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ARTICLE

The Fractured Island: Divided Sovereignty, Identity and Politics in Ireland

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Abstract

Since the final conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the violent conflict and military operations convulsing the state of Northern Ireland since 1969 appeared over and peace restored. Despite this, profound mistrust and division remains. This paper examines the factors influencing historic conflict in Ireland with reference to the acceptable forms of governance in a deeply divided society with antagonistic and diametrically opposed concepts of citizenship, allegiance and sovereignty. The changes have been fundamental and profound: absence of military occupation models, entry into public life and political responsibility of former combatants, development of power-sharing governmental structures and progress of civil society. The fact remains that the Good Friday Agreement was seen by the majority community – the unionist population – as a guarantee to assert its intention and desire to remain an integral part of the United Kingdom (to remain British). In the same manner and in the same way, the Agreement was seen by the minority community – the nationalist population – as a guarantee to assert its intention to leave the United Kingdom and to re-unite with the rest of Ireland (to remain Irish). Ireland has never been a uniform or agreed socio-political entity. The nature of Irish society is been fragmented, divided and polyglot. The fractured states that emerged from the forced partition of Ireland in 1922 epitomized the crises and issues around sovereignty and identity. Disputed sovereignty in Ireland is analyzed in relation to three key associated factors: ownership, legacies of colonial power and the dynamics of changing demographics.

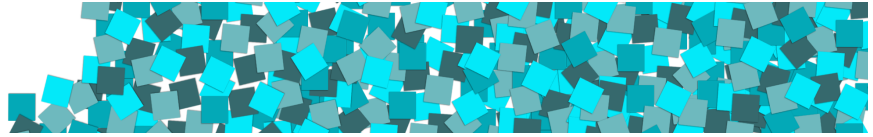## AGREEMENT: END OR BEGINNING?

With the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) in 1998, a turbulent chapter in the history of Ireland seemed to have ended. The violent conflict, war and military operations that had convulsed the state of Northern Ireland since 1969 appeared over and peace restored. This brutal conflict had been one of the longest running civil disturbances in the world and the greatest military and community conflict in Europe until the onset of the Balkan wars in the early 1990s.

Despite the enormous difficulties in securing cross-community support, as well as the support of the majority of the populations in the two States that make up the island of Ireland (the Republic and Northern Ireland), the Belfast Agreement was massively endorsed by two referendums in 1998. This was justifiably hailed as a major breakthrough and as the end of a phase of extreme violence and conflict.

Despite this, profound mistrust and division remained, particularly among the unionist (or pro-British) elements of the population: the Agreement employed an often deliberately vague phraseology in terms of acceptance of responsibility for past actions and an approach of 'creative ambiguity'. There followed a period of some eight years in which false starts, political blockades, police reform and the enormous challenges of military de-commissioning were faced.

Nonetheless, by 2007 the political mechanisms were up and running, an administration based on power sharing was operational and a new Northern Ireland began to reflect the feeling that a better future was slowly emerging. In many ways, the progress has been remarkable. This has also been the focus of the most successful application of the theory of consociational theory.

Consociational theory, developed by Arend Lijphart and other scholars (Lijphart, 1975), is one of the most influential theories in comparative political science. Its key contention is that divided territories (whether regions or states) with historically antagonistic ethnically, religiously or linguistically divided peoples, are effectively, efficiently and sometimes optimally governed according to consociational principles.

This has been intensively examined by scholars as both a method and approach that demonstrate resolution of seemingly intractable problems while also implementing forms of governance, which have a relatively wide level of acceptance.

"Complete consociational democracies respect four organizational principles:

1) Executive power-sharing (EPS). Each of the main communities share in executive power, in an executive chosen in accordance with the principles of representative government.
2) Autonomy or self-government. Each enjoys some distinct measure of autonomy, particularly self-government in matters of cultural concern.
3) Proportionality. Each is represented proportionally in key public institutions and is a proportional beneficiary of public resources and expenditures.
4) Veto-rights. Each is able to prevent changes that adversely affect their vital interests." (McGarry and O'Leary, 2006)

The development of functioning administrative and political mechanisms has been accompanied by a remarkable reduction in violence and civil strife. Solid economic progress was made, with levels of inward investment in post-war Northern Ireland beginning to show solid improvement. Policing reforms were significant and far-reaching and reflected a dramatic re-alignment of the role, nature and demographic composition of the police service.

