

My choice and your choice

by Conall McDevitt

Britain and
Ireland **Lives**
Entwined



Conall McDevitt was born in Dublin in the early 1970s but spent most of his youth in Malaga, Spain. He has been politically active most of his adult life.

Conall served as junior adviser in the Irish government during the Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition in the early 1990s and also worked in the European Parliament. He is a former vice-president of the youth wing of the Party of European Socialists. He was the Social Democratic and Labour Party’s director of communications during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations and subsequent referendum and election, later serving as a special adviser in the first power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.

He served as Member of the Legislative Assembly for South Belfast from 2010 to 2013, during which time he led the campaign for a public inquiry into historic institutional abuse, chaired the assembly’s All Party Group on International Development and served as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Today he is chief executive of Hume Brophy, a global communications and government relations firm with offices in Dublin, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Brussels, Hong Kong, Singapore and New York. He still runs, just not as quickly, and is most happy at sea, literally!



The Irish are the blacks of Europe, Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland, and the North Siders are the blacks of Dublin ... so say it loud – I’m black and I’m proud!

Jimmy Rabbitte, *The Commitments*, 1991

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John Hume said that the real borders are in people's minds and not on maps. He was right of course, and the past 20 years on the island of Ireland have been a journey into those borders – a slow process of dismantling the conscious and unconscious prejudices, barriers, walls and hates that divide people.

It's been a hell of a journey too. Through the contested street politics of Drumcree, the conflagration of flags and the killing field of Omagh. The long and winding road of devolution, suspension, devolution and more suspension of Northern Ireland's shared institutions of government trundles on.

The journey has also been a tremendously social one, from the protests of Free Presbyterians at Belfast's magnificent Pride marches, to referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion changing discourse and attitudes, not just in the Republic of Ireland but across our island. The taoiseach can now parade in Belfast Pride as a celebrity and a hero not to some nationalist cause but to progress, openness, liberal attitudes and a 21st-century island whose people increasingly share more attitudes and opinions than those that divide them.

I am writing these words in my house in Belfast. That I am here is not an accident of my birth nor a consequence of my upbringing. It is my choice.

I was born in Dublin, on the north side in 1972, into a family with some northern history but with no immediate northern relatives. Aged ten, we moved to Malaga in the south of Spain: a port city which at the time was just emerging from the long shadow of the Franco dictatorship. I remember seeing the posters go up that spring for the candidates in the second free election and I recall well a young Felipe González being elected premier. It was also the year of the World Cup in Spain

and just down the road in a stadium I would have the privilege of playing in myself years later, Gerry Armstrong and the rest of the Northern Ireland football team were to make their own little bit of history.

My dad had no interest in fraternising with their supporters that summer; they represented a 'Protestant North'. They were the embodiment of 'a sectarian statelet, failed and doomed to fail'. To be honest at the time none of this had any impact on me. I was more concerned with keeping my head above water in my new Spanish school as no one spoke English and I didn't speak Spanish.

I did love football though and became good enough to roll out in the stadium. I was known as 'Patrick' because, if you're a kid from Andalusia and truth be told, a skinny rake from some northern place – Conall just led to endless barbs about being Conan the Barbarian.

By the age of 15, five years into my Spanish life, I considered myself Andalusian, and as Spanish as any of my teammates or my class. That's not to say I wasn't still Irish, coming from a home with very little means and never having the money to go home to Ireland to visit, my relationship with the land of my birth was different.

It was, I guess, very similar to the relationship many immigrants would've felt in the 19th and early 20th century as they left for far away lands, never to return. And that is what happens, or at least what happened to me in my formative years. The next time I would set sail for Ireland I would be a man.

Multiple identities

You never realise these things at the time, but the fact is my life has been an experiment in the great richness of multiple identities. I am a Dubliner even though I have lived less than a quarter of my life in Dublin. I am an Andalusian even though I've only lived about a quarter of my life in Andalusia. I am a northerner, even though it's been around a third of my life. And these are just my regional identities. My Irishness is an accident of birth but also a source of inspiration, of pride and a purpose. My Spanishness has a huge impact on my culture and my taste in music that many around me consider eclectic. On the upside, it has impacted my ability to cook in which I have considerably more followers.

These levels of identity can be confusing at times. I am so proud that my beloved Dublin Gaelic Athletic Association team has now won five All Irelands in a row, yet I have never followed an Ulster county, but have a much softer spot for Ulster rugby than I do for Leinster.

