish Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald thanked the French President, François Mitterrand, for his efforts in helping the Irish Republic secure this agreement.

<sup>13</sup> On 12 October 1984, the IRA detonated a bomb in the Grand Hotel in Brighton which was hosting the annual conference of the Conservative Party. The aim had been to kill the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet.

to achieve its aim and trigger a spectacular U-turn in Margaret Thatcher's attitude (Chauvel, 1985a, 1985d). This argument tended to legitimise the IRA and its use of violence as a political tool. The Loyalist opposition to the Agreement was largely reported, but in simplified and generalised terms. The cumulative impression was yet again a negative image of the moderate Protestant community: 'The Protestants from the numerous sects in Ulster, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Methodists, Church of Ireland, the Reverend Paisley's New Presbyterian Church,<sup>14</sup> are all united against the "English betrayal" and the "Republican enemy"' (Chauvel, 1985b: 3). However, the reporter was confident in the Agreement's success because 'Mrs Thatcher never gives in' (Chauvel, 1985c: 4).

If both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* supported the Anglo-Irish Agreement, this was not the case when it came to the left-wing publications. *L'Humanité* deliberately minimised its importance, only publishing one short article on the subject (1985). Moreover, it expressed disappointment because 'the agreement confirms the colonial status of Northern Ireland'. The whole treaty was reduced to the creation of a permanent secretariat whose role was that of a 'complaint office'<sup>15</sup> for Catholics. It also criticised the French government for its support of the Agreement, accusing it of lacking caution and forgetting about the Irish people's right to self-determination. The paper did not even mention the Loyalist reaction.

By contrast, *Libération* gave its readers full coverage of the Agreement, but Sorj Chalandon, its Belfast-based reporter, viewed it as an attempt by both governments to crush the Republican movement. He insisted on the increased collaboration between the two police forces and the cooperation in the fight against terrorism (Chalandon, 1985b). Moreover, he opposed a settlement that did not involve the people of Northern Ireland. The journalist considered the Anglo-Irish Treaty to be

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<sup>14</sup> The Reverend Ian Paisley was the son of a Baptist minister who, in 1951, started a Free Presbyterian Church in Belfast. He mounted large demonstrations against civil rights marches in 1968/69, became the Member of Parliament for North Antrim in 1970, founded the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in 1971, and was then elected a Member of the European Parliament in 1979. He became First Minister of Northern Ireland on 8 May 2007, head of an interdenominational, power-sharing government. He stepped down as DUP Leader and First Minister in June 2008 and died in 2014. For his portrayal in the French press, see Deslandes (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Title of the article.

a political failure which, instead of offering a solution to the conflict, would only create more tensions in the Province (Chalandon, 1985a). Once more, the left-wing daily opted to report the Agreement from a Republican point of view.

It is noticeable that a clear divide appeared in the French daily press under study regarding the first peace attempts: if *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* showed some optimism and supported them, *L'Humanité* and *Libération* systematically rejected them all, the former resorting to silence in order to show either a lack of interest or disapproval, and the latter refusing to acknowledge initiatives that excluded the Republicans or harmed their position.

Between 1988 and 1993, the peace process picked up momentum, with different attempts to end the political stalemate and create conditions for all-party discussions in Northern Ireland with the Hume-Adams dialogue and the Brooke/Mayhew talks, leading to the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 and the Framework Documents in 1995.

The conversations between the two leaders of the Nationalist camp, John Hume from the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Gerry Adams from Sinn Féin, started in January 1988 and lasted over five years. Even though their joint statement was rejected by both the Irish and British governments, these meetings were crucial in the evolution of the peace process because they gave some legitimacy to Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, which had been ostracised until then (Elliott & Flackes, 1999: 289). Only three French daily newspapers reported on these talks: *Le Monde*, *Libération* and *L'Humanité*. As always they considered the Nationalist/Republican point of view as important. In contrast, *Le Figaro* did not pay attention to this Irish initiative, showing once again its preference for the official British position.

