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Belfast – Our Time, Our Place

What a year. During 2012, while economic forecasts were being repeatedly revised downwards, and more and greater cuts to general public provision were enthusiastically promised by the coalition government, the UK gambled everything on a Keynesianism of the spectacle: billions were lavished on the Olympics and Paralympics, and the countless sideshows that accompanied them nationwide as part of the London 2012 Festival. The phrase ‘bread and circuses’ hardly does justice to misallocation of public funds on such a scale. Whether the games cost £9bn, or £11bn, or some other figure that hasn’t yet been calculated, we are breathlessly assured that it was worth it because of the returns that are going to accrue in the months and years to come (returns which are unfortunately, by their very nature, so often unquantifiable in mere numerical terms). What has been promised is a kind of heritage of the future, a Govian-Schamaesque heroic history that is still to be made: tomorrow belongs to us.

Meanwhile, however, the UK is a nation increasingly ill at ease with itself. Our government explains that continued recession is caused not by the disappearance of demand in the economy but by instability in Europe; there is therefore no need to revise the coalition’s economic strategy, even if they can’t agree amongst themselves exactly what it is. Simultaneously, public attitudes are turning against the poor, those on benefits, and even the disabled (could it be that the Paralympics had the unintended effect of making ‘disability’ appear to be simply a refusal to get off your arse and stop whinging?) The fourth estate seems genuinely confused, waiting anxiously for Lord Leveson’s report while fulminating against foreign scoundrels for printing pictures of a nearly-naked duchess that they would love to have

scooped themselves. The constitutional position of the UK is more uncertain than it has been for many decades: the national government is composed of parties that are in opposition or have no representation at all in the devolved assemblies, each of which has different powers to all the others, and different parties standing in it; and a referendum on Scottish independence is now set to take place in 2014.

Yet none of the regions can be more anomalous than Northern Ireland, the only one of the four 'nations' of the UK not to be a nation at all. Even in deciding what to call it one exposes one's political bias (throughout this text I've used the names 'Northern Ireland' and 'the North' interchangeably, mainly because I have a reasonably complex and ambivalent set of understandings about its political and economic viability and legitimacy). Northern Ireland is effectively doubly disenfranchised from UK politics. The only one of the parties theoretically capable of forming a UK government to stand in Northern Irish elections is the Conservatives; in 2005, they stood in only three of the North's eighteen seats and lost their deposits in each one. In 2010 they merged with the Ulster Unionists to form the 'Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force', which resulted in the UUP losing their only Westminster seat. With no access to a significant democratic mandate at Westminster, we also have an Assembly in which sectarianism is actually written into its procedures: the terms of the power-sharing mechanism, used to ensure cross-community support for legislative motions passed at Stormont, mean that each member must declare themselves as Unionist or Nationalist on taking their seat. And the list of powers reserved by Westminster, which of course is different to those reserved in Scotland or Wales, means that the Assembly is mostly just a glorified parish council, unable to raise its own revenues or to set its own total expenditure. It is desperately lacking in political expertise, infested with sectarian clientelism, and boasts several members – including ministers – who refuse to accept the scientific basis of evolution.

On a bright, blowy morning in April, I walked from my home in north Belfast to an arts centre on the Shankill Road. At the invitation of a friend, I was attending the launch of the 'Greater Shankill Neighbourhood Renewal Area Action Plan'. Community activists had talked and bargained and consulted for two years to produce the document, which is a familiar mix of bullet points, numbered paragraphs, statistics, and tables of aspirational

‘action points’ – the technocratic language that government has taught civil society to use whenever it wishes to engage it in conversation.

We drank tea and ate croissants with jam as the plan was introduced in the enormous main hall, normally used for gigs or plays. Projected onto the screen were the usual laudable intentions – plans to address the chronic unemployment and the lack of skills among the working-age population, plans to make the Shankill ‘an area where drugs are not easily available’, and this time, an emphasis on ‘wrap-around’ support, a piece of jargon which apparently means putting families at the centre of the strategy: the aim of the community is to support the family, as it in turn supports the individual, from the cradle to young adulthood and beyond. The report is only the latest in a pile of similar plans, assessments, feasibility studies and the like, produced by the huge number of community groups and voluntary organisations struggling for recognition in ‘post-conflict’ Belfast; but even now, fourteen years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, it’s still all about accessing the most basic of necessities.

