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Reconciliation and/or Reunification? The Irish republican movement and the Brexit test.

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Introduction

The seeds of modern Irish nationalism were sown by members of the Anglo-Irish and Scottish-Irish Protestant minority who ran the country in the late 17th century and in the 18th century. What they initially sought was a much greater degree of autonomy from London, more particularly in terms of trade regulations, as William Molyneux's 1698 pamphlet 'The Case of Ireland being bound by Acts of Parliament in England, stated' illustrates. To prove that Ireland was a nation in its own right equal to England and Scotland, Irish Protestant intellectuals developed a whole corpus of writings on the glorious Irish past. Their aim was to make the Irish colony the fourth British nation alongside Scotland, Wales and England. Persisting religious discrimination and considerable social inequalities coupled with the influence of the French Revolution led to the emergence of a republican nationalist movement at the end of the 18th century and to the rise of Irish Catholic nationalism in the first part of the 19th century under the influence of Daniel O'Connell. The divide created by the Act of Union and the industrial revolution between a largely agrarian south dominated by Catholics and an industrial north east dominated by Protestants froze the national debate along sectarian lines. Pitt – the British Prime Minister – had hoped that the Act of Union would settle the Irish question through the integration of the colony into a larger multinational State. In fact, direct rule from London reinforced the colonial nature of the relationship. Catholic emancipation in 1829 and the Home Rule campaigns in the 19th century frightened the Protestant minority, who feared being overwhelmed by a Catholic majority if autonomy was granted to Ireland. Unionism/Loyalism in Ireland was born in the 19th century, out of conflicting economic interests and a diverging sense of national identity crystallized on religious denominations (Whyte 1990, Kee 2003, Bardon 1992, Ruane 2021).

Present day Northern Ireland is the heritage of those irreconcilable perceptions, which led to violent conflict and to partition of the island between an autonomous and later full-

fledge independent state in the South, and a British North with devolved institutions. Yet partition did not solve the national question as the South maintained a territorial claim on the North in its 1937 Constitution, and the Catholic minority in the North was discriminated against by what Lord Craigavon called ‘a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State’ (Bardon 1992 : 539) which contributed to foster a siege mentality inherited from the 17th century. The uncompromising attitudes and the brutality which came as a response to the rise of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s led to civil unrest and to the emergence of paramilitary groups on both sides, the most important being the Provisional IRA. Violence led to the demise of the Northern Irish devolved institutions and to the restoration of direct rule from London.

As a result, Northern Ireland experienced 30 years of conflict, which totalled over 3,000 casualties and more than 43,000 wounded and maimed people, out of an overall population of about 1.5 million living on a territory of 9,300 square miles. The failed tentative step to establish a power sharing administration with the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973-1974 and the failed referendum of 1973¹ revealed that no lasting settlement was possible without taking into account all the layers of the conflict. This implied 3 strands: a North-South Irish dimension, a British-Irish dimension, and of course a nationalist-loyalist Northern Irish dimension. This in turn, implied that there should be no exclusion from the negotiation table. This pre-condition was met in the 1990s under the favourable conditions created by the end of the cold war. The end of apartheid in South Africa provided a peaceful example of conflict resolution. Then US commitment, the conversion of the republican movement to representative and parliamentary politics through its party Sinn Fein, the more conciliatory attitudes of the British government, Tony Blair’s large parliamentary majority which gave him a free hand, were vital ingredients in the Peace Process. Finally, the influence of European Community and European Union policies in terms of economic integration largely made the border irrelevant at the end of the century (Bévant 1993, Bévant 1994, Ó Gráda 1997, Groutel 2004, Hayward and Murphy 2019).

The Good Friday Agreement

¹ The referendum was held in March 1973 to determine whether people in Northern Ireland favoured reunification or the status quo. The so-called ‘Border Poll’ was boycotted by Nationalists and resulted in an inconclusive victory for remaining in the UK. 98.9 per cent voted to remain in the UK but the voter turnout was 58.7 per cent.

The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998. The agreement opened the way for the creation of consociational power-sharing institutions in the North. The constitution of the Irish Republic was altered in order to drop the territorial claim on the North. In return the British State acknowledged that sovereignty over the North was based on the consent of the Northern Irish population and that if a referendum produced a majority in favour of reunification, the British Parliament would legislate accordingly (provided the Irish State also approved the change...). Intergovernmental conferences were also created to address the British-Irish and Irish-Northern Irish dimensions. The Agreement was approved by referendum on both sides of the border with solid majorities of 94 per cent in the South and 71 per cent in the North (Melaugh and McKenna 2023).

To make a long story short, compromise was made possible by the favourable conditions of the 1990s, by economic integration, by the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of all identities. The large success in the 1998 referenda is explained not only by the fact that the Irish, North and South, had grown weary of the conflict. It is also explained by major ideological and economic changes. The border issue which had been one of the causes of the civil war in the 1920s and which had remained a key issue in British –Irish and nationalist-loyalist relations, was becoming irrelevant because of the process of European economic integration.