*Libération* praised 'John Hume's courage and perseverance' (Chalandon, 1993a: 23) as well as Gerry Adams' willingness to get his party out of political isolation (Chalandon, 1993a: 23; Dupuy, 1993: 3, leader). The French daily published an interview with both leaders (Chalandon, 1993b; Rousselot, 1993b). Its correspondents in Belfast, Sorj Chalandon and Fabrice Rousselot, also managed to get an exclusive interview with 'a member of the IRA army council', in which the organisation asserted that it would 'support a peace process based on the Hume-Adams initiative'. The

two reporters were proud to announce that 'this is the first time that the IRA Army Council has agreed to answer questions from an international newspaper since the start of the Troubles more than twenty years ago' (Chalandon & Rousselot, 1993: 15–16). *Libération*, which never hid its preference for the Republican point of view, supported an initiative which enabled the Republican movement to take part in the search for a settlement in Northern Ireland. However, while the left-wing daily presented the Nationalist/Republican point of view, it did not report on the Unionists' reactions, unlike *Le Monde* (Zecchini, 1993a, 1993b). The latter also published an interview which presented John Hume as 'an idealist' and a 'conciliator' (Zecchini, 1993d: 3), but failed to interview Gerry Adams. The paper justified the importance of this dialogue by referring to US President Clinton's support and involvement in the peace process (Zecchini, 1993f). *L'Humanité* also considered these talks as 'an important peace initiative' (Avis, 1993d: 11) and the only way forward to eliminate violence (Avis, 1993a), which is why it severely criticised John Major's attitude for rejecting these propositions without offering any alternative (Avis, 1993b).

These three newspapers constantly asserted that there could not be any solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland without 'the men of violence' being involved in a political process. It was therefore not surprising that they supported the British government's secret talks with the IRA. Unlike most of the British press, not a single French publication disputed these contacts. Instead they considered that talking to paramilitary organisations was the ultimate condition to a solid agreement. Consequently, they unanimously welcomed the British authorities' renouncement of their 'never talk to terrorists' principle (Zecchini, 1993c, 1993e; Duplouich, 1993a, 1993b; Avis, 1993c, 1993d; Rousselot, 1993a; Chalandon, 1993c; LeMonde, 1993).

The French coverage of the 1991/92 talks between the British and Irish governments and the four main Northern Ireland political parties—Sinn Féin was not invited—was consensual: all newspapers, including the left-wing publications, welcomed this initiative and praised the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, for his courage. For *Le Monde*, these talks were 'a ray of hope' (French Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement), and 'a small step towards the settlement of the Ulster tragedy' (1991:

leader). It explained that the success of these discussions was far from guaranteed as the Republicans were not part of the process (*Le Monde*, 1991). Although the newspaper mentioned a 'historical meeting' (Zecchini, 1992: 6) between the Dublin government and the Unionists parties, it severely criticised the intransigence of the Unionists who were trying, once again, to 'torpedo the negotiations' (*Le Monde*, 1992: leader).

*Le Figaro's* coverage was rather similar. Its London-based correspondent, Jacques Duplouich, talked about 'an unprecedented event' (1991a: 4), 'a miracle in this country where terrorism forbids all dialogue between devotees of the same God' (1991b: 3), resorting to the image of a war of religion. He also did not differentiate between the political terms 'Nationalists' and 'Republicans' when he presented the talks as negotiations between 'Protestant Loyalists and Catholic Republicans' (Duplouich, 1991b: 3). More troublingly, he then explained that the Republicans were excluded from these talks, which could have been rather confusing for the newspaper's readership.

