Northern Ireland: a reminder from the present

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Social and cultural shifts on the island of Ireland are held to have diluted the authority of nationalisms that were tied to unidimensional and archaic notions of Irishness and Britishness.¹ It is contended that there is an ongoing and positive transition towards new modes and definitions of cultural belonging that in themselves reject the logic and validity of ethno-centrism. The Europeanisation of political and financial power, the influx of foreign capital, political morphology in Northern Ireland and the growth in consumption have all been identified as sociopolitical forces that have advanced more heterogeneous senses of identity and belonging.

The 'death' of an Ireland tied to the narratives of idyllic rurality, Gaelic custom, unionist triumphalism and devotion to the champions of ideological confrontation is interpreted as being paralleled by the customisation of new discourses of progress and postmodernity. Postnationalist readings maintain that identities in Ireland have and will continue to become less nation centred and more contingent upon choice, place, sexuality and other individually defined imaginings of self-value. This argument asserts that as the 'Irish' and 'British-Irish' become more 'cosmopolitan', they will ditch the rhetorical narratives of Irish- and British-based ethnicity. Such optimistic accounts aim to distil the contemporary from a 'redundant' past.

Dominant bourgeois readings retain the argument that the complex sociohistorical forces that shaped contemporary Ireland, such as the link between Catholicism and Irish nationalism, have been left behind in the rush towards more dispassionate and benign cultural reasonings. Ireland as a place is thus held to have been liberated from the bondage of nationalism and ethnicity. This view emphasises the idea that such a transition is based upon a shift from 'primitive' to modern conceptions of identity. What we are offered is an essentially ahistorical account which aims to hide the negative nature of present realities under the quilt of historical revision. A simplistic and binary argument seeks to

suggest that the past was so appalling that the future must obviously be bright.

Social mobility and the growth in consumption may have partly undermined both the vocalisation and visibility of state-sponsored discourses of Irishness and unionism/Britishness. However, the debility of 'official' Irishness and the growth in self-selected identities in the Republic of Ireland do not mean that salient tensions between Irishness and Britishness have evaporated or will evaporate. There is, despite the reverie of postnationalist interpretation, the potential for ethnocentric tension to re-emerge.

This chapter aims to establish how the ideological divisions between Irishness and Britishness continue to be reproduced, despite the supposed evaporation of such discursive constructions. In pinpointing the divisions that remain and those that may reappear, this chapter argues that the capacity exists for sectarian consciousness to spread throughout the Irish body politic. The Irish 'problem' remains one of territory, given the existence of a border that acts as a social, constitutional, political and cultural divide. However, the northern problem may become a southern reality. A fundamental dilemma facing the Republic of Ireland is that the removal of the border – an abiding aspiration for most people in the twenty-six counties – holds the danger of unleashing cultural and political antagonisms not seen since partition. Unification would ultimately mean that Northern Ireland would no longer remain a 'place apart'. In becoming a place 'within', the north of Ireland could bring with it the multiple afflictions of ideological division and territorial disputation.

Postnationalist interpretation – northern style

In recent years, political change in Northern Ireland has been heralded as the beginning of the end of sectarian asperity. The creation of a power-sharing executive and the endorsement of a pluralist accord has been upheld as an 'exemplary constitutional design for an ethnationally divided territory'.²

There have, of course, been positive political developments. David Trimble, the Ulster Unionist leader, has publicly accepted that 'it is legitimate for nationalists to pursue their political objectives of a united Ireland'. Trimble has also stated that his party endorsed 'the principles of inclusivity, equality and mutual respect'.³ Sinn Féin have also worked hard to create some form of political change by taking seats in a Northern Ireland Assembly, which is located in Stormont, one of the most obvious icons of past unionist authority. Sinn Féin, in dropping its insistence that the British state must withdraw from Northern Ireland prior to the beginning of a negotiated settlement, indicated that it was prepared to adopt

a different political course than hitherto. These shifts in discourse and direction would suggest that devolution in Northern Ireland and the formation of a power-sharing executive will help usher in a more inclusive political culture that will dilute ethnonationalist forces.⁴

