

## **Ironic inversions and stable purposes - reimagining political traditions in Ireland after the EU Referendum 2016**

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### **Abstract**

The outcome and impact of the EU Referendum result in 2016 has raised some interesting questions about living with ideological divisions in Northern Ireland and about how the traditions in Northern Ireland, and on the island of Ireland, now stand in relation to one another. There are questions of the 'identity effects' on Brexit on unionism and nationalism, where old prejudices have found new contexts for expression and questions around how old political traditions and arguments have been reshaped or reimagined by Brexit. We argue that there have been some clear ironical inversions of argument since 2016 and that these ironies are traceable first, to the clearly changing balance of power between the two main communities and second, to the changing ideological ethos of the Republic of Ireland vis-à-vis Northern Ireland, provoking what we call separation or castration anxiety for both unionism and nationalism in the context of reimagined future.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland; Brexit; Conflict; Identity; Border

### **Introduction**

The outcome and impact of the EU Referendum result in 2016 has raised interesting questions about traditional ideological divisions in Northern Ireland and on the island. This paper addresses two of these questions. Has the 'identity effect' of the Brexit debate sharpened the ideological contest between unionism and nationalism, where old prejudices have found new contexts for expression? Have political traditions been reshaped by Brexit? In addressing these two questions, the paper develops arguments addressed in our earlier discussion of the 'border in the mind' (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey, 2017) and the 'standing in relation' of unionism and nationalism in Ireland (Aughey and Gormley-Heenan, 2011). In this paper, the focus is on the balance of power between the two traditions and expectations of and anxieties about that balance changing.

The first part explores these political questions as antagonistic mental boundaries that took violent form during the recent history of Northern Ireland's Troubles and correlates their ideological statement with respective assessments of how unionists and nationalists stood in relation to each other. The second part considers how the 1998 Agreement attempted to provide a formula to answer the 'question of the political' in Northern Ireland and identifies the new standing- in-relation between communities that it specified. The third part looks at the effect of the 2016 referendum on the political expectations and anxieties it provoked. The fourth part suggests that the 'identity effect' of the Brexit debate has sharpened the ideological contest between unionism and nationalism but it notes how there have been some ironical inversions of argument since 2016. We argue that these ironies are traceable first, to the changing balance of power between the communities and second, to the changing ideological ethos of the Republic of Ireland. In the final (speculative) part, we conclude with

an assessment of Brexit as a set of dilemmas for political traditions in Ireland in terms of their challenges and their opportunities.

### **(1) The Conflict**

The so-called ‘intractability’ of the Northern Ireland question -intransigence, dogmatic entrenchment of positions and incompatibility of demands – has exerted an enduring fascination amongst academics and commentators. The question of the ‘political’ has been dominated by a question of community identity (unionism versus nationalism) and its attendant conflict. Beneath the surface of any periodic calm, binary notions of the ‘two communities’, ‘two traditions’, ‘two religions’, and even ‘two nations’ appeared to be so fundamental such that all else was mere historical embellishment and detail. That enduring identity not only seemed to explain much about the emergence and persistence of conflict after 1969 but was also the central issue which those seeking political agreement needed to address. The point, simply put, is that there existed (and continues to exist) competing claims of self-determination and profound differences about who is ultimately sovereign (Coakley 2003:26; also 2002). In *Understanding National Identity*, McCrone and Bechhofer (2015) stated the ‘Big Ulster’ question succinctly: ‘To ask who ‘we’ are, and for what purposes, remains one of the key questions of our times’ (and that is the central question posed by Brexit too). A generation ago, Whyte (1987) judged unpromising the prospects for reconciling opposing views of who ‘we’ are. The ideological premises of unionism and nationalism appeared to lock them into permanent division and their respective options, when articulated as answers, only kept the division alive. They did so, to adapt Schmitt’s fundamental concept (Schmitt, 1976), because those answers were about mobilising friends to defeat enemies rather than about dealing with one another’s anxieties and expectations. The Belfast Agreement of 1998, however, suggested another framework for the political and held out the prospect of a rough answer to the question ‘who we are’. It is this Agreement, of course, that is bound up so intimately with the Brexit dilemma.

### **(2) The 1998 Agreement**

One reading of the 1998 Agreement is this. If nationalists are sincere about persuading unionists of the value of being fully part of an Irish nation - rather than forcing or manoeuvring them into a position ‘castrated’ from the rest of the UK - then they should be true to their own ideology. They should act on the basis that harmony between the parts of the nation is the *pre-condition* for the unity of the state. Constitutional consent is not an abstract concession but an operative political principle. If unionists are sincere about the benefits of the Union, then they should be true to their own ideology as well. The stability of Northern Ireland’s place within the UK depends on accepting a political framework sufficiently accommodating of nationalists. Equality of status is not some abstract concession but an operative political principle. Respect for the principle of consent qualifies the nationalist aspiration for unity but changes required within Northern Ireland involve qualifying the unionist view of majoritarian rights. In short, the Agreement was a negotiated example of Lampedusa’s paradox. For unionists, if things were to stay the same things would have to change (arrangements are needed to which nationalists could consent). For nationalists, if things were to change things would also have to stay the same (unity could only be achieved realistically with broad unionist consent). The challenge for both was to establish a stable *modus vivendi* that could constitute a stable ‘standing in relation’ together.

