Notes from the comments of Professor Paul J. Arthur:

Professor Paul Arthur began his comments by holding up a copy of the Good Friday Agreement - what he described as the bible and the document that he would speak in reference to throughout his comments. He explained that the agreement has three titles: the Good Friday Agreement, which can be used to stand for a Nationalist agenda; the Belfast Agreement, which can be used to represent a Unionist agenda; and The Agreement Reached in Multi-Party Negotiations, a neutral title with no implied agenda. He emphasized that implementation is always the most difficult after reaching an agreement and that Northern Ireland is currently in the phase of moving toward reconciliation. Professor Arthur illustrated that the Agreement does have pitfalls and while it can be about win-win, it can also be about lose-lose, as many people fear that they have too much to lose by the Agreement. Thus, the Agreement is asking those involved to head into the unknown and, in particular, to develop a new language for the post 1990 period that takes into account a proper understanding of time scale - the necessary amount of time that must be allowed for the goals of the Agreement to take shape. The Minister for Northern Ireland, John Reid, has said that both governments have broken free from the straitjackets of history and put primacy into the Agreement.

Professor Arthur argued that the Northern Ireland dialogue has, and is currently moving in, three stages. The first stage is the encounter stage which took 17 years in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The second stage is the eternal societal stage, where identities are examined and become painful and foremost and the damage that these identities may have caused another is assessed. At this stage the parties to the conflict are so wrapped up in their own identity that they are unable to see one’s own crimes perpetrated against the opposing party. For comfort, the disputants go back to their religion and history. The third stage is the reconciliation stage, where the focus is on values not on interests or identity. Professor Arthur stated that peace is not a value but an objective - a mechanism to create a free society based on the guiding principle of trust. Trust becomes a very important issue in answering the question of whether the general will is to continue the battle or if the will is to move toward issues of justice and peace.

One thing the Good Friday Agreement has allowed for is an extended absence of fighting. In describing this situation, Professor Arthur made repeated references to South Africa and its influence on the Republican movement. (Nelson Mandela is an icon in Northern Ireland.) For example, following the decommissioning of weapons in South Africa, the IRA began decommissioning its own weapons. This result is partly due to the fact that the IRA now recognizes reconciliation as replacing the culture of revenge, following Mandela’s example that peace and reconciliation are more important than justice. The IRA had traditionally believed in justice above all else, given that Irish history can be described as wounds caused by memory caused by wounds. This move towards reconciliation as their primary value is a significant shift in ideology. He emphasized the need for all parties to make a psychological leap forward - a process that takes a huge shift in mindset. Yet denouncing the wrongs and delivering the rights is a key part of the reconciliation movement.

In examining the history of the conflict, Professor Arthur argued that before the Agreement, the problem was that neither side could agree on the nature of the problem and therefore could not agree on a solution. In the first phase, prior to 1980, Britain felt that the conflict was purely a domestic
terrorism issue. From 1980 on, London recognized the need to internationalize the question. This recognition led to negotiations with the Irish Republic that resulted in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Accord that enshrined the principle that the conflict was not a Northern Ireland problem but a British-Irish problem that had to be viewed in its larger context. Stemming from this was the notion of international funding for Ireland and the idea that economic development could move the situation out of conflict. Britain accepted that the international community needed to be involved, specifically the United States and the European Union. Once this was done, economic development funding soon began finding its way into the six northern provinces.

The Anglo-Irish Accord (which was exclusive to the British and Irish governments) did not deal with the political extremes, but instead continued to rely on the erroneous conception that the terrorism involved in the conflict could be militarily defeated. Professor Arthur explained that the Republican movement’s pathway toward peace began in 1986 when they began to think outside the box and to shift from ideological dogma to practical actions. The reason was because the IRA believed the Anglo-Irish Accord represented the most serious counter-revolutionary challenge they had ever encountered, since for the first time the British and Irish governments were on the same side denouncing extra-judicial actions (i.e. terrorism).

While the Republicans had refused since 1918 to recognize the Irish parliament in Dublin, this entity was recognized in 1986. While Sinn Fein does not recognize the British government in Northern Ireland, its members now have offices in the British Parliament, an important step forward from Gerry Adams earlier cries of we will never sit there. All of these steps illustrate the movement toward reconciliation.