The aim of the Belfast Agreement (BA) is to draw together atavistic political groups in order to promote a consociational accord, which would endorse Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom but at the same time uphold minority rights and cultural demands.⁵ It is evident, however, that the return of a devolved administration has not resolved the long-term political future of Northern Ireland. Devolution is the first step along a path that leads ultimately to a range of possible constitutional arrangements.⁶

Commentators such as McGarry and O'Leary are correct in their analysis that the BA was intended to be a binational compromise dedicated to challenging the reproduction of sectarianism by conjoining disparate political ideologies.⁷ Positive readings of the BA have highlighted how the negotiation of Northern Ireland's constitutional future was based upon the endorsement of both Irish national self-determination and the British constitutional convention. The political maturity of the BA is also saluted because it makes clear that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland can be altered only if the majority of people in Ireland, north and south, wish to effect such a change. This provides a sense that Northern Ireland is maintained by majoritarianism as opposed to 'colonial' administration.

The 'wisdom' of political change, it is argued, is also underlined by the fact that the Irish Republic now recognises Northern Ireland as a legitimate political and constitutional entity.⁸ The BA has thus aimed to interweave symbolic recognitions of Irishness and Britishness. The replacement of the claim to Northern Ireland contained in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Republic's constitution with a more benign aspiration to unification is understood as a positive acceptance of the need for political renegotiation and understanding. The hosting of dual referenda clearly recognised and permitted a theoretical form of joint sovereignty, a North-South ministerial council and limited forms of cross-border cooperation. The compromises made by the Irish state were also reflected in the concerns of London to stress that the BA is not about maintaining the 'British' constitutional system. Compromise, it is argued, is based upon the creation of a new and renewable constitutional settlement.⁹ In reality, however, the ability of the BA to dilute the rationale of ethno-sectarianism is over-emphasised.¹⁰

In economic and cultural terms, the endorsement of equalisation, as outlined in the BA, is represented as being capable of diluting the logic for ethnically defined labour markets and claims of cultural disaffection. In terms of 'conflict resolution', the aim of the BA is to democratise a

society in which discord over sovereignty has undermined the appearance of cross-community compromise. Furthermore, the pursuit of seemingly incompatible objectives such as the attenuation of British sovereignty – via the involvement of the Irish state in Northern Ireland's affairs – and safeguarding the union – via the principle of consent – bears witness to a constitutional stratagem aimed at encouraging issues of sovereignty to become gradually more ambiguous.

The BA is thus regarded as a mature political settlement which contains the capacity to delegitimise history and wider structures of territorial disputation. The argument is made that the BA can provide the political normality needed to create a northern version of the 'Celtic Tiger'. It is, thus, understood that the type of economic and social forces which aided the decline of ethnocentric imagining in the Republic of Ireland can be duplicated north of the border. Within this postnationalist interpretation lies the belief that rising economic tides can and will sink sectarian boats. Growth in consumption and personal prosperity is held to have the power and capacity to dilute the rationale of ethnic belonging. An argument is advanced that suggests that growing incomes and self-interest can divorce people from political dogma and their need to source identities through ideological confrontation. Within the postnationalist imagination is the belief that states can fashion democracies that are both inclusive and capable of moving beyond fear and prejudice.¹¹

John McGarry¹² indicates what is probably the most desired outcome of political consensus building when he suggests that the BA will 'bring out the benign characteristics of rival identities and [will] marginalize chauvinists more effectively'. If anything, such a positive prognosis fails to square with the reality that the BA has, in fact, nurtured the conditions that have enabled the ethnic chauvinists to thrive.

In a broader sense, the BA is, in fact, part of a programme of promoting a postnationalist interpretation of places of identity on the island of Ireland.¹³ The Irish and British states are convinced that the genius of 'conflict resolution' lies in the ability of both states to create institutions that reconcile order with personal, spatial and communal liberties. On the down side, the recognition of mutual consent, cross-border cooperation and the totemic institutionalisation of communal rights is problematic for certain groups whose political culture is tied to an unwavering obligation to an ethnically defined formation of territorial sovereignty.