On questions of sovereignty, self-determination and national identity, it appeared that the 1998 Agreement had displaced to positive effect – not least in the absence of serious violence - the old Schmittian friend/enemy antagonisms. On constitutional matters the Agreement's formula was to underwrite 'the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland'. Here were all those factors of ideological division, of anxiety and expectation, rephrased in a hoped-for pattern of grand coalition. It was a wager on the possibility of Crick's rather than Schmitt's concept of the political - if there can be no consensus about the *end*, there can be a consensus about the *means* (Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2012: 657-8).

It would be putting words into the mouth of that history to suggest that here was a problem 'solved'. Certainly, the 1998 Agreement did involve an intelligent interlocking of political institutions and it had required political courage to move positions. Nevertheless, the Agreement was not a new beginning in the radical, almost religious sense. We have argued that the Agreement can be described - to adapt an expression of Michael Oakeshott's – as a 'modification of Irish circumstances', those modified circumstances embodying still, and unresolved, the old antagonisms of the past. To put the modification in those terms is not to underplay the historical significance of 1998, merely to put it in perspective. The Agreement was a contract to facilitate communal politics but its grand expectation was that practical benefits would ultimately outweigh symbolic losses, what one journalist (McKittrick 2013) described as that curious condition in Northern Ireland where 'the aspirational co-exists with the precautionary'.

The subsequent electoral success of Sinn Fein amongst nationalists and of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) amongst unionists confirmed enduring historical positions and revealed much about the limitations of ideological change (or 'moving on'). Even so, there was an expectation that despite 'misleading rhetoric to the contrary' (Mitchell, O'Leary and Evans 2001) both of these parties would be compelled to moderate their platforms and soften their positions to secure electoral success (an expectation rather than political science). By the Assembly elections of 2007 both Sinn Fein and the DUP had become 'stakeholders' in the institutions, even if the operation of devolved institutions revealed power-splitting and power-snaring, as much as power-sharing (see Gormley-Heenan, 2011). If one can legitimately criticise as dysfunctional the institutional arrangements and governing practices of devolution it is also possible to defend dysfunction in the name of a higher function, namely embedding the mutually accepted principle of consent into the political culture.

It was possible to indicate one area of political contention that appeared no longer to be a matter of active contention – remarkably, given its symbolic significance in Irish politics. It was the border.

For unionists since the early 1970s, there had been always deep concern about North/South institutional arrangements as a transition to Irish unity. The practical outworking of Strand II of the Agreement meant that the issue for most unionist voters, and certainly for party leaders, fell off the political radar. The operation of the North South Implementation Bodies and the functioning of the North South Ministerial Council filtered rarely into partisan politics, especially when the DUP committed, under the St Andrews Agreement of 2006, to work arrangements in good faith and in a spirit of genuine partnership. For nationalists, the Agreement helped to take the border out of the island allowing them to feel more comfortable in a Northern Ireland that remained part of the United Kingdom. If the European Union was

peripheral to the negotiation of the Agreement, the European ‘context’ (both the UK and Republic of Ireland being members of the EU) helped to frame the identities of being either British or Irish or both (not only for nationalists).

We have we have used the analogy of the ‘dry wall’ to describe the Agreement’s political character (Aughey and Gormley-Heenan 2011: 10-12), a term appropriated from Oakeshott’s *On History and other essays* (1983: 94). As Oakeshott argued, historical events ‘are not themselves contingent, they are related to one another contingently’. The relationship is ‘composed conceptually of contiguous historical events’ with no place for ‘the cement of general causes’. Rather the stones ‘(that is, the antecedent events) which compose the wall (that is, the subsequent event) are joined and held together not by mortar, but in terms of their shapes. And the wall, here, has no premeditated design: It is what its components, in touching, constitute’.

To translate into our usage, the Agreement’s arrangements can be understood neither as grand architectural design nor as mechanical blueprint but as a drystone wall, using the political materials locally to hand in a rough and ready fashion for the purpose of political stability. From this perspective, the eccentricities, irregularities, even the dysfunctional characteristics of the 1998 Agreement may be considered defensible features of it. To describe the shape of the Agreement in this manner is not to argue that it represented the best possible of all possible arrangements and that everything in it was a necessary good (or evil). It is to suggest that its rationality lay in a putting together of parts that was not ideal but purposeful – and the object was to establish that elusive *modus vivendi* within Northern Ireland, between north and south of the island and between the UK and Irish governments that had evaded achievement since 1969. There is no secure ideological mortar holding together the institutions of the Agreement. The arrangements are not ‘set in stone’, they are open to change (and have been on a number of occasions) but one needs to be careful (insofar as one’s intent is to maintain things in equilibrium) how one adjusts the political stones in the dry wall. There is no guarantee that the delicate arrangement will not fall apart (as they most recently did with the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive from 2017-2020). The reasons for the weight and importance of the materials in the constitutional dry wall are a consequence of changing balance of power, political influence, state policy and democratic pressure.