From a pre-Agreement position where the police force (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) had been 93% Protestant, the new Police Service of Northern Ireland, by 2010, was 69% Protestant and 31% Catholic. More significantly, it received notably higher levels of public support and approval.

The changes have been fundamental and profound. The absence of military occupation models, the entry into public life and political responsibility of former combatants, the development of a power-sharing governmental structure and the progress of civil society are positive and welcome developments for the vast majority of people.

The absence of violent conflict, however, is not the same as peace and sustainable collaboration. The fact remains that the new models of governance in Northern Ireland are papering over the divisions around two fundamentally and diametrically opposed national aspirations.

The fact remains that the Good Friday Agreement was seen by the majority community – the unionist population – as a guarantee to assert its intention and desire to remain an integral part of the United Kingdom (to remain British). Similarly the Agreement was seen by the minority community – the nationalist population – as a guarantee to assert its intention to leave the United Kingdom and to re-unite with the rest of Ireland (to remain Irish). The Agreement, in one of its more ingenious phrases, allows citizens in Northern Ireland to assert individually that they are Irish or British, or both or neither.

"Mutual recognition of national claims lay at the core of the Agreement. Ireland has recognized the British political identity of unionists. The UK recognized Irish northern nationalists as a national minority, not simply as a cultural or religious minority, and as part of a possible future Irish national majority. Unionists who made the Agreement recognized nationalists as nationalists, not simply as Catholics. Nationalists recognized unionists as unionists, and not just as Protestants." (McGarry and O'Leary, 2002, p. 58)

Mutual recognition however, is only one step. That in itself has proved intensely problematic. It masks the significant disparities between different national traditions. It also masks the trajectory of history and the repeated insurrections by the population of Ireland to secure rights, recognition and autonomy in the face of often overwhelming levels of oppression and marginalization. It is unlikely that these issues will diminish in the coming years.

"Specifically, the two states have been keen to provide the mechanism through which paramilitarism can be diverted into what is deemed to be political 'normality'. An obvious characteristic of conflict resolution in the Irish case is that the illusion has to be created whereby each side will achieve some of its ultimate goals and objectives without being seen to lose face. This process
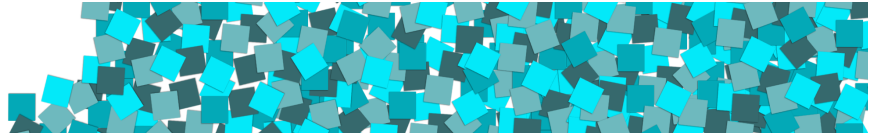
of political confection misses the reality that without the removal of the causes of conflict the discord within Northern Irish society will lie dormant and, as is noticeable at present, reproduce acceptable levels of violence." (Shirlow and Stewart, 1999)

THE CONTINUING THREAT

Under the surface of the new and peaceful Northern Ireland, three critical fault lines remain which in themselves provide a real and present threat to stability and peace.

The first is the external economic environment, which has undergone a profound shift since the collapse of the economy and accompanying banking crisis since 2008. Much of the presumed successful outcome of the Agreement was explicitly based on the creation of a viable economic space where inward investment, improved competitiveness and a vibrant ICT-enhanced export sector would create full employment for the population. The impact of the crisis, the inability of the new Northern Irish administration to raise sufficient tax revenue and the severe impact of public spending cuts on the most heavily subsidized economy in the UK all have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland.

"From the case of Northern Ireland, there are four specific economic lessons to draw:

1. Economic disparity was a principal aggravating factor in touching off and sustaining violence. Together with a series of legislative changes, improved economic conditions helped reduce the disparity between Catholic and Protestant unemployment rates from as high as 14% in 1985 to about 3.5% in 2004;
2. Public sector financial support by the British government underpinned the economy through the most difficult periods of the Troubles, although a side effect of subsidies was to reduce productivity;
3. Private sector growth supported by substantial foreign direct investment, from the US in particular, was a key driver of increased employment and improved living standards;
4. International mediation began around economic issues.

