

**‘So much more than
just neighbours’:
shifting borders,
shifting identities and
a time of uncertainty**

by John McCallister

**Britain and
Ireland Lives
Entwined**



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After many years of involvement with Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU) serving in various roles within the organisation, he was elected YFCU president and served between 2003 and 2005.

With a passion for politics, John was then elected as a Ulster Unionist Party Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in March 2007 and re-elected in 2011 for the South Down constituency. He was the first MLA to have a private members' bill passed by the assembly, becoming the Caravans Act 2011, and the only member to pass a second private members' bill in 2016 when the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act 2016 was passed. He served on ten different assembly committees and the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly. John served as deputy leader of the UUP between 2010 and 2012. He co-founded NI21 and was deputy leader for one year.

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Shifting borders and shifting identities have been a consistent theme in the history of these islands and the political allegiances which have shaped our polities. The unionism of the 19th century, a definitively Irish political tradition and vision, was to transform into Ulster unionism. Republicanism was very much a minority expression within 19th century nationalism, before fundamentally reshaping the nationalist allegiance following 1916. In more recent times, unionism has journeyed from a ‘Protestant parliament for a Protestant people’ to a ‘pluralist parliament for a pluralist people’. Constitutional nationalism journeyed from a *de facto* rejection of the institutions of partition to full participation in devolved institutions. Equally significant, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) largely abandoned the exclusivist politics of fundamentalism for a more mainstream unionist outlook, while Sinn Féin moved from the politics of physical force and rejection of the legitimacy of partitionist institutions to constitutional politics within Northern Ireland structures.

Shifting identities has also been a feature of both the United Kingdom and Ireland. The United Kingdom’s transition to a post-imperial power perhaps has been the single most significant factor in a shifting British identity since 1945. Added to this, mass immigration,

secularisation, and the (re-)emergence of regional and national identities (a process intensified by Scottish devolution) have resulted in profound shifts in the self-understanding of Britons. No less dramatic, the Irish identity embodied in De Valera's 1936 Constitution has, in recent decades, undergone revolutionary change.

This history of shifting identities should inform contemporary unionist-nationalist and British-Irish relationships. Changes in communal and national self-understanding, rather than being regarded as inherently destabilising or as occasions for fear, are an innate characteristic of both unionism and nationalism, of being British and being Irish (indeed, the assumption that 'British and Irish' is a statement of alternative, rather than complementary identities, is itself deeply ahistorical). What is destabilising, however, is belief in mythic, pristine 'fixed' identities, and the associated intolerance of ambiguity, fluidity, and change.

Dreary steeples?

This being so, the routine invocation of Churchill's words regarding 'the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone', and the assumption that these words embody an enduring wisdom, obscures the realities of shifting identities on this island and these islands – identities which have certainly not been untouched by 'the deluge' of wider patterns of political, social, and cultural change. Assuming fixed identities, fixed allegiances, and fixed accounts of communal and national interests prevents a recognition of the challenges and opportunities presented by shifting identities.

A similar history of ambiguity, fluidity, and change characterises the borders – physical and metaphorical – which have featured in unionist-nationalist and British-Irish relationships. Perhaps counter-intuitively, ambiguity has been a significant feature of the Northern Ireland-Ireland border. The rejection of the Boundary Commission report in 1925 resulted in the agreement between the prime ministers of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, and the Free State to leave the border as it was, contrary to the intentions of the UK government, contrary to unionist commitments to Protestant communities south of the border in the historic province of Ulster, and contrary to nationalist ambitions. The existing border, therefore, was itself the result of pragmatism, a refusal to force abstract concepts of self-determination (which blighted the Versailles settlement), and a statement of shifting identities on the part of both unionism and nationalism.

The 1923 and 1952 Common Travel Area agreements demonstrated the extent to which the UK–Ireland border was fluid, qualitatively different to many other border experiences elsewhere in Europe. The constructive ambiguity of the Éire government during the Emergency – in particular, the Donegal air corridor – is another example of such fluidity, as was the Irish pound’s link to sterling. The UK–Ireland border, literal and metaphorical, has not been characterised by fixed, pristine notions, but by a consistent ambiguity and fluidity which means that the post-1998 arrangements regarding the border, rather than being an innovation, reflect an enduring historical pattern in which the impact of the Troubles on the border was an aberration rather than a characteristic pattern.