A flawed process

One of the central problems with the BA is that it is concerned more with conflict management than with conflict resolution. This in itself provides the very political vacuum within which sectarian asperity can

and does thrive. The BA institutionalised sectarianism. The facts that members of the Northern Ireland Assembly must designate themselves as nationalist, unionist or other and that all decisions taken must have majority support from both the nationalist and unionist blocs means that the capacity of alternative political interpretations is hindered. All decisions are effectively based upon ethnocentric majorities. In a climate of perpetual controversy, as demonstrated by the successive standoffs at Drumcree and the loyalist blockade of the Holy Cross girls' school, there is no place within the new administrative order within which an accommodationist middle ground can develop. It is not surprising, given the existence of a political system which undermines the power of appeals to cross-community sentiment, that parties such as the Women's Coalition and Alliance have seen their fortunes slump in recent elections.

Devolution and the delivery of the BA have not aided the development of a centrist political culture but rather have fortified the power of those committed to the strongest and most vociferous notions of cultural identity and political victory. If anything, the middle ground has been diminished further in a period of political transformation which was intended to facilitate its growth. This would suggest that political change is based around ethnosectarian power brokerage as opposed to meaningful cross-community dialogue and commitment.

If anything, the Northern Ireland Assembly has provided an arena within which ideological confrontation can be played out via the most public of media. A central problem in the political life of the region is that the strength of the communal blocs is now fairly similar. This, combined with a growing nationalist/republican electorate and the debacles over decommissioning, rioting and policing, provides the context in which the quest for accommodation can be overwhelmed by the desire for victory and revenge.

In a sense, the BA seeks to maintain a kind of political illusion. The deal struck at Stormont strives to make the border seem more fixed for unionists – through the endorsement of the principle of consent – and more permeable for nationalists – through the endorsement of an 'Irish dimension' in Northern Irish affairs. There is, nevertheless, a crucial problem in the idea of creeping porosity of 'the border', since it imagines a shared loss of memory regarding the significance of a cultural and political construct which has and continues to be the foundation of conflict. In reality, the fact that the consent needed for a united Ireland is slowly emerging due to demographic shifts, in Northern Ireland, means that unionism is further placed on the defensive while republicanism moves onward and upward.

For most unionists, it matters not one jot that the Republic of Ireland has come so far from the conservative and exclusive society associated with the De Valera era. The decline in the authority of the Catholic

Church and the move away from what are conventionally termed 'traditional' social mores among the wider population do not dilute the belief system which upholds the 'values' of Britishness. It is not unusual to hear politically conservative unionists using similar radical denunciations of the Celtic Tiger that would be common among the left in the Republic of Ireland. Unionists passionately believe that they would be politically invisible within a united Ireland. For many unionists, the argument remains that they cannot trust the ideological 'other' to treat them fairly. The border is no longer a metaphor for unionist integrity but is seen as a blanket that protects them from cultural and political dissipation. The recent growth in Sinn Féin's political base in the Republic 'proves' to unionists that their most obvious opponents are everywhere. The problem is that such fears and hostilities cannot be removed by a postnationalist interpretation that the Republic has somehow changed.

Unionists constantly seek the body of Irish nationalism within the Republic of Ireland. The failure of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) to allow soccer to be played at Croke Park,¹⁴ the remaining sectarian nature of the Irish constitution and the 'history' of decline among southern Protestants aids the belief that the Republic of Ireland remains, in spite of the ways in which it has changed, a place within which unionists do not feel welcome. Unionist resistance to a united Ireland is partly sectarian but is increasingly based upon a self-understanding of past, present and future victimhood.

The creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly also sought to persuade those who favour the unification of Ireland to be less impetuous in their demands for radical political change. The Social Democratic and Labour Party, which aims to play the postnationalist card in Northern Irish politics, has seen its fortunes degenerate as the more vociferous nationalist politics of Sinn Féin emerge as the dominant voice for Irish unity. Given the extent to which its mandate has grown, it would be naive to expect other than that Sinn Féin will push strongly for the dissolution of Northern Ireland.

