

Revising Conflicting Identities: Pathways to an Enduring Peace

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It would be heartening indeed to believe that in 50 years' time – by 2065 – the so-called 'Irish Question' might be resolved definitively once and for all.

Looking back in the other direction for a moment – 50 years ago to 1965 - Northern Ireland was languishing somewhat complacently in the conviction of its Unionist majority and its British identity. These certainties however were protected and bolstered by a regime that sanctioned Gerrymandering and abused the civil liberties and freedoms of its minority Roman Catholic community, much in the manner that the regime in the Republic of Ireland sought to institutionalise a vision of Roman Catholic 'Irishness' through a symbiotic relationship of Church and state.

And the popular protests of the late 1960s sweeping through Europe and America were just around the corner. Newly radicalised community activists – and the authoritarian suppression of their demands - were to ensure that nothing in the province would ever be the same again.

I lived through the subsequent travails of *'the troubles'* and like many others, marvel at the changes for the better that have taken place in Northern Ireland following

'The Good Friday Agreement' of 1998 and subsequent policy negotiations thereafter.

Unquestionably, Belfast has been transformed and the wider province has flourished since the peace.

But 50 years is a laughably short time in the panoply of Irish-British politics and we would do well to temper our predictions or aspirations with caution.

Whilst a pragmatic power-sharing arrangement has emerged, the two party nature of governance in Northern Ireland reinforces the dichotomy of old, tribal sectarian and political enmities.

And the absence of war on the streets does not by definition guarantee an enduring peace.

We are still reduced to a zero-sum game of mutually exclusive identities. Despite provision to the contrary being made in The Good Friday Agreement, identifications of Irishness and Britishness remain diametrically opposed.

Preoccupations of this nature may seem spurious to those who have always felt safely ensconced in their uncontested nation state and at ease with their place within it. But the citizens of communities defined by the defence of their heritage, culture and distinctiveness when under threat by a usurper, see things very differently. Just ask any resident of Port Stanley on the Falkland Islands or of Palestine or Israel for that matter. Flags, emblems, language, freedom to

worship and to celebrate the historic associations that define communities, become day-to-day issues of paramount importance.

And so it remains with Northern Ireland.

