

‘THAT IS YOUR PLACE?’ UNIONIST IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND; WHERE ARE WE?

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**‘...that is your place,
going back as if something,
an heirloom, memory had
been lost of misplaced.**

- Gerald Dawe, ‘Exchange.’

This week, May 3rd 2021 marked the centenary of the creation of ‘Northern Ireland.’ For some, this is an occasion to be celebrated, for others, it is something in which they wish to play no part. Northern Ireland is a land divided, in which Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionists co-exist in a hard-won and relative peace. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 did away with the physical ‘hard border’ separating Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland, and gave individuals the right to assert their identity on their own terms, be it Irish or British. Northern Ireland, would remain in the UK, yet those citizens who so wished, could identify as Irish. The 2016 referendum in favour of Brexit has aggravated tensions in the land. The initial promise of no border in the Irish sea separating Northern Ireland from the UK given by Boris Johnson has proven to be a falsity, the border recognised by the Northern Irish Protocol. For Unionists this stands as a threat to their very identity as British, and the place of Northern Ireland as a member of the United Kingdom. The possibility of a united Ireland seems to be something with much greater gravitas than before, due to both the political situation and shifting demographics amongst the Northern Irish population.

Peace is a fragile thing here, and identity is set in stone, with neither side willing to compromise. As we edge further into this new post-Brexit landscape, in this paper I wish to explore what is the current state of Unionist identity in Northern Ireland at present, and in light of the newly imposed sea border, where to next? Northern Ireland has a complex past. To understand how we got to where we are now, I will first provide an overview as to the history of place, and the events that gave rise to the Peace Process and the freedom of choice of identity. I will explore these conflicting concepts of identity, and why they are clung to so ardently, before considering where we find ourselves post-Brexit, and what this means for Unionism.

MEANINGS AND DEFINITIONS

Some definitions may be helpful as a means of better understanding what I mean when I speak of ‘Nationalists,’ and ‘Unionists’ in the context of Northern Ireland.

First, the 6 counties that make up Northern Ireland, despite being on the island of Ireland, is not a part of the Republic of Ireland. It is a British territory, composing one entity in the United Kingdom.

Nationalism here refers to the Catholic population in general, and those individuals who identify as Irish. Nationalism in this restricted meaning refers to a political tradition that favours an independent, united Ireland achieved by non-violent means. The primary political parties voted for by Nationalists would be the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), with a more militant strand of nationalism embodied by Sinn Féin (SF).

Unionism refers to the Protestant population in general, and those who identify as British. These individuals support and wish to remain a part of the United Kingdom., and are opposed to the idea of a united Ireland. The primary political parties for Unionists are the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which is a more conservative branch of Unionism, and the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), which is again more conservative in its outlook.

Nationalism in Northern Ireland is more left leaning and liberal in its politics both economically and socially, supporting same sex marriage, and reproductive rights, whilst Unionism tends towards conservatism. Unionism is more conservative in its leanings, and is against same sex marriage, and reproductive rights. The DUP endorses creationism.

It should be noted however, that not all Catholics are Nationalists, and not all Protestants are Unionists.

The Northern Irish government, the Executive is a consociational state, that is that it is an example of power sharing within a democracy. Political scientists define a consociational state as one which has major internal divisions along ethnic, religious, or linguistic lines, with none of the divisions large enough to form a majority group, but which remains stable due to consultation among the elites of these groups. The goals of consociationalism are governmental stability, the survival of the power-sharing arrangements, the survival of democracy, and the avoidance of violence.¹ At present, it is led by Arlene Foster of the DUP as First Minister, and Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Féin as the deputy First Minister.

HISTORY OF NORTHERN IRELAND²

December 1920 saw the Partition of Ireland with The Government of Ireland Act. Under this act, two parliaments were introduced, one in Dublin to serve twenty-six counties and one in Belfast to serve six northern counties. The twenty-six counties were known as the Irish Free State and were given a measure of independence from the British government. The government of these counties was known as the Provisional Government. The six northern counties were to remain part of the United Kingdom but they would have their own parliament, the Executive, which would sit at Stormont. These six counties were chosen so as to maintain a pro-Union stronghold.

The Irish Free State Treaty of 1921 between Britain and Ireland, legalised Partition. Violence, especially in the six northern counties escalated as Catholics showed their opposition to Partition. 1922 gave rise to the Irish Civil War. In early 1922 British forces began to leave Ireland. Their stations were handed over to the Irish Volunteer, however, the Volunteers were split between those who supported Partition and those that did not. Those that did became known as Free State soldiers while those that did not were known as Irregulars. Tension between the two groups escalated into violence which lasted for just over a year and left hundreds dead including Michael Collins leader of the Free State soldiers. The violence was eventually put down by the Provisional Government and 1100 rebels were interned (imprisoned without trial). On 21st December 1948 the Republic of Ireland was created. The

¹ B. O'Leary, 'Debating Constitutional Politics: Normative and Explanatory Arguments,' in S. Noel (ed) *From Power Sharing to Democracy: Post Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies* (2005, Queen's Press) at 3-43.