### **(3) The 2016 Referendum**

The outcome of the 2016 EU Referendum was accepted broadly by unionists - however differently they may have voted individually - as a legitimate sovereign act of self-determination by the British people of which they are an integral part. Since the EU was peripheral to the actual negotiation of the 1998 Agreement, the argument of the unionist parties has been that Brexit should not affect the status of either Northern Ireland or have implications for operation of the Agreement. For nationalists, the result of the Referendum represented a destabilisation of the standing-in-relation they envisaged in the Agreement, bringing back into sharp focus those very questions of legitimacy, sovereignty, and self-determination they imagined had been ‘re-arranged’ in 1998. In short, the often-remarked ‘constructive ambiguity’ of the Agreement was dispelled by the stark choice required by the 2016 referendum. After June 2016, it was not so easy for ambiguity to rule. As we note in the next section, the ramifications of the negotiations between the UK and the EU (beginning with the possibility of a ‘hard Brexit’ or an indefinite ‘Northern Irish backstop’ and latterly

‘Northern Irish frontstop’) brought to mind once again for both unionists and nationalists the familiar disorder of ‘separation/castration anxiety’.

Another dimension of how things stood-in-relation concerns the relative sense of inter-community balance in Northern Ireland. There is a consistent theme here rooted in the friend/enemy legacy of the political. For example, Whyte (1981) had argued that experience of long running conflicts elsewhere suggested that incremental changes in the balance of power — he used such measures as population, relative economic strength and political strength — ‘can accumulate imperceptibly until the situation is transformed’. Even four decades ago, he considered that such shifts in balance were already happening in Northern Ireland, working in favour of nationalists and against unionists. Put bluntly, a ‘number of changes, none decisive in itself, are combining to make the unionist position weaker than it has ever been before’. These included ‘the declining Protestant percentage of the population; the collapse of Ulster's traditional industries, which Protestants dominated, and the growth of the service sector in which Catholics are better-placed’. By 2016, these trends were even more evident. The political effect was a nationalist community more confident about its positional status within Northern Ireland (as part of the UK), its positional security on the island (Irish citizenship) and its positional context (both parts of the island within the EU). The result of the EU referendum challenged all three levels of confidence and revived nationalist anxiety of being confined in political terms exclusively conducive to unionism (Brexit). The Northern Irish backstop/frontstop revived unionist anxiety of being confined in terms exclusively conducive to nationalism

After the referendum, in other words, the old binary choice of British versus Irish (which had never gone away) raised the critical question of consent. On the one hand, the result of the Referendum in Northern Ireland did not divide on a straightforward unionist/nationalist votes. On the other hand, the strongest support for Remain came from within nationalism and for Leave within unionism. It is no surprise, therefore, that the result was taken to be a victory for one community at the expense of the other and a defeat for the imagined standing in relation between nationalists and unionists. This was a psychological blow for nationalism and raised fundamental questions not only about consent but also about expectations derived from the changing standing-in-relation. It posed a challenge to nationalists: given what they thought had been agreed in 1998; given what they now thought of their standing-in-relation to unionists; given what they expected the future to be, the question was fundamental: is it now possible to accept conditions for increasing divergence, real or imagined, between Ireland, north and south? Here was an old question: can one continue to accept the practical legitimacy of Northern Ireland as part of the UK outside the EU? For unionists the question was equally an old one: despite all the statements by the Irish government of respect for the principle of unionist consent, has there not been a return to a strategy of manoeuvring them, via Brexit protocols, into unity against their will. The ideological contest following the referendum result conjured the rhetorical bitterness of former ideological debates though it has done so with some ironic ideological inversions.

#### **(4) Some Ironic Inversions of Argument**

We begin with a reversion effect. One characteristic of traditional ideological discourse is the separation/castration anxiety, a sense of being cut off from the national (and natural) affinities of identity. As a negative ideological condition, it involves two main characteristics. First is the experience of dissociation from the main currents of belonging vital elsewhere – for unionists, from the rest of the UK and for nationalists from the rest of Ireland. Historically of

course, nationalists have experienced this exclusion more directly and painfully, though unionists have complained as well about differential treatment from citizens elsewhere in the UK. Second, it involves anticipated disadvantage post-Brexit. For nationalists, it means being part of a state that is no longer a member of the EU and being separated from an identity shared with others on the island of Ireland. For unionists it means being part of arrangements in Ireland over which their adversaries can exercise control, the very protocols negotiated by the UK government with the EU to address the concerns of nationalist anxiety. In sum, it is a common anxiety of becoming reliant on the ‘kindness of your enemies’.

