

Relationships, realities and representation

by Ian Marshall

Britain and
Ireland Lives
Entwined



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Ian joined the university following two terms as vice-president and a term as president of the Ulster Farmers' Union. Married with three children, he was born on a mixed family farm near Markethill in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. He went to Greenmount Agricultural College to further his education with a view to returning to the farm to expand and grow the family business. Over 20 years later he returned to academia to complete a Master's in Agri-Food Business Development at Ulster University and Babson College in Boston, USA.

He has also served on the Agri-Food Strategy Board for Northern Ireland and an extensive list of boards and committees, and is a professional member of the Institute of Agricultural Management (P Agric).

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In 1979, I went from a small 'country' primary school in a local town to a Protestant grammar school in Armagh. For the first time I came into contact with people from the 'other side'. The Troubles were at their height with atrocities and horrors filtering into our lives from news reports on a daily basis. The country appeared trapped in a cycle of murder and mayhem, aggression and counterattack, confrontation and confusion about what should happen to bring it all to an end.

For me, this move from a close-knit community to the realities of a city education was shocking from the outset, first and foremost because of the tension between the school students travelling back and forth on a daily basis by bus. Children who'd grown up knowing nothing else but division and separation, whose years of primary education consisted of schooling with 'their own side', playing sport with 'their own side', attending youth groups with 'their own side', and a social life built around the safety blanket of their own community – trust had disintegrated to such a level. Mistrust was very much the order of the day.

Born in the late 1960s at the beginning of the period referred to as 'the Troubles', it was these tensions between young people from different backgrounds and religions that made them the people they were. This was the mould we fitted into. Not the multicultural mix of race and identity we know today, but the very basic binary identity of green or orange, Protestant or Catholic, 'fenian' or 'prod'. It was this that defined you.

Flags were despised and revered depending upon your identity and culture, and colours were tremendously important. The primary colours – not ones any artist would identify – were in two distinct camps of 'red, white and blue' and 'green, white and gold' – or 'green, white and orange' as even gold and orange had a contentious meaning in the six counties.

Nor in these early years of education in Armagh did the contention stop there. It went on to include many forms of symbolism and identity and language. The Irish language, in the opinion of many in the unionist community, was a statement of 'Irishness' and 'anti-Britishness' used to antagonise, as the 'wee prods' couldn't understand it!

Any inadvertent reference to the 'North of Ireland' (a nationalist/republican term) or alternatively 'Northern Ireland' (a unionist/loyalist term), or to Derry or Londonderry in conversation would define you as from, or empathising with, one side or the other. The list went on and on.

This was a time when I recall as an 11-year-old farm boy impatient to get home, waiting and waiting until the first strike of the bell signalled my release from school. If I ran really fast I could just make it to the first 15.30 bus home, returning me to a life I believed at the time infinitely more important than studying. However, if I missed this first bus I definitely didn't want to catch the second, because the second bus was what we referred to with disrespect and disdain as the 'fenian bus'.

On it, children from the other, Catholic schools in Armagh had already boarded and didn't relish children from the local Protestant schools entering their space. When it did happen, on a daily basis, the vitriol and hatred manifested itself from both sides of the bus, with each side displaying their mistrust of the other in verbal abuse, spitting, the throwing of inanimate objects and a general display of mob dissent. This was far from the normal respectful conduct all had been taught at home, and all knew that it was an unacceptable standard of behaviour, irrespective of your background or religion.

I refer to this experience because this was normality, and was regarded as normal even though it was far from such. This was a set of circumstances we'd all come to know as acceptable, even though by anyone's standards it was a completely unacceptable situation: a deep-rooted scorn for each other that would ultimately embed prejudices and fears that would take generations to subside.

This was at a time when the local area was gripped with horrors and atrocities such as the Kingsmill massacre and the murder of the Reavey brothers at Whitecross, set against a backdrop of murder and death on a daily basis and a relentless cycle of ethnic cleansing along the border, destroying trust and co-operation between communities

for decades. Friendships and partnerships built up over lifetimes would be torn apart and not rekindled for generations and, in some circumstances, never rebuilt.

A damaged society would emerge built on tribal lines where survival and self-preservation were the order of the day, with communities divided along religious and cultural lines even though most participants, especially in rural areas, were actually wholly dependent on working with each other in order to flourish from day to day.

Far-off friendships

Amidst all the darkness, one recollection that continually re-emerges is that most people were fundamentally good. Most wanted to get on with their lives and businesses and just hoped and prayed (because it was a deeply religious society at this time) that the violence and mayhem didn't come to their household and that some divine force would ensure that their family remained safe through it all.