² R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (1990, Penguin); S.J. Connolly, *Oxford Companion to Irish History* (2nd edn, 2011, OUP); U O'Connor, *Michael Collins and the Troubles* (1996, Norton); D. McKittrick and D McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles* (2002, Dee Ivan. R); T.P. Coogan, *The IRA* (2002, St Martin's).

Irish Free State was granted full independence from Britain under the terms of the Republic of Ireland Act. However, the six northern counties remained part of the United Kingdom.

With 1967 came the emergence Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), their aim being to act on behalf of the oppressed Catholic minority population. The Northern Ireland Government was dominated by the Unionist party and as a part of the United Kingdom anti-Catholic laws that had been passed in the nineteenth century were still in force (these included access to the welfare state and public housing; preventing Catholics from buying land; preventing Catholics from holding public positions, entering the legal profession, and voting or serving as members of parliament). The NICRA was largely based on the US Civil Rights Movement that fought for equality for black Americans and wanted to see the anti-Catholic measures abolished and equality for Catholics in Northern Ireland. The Civil Rights Protest began in 1969. The first Civil Rights protest march took place in March, with the second taking place in Derry in October despite it being banned by the Minister for Home Affairs, William Craig, who claimed that the movement was a front for the IRA. The Royal Ulster Constabulary were sent in to break up the march. They used excessive force, much of which was televised and broadcast worldwide. The tactics of the RUC left Catholics fearful and untrusting of them. The British government could no longer take a back seat and forced the Stormont to make reforms, however, the changes were minimal and in no way met the demands of the Civil Rights Movement.

Tensions continued to build between Catholics and Protestants. Catholic demands were no nearer being met and with the approach of the two main Unionist marches (the march of the Orangemen on July 12th and the march on August 12th to commemorate the siege of Derry in 1689 when apprentice boys closed the gates on King James) tension between the two communities was high. These marches resulted in the two day Battle of the Bogside. As the Apprentice Boys marched past Catholic Bogside there were clashes which forced the intervention of the RUC. However, the rioting escalated and the police were stoned and petrol-bombed. The NICRA called on Catholics to take the pressure off Catholics in Bogside by mounting demonstrations in Belfast. Consequently, there was rioting in Belfast as well and the RUC were unable to cope. The Northern Ireland government had no choice but to call for British troops to be sent in to put down the riots. The first British troops arrived on the 15th August. In the Bogside area of Derry barricades were put up and neither the RUC nor British troops were permitted access to the Catholic area. In order to avoid further bloodshed the British troops allowed the 'no go' areas to stand.

In 1969, the IRA split into two wings – the Marxist-oriented Official IRA and the more hard-line Provisionals, and in 1971 Internment introduced. The Civil Rights Movement continued to protest despite a ban being placed on all marches and the IRA continued to make attacks on British troops resulting in the death of a British soldier. In the face of increasing calls for internment for IRA members, it is introduced on 9th August 1971 and around 350 people were immediately arrested and interned. The following 48 hours saw violence and protests against internment that left 17 dead including 10 civilians. Protests against internment followed in 1971. The protests included violence, withholding of council rents, strikes and resignations by officials.

Bloody Sunday occurred in 1972. A march organised by the NICRA against Internment and the ban on marches took place in Derry. In order to ensure that the march was peaceful the IRA had promised to stay away. British soldiers had put up barricades to prevent the marchers entering the city centre square. A section of the marchers and some observers confronted soldiers manning the barricade. British paratroopers opened fire killing 14 and injuring 13 others. Direct Rule was subsequently imposed. In the aftermath of Bloody Sunday there was a rise in support for the Provisional IRA. In February the British Embassy in Dublin was burnt. It was clear that the British government had to do something to try to quieten the situation. As a result, in March the Northern Ireland government was

suspended – Northern Ireland was to be directly ruled from Westminster. One of the first actions by Westminster was to order the dismantling of the ‘no-go’ areas set up in 1969. The IRA responded by using increasing violence.

As a reaction to this violence, the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974 was implemented. With the British becoming increasingly active in Northern Ireland, the IRA launched a bombing campaign which targeted public areas both in Ireland and on the British mainland. Bombs exploded in Dublin, Monaghan, Guildford, Woolwich and Birmingham killing and injuring civilians. The government responded by introducing the Prevention of Terrorism Act which allowed suspects to be detained without charge for up to seven days.

In 1976 the British government had removed ‘special prisoner status’ for those imprisoned for political acts, and this provoked the Hunger Strikes of the 1980s. The prisoners had campaigned for ‘political prisoner status’ since 1976 by using both the ‘blanket protest’ refusing to wear prison clothes and donning a blanket instead and the ‘dirty protest’ where prisoners refused to clean their cells and smeared excrement on the walls. When these had failed prisoners began going on hunger strikes. Bobby Sands was the first hunger striker in 1981. He and nine others died as a result of the hunger strike. They were considered martyrs – around 100,000 people attended Bobby Sands’ funeral. Although no concessions were won from the British government, support for the Political wing of the Provisional IRA increased considerably.