Another pattern

It has been this very pattern of shifting identities and shifting borders which has enabled British-Irish relations to absorb and manage a range of pronounced challenges over the decades. Precisely because identities have shifted, and because borders (literal and metaphorical) have been fluid, there has been a capacity built into British–Irish relations to absorb ruptures and disagreements.

To take one example that is often overlooked but which has a significance difficult to understate: the Cold War. Ireland’s non-aligned status during the Cold War and the UK’s NATO membership resulted in radically different commitments and understandings of national interest. This did not prevent, at a moment of intense confrontation during the Cold War, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (itself another expression of shifting identities, on the part of a strongly unionist UK prime minister, and shifting ‘borders’, with the Irish government committing to intensified security co-operation).

Similarly, the 1948 rejection of Dominion status and the establishment of the Republic, and the ending in 1979 of the Irish pound’s link to sterling, were examples of ruptures which British–Irish relations have been able to absorb and accept precisely because this pattern of shifting identities and ‘borders’ had been set. These latter examples have a particular contemporary resonance in terms of demonstrating how significant constitutional and economic changes – ruptures – can be accommodated by British–Irish relations.

Indeed, patterns of change, rather than fixed ideological notions, have chiefly characterised both unionism and nationalism, and the British–Irish relationship. This reflects the wisdom of a political thinker whose personal narrative (the Irish defender of the British Constitution, a Protestant of Catholic descent) testifies to the fluidity of identities on these islands. As Edmund Burke stated, ‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’. Shifting borders and shifting identities – ‘means of some change’ – have enabled unionism and nationalism, and British–Irish relations, to navigate evolving contexts and the realities of sharing these islands.

After Brexit?

It is against this background that the prospect of impending Brexit should be considered. Rather than regarding the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union as an existential threat to British–Irish relations, and to nationalist identity and aspirations, it is, rather, another expression of shifting identities and shifting borders.

British–Irish relations have absorbed other, arguably more significant, ruptures than that represented by Brexit. The relationship has also matured alongside radically different understandings of national interest and international commitments. This being so, our shared history suggests that Brexit – irrespective of initial controversies and disputes – can be accommodated by the British–Irish relationship. Particularly in terms of the political institutions of the EU, there is little reason to regard Brexit as more significant than, for example, Ireland not being a participant in NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly or the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly.

The fluidity of identities and borders also ensures that the identity (or identities) and aspirations of nationalists in Northern Ireland are not undermined or compromised by Brexit. With Irish citizenship rights carrying with them the rights of EU citizenship, and available to all born on the island of Ireland, the contemporary experience of shifting borders and shifting identities ensures that the rupture of Brexit can be absorbed and managed without negatively affecting nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. On this point, it is also worth noting that the (far from numerically insignificant) use of Irish passports by those in Northern Ireland of a unionist background – and the nonchalant response of political unionism to this phenomenon – is another example of a fluidity over identities and borders which promotes practical, pragmatic accommodations.

What about the ‘backstop’?

It is an obvious rebuttal to this understanding to point to the intense debates surrounding the ‘backstop’ provision in the Withdrawal Agreement. The ‘backstop’ itself reflects the characteristics of shifting borders, shifting identities (and I think a much stronger pragmatic case should have been made on this point in a way which may have addressed some unionist concerns). Does unionist opposition to it, therefore, contradict the suggestion that fluidity has been and continues to be a defining characteristic of nationalist and unionist identities? This might be the case if unionist opposition was on the basis of securing a ‘hard border’, but this has been consistently and explicitly rejected by political unionism since the outset of this debate. Any of the proposed alternative mechanisms to the ‘backstop’ have assumed a fluidity to the border, and seek to ensure that this fluidity continues. Irrespective of whether or not such proposals have practical merit, they at least demonstrate – alongside the agreement to maintain the Common Travel Area – that there is a shared commitment to an open and a fluid border.

Having campaigned for a Remain vote in the 2016 referendum and continuing to be very sceptical about the suggested benefits of leaving the EU, I recognise that the UK government has a responsibility to implement the outcome of the referendum. I supported the Withdrawal Agreement as the best means to that end and believe that both Remain and Leave MPs who failed to support it bear a heavy responsibility for the political turmoil experienced by the UK, particularly as it is obvious that partisan calculations defeated a pragmatic negotiated settlement.