I am, by conviction and belief, a constitutional nationalist in the Irish sense of the word, a person who believes that the people of Ireland should be united. However, that conviction is rooted in the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determination – that right, enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, that is known as the principle of consent.

The Spanish part of me is a product of my education as a member of the group which in Spain is known as the ‘transition generation’: those who were a product of the 1978 constitution. As recent events in Catalonia remind us, the question of self-determination for regional people in Spain is seen differently to the way we see it here. I would be lying to say that the Spanish me is not a unionist, in that my preference would be to see the Spain I know and love under the 1978 constitution continue to exist and to prosper, preferably under a socialist government of course! That said, I struggle with my Irish self that believes the people of Catalonia should have the right to self-determination.

How do these contradictions reconcile? Am I just messed up? When Theresa May, a woman I have grown to respect for her integrity and courage in the face of great adversity and considerable sexism, said that global citizens were just citizens of nowhere, I wondered if she meant people like me? I don’t agree with the statement. But it is an important thought-provoking question. Can you have multiple identities? And if you do, how do you reconcile them? Do they even need to be reconciled?

I think this question would’ve been much more difficult to answer 30 or 40 years ago. But today, things are just different. The fact is identity is chosen, and in a well-worn phrase ‘fluid’– and that’s not just a reference to gender.

To take one more very different example that matters most to me. In 2010 my daughter was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. She was six and we decided to go public to raise awareness of this terrible chronic disease for which there is no cure and which strikes without warning

and with no known cause. That happenstance brought me into a community of mums and dads who shared the same challenges. You would never believe me if I told you some of the people who came into my office to share their experience, asking me to give voice to their kid's needs. They came from every strata of our society, from all communities and none and several had their own 'past' to contend with. It was a great honour to campaign for them, always, and I am very proud of all the little victories we achieved. I am also bound forever to the sufferers of muscular dystrophy for whom I did my best. I was humbled to be trusted by the survivors of a history of institutional abuse to speak for them and lead their campaign for justice in the Northern Ireland Assembly. They had their family and personal identities robbed and their humanity abused. They lost faith and trust but in the end were at least given access to justice.

Tokyo and New York

I took a trip to Japan this summer with my eldest son: a man himself now and a student of the Japanese tradition of manga and anime. We were on a pilgrimage into the heart of Tokyo's electric town and the great manga studios of Kyoto and Osaka. It was a real adventure for me and deeply enriching. I know we were so privileged to be able to make the trip and I wish every young animation and art student on this island could do the same.

Because to understand the culture of anime and manga is to understand one of the most important sub-cultures in British and Irish youth culture today. Comic-cons, cosplaying, dungeons and dragons, gaming and general 'nerdness' is a very big part of our kids' lives. They are able to be multiple things. Their identities – who they believe themselves to be – are not binary or linear but fluid. That same man considers himself a northerner and an Irish person, but there is a bit of him that may as well be culturally Japanese.

I was sitting in a beautiful office on 345 Park Avenue last week talking with Ireland's consul general in New York. We were chatting about the diaspora, about the challenges that he faces representing Ireland in one of the greatest, most cosmopolitan, cultural and commercial capitals of the world. New York is the home of the world's largest Saint Patrick's Day parade, a very traditional expression of a very traditional view of Irishness. It's green, it's folksy, it's Catholic, it's Ireland.

Hercules Mulligan and the diaspora

But in New York you will find many other expressions of identity that are equally rooted in our island. Captains of industry carry surnames of planters, farmers and refugees, 20th-century economic migrants, and a few who go back so far and whose wealth has been accumulated over so many generations that they undoubtedly have a bitter legacy of colonial slavery too.

I am very interested in the concept of diaspora because I was for an important part of my life an immigrant, and I believe passionately in the importance of celebrating, connecting, understanding and being influenced by the diaspora when you are from a place that is much bigger abroad than it is at home. (I understand there are over 70 million members of the Irish diaspora, North and South, around the world and to fewer than seven million of us on this island.)

My job also takes me to Asia a lot. It's interesting to walk down the streets of Hong Kong and Singapore that remind you of home. Connaught Road, Killiney Road, Dublin Street, Harcourt Place are all direct reminders of the reach of the British Empire and the obvious involvement of Irish people in its expansion – Irish people who, of course, would have been British people, there on behalf of empire and serving their nation, however they may have defined it. Differently, I suspect to how we define nations on these islands today. Do they feel less Irish to me because of that? Well, no. No more than do the Irish names on the tombstones of the war dead on the western front of France and Belgium feel less Irish. No more than do those in the republican plots in Dublin or Belfast.