This dark period of Northern Irish history became known as the Troubles. Many believed that this unrest could be ended with a compromise solution. If Catholics and Nationalists were better represented in government, it was argued, then support for the Provisional IRA would dwindle. A consociational or power-sharing government seemed the best hope. This would distribute executive power between Unionists and Nationalists, reducing discrimination, encouraging political partnership and boosting stability. There were three significant difficulties to overcome. The first was convincing everyone to accept power-sharing – a formidable task, given the extreme positions of some groups. The second difficulty was formulating a stable and functional system acceptable to all parties. The third was determining a role for the Republic of Ireland.

1985 saw the proposal and failure of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Leaders of Britain and Ireland met to discuss the situation. The resulting Anglo-Irish agreement gave Dublin some control over Northern Ireland affairs. Unionists were outraged and the agreement was never fully implemented.

In 1993, following talks between the British Prime Minister and the Irish leader, the Downing Street Declaration was issued. It stated that the people of Northern Ireland should be free to decide their own future and that representatives of various groups should meet to discuss a solution. Sinn Féin was offered a seat provided that IRA violence was ended. As a result, the IRA declared a cease fire in August 1994 and were followed a month later by a cease fire declaration from Loyalist groups.

Peace Talks began in 1996. Multi-party peace talks began chaired by US senator George Mitchell. Mitchell proposed that disarmament should begin but this led to a stalling of the talks and the IRA broke its cease fire and violence resumed. In 1997 the British government proposed a resumption of peace talks. Once again Sinn Féin were invited on condition that a six-week cease fire had been observed. In July 1997 the IRA announced the cease fire. After months of discussion a settlement is reached on Good Friday 1998, the Belfast Agreement (also referred to as the Good Friday Agreement) was brought into existence.

SUSTAINING DISTINCTIONS; A SEPARATION AS INHERITANCE

One of the mechanisms by which the Good Friday Agreement sought to achieve peace was through offering a choice of identity; 'the people of Northern Ireland have the right to call themselves either British or Irish, or both.' 'Both' perhaps given recognition in the concept of a 'Northern Irish' identity. However, the terms as they stand appear to be in direct contradiction to one another. The lines are hard drawn; you are either Irish or British. No-one from one community will identify as a member of the other; they view themselves as existing within two distinct cultural traditions predicated on the history and past of place. To choose an opposing identity would be to legitimise a tradition with which they do not perceive themselves as aligning. The Agreement however cemented the existence of Northern Ireland as a separate entity from Ireland, which provided Unionists with great reassurance of their place in the Union.

In NI, the Unionist majority believed as Protestants do, in the power of the text. Their claim to power was underwritten by the Ulster Covenant of 1912, Nationalist claims had a more oral basis, rooted in tradition rather than a textual history. Nationalists looked far back to a time when the lost land was there, or forwards to a Utopian world in which it would come back to them again. The Literary Revival of the 1920s asserted a uniquely Irish culture by looking back to an ancient Ireland of pre-colonial times. This served to influence and inform the political revolution – manned by many of the same artists of the cultural revival – that gave rise to an independent Ireland free of British rule. Culture preceded politics in scoping out a national 'Irish' identity.

The concept of an 'Irish' identity came about the Young Irelanders of the 1840s,³ and was given greater gravitas and definition with the Irish Revival of the early 20th century.⁴ The Revival sought to reclaim an identity that it was believed had been displaced and forgotten due to the English influence over Irish culture, society, and politics. But where to begin? 'The Irish race is at present is in a most anomalous position,' believed Hyde, 'imitating England, yet apparently hating it.'⁵ An English identity was somewhat imposed upon Irish citizens, for 'as far as authorities were concerned, England represented the ideal human norm.'⁶ English culture and English history became core elements of the national school curriculum, with tens of thousands of children reciting at the start of each school day

I thank the goodness and the grace

Which on my days have smiled;

And made me in these Christian days

A happy English child.⁷

³ 'The Rising of 1848,' Ireland, Ireland's History Magazine (Issue 3, Autumn 1998, Vol. 6).

⁴ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Vintage, 1996).

⁵ Douglas Hyde, 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,' lecture delivered before the Irish National Literary Society 1892 <http://www.gaeilge.org/deanglicising.html> (accessed 18.10.2017).

⁶ Declan Kiberd and P.J Mathews (eds) *Handbook of the Irish Revival* at 271.

⁷ J.A. Mangan, *Benefits Bestowed?: Education and British Imperialism* (Manchester University Press, 1988) at 85.

The English narrative built itself into the Irish psyche, with the Irish people ‘ceasing to be Irish without becoming English.’⁸ If the people are neither Irish nor English, then what are they? The Irish nation as far as concerned a national identity, was in a state of paralysis. But things began to stir.

Emancipation and the consequential growth of a Catholic middle class paved the political foundation. The end of the nineteenth century saw a sense of a new beginning in terms of sports, literature, and politics; things were happening that were culturally unique to an Irish people, and inherent within these happenings was a belief that Ireland could be remade and reshaped through culture. People were thinking about revolution in both political and cultural terms, for in order to assert Ireland as independent state and liberated people, there was a need to identify what it was that marked Ireland as a distinct and separate entity onto herself, to be done through cultivating an understanding as to what it was to be Irish.