It is evident that the BA endeavours to create the chimera whereby 'each side' will realise some of its critical goals and political objectives without being seen to 'lose face'. This attempt to foster some kind of political equilibrium has been undermined, however, by the growth in support for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin. In the eyes of the DUP, the Ulster Unionists are party to a 'process of surrender and duplicity'. For Sinn Féin, the 'refusal' of unionists to treat them 'equally' simply strengthens the argument that unionism can be reformed only when the British state removes itself from Ireland. In such a politically unstable process, the capacity to eliminate the causes of conflict is underwhelmed by ethnocentric power and its legitimisation by the BA.

It was not unexpected that the growing size and political influence of Northern Ireland's nationalist community have continued to be accompanied by a violent loyalist backlash. The depth of sectarianism within social life in the six counties means that the BA cannot overturn perceptions of religious discrimination and the belief that communities are being socially and culturally marginalised, due to either intransigent unionism or belligerent Irish nationalism. A significant section of the unionist community has already lost faith in a political process which has not delivered the demise of militant republicanism. It is true that sectarianism plays a part in the unwillingness of many unionists to accept Sinn Féin in government and other political changes. However, there is also, within unionism, a coherent sense of being in political and cultural decline. For republicans, the recent growth in loyalist violence and the inability of the Police Service of Northern Ireland to protect Catholic communities are also primary concerns. It would seem that Northern Irish society has shifted from intense violence to a version of warfare by proxy.

This latter form of war is based upon the conviction that ideological confrontation must be maintained via the medium of ethnocentric resource competition and cultural contestation. It is undeniable that a significant section of the electorate in Northern Ireland wish to promote ethnic chauvinism despite the good intentions spelt out in the BA. In a society driven by the memory of a violent and not so distant past, the building of trust can be destroyed by the reality of continual and meaningful discord. The problem that remains is that what is determined as ethnic chauvinism is understood by its promoters as rational and valid. There is still a need to understand that the perpetual realities of political intransigence and cultural contestation, which surround job allocation, marching, decommissioning, flag bearing and policing, are ever present.¹⁵

In recent years, both Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionists have become involved in the practice of stimulating ethnosectarian rivalries. Republicans have, of course, had to find ways to camouflage the concessions that they have made. Determining ways in which to tolerate unionist intransigence has been a central problem in terms of selling political morphology to the republican 'heartlands'. It is evident, during the recent upsurge in loyalist violence, that dissident republicans aim to usurp the Provisional IRA's mantle as defenders of the republican people. Thus far, the Provisionals and Sinn Féin have not taken the bait of a loyalist violence which is dedicated to enticing them back to war. But, as a result of such violence, they must still play political hardball if they are to remain ideologically dominant.

However, the reality of unionist intransigence and the failure of an 'acceptable' policing agenda to emerge provide Sinn Féin with the opportunity to remobilise resistance to unionism and the British state. It is

one of the many ironies of Northern Irish politics that Sinn Féin can champion the cause of the oppressed and culturally marginalised even though they themselves are a central part of the political system.

Unionism's central problem is that it has not come to terms with the collapse of its authority. Political decline, demographic change and the loss of generations of those who graduated in British universities have all added to the sense of sociocultural fatalism among a significant section of the unionist people. The negativity of a unionist politics tied to the demonisation of Irishness remains pronounced and unmistakable. Within the more fundamentalist strands of unionist consciousness, the Republic of Ireland remains a place that must remain apart. Within such a discourse of unionist purity lies the inability to detach the politics of militant republicanism from those of other, rather different versions of nationalism.

The fact that Northern Ireland's constitutional future will be dictated by 'plebiscite politics' is potentially troublesome. Given the recent actions of loyalist paramilitaries and rejectionist unionists, it is evident that they interpret political change as favouring the cultural, political, economic and social ascendancy of the Catholic population. Unlike the Ulster Unionists, who argue that there is no guarantee that demographic shifts will bring about unification, other unionists argue that the unionist community is being sold out because of the desire within official circles to 'appease' the republican cause. This 'appeasement' of republicanism is heralded as an example of how the unionist community will be treated in a united Ireland. The conclusion at which the more militant elements of Ulster loyalism have arrived is that it has become necessary to make Northern Ireland ungovernable, in order to dilute the desire of the citizens of the Republic of Ireland to accept unification.