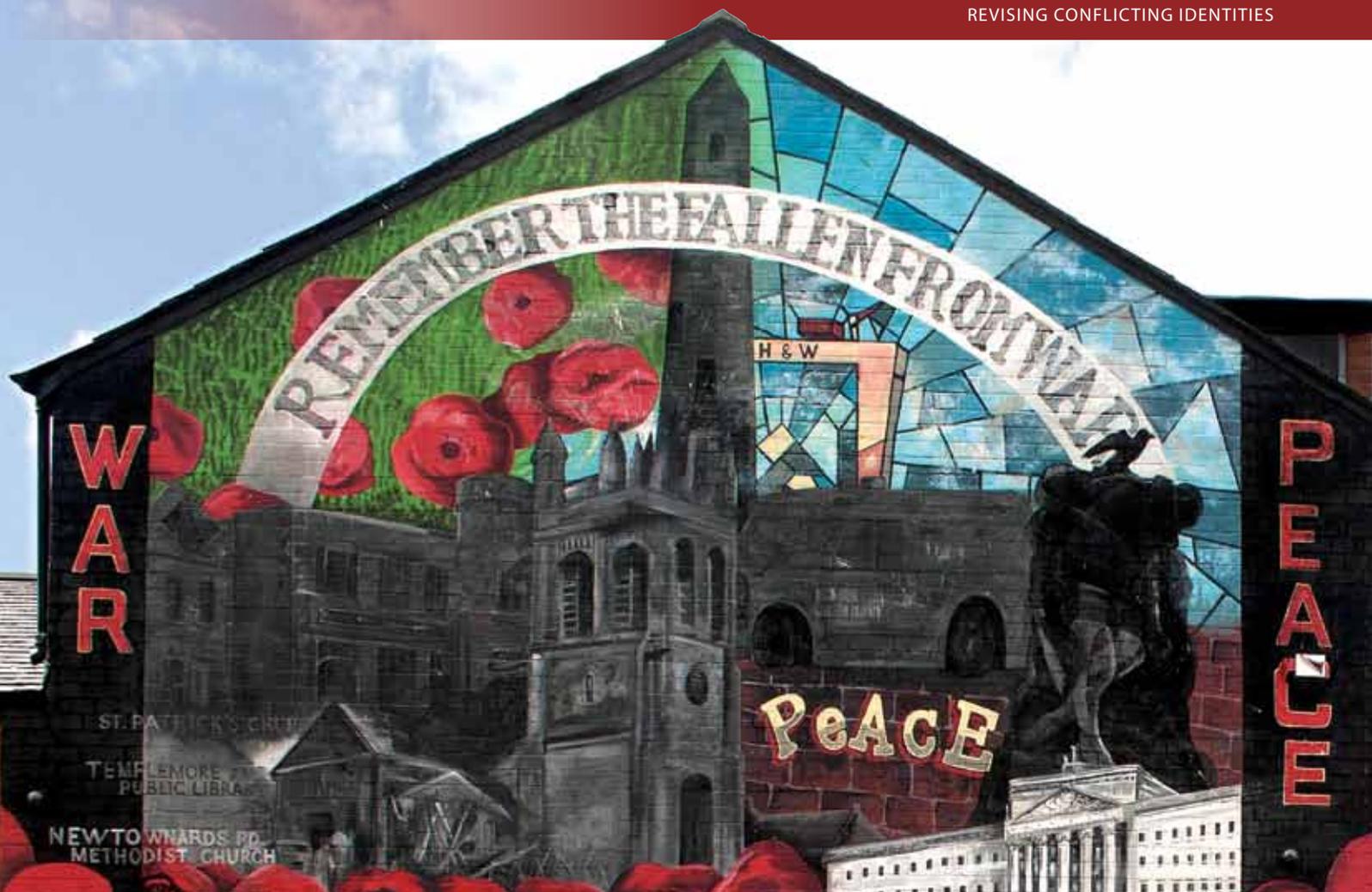
But of course, to some degree this is to over-simplify the status quo. And to paraphrase a famous Ulster maxim; *"If you're not confused... you haven't understood the situation."*

The tendency for commentators and observers to lazily group the two main traditions in Northern Ireland into convenient, homogenous blocs, not only sells this complexity short, it also contributes to the impasse by reinforcing the stereotypes.

Not all Protestants are Unionist in their political outlook and Loyalist in their Monarchist support. Similarly, not all Catholics are Republican or have Nationalist aspirations.

This is particularly personified in the post-conflict generations - and it is in their rejection of the historical straitjacket that they have inherited - that I believe the genesis of a shared future resides.

In 2012, a young, mild-mannered, lower middle class, Controlled Grammar school-educated County Down man, (Roman Catholic by religion for those interested in such matters) inadvertently reminded us of the depth of significance that the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland still place on national and cultural allegiance. In a wide-ranging interview with Sportsmail, the then 23-year-old - whose Northern Irish roots made him eligible for both British and Irish representation - had spoken candidly about this dilemma. ▶▶



PEACE CANNOT BE KEPT BY FORCE
 IT CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED BY UNDERSTANDING



"Maybe it was the way I was brought up, I don't know, but I have always felt more of a connection with the UK than with Ireland. And so I have to weigh that up against the fact that I've always played for Ireland and so it is tough. Whatever I do, I know my decision is going to upset some people but I just hope the vast majority will understand."

Whether his aspiration to empathy was realised is a matter for conjecture. However, for a significant number of opinion formers in the media and on social networking sites, they most assuredly *did not* understand. And golfing superstar Rory McIlroy learned a salutary lesson in regard to the place that sports and cultural allegiance hold in the collective national psyches of both traditions in Ireland, North and South and within Great Britain.

What was perhaps most depressing about the subsequent outpouring of vitriol, jingoistic tub-thumping and rash editorial comment, was the unforgivably thoughtless filicide of a new and emerging post-conflict generation in Northern Ireland. One uncomfortable with the traditional religiopolitical stereotypes foisted upon them and refreshingly honest in their opinions based on their own lived experiences.