The University of Ulster is planning a major new development at its Belfast campus, on the doorstep of Lower Shankill, but the Action Plan mentions nothing about young people from the area aspiring to study there. It says nothing about ‘learning’ being an aspiration in its own right; although the plan is seen as an approach for the next twenty years, there seems to be no expectation that kids in the Shankill should or could go to university (whatever the merits of university education may or may not now be). The idea is just too far off, the suggestion being that the people of the Shankill know their place, haven’t started getting notions about themselves. The Action Plan is a piece of organised pleading for there to be some way of keeping this extremely poor community alive, but the launch was notable for the absence of any well-placed political representatives. The two councillors who attended (from the DUP and SDLP) made no contribution. Across the peaceline, in the Falls Road, the development of an agenda such as this would be driven from the outset by Sinn Féin and the community groups it works with. On the Shankill, community activists have a harder time persuading their elected representatives to show some interest in their cause.

The most obvious and dispiriting thing about the whole event, though, is that the document exists in a kind of economic vacuum, hermetically sealed within its own good intentions. There is no recognition that even the very

humble hopes itemised on page after page, in table after table, are all the time getting further and further away from being realised. Northern Ireland has yet to feel the full effect of the public sector cuts. We're less than halfway through a five-year spending round that will see our block grant from London cut by 10 per cent in real terms, with spending on capital projects slashed by nearly 40 per cent; this in a region that raises from its own taxes barely half what it spends. As capital spending disappears, so more of the construction firms that prospered during the boom go bankrupt each week. Schools, libraries and health centres will close. As public transport subsidies decrease, fares will go up, and communities will become more isolated. Funding to the community and voluntary sector, a crucial layer of Northern Ireland's efflorescent bureaucracy, will become minimal (the next generation of 'action plans' will aspire to less, and achieve less again). And some time after the next election, the deferred water charges, for which no political party wanted to take responsibility, despite their arguments about the need for alignment with the rest of the UK, will finally be introduced.

Across town, one of item of capital spend was, however, completed on time, at a public cost of around £60m. The Titanic Belfast exhibition centre, in the middle of the dusty brownfield wasteland that used to be the shipyards (now dubbed – what else? – the Titanic Quarter), opened in time to be the star attraction in a festival organised by the Tourist Board and City Council to commemorate the sinking of the ship a century ago. The building is astounding, gravity-defying; its four cantilevered 'wings', resembling towering ships' bows, look a little like a giant arrowhead planted in the ground. Belfast wags who have commented that it looks more like an iceberg than the Titanic have inadvertently divined Texan architect Eric Kuhne's original inspiration for the building, which is in fact meant to encapsulate that dynamic, violent moment when steel struck ice in the frozen north Atlantic. Inside are various 'experiences' descriptive of the making, sailing, sinking and selling of the famous liner, which for £13.50 the visitor can explore. I had an opportunity to look inside during a promenade theatre production put on by Belfast company Kabosh in the opening week. It is predictably impressive, with exciting views both in and outside the building. Surely, as Titanic museums go, it is the biggest and most elaborate in the world. It is true that the building has already had more than 500,000 visitors, and far surpassed its first year projections. The Northern Ireland Audit Office, however, believes that it needs to receive

290,000 paying visitors *every year thereafter* if it is to break even, and predicts that, after the initial flurry of interest, it can expect annual audiences only very slightly above that, around 305,000. Notwithstanding initial interest in this centenary year, the building is running on slender margins.

Whether you view the sad story of the Titanic as primarily a tragic loss of life, a catastrophic failure of individual human judgement, or a clear case of corporate manslaughter, the anniversary festivities in Belfast were peculiarly inappropriate. The chilly first half of April saw light shows in the drizzle, an open-air concert sponsored by MTV outside Titanic Belfast, and a slew of other theatrical productions, film screenings, exhibitions, walking tours and themed banquets (this must surely be the first time in a hundred years that Consommé Olga has appeared on so many menus). The Titanic Festival, however, is only one aspect of a comprehensive, ambitious marketing drive devised by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which has seen the whole of 2012 branded with a logo of red, blue and yellow ribbons bearing the slogan 'Our Time, Our Place'. (It seems strange that the Tourist Board should use the possessive plural in this introverted way; writer Colin Graham suggested in Belfast's satirical *Vacuum* newspaper that the recent campaigns try to speak to two audiences at once, constructing an image of 'us', for external consumption, as dynamic, optimistic, youthful, relaxed, jocular, welcoming and confident, while simultaneously reminding 'us' that we have to behave, and play nicely when the guests are here.)

As the summer progressed, we were able to enjoy Northern Ireland's contribution to the Olympics spin-off London 2012 Festival. The high point of this was a 'spectacular' at the end of June called 'Land of Giants', in which the 'icons' and 'legends' of Belfast's past and present – Fionn mac Cumhaill, Lemuel Gulliver (Swift drew inspiration for his story from the topography around Belfast), the Harland & Wolff cranes Samson and Goliath, the Titanic (again) and, of course, us, who are 'giant in ideas, talent and heritage' – converged in a spasm of 'acrobatics, aerial dance, physical performance, music, special effects and pyrotechnics', and drizzle.