If you fancy a fun exploration of this notion and a great night out, save up and get some tickets to the musical *Hamilton*. The character Hercules Mulligan is a reminder of the Irish in empire (subversive or not) and *Hamilton* tells the story of this essay ten times better than I ever will.

Side stories

There is another side story to that one too. I served in the Northern Ireland Assembly with Sinn Féin MLAs whose grandfathers fought in the First World War for the British Army. My great grandfather was a tailor in Belfast at the turn of the 20th century, and when James Connolly came to the city to organise trade unions he stayed in my grandparents' house. When the First World War broke out, my great grandfather Danny McDevitt provided refuge in the attic of his tailor's shop in Rosemary Street to Englishmen who were dodging the conscription that all young males in Great Britain faced at that time. It is a curious example of how identity changes and evolves, but is essentially plural and complicated.

I have cousins who grew up in England in working-class communities who went on to join the British Army and serve in Northern Ireland. In fact one of them was posted in Lisburn when I was the Social and Democratic Labour Party's director of communications during the talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. It took, pardon the pun, a minor military operation to organise for me to bring him up one day to meet some of our negotiators and tour the building. This was a big deal for him. He was meeting the people who represented him whilst still serving loyally and with distinction in the British Army. He and my other cousins are Irish (as well as British) and I would advise you never to challenge their right to be so and certainly never to their face. Yet to the modern republican movement at that time they could never be Irish because Irish people couldn't possibly be in the British Army.

The First World War was a long time ago. But I acknowledge that it is very important to very, very many people in Northern Ireland and indeed across Ireland. A wider discussion is probably best left to the historians for now.

And then there's the future. I used to love talking with the A-level Politics students who'd troop into a briefing room in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, a class at a time, to meet some 'MLAs'. I rarely refused the opportunity to engage with them no matter where they came from and because of our largely segregated education system in Northern Ireland, they were coming in from Catholic, non-Catholic (generally overwhelmingly Protestant) and integrated schools. They were further divided into secondary and grammar students – a peculiar Northern Irish way of ensuring class division on top of sectarian division in second level schools.

I always had three questions for them (don't worry these came after them giving me a thorough cross-examination ...).

Question 1 – Who are you? Like Irish, British, Northern, what?

Question 2 – What does this place mean to you?

Question 3 – What are your hopes?

Question 1 would get a series of answers. The overwhelming majority would answer according to their community background, 'I'm Northern and Irish', 'I'm Northern and British' or 'I'm just Northern'. There were of course some who would say 'I'm Irish' or 'I'm British', but they were the few and most often the very few.

To Question 2 the answer was invariably 'this is our parliament', you make the laws that govern us and you fund our schools, hospitals, etc.

To Question 3 it was always the same. We want to see this region succeed. We want to be part of its success and we want you to make sure that happens.

Their right

Non-binary, that's a word we hear lots these days. Whether it's a popstar or other prominent public figure using their position to help explain that not everyone identifies or feels the same way we do, it is really important to my mind. I'm a white middle-aged straight man. I wish I understood what someone meant when they wanted to be described as 'they'. The honest answer is I don't, but I'm entirely comfortable acknowledging their right to feel this way and supporting their demands to be acknowledged in this manner.

It was Darwin who taught us that evolution is in fact adaptation. As a species we continue to evolve and adapt. Our thinking, our creativity, our imagination or identity itself is constantly evolving and adapting.

I have never bought into the idea that humanity should be dictated to by any fundamental rules written millennia ago. But I wholly embrace the idea that we should be guided by principles that have stood the test of time and by great philosophy, however ancient it may be. There is a great difference between blind obedience and enlightened evolution.

Our great societies of the West were built on beliefs that were often considered heretical when they were first conceived. In the past 50 years we have achieved more scientific innovation and progress than at any point in our great journey as a species. And every year we more than double the amount of information that is processed. I am desperately optimistic about humanity and about the ability of our species to reach a higher form of reasoning and to evolve to a state where conflict, war and famine are consigned to the history books.

The message of populism

I do not see this in any way as a utopian vision. It is, though, an outright rejection of Hobbesian philosophy and of the populism that in recent years seems to have taken hold in the so-called democratic world.

That populism is a message sent to our better selves. It is, I believe, telling us that if we keep looking over our shoulders expecting some elder to address the challenge that is in fact in front of us, then we will retreat into an introverted atavistic mindset. It is a symptom of our inability to think about the challenges that face us on a community level, regionally, nationally, as a continent and globally. It chooses to disconnect all these things, and to reduce our politics to one which refuses to recognise that all of our societies are increasingly diverse. It rejects the idea that all of us embody many different expressions of identity. It hankers after the era of empires, and confuses nations and states. It breeds on war and division between people. It does all this when in fact the greatest challenges we know and face as a civilisation are shared by all of us, irrespective of how rich or poor we are, and wherever in the world we may live.