The importance of economics in conflict resolution is that it sets aside the question of motive, of grievance, of historical rights and wrongs, and focuses instead on the question of economic opportunity: what conditions – economic conditions in particular – have made the conflict possible? For if these conditions can be removed, progress to end the conflict might be made,

just as surely as if the motives had been removed." (Portland Trust, 2007)

The second is the shifting importance of external relations. The Belfast Agreement has key elements in relation to the institutional relationships contained therein: between Northern Ireland and the Republic, between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, between the United Kingdom and the Republic. In addition, there is both implicit and explicit reference to relationships with the United States and the European Union.

Partly as a result of the generalized economic crisis since 2008, but also as a result of changing external landscapes, we are witnessing significant issues and changes at the level of the European Union. In addition, the economic implosion of the Republic of Ireland has cast a profound shadow over many elements, not least trust in the Republic as a model for effective and meaningful socio-economic future development for the northern population. And then there is the question of shifting constitutional priorities and systems in the United Kingdom itself. The real possibility of both Scottish independence with a forthcoming referendum in 2014 and the growth of specifically English nationalism and overt hostility to UK membership of the European Union are significant factors in future landscapes around national identity and aspirations in both parts of Ireland. They also have implications for the stability of the current conflict resolution models employed at the level of governance.

Third, there is the continuation of embedded sectarianism, deep community divisions and the persistence of overt hostility and prejudice between members of the main traditions in Northern Ireland, broadly summed up as Catholic and Protestant (although these labels mask much more complex and deeper divisions). The shifting demographic balance only intensifies some of these dimensions. For example, on the foundation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1922, the population of the six counties was roughly 70% Protestant and 30% Catholic. Today it is 55% Protestant and 45% Catholic. This indicates that the future may well see a Catholic majority, with clear implications for the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. To put this bluntly, unionism now depends on securing Catholic and nationalist support for its cause, a profoundly contradictory position.

In December 2012, the emergence of significant violence and rioting in loyalist working class communities emerged as a result of the decision by Belfast City Council to restrict flying the UK union flag to a limited number of specified days during the year. This minor change (itself a significant compromise and concession by the nationalist community) was seen by some loyalist elements as a fundamental attack on the constitutional position of the state and a denial of unionist identity. The violence was severe, with a marked increase in attacks on the police. This new
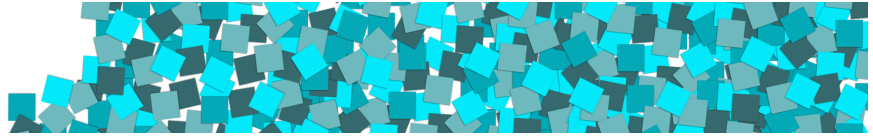
neutral service is now seen as yet another 'concession' to nationalism. The rapid intensification of polarization is acknowledged by all as deeply worrying. It also speaks of the high levels of alienation and fear in unionist communities, themselves beset by a host of social and economic challenges. For these communities, the benefits of the peace process are portrayed as not immediately evident.

All these issues point to the continuance of dispute as a manifestation of divided concepts of sovereignty and identity. This is the fundamental divide in Northern Ireland. If the Belfast Agreement is seen as the final stage in the conflict resolution process to end war, then the issue has barely been addressed. If, however, it is seen as the beginning of a process, issues around understanding sovereignty can be addressed only with the clear expectation on all sides that this opens a parallel discourse on national identity and allegiance. In the Irish context, this re-opens the discourse on historic conflict and struggle around national liberation. It is in these contradictory and shifting constitutional sands that containment of the sources of conflict and dispute are being articulated in Northern Ireland.

HISTORIC CONTEXT OF DISPUTED SOVEREIGNTY

The conflict from 1969 to 1998 in Northern Ireland was only the most recent phase of conflict and violence that has characterized Irish history since the sixteenth century and the implementation of formal colonization policies and planned military conquest by the Tudor régime. In fact, the roots can be traced even further back to the initial Norman invasion of the Irish petty kingdoms in the twelfth century.

Ireland always remained on the periphery of European politics and statecraft. It was however, in every significant sense, the first conscious colony and served as a laboratory for the colonizing imperatives that would shape English expansion in North America and the Caribbean. The internal processes of English (and subsequently British) colonization in Ireland mirrored the process described by Galtung (2009) of exploitation, penetration, fragmentation and marginalization. One result of this lengthy process of invasion, ethnic displacement and subordination was the creation of a profoundly divided and fractured political entity, which never achieved autonomy or self-determination in its economic, social or political affairs. Consequently, Irish history became one of lengthy and regular uprisings and revolts against the established order, and of a gradual decline in the standard of living that, by the time of the impact of the Great Famine in 1846-49, had reduced Ireland to a demographically shattered state with one of the lowest standards of living in Europe.