There was a move towards a national self-development, for ‘we’ were ‘on the threshold of a new period.’⁹ Political institutions like the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Land League and Parnell’s Irish Parliamentary Party alongside new cultural institutions like the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League, the Irish dramatic movement, and the Revival, had provided institutional discourses that had the potential to develop and sustain the reimagining of the Irish nation.¹⁰ The Revival was premised upon this concept of reimagining the Irish nation. The identification of the movement as a cultural ‘revival,’ a ‘renaissance,’ suggests the return to and rejuvenation of some essential and inherent element of Irishness that for too long had laid dormant. It connotes ideas of renewal and rebirth, yet simultaneously, there is also an element of building and constructing an identity within such a context, for to ‘revive’ a culture, you have no option but to reinvent it if it hasn’t been around.

A colonised culture tries to assert what is least like the coloniser, reverting to a past before colonisation, a time when it had its own language, sports, and culture. The Revival would define the Irish by that which they were not; British. They wished to self-invent, to derive fully from themselves, which meant the return to an Ireland that existed prior to any British influence, aligning with Fanon’s theory that a colonised people ‘in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their own people... determine to renew contact with the oldest and most pre-colonial spring of life.’¹¹ Here, the claiming of an Irish identity becomes a bold assertion, ascertaining them as a people onto themselves, a people who will define themselves on their own terms, speaking on behalf of ‘all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation.’¹² This act of assertion simultaneously enables us to think of this type of constitutions of a people in what Jacobsohn terms an ‘unconventional way... an expression of defiance directed against an existing social order.’¹³ Thus ‘we the people’ becomes a proclamation, that ‘we’ are not you. The assertion operates also as an act of defiance. It advances a distinction between ‘us,’ and ‘them,’ bringing together an ‘anomalous’ people in an act of unification. It defines

⁸ Douglas Hyde, ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland,’ lecture delivered before the Irish National Literary Society 1892 < <http://www.gaeilge.org/deanglicising.html> > (accessed 18.10.2017).

⁹ J.M Synge translated by Michael Egan, ‘The Irish Intellectual Movement’/‘Le Mouvement Intellectuel Irlandais’ in *L’Européen*, 31 May 1902.

¹⁰ Roy F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (Penguin Books, 1990).

¹¹ Frantz Fanon translated by Constance Farrington, *The Wretched of the Earth* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1965) at 168.

¹² ‘Opening Statement of the Irish Literary Theatre,’ quoted in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (The Knickerbocker Press, 1913) at 9 < <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/gregory/theatre/theatre.html> > (accessed 18.10.2017).

¹³ Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn, *Constitutional Identity* (Harvard University Press, 2010) at 22.

the Irish people as a definite definitive, 'we *the* people.' The act of constituting the people writes them into the history and legacy of their country, rendering them substantial and concrete, not simply, Kramer writes, 'an empty abstraction.'¹⁴ It proclaims the existence of this particular people, their being, and their desire to be something more than the mere subjects of an alien force, free to 'be the sole mistress of her own destiny.'¹⁵ In this context, for the Irish identifying community to take on the mantle of a British Unionist identity would be seen as a form of submission and reversion from this forging of a liberated Irish identity.

Similarly, for the Unionist community, to identify as Irish would be disregard the very fact that the origin point of their identity is derived from the ties to and union with Britain had by Northern Ireland. And a Unionist identity likewise stands as a bold assertion and statement of defiance that Unionism is not Irishness, and asserts the claim to the land of Northern Ireland, sustaining and placing emphasis upon Northern Ireland's place within the UK. Unionism is thus a reaction to and in opposition of Nationalism.

The history and narrative of Northern Ireland is contested, subject to a duality of interpretation depending. For the Unionist community the creation of Northern was a great feat, something to be celebrated. For Nationalists it marks a loss. The two communities each have a version of events, which are passed down as inheritance with each generation. This serves to enhance the distinction between identities, and the separation between communities. This distinction perhaps gives a degree of protection to Unionism; it exists in isolation, and is untainted by any connotation with Irishness. As a dual narrative, and these two distinct identities are passed down, the dual narrative of past and place is sustained.

The playwright Brian Friel, in exploring this division and distinction caused and created by the existence and opposition of Nationalist and Unionist identity, sought to demonstrate the way in which 'we are the products of stories we tell ourselves.'¹⁶ Through the characters of whom he writes, Friel illustrates how we are the summation of stories and narratives that we have internalised as result of existing within the particular communities that we do. In 'Freedom of the City,'¹⁷ Friel's storyline carries with it connotations of Bloody Sunday, focusing on the tribunal into the deaths of three civil rights marchers who mistakenly found themselves in Derry's Guildhall. In it, one of the expert witnesses at the tribunal speaks of

A way of life which is common to... communities all over the Western world and which is transmitted from generation to generation... And once it comes into existence – this way of life, this culture – it is handed down... and thus its perpetuation is ensured... People with a culture are... locally orientated... [t]hey know only their own... their own local conditions, their own way of life... they share... [an] attitude to many of the values and institutions.¹⁸

Friel advances the idea that who we are, what we think, and the way in which we think is derived from a pre-existing discourse, that of the communities into which we are born, and with whom we interact. We are not born free from influence. Our reality of who we are and the thoughts that belong to us are shaped by a pre-existing 'way of life,' which we unquestioningly believe to be true and adopt as our

¹⁴ Larry Kramer, *The People Themselves* (OUP, 2004) AT 7.