For the first time, even the left-wing press showed some enthusiasm for the talks. Indeed, for *L'Humanité*, they were 'a feeble ray of hope for a harshly affected people', and its reporter hoped for 'a better *modus vivendi* with the Republic of Ireland and the creation of democratised structures to administer the North' (Avis, 1991a: 11). As for *Libération*, it declared: 'these talks represent some progress for the six counties' (Guichoux, 1991a: 14). On the one hand, these two publications praised the British government for its efforts (Avis, 1991b; Guichoux, 1991a), which was a significant change in their attitude, but on the other hand, they accused the government of bias: the British had excluded Sinn Féin for supporting IRA violence, but they did not exclude the Loyalists who also supported their paramilitaries' acts of violence (Chalandon, 1991d). Like the other newspapers, they both castigated the Unionists' 'intransigence', 'sectarianism', and hypocrisy (Chalandon, 1991d: 27; Avis, 1991b: 13). Sorj Chalandon of *Libération* claimed that their only intention was 'to obtain the suspension of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985' (Chalandon, 1991d: 27). *Libération* produced a series of articles under the title 'Portraits of Ordinary Families of Ireland' (Chalandon, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Guichoux, 1991b). What is striking, however, is

that out of four portraits, three were devoted to Nationalist families and only one to a Loyalist family which supported Ian Paisley. The voices of moderate Unionists, who would accept power-sharing and wished the end of violence, were not presented to the newspaper's readership.

As a result of these talks, the Anglo-Irish Joint Declaration was issued on 15 December 1993<sup>16</sup> by the British Prime Minister John Major and the Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, and was fully reported in the French press. French journalists welcomed the British government's acceptance of abandoning its sovereignty over Northern Ireland and encouraging the reunification of Ireland if a majority of its population was in favour of such a move. Following the Declaration, for the first time, the French daily newspapers placed the responsibility of establishing peace onto the IRA, as they considered that the British government had now fulfilled its part.

*Le Monde* gave a detailed analysis of the main points of the Declaration and announced 'an unprecedented opportunity to establish lasting peace that is now up to the men of violence to seize or reject' (Zecchini, 1993g: 8). When Sinn Féin rejected the Declaration on 24 July 1994, its leader writer could not hide his disappointment: 'The Nationalists [*sic*] from Northern Ireland did not have enough courage—or determination—to take the plunge'. He then called on Gerry Adams, who 'constantly talks about peace' to 'put his words into action' (*Le Monde*, 1994: leader). *Le Figaro* was so optimistic that it declared: 'the end of the civil war in Northern Ireland is in sight' (Duplouch, 1993b: 1). Unlike *Le Monde*, the conservative newspaper insisted on the feelings and reactions from the people of Northern Ireland: 'the Protestants' bitterness', 'Sinn Féin's disappointment' and 'the population's disbelief' (Duplouch, 1993b: 2).

As expected from the communist newspaper, *L'Humanité*, all its coverage was about London acknowledging the Irish people's right to self-determination, a principle that it has relentlessly advocated throughout the years. Peter Avis (1993e: 14) welcomed the fact that 'Great Britain no longer has any strategic or economic

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<sup>16</sup> See *Joint Declaration: Downing Street*. Belfast: HMSO, December 1993.

interests in Northern Ireland' and that 'the Republic of Ireland has managed to go beyond the romanticism of its founders to find some realistic common ground for a pluralistic future of the island of Ireland'. However, one notes a total silence on the Loyalists and Unionists' reactions from *L'Humanité*, which had always called for the withdrawal of 'the British occupation forces' and the reunification of the island. It minimised the Republicans' rejection of the Declaration, insisting on the fact that Gerry Adams had called on the Unionists to build together a pluralist society (Avis, 1994).

*Libération* talked about 'a historic day', and its London-based correspondent, Fabrice Rousselot, admitted that he feared this would be another document devoid of any substance, but was pleased with the outcome as 'both governments have decided to make concessions'. He declared: 'the IRA military campaign no longer has any reason to be' (Rousselot, 1993c: 17–18). Following Sinn Féin's rejection of the Declaration, he blamed the Republicans for creating an 'impasse' and ignoring the profound desire of Northern Irish people for a permanent end to violence (Rousselot, 1994: 14). For the first time, the left-wing newspaper was in disagreement with the Republican movement that it had always supported until then. Suffice it to say, this marked a big shift in its attitude.