On both sides of the Irish Sea, and within Northern Ireland, the polemical tone of the debate concerning the ‘backstop’ has (somewhat ironically) reflected and echoed the Westminster debate. A contributing factor to this was the absence of functioning devolved institutions in Stormont which, potentially, could have facilitated and encouraged greater pragmatism and compromise, not least as a Stormont administration could have been a shared unionist–nationalist persuader for the economic importance of an open border. This perhaps could have resulted in a less confrontational debate on the ‘backstop’, and promoted much greater recognition of the shared commitment to an open, fluid border.

Not helpful

The current dynamics and tensions of Westminster and Stormont politics have, then, obscured the patterns of shifting identities and shifting borders which have historically shaped British–Irish relationships and unionist and nationalist identities. This has also been the case with the Irish government’s participation in the debate, markedly lacking the pragmatism which traditionally has been a hallmark of Dublin’s approach. (It should be noted that the Dublin government’s frequently tone-deaf interventions regarding the ‘backstop’ have had a profoundly negative impact on unionist views.) This being so, responsibility lies with both Westminster and Dublin, and on unionists and nationalists, to interpret Brexit within the context of the patterns of shifting identities and shifting borders.

For both nationalists and unionists, there is a concern that, respectively, Westminster and Dublin are pursuing Brexit agendas which fail to respect the fluidity and complexity of identities in Northern Ireland, seeking monolithic outcomes, and not recognising the need for ‘shifting (i.e. fluid, permeable) borders’ (whether, from a unionist perspective, establishing an Irish Sea ‘border’ between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK or, from a nationalist perspective, undermining the open nature of the Northern Ireland–Ireland border).

From both Westminster and Dublin, and unionists and nationalists, there needs to be a shared determination to ensure that Brexit is integrated into the enduring patterns of relationships between these islands and on this island. There is no *prima facie* case why this should not be so. Brexit will be neither the utopia of ultra-Brexitteer fantasies nor the apocalyptic scenario suggested by too much nationalist polemic. A United Kingdom outside of the EU will be placed alongside an Ireland outside of NATO and the Commonwealth: another expression of shifting identities to be accepted and managed.

Westminster’s foolish neglect of the East–West relationship amidst the Brexit debate and Dublin’s response of megaphone diplomacy both need to be urgently replaced with a renewed and deepened commitment to the East–West relationship for a post-Brexit context, with a determination to demonstrate that the strong, positive bilateral relationship of recent times can be restored. The shifting borders and shifting identities of these islands call for such a relationship, a means of reflecting, respecting, and securing our interdependence – an

interdependence that can flourish even with the United Kingdom outside the European Union, precisely because it is deeply rooted in the historical experiences and contemporary realities of the islands.

The Stormont vacuum

Devolved institutions in Northern Ireland – indeed, devolved institutions across the United Kingdom – give similar expression to the shifting borders and shifting identities of these islands. Scottish and Welsh devolution, for example, reflects both the experience and reality of these national identities within the union, and a history of open, permeable borders.

This itself highlights, in a number of ways, the weaknesses of *de facto* direct rule for Northern Ireland. The complexities and layers of identities throughout significant parts of these islands have required institutional recognition over centuries (for example, the pre-union Scottish and Irish parliaments, the provision for Scotland's legal and religious identity within the terms of the 1707 Act of Union, and the Stormont parliament). Against this background, the devolutionary settlements of the 1990s stand in continuity with these patterns and the experience of shifting borders and shifting identities. The absence of functioning devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, therefore, deprives this region of the inherited wisdom which has historically shaped the institutions of these islands and which led to the devolutionary settlements, an inherited wisdom conscious of fluid borders and identities.

From a unionist perspective, then, the absence of devolution weakens the union, setting Northern Ireland apart from the experience of Scotland and Wales, while it also obscures the complexity of identities in Northern Ireland to which nationalism is particularly (but not solely) alert. Direct rule (whether *de facto* or *de jure*) is inherently incapable of giving institutional expression to these shifting borders and shifting identities which shape Northern Ireland.

Despite this, however, there is little evidence to suggest that either unionism or nationalism since 2016 has had a political focus on the restoration of the devolved institutions, with, respectively, Westminster and Dáil agendas and activity consuming the political energy of both. This does raise the question of why institutions

historically important to both unionism (devolution) and nationalism (power-sharing) have failed, in recent years, to attract significant investments of political capital from either tradition.