¹⁵ James Connolly, 'The Irish Flag,' in the *Worker's Republic*, 8 April 1916.

¹⁶ F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post)Colonial Drama* (Syracuse University Press 1999) 13.

¹⁷ Brian Friel, 'Freedom of the City,' in *Brian Friel: Plays One* (Faber and Faber 1996).

¹⁸ *Ibid* at 110-111.

own. We exist in our communities that are both 'local' and familiar. As a community, 'they know only their own.' And so, we are born into 'them' and that which is theirs becomes ours as we know nothing else. The pre-existing way of life in Northern Ireland is a relative peace, but it is a peace without integration between communities. Nationalists keeping to their own, and Unionists likewise. This separation and lack of integration is made manifest in the peace walls that run through the cities of Belfast and Derry, barriers that run through the area separating Unionist and Nationalist communities. Initially built to be a temporary measure following sectarian riots in 1969, they remain until this day. There are separate schools for each community, separate newspapers, and separate sports.

The narratives and discourse upon which our communities are based are founded in language, and in this way, 'our own identity, our own sense of self is ultimately constituted by language.'¹⁹ In his writing, Friel draws on Heidegger's theory²⁰ that it is not we who speak language, but language that speaks us,²¹ consequently, one's identity as an individual is a construct by way of existing within one's community, and so, 'identity...is structured as a fiction, as a story or a number of stories about who we are.'²² We identify groups of individuals by the beliefs and narratives that are shared and 'common' to them, looking to discern that which they are, from where they come, and what their purpose is. Friel advances Heidegger's notion of language as speaking us in that our existence, our reality is founded in language, culminating in the idea that our 'our realities are constructed out of discourses and narratives we have internalised,' that such a reality, such an existence is 'construed within the frameworks of these discourses and narratives.'²³ We internalise a particular narrative as we are immersed in a particular way of life, that of the community we inhabit. In existing within the confines of such a community, we acquire the way of thinking that constitutes that community, and the idiom by which it expresses its beliefs. In internalising this way of thinking and this language, it becomes harder to recognise and thus seek to possibly move beyond the boundaries, or 'frameworks', that delineate that community's existence. We subscribe to a specific way of life to comply with the standards set by the community of what is acceptable. In essence, the realms of a community within we exist constitute, in the language of legal and literary theorist Stanley Fish, an 'interpretive community.'²⁴ Our perception of events, of who we are, of what we are is subject to these very particular means of interpretation into which we have been born. Bauer writes that the character of the individual is never simply the totality of hereditary properties, rather, he posits it is 'always determined also by the culture that is transmitted and works on him: by the education he enjoys... the customs by which he lives, the ideas of what is proper and improper... that are handed down to him, by the religion... and politics that have their effect on him.' He concludes that the assertion and implementation of any such culture is primarily through the means of sustained communication and language.²⁵ For Unionism to remain strong, it must locate itself within a Northern Ireland that remains a part of the United Kingdom, and sustain these separation that are already in place. However, in light of Brexit and the imposition of a sea border between the island of Ireland and the UK, Unionism is increasingly seen as a weakening entity under threat.

¹⁹ F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post)Colonial Drama* (Syracuse University Press 1999) at 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Martin Heidegger translated by Albert Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics 2001).

²² F.C. McGrath, *Brian Friel's (Post)Colonial Drama* (Syracuse University Press 1999) at 13.

²³ *Ibid* 14.

²⁴ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (HUP, 1980).

²⁵ Otto Bauer, 'The Nation,' in Gopal Balakrishnan, *Mapping the Nation* (Verso, 2012) at 53.

AT PRESENT

The UK by referendum in June 2016, voted to leave the European Union. On the cusp of the province's centenary this month, Arlene Foster announced her resignation as Northern Irish first minister on April 28 after members of the DUP urged even stronger opposition to the customs border in the Irish Sea. It's the latest sign of the fear and anger that Boris Johnson's Brexit deal has provoked among unionists. The map of the UK has essentially been changed, with a customs border separating the province from Great Britain and reawakening old unionist fears of separation from the mainland.

The Northern Ireland Protocol in the Brexit withdrawal deal replaced the prospect of a problematic frontier between the UK and the Republic of Ireland with the reality of a problematic frontier between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The protocol keeps Northern Ireland aligned with many EU laws while Great Britain can diverge from them, necessitating checks on goods flowing between the two parts of the UK. When Prime Minister Boris Johnson finally struck an agreement with the EU in October 2019, Brexiteers – and many others suffering from Brexit fatigue – greeted the divorce deal with euphoric relief after three years of interminable wrangling over the Northern Irish border under his predecessor, Theresa May. But the DUP expressed outrage about the customs frontier in the Irish Sea. “It isn't Brexit for the whole of the United Kingdom,” the party's deputy leader Nigel Dodds told journalists at the time.²⁶ Jonathan Powell, ex-PM Tony Blair's chief negotiator for the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, was one of the few voices in the British establishment to warn that Johnson's deal posed a serious threat to Northern Irish unionists' interests. “The hard border in the Irish Sea is a real problem for them,” Powell wrote in the Irish Times soon after Johnson reached the deal. “It will grow wider over time as the UK diverges in terms of regulation and as we introduce new tariffs,” Powell continued. “And that widening border will threaten their British identity.”²⁷