All of the French daily newspapers under study called on Irish Republicans to seize the opportunity brought by the Joint Declaration. It was therefore not surprising that they all supported the IRA ceasefire on 31 August 1994, which made the headlines on all the front pages. However, the Loyalists' ceasefire on 14 October 1994 was hardly mentioned in the French press, perhaps because it appeared as a logical step, but also because French journalists were disgusted by the Unionists' intransigence and instinctively turned their attention to those they felt wanted peace. Besides, their coverage of the Framework Documents in 1995 drew a parallel between the inflexibility of the Unionists and the goodwill of the Republicans.

This twenty-six page set of documents was launched on 22 February 1995 by both prime ministers, John Major of the United Kingdom and John Bruton of the Republic of Ireland. The French press welcomed this new initiative, considering it another 'step' (a recurrent word throughout their coverage) in the peace process. For

*Le Monde*, these documents were 'more daring than expected' (De Beer, 1995b: 3). While reminding his readers that these texts were 'a basis for negotiations', and not an Anglo-Irish treaty, the London correspondent thought that they were 'a good compromise that safeguards both the Irish ideal of reunification and London's willingness to guarantee the interests of the Protestant majority in the North' (De Beer, 1995a: 2). *Le Figaro's* correspondent also praised a text that 'takes into consideration all aspects of the Irish issue, the aspirations of the Nationalists and Republicans on the one hand and the concerns of the Unionists on the other hand' (Duplouch, 1995a: 3). He asserted that it was 'the first time since the partition of the island in 1920 that the Irish question has been examined in detail and solutions put forward' (Duplouch, 1995a: 3). *L'Humanité* also showed some enthusiasm with its headline: 'A New Step on the Way to Peace' (Avis, 1995a); *Libération* likewise applauded 'a decisive step in the peace process' (Rousselot, 1995: 11).

Nevertheless, the French daily newspapers chose not to base their reporting on the text itself but on the Unionists' negative reaction and the Republicans' positive attitude. *Le Monde* noted that 'paradoxically the extremists appear more moderate than the leaders of the Protestant political parties' and praised John Major's political acumen: 'giving Northern Irish people—a majority of Protestants—the right to approve or veto the suggested process, he compelled them to face up to their responsibilities' (De Beer, 1995b: 3). *Le Figaro's* correspondent viewed the Unionists' hostility as a lack of maturity: their minds were not ready for 'such an enormous change of mentality' (Duplouch, 1995a: 3). However, he mentioned that this inflexible position was clashing with their electorate's more open mind-set (Duplouch, 1995b). That is why he approved of John Major's 'clever initiative', which consisted of inviting the population 'to make up their mind on the proposed solutions' (Duplouch, 1995a: 3). *L'Humanité* denounced the hypocrisy of the Unionists who, according to its reporters, were pretending to be open to dialogue in order not to cut themselves off from their electorate, but had absolutely no desire to accept any change (Guichard & Avis, 1995). To show the contrast between the two camps, the communist daily referred to the 'hand of friendship that Gerry Adams extended to the Unionists', inviting them to 'join the Republican movement to build a new society of peace

and justice in their shared country'. Yet, according to the correspondent, this hand 'has no chance of being accepted by the Unionists' (Avis, 1995b: 14). *Libération* also insisted on Sinn Féin's willingness to open a dialogue with the Unionists (Chalandon, 1995a: 11, 1995b: 9) and on the 'gap between the Unionist MPs and the Protestant grassroots' in its article about the reaction on the Shankill Road (Amoric, 1995: 11).