The twenty-five years of peace enjoyed by Northern Ireland do not mean that all problems are solved. There have been several crises leading to temporary suspensions of the power-sharing executive, but the most serious of them all is today the Brexit crisis, which has brought back to the fore the border issue. Tensions between nationalists and loyalists led to the suspension of the power-sharing administration and assembly with no prospect of a negotiated settlement in sight, at least not before the council elections of May 2023. Northern Ireland gave a 56% turnout in favour of Remain in the Brexit vote. This contradicts the line of the main loyalist party, the DUP, which campaigned in favour of Brexit. Today the DUP, which was staunchly opposed to the Protocol on Northern Ireland negotiated between the UK and the EU, still refuses to restore the power-sharing administration in spite of the new settlement agreed between Rishi Sunak and Ursula Von der Leyen in April.

Re-integration of ex-prisoners

‘Those who renounce violence [...] are entitled to be full participants in the democratic process. Those who show the courage to break with the past are entitled to their stake in the future’ (Clinton 1995). This quote from a speech delivered by Bill Clinton on his State visit to Northern Ireland in 1995 sums up the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement, and it also underlines the central role played by the paramilitaries in the resolution of the conflict, thus putting an end to years of criminalization of republican activities. The consultation of paramilitary prisoners in the rounds of negotiations that preceded the Agreement was important (McEvoy 1998), and the fundamental principle in the Agreement was that of inclusion. The only way to build a long lasting peace in the North was to accept the legitimacy of all ideological standpoints and consider all shades of opinion as full and equal participants in the building of a post conflict community, which future would remain open.

Therefore, former paramilitaries, historically considered as the main instigators of violence, were given the opportunity through the peace process to achieve a new contribution to society at large, and to their own cause in particular. Brian Gormally’s report on the re-integration of ex-prisoners casts a very interesting light on this concept of inclusion, here defined under the notion of conversion:

The concept of “conversion” relates to the transition from a violent conflict to peace and to the consequent change of use of economic and social resources and change of vocation of former combatants. Conversion is a way of minimizing the cost of past conflict and maximizing the benefits of peace. (Gormally 2001:14)

Though the report focused on ex-prisoners, its conclusions obviously apply to all former paramilitaries. In other words, in a context of post-civil conflict one of the main challenges was to make sure that former guerrillas would be given a place and status within their community and within society at large that would contribute to secure their farewell to arms. The challenge was all the more crucial that even though the hold of Sinn Fein and of the IRA would remain strong, the existence of splinter groups dedicated to the continuation of the armed struggle could well represent a strong temptation if the Agreement did not deliver its

promises. Reintegration became as a result inseparable from the notion of inclusiveness, irrespective of the ups and downs of political life in post-conflict Northern Ireland, yet it must be borne in mind that in the case of the republican movement, Reintegration would not only affect the Six Counties, but Ireland as a whole (Shirlow, McElrath, McEvoy 2004).

According to Brian Gormally (2001:14), the first stage of reintegration was political reintegration. As no formal structures of demobilization programmes had yet been set in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, the transition had to come through political parties representing the aspirations of former guerrillas.

As the political recognition of Sinn Fein as a legitimate representative of widespread political aspirations in the nationalist community was effective, and as Sinn Fein would field candidates in all elections north and south with the possibility of becoming one day the single largest party, the Agreement encouraged conversion from guerilla warfare to political activism. In the case of the republican movement this trend presided over the creation of a widespread community sector in which former paramilitaries and ex-prisoners became key figures in the development of their own communities. This is epitomized by Mickey Culbert, an IRA prisoner for 16 years and a former member of staff of the republican ex-prisoners' support network, today head of the umbrella organization *Coiste ni nIarchimi*: (in English 'ex-servicemen network or committee')

The issue about the Republican ex-prisoners' community is that they were never apart from the community even when they were inside. [...] They were never removed from the political context that brought them to jail. [They were very much part from the struggle in jail] When people went out of prison, they were totally tuned in, they weren't there in the whole underground, they were very aware, self-developing. The major drive for self-development was that they would be better people for participating when they came out of prison. When people came out of prison from the 1990s onwards, they were coming back to a non-war situation, to political struggle (Bévant 2010).