In fact, few were preoccupied with Irish unity or the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and many were quite happy to befriend and socialise with those from the other community when they were taken out of the goldfish bowl of Northern Ireland and its divisive politics.

I recollect a summer holiday as a youthful 18-year-old, heading off to Spain with my mates. A small tight-knit group of friends, all unionists and Protestants who played sport together and socialised together and who never fraternised with Catholics, getting away to the sun and a break from home. We became best friends with a group of young people from west Belfast; a group of Irish nationalists and republicans.

For one week we had a fantastic experience, sharing our culture and identity in craic and conversation, partying and revelling, demonstrating all the things we had in common and never highlighting anything that made us different let alone diametrically opposed. In a place far removed from home, we could agree and enjoy each other's company, accepting our differences and not feeling threatened by them.

Yet, even with the strong bonds we developed and the good times we'd shared, we all knew that on our return to Belfast, as we went our separate ways at Aldergrove airport, we would or could never meet again. This was how it was.

Unprecedented change

But change happens. Change is a bit like the seasons, creeping up without anyone realising. Even though expected, no one notices it happen. With the passage of time, for a variety of reasons, Northern Ireland witnessed unprecedented change. In a conflict that neither republicans nor the British could ever win and a struggle that would take in excess of 3,700 lives, we eventually witnessed the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, in 1998. The very naming of course had significance. But it was an agreement based on the founding principles of mutual respect and parity of esteem for all, as important today as it was at the time of signing.

Undoubtedly this was a monumental moment in history; one where, even though all did not agree, the vast majority of the elected representatives and leaders signed up to a commitment to move forward, one where peace and prosperity would be the priority. Future generations would never have to endure the anger, violence and hatred all had experienced for the previous 30 years.

This change would deliver relative peace in the following years and even become something that many took for granted, thinking naively that once secured it could never be lost.

However, this newfound stability and security would still leave a number of questions unanswered, a number of concerns we need to address about human rights, identity and culture and the issue of Irish unity and the constitution. Following the Brexit referendum of 2016 raising the question of the UK's relationship to the EU, the issue of a hugely important symbiotic relationship would rise to the fore. This would challenge Northern Ireland's position in the EU and the UK, and our relationship with Ireland, our nearest neighbours and arguably our most important trading partners and allies.

This conversation has now raised questions about both British and Irish identities that are so complicated that they cannot be answered in any simplistic or straightforward fashion. No binary choice between being either British or Irish in Northern Ireland, or even the option where citizens could define themselves as both, could possibly deal with the complex tapestry of history and heritage. But many people do indeed define themselves as both British and Irish, a description difficult to understand outside the six counties, including for many citizens in the Republic of Ireland.

Former Ireland and British and Irish Lions rugby international player Hugo MacNeill fondly recalls a conversation between teammates Brian O'Driscoll and Rory Best, where O'Driscoll couldn't understand Best's position. Best, as a northern Protestant and a British citizen proudly captaining Ireland in the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, would stand to attention to '*Amhrán na bhFiann*' ('The Soldier's Song') and 'Ireland's Call', whilst retaining an immense pride in his British identity. This was a significant contrast to O'Driscoll's much more clear-cut identity as a Leinster-born Irishman. Yet this position of not being conflicted by a dual identity, being comfortable with both, is one I wholeheartedly share along with many colleagues and friends, and indeed a significant majority of the people in Northern Ireland from both nationalist and unionist backgrounds.

Everyone has a unique identity in Northern Ireland based on many factors. Even if a majority currently prefers to remain in this arrangement, the changing demographics and changing political environment have raised some interesting questions about the future relationship between Britain and Ireland, North and South, and our constitutional position within the UK.

But this relationship has also always presented challenges, and often overlooked opportunities: two nations linked by a small channel of water in a push-pull, love-hate relationship, with cultures and traditions shared and boundless synergies, whilst having tensions and strains synonymous with the healthy competition and rivalry of siblings trying to outdo each other, a relationship evolved over generations with two nation states trading and working with each other, people travelling, mixing, marrying and forming partnerships, businesses dealing with each other co-operating and collaborating together; all made much more complicated, admittedly, by the legacy of the Potato Famine, the Great War, the Easter Rising, the civil war, partition and independence, the civil rights movement, and the Troubles.

Tensions persist today without any real justification from people who invariably watch British television, support British football teams, shop in British shops, go to British universities and have many friends and relations living and working in Britain – yet still appear to harbour resentful feelings towards it. Sentiments defended by the reference to 800 years of oppression and occupation are in my opinion more about the absorption and adoption of ideas from parents and grandparents, not grounded in any contemporary rationale or logic regarding two nations which have much more uniting them than dividing them.