At this time the French reporters placed the responsibility for peace on the Unionists, whose image in the French press had seriously deteriorated. This image did not improve during the multi-party negotiations. Indeed, French journalists did not hide their frustration at the Unionists' 'blackmailing' of John Major's government, which needed their votes in Westminster in order to survive (De Beer, 1996a, 1996b; Duplouich, 1996; Avis, 1996a, 1996b; Chalandon, 1996; Amalric, 1996). When the IRA ceasefire came to an end on 9 February 1996, the French newspapers unanimously blamed the Unionists and the British government. It was only in May 1997 after Tony Blair's landslide victory at the general election that they became hopeful again. They mentioned Sinn Féin's excellent results in the election, becoming the third largest political force in Northern Ireland, meaning they could no longer be ignored by the British government (De Beer, 1997; Mandeville, 1997; Avis, 1997; Sergent, 1997).

On 10 April 1998, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was signed after days of intense negotiations.<sup>17</sup> This peace accord was on the front page of all the French daily newspapers, and they paid it close attention.<sup>18</sup> 'Historic' was the recurrent word which was used to describe the agreement. *Le Monde* from 12/13 April 1998 ran the headline: 'A Historical Peace Agreement in Ulster' and talked about the 'biggest political change on the island since partition in 1921'. *Le Figaro* ran the same headline on 11/12 April 1998 and in a small box on the front page, Alain Peyrefitte<sup>19</sup> admitted:

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<sup>17</sup> See *The Good Friday Agreement/Belfast Agreement. Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great-Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland. Text of the Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations on Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO, April 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Deutsch, former correspondent for *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and the weekly magazine *L'Express*, published a very detailed account of the last days and hours of negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement in French, *Le Sentier de la paix: l'Accord anglo-irlandais de 1998* (1998).

<sup>19</sup> Alain Peyrefitte (1925–1999) was a French politician who served as a minister under Presidents de Gaulle, Pompidou, and Giscard d'Estaing.

It is rare that this adjective can be used without emphasis but one has to use it without hesitation to describe the agreement signed in Belfast. ... This date will go down in History like the Franco-German reconciliation or the Begin-Sadate (Camp David) agreement.

*L'Humanité* from 11 April 1998 also mentioned 'a historical day for Northern Ireland' and *Libération's* headline on its 11/12 April edition was 'Historical Agreement in Belfast: Day of Hope in Northern Ireland' (Sargent, 1998a).

*Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* considered the Agreement to be 'balanced' as 'it gives guarantees to the Republicans' while '[reassuring] the Unionists' (De Beer, 1998a: 2; 1998b: 2; Duplouich, 1998b: 2). They insisted on the fact that each camp had made concessions, saying that there was no winner and no loser. However, *Libération* appeared divided on this issue: Sorj Chalandon (1998b: 4) talked about the 'delicate architecture of a project made up of concessions that gives hope to some without driving the others to despair', but his colleague François Sargent (1998b: 3) claimed that 'the Protestants have finally conceded, as they were forced to do so'. He then added that the Agreement was a victory for the Republicans as 'it acknowledged the nationalist identity of the Catholic minority, scorned since partition in 1921'.

The role of the newly elected British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in solving the conflict was unanimously acknowledged by the French press. *Le Monde* praised his determination, his boldness (De Beer, 1998b, 1998c), and *Le Figaro* lauded his 'dynamism, his power of persuasion to end an archaic conflict and his political drive' (Duplouich, 1998: 2). In its leader column on 13 April 1998, Paul Guilbert talked about 'a typical English operation', wondering 'which continental lawyer would have imagined such a status'. He praised Tony Blair's efficiency and even predicted that he would 'become the man that Europe envies'. Even *Libération*, which had in the past displayed in its columns some strong anti-British feelings, asserted that 'in contrast with his predecessors whose Northern Ireland policy was antinationalist repression, [Tony Blair] contributed to break all the political taboos that froze the situation' (Chalandon, 1998a: 5).