There was hardly time to recover from all this pageantry (meagre cost: £1.2m) before the parading that accompanies any Northern Irish summer was underway. This year's marching season was particularly active. On the Twelfth of July, as they waited for the main march to depart, a loyalist band from the Shankill Road decided to create a new 'flashpoint' where none had

previously existed, by playing sectarian songs outside a Catholic church in the north city centre. This had the desired effect of provoking statements of outrage from Catholic residents nearby, and a theme was set for the summer. Two major marches in August (the first time the Royal Black Perceptory's 'Last Saturday' march had been held in Belfast) and September (marking the centenary of the signing, by half a million men and women, of the Ulster Covenant against the Third Home Rule Bill) duly returned to this spot, and photographers, cameramen, and the professionally offended were ready for them. It seems likely that the loyalists' strategy, inasmuch as they inadvertently stumbled upon one – wilfully igniting and then painstakingly neutralising a new locus of conflict – was to find a new front for their ongoing campaign against the Parades Commission, the body which decides what marches and processions can take place, and under what conditions. The side effect of this political game was that attention was mostly diverted away from what they had hoped would be a story of celebration and commemoration at the Covenant event – a further attempted recuperation of loyalism as 'heritage' – and focused instead on the possibility of another violent confrontation in the city centre.

All in all, then, the Covenant centenary may have been something of a missed opportunity; this history anyway proves harder to neutralise than the decline and dereliction of the shipyards has been. This mixed story may give us some indication of how the approaching decade of equally uncomfortable centenaries – of the Easter Rising, the slaughter of the Ulster Division in the Battle of the Somme, the Sinn Féin landslide in the 1918 general election, the War of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the foundation of Northern Ireland itself in 1921 – might be worked for public (and especially tourist) consumption. The Executive has set itself a goal of earning £1bn a year from all tourism by 2020. If it hopes to achieve this, then it needs some strategy by which not only to neutralise but to capitalise on those recurrent opportunities for the North's historical and political background to erupt once again into the foreground.

For the moment, though, we can draw a little breath as we wait for the next carnival to roll up, with 2013 marking Derry's year as UK City of Culture, and the whole bloody business, as Samuel Beckett put it, starting all over again.

So is this it? Is all this din of celebration and self-congratulation our evidence that the post-conflict promises have finally been realised? In the

decade after the Agreement, Belfast reverberated to the noise of construction. It felt like a small eastern European nation emerging from state socialism: areas of the city were zoned and rezoned, deals were struck in private, and vast speculative building projects commenced. Meanwhile, experiments were conducted with privatising the public realm: the new shopping centre at Victoria Square, luxury brands in tow, became an unofficial city centre, and the various public agencies drew plans explaining how ‘retail-led regeneration’ would provide the means to escape our painful recent history. The streetscape was remodelled with gratuitous public art able to speak to us of our history and our future, while helpfully pointing the way to the next department store. New buildings rose – among them the tallest residential building in Ireland, the Obel tower; and, just occasionally, old ones accidentally burned down, as they tend to do in a rapidly redeveloping city. Homeowners saw house prices record the fastest rises in the whole of the UK (admittedly from a much lower base), with some properties trebling in value in just five years.

Then, in 2008, it ground to a halt. As investors and speculators in the Republic of Ireland saw their loans recalled and their banks bailed out, work stopped on a number of high-profile city centre projects, with others not even commencing. Only in 2011 did the extent of northern developers’ exposure to the Republic’s crisis finally become clear, as the National Assets Management Agency, the Republic’s ‘bad bank’, published a list of sites in the North that had passed into the reluctant ownership of the taxpayers of the Irish Republic. This was not the way we had expected reunification might take place.

All this is familiar enough, hardly distinctive. What was different about Belfast, and about Northern Ireland as a whole (although the extent of redevelopment has remained extremely uneven across the region) was the particular ‘moral economy’ that was quite quickly created during the boom, and which persisted through successive interruptions and prorogations of the Assembly, indeed was the single constant throughout. It entails, in essence, a refinement of the argument which maintains that there can be ‘no alternative’ to speculator-driven redevelopment. In ‘normal’ societies, this argument is a repetition of the general abandonment of the notion of public good: the final, unarguable victory of trickle-down economics in the urban sphere. In Belfast this took on an added dimension; since there could be no alternative to this model for regeneration, and since our choice could only be between

the hope and promise of peace on the one hand, and the tangible threat of continued war on the other, private developers found themselves imbued with a new moral mission. They would be the ones who really delivered the peace, in brick, concrete, glass and steel; the politicians' contribution was merely to learn to behave for long enough to allow it to happen (particularly since planning powers have yet to be devolved to elected local representatives). Very quickly it became apparent that to oppose this prescription for urban redevelopment meant to oppose peace itself. The idea was given form when a property developer, responsible for a range of controversial projects around the city, was appointed as the Chair of the new Policing Board.