The growth in protests against Orange marches, the 'rumble in the Colombian jungle',¹⁶ the emergence of Sinn Féin as the dominant voice of northern nationalism, the disbandment of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, gun running from Florida and the fact that decommissioning has been less than conclusive have each eaten away at unionist resolve to engage in civic politics. It is also the case that most unionists now speak of their 'alienation' within the northern state in a manner that was until recently the preserve of republicans.

A more positive political outcome was expected, given that devolution, regionalisation and the evolution of 'postmodern' politics are often understood as having the capacity to unravel the complexities and force of ethnic affiliation and social class. The very forces of political belonging which are supposed to be moderated by globalisation, social mobility and wider patterns of Europeanisation¹⁷ continue to prove remarkably resilient in the context of the six counties. The realities of power sharing in Northern Ireland clearly indicate how the politics of modification and consensus building can run up against the bulwark and

intricacies of ethnic belonging. Evidently, the power of cultural memory, perceptions of victimhood and notions of cultural dissipation still influence the politics of constitutional change in places as diverse as Belfast, Bilbao and Belgrade. As argued here, it is important to understand that the establishment of positive and inclusive state forms demands more than simply the creation of better economic conditions and tokenistic political change. Within the Northern Irish context, it is evident that the BA cannot, in the short term, resolve political antagonisms which are rooted in the perpetuation of partition, armed paramilitary groups and the territorialisation of cultural and economic claims.¹⁸

The past in the present

The impasse over decommissioning and policing, and hostility to the BA, illustrate how wider issues of social exclusion and subordination are often easily marginalised by political machination. In this sense, decommissioning and police reform have become obstacles to concrete social and economic change in the different and diverse communities of Northern Ireland. The recent growth in community violence and the re-engagement of the Ulster Freedom Fighters in random sectarian violence indicate how supposed political settlement is paralleled by actual sectarian discord. Contemporary history is still being forged by the reproduction of sectarian labelling and habituation.

Despite political morphology, sectarianism is being redefined via new forms of community expression. In a zero-sum logic of sectarian acknowledgement, the growth in Sinn Féin's vote indicates to many unionists that the 'other' community increasingly favours a more belligerent form of nationalism. In the eyes of republicans, the unwillingness of unionists to distinguish between Sinn Féin and the IRA and to accept the participation of the former in government articulates an aversion to having 'a Taig about the place'. The inability to stop or even adequately denounce the activities of militant loyalists is also seen as a refusal of unionism to drag itself away from established sectarian constructs. All are signs that both communities are seeking things that remain politically divergent.

One conclusion from the foregoing discussion is that the BA does not adequately challenge the populace to distance themselves from sectarianised belongings. The desire to dilute political hostilities is meaningless, given that to do so would be to accept some form of political defeat. However, the most fundamental problem is that sectarianism is reproduced via a range of institutionalised forms and lived experiences.

Crucial to any understanding of ethnosectarianism in Northern Ireland is an interpretation of how the spatialisation of fear, threat and attack has created an extensive sequence of sectarian enclaves. Modes of religious

segregation have striven to create and promote ethnic homogeneity via complex modes of territorial separation.¹⁹ Darby²⁰ notes:

Just as one cannot hope to understand the Northern Ireland conflict without an acquaintance with its history, it is impossible to appreciate its pervasiveness without some knowledge of the background, extent and effect of residential segregation between Catholics and Protestants. This is both the cause and consequence of the province's history of turbulence.

The perpetual search for spatial enclosure and socio-spatial demarcation is clearly tied to Sack's notion²¹ that the creation of illusionary spaces produces '[b]oundaries which are virtually impermeable [and which] isolate communities, create fear and hate of others, and push in the directions of equality and justice'.