Unquestionably, Brexit is the ‘hand grenade’ now thrown into this mix to raise serious issues and challenge conventional thinking. Some commentators regard the elevation of the Irish unity question as opportunistic and divisive, whilst others see it as merely bringing the unresolved issue of partition back onto the table. Most would agree that partition never delivered what was promised or became what was intended. It was a ‘convenient’ model dealing with short-term concerns whilst failing to take into account major shortcomings in relationships built up over centuries, one that would be bound to compromise arrangements in the future.

The creation of a northern Protestant state for Protestants and a southern Catholic state for Catholics was always destined to present as many challenges as opportunities both on the island of Ireland and between the two islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Interestingly, for those who consider that partition was flawed and was a failed policy founded on the forced separation of land and people, logic dictates that any repetition of such a model founded on the forced unification of land and people would prove equally flawed. Any belief in the value or benefits of a border poll in advance of a deep and meaningful public debate is premature and potentially divisive.

It would be of paramount importance to clearly define beforehand what any such proposal would involve. What would health and education, social services, government look like? Would people be richer or poorer? The lack of any modelling or studies to establish impact and outcomes, and the failure of protagonists to consider the pros and cons of any such venture, can only result in a poorly informed electorate unable to consider such radical changes.

In addition, there would be a substantial risk that we would repeat the mistakes of the past. Many in Northern Ireland will feel that ideology and aspirations are fine, but these only become meaningful and tangible when everyone grasps more fully the implications of any divergence from the status quo.

United people

Ultimately, the immediate goal must be to have a 'united people' across both jurisdictions; an all-island ecology and economy where North and South complement each other, where seamless, frictionless trade exists North and South, East and West, both on the island and between the two islands of Britain and Ireland. This unity of people has the advantage of reducing tensions and differences and makes any changes or amendments to borders less threatening to anyone's culture or identity in the truly multicultural society we witness evolving in Ireland, irrespective of geography. The Irish unity conversation has been re-energised, especially as a consequence of Brexit, but shouldn't be conflated or confused with the conversation about whether the UK decides to leave the EU. Although Brexit and Irish unity are not mutually exclusive, they are separate topics and one should not define the other.

Some have stated that 'the train of Irish unity has left the station'. However, this train will only remain on the tracks if the destination remains open and if the option remains to decide the endpoint as we learn more on the journey. The union (Great Britain and Northern Ireland) or unity (Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland) must both be choices until such time as consideration can be given to all the advantages and disadvantages of either. Why would any unionist board such a train if the destination was only unity? Undoubtedly and understandably unionists would endeavour to build more track or derail this train!

Any Irish unity conversation must give all parties and perspectives a mechanism to present evidence and supporting arguments for their individual positions. The human mind is like a parachute: working best when it's open – and for this reason this discussion can only be facilitated by strong leadership and open minds, leaders at ease with their identity and open to alternative thinking, receptive to

considering ideas not normally within their comfort zone based on the merits and values of any such proposals and devoid of prejudice or preconceptions. Good shepherds (not a religious reference!) don't lead from the front but direct their flocks from behind by identifying the leaders in the flock and letting them guide the rest. We will need a few good shepherds!

The biggest enemy could be impatience. All options are dependent upon Ireland, North and South, being a peaceful, harmonious place where businesses thrive, jobs are created, wealth is generated, where people want to live and that 'everyone can call home'.

Building bridges; bringing people together

This awareness of a place we all can call home on an island where everyone can live together with respect was in my thoughts when, in early 2018, I was asked by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar to run as an independent candidate in a Seanad by-election. Following the campaign in April that year, I was duly elected to serve as the first Ulster Unionist elected to Seanad Éireann. This was a huge privilege and I will always be sincerely grateful to those teachtaí dásas and senators who supported me without knowing very much about me, in the task of representing the people of Ireland, North and South in the Seanad. It is a debt of gratitude I will endeavour to repay: by working hard to bring a different perspective to debate and discussion; striving to build relationships across the island in civic dialogue and political conversations; and by creating an environment where businesses can work together North and South for mutual benefit.

The idea of working together for mutual benefit must be underpinned by a mutual respect and a commitment to understanding all perspectives. Many politicians north and south of the border harbour opinions and perspectives based on ideology and sketchy information, often misguided and inaccurate, often absorbed from news channels and social media outlets, frequently based on hearsay and urban myths. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we open up communication and understand each other better.