After the 2016 referendum, nationalists claimed they had woken up in a different country. For example, Malachi O’Doherty (2016) argued that the 1998 Agreement had encouraged some northern nationalist pragmatism – content to live in the UK so long as their rights were respected and their Irish identity was secured. These pragmatists have little or no affinity either to symbols of British identity or the political institutions of the UK yet they are not necessarily ideological (or republican) in politics. Following the EU Referendum, O’Doherty thought that nationalist pragmatists could only re-evaluate that pragmatism if faced with the prospect of living in Northern Ireland ‘without the protections that come from Europe - and the underpinning of a common identity with the Irish state that also comes from Europe’. That re-assessment has been under way since 2016. It sharpened the nationalist ‘border in the mind’, if only because the discourse of Brexit made the Irish border central to negotiations.

The negotiation by the UK government of its Withdrawal Agreement has had an equal and opposite effect within unionism. A unionist victimhood was recovered, one as old as the Irish Question in British politics when unionists argued they would be ‘the sacrifice’ required by policy on Home Rule. The negotiated Protocol says that Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK customs territory but must retain close links with the EU customs union and single market, particularly in terms of EU regulations on manufactured and agricultural goods. This is designed prevent a ‘hard border’ on the island of Ireland; but it will also introduce a ‘border’ of sorts between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK since goods leaving GB for Northern Ireland will have to be processed in some way for the first time ever. Ironically, and despite the Brexit mantra of ‘we joined as one Union and we leave as one Union’, it too would mean Unionists waking up in a different country in 2021, cut off in part at least - not only symbolically but also materially – from the UK single market. The trade-off of mutual ideological dissatisfaction into a ‘special status’ for Northern Ireland (even if it isn’t called that) attempts to re-arrange the dry-stone wall in a manner conducive to stability. Whether that is possible is an unresolved question, but it is one to which we return (speculatively) in the concluding section of the article.

The first ironic inversion concerns the principle of consent. For most of recent history this has been a principle ‘owned’ by unionists. The 1998 Agreement was in part intended to address the unionist grievance that the earlier 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement - which permitted the Irish government to represent northern nationalist interests through inter-governmental cooperation in an Anglo-Irish Secretariat - had infringed the principle of consent because it had been negotiated without their involvement. The unionist experience was one of marginalisation – the former DUP First Minister, Peter Robinson, at the time described this marginalisation to mean that unionists had been put on the ‘window-ledge’ of the UK (Aughey 1989: 59-86) - a pervasive sense that policy was determined by bureaucratic cliques beyond their democratic influence. Their anxiety was (to use the official jargon of the time) that Irish officials would determine and promote ‘the modalities of bringing about Irish unity’ (see Aughey and Gormley-Heenan 2011). Concerns about the operation of the Withdrawal

Agreement Protocols have been expressed in similar language. The substance of the claim was a democratic argument that significant constitutional change was being imposed against the will of *the* majority (that is, unionism).

The Brexit effect here involves the irony that, on the issue of majorities in Northern Ireland, unionists have become old nationalists and nationalists, old unionists – not, of course, in their ultimate aim but in the majoritarianism they proclaim. The traditional unionist defence of Northern Ireland has been that there exists a ‘people of Northern Ireland’ with a right to self-determination and that any change in the status of Northern Ireland requires the consent of the majority or the ‘greater number’. The result of the EU referendum vote ironically inverted the deployment of that defence. It is now claimed by unionist opponents (not only nationalists) that the people of - or the majority in - Northern Ireland has not consented to Brexit. Here is a nationalist opportunity to disorder unionism by appropriating its discourse – majority, consent, status and self-determination – and deploying it against the Union. Equally, when confronted with the present Withdrawal Agreement’s position on Northern Ireland consent (a simple majority in the Assembly) unionists have adopted the old language of their opponents – concurrent consent, parity of esteem and equality of rights.

In the short term, the current Withdrawal Agreement asks the Northern Ireland Assembly periodically to give its ‘democratic consent’ to the continuation or otherwise of the Protocol. The Assembly will be asked to consent to the customs and single market provisions four years after the transition period ends and every four or eight years after that, depending on what the previous vote had concluded. In the longer term, Unionist anxieties about exclusion from the UK may mean that they will vote against the Protocol every time. But if they do so, they will bring the possibility of a hard border on the island of Ireland back on to the table - when the whole point of the Protocol is to take this ‘problem’ away. Equally, nationalist anxieties could mean they will promote the vote as a proxy border poll vote for Irish reunification. It is entirely possible, then, that for both unionists, nationalists and everyone, else, the ‘democratic consent’ requirement in relation to the Protocols will, as one former Ulster Unionist Party leader suggests (Empey, 2019), ‘condemn us to endless Brexit arguments and further toxify our politics’.