A central part in the construction of identity in contexts of conflict is not merely to use space to promote ontological togetherness but to compact time and space through the generation of a sense of connection to place. The spatialisation of ethnic affiliation is understood as both a directive of community space and a classification of ethnosectarian belonging.²² Religious segregation is held to actualise constructs of identity via the mediation of inclusion and exclusion and the subjective geographies of necessary separation.

Continuously being remade, the construction of territorial division encapsulates distinct, eulogised and communally devoted places, circumscribed by their very difference from the territorial 'other'. An understanding of the mechanisms through which the ethnic other is excluded and the 'home territory' cast as pure and uncontaminated are essential to comprehending conflict and conflict resolution.²³ A devotion to community underpins the casting of the 'other' community as treacherous, dangerous and untrustworthy. Parallel to this is the compulsion to construct the 'communal self' as trusted, safe, culturally homogeneous and morally superior. Therefore, the demonisation of the 'other' community as violent and repressive is conditioned by a celebration of one's own community as sacred, politically resistant, honourable, dependable and culturally wholesome. A central aspect of the reproduction of religious segregation has been to celebrate the loyalty and devotion afforded to the 'communal self' and the cultural and political spirit that has emerged within 'interfaced' areas.

Interfaces had historically operated as arenas within which the performance of ethnosectarian violence was both assembled and conspicuous. This work was also crucial in that it verified how interfaces rendered communities as victims of petrified parameters. The prominence of interfaces in the late 1960s and 1970s, and the influx of refugees into ethnic enclaves, due to the resurgence of violent conflict, created sanctuary

spaces that mapped 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas for local people.²⁴ The physical process of ethnicising space led to the subjective coding of the 'other' side of the interface as sources of deviance, transgression and marginality.²⁵ The imagined symbolic purity of the 'communal enclave' and the symbolic impurity of the 'collective other' were further reinforced when the ethnic refuge was threatened and abused via violence, intimidation and paramilitary or state targeting.

As a result of ethnic enclaving and the growth in violence from the late 1960s, communities tended to face in on themselves. Those who wished to promote cross-community contact and conflict resolution were, in many instances, deemed to be betrayers of the enclave. Evidently, the potential for conflict resolution was destroyed by the same spatial devices that enacted violence.²⁶ As Downey notes:²⁷

Within ten years of violence most forms of pan-cultural contact had been dissolved. Safe places for Protestants and Catholics to meet had all but evaporated. Friendships that had spanned decades could no longer be upheld. Children of those who had once had friendships on 'the other side' knew nothing of what had been. Fear, mistrust, and hatred made pluralism a dirty word.

Furthermore, violence ensured that communities looked inwards as the 'collective self' became a victim of a 'ravaging' 'collective other'. In order to rationalise reactive violence, communities needed to create a communicative dimension which not only supported conflict but which mobilised fear as an instrument for survival. Fear of being attacked and the existence of a complex mosaic of ethnic enclaves meant that those living in districts where the conflict was most pronounced needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of implied threat and menace.²⁸ The evolution of complex modes of segregation and habituation not only created safety consciousness but also stimulated the reading of the 'other' community as transgressive, deviant and marginal.

Although incidents such as the infamous dispute at the Holy Cross girls' school are presented simply as acts of mindless thuggery, it is evident that fear and a sense of cultural dissipation drive the use of violence. More importantly, a new generation of young men who see their role as defenders of their community has emerged as a result of tit for tat violence. In a sense, new forms of violence are encouraging new and robust modes of sectarian deployment.

