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‘The State We’re In:-

Imagining a New Republic; the Challenge to Irish Nationalism’

Thomas Paul Burgess

Something is moribund in the body politic of the United Kingdom.

The Union is terminally ill.

Yes, there may yet be periods of remission. Even some good days when self-delusion wins out over existential inevitability.

But be in no doubt. Brexit, Scottish and Irish Nationalism and regional economic aspiration are all eating away at the very fabric of the Act of Union itself.

We live in very different times from previous 20th century certainties and everything from portentous national and international events to unremitting demographic change have ensured that history marches relentlessly on.

Those who feel the winds of change most of course are the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities of Northern Ireland. For more than any other community within the union, they have (or perceive that they have) most to lose.

This community have been at war to protect and preserve their constitutional and cultural status. A community who feel that the very ground beneath their feet is coveted by many of their fellow citizens who walk amongst them. And by another state to the south where senior politicians speak publicly of aspiration, inevitability and fielding candidates in elections there.

Faced with this scenario, the political representatives of Ulster Unionism have shown little or no capacity for adroit or imaginative responses to the unfolding dilemma. Rather, the duopoly of power sharing that passes for (sometime) governance in Northern Ireland continues to lock them into a 'what we have, we hold' mind-set that is simply no longer fit for purpose.

Leo Varadkar's recent 'bullish' promise to Northern nationalists, might have been unthinkable under an earlier Enda Kenny- led Fine Gael administration.

"To the nationalist people in Northern Ireland, I want to assure you that we have protected your interests throughout these negotiations. Your birth right as Irish citizens, and therefore as EU citizens, will be protected. There will be no hard border on our island. You will never again be left behind by an Irish Government." An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD. 8th December 2017

Yet his comments and general demeanour regarding post-Brexit border arrangements – whether bolstered by assurances from Brussels or necessitated by the threat of potential Sinn Féin gains in any forthcoming election – have upped the ante in relation to the perennial 'national question'.

The re-imaging of a unitary state on the island of Ireland comes at a time, internationally, when an appetite for devolution and regional autonomy sits squarely in opposition to a renewed sense of nation statehood, bolstered by inward looking self-interest.

The Brexit desire to make Britain great again has been echoed by a Trump presidency intending to achieve a similar goal in the United States. Unbelievable as these developments might have seemed just a short time ago, we are experiencing a new dispensation that resonates to the popular 17th Century English ballad, '*The World Turned Upside Down'*.

Elsewhere, Catalonia has presented the Spanish Government with a number of demands for self-governance, Scottish nationalism currently keeps its powder dry in anticipation of a second referendum that may break up the Union and in Kurdistan, more than 92 percent of Kurds voted in favour of officially separating from the central Iraqi government.

In Northern Ireland, nationalists can now add estrangement from the European Union to their feelings of alienation from the Irish Republic. Yet suggestions that this necessarily bolsters an appetite for Irish re-unification from within the nationalist community, might be exaggerated. (Irrespective of Sinn Féin clearly identifying this as an opportunity to advance their own vision for a United Ireland).

Nevertheless, all actors –not least Sinn Féin - are now acknowledging the seismic changes on the political map of Ireland, north and south.

> In June 2016, the people of the North of Ireland – nationalist and unionist and others – voted to remain within the European Union. They did so despite very many having legitimate concerns regarding the EU. It is incomprehensible to have one part of Ireland operating within the EU and another outside it…The Brexit referendum result has swept away many of the previous political assumptions about the constitutional, political and economic status quo in Ireland. Ireland's political landscape, North and South, has been transformed dramatically.
>
> (Sinn Féin, 2016)

In that virtually unique manner in which Northern Irish politics can reduce the most complex and nuanced issues to a simple binary sectarian electoral outcome, both communities there find themselves signed up to the respective Brexit positions of the DUP and Sinn Féin (by dint of the mandate delivered to them and irrespective of individual voter preference on the matter).

If dissent does occur within the virtually 'Balkanised' society of Northern Ireland, there exists no viable alternative political vehicle by which to mobilise or express it.

Calls for an Irish border poll on the national question further risk reinforcing both division and democratic frustrations, by again reducing a complex and multi-faceted conundrum to a simple 'Yes/No' designation. Similarly, proponents of the 'demographic inevitability theory' which reduces the question of national sovereignty to a sectarian head-count, make unfounded presumptions on the preference that the nationalist community will express when (eventually) in a majority.