The IRA had come to realize that they were not simply a terrorist organization but had genuine popular support in the ghettos. Nevertheless, they horrified their own people in the 1987 Enniskillen bombing and their popular support suffered greatly. They realized the need to recapture popular appeal and so entered into a dialogue with the SDLP in 1998 and they so became less of a sect while at the same time leaving themselves open for self-doubt and criticism from their hard-line base. 1990 marked the start of secret negotiations with the British government culminating in the first cease-fire.

In the period since 1994 there were three core issues that arose to challenge the peace process. Firstly, an absence of consensus on local government. Secondly, a huge gulf between the two communities on a common definition of violence, coupled with an inability to recognize each side’s actions as causal for violent retribution from the other side. Thirdly, a distancing of the two communities from each other. From 1994 through 1998 there was a movement to address these issues.

In many ways, the Agreement raised more questions than answers. Professor Arthur illustrated a number of difficult areas in the Accord such as the absence of consensus on local political issues, the gulf that remains in the definition of violence on both sides, and the fact that communities are both socially and physically distant from each other. Yet one very important aspect of the document was that for once the people agreed to be accepted as Irish or British, or even both. This was a blow to ethno-nationalism - the idea that people can only have one identity - and allowed people to see that they can have multiple identities. As part of the negotiation process, the Irish Daal changed the Irish constitution to remove the irredentist clauses claiming the six provinces of the north and so recognized the inherently undemocratic nature of the previous Irish constitution for the first time.

Professor Arthur maintained that while the Accord is in place, the next question is how to move the situation forward. In 1998 there were two referenda of which 94% of the population approved.
The institutions were in place for change now it was time to alter people’s mindsets. One issue that is key to moving the process forward is the decommissioning of weapons by the IRA - what Professor Arthur calls the biggest hurdle remaining in the process. It is a *sine qua non* for the Unionist community which wants security and certainty, but does not believe in certainty until decommissioning. Initially, the IRA viewed the decommissioning of its weapons as capitulation, preferring to demonstrate the absence of violence that existed and calling for their weapons to rust in peace. Nevertheless, there has been movement towards decommissioning under the auspices of the Agreement-established International Commission on Decommissioning, chaired by John de Chastleign.

Professor Arthur described how Richard Haas, the current US Special Coordinator for Afghanistan, read Sinn Fein the riot act after September 11 and the discovery of three IRA operatives training FARC rebels in Colombia, and told them that there must be decommissioning. The Sinn Fein leadership apparently needed this strong encouragement from the Americans to persuade its rank and file to decommission. Professor Arthur believes that this is where the international community has a role to play that by punishing or awarding certain styles of leadership and behaviour, the international community can lead Northern Ireland to a resolution. Professor Arthur continued that he believes we will see a concerted effort at decommissioning within the next month because Sinn Fein will enter elections in the Republic where they currently only have one representative in a 166 member Parliament, but where they will likely increase their numbers. (He pointed out that in a proportional parliament, small parties can wield great influence.) Arthur emphasized the fact that members of Sinn Fein’s own leadership have spoken publicly in favor of decommissioning, framing the pain of decommissioning as something that had to be done to save the peace process.

Professor Arthur described these public claims as having turned history on its head and turned the IRA upside down. He offered another example of this by illustrating how the reconciliation concept is in the language of Republican leader Gerry Adams, who was in New York speaking about the need for consent rather than being in (London)Derry for the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. This points to a new way of thinking and perceiving, and most of all it illustrates the need for a new language. Professor Arthur argued that the parties are currently at the level of rhetoric - that part of internal dialogue where leaders must help their own communities to accept the changes. Again, he emphasized the importance of being aware of time-scales in resolving conflicts and understanding that this process can take time.

Arthur made the important point that demographics have a large role to play in the future shape of Northern Ireland. In the 2001 census it appeared that a majority of the population under 16 is Catholic. This means that within 30 years a Nationalist majority could vote Northern Ireland into the Republic. However, since the Agreement the Irish Republic accepts that the majoritarian principle is not the basis for reunification, and that the minority must consent to unification. (However, this liberal perspective is not accepted everywhere in the Nationalist community.)

Professor Arthur concluded his remarks by illustrating that while the institutions are in place in Northern Ireland, including the Executive, what is needed now is a change in mindset that will accept reconciliation and peace.