Coiste played an important part as an ex-prisoner support network and, by extension, in the conversion and sometimes relocation of former republican paramilitaries. As its Gaelic name suggests, *Coiste* works on behalf of numerous local groups. It is a kind of mother

structure that represents local associations at a higher level, and makes decisions as to the policies pursued by the association. Mickey Culbert explains:

There had always been an ex-prisoner loose network through the island. It was actually a separate department within Sinn Fein called the POW department. That was maybe the think tank that came up with the idea of formal grouping. So the group was set up, funding received, and there were three or four people employed in the Belfast area, and almost straight away the Dublin group was set up so that we could coordinate the activities in the South in the North.[...] Money comes from Europe and from agencies set up by the British Government in the North and by the southern government in the South.[...] as a matter of fact we are subjected to very rigid audits accounts and procedures quite simply because they don't trust us, there is a lot of suspicion about this. But we have improved over the years to be a very professional, professionally run and professionally worked organisation (Bévant 2010)

What the experience of *Coiste* reveals

First, *Coiste* is representative of concepts developed by Lederach, McGinty and Richmond. Damien Okado-Gough argues (Okado-Gough 2017) that the local turn in peacebuilding began in the early 1990s with the work of John Paul Lederach, and has been developed further by writers such as MacGinty and Richmond. Lederach argues for conflict transformation whereby local people act as the primary authors of peacebuilding in a bid to create sustainability by rebuilding relationships within society through reconciliation (Lederach 2014). McGinty and Richmond also place emphasis on the local in terms of local agency, context, and dealing with local partners, arguing that locally driven peacebuilding is a form of resistance against dominant (often neo-colonial) discourses and practices of the liberal, top-down peacebuilding model (McGinty and Richmond 2013). *Coiste* would therefore be representative of this hybrid approach² and serve the purpose of reconciliation in Northern Ireland at a time Northern Ireland was hailed as a successful example of global peacebuilding.

² The hybrid model is an attempt to merge the basic tenets of the liberal model with the local turn by advocating a mediation “between local and international norms, institutions, law, right, needs and interests” (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013: 763)

The approach, however, remains questionable. The Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement do not or only partially deliver for Irish republicans what Richmond defines as a central tenet of peacebuilding, that is emancipation, autonomy, and a sense of liberation (2013: 775-6): they have only offered an alternative, peaceful road to the ultimate goal of reunification and end of British presence in the North. This alternative option was acceptable since the armed struggle had come to a stalemate given the international context, and the border issue was no longer a major bone of contention in the context of European integration as both parts of Ireland were already economically amalgamated. Now, with the rapidly changing international situation, the rise of Sinn Fein both north and south, and Brexit that has shaken British-Irish and north-south relations, the question that matters is whether Damien Okado-Gough's following assumption is correct: "A permanent resolution can only come about by overcoming the issues of conflicting identities between the two communities, an issue IRA ex-prisoners are working to address through their peacebuilding activities". (Okado-Gough 2020 : 4-5)

This brings us to further explore *Coiste's* experience. The republican movement took the opportunity of the lack of planning of both the British and Irish authorities when the decision enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement resulted in the release of no less than 3,000 prisoners from prisons in Northern Ireland and in the rest of Europe in a very short period of time (Shirlow and McEvoy 2008). The absence of structures and procedures would have inevitably created huge problems of management and resettlement, and the authorities had no other option than to rely on the existing support network, even though they remained suspicious of republican activities. This situation contributed to give Sinn Fein a hold and a decisive influence on an organization that was supposedly independent from the party, contrary to the former republican POW Department, as it had the official status of a non-profit association. *Coiste* has remained closely connected to republican politics because of its origin and because of the background of its members (McEvoy Shirlow & McElrath 2004).

Coiste served the purpose of peaceful republican activism as it spread North and South, thereby allowing the republican movement to spread its influence in southern communities. Even though *Coiste* came across difficulties at the beginning of the project, testimonies dating back to the beginning of the 2000s tend to show that the organization became accepted as a serious and legitimate association well beyond its traditional territory:

The difficulty was the acceptability, people's suspicion. [...] if we go back 5 or 6 years, people's awareness of what republicans were and ex-prisoners were was very limited. [...] Now, we have been accepted, our bona fide has been accepted, [...] we're totally accepted because we are the person who lives next door. (Bévant 2010)

This is confirmed by the situation of *Coiste* today, some twenty-five years after the Good Friday Agreement, as the association is firmly established on an all-Ireland basis even though its headquarters are located in Belfast. Today *Coiste* gathers twelve formal groups based in various parts of the country, and a number of associated informal groups. The network is funded by the European Peace Fund, set up to address the legacy of the conflict, and employs 65 full-time workers and numerous volunteers (*Coiste* 2003).