The second and related ironic inversion concerns the question: who are the people of Northern Ireland? In 1975, the unionist parties bar one had campaigned for a No vote in the European Communities referendum. On that occasion, Northern Ireland voted 52 % Yes and 48% No. However, this had little consequence for Northern Ireland’s status since the UK as a whole voted Yes (67%). In 2016, here was another ironic inversion. Brexit would mean discontinuity and disruption to which, it was now possible to argue, the distinctive ‘people’ of Northern Ireland had *not* given their consent. Moreover, since it was the stated objective of the government of the UK to honour the result of the referendum, it was an easy shift for nationalism to invest that political choice with an inimical constitutional objective. In short, the real effect of Brexit would allow unionist ideologues to re-assert the fundamental division of the island outside the EU and against the will of the distinctive people of Northern Ireland.

The conclusion to Garry’s (2016) study of the vote is that the result of the EU referendum indicated ‘a very strong ethno-national’ character. Yet the combination of votes which determined that Northern Ireland *as a whole* voted 56% to Remain cannot be described absolutely as ‘ethno-national’. 40% of those self-designating as ‘Protestant’ and 34% of those self-designating as ‘Unionist’ voted Remain – in Northern Ireland terms, both are significant deviations from the norm if the choice for or against Brexit is understood exclusively as an

‘ethno-nationalist’ matter. The ‘very strong ethno-national’ character of the Brexit, one may argue, was not necessarily in the mind when an individual cast a vote. Its ‘very strong ethno-national’ character’ reflects the ideological aftermath of the vote and its articulation politically. Put simply, the result of the EU referendum in Northern Ireland became another forerunner for nationalists (not only in Northern Ireland) of the inevitable ‘break-up’ of the UK (as a unionist majority slipped away) and with it the equally inevitable political unification of Ireland; and for unionists it revealed how nationalists were determined to use every opportunity to bully and lever them out of the UK against their will.

There is a third ironic inversion of ideological argument. A venerable part of the Ulster unionist tradition has been its self-understanding as part of a larger – for want of a better word – project of ‘civilisation’. That grand sense of purpose and destiny Sir Thomas Sinclair (1970: 173) expressed in the following way during the Home Rule crisis of 1912. Ulster unionist sympathy, argued Sinclair, is ‘with the world mission of the British Empire in the interests of civil and religious freedom’. This sympathy meant that ‘Ulster is entitled to retain her full share in every privilege of the whole realm’. The unionist position was not only for the Union but also its affinity with a larger cultural and political ‘project’. For unionists, a European identity was and is an (optional) addition to their participation ‘in a culture and ethos which is not exclusive to this part of Ireland’ Bew (2009).

A European identity for nationalism, by contrast, means participation in a larger framework of civilisation (and in practice this participation is equated with the EU). The Brexit debate amongst nationalists today has compressed a more complex history of EU membership into unqualified ideological support, ignoring the fact that an agreed or exclusive Irish European ‘vocation’ remained challenged for much of recent history. Nevertheless, an ideological rule of thumb has been that the European ‘project’ is central to Ireland’s official political identity because it is associated not only with economic development but also with political emancipation (from the UK).

It is now nationalists (north and south) who claim to be in line with a grand project: in this case, the European Union ideal of peace, prosperity, progress, liberty, security, solidarity and transnational cooperation. It is the UK (more precisely, unionism) that reveals its incapacity to cope with modern times by retreating towards illusions of nation and empire. It is a judgement which cut with the grain of anti-Brexit academic and journalistic comment in the UK (see for example the correspondence in view between O’Toole 2019 and Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). In this perspective, while Irish nationalism has learned to accept a complex, postmodern, diverse relationship within the creative framework of EU institutions, Brexit has reversed the UK into a backward cul-de-sac and become ‘wrong-footed’ by history.

The new nationalism has become the old unionism, at least in this way. The old prejudices – the ‘other’ is backward, religiously superstitious, living in a nostalgic twilight, wrong-footed by history, conservative and illiberal – have been transposed from (Catholic) nationalism to (Protestant) unionism. Out of this grand strategic narrative, a number of further strands intersect – the economic, the cultural, the religious, the political and the demographic. In particular, on issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, divorce, the role of religion in social policy, ironically it is now nationalists who identify themselves on the side of progressive liberalism (the old unionist self-identity) while unionism, especially in its DUP articulation, is identified as illiberal, almost theocratic (how unionism used to dismiss nationalism).



## (5) New ideas and old purposes

At this point, we were tempted to refer to the academic's get-out clause conveniently supplied by Humphrey Lyttleton. His reply to a journalist's question about the future of modern jazz was pure genius: 'If I knew where it was going it would be there already.' Do we know where Irish ideological traditions are going? If ideological conviction involves faith in the direction of political travel then at first glance, the Brexit effect (ironically) has been to boost nationalist self-confidence (Irish influence in Northern Ireland policy can only increase) and to diminish unionist self-confidence ('getting Brexit done' really means a slow, and ideological painful, territorial castration). That said, our conclusion must be speculative. There are so many unknown unknowns that certainty is impossible. Nevertheless, it may be worth considering the ideological impact of Brexit according to a set of challenges and opportunities for the traditional ideologies of unionism and nationalism.