French journalists also admired Blair's innovative devolution policy, which they said would bring the United Kingdom into modern times. *Le Monde* explained that 'the agreement goes far beyond local rivalries between Catholics and Protestants: it is part of the much wider context of a new organisation within the British Isles' (De Beer, 1998d: 2). In *L'Humanité*, Christophe Deroubaix (1998: leader) expressed some satisfaction that:

For the first time since 1921 and the partition of Ireland, a British Prime Minister accepts measures that tend to unify rather than divide. ... He [Blair] admitted what became obvious: the United Kingdom as it is today constitutes an anachronism.

Blair's devolution policy was seen in France as a democratic readjustment because the United Kingdom was viewed as an act of union between four nations that had been more or less imposed by a formerly dominant English power.

While acknowledging the special role played by Tony Blair, French reporters also talked about 'a team job'. They praised the Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's efforts, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State Marjorie Mowlam's temperament, the former US Senator George Mitchell's<sup>20</sup> mediation skills, and, finally, the US President Bill Clinton's personal intervention (Zecchini, 1998; Duplouch, 1998b; Duraud, 1998a; Amalric, 1998). As for Northern Irish politicians, John Hume's role in the peace process was unanimously lauded, but *Le Monde* also gave credit to Gerry Adams (De Beer, 1998a). The Unionist leader David Trimble triggered a mixed reaction in the French press: if he was presented as a 'modernist' or a 'moderate', it was solely because of the fact that there was always someone more intransigent than him in his own camp (De Beer, 1998a: 2; Duplouch, 1998b: 2; Duraud, 1998a: 4). *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* also reported reactions from some world leaders like Queen Elizabeth II, the United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan, the South African President Nelson Mandela, the European Commission, and, of course, the French

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<sup>20</sup> See Mitchell (1999), who gives an account of his mediation work in Northern Ireland during the negotiations.

President, Jacques Chirac, who talked about 'a historical step that should put an end to the violence that struck Ulster for so long' (De Beer, 1998b: 2; Duplouich, 1998c: 2). *L'Humanité* reported the words of the French Communist Party leader, Robert Hue, offering the 'French Communists' support and solidarity to the Irish people' (Duraud, 1998b: 9).

While displaying enthusiasm, French journalists also mentioned their fear regarding the viability of the Agreement. Numerous reports described a population suspended between hope and pessimism, refusing to show any euphoria or joy, and fearing that some dissident group might try to sabotage the Agreement by a series of bombings (Paringaux, 1998a; Duplouich, 1998d; Duraud, 1998b; Rousselot, 1998a, 1998b). In its leader column from 12/13 April 1998, *Le Monde* reminded its readers that 'a peace agreement does not automatically make peace'. *Le Figaro* also asserted that 'a lot of time and courage will be necessary to abolish the barriers that have been erected in hearts and minds for the last 70 years' (Duplouich, 1998a: 3). Its reporter explained that the Agreement was 'a political act' and that 'the most difficult things remain to be done', namely to 'convince the population, get the new institutions working and neutralise the extremists' (Duplouich, 1998d: 3). *L'Humanité* mentioned that the Agreement remained 'fragile and precarious' because 'sealed on a piece of paper, peace still has to be built in a country that has been divided by twenty-nine years of war and four centuries of English colonisation' (Duraud, 1998a: 3). In his leader on 13 April 1998, Christophe Deroubaix warned that 'ending the social apartheid in the streets, shops, offices, [and] companies, will be a long-term endeavour'. Jacques Amalric from *Libération* also wrote in his leader on 11/12 April 1998 that 'it is premature to celebrate peace. It remains to be built'. He then explained: 'the agreement reflects more the willingness of London, Dublin, and Washington to end an anachronistic conflict than a real willingness to compromise from those who have been fighting each other for three decades'. All papers reported the worrying division within each camp, Ian Paisley's ferocious opposition to the Agreement, and the radical Republicans ready to 'kill the peace' (Paringaux, 1998b; Duplouich, 1998e; Duraud, 1998d; Sergent, 1998c). And indeed, on 15 August 1998,

the Omagh bombing was carried out by the Real IRA, a splinter group who rejected the Good Friday Agreement, killing 29 people and injuring 220. Despite this damage, the bomb did not manage 'to kill the peace'.

