

Changing Ireland

*Changing Relationships? – Nationalism & Unionism Post the Good
Friday Agreement*

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Change, no matter how significant is never total. So, while Ireland, North and South, has changed enormously, economically, socially, culturally and politically, over the past twenty-five years, many aspects of our lives have not changed very much. The picture of change I wish to discuss, therefore, is one of some significant changes affecting relationships between Unionists and Nationalists, but also one where many aspects of those relationships remain unchanged. In this discussion these relationships are addressed both within the Northern context itself and in terms of their all-Ireland dimensions as well.

From my perspective as an SDLP activist in Northern politics over the past thirty years, the greatest change marking relationships between Unionists and Nationalists was seen in the negotiations leading to the GFA. Those negotiations and the agreement itself witnessed the last gasps of extreme and violent nationalism, whether of the Irish or of the British-Irish kind, at least in terms of their political expression.

As a consequence of that agreement I don't believe that ever again on this island shall we see attempts to impose the narrow exclusive interpretations of those 'isms'. They are dead and in the grave to which the GFA assigned them.

But, and it's a big 'but', whether the official and political deaths of those two 'isms' has also changed relationships between unionists and nationalists for the better is a very moot point.

The extreme Irish nationalism to which I refer is the version espoused by Sinn Féin and the IRA until the former signed the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin would label their version of nationalism 'republicanism', but I and many others would challenge that description. Personally I regard it as more akin to eighteenth century Catholic defenderism. But however labelled, it was a version of Irish nationalism that led to a twenty-five year terror campaign unleashed in the North in 1970 and aimed at achieving a British withdrawal as prelude to some form of Irish unity.

But against the reality of a million or so Unionists who value their allegiance to the UK and who have time and again demonstrated their capacity to resist any attempt to impose Irish unity, as well as the opposition of successive Southern governments and of the overwhelming majority of nationalist Ireland, North and South, to IRA violence, that exclusive form of Irish nationalism never had any prospect of success.

Tragically, however, what the campaign did have was a capacity to orchestrate violence against anyone or anything deemed part of the British establishment. In effect this frequently meant murdering ordinary people going about their ordinary day's activities. The campaign fed on real if frequently exaggerated grievances and on inept British government and unionist policies. Politically, because of the manner in which the campaign targeted the unionist community, it deepened unionist opposition to Irish unity and has made the implementation of the GFA a very hazardous process.

Paralleling the IRA's campaign was a viciously sectarian loyalist campaign directed at terrorising the nationalist community into acquiescing in an unqualified British identity for the North. But faced with the reality of the size of that community and its determination to maintain its Irishness and unlikely ever to acquiesce in an exclusively unionist definition of the North's identity, this campaign also had no likelihood of success. Nor was the wider unionist policy of trying to maintain its exclusive political control of the North any likelihood of succeeding.

The official death of these two exclusive and tragically destructive versions of nationalism was finally proclaimed in the GFA and endorsed in the joint referenda a month later. True a significant section of unionism did not endorse the agreement and others have since withdrawn support, the latter mainly as a result of the failure of paramilitaries expeditiously and generously to honour the agreement's requirement to disarm.

Notwithstanding current difficulties, there is no escaping the fact that the agreement's fundamentals provide the best template upon which all of the people of Ireland can, for the foreseeable future, forge positive relationships. Indeed, it my firm conviction that were we to start again with a blank sheet, we would end up with an agreement similar in all its essential to that signed seven years ago.

The key characteristics of the agreement and those that set it in contrast with exclusivist approaches of the past, are the inclusivity and outward-looking nature of the GFA. It is inclusive and outward looking because it seeks to include all our political traditions. Its image of Ireland is of a multicultural society, probably much more multi-cultural today even than its 1998 authors understood; it proclaims parity of esteem for the island's historic cultural traditions and also esteem for those of Ireland's more recent arrivals; it espouses the politics of partnership within the North and between both parts of our politically divided island and it roots our politics in respect

for fundamental human and civil rights. Furthermore, it entrenches more deeply than ever before a new relationship based on very close cooperation, between Ireland and Britain.

While I would never concede that we aimed too high in reaching that agreement, it is the case that the transforming effects of the GFA on relationships and developments in Ireland have not yet had the impact intended. In my judgement the principal reason has been the failure to end paramilitarism and all other forms of criminality in which the paramilitaries have become involved.