The political solution proposed and implemented by the British State in 1922, after the War of Independence, rested upon the partition of Ireland into two states. The Irish Free State (later evolving into the Republic of Ireland in 1949) occupied the majority of the island and was formally self-governing and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Northern Ireland occupied the six northeastern counties of Ireland and remained constitutionally part of the United Kingdom, although with an autonomous parliament and government which rapidly implemented its own laws, security and governance mechanisms.

This state, over 70% Protestant at the time of partition, rapidly became a deeply divided and sectarian entity whose very existence was not accepted by a large minority of the population, which sought the restoration of a united Ireland and the recognition of equal rights. The majority population aimed to maintain the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and the Protestant and British nature of the territory it controlled. This conflict about fundamentally different political aspirations has been exacerbated by inequalities between the two communities, by the wounds inflicted through violence, but also by increasing intra-communal diversity.

> "The conflict in Northern Ireland is primarily caused by incompatible conceptions of national belonging and the means to realize them. These two different conceptions are the goal of a united Ireland, pursued by Nationalists and Republicans, and the goal of continued strong constitutional links between the province and the United Kingdom, desired by Unionists and Loyalists. Historically, these two traditions have been associated with two different religions – Catholicism and Protestantism." (Wolff, 2002)

This divided sense of allegiance underlines the understanding of the perennial conflict dominating Northern Ireland's brief history as being a conflict between two fundamentally different conceptions of national belonging. In that classical sense one can approach the dimensions of Irish conflict from the position of divided allegiance and its political manifestation, divided sovereignty. In fact, the roots of this division are more complex and go far deeper into the origin and outworking of the European colonial and imperialist adventure, as a conscious articulation of state policy since the sixteenth century.

In this sense one can look at the other critical dimensions of sundered Irish identities and allegiances: the persistence of systemic discrimination against large sections of the population; the creation and maintenance of blatantly discriminatory criminal codes against indigenous culture, language and identity; the systematic denial of legal and civil rights as a conscious act of state policy; the overt use of sectarianism as an instrument of political control and the attempted demographic transformation of the island's
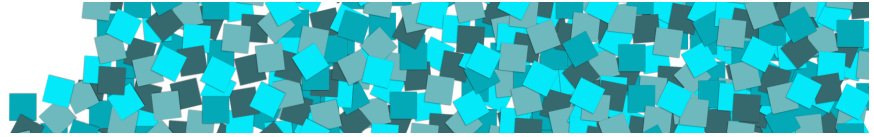
population through a variety of measures from land confiscation to ethnic transfer to forced starvation and emigration.

This alters the conceptualization of current understandings of divided sovereignty as found in other countries to one of a dynamic process and interrelationship between conquerors and conquered, ruler and ruled. The understanding of this divided sovereignty as a result of explicit colonial policy and control is what makes Irish political articulation of identity unique in contemporary European terms.

Thus the disputed sovereignty of Ireland in general (for this issue long pre-dates the creation of Northern Ireland in 1922 by the partition of the island) is paralleled by embedded inter-communal hostility and conflict, most seen in the persistence of sectarianism, bigotry and prejudice. The work of MacGreil has explored this in great depth over many years. The profound and sustained polarization between communities in Northern Ireland is evidenced at almost every level. Apart from lack of contact and engagement, there usually exist separate institutions and structures for education, sports, culture, religious expression and so on. Many writers have compared this, not unrealistically, to a form of self-enforced apartheid.

Those affected by sectarianism speak movingly of the consequences. These center on profound levels of fear and anxiety. Others speak of humiliation and distress. Remembrance of taunting, name calling and jeering is commonly referenced. Insult, rudeness and insensitivity are among the wrongdoings described. The critical point is that these feelings are reality for those who have experienced them. They cannot be justified or rationalized by others. The victims of sectarian attack or discrimination are the only experts of their own reality. And their witness is powerful. Sectarianism is targeted and awful (Farrell, 1976).

