In the summer of 1985 the BBC entered a period of crisis. It had planned to broadcast a documentary called *At the Edge of the Union* which featured extensive interviews with two of Northern Ireland’s more outspoken political figures, Martin McGuinness, senior Sinn Féin politician and someone who has admitted membership of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Derry, and Gregory Campbell, an outspoken member of Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Unaware of the existence of the yet to be broadcast programme, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made a speech in Washington arguing that the media should not give terrorists ‘the oxygen of publicity’. After Rupert Murdoch’s paper, *The Times*, linked the stories, the Home Secretary at the time asked for the programme to be banned, the Board of Governors of the BBC attempted to intervene, and the system of editorial control of the BBC spiralled down into disarray. Rupert Murdoch was busy launching Sky Television so undermining the BBC was convenient but for the BBC, covering Northern Ireland, which its journalists and documentary makers were always keen to do, had always been a problem. Much editorial policy within the organisation had developed specifically to deal with the precarious position of the state in the six northeastern counties of the island of Ireland.

Like any other society Northern Ireland has conflict. The type of ethnonational conflict that Northern Ireland exhibits, built on a colonial legacy, is also, sadly, not uncommon. But unlike in some other parts of the world the conflict in Northern Ireland is not strategically important, nor is it likely to spill over into neighbouring areas in any significant way. Indeed, one of the striking elements of conflict in Northern Ireland is that the competing forms of British and Irish ethnonationalism exist within a context of two wealthy European states, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, that share such similar cultural, economic and political backgrounds, that in recent history have extremely friendly relations and that have a common goal of creating peace in the disputed territory. Yet, in a way, these reasons for diminishing the broader importance of Northern Ireland also make it interesting. For these two stable and economically healthy European states Northern Ireland poses a particularly acute problem. How do you create peaceful coexistence amongst citizens that appear to exhibit such polarised political identities? Whether the six counties of Northern Ireland eventually join the Republic, or stay within the United Kingdom, or find an existence in between, the development of shared civic space, a common political space, that both accounts for diverse understandings of a cultural and political heritage and offers common citizenship, is required.

The articles in this special issue of *Anthropology in Action* reflect not only an ongoing research interest in the legitimacy of the state and in conflict management, but also the role of the anthropologist in exploring attempts at understanding the nature of shared space. Working on North-
ern Ireland as an anthropologist, and living and working in Northern Ireland, makes it very difficult to avoid direct involvement in issues of local public policy. This is most obviously elucidated in Andrew Finlay’s important essay on the way the concept of culture has been used in processes of policy formation through the peace process, particularly in the 1990s. Finlay, drawing on Wright (1998), observes that the ‘old’, essentialist, idea of culture has remained dominant in the development of policy in Northern Ireland right into the contents of the 1998 Multi-Party Agreement (Good Friday Agreement). He argues that others have mis-applied anthropology in their search of political solutions between ‘the two traditions’.

More optimistically, the essays of Neil Jarman, Jacqueline Witherow, John Nagle and Dominic Bryan all explore the contested nature of public space and the way anthropology and anthropologists have mapped, but also directly influenced, the development of policies designed to mediate the territorial divisions that are so striking in Northern Ireland. Jarman looks at policy development around the management of conflict at territorial interfaces and in particular highlights the complex relationship between government and communities leading to some common notions as to the appropriate ways of managing apparently endemic street violence. In a similar vein, Bryan looks more specifically at the development of mediating roles that have developed through disputes over the sharing of space during parades and demonstrations. Nagle maps the contested development of St Patrick’s Day in Belfast, evaluating the attempts by Belfast City Council to create a shared, ‘civic’ event.

Witherow examines the role of the enormous number of marching bands in Northern Ireland and suggests that ethnographic research has offered the possibility of engagement with an isolated but important group of people. Roche is interested in the relationships of young people, Protestant and Catholic, with the environment around them. Similar to Witherow, Rosellen Roche is interested in how ethnographic research offers access to particularly difficult groups. She discusses the use of fieldwork in developing feedback mechanisms whilst undertaking a policy-orientated survey of young people in Derry/Londonderry, arguing that the research process can offer ‘informants’ some control over the process of scholarship.

Kirk Simpson and Hastings Donnan look at Catholic-Protestant relationships at the edges of the state, along the border, and start to unravel the dynamics of populations living in a ‘frontier’ zone. They are particularly interested in how the unionist, Protestant community is influenced by living at the very edge of the Union. In doing so they are in some ways returning to the rural foundations of anthropology in Northern Ireland, exploring, as Rosemary Harris did in her ground-breaking *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster* (1972), how communities live in close proximity and cooperate in everyday activities.

These articles all reflect the tendency of anthropologists working in Northern Ireland to engage directly with the policy arena. Donnan and McFarlane, in two edited volumes in the 1980s and 1990s, have noted this process previously (1989; 1997). They attempted to identify why a strong regional tradition of policy work emanating from anthropologists existed. They suggested that the relatively small nature of the region might encourage a sense of commitment but also that there might be a greater number of job opportunities (1997: 4–5). This has certainly been true in the period since, when there has been significant European peace and reconciliation funding, which at least five of the anthropologists in this volume have utilised. They also identified the possibility that the ‘corridors of power’ in Northern Ireland, short as they have been of local democratically elected politician, might be more willing to look to academics for policy initiatives (1997: 5). Again, as Finlay points out in his article, there is some continued evidence for this.
In many ways Northern Ireland should not be seen as different from other societies. Nevertheless, sitting, as it does, at the edge of the Union, particular spaces are opened up, creating enormous challenges for policy makers but also possibilities for academic engagement.

Dominic Bryan is Director of the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University Belfast. His email is d.bryan@qub.ac.uk.

References