The great achievement of the nation states of the 20th century was to create a civilisation which now needs to solve its problems as an international community of interest. Identity matters when you're trying to fix problems that are bigger than nations. I think our kids understand this. They are globalised. They mobilise and come onto the streets to condemn our generation for its inability to tackle the climate crisis. They are inspiring not just because of their energy and their dignity and good humour, but in their challenge to us to look beyond the narrow prism of our community, our regional, national or continental self-interest, and to think about our duty to everyone on the planet.

If we are willing to accept that sexual identity is non-binary, or a little fluid, then surely we should be open minded enough to understand that the same applies to one's national or cultural identity.

Religion

I am not an active participant in any of the great faiths of the world. That may be the Spaniard of the post-Franco transition generation in me, a socialist internationalist who feels more comfortable with humanist values. But I am still deeply, culturally Catholic. How could I not be? I grew up in Andalusia and Ireland!

The Andalusian in me is particularly interested in religion's impact on our cultural identity. This region of southern Spain was for 700 years home to some of the greatest cities in the Moorish world. It was to Granada that Christopher Columbus returned to present his credentials to the Catholic Queen Isabel after his first voyage to what he believed was 'the Indies'. You cannot sit in that throne room of the Alhambra in Granada, where the Khalifa presided over a great period of enlightenment and tolerance, and not appreciate that it's all a bit complicated. I still rage at people who see Islam as a backward, reactionary, dangerous religion. No such religion could ever have built the mosque in Córdoba, the Alhambra in Granada or the golden tower of Seville. But that's not my point on this particular occasion. My point is that if you think Spanish Catholic identity and culture is in fact just Spanish, or just Catholic, then you're kidding yourself. The origin of the word *Olé* is in fact *à-la* – 'God', the Christian and also the Muslim one.

Then there's Britain ...

This meandering is all quite important in my little head because it's just what's there. It's what has shaped me. It's my identity or dare I say my identities. I haven't spoken much about Britain yet and that is because with the exception of a short period in 1990 and my life since leaving the assembly, I've never really spent a lot of time in Great Britain.

I'd like to think I know London well and for the record, I love it. It's probably the greatest city in the world. But because my youth was spent in Spain my first team is Real Madrid and then Manchester United. My first pop idols are El Último De La Fila and not the Smiths.

That makes me a little different from most of my friends and colleagues, be they Northern or Southern Irish, who grew up influenced by British sports and popular culture.

But please don't think that because Britain has had no active role in my life there is not a great influence. I am a Dubliner you will remember: we are the children of the second city of the empire. We are the capital of the 'Pale'. We would be kidding ourselves to think that our city's identity has not got a deep, deep Anglicised tinge. In fact, it is a simple truth that Irish people, of whatever tradition, know the British much better than they know us. We know this because we are still carrying a little bit of them in all of us, a privilege they cannot claim back.

As I write in the dying days of October 2019 with a Brexit crisis now in its third year, life, economic development, and our political discourse is still paralysed by the decision taken in the referendum of June 2016. You could be forgiven for feeling that we are indeed at the end of an era. During the May and June 2016 referendum campaign, where was the meaningful debate about Ireland? And subsequently, despite appeals from Tony Blair and John Major and Gordon Brown – all former British prime ministers – there was no interest in seriously debating the impact Brexit might have on the island of Ireland. Yet Ireland, and a border that hardly exists, has become the red line in the entire sorry saga. The casual return of a border in the minds of those in England and in Ireland tells us a lot about identity and conflict on these islands in the 21st century.

The border in people's minds that John Hume talked about so often was done away with in May 1998. By removing it, the people of these islands chose to embark on an even more difficult journey: to tackle prejudice and hatred head on, and give enough time for grievances to emerge, to be discussed and ultimately to heal. As we see in modern-day Spain, you can pass a 'law of forgetting' but people do not forget the past – they live it every day and Ireland's past has also to be faced and acknowledged, however painful that is.

For Northern Ireland to succeed we must embrace and build on our diversity for its own sake. For Ireland to succeed, Northern Ireland must be a success and for the UK to succeed Ireland must too (North and South). To do all that we must feel comfortable in ourselves, we must embrace others and accept that we all have more than one identity. As my anime-mad son would say, 'that's cool'.



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