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it', as Atticus Finch puts it, in the 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a*

Mocking Bird by Harper Lee, dealing with injustice and prejudice, race, class and gender inequality in the deep south in the United States. There is no better reference book. Herein lies the lesson, because if we are serious about opening up a conversation across the island of Ireland, we must admit that we have failed to get to grips with this mutual understanding and respect between republicans and unionists. Yet this is fundamental to delivering the Good Friday Agreement, with its inclusion of 'mutual respect and parity of esteem for all'; not just one side or the other!

This lack of understanding founded in 30 years of violence has been highlighted by my travelling between Belfast and Dublin in both my role within Queen's University and my work in the Seanad. Those people I engage with on a daily basis in Belfast have a surprisingly limited knowledge of Dublin, its people, politics and culture, with opinions formed from second- and third-hand sources. Meanwhile those I work with in Dublin, many from the 26 counties, have little or no knowledge of Belfast, its people, politics and culture. Considering that these two cities on one island are separated by only 100 miles, this 'light years' of distance in understanding is startling.

The vision

Roles like mine in the senate are critical because, as defined in the Good Friday Agreement, the future will be built on good governance based on the integrity of an open, inclusive conversation. The function and role of the senate is crucial as a mechanism to scrutinise and interrogate legislation, a platform to amend and challenge legislation before passing it back to a lower house – something I believe we lack in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that we do have a senate chamber, and actually used to have senators. Reinstating the upper chamber is a discussion we need to develop.

People in Northern Ireland are apathetic and frustrated with the stalemate in Stormont. They demand more from their politicians. A conversation has already commenced in communities across the length and breadth of Ireland within the silent majority who wish to see change. They are the vast majority of people whose concern is more devoted to health provision, education, business, environment and economy, than any preoccupation about the union or unity.

Leadership will be required on a number of fronts. Firstly, we need leadership from elected representatives and a move away from identity politics. We live in a diverse, multicultural society where the binary choice of Protestant and Catholic is out-dated, if only due to the myriad of religions and beliefs from Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, notwithstanding the large numbers expressing positions of atheism or agnosticism, where Protestantism or Catholicism has less and less relevance. The fact that you're from Ballymena or Balbriggan, Coleraine or Cork should merely serve as a mechanism to highlight similarities rather than something exposing differences. We need to create a culture where it's positive to define yourself as unionist or nationalist, republican or loyalist, to be proud of and comfortable in your identity, without feeling threatened by someone who doesn't share the same ideals and aspirations.

Political leadership must demand that doing the right thing for the greater good will be much more important than doing the best thing for short-term political gain. The era of political structures based on creating an environment of fear and insecurity must be banished.

Only a civic dialogue on a cross-community basis can provide the right kind of platform to mandate elected representatives. This civic dialogue can be facilitated and supported by both governments allowing all perspectives to have a voice, so that people can help build the template themselves and lay out the future roadmap. Politicians will then have a mandate to lead by telling people it's fine to be British or Irish, or British and Irish without any sense of undermining your identity, building the importance of 'interdependence' between the people on the island of Ireland and between the islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Strong leadership will create a platform for people to tell their story and voice their opinion, to share experience and most of all learn from this experience, to ensure that we never repeat the mistakes of the past.

Many young people have little or no concept of 'the Troubles' and definitely don't want to revisit our violent past, despite some of the messages delivered on a daily basis to their smartphones and devices by the more radical elements of Northern Irish politics. So secondly, we must demand a culture with media responsibility and accountability, where we focus on the thousands of projects demonstrating the good

work to date where cross-community schemes are reaching out, building bridges and healing hurt. Schemes unreported, where individuals and groups are working North and South between divided communities, building trust and reconciliation. All of this must ensure a move away from giving 'oxygen' to the extremists and the polarised opinions, giving the false impression that this is the majority view rather than an ideal to which only a few subscribe. It's through these younger voices, devoid of bigotry and prejudice, forming the vast majority in society, that we can deliver a 'renewed Ireland' where all can live and work together.

Finally, I'd like to quote a verse that I used in my maiden speech in the Seanad, from a poem by Domingo Ortega that John F Kennedy claimed he tucked into his wallet and walked around with every day. Ortega – like myself – was a farmer's son who went on to become a bullfighter, knowing well that everyone outside the ring always thought they knew better:

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous Plaza full;
But only one is there who knows –
And he's the man who fights the bull.*

As citizens of Great Britain and Ireland and Northern Ireland we all have a responsibility to 'fight the bull'. We must work together, building on what unites us whilst respecting our differences, learning from the past and ensuring that North, South, East and West, we recognise our interdependence and our 'lives entwined'.