Table 11.1 provides evidence of the growth of sectarian attitudes among 800 respondents who live in the most segregated areas of Belfast.²⁹ These areas constitute over sixty per cent of the city's population. In 1999, there was evidently confidence among both communities that positive political change was taking place. Around thirty per cent of both sections

Table 11.1 Community attitudes to peace building and reconciliation, 1999 and 2002: percentage of respondents affirming the survey statements

	<i>Catholics</i>		<i>Protestants</i>	
	1999	2002	1999	2002
Relationships with the 'other' community have improved since 1994	34	18	28	11
The 'other' community has become less sectarian since 1994	28	21	22	18
The 'other' community wishes to cause my community harm	19	38	27	49
I am less afraid to enter areas dominated by the 'other' religion since 1994	32	22	31	18
Both communities are committed to peace building in equal measure	38	18	29	14

of the population believed that intercommunal relations had improved since the ceasefires of 1994. By 2002, the proportion of respondents who believed that such relationships had been enhanced had significantly declined. This decline was mirrored in the falling proportion of respondents who believed that the 'other' community was less sectarian, or that crossing territorial barriers had become less difficult. In 1999, a mere nineteen per cent of Catholics and twenty-seven per cent of Protestants believed that the 'other' community wished to harm their community. By 2002, these shares had grown to thirty-eight per cent and forty-nine per cent, respectively. In addition, the share of Catholics and Protestants who believed that both communities were committed to peace building halved during the same period. Table 11.1 indicates that sectarian prejudice and fears that were already manifest in 1999 have grown since.

Given the realities of ethno-political separation, it is perturbing that the BA does not mention the term 'sectarianism'. Instead, the BA talks of bringing together the 'two traditions' via endorsing the principle of 'party of esteem'. The term 'sectarianism' was not invoked because it is highly subjective and loaded with political meaning. Yet it is the most significant political discourse within Northern Irish society. A fundamental problem is that the power of memory and the reappearance of violence continue to shape the reproduction of sectarian atavism. The prospect of benign developments in the future have little meaning for communities that have ample reasons for distrusting each other in the here and now.

Conclusions: a nation once again?

Commentators such as Ruth Dudley Edwards see the ability to ‘progress’ in a ‘new world’ as symptomatic of an ability to shift away from outdated nationalist values and political dogmas.³⁰ The logic of this and other such arguments is that ideological ‘backwardness’ is contingent upon significant flaws in collective psyches.

There is no doubting that a nationalism premised upon an intimacy between the Irish state and the Catholic Church has become rather less evident. However, in spite of important recent changes in the nature of Irish nationalism, the Republic of Ireland falls a good deal short of being a postnationalist utopia.

Incidents such as the booing at Lansdowne Road of an international footballer who happened to play for Glasgow Rangers would suggest that a sectarian consciousness persists among the Republic’s supporters. The appearance of the Angelus on the national television station intimates that Catholicism continues to exert a certain influence in the affairs of the twenty-six counties. The continuing ban on abortion and clerical control of teaching indicate that the Catholic Church retains considerable authority. Recent Church pronouncements that all children who attend their schools must be christened and that their parents must be ‘good’ Catholics provide echoes of the De Valera era. The fact that such prescriptions failed to create greater political controversy suggests that many citizens of the supposedly modern and pluralist Republic still have some sympathy for the view of the Catholic Church as a moral arbiter.

Bertie Ahern, the leader of this supposedly new and postnationalising society, appears to be working towards a more explicitly nationalist agenda. His attack upon revisionism at Bodinstown³¹ and his desire to orchestrate the reinterment of Kevin Barry and nine other IRA men executed during the war for independence are episodes which suggest that he is engaged in an ideological conflict with Sinn Féin over who is a ‘true’ republican. The growth in Sinn Féin’s vote south of the border will continue as it develops and extends support from within the nationalist hardcore. Lest we all forget, two IRA hunger strikers were elected to the Dáil in 1981, compared with one in the supposedly more belligerent North.³² The election of these hunger strikers put Fianna Fáil out of power and reminded them of the need to keep a closer eye on the changing tides of nationalist opinion.

Most people in the Republic of Ireland engaged in an understated nationalism during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Most citizens switched off from the scenes of death and mayhem. Few openly discussed northern affairs, as to do so could lead to being condemned as a fellow traveller with the IRA. However, the decline in violence and the shift of Sinn Féin into civil politics means that the opportunity to express serious opinions

about Northern Ireland is now rather greater than before. Anecdotal and personal experiences suggest that there has, in recent years, been a growth in anti-unionist prejudice in the Republic. The recent rehabilitation of Michael Collins, an individual who had previously virtually disappeared from Irish history, and the controversy that attended the proposal that the Orange Order should march in the centre of Dublin both suggest that nationalism continues to exercise an appeal within the twenty-six counties. Each of these events merely provides rejectionist unionists with the ammunition they need to preach that the Republic of Ireland remains a monocultural and sectarian state.