A possible convergence of ideological ironies generates nationalist self-confidence that the drystone wall of the Agreement cannot easily be put back together again as it was in 1998. The dislodging and the shifting provoked by the result of the referendum result of 2016 means that further change must happen. That further change assumes that the standing-in-relation and the balance of power within Northern Ireland, and between north and south, will shift further in the interest of nationalism. Ultimately it will mean Irish unity. That end is not surprising, of course - it is a given aspiration. It is a question of how soon, how urgently and by what process. It is *idealism of the imagination*, about conjuring a new reality into existence.

The general principle remains that Irish unity is the historical destiny as well as the natural reality of the island. All further argument is either embellishment or detail. It is the proclamation of a never-ending story - in short, the future belongs to *us*. The narrative involves an imagined state in which all obstacles to unity are capable of being overcome (unionists will see sense or be persuaded) and all present limitations are capable of being transcended (with sufficient political will). This idealism can only see facts as a limitation on imagination and a denial of the ideal.

Ideologically Irish unity has been normally pitched a generation away, always (yet another) '20 years' hence - near enough to unsettle unionists but distant enough not to test the practicalities of nationalist destiny. Following the EU referendum result, there have been frequent announcements of history taking wings and Brexit bringing about the swift end of the Union. It implies that Brexit involves such a reckless removal of the key stabilising stone from the dry wall of Irish politics that there would be a collapse of (nationalist) support for anything short of Irish unity. That suggestion has encouraged amongst some the claim that a border poll (along with a plan for Irish unity) is now a priority. In short, the expectation is that Brexit is a dramatic 'game changer' or 'barrier breaker' for Irish unity and accounts for its raised profile in nationalist discourse. The border in the mind (spiritual) and the line on the map (physical) coincide in a new urgency.

Novel arguments against Brexit reflect old arguments for Irish unity: that, at last, the day of a majority in Northern Ireland - disaffected from a UK outside the EU - has arrived. Here is that long expected working through of demographic change in Northern Ireland favouring Catholics/nationalists over Protestants/unionists. As one journalist wrote (McCarthy 2019), 'this island has entered the transition to unity' and that we are now in 'the persuasion phrase'

(of unionists) by the sheer weight of new facts which displace the old. What is the evidence? There is a number of elements to this new emphasis.

First, there is the argument according to changing communal balance in Northern Ireland. The 2011 Census showed that confessing Catholics made up 41% of the population of Northern Ireland, which rose to 45% if non-confessing Catholics were included. Those identifying as Protestant stood at 48%. It is likely that in the course of the last decade those numbers have changed further towards an equal communal balance. One BBC survey (Devenport 2018) showed that ‘45% of those surveyed said they would vote for Northern Ireland to stay in the UK, whilst 42% supported Northern Ireland leaving the UK and joining a united Ireland’. For unionists that is uncomfortably within a margin of polling error in favour of unity. For nationalists it is a sign that things have changed and changed irrevocably. Kevin Meagher (2016b) could argue that ‘Irish unity is now a medium-term probability. Within five years, it will have gained unstoppable momentum’. For Meagher (and those who take a similar position) ‘the sheer paucity of coherent arguments for retaining the Union’ is what makes unity inevitable. And the unstoppable momentum of his prediction would be 2021, the centenary of Northern Ireland’s creation.

Second, there is an expectation of scooping up a vital number of unionist remainers into a majority sufficient to swing a referendum vote in favour of Irish unity (especially since the Alliance Party has been strongly pro-EU in its politics). The European Commission has already provided clarification that the whole territory of a united Ireland would be part of the EU. It is possible to imagine that a number of unionists may be more receptive to that option. As the same BBC survey found (Devenport 2018) 28% of those supporting Northern Ireland’s continued membership of the UK now believed that the UK’s decision to leave the EU ‘made them more likely to vote for a united Ireland’. ‘More likely’ does not mean they would. The suspicion, however, is that such a reversal of pro-Union support to prioritising the EU - with Irish unity as the consequence of that priority – is for now unclear. The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey reports, based on face-to-face interviews, reveal a more complex picture and puts support for unity at much lower levels, as well as suggesting that Brexit has encouraged a retrenchment of the unionist/nationalist divide. The University of Liverpool NI General Election Survey (2019), also showed a similar position. The Brexit effect on unionist opinion may be much less transformative of opinion than expected.