In this context, the pronouncements of Taoiseach Varadkar and Tánaiste Coveney regarding their aspirational nationalism, proves vapid and opportunistic. Neither politician seems publically willing to address the two substantial elephants in the room; firstly, the 48 per cent of the population identified as Protestants in the UK Census of 2011 and likely to express opposition to a united Ireland. Secondly, the massive annual subvention from Westminster, necessary to keep the province viable. Without a feasible socio-economic solution to these

daunting impediments to constitutional change, the Dublin government's assertions remain little more than empty (and destabilising) rhetoric.

Much in the manner that Arlene Foster and the DUP have been preening themselves with regard to their influence over the British Tory Party, Simon Coveney and the Fine Gael government have displayed considerable swagger concerning their apparent cast iron guarantee from the EU that until the Irish border question is settled to their satisfaction, no Brexit deal can be agreed.

That a veto can effectively be placed in the hands of the (defacto) unionist Government of Northern Ireland and nationalist Government in the Republic of Ireland, places both jurisdictions further at logger-heads with one another and augurs gravely for the prospects of an agreed Brexit solution.

Whilst it might safely be assumed that the majority of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, this should not automatically translate into the misnomer that the Irish government now have a real role in defending the European civic rights of that community. For in doing so, this over simplistic pronouncement once again conveniently ignores the vagaries of Northern Irish politics. Many non-nationalists - indeed unionists - voted to remain (just as they did in numbers on mainland UK). Yet there is no appeal to them made by the Irish government, to promote or protect *their* wishes or interests. This therefore smacks of unprincipled jingoism on Dublin's part and suggests perhaps, an opportunity missed by the Irish Government to rise above sectarian politics.

The Appeal to 'Creative and Courageous' Nationalism and Unionism

Due to the outcome of the Brexit referendum, the fall of the Northern Ireland Executive, subsequent general election results in Britain and Northern Ireland and a change of Sinn Féin and Fine Gael leadership, the political landscape – which superficially appears in a state of flux - currently flounders in a bog of stagnation.

In some sense, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Witness the further estrangement of the Northern Irish electorate voting in the Westminster determinations. In one fell swoop, eradicating the middle ground from Ulster politics and reinforcing the 'Balkanisation' of the region in bluntly sectarian, East / West of the Bann terms.

Any serious commentary on this development surely must acknowledge that once again, historical legacy and the democratic process have failed the electorate of Northern

Ireland. Insofar as the disconnect between both the DUP and Sinn Fein and their respective electorates, regarding representation which fairly or accurately reflects a variety of social and political opinion and aspiration across both their constituencies.

Shared civic values and a common desire for stable effective devolved government have fallen foul of questionable ethics, conservative social mores and a relentless pre-occupation with identity politics and partition. Whilst internationally, shibboleths and previous certainties come under review and revision, the immovable object of unionist intractability continues to be vexed by the irresistible force of aspirant nationalism.

Admittedly, in the context of a stalled power sharing administration, the intransigence of the DUP and Sinn Féin regarding 'red-line' issues does not inspire optimism. The Irish Language Bill; the red herring of a re-emerging second class citizenship; the lack of any meaningful mea culpa following the disastrous Renewable Heat Initiative debacle and the hubris attaching to the disproportionate leverage the DUP enjoys with the Tory government; all perhaps render the term, 'Creative and Courageous' nationalism and unionism an oxymoron.

Nevertheless, creativity and courage from the political classes is exactly what is required to break the current impasse and move forward in governance. It is certainly what their respective electorates deserve and increasingly demand.

Despite the high rhetoric following the Good Friday Agreement -of building a new power-sharing reality in post-conflict Northern Ireland – all attempts to engender a civil society where issues based politics pre-empt old sectarian enmities, has seemed futile. Unionists and Nationalists in the privacy of the voting booth, forever reduced to the same 'zero-sum' game of 'Them' and Us'. It is now being suggested that the GFA itself has ran its course, that it was little more than a Blairite monument to constructive ambiguity, and that it has now been found out. [1]

Up to now, the attitude of respective British and Irish governments has been to consign the Irish border question to the middle or distant future, remembering no doubt, the horrors of the near past and concerned that any such re-emerging narrative would risk dangerous destabilisation.

[1] Rather worryingly, the term 'constructive ambiguity' has become attached to political machinations leading to the December 2017 Brexit agreement on the Irish border.

Reluctantly however, it may now be necessary to admit that until the 'national question' is adequately resolved, no durable and lasting solution to governance in the region is possible. We can no longer put the 'cart before the horse' so to speak.

Rather than simply invite a border poll or referendum on unity (the overly simplistic framing of which would abdicate political nuance and inevitably invite a groundswell of emotional 'heart – over - head' division, a more sophisticated set of determinants is required.