The desire for unification may not be the most visible part of public discourse in the Irish Republic but it is, nonetheless, an important emotional demand. However, if unification ever becomes a serious proposition, then it is possible that nationalist agendas would come to the fore.

There is a strong possibility that the prospect of a united Ireland would be accompanied by a loyalist backlash. Attacks south of the border would, in all likelihood, form part of loyalist militants' campaign to prevent unification. A bombing campaign in Dublin would provide the conditions under which ethnosectarianism might grow. As the drift towards a united Ireland accelerated, unionists would seek to highlight the sectarianism perceived within the twenty-six counties. The political agenda of unionists prior to a united Ireland would be to demolish the arguments of those seeking to dissolve the border. Such an approach would, within the Republic of Ireland, draw Irish nationalism out. It is, perhaps, only when nationalism in the Republic is challenged that its true depth and nature will emerge.

Within a united Ireland, unionists would have significant political power. They would undoubtedly work to gain as many resources as they could for the north of Ireland. A central allegation that might gain ground within the twenty-six counties would be that the unionist community was being treated with undue generosity. Such accusations might be levelled in the context of tax rises introduced to support the northern economy. The potential for anti-unionism to emerge before and during the early phases of a united Ireland could be substantial.

The fundamental problem for the Irish Republic is that a united Ireland will bring with it the forms and issues of political engagement that have been hitherto associated solely with the six counties. Over a million politically motivated citizens would suddenly become part of a society in which social fractures have been carefully stage-managed. Unionists would strongly advocate equality for their community and, in so doing, could serve to foment socioreligious tensions unseen since partition. Loyalists are shrewd enough to know that violence and the threat of destabilising the Irish economy through ensuring that foreign investors were dissuaded from locating in the Republic are potential trump cards.

Either way, it is clear that unionism would seek concessions that could cause social disharmony. The obvious impact of unification would be that the north would become not only a place which was no longer apart but a place that was more politically important than any other region outside Dublin. People in the Republic may pretend to be benign about Northern Ireland but that will all change if and when a united Ireland is realised and brings with it new forms of territorial division and political dispute. The only thing that can, perhaps, be said with any certainty about Irish history, then, is that it is rather far from being at an end.

Notes

- 1 R. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 2 B. O'Leary, 'Comparative political science and the British-Irish Agreement', in J. McGarry (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: Post-Agreement Northern Ireland in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 53.
- 3 Cited by J. McGarry, 'Northern Ireland, civic nationalism and the Good Friday Agreement', in McGarry (ed.), *Northern Ireland and the Divided World*, p. 106.
- 4 At the time of writing, the Assembly had just been suspended due to allegations concerning spying within the Northern Ireland Office by members of Sinn Féin and the Provisional Irish Republican Army.
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- 11 J. Michie and M. Sheehan, 'The political economy of a divided island', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 22 (1998), pp. 243-59.
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- 14 Croke Park is the principal venue and home of the Gaelic Athletic Association. Rule 4 of that organisation bans the playing of 'foreign' games on grounds owned by the GAA. Despite this rule, American football and boxing have been hosted at Croke Park.
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- 28 F. Burton, *The Politics of Legitimacy: Struggles in a Belfast Community* (London: Routledge, 1978).
- 29 These data are taken from ongoing research conducted by the author in interface areas in Belfast. A full account of the findings will appear in a forthcoming text.
- 30 Ruth Dudley Edwards, 'We must not take our eyes off the IRA', *Daily Mail*, 24 October 2001, p. 18.
- 31 Bodinstown graveyard contains the remains of Wolfe Tone, a founding member of the United Irishmen and icon of the Irish republican movement. The graveyard forms an important part of the Irish republican landscape.
- 32 Bobby Sands was elected to the Westminster constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.