The sea border is seen as a pushing Unionists away from the United Kingdom, and towards a United Ireland. A recent poll carried out on both sides of the border presented the result whereby most respondents said that they thought Northern Ireland would still be part of the UK in 10 years time, but not in 25 years.²⁸ As Northern Ireland begins its centenary year, the ideology on which it was founded is waning. Unionism has lost its Stormont majority, there's a border in the Irish Sea and the constitutional conversation is louder than ever. Outside forces are also undermining it – increased secularisation and liberalisation in the pro-EU south, coupled with a growth in both English and Scottish nationalism. Unionists in Northern Ireland feel increasingly isolated, while the social policies adopted by the big unionist parties appear anachronistic and out of step with Britain (Unionist parties in NI are socially conservative, voting against the legalisation of reproductive rights and same sex marriage). Professor Jon Tonge of the University of Liverpool states that it wasn't so long ago that the DUP enjoyed its “best election result ever” in 2017, giving the party the balance of power at Westminster. That, however, may have been a high water mark. The demographics are against

²⁶ ‘Nigel Dodds: We'll Vote Against Boris Deal, this isn't Brexit for the whole UK,’ The Newsletter, October 19th 2019 <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/politics/nigel-dodds-well-vote-against-boris-deal-isnt-brexiteer-whole-uk-930636> (accessed 01.05.2021).

²⁷ Jonathan Powell, ‘DUP Justifiably Aggrieved Over Brexit Deal,’ The Irish Times October 19th 2019 < <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/jonathan-powell-dup-justifiably-aggrieved-over-brexiteer-deal-1.4055358>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

²⁸ ‘NI 100: Majority believes NI will leave UK within 25 years’ BBC News, April 20th 2021 < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56777985>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

unionism and these days fewer and fewer people are opting for the label unionist,” he says.²⁹ “At the time of the Good Friday Agreement around 40 per cent of people in Northern Ireland described themselves as unionist, whereas the corresponding figure today is closer to 28 per cent.” As such, Northern Ireland’s centenary is taking place at a time when those celebrating Northern Ireland’s milestone feel its continued existence and their own identity is under threat, caught as they are between British indifference, a perfidious prime minister and the increasingly loud cries of those advocating for a united Ireland. “My fear is that the status quo will not remain that way, and that the agitation towards a united Ireland and the push for it won’t stop,” says Valerie Quinn, the chair of the Ulster Bands Forum. “In terms of Northern Ireland I’m very positive, but in terms of there not being a Northern Ireland, that scares me.” Playwright Jonathan Burgess says: “Of course we feel our identity is under threat because we’re always questioned about it, always asked about a united Ireland. It’s constant, constant, constant.” All the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community want is “for things to stay the same”, says Quinn.³⁰ Jim Allister, the leader of the Traditional Unionist Voice said in an interview with Channel 4 News on March 15th 2021 that “either we kill the protocol or it kills the Union... it’s about saving the Union.” The implication here is that the Union needs saving in relation to the place of Northern Ireland. And if the Union needs saving, then the perception is that Unionism is under threat.

For Unionists, the nation that must survive is Northern Ireland. Even the language used to identify and assert the place is subject to division. Nationalists often refer to it as ‘the North’ as in the North of Ireland, which locates it within Ireland and ties it to aspirations of reunification, whereas Unionists use the moniker Northern Ireland, recognising the creation of the State as arising from historical division, and cementing the status of place of the territory within the United Kingdom, thus also reaffirming their identity as Unionists. Northern Ireland must remain for the Unionist identity to remain intact.

Northern Irish may be acceptable as an identity, but only in so far in that as a name, it legitimises the Unionist enterprise that gave rise to and sustains Northern Ireland, and seeks to see it endure as a part of the UK. The concept of a Northern Irish identity was conceived as an inclusive identity that it was believed would attract both Nationalists and Unionists, however this hoped for openness to and inclusiveness of identity was not realised in the way it was hoped for. In fact, Northern Irish as an identity is considered to be more closely associated with Britishness and Unionism (and thus Protestants) than Irishness (and Catholics) and that the individual who identifies as Northern Irish is most likely to be Protestant.³¹ To that end, yes, a Northern Irish identity would be acceptable to Unionists, but only due to the fact that it is essentially synonymous with Unionism.

WHERE TO NOW?

One of the key figures in the Good Friday Agreement, John Hume, the Catholic leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in working to

²⁹ Professor Jon Tonge appearing on BBC 1 Northern Ireland, The View, January 17th 2021.

³⁰ BBC Radio Ulster May 2nd 2021.