The stark reality of conflicting ideas of sovereignty and allegiance is contained within the narrative of centuries of exploitation, colonization, plantation and dispossession. It is critical to locate conflict resolution mechanisms within this context, which is both highly charged and deeply contradictory for the populations concerned. Terry Eagleton, himself a son of the Irish diaspora, has written cogently of this.

"…the struggle in Northern Ireland writes dramatically large a tension between political principle and political realism which is of more general import. It is, in part, a clash between actuality and counter-factuality – between fact and value, indicative and subjunctive, positivist and idealist, pragmatist and utopian, what does and what should (or should not) exist. In the case of Northern Ireland, these complex tensions are overlaid by a historical/contemporary axis, such that wholly divergent views of the region emerge depending on whether one is examining it synchronically or diachronically, from the standpoint of its political

genesis or the viewpoint of its empirical existence." (Eagleton, 2003)

CHANGING FUTURES

Discussion of change has become almost a cliché in the Irish context. The transformation of a largely rural and agrarian society, with a self-perception of racial and cultural homogeneity, into a complex and multi-ethnic, postmodern melting pot at the cutting edge of technological advance, is one of the great myths of contemporary Irish public discourse. Like all myths, it does encompass some surface truths while explaining little about the underlying reasons for a historical fact and economic realities. The change process in Irish society is similar to that experienced by other societies undergoing the dual processes of industrialization and integration into a world market economy. That this process had commenced several centuries previously with the impact of colonization, expropriation and plantation does add originality to the Irish experience – especially in a specifically European context.

It also means that Irish social diversity is not a new phenomenon. The fracture lines of Irish identity are both complex and laced with the potential for significant violence. The norm for Irish society for many centuries has been one of violence and contentious fragmentation with little, if any, shared sense of unity or common purpose. The sense of a settled, cohesive society moving through the standard European phases of state formation, balanced economic growth and enhanced civic enlightenment has not been Ireland's. Sovereignty itself has been a disputed notion around external control and domination.

The traumatic course of Irish history has meant that change has usually been accompanied by deep resistance or panicked sectorial clutching to often meager economic gains. While the specificity of Irish history does not negate broad economic trends and developments, it lends a unique perspective to legacies of difference and disadvantage in the process of economic transformation. The depiction of Ireland as a homogeneous and uniform cultural polity is a recent one. It has its origins in the settlements achieved by the Land League, the pervasive cultural influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the post-Famine era and the inert conservatism of the two States that emerged from the Partition settlement. The trauma of the last thirty years in Northern Ireland has been as much linked to social change, urbanization, inequality and cultural identities as it has to movements for or against political unification.

The key point is that Ireland has never been a uniform or agreed socio-political entity. The nature of Irish society has been a fragmented, divided and polyglot one. In its very fibers, Ireland has been a laboratory of diversity. Its cultural mosaic has encompassed layers of identity not to
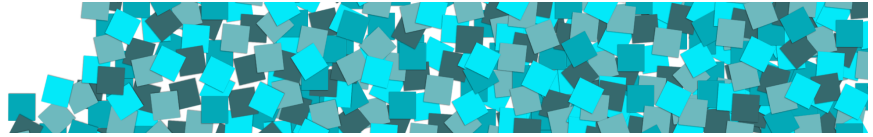
be expected in a remote offshore island. Its discontinuities and divisions have however been the source of extraordinary creativity and interplay, where no single culture (Celtic, Gaelic, Danish, Norman French, English, Scottish, Flemish, Jewish or Huguenot) has had a monopoly of Irishness.

In both states that emerged from the partition of Ireland in 1922, civic responsibilities and oversight were subcontracted to private, largely religious agencies. Ireland is presently grappling with the revelations of profound institutional abuse and extensive networks of denial and cover-up in its educational, social, institutional and commercial spheres. The uncertainty and shock stemming from disclosures about the litanies of abuse have had as much to do with locating responsibility in state authority and legitimacy as loss of faith in the traditional self-image of a caring and supportive society.