The answer to this question may lead to initially uncomfortable conclusions regarding the structures of the Belfast Agreement. In his now classic study of ‘the Ulster question’ – *The Narrow Ground: Patterns of Ulster History* (1977) – historian ATQ Stewart concluded by noting that, as with any society, society in Northern Ireland ‘is, of course, changing continually, but it changes in accord with intrinsic laws, and not at the dictate of the makers of instant blueprints’. Hence part of the ‘function of wise constitutions’ is to take account of such change.

A case can be made that the 1998 architecture for the devolved institutions – when interpreted in a static, ossified manner – has not allowed for the change which is a characteristic of ‘wise constitutions’. Mechanisms and processes initially required to build confidence have, over 20 years, too easily become regarded as unchanging, permanent aspects of the architecture of devolution, rather than temporary expedients. In many cases – and this is particularly so with regards to the Petition of Concern and Designation provisions – these features have become obstacles to devolution functioning effectively and have impeded the evolution of a parliamentary culture characterised by accountability and consensus-building.

As David Trimble pointed out on a number of occasions, however, the 1998 arrangements did provide for organic change and reform through the review mechanism contained in the agreement:

After a specified period, there will be a review of these arrangements, including the details of electoral arrangements and of the Assembly’s procedures, with a view to agreeing any adjustments necessary in the interests of efficiency and fairness.

The failure to meaningfully implement this commitment undermined the functioning of the devolved institutions and, crucially, impeded their ability to take account of and reflect the reality of shifting identities within Northern Ireland, identities which have changed and evolved since 1998.

Above all, while the immediate post-conflict context necessitated rather fixed and monolithic institutional assumptions regarding identity, keeping the related mechanisms in place for over 20 years has obscured the realities of the fluidity of identities. With opinion polls consistently indicating an increasingly socially liberal electorate, a population with a growing proportion of 'others' (a majority of whom, interestingly, while rejecting the description 'unionist', have the union as their preferred constitutional option), and a growing section of society with no personal memory of the Troubles, mechanisms designed to address the immediate post-conflict context of 1998 cannot be assumed to retain their relevance.

Perhaps the most startling political expression of this has been the 2019 European election, with the combined 'others' vote (Alliance and Green) representing over one in five voters, and with Alliance winning its first European seat. This is a significant swathe of Northern Ireland political life of which the Designation provisions of the assembly are incapable of rendering meaningful recognition.

Shifting identities require the pragmatism and flexibility of parliamentary structures and representative institutions which are capable of evolving, rather than a brittle, fixed architecture established to address a particular set of circumstances which, 20 years on, can no longer be regarded as definitively reflecting social and cultural realities. Effective and fair devolved institutions – to use the phrase from the agreement's review provision – require significant reforms to the mechanisms and processes which shape the Northern Ireland Assembly, encouraging and enabling a more robust parliamentary culture. These should reflect fluid identities and opinions rather than be constrained by the strait-jacket of Designation and Petition of Concern, thereby fulfilling the promise of a pluralist parliament for a pluralist people.

The union and pluralism

The coincidence of the Brexit debate with the inability (and unwillingness) to restore the devolved institutions has also resulted in calls from Sinn Féin for a border poll. This, of course, is another example of shifting political identities, overturning Sinn Féin's historic rejection of the legitimacy of border polls, embodying a recognition

of partition, and reflecting the agreement's commitment that 'the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union'.

Aside from this, however, unionists have to recognise that the conflation of the Brexit debate and the absence of devolved institutions do pose a threat to the union. What appeared to be a settled constitutional position in the decade following 1998, with the focus of (admittedly very intense) debates being internal arrangements, has given way to a context in which discussion of a border poll, rather than being merely partisan polemic from Sinn Féin, is being seriously debated.

Unionism is correct to oppose the suggestion of a border poll, not because of the unlikely outcome of support for Irish unification, but because such a referendum would be a distraction to the body politic in Northern Ireland (and beyond). From both unionist and nationalist perspectives, changing the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would not address either the need to shape the post-Brexit British–Irish relationship (debate surrounding the 'backstop' has too often overlooked the fact that this relationship is about much more than the Northern Ireland–Ireland border) or the need to secure stable institutions of regional government in this part of these islands, required irrespective of the union or Irish unity defining the constitutional status.