In the first instance, both communities (and political parties) in Northern Ireland should be encouraged to reflect upon the changing nature of their relationships with their respective 'Motherlands'.

Ulster Unionists have for some time feared that British citizens generally (and the metropolitan elite in particular) show a practiced indifference to their status. Furthermore, whilst the DUP may briefly enjoy a position of influence with the British Government, they should be in no doubt that the Tory party, civil service mandarins and a considerable number of the British public, are holding their noses whilst doing business with them.

Similarly, Northern Nationalists surely (if begrudgingly) must now accept that their 'Irishness' is viewed in somewhat different terms to those citizens residing in Munster, Connaught and Leinster.

Sinn Fein's abstentionist policy at Westminster has been exposed for the symbolic ideological posturing that it has always been. Nationalist voters feel increasingly disenfranchised by this stance. Additionally, despite electoral gains, the party continues to be treated with suspicion by the political classes in the Republic, who forswear any political pact with them.

Archaic appeals to outdated notions of exclusive affinity with both British and Irish states, needs to be re-cast in terms of a common, shared agency, dictated by the uniquely historical, cultural and socio-political factors pertaining to those who live within the state of Northern Ireland.

In short, an imaginative and bold 'reimagining' of the national question is required.

One that adequately accommodates the complex and unique identity forged by Irish, British and regional/provincial associations. And whilst it has been the tradition of liberal left thinkers to assert that this must begin with the Protestant/Unionist/ Loyalist community

loosening their grip on the Union, this chapter will assert that the real challenge to resolving the national question in perpetuity, lies with the Catholic / Nationalist/Republican communities in Ireland, North and South.

It is an oft-stated maxim in the Republic of Ireland – spoken from bar room to boardroom – that the biggest impediment to Irish unity, is in fact… Sinn Fein themselves.

The irony of this I am sure, is not lost on the reader, nor do I assume, on Sinn Féin.

Sectarian infused interpretations and ownership of the concept of '*Irishness*' – where the term is given to be synonymous with 'Catholic, nationalist, Republican' – has done much to alienate Irish (and British) Protestants (who otherwise might be encouraged to find common cause with shared affiliations). Sinn Féin have much to answer for in this respect.

In Leinster House and in the Dublin Financial District, Irish 'exceptionalism' has somehow come to replace a previously held feeling of pride – tempered by unpretentiousness- in Irish identity. Its hallmarks unfortunately are represented in the thrusting, neo-liberal, 21st century, braggadocio of revitalised economic success and affluence.

Simultaneously, Ulster (or rather, DUP) 'Britishness' is now most assuredly out of step with the rest of the union in regard to their socially conservative positions adopted around abortion and same sex marriage.

Therefore, central to the premise of nurturing political courage and creativity, is the rejection of the perceived dichotomy of the designations, '*British*' and '*Irish*'. That is to say, that the two are not mutually exclusive and – in keeping with the tenets of the Good Friday Agreement – duel / joint nationality should be the accepted status of all citizens in the Province. However, perhaps a third designation - that of *Northern* Irish - could usefully sit alongside these fixed affiliations and be actively promoted by legislators in all civic arenas.

The Unionist communities of Northern Ireland enjoy unique cultural attributes that are drawn historically from their time as residents on the north-eastern corner of the island of Ireland (long pre-dating partition). Irish regiments within the British army display the trappings of Irish identity on their colours and paraphernalia. This in turn is complimented by the heraldry and symbols of the Royal institutions themselves. Of course, these are legacies of a time when a 32 county Ireland resided within the shared community of Commonwealth and United Kingdom.

Moreover, when 'Irishness' is deemed to be 'de-weaponised' and therefore 'safe' by Protestants, many are more comfortable to embrace these associations. [2]

Likewise, the nationalist communities of Northern Ireland are influenced by many cultural norms, which have their origins and perpetuation from within the United Kingdom. (The National Health Service, the Judiciary, the Social Welfare system, the Civil Service and the BBC, all have exercised a significant sway on this community).

Crucially, the distinctive fusion of these shared Celtic/Scots/Saxon influences, meld together into a unique regional identity that has been described as, 'Northern Irish'. (Although it is acknowledged that for some Nationalists, this descriptor – like many semantically challenged terminologies associated with the region – carries an implied legitimacy for the very state itself, which they reject.) (McNicholl, 2017).

Hypothetically, freed from the limitations of an over simplistic, bi-polar, all-encompassing label of oppositional 'Britishness' or 'Irishness', an agreed, shared, regional, designation would form the foundation to negotiate for a ground-breaking, political re-alignment. Perhaps ultimately leading to a form of re-unification on the island of Ireland. (But employing a very different model than has been previously conceived.)