The traditional depiction of Irish backwardness and underdevelopment has a strong parallel with contemporary depictions of social exclusion. Within every category, Irish society could be viewed in *toto* as a metaphor for under-privilege and disadvantage. The structural inequalities were built into a fragmented and discriminatory polity. As the decades of disadvantage unfolded in the twentieth century, Ireland seemed unable to emerge from the social, economic and cultural constraints that dragged it down. In such an environment, Raymond Crotty, the chronicler of agricultural underdevelopment and inequality, observed with a wry bitterness that Ireland had become simply unable to support as many people as cattle.

As one astute academic observer has pointed out, Ireland operates an ambiguous position in the current global economy, where notions of underdevelopment and limited sovereignty intersect:

"Ireland's position in the global system is a very contradictory one. At one level, it is characterized by exceptional levels of dependency upon external capital, both north American and European. At the same time, Ireland's position as a 'bridge economy' between the US and the EU has enabled Irish people to have a significantly higher income than they might otherwise have had. The GDP figures are exaggerated certainly, but there is no getting away from the fact that wages in Ireland are, by and large, significantly higher than in Mediterranean Europe. To many people, this seemed like a good deal. It is only with the global financial crisis that the downside of the deal has become more evident. Suddenly Ireland was being demoted to the status of a 'peripheral' state, albeit a periphery of the world's second major core region." (Coakley, 2012, p. 8)

Decades of deprivation, emigration, political violence, unemployment and disadvantage were connected to the disputed nature of sovereignty and national identity. The attitudes, practices, rationalizations and understandings of those decades persist, and persist profoundly, in the social and economic practices of modern Irish society, both north and south. The specific nature of Irish social dislocation intersects, and is organically connected to, more widely recognized aspects of the processes around both national identity and growing globalization.

As far as the relationship between individual citizens, identity groups and the state is concerned, institutional design is about the recognition and protection of different identities by the state. On the one hand, this relates to legislation on both human and minority rights, that is, the degree to which every citizen's individual human rights are protected, including civil and political rights, as well as the extent to which the rights of different identity groups are recognized and protected. While there may be a certain degree of tension between them, (such as between a human rights prerogative of equality and non-discrimination and a minority rights approach emphasizing differential treatment and affirmative action) the two are not contradictory, but they need to complement each other in ways that reflect the diversity of divided societies and contribute to peaceful accommodation.

Ireland remains a partitioned country. The two states emerge from a political device of explicit British imperialism, in the 1920s the most powerful form of imperial control. The secession of a part of the United Kingdom, the re-establishment of an Irish state after 122 yeas, the articulation of a new form of Irish State and identity were not small achievements. But they were deeply constrained by a series of imperial restrictions that touched on the very notion of sovereignty and autonomy. These related to many issues and themes, from monarchy to external affairs, from military bases to the ability to develop economically without an independent currency. The southern Irish state moved adroitly through the cataclysmic events of the 1930s, in an attempt to extend its sovereignty by various measures. The ultimate act of sovereign decision-making perhaps culminated in the decision to remain neutral in the Second World War.

Northern Ireland was forged in the reactionary mass movement to maintain Ireland within the United Kingdom and to prevent an autonomous parliament being established in Dublin. Ironically, this struggle failed but the leadership of the majority Protestant community in Northern Ireland was prepared to accept partition and the establishment of an autonomous entity in Belfast. This curious state was at once part of the United Kingdom but in critical respects able to make its own decisions in relation to security and governance. From the outset, the state of Northern Ireland was beset by sectarianism, conflict and regular periods of severe civil disturbance. The instability was to continue until the onset of the crisis in 1969 and the final abolition of the Stormont government in 1971.
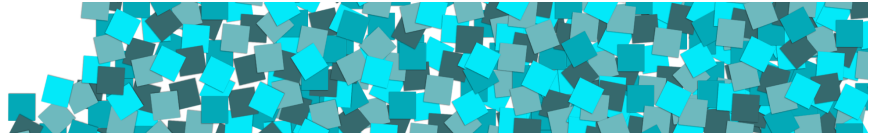
These fractured states epitomized the crises and issues around sovereignty and identity: the very name of the state often challenged. To this day 'Northern Ireland' is used by Protestants or unionists while Catholics or nationalists prefer the much more nuanced terms of 'the North' or 'north-east Ulster' — anything but the official name.