As this article has shown, not all French daily newspapers supported the first peace attempts in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the two left-wing publications, *L'Humanité* and *Libération*, showed a clear antipathy towards reconciliation projects until the early 1990s. These newspapers appeared to be prisoners of their own ideology: *Libération* defended the idea of a fight for freedom, and supported the Republicans' campaign rather than peace, considering that any initiative that did not include the Republicans would fail. *L'Humanité*, which always considered the Northern Irish conflict a colonial war, would only support the withdrawal of the British government from Northern Ireland (see Deslandes, 2011). From the moment Sinn Féin was allowed to participate in the peace process and the British government stated that it did not have any strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland, both *L'Humanité* and *Libération* supported the British government's initiatives to find a solution to the conflict. The strong desire for peace in Northern Ireland, the Republicans' shift from armed struggle to peaceful politics under Gerry Adams, and the evolution of the British Government's attitude towards Republicanism certainly contributed to a change of standpoint from both left-wing French newspapers.

The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was reported on in all the French dailies, which enthusiastically endorsed this 'historical accord'. The newspapers welcomed a balanced agreement, congratulating the different protagonists who made it possible, Tony Blair in particular. But some also expressed fears regarding the Agreement's viability. French journalists have always considered the Northern Irish conflict an anachronism in the European Union. The leader in *Le Monde* on 12/13 April 1998 was particularly revealing when it expressed the hope that the Agreement would bring 'in this Province of a member state of the European Union the same standards of civilisation as the rest of Europe today'. They viewed the 'Troubles' as a war of religion and this stereotype was very much present in their reporting of the Good Friday Agreement. Indeed, these three French newspapers, *L'Humanité*, *Libération*

and *Le Monde*, all mentioned 'the end of thirty years of conflict between Catholics and Protestants' (De Beer, 1998c: 3; 1998d: 2; Duplouich, 1998c: 2; Duraud, 1998c: 10; Sergent, 1998b: 2). The fact that the title of the Agreement—'Good Friday'—had some religious implications might have reinforced this perception, even though Sorj Chalandon from *Libération* (1998a: 4) had the courage to admit: 'It is out of ease, ignorance or laziness that the events in Northern Ireland have often been presented as the archaic continuity of a simple war of religion'.

Since 1998, the French daily newspapers have defended the Good Friday Agreement when it was under threat from the Omagh bombing in August 1998, the Northern Bank robbery in 2004, and Robert McCartney's murder in 2005.<sup>21</sup> More recently, they have all expressed fears following the United Kingdom's decision on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union. Moreover, all have denounced the deal struck on 26 June 2017 between the British Prime Minister Theresa May and the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in order to prop up her weakened government following her failure to obtain a majority at the snap general election. Although the final chapter of the Agreement's history is still to be written, French journalists consider that Brexit and the DUP deal could put the Good Friday Agreement at risk (Papin & Bernard, 2017; Bernard, 2017a, 2017b; Lemahieu, 2017a, 2017b; Collomp, 2017a, 2017b; Delesalle-Stolper, 2017a, 2017b; Labaune, 2017).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>21</sup> The Omagh bombing was a car bombing that took place on 15 August 1998 in Omagh. It was carried out by the Real Irish Republican Army, a Provisional IRA splinter group who opposed the IRA's ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement. The Northern Bank robbery was carried out on 20 December 2004; the gang seized £26.5 million, making it the largest bank robbery in Irish history. The Police Service of Northern Ireland, and the British and Irish governments claimed the IRA was responsible, but this was denied by both the IRA and Sinn Féin. The case remains unsolved. The murder of Robert McCartney on 31 January 2005 occurred in Belfast and was allegedly carried out by the Provisional IRA, who denied any involvement. Sinn Féin suspended twelve members of the party and the IRA expelled three members. Terence Davidson was charged with murder but found not guilty in 2008. For the coverage of these events in the French press, see Greenaway (2007).

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