The Need for Constitutional Reform

> In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred; We, the people of Éire, humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ; Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial; gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful independence of our Nation. (Bunreacht na hÉireann, (Preamble))

[2] Linda Ervine, sister-in-law of the late PUP leader, David, famously has championed Irish language initiatives in Protestant working class areas. Another easy affiliation in this context is the all-Island support for Irish rugby.

A New Ireland, it follows, requires a new constitution for the 21st century. And a referendum putting to the Irish people the need to reform and re-write key aspects of the constitution, will offer a valuable insight into the appetite for meaningful change regarding the national question. It would also communicate a strong message of intent to northern unionists, similar to the abandonment of articles 2 and 3 revised by means of the Nineteenth Amendment, which took effect on 2nd December 1999 (Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act (1998)).

In other areas, the state has made significant progress on the issues of same sex marriage and is currently reviewing abortion law. However, if constitutional change *is* to be undertaken, then there exist other aspects of its composition that might usefully benefit from revision.

In the context of cross-border and UK relations, some articles may present themselves as opportunities.

> Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.
> (Article 2, Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution Act (1998))

Might there also be a case here, for adding an insertion regarding a special affinity with those who occupy the north-eastern region of the island, who share dual nationality or provincial kinship and offer another facet of Irish identity? Similarly, a statement regarding the unique relationship that Ireland enjoys with the UK, (concerning culture, trade and the movement of peoples) is perhaps also worthy of inclusion.

A new constitution would have to reflect the spirit of this innovative imagining, to which all could subscribe and aspire.

Writing over 45 years ago, Michael Sweetman stated plainly, what was required.

> We [in the Republic] have got to go back to 1912 and relinquish a great deal of what has happened since in order that both parts of the country can make a new start.
>
> He cited, "…consistent attempts to impose a narrow concept of Irishness, involving the primacy of Gaelic culture, the rejection of

> British strands in Irish traditions, and a particular view of history which made a virtue of fighting against Britain and a vice of defending British rule".
> (Sweetman, 1972)

Furthermore, Sweetman did not hesitate to prosecute those historical, defining foundations of the state he viewed as backward –looking and repugnant.

> It is not from that kind of Republicanism, with its glorification of violence in the past and its incitement to violence in the present, that the new Ireland will come.
> (Sweetman, 1972)

For those thinkers brave enough to countenance meaningful change regarding how we frame the national question, other customs and cherished principles would additionally require review; Éire as the name of the state, Irish as the "first national language", the tricolour as the national flag, and a new national anthem, would all be subject to review. (If deemed in the national interest, a reappraisal of Commonwealth membership might also be undertaken).

For many, these revisions would undoubtedly prove too high a price to pay. But what if the reward for such courage was a newly imagined, 32 county federal Republic?

A New Federal Ireland

The late Conor Cruise O'Brien made perhaps his most thought-provoking meditation on Northern Irish affairs in the late 1990s, when he suggested that:

> …the interests of the Protestant or unionist community in Northern Ireland were more threatened by the UK's determination to do a deal with Sinn Féin/IRA than they would be by a negotiated deal with Dublin to unite Ireland under a federal-type arrangement that guaranteed all existing rights to all residents of the North. This

> community, he maintained, would be better able to defend its interests under such an agreement than it would as "despised hangers-on" and a tiny minority in the UK.
> (Kennedy, 2014)

O'Brien was speculating at a time that pre-dated Sinn Fein's electoral successes on both sides of the border. And of course, the instability and division ensured by the Brexit vote.

Might a DUP majority realistically give credence to a federal proposal that sought to include them in a new, federal Ireland? In the current climate, the answer is almost certainly, a resounding 'no'! Yet as we have learned, Northern Irish politics can sometimes surprise. Few would have given any credibility to the idea of a power-sharing administration with the late Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness at its head.

The unionist community of Northern Ireland possess a keen appreciation of 'profit and loss' in regard to the practice of deal making. Depressingly, their eye for a good deal is often subjugated to their fear of estrangement from Britain and this clearly remains so.

However, we are in a new, post-Brexit, dispensation that has disorientated unionists (despite their bluster) and undermined the very Union itself. Furthermore, the prospect of a far left labour party in power- with traditional ties to Sinn Féin- certainly focuses the mind. There have previously been periods when Unionism has been presented with opportunities to 'recalibrate' their locus on the island of Ireland, largely on their own terms and from an advantageous position of strength[3].

Now is another such opportunity. Therefore, in any discussions relating to federalisation, what might be in it for unionists?