The current arrangement accommodates two very different national aspirations and conceptions of identity in a makeshift but effective way. The prime concern since 1998 has been that the agreements would unravel and that underlying sectarian (one could at times almost say ethnic) tensions would erupt and see the entire edifice collapse. This has not happened. The institutions established and the mechanisms employed have functioned effectively. This of course is largely due to the extraordinary cohabitation of two previously profoundly antagonistic and hostile parties: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (the political voice of the military insurgency since 1969, the Irish Republican Army). This extraordinary coalition has provided a shared government experience that could not have been envisaged only 15 years ago.

The fact that both communities in Northern Ireland can partake in a power-sharing agreement should not and cannot obscure the fact that diametrically opposed understandings of citizenship and allegiance remain. Both sovereign governments (Irish and British) have facilitated the sharing arrangements. Both have formally indicated 'no selfish interest' in maintaining the status quo. Whatever the benign intentions, it is clear that expectations differ greatly among both communities. For unionists, the argument is over. Northern Ireland will remain in perpetuity a part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists must accept this and get the best deal they can. For nationalists, the absurdity and failure of partition have been demonstrated and the first step has been achieved towards an eventual reunification of Ireland.

Conflicting understandings of sovereignty have always been evident in Irish history. These legal and constitutional formalities often merely overlaid the realities of power, dispossession and ownership. The formal establishment of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1540 meant nothing of the sort. There was no resident monarch, no independent parliament. Like Bohemia, Ireland remained the reserve of its lords and landowners, themselves alien to the vast majority of the aboriginal population. The most significant event of the war-torn seventeenth century was the introduction of many thousands of English and Scottish 'planters' – colonists who were explicitly recruited to move to Ireland to supplant the local population and to produce a trusted class of 'loyal' yeomanry.

Even these plantations of the 17th century turned, within three generations, to a net emigration of the Ulster Scots population. Ireland was a poor and peripheral European country with socio-economic characteristics more in common with the colonial economies to which it was linked through the common experience of British imperialism. Ireland was scarred by economic deprivation and a long history of emigration that was dramatically accelerated by the 1847 Famine and subsequent demographic near-collapse.

The constants around sovereignty remained even under the apogee of Ascendancy rule in the late 18th century (when Ireland did have something approaching an autonomous parliament). The laws and practices reinforced a concerted and deliberate policy of religious persecution and discrimination, loyalty tests, land grabs and measures to extirpate the Irish language. The legacy of these events has been preserved to our own times.

Disputed sovereignty in Ireland rests on two key associated factors. One is ownership and power, the other is demographics. State power in Ireland since the plantations and conquests of the 17th century depended on those who owned the land and who derived extraordinary profit from that ownership. The history of subsequent Irish unionism, in particular, demonstrates the influence of these classes in dictating the terms of the constitutional arrangements that suited their economic interests first, hardly those of the population at large.

Professor Bryan Fanning has indicated that Ireland's own, long, 19th century began in the aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion with the 1800 Act of Union, a political settlement that lasted formally until 1921, but had become ineffective by 1912. This he sees as part of a wider European century that ended with the First World War. The thinkers, writers and commentators who produced outsider assessments of the condition of Ireland, addressed a period of seismic change, political and economic. Some wrote as friends of Ireland, some as defenders of the status quo. They presented either environmentalist or cultural essentialist explanations of Irish social problems, and sometimes conflated both.

Fanning feels they based their cogent observations on the work of Jonathan Swift's 1720s analysis of Irish social and economic woes (perhaps the most cogent guide to issues of disputed sovereignty and conflict in Ireland). In his essay *The Uses of Irish Manufacture*, Swift lambasted landlords who "by unmeasurable screwing and racking their tenants all over the kingdom have already reduced a miserable people to a worse condition than peasants in France, or the vassals in Germany and Poland; so that the whole species of what we call substantial farmers, will in a very few years be utterly at an end."