Third, in electoral terms a number of new ‘firsts’ occurred. Unionism lost its majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2017, for the first time since the creation of the state, with unionist parties holding only 40 of the 90 seat Assembly and in the 2020 Irish General Election, Sinn Fein took the largest number of first preference votes for the first time with 24.5%, compared to 22% for Fianna Fáil and 21% for Fine Gael, shifting the political landscape in Ireland away from the traditional two party to a three party construct where Sinn Fein could no longer be sidelined, given that it would become either a junior coalition partner, or the main opposition party. As a consequence, Sinn Fein are now the only political party with significant political influence in both the north and south, allowing it to push the agenda for Irish unity from both ends, and increasing the calls for a referendum.

The urgency of these calls for a border poll involves a Lyttleton moment. They suggest that it is possible to say where Irish history is going because it *is* there already (Meagher’s ‘unstoppable momentum’). It is the task of the present generation to fulfil the destiny of Irish history. And here is another irony. The idealism of imagination with its vision of creative

possibility now swerves back. It returns in order to recover the purity of original purpose in the supremely sovereign act of declaring the unity of Ireland.

Others - especially the current Irish government and its Taoiseach, Micheal Martin - are cautious about the destabilising implications of this border poll nationalism and not only for tactical political purposes. There is no dissent, of course, from the value and goal of (eventual) Irish unity but the rhetoric and the trajectory are different. Martin's idea (**ref**) of a 'shared island' announced itself as one with which 'all sections of society, North and South - nationalist, unionist or neither - can engage with this fully and confidently.' This can be so because 'no outcome is pre-ordained' under the 1998 Agreement. The objective is to 'work together for a shared future without in any way relinquishing our equally legitimate ambitions and beliefs - nationalist, unionist or neither'. Any consideration of a border poll is pushed at least five years into the future. Martin's 'shared island' is a variation on the late John Hume's idea of an 'agreed Ireland' and it is no coincidence that Martin's caution has encouraged some venerable figures in the SDLP to warn against pushing a border poll (see Maginess 2020).

Amongst unionists, there has been a temptation over the last four years to stick with the mantra 'we joined in 1973 as one Union and we leave in 2016 as one Union'. As one commentator argued, 'unionists don't just oppose the formation of an all-Ireland state. They cherish their place in the United Kingdom, and want to play a full role in the political, economic and social life of the British nation' (Polley 2020). Unfortunately for that proposition, the split in the unionist vote alone between Leave and Remain makes it a difficult position to sustain. A substantial proportion of pre-Union supporters (not necessarily unionist party voters) are wary of the consequences for constitutional stability of forcing the Brexit issue in the direction of a 'hard border'. If nationalist ideology falls under the heading of the idealism of the imagination, unionist ideology is (for want of a better expression) the *idealism of practicality*. In short, the facts of life favour the Union.

It was once claimed – by the late Peter McLachlan - that nationalists think *deductively* beginning with a few general principles and deriving specific commitments from them while unionists think *inductively*, beginning from specific commitments and working up to general obligations. That is unpersuasive as a universal distinction but it did have some purchase on how political discourse is situated argumentatively. Today – despite Meagher's blanket dismissal – the pro-union argument tends to work facts upwards towards a persuasive case. Its starting point is *instrumental* – a consideration of the material benefits of remaining in the Union – the base from which affective support can be justified and maintained.

For example, calculation of the real cost of Irish unity has become a prominent unionist argument. According to Lord Bew (2017), being part of the UK 'in material terms amounts to a £20,000 subvention for every family of four in Northern Ireland and it 'ensures economic stability and for a majority it constitutes the imagined community of national belonging'. That British subvention to Northern Ireland is 'something which the Republic of Ireland could only take on by engaging a huge debt obligation at a highly vulnerable moment in its history'. That is why Bew is tempted (but not sufficiently convinced) to dismiss the fashionable notion that Brexit that has established an inevitable drift towards Irish unity. There is a ladder of commitment in that argument which assumes a dual benefit: appealing to those (like O'Doherty for example) who feel no emotional affinity with the Union but to feel comfortable (enough) in N. Ireland as part of the UK as well as to those who have strong emotional affinity with the Union, feel comfortable in N Ireland as part of the UK *and wish to*

feel comfortable on the island of Ireland. That the Brexit effect on unionist anxiety may be overstated and that there is comfort still in the idealism of practicality can be found in the recent Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ref). Almost two-thirds of unionist identifiers see no likelihood of a united Ireland in the next generation (20 years). Here is a further irony. The idealism of practicality must become significantly more imaginative than it ever has been if it is to secure the Union.