While *carte blanche* – or rather, active encouragement – was thus being given to private speculators, local bureaucrats and politicians were becoming especially interested in the opportunity to compete with European and international cities for a range of potentially valuable cultural prizes. This market had been hot since at least the early 1990s, as contemporary city-states detached themselves from their regions, rebranded themselves into corporate entities and bid to be European Capital of Culture, or to host a biennale or, perhaps, an international sporting championship. Belfast's first stab at this racket was marked by some ignominy, when the bid to be Capital of Culture in 2008 was unsuccessful; but the lesson was learned that the circuits of capital are international, and that our competitors are not in Dublin, Derry or Glasgow, but Barcelona, Melbourne and Dubai.

The political conflict, meanwhile, became sublimated into a cultural contest, about symbols and languages, and even this has started to lose its venom (the summer's events notwithstanding). Both the DUP and Sinn Féin have become adept at facing in two different directions at once: towards their electoral base, and (jointly) towards the market and its demands. The base is still defined in sectarian terms, and the address to them remains clearly about protecting 'our' interests. It might be expected that the requirement on the two main parties to choreograph their joint approach to business would bring with it a necessity to imagine some kind of shared future, but this is impossible while 'power-sharing' is constructed in such nakedly sectarian terms. The two parties are locked in an interdependent embrace, with no interest in articulating a shared, public belonging that can go beyond crudely ethnopolitical 'provision'; so long as they are able to maintain the sectarian balancing act, the job of 'management' can go on indefinitely.

The reflex reaction to such complaints is to mutter that the past can so easily come back if we aren't careful. Yet these days, there is very little stomach for the conflict as it was; increasingly, however, there is an anomic, impotent rage at the continued failure of the devolved administration to provide for the poorest here, who continue to fail educationally, get the worst jobs or no jobs at all, and die younger. The opposite of the management of Northern Ireland for global business interests is not renewed sectarian violence, it's a class anger that crosses ethnoreligious lines – a nightmare that the politicians prefer not to countenance.

It's a commonplace to hear that Northern Ireland's bloated public sector is unsustainable and must now be cut. One third of employment is in the public sector, and another third is directly or indirectly dependent on it. Public expenditure stands at 70 per cent of GDP. But, beyond the familiar argument that the private sector is underdeveloped in the North (so much for the illusory peace dividend), what creates this imbalance is, once again, the sectarianised administration of devolution: from the neighbourhood, and up to the topmost level of the state, we are awash with semi-state and state-funded organisations, all busily publishing regeneration plans and conducting consultations. At the level of the various government agencies, the confusion of responsibilities between local authorities, the Departments of Social Development, Regional Development, and Environment, the different regeneration quangos, and of course the Northern Ireland Office means that it is impossible for ordinary citizens, acting in their own right, to put any effective pressure on policymakers. In turn that interaction between ordinary people, public bodies and politicians has become professionalised, with community groups and partnership boards proliferating in the breach, and any democratic accountability obscured.

Can we really not imagine this place any differently? I went to see a friend, Leontia Flynn, a poet (she's constantly referred to in Northern Ireland as a 'local poet', much to her bemusement – does a local poet have some sort of public function? To what, exactly, are they really local?) She's had her crack at criticising the tawdriness and banality of our post-conflict society. She found it ironic that the arts, which had flourished, in certain ways, during the most difficult times, were now merely a minor element in the rebranding of Belfast, and of Northern Ireland; creativity, or culture in the vaguest, most general sense, are obviously valuable buzzwords in any adman's spiel