Mindful of how the Brexit debate – pre- and post-referendum – has voraciously consumed political focus and capital in the United Kingdom, it is very difficult indeed to believe that a similarly damaging dynamic would not be seen in Northern Ireland and Ireland in the event of a border poll.

Renewing the British–Irish relationship post-Brexit and the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, both vital expressions of the shifting identities and shifting borders on these islands, should not be sacrificed in the pursuit of a constitutional outcome which is both highly unlikely to be achieved and which, even in the highly unlikely circumstances that it was achieved, would have negative consequences for pluralism on this island and these islands.

As the taoiseach rightly emphasised in recent comments, a border poll which resulted in a narrow vote for unification – and any such result would inevitably be very narrow – would profoundly destabilise

the Republic. It is very difficult indeed to understand how nationalism would be served by threatening the settled constitutional order of the Republic with such instability. This settled constitutional order has organically evolved in the light of shifting borders (the changes to Articles 2 and 3) and shifting identities (for example, the acceptance of equal marriage), but would be incapable of absorbing the seismic shock of undoing the settlement of the 1920s.

Above all, however, unification would be an intrinsic rejection of pluralism, a pluralism embodied in the reality of two jurisdictions on this island, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of shifting borders and shifting identities. This flows from the historic unionist opposition to home rule and the conviction, in the words of the Ulster Covenant, that a home rule parliament would be 'subversive of our civil and religious freedom', unable to reflect the complexities of identities on this island. Two jurisdictions with diverse institutions are more capable of reflecting and promoting pluralism than one single monolithic constitutional outcome for the island.

For unionism to convincingly articulate and promote such a case for the union, a range of challenges need to be urgently addressed. With Westminster having legislated to extend equal marriage to Northern Ireland, unionism should recognise that its opposition to this undermined the case for the union and threatened to make unionism appear fundamentally reactionary. The union, however, is sharing in a vision of the common good and that this includes equal marriage should be positively embraced: the parliament of the United Kingdom has secured for gay and lesbian couples in Northern Ireland the same right to marry as found elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The matter of abortion raises rather different moral issues, but it is clear that some form of access to termination of pregnancy is required to secure for women in Northern Ireland the rights and choices that characterise a pluralist and compassionate society.

Likewise with unionist attitudes towards Irish identity, a more robust and convincing expression of pluralism is required. The Irish language, already deeply embedded in Northern Ireland through place names and family names, requires appropriate recognition, not as in the highly divisive, ideological proposals emanating from Sinn Féin, but in a variety of pragmatic ways. Appropriate recognition of the Irish language would be an affirmation of pluralism, a declaration that Irish identity is embraced by the union. More broadly, there is a challenge

for unionism to re-engage with its own history as an Irish political tradition, and with the various ecclesiastical, cultural, and sporting organisations that have had and continue to have significance for unionists in civil society and which are explicitly identified with 'Ireland' (for example, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland).

In his speech on opening the parliament of Northern Ireland in 1921, King George V stated: 'For all who love Ireland, as I do with all my heart, this is a profoundly moving occasion in Irish history'. For the king, and for the unionist-dominated senate and commons of Northern Ireland, there was no sense of contradiction in referring to the new parliament in such terms, or in the king's hope 'that the Irish people, North and South ... shall work together in common love for Ireland'. Such a vision – with deep historic roots within unionism – has a renewed contemporary significance in making the pluralist case for the union, embracing layered identities and fluid borders, ensuring that Irish identity is at home within the union, and contributing to the richness of the diversity of this island and these islands, diversity reflected in two jurisdictions in Ireland and devolution across the United Kingdom.

The politics needed today

In her speech in Dublin Castle in 2011, Her Majesty the Queen said of these islands that we are 'so much more than just neighbours'. This captures the significance of our experiences of shifting borders and shifting identities, and our need of diverse institutions and institutional expressions to sustain the many layers of our relationships. It is because we are 'so much more than just neighbours' that there must be a renewed commitment to a deepened post-Brexit relationship, a reform and renewal of the devolved institutions, and a fresh expression of the unionist vision for the flourishing of all in Northern Ireland.

The complexities of our identities and relationships within Northern Ireland, across Ireland and between our islands are not obstacles to overcome. They may be lamented by ideologues as hindrances to monolithic aspirations, but they should be the stuff of a vibrant, positive, confident politics of pluralism and the common good, the politics needed today by those who are 'so much more than just neighbours'.



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