McIlroy enjoyed a largely middle-class upbringing, provided by the herculean efforts of his working class parents, who sought to create a non-sectarian environment for themselves and their son. Enjoying a religiously mixed social and educational setting and growing up in an area relatively free from social unrest ensured that young Rory was able to take pleasure in the interests and enthusiasm of his peers.

Supporting the Ulster Rugby team, following Manchester United, representing Ireland in his chosen field - whilst declaring for team GB in the golfing Olympics¹ - were all passions that he pursued without the encumbrance of believing that he had to belong to one side or the other.

Rather than lamenting him for his political naïveté, the popular and sporting press should have been lauding him as the successful face of an emerging, post-conflict Northern Ireland. Someone who fought shy of the minefield of nation statehood and undoubtedly saw himself as first and foremost, *Northern Irish*.

But this is not a designation that is easily accepted by Nationalists/Republicans, refusing as they do to recognise what they describe as the artificially constructed 'statelet' of Northern Ireland. (Despite accepting political office in its governmental institutions).

Living and working in the Irish Republic for some twenty plus years now, I was appalled at the irresponsibility of journalists, broadcasters, social commentators and casual acquaintances alike, who decried McIlroy for daring to describe himself as 'British' and declaring for *'them'*.

The incident was a timely reminder of how the whole panoply of representative life on this island remains mired within the history and perceived culture of the two main traditions. And how 'ownership' of successful high profile individuals and their achievements can be used as a celebration or affirmation of national and community identity.

So policy makers, commentators and academics continue to wrestle with this fundamental contradiction of identity and allegiance.

However, it is my belief that there does indeed exist an analysis or position that would reconfigure this impasse and provide optimism for a stable, more collaborative Northern Ireland by 2065.

Next year, 2016, The Republic of Ireland celebrates the centenary of the Easter Rising, an event that predicated Irish independence. There will no doubt be a swelling of nationalist sentiment both North and South of the border and the *'inevitability'* of a United Ireland will again be mooted.

However, if the Orange segment of the Republic's national flag is truly to symbolise a recognition of another valid Irish tradition within the state (and the island as a whole), then perhaps the most immediate and far-reaching developments to acknowledge this might take the form of real and pragmatic changes and reforms to further *secularise* the Irish national identity, the constitution and the institutions of that state.²

As previously discussed, whilst identity in Ireland is often by definition adversarial, it should nevertheless be possible to create more meaningful cross-border 'national'

allegiances or forums where both traditions are accommodated and respected in a common cause.

Similarly, Loyalist/Protestant/Unionist communities should be able to meaningfully reengage with those unique characteristics that previously identified them as different and distinctive within their shared British family; namely, their *'Irishness'*.

From a policy-making perspective, we cannot underestimate the potency of partitionist/separatist opinion from within the ROI itself in this regard. And at the sharper end of things, from those Northern Nationalists who relentlessly seek cultural domination and the eradication of British culture from Northern Ireland.

In order for this to succeed, Irish cultural identity must be seen to denote more than simply the 'Catholic/Nationalist/Republican' monolithic tradition. I myself hail from the Loyalist heartland of the Shankill Road. My grandmother was from Co. Donegal, in ROI. It is my contention that I am just as Irish as Gerry Adams or Enda Kenny, the current Taoiseach. That I choose to see my Irishness in the context of my Britishness (i.e., Scots/Welsh/English) does not in my eyes dilute this. (And as such, I legitimately hold two passports).

Politics in these British Isles are already undergoing a fundamental rethink and with regional autonomy to the fore, it can only be a matter of time before a federal model emerges, inviting serious consideration.

The post-conflict generations of both states in Ireland, North and South, are the young voters of today and the future policymakers of tomorrow. Yes they still associate themselves with Britain and/or Ireland. But thanks to modern communications technologies and easy access to travel, they are also truly citizens of the world. They are already redefining their distinctiveness and adherences in the context of a 21st century island.

Their elders must do all in their power to make this transition a painless and productive one. ■

¹ He famously revised this decision and declared for Ireland at a later stage and no doubt in deference to the furore that had emerged.

² And it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the progress that has been made in this respect.