That same Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ref) found that the impact of Brexit on the ‘neither’ identity referenced by Martin (neither unionist nor nationalist) had been squeezed to 39 per cent (the lowest score in 15 years). However, it is a significant percentage. Its identity could be described as one wishing to retain the modifications of unionism and nationalism intimated in the compromise of the 1998 Agreement. If staying in the EU was impossible, it supported such modifications of the UK Withdrawal Agreement to ensure significant continuity between Northern Ireland and EU regulations and standards and therefore a ‘special status’ in all but name. Garry (2016) found that ‘those who identify as “Northern Irish” tend to vote to stay, with almost two thirds doing so’. That category of Northern Irish is often taken as a measure of the ideological ‘neither’. In the 2011 census 21% of people identified as Northern Irish rather than British or Irish (or 28% when Northern Irish was an additional identity to Irish and/or British). Possibly one can describe it as an identity where Protestants, possibly the largest component, can feel comfortable calling themselves ‘Irish’ (if distinctively ‘Northern’) and Catholics can feel comfortable admitting to being ‘Northern’ (though collectively and commonly ‘Irish’). Thus ideological ‘wild card’ is the significant swing constituency to which the idealisms of imagination and practicality need to pitch their case.

## **(6) Conclusions and the dilemma for political traditions**

The 1998 Agreement took the border - in the mind and on the map - out of its central position in Irish politics. The result of the 2016 EU Referendum brought it back in as the defining issue, defining because it highlights once more the issues of contesting ideological traditions - self-determination, legitimacy, statehood and belonging. In other words questions of who is sovereign, who decides and who are the people? In this article we demonstrated the intersection of unionist anxiety – the fear of marginalisation - and nationalist expectation – a border poll delivering Irish unity sometime soon.

In the immediate term one can imagine the emergence of a new ‘constructive ambiguity’ - to use a well-worn phrase used to describe the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Such constructive ambiguity could develop around the idea of Northern Ireland enjoying ‘the best of both worlds’ - a Northern Ireland benefiting economically, politically and culturally from its ‘special status’ within both the EU’s single market and the UK’s customs union. Unionism and nationalism remain the dominant ideological traditions, but that proportion of the electorate choosing *not* to self-identify in traditional ideological terms might be comfortable with this ambiguous status and it is this group – a constituency of swing voters – who may well determine the future of Northern Ireland after Brexit. What other trajectories are possible?

Inevitably, there will be further calls for a unification referendum and such calls have grown considerably since 2016. It is possible to imagine in 2021, a chaotic Brexit with significant negative economic effects in Northern Ireland. Far from the new ambiguous status delivering the best of both worlds it could deliver the worst of both worlds. Coinciding with the

contested centenary of Northern Ireland's existence, there could emerge a narrative of failure rather than success with significant ideological effect on the 'swing constituency'. It is possible further to imagine that coincidence antagonising moderate nationalist opinion, alienating non-identifiers and detaching some former unionist Remainers from their traditional allegiance. In that case, it would be difficult to resist demands for a border poll. These developments could coincide with Sinn Fein becoming a governing party in the Republic of Ireland, with the Irish state then also pushing strongly for a border poll. Even former DUP First Minister, Peter Robinson (2020), highlighted the need for unionism to prepare for such a poll (at an unspecified future date). However, the demand for a referendum on unity has its obvious dangers for ideological nationalism. It reduces the complex *modus vivendi* of 1998 to only one - and final - aspect of it. The danger is that demanding a border poll re-runs the old symbolic division only to inflame enmities, estranging moderate nationalism as well as unsettling unaligned opinion (Maginness 2020). Moreover, it is a strategy which may be at odds with (some of) elite opinion in the Republic (Fitzgerald 2020) who argue that Northern Ireland needs reform more than unity and that a referendum will only destabilise the island.

When we consider the position of unionism, there could be another irony. A push by republicans for a border poll could allow unionists to pose as defenders of the 1998 settlement and position themselves within a more conservative (as in 'cautious') consensus north and south on the island. The Peter Robinson article argued not in favour of a referendum on unity but in favour of imaginative unionist thinking to make a referendum either unlikely or winnable. It is at least conceivable that unionism, promoting a collective interest in making Northern Ireland work, could appeal to moderate nationalism, possibly alarmed at the divisive and disruptive consequences of a push for unity, and also to those others who don't subscribe to the symbolic identifications of either unionism or nationalism. The emphasis would be on not only the perceived instrumental value of remaining in the UK – employment, health and welfare – but also to the local identification which the late Seamus Mallon (2019) called a 'shared home place'. It is also conceivable that unionism could align itself with the initiative of Irish Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, to promote a 'Shared Island'. It is not necessary to agree that unity is ultimately desirable and unionists could insert themselves within a potentially fruitful approach, post-Brexit, to promote mutual social/economic interest through developing the institutional framework of the Agreement (Tannam 2020). Whether it can or will or it is possible to seize those opportunities is a question that must be left hanging.

On the maintenance of the Union, on the attraction of Irish unity, on enjoying constructive ambiguity of special UK/EU status, the persuasive pitch is likely to be to those who are in the 'neither' camp - neither ideologically unionist nor ideologically nationalist and that fact alone may modify the rhetoric and appeal of Northern Ireland's ideological traditions. Beyond these tentative speculations, little is clear politically, economically or culturally.

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