³¹ John Garry and Kevin McNicholl, ‘Understanding the Northern Irish Identity,’ Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2014-2015, Northern Assembly <
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/knowledge_exchange/briefing_papers/series4/northern_ireland_identity_garry_mcnicholl_policy_document.pdf> (accessed 03.05.2021).

find a peaceful solution in Northern Ireland,³² was known to recount a tale whereby his father bid him against ardent identity politics. Flags are a common feature in Northern Ireland; the Union Jack demarcates Unionist areas, and the Irish flag, Nationalist areas. Hume recalled walking through these flag lined streets as a boy with his father during an election period, ‘and young people getting all excited. And my father was standing watching this with me and... he says “Don’t you get involved in that stuff, son”. I say “Why not, dad?”. And he says “You can’t eat a flag”.’³³ Rather, what he was saying is that real politics is about the living standards, about social and economic development. It’s not about waving flags at one another. However, emotional attachments to flags and other symbols sustain social groups. The ‘symbolic construction of communities’ plays a key role in politics, marketing and society. You could equally argue: you can’t build a nation on a bread roll. For a nation to sustain itself, it must continuously assert and reassert itself, and that is what Unionism seeks to do. It is a mechanism by which Northern Ireland is reasserted.

It is the possibility of a United Ireland that is viewed as a threat to Unionism, and the British identity of Unionists, and it is an idea that seems a more realistic possibility now than ever before. The Dáil, the government of the Republic of Ireland has established a Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) - notable in that it is located within a domestic unit, as opposed to the department of foreign affairs – to assess and analyse the possibility of a United Ireland at some stage in the future. This places the conversation of reunification into mainstream political debate;³⁴ it is no longer a hypothetical conversation, rather, it is a conversation that carries with it greater gravitas.

The pinnacle of Unionist identity lies in Northern Ireland place in the Union. For Northern Ireland to leave the UK and the island of Ireland to be reunited would be an attack on the very essence of Unionism, an offence to Unionists sense of selves. Channel 4 News on May 3rd 2021 interviewed teenagers from Unionist backgrounds born after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. They spoke of their fears should the Union fail, and reunification succeed;

“They’ll take over.”

“Who’s they?”

“Catholics.”

“If that happens, I’ll move away. My identity is under threat. They want to take everything from us.”

There is a sense that they feel that their identity is under siege. In relation to the recent riots in loyalist communities across Northern Ireland as a reaction to the Irish sea border which were carried out primarily by teenagers,³⁵ there was, as one of the Channel 4 interviewees put it, a sense amongst them that they were “fighting for our future.” Further, these young people gained media attention from the fights where they were not gaining attention or attentive ears from Unionist politicians. This attention so shows them that fighting works, and that it has some sort of impact.

³² John Hume, Nobel Peace Prize <
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1998/hume/facts/>> (accessed 21.4.2021).

³³ Staff Reporter, ‘And What John Said’ Belfast Telegraph August 4 2020 <
<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/and-what-john-hume-said-memorable-quotes-from-a-quotable-politician-39420913.htm>> (accessed 21.4.2021).

³⁴ Pat Leahy, ‘Shared Island: United Ireland Conversation Edges into Mainstream Political Debate,’ in The Irish Times, September 5th 2020 <
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/shared-island-united-ireland-question-edges-into-mainstream-political-debate-1.4345768>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

³⁵ Michael Hirst, ‘NI Riots: What is behind the Violence in Northern Ireland?’ BBC News, April 14th 2021 <
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56664378>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

Should a united Ireland come to pass, Northern Ireland could continue to exist, however, within the context of Ireland as opposed to within the UK. The identity provision in the Good Friday agreement allowing for freedom of choice of identity as either British or Irish or both would continue in existence, extending the same identity liberties to Unionist citizens in Northern Ireland, as Nationalists are currently able to benefit from and claim Irish citizenship today within the UK. Former leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster in an interview with RTE News on March 28th 2021 has said however that “as someone who is British, I want to remain within the UK. I cannot be British within Ireland. It is much more fundamental than that. (Another alternative is that Northern Ireland becomes a distinct entity from both the UK and Ireland, a kind of quasi-independent state, however from an economic perspective this would likely be unsustainable.)

It is this fundamental of Unionist identity – or any identity for that matter – that so poses a problem. Identity is an inherent and innate thing that does not necessarily respond to reason or logic. Identity is a feeling, a belief, that may be certain, or more mutable, and in that respect it is fragile. But a certain and steadfast identity is required to ensure the longevity of unionism in Northern Ireland, even if in the face of a United Ireland. Identity is here and now, not elsewhere at another time, and in this respect Unionism must keep an eye to the future rather than being fixated on claims of the past, for identity, even Unionists identity is something with the capacity to change and adapt. Indeed, many young Unionists struggle to align their progressive views³⁶ – which are more in line with Nationalist politics in the North and Republic of Ireland – with their Unionism. Unionisms in this sense is fractured, there is a unionism in favour of retaining ties with the UK with which they are in favour, however, they cannot make sense of the sectarian divisions and conservative social values that are advanced with Unionism. As a consequence, whilst young people may still be identifying as Unionist, they are less likely to actually vote for Unionists representatives due to the fact that they don't agree with Unionist social values.³⁷ There is a disjunction here. Further, Unionism is not serving its communities in ways that aid and propel those communities towards prosperity, with Unionist politicians more fixated on ideas and threats to identity that socio-economic issues; unemployment is highest in Northern Ireland in Unionists communities.³⁸ Where once sectarian violence and fear of attack was the main concern, it has now moved down the list with drug and alcohol problems, family conflict, lack of employment and educational qualifications and violence within single identity communities taking precedence.³⁹ In this regard, Unionism is out of touch with its demographic. It must reassess and regroup perhaps if it is to gain ground amongst younger demographics. For to survive, it is younger generation on whom it is depending.