Swift warned that such exploitation was never without repercussions:

"I know not how it comes to pass (and yet perhaps I know well enough) that slaves have a natural disposition to be tyrants; and that when my betters give me a kick, I am apt to revenge it with six upon my footman, although perhaps he may be an honest and diligent fellow. I have heard great divines affirm that 'nothing
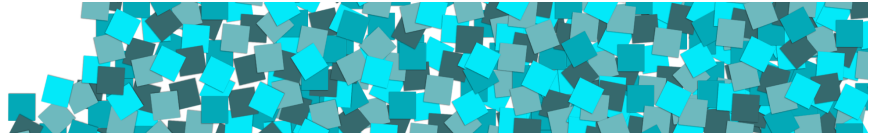
is so likely to call down universal judgement from Heaven upon a nation as universal oppression'… Whoever travels this country, and observes the face of nature or the faces, and habits, and dwellings of the natives, will hardly think himself in a land where either law, religion, or common humanity is professed." (Fanning, 2010)

What was evident in the 1720s is relevant today in terms of power and Irish governance. All discussions on disputed sovereignty must bear this in mind.

As for demographics, the current realties of the early 21st century represent a remarkable change in Ireland's experience of population movement. Historically, and particularly over the past two centuries, Ireland has been a country of strong outward emigration. The vicissitudes of Irish history and the sustained economic underdevelopment and weakness of the country meant that strong patterns of emigration were established and maintained for decades. Today, in both Irish states, the population is growing. And, in addition to the indigenous population, there is a significant increase in non-Irish migrant populations.

From national, international and local perspectives, trends at the European level can be cross-referenced to policy concerns and directions articulated by both the European Union and national governments. This is confirmed by Irish national bodies involved with immigration and interculturalism – as well as a range of specific sources of academic and research expertise.

The broad trends at national and European levels suggest:

- Immigration will remain a permanent feature of most European societies.
- Inward migration is necessary to maintain economic activity and functions because of altered indigenous European demographics.
- Issues around accommodation and integration are highly contentious in some countries.
- Associated issues of xenophobia and racism have the potential to cause significant issues of destabilization and conflict.
- Debates around national approaches are often confused and strongly demarcated between themes around assimilation, multiculturalism, interculturalism, etc.

The specificity of Irish circumstances is notable. Uniquely, Ireland has transformed itself from a country of significant emigration to one of net inward migration in a remarkably short period of time. There is no tradition of debate or analysis on immigration, although there is a long tradition of support for those Irish 'exiles' compelled to emigrate. On the surface, this is seen by some commentators as a factor which pre-disposes Irish indigenous populations to be more empathetic towards the needs of immigrants and have enhanced degrees of tolerance.

As the work of MacGreill and others indicate, however, there are issues of prejudice, discrimination and intolerance. Pre-existing attitudes in Ireland towards travelers indicate that hostility towards out-groups can be felt and expressed. While, regarding immigrants, this has not been consistent, there is the potential for this to happen. In addition, while the economic contribution of immigrants has been acknowledged, issues arise around the capacity of Irish society to incorporate national and ethnic differences, in the longer term, in all their cultural, religious and linguistic dimensions.

Interaction with the host community (or with other migrant communities) can produce unexpected challenges and experiences (not all of which are negative). The increasing engagement of immigrants with social structures and services may contrast sharply with earlier experiences in the home country. Issues around familiarity with and navigation through, often alien, bureaucracies and systems can seem daunting. It also raises significant questions of identity for the host community. Before defining the other, they too embark on a process of discovery about who they are and their identity.

It is advisable that an international perspective be adopted from the outset when addressing concerns around disputed sovereignty in Ireland, north and south. The long struggle for national identity is now confronted by a respite in terms of military violence and conflict. But deeper issues around identity and governance will be subsumed in discourse around European governance, ownership of resources and the growing diversity of the populations. In the intersection of these issues and themes, constitutional provision will need to link to pressing concerns around culture, migration and meaningful social inclusion. No problem or issue in Ireland is unique to Ireland. Every problem found in Ireland is a lesson and has added value for understanding those from other countries: however wide the surface disparities, issues around power, exclusion, discrimination, difference and prejudice have common threads, largely because they have a common origin.

The analysis of power, social change and human rights will form the basis of the next stages on the question of sovereignty – shared, disputed or absolute – on the island of Ireland in the coming decades.
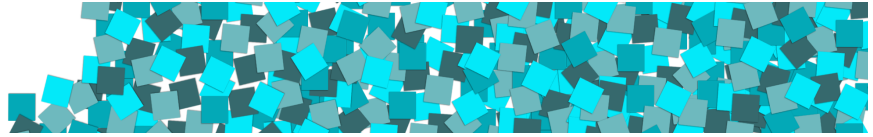
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Recommended citation

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