A contributing factor has been the failure of a significant section of the unionist community to get behind the agreement, accept the people's mandate for the agreement and seize the opportunity its guarantees provide to unionism, and then to build on them. But of course the IRA's failure to move on decommissioning with generosity and good will, which, incidentally, one might have expected from true republicans, gave such Unionists a great excuse.

Today, despite the prospects of an IRA statement on its future, including disarmament and an end to involvement in criminality, and the hopes for what will follow, relationships between our communities while positive in some respects are still charged with many historically deep rooted negatives. The tensions surrounding parades this year, as in previous years, are obvious testimony to that. But so too are the many, often unreported minor day-to-day acts of sectarian motivated verbal and physical abuse perpetrated by one side on the other. This abuse is evident in all sections of our communities and is displayed by all ages.

In many areas, children from different schools in the same towns no longer share bus stops or school buses when travelling to and from their schools. School timetables are adjusted so that the exodus from one school does not converge with the exodus from another – all to reduce the ever present possibility of sectarian confrontation. Young people wearing the 'wrong' sporting colours run serious risks of being assaulted if they venture into the 'wrong' neighbourhood.

More fundamentally consider the following contrast. Thanks to strong employment legislation people increasingly work in religiously integrated work places, but at the same time are increasingly residing in religiously segregated neighbourhoods. Such segregation leads, not surprisingly, to one-sided socialising, it reinforces school based segregation and produces a society in which the 'other side' still remains subject to very negative stereotyping. Past and

present insults, injuries and pain are kept fresh as stereotypes are passed intact from one generation to the next.

Politically segregation reinforces solidarity around those parties that portray themselves strongest at standing up to those perceived as a threat on the 'other' side. In practice it leads to the harassment of minority group residents and frequently to their involuntary departure from neighbourhoods where they have lived for many years.

The outcome is the maintenance of suspicions and antagonisms that feed inter-communal tensions, hatred and conflict. This tension boils over during the marching season leaving us all wondering how and when fundamental change for the better will ever be registered in community relationships.

Yet another paradox we do not want for initiatives aimed at bringing about that kind of change. A considerable amount of effort, commitment and organisation is invested in all kinds of initiatives aimed at eliminating sectarianism and at developing a more respectful approach to community relations within the North and between North and South.

Schools, youth organisations, women's groups, development groups, religious groups, arts groups, sporting groups etc. etc. are engaged in these initiatives. If it's difficult to measure the scale of their achievements, one has to wonder how much worse the situation could be if they didn't exist. Certainly the scale on which they exist and the scope of their work must rank amongst the most positive community based changes of the past twenty-five years.

On the all-Ireland stage the opportunities created by the GFA to forge economic, social and cultural links by the establishment of the North-South Ministerial Council have marked another sea change for the better. The work of such bodies as *Intertrade Ireland*, *Waterways Ireland*, *Tourism Ireland*, and the *Languages Body*, are evidence of the benefit to be gained by people and communities through co-operation on an all-Ireland basis.

The growth in North-South trade, the development of research to business links on an all-island basis, the development of a single island wide tourism market, are practical examples of the benefits that are already flowing from this approach. In all of this no one's political allegiance or aspirations are threatened.

So, how can change for the better be sustained so that the grosser problems which produce inter-communal tension and confrontation are eliminated? The short-term answer lies in political leadership which demonstrates a firm commitment to work the partnership institutions of the GFA, which demonstrates support for the police and for a human rights based approach to resolving disputes over parades and other contentious matters.

Such a partnership approach requires that each community accept the *bona fides* of the other's cultural identity, political aspirations and allegiances in the terms prescribed by the GFA. If people who describe themselves as republicans cannot respect the Orange tradition as legitimate and that it has a right to the lawful, public expression of its customs, then it is less than republican. If the Orange and other loyal organisations and unionist politicians cannot enter into dialogue and then into working partnerships with nationalists, or cannot respect nationalist traditions and, especially, the religious allegiance of most nationalists, they betray the civil and religious liberties that they claim to defend.

Above all if the partnership approach cannot be entered into wholeheartedly at all levels of government, local as well as regional, then we condemn ourselves to another generation in which age old tensions will fester and, from time to time, overflow into violent confrontation.

If we fail to pursue the changes to our relationships essential to the full implementation of the GFA, we will have lost the best opportunity to make Ireland the beacon of hope which the world had expected of us on that Good Friday seven years ago

The world will then turn its back on us, and rightly so!