Following Arlene Foster's resignation as head of the DUP and First Minister of Northern Ireland (and most prominent Unionist in Northern Irish politics), Unionism must consider where it wishes to go. Arlene Foster was not seen to be hardline enough so as to guarantee the survival of the Northern Ireland within the Union, and indeed Unionism as it currently exists due to her handling of the Irish sea border. The DUP with Edwin Poots and Jeffrey Donaldson as possible contenders for leadership⁴⁰

³⁶ Kylie Noble, 'Northern Ireland's Politics is Stuck in the Past – but Young People Want Change,' in The Guardian, August 7th 2017.

³⁷ Jordan Moore, 'DUP and UUP Leave Many Young People Feeling Embarrassed,' Belfast Telegraph, December 1st 2020 < <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/comment/dup-and-uup-leave-many-young-unionists-feeling-embarrassed-39809569.html>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

³⁸ Neil Rowland, Duncan McVicar, and Ian Shuttleworth, 'The Evolution of Catholic-Protestant Labour Market Inequality in Northern Ireland 1983 -2014,' Discussion Paper Series June 2018, Institute of Labour Economics.

³⁹ Terry Wright, 'Is Unionism Allowing Irish Nationalism to Own the Future of Northern Ireland?' < <https://eamonnmallie.com/2020/08/is-unionism-allowing-irish-nationalism-to-own-the-future-of-northern-ireland-by-terry-wright/>> (accessed 01.05.2021).

⁴⁰ BBC News, 'DUP: Sir Jeffrey Donaldson Enters Leadership Contest,' May 3rd 2021 < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56967059>> (accessed 03.05.2021).

looks to be veering towards a stricter conservatism, harking back to its hardline, obstructionists, creationist roots. This could be a reactionary measure born out of a concern that Unionists culture and wishes will not be respected in the absence of a more hardline approach. However, there is the risk that this could simply serve to further alienate younger voters. If Unionism doesn't connect with young people, or work towards a more socially progressive unionism engaging with unionists on the left, it may see to its own demise whereby constitutional change may ultimately be the only way to bring about social change in Northern Ireland.

Identity to that end is something that is must look to the future and be aware of the need for adaption in order to survive and endure, for identity is a series of leaving, of departures from origins which were themselves only points of transit, provisional locations of the subject. In this sense, Unionism is perhaps stuck in a past which bears little reality to the current present. Derrida writes of the barbarism of a name, regretting its vulgar attempts to label a self or thing which is in perpetual flux.⁴¹ Indeed, Unionism as it exists today is not exactly as it was when it first came into existence in the context of Northern Ireland. Perhaps 'Unionism' is too stringent a name, too strict and outdated a catch all to impose on future generations which may seek something more liberal and progressive premised upon community action and organization, as was seen by community activists who set out to calm the recent riots. Can unionism be conceived as something else whilst maintaining a distinctly unionist character? Perhaps it is so possible to be a Unionist by any other name; supporting the Union, but in a softer form, be that by favouring more progressive policies, or indeed, recognising the existence of Northern Ireland within a United Ireland. Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artists* explores the limitations of an identity as an entity imposed upon a people; 'everything had a name, but although every name was nothing without the thing named, the thing cared nothing for its name, had no need of a name, and was itself only.'⁴² Maybe by this, in loosening our understanding of how 'unionism' is interpreted, there might be greater freedom to reimagine the scope of what unionism can do for its people. However, on the other hand, Unionism in this context still loses out, as what is understood by Unionism is the tight upholding of conservative values, and the adamance and insistence of Unionists of their place in Northern Ireland, and the UK. To disregard that, is to ignore the very fundamentals of Unionism, and so leaves it with little ground on which to stand in opposition to nationalism.

THE STONY STABILITY OF IDENTITY?

The stony stability of identity as the word is commonly understood in Irish politics and cultural discussion is founded in paradox. Whilst the word ostensibly refers to the sheer individuality of experience, its unrepeatable particularity in practice is that it is employed almost always to emphasize the common nature of experiences and to provide those experiences with a significance and meaning already mapped out in cultural terms. In NI however, the 'common' nature of things is deeply conflicted and divided. The central paradox of identities is thus that identities seem to be the cause of the problem and yet the problem continues to be discussed as one resolvable through identity. Unionism is a self-absorbed entity, and to an extent it is justified on being as such, if its aim is survival. But survival of what? If it is simply the Union, the it may lose the people on whom it depends as a life source. It needs to reassess its composite and reconsider who it is, where it is, and where it is going. It needs to refocus on people and a politics of empathy and progress, but can a Unionism re-centred on these entities legitimately call itself unionism in relation to the past of unionism as a political entity? That remains to be seen.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida in Thomas Dutoit (ed) trans. By David Wood, John P. Leavey, and Ian McLeod, *On The Name* (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, 1995).

⁴² James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* (Wordsworth Classics, 1992).