Put simply, dual nationality de facto could mean, dual jurisdiction. Unionists have historically opposed any form of Dublin influence in *their* affairs as they saw them. However,

[3] Another such opportunity arose around border Brexit negotiations. Had the DUP been confident enough to rise above the usual fears regarding a diminution of NI's place in the UK, then Northern Ireland as a region might economically have benefitted enormously as a 'special status' area, enjoying unique customs provisions between the UK and EU.

dual jurisdiction is a two way street. Whilst there would certainly be a move toward joint authority of the Province, that arrangement could be reciprocated. [4]

The reunification of the nine Ulster counties, offering devolved powers to the region, might be a good place to begin. In a federal Ireland, unionists would be a formidable voting bloc in a system of government where coalitions are the rule rather than the exception. Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan natives who routinely complain about the 'Dublin-centric' nature of policy making, might welcome robust representation of their affairs by canny and battle-hardened Stormont veterans. (Now freed from shackles of sectarian politics to best promote their constituency interests).

And what of Stormont, Dáil Éireann and the Oireachtas?

In recognition of the dual (triple?) nationality afforded to the region, elected representatives might happily sit in both Westminster and Dáil Éireann [5] if returned to do so at respective elections held by the UK and Ireland in the provincial jurisdiction. Thus again, enhancing the political influence of the region. Stormont and the Oireachtas might usefully occupy the roles of regional assemblies, the former for nine county Ulster, the latter for 23 county Leinster, Munster and Connaught. [6]

The maintenance of Northern Ireland as part of the UK, whilst simultaneously playing a pivotal role in the governance of a federal Irish republic, may be a lot to ask nationalists to accommodate. But consider the juxtaposition for a moment. Sinn Féin, avowedly Irish Republicans to their bootstraps, enjoy MP status at Westminster (albeit in absentium), whilst the party are fully involved in opposition within the governmental processes of the Irish state.

The thorny question of who will foot the bill for a re-configured Ireland is of course centrally important. It is unlikely that Westminster would sanction the continuing subvention for Northern Ireland as is, in any new arrangement. Neither could Ireland alone fund such an enterprise. Therefore, there might be subventions from both governments for a designated period. Certainly until the region moves toward a degree of self-sustainability. Special funding

[4] The question of whether Irish citizens should be extended the right to hold British citizenship is the inevitable out-playing of this development.

[5] There may be a case for the use of the D'Hondt method in this regard. This is a highest averages method for allocating seats, and is thus a type of party-list proportional representation. Proportional representation systems aim to allocate seats to parties approximately in proportion to the number of votes received. For example, if a party wins one-third of the votes then it should gain about one-third of the seats.

[6] There is every chance of course that presented with such an arrangement, the other regions-particularly Munster- may press for a degree of semi-autonomy themselves.

arrangements – possibly benefitting from targeted initiatives from the EU and US-would also apply.

It is neither possible nor desirable to speculate here on the broad, complex and far-reaching modifications required to the existing systemic and institutional workings of both states. However, some considerations seem axiomatic. For example:

- A National Federal Security Service could be put in place, with elite operatives from the PSNI and An Garda Siochana working together on an all-Ireland basis.

- Legal protections must be agreed in order to defend and promote genuine parity of esteem, specifically for the British/unionist tradition within the new state. These would traverse the education, health, broadcasting and religious sectors, amongst others.

- Initiatives to promote civic allegiance to and ownership of the new federal republic should be a high priority.

Rather than hold on grimly to a status quo, (that will inevitably come under more scrutiny and increased stress from electoral demographics and a British government, indifferent to the plight of the regions in general and Northern Ireland in particular) unionist politicians must put the well-being of their people front and centre. To do this, they must be prepared to '*re-imagine'* the national question in a way that protects in perpetuity, the cultural identity, rights and economic future of their electorate on the island of Ireland. To realise this, they must embrace a new dispensation, fit for a new millennium.

In conclusion, it follows then, that Irish nationalists – north and south- must also be prepared to re-examine (and perhaps compromise) treasured shibboleths established from the formation of the Irish state and before. In doing so, Ireland can move forward with the imagination and courage of a state no longer mired in the politically infantile legacies of the 20th Century. Revolution and rebellion, church-state controls and post-colonial inferiority complexes must be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Similarly, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 – ground breaking as it was in brokering peace in Northern Ireland- has exhausted its usefulness in relation to the power-sharing administration of the province. Unionists must realise that they have a far more productive and

safeguarded future with an increasingly self-confident and affluent Irish Republic, than they do with a Sinn Fein party, who have always been antagonistic toward them, their state and their legitimate place on the island of Ireland.

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