about the place, but not usually in any engaged or sustained way. Poetry, she admits, continues to be something that is saleable about the North, and she understands that she too is expected, when she travels to readings abroad (she was just back from Poland), to ‘represent’, somehow, this new Northern Ireland (something else that causes her some bemusement). But even while the tourist brands sell images of who ‘we’ are, and the next generation of Northerners, like young people everywhere else, happily accept their duty to commodify and consume virtual ‘selves’, through social networks, designer labels and musical scenes, it doesn’t appear that a ‘culture’ which was often so introspective during the Troubles has much that is genuinely communicable to offer to anyone outside, at least not something that is actually ‘about’ us; or here. We’ve stopped talking about ourselves, to some degree, because we’re not sure where exactly we are yet. Graham Walker, a professor of politics at Queen’s University, told me that his students want to write about the political conflict in the 1970s or ’80s, but have very little to say about the committee structure of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Greater Shankill Neighbourhood Renewal Area Action Plan contains a section titled ‘It Needs A Designation’. The partnership who authored the plan understand that they need their area ‘designated’ – branded – if they are to stand some chance of success. “This plan needs a structure and the Greater Shankill needs a designation to realise it... In Belfast we have done this around physical development. It was called ‘Laganside’ and has its latest manifestation in Titanic Quarter or around cultural development as in Cathedral Quarter.” The Shankill is desperate for a brand.

Another friend, a former actor from the North who’s now a psychotherapist, talked to me about Northern Ireland in the context of the family therapy she practices. We spoke about the lack of an ‘identity’ that can create a single, functional, inclusive society in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement and the peace process swept away a society, such as it was, but made no effort to replace it with something else, indeed the whole point was not to replace with anything else; the history of the last fourteen years has been about the impossibility of arriving at this ‘something else’ whilst ideas of sovereignty and nationality remain so irreconcilable, so incommensurate.

I talked with Graham Walker about the threat to this fragile sense of collective self from the Scottish referendum on independence. Unionists have reacted with some hysteria to the plans: Sir Reg Empey, former leader of the

UUP, announced that Scottish independence could ‘reignite the difficulties we have just managed to overcome’, while John Taylor, now Lord Kilclooney, wrote to *The Scotsman* that if parts of Scotland voted to remain in the Union, it would be better to offer partition than to subjugate them to the will of the majority. In a speech at the annual conference of the British-Irish Association in September this year, First Minister Peter Robinson made a detailed case for the continuation of the Union, and even seemed to suggest (in somewhat more historically measured tones than those of Kilclooney) that the partition of Ireland has not been an entirely untrammelled success: ‘While Ulster was always a place apart on the island of Ireland, partition changed things – and not just for Northern Protestants, but for Southern Catholics and Southern Protestants for that matter, as well’. Reporting of the speech in the media was limited to Robinson’s claim that the call for independence could be defeated ‘with a Saltire in one hand and a Union Flag in the other’, a strange take on the IRA’s stated strategy in the 1980s of achieving independence ‘with a ballot box in one hand and an Armalite in the other’.

Nonetheless I wondered whether there mightn’t be a pocket of opinion within Unionism that might, if push came to shove, prefer to align itself with an independent Scotland rather than a distant, ‘disinterested’ England. Walker feels that members of the DUP might harbour a sentimental affection of this kind, but that even they would recognise that it couldn’t be done in reality. If the Scots do vote against independence, it will probably mark the end of the Barnett Formula, by which the block grant has been distributed across the UK since the 1970s. Moreover it could mark the beginning of discussions about a more equally devolved, or even fully federalised UK (something else which Robinson’s BIA speech accepted needed to be more thoroughly examined). Both these measures could, in the long run, make an enormous difference to the political and economic culture of the North: Barnett, particularly, should be replaced with a formula based on needs, rather than on a simple headcount, especially given the massive changes to the consitutional arrangement since it was implemented. Walker believes that the devolved nations have not made enough of their opportunity to work in partnership from the fringes of the Union, and nor have they used the range of institutions available to them – particularly the British-Irish Council (no relation of the BIA), a body set up under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement as an ‘East-West’ counterbalance to allay Unionist fears about

proposed North-South bodies. Despite existing since 1998, the Council only established a full-time secretariat earlier this year; it has a remit to meet and issue communiqués on a range of topics – including languages, spatial planning, housing and the environment. A mechanism through which the nations can speak to one another bilaterally, without the involvement of London, the Council could offer a degree of collective bargaining power to the Irish, Northern Irish, Scots and Welsh. But the ad hoc, piecemeal way in which devolution was delivered by New Labour means anyway that the status quo is unlikely to be tenable for very long. ‘The more anomalies persist between the manner in which devolution has been realised in the different parts of the UK, the more it grates and the looser the fabric becomes,’ Walker warns.

As it stands, Belfast at the end of 2012 continues to be a blank slate, upon which can be written the most lurid fantasies of urban planners, undead private developers and tourism wonks. A proposal recently published by one government agency for a scrappy patch of land beside the River Lagan included sketches of a zip-cord stretched between the banks of the river. The worrying lesson of Titanic Belfast is that anything is now possible, if the right people decide that it’s necessary. They are, of course, doing it for our benefit.