In other words, though the commitment to peace and peaceful politics of *Coiste* through the process of reintegration of former prisoners is unquestionable and unquestioned today, its bona fide remains the empowerment and citizenship of former republican paramilitaries. As time passes the original objectives, which were to meet the needs of ex-prisoners through counselling and lobbying against discriminations, have evolved. From an ex-prisoners centred approach mainly based on reintegration, groups have moved to a much more community-orientated policy. More and more projects started to emerge in the 2000s such as the Process of Nation Building, which have transformed the nature of actions. As over time less and less ex-prisoners needed the help of *Coiste*, its local groups have laid the stress on their contribution to the local communities. Rosinna Brown, a former republican inmate who set up a centre in Dundalk in the South thus recalls:

We discovered that there was no childcare in the town at all, except for one place which was very expensive.[...] So we did a survey and we discovered that people who were not in the republican community had nothing.[...] So I thought, we will develop a childcare centre, and we are not bringing ex-prisoner children, we want to help the people in the community. [...] we later found that it was called "Long Crèche", however the Protestant minister in the town came up and asked if we could take his child on Mondays [...] and suddenly the people in the town thought "well, if it is good enough for the protestant minister, it is good enough for us". So it really took off (Bevant, 2010).

Republicans and Brexit

The anecdote is one among many that show the place and importance of former IRA members in a context of conflict resolution, but above all, in a context of reconciliation that benefits republican politics in the long run. Former guerrillas and paramilitaries are thus seen no longer as men and women of violence but as social workers, community service providers and social activists dedicated to the well-being of their communities. It should come as no surprise that such a dedication has borne electoral fruits to the republican movement both north and south of the border (Bauluz, Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Morgan 2021), as the republican ethos remains the backbone of *Coiste* and of local associations. The peace process benefitted Sinn Fein to the extent that it has now become the first political party in Ireland in terms of first preference votes, and its focus on social and economic issues mirrors its success at grassroots level. One could even contemplate with irony how the republican movement reversed an old British trend. In the nineteenth century British imperial governments wanted to kill Home Rule with kindness, in the twenty-first century Sinn Fein's strategy is to bring reunification with kindness and dedication now that the economic interests of both parts of Ireland are convergent. The trouble is that Brexit has revived old wounds and a border issue that could derail the plan.

Over the last seven years since June 2016 many have voiced their concern that the return of a hard border between the two Irelands may signal the end of the Peace process and the beginning of a new cycle of violence. This scenario has not materialized so far despite serious tensions, and this calls for further investigation, as British politicians – including the DUP - did little over the past four years to bring back some measure of serenity over the matter.

The electoral fortunes and strategies developed by Sinn Fein over the past years were coupled with a change in leadership which gave the party a new look. Young women from a generation who was not involved in the Troubles are now the new faces of Irish republicanism, and their strong commitment to a whole set of social, progressive and feminist policies have reinforced and completed the work of the grassroots in local communities. Furthermore, Sinn Fein's participation in the northern institutions have also given the party a large measure of respectability and credibility since the era of the 'chuckle brothers' (Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley), an executive couple who would have been the most improbable

of all but a few years before. It would not be in Sinn Fein's interest today to see the return of violent politics. Power seems at hand through electoral means and Brexit has had a strong impact on northern voters, leading pro-European unionist voters to distance themselves from the DUP or the OUP as the last elections in May 2022 and May 2023 indicated.

There is another interesting irony as the republican movement was initially as hostile as the DUP to European integration. It started to evolve under the influence of the special programmes for Ireland complementing Objective I European funds, and those of the International Fund for Ireland (largely funded by the European Community after 1986), which attracted cross border and cross community support. The irony with the IFI is that it came into being as the financial weapon of the Hillsborough treaty of 1985 signed by Margaret Thatcher and Garret Fitzgerald and dedicated to combat the influence of the republican movement. In other words, economic weapons used against paramilitaries in order to restore peace in the North eventually contributed to the transformation of the republican movement into a pro-European party benefitting from the popularity of Europe in Ireland as a whole. The pro-European, left-wing stance and commitment to peaceful politics largely explain why votes switched from the SDLP to Sinn Fein in the North and from Fianna Fail in the South (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, Müller and Regan 2021).

Now loyalist parties have not followed the same road, and their support of Brexit has contributed to alienate a number of traditional votes to the benefit of the Alliance in particular. Today loyalist parties – i.e. the Ulster Unionist Party, the Democratic Unionist Party and the small Traditional Unionist Voice - no longer enjoy an overall majority in the Northern Irish Assembly, and the fear that they could lose a referendum on reunification is real, even though polls suggest the prospect remains remote (Renwick, Dobrianska, Kelly and Kincaid 2023).³ If violence were to erupt, it would most likely be from desperate loyalists' quarters than from the republican movement, and the awareness that such a situation cannot be ruled out also explains why Sinn Fein's electoral tactics rely more on social and economic issues than on the old national question. Such tactics pay off and contribute to the rise of the party; besides, they allow republicans to avoid confrontation on a matter that would be divisive and could trigger counterproductive reactions.

³ In 2018, a survey carried out by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University also indicated that 62 per cent of Northern Irish respondents supported remaining part of the United Kingdom via devolved government or direct rule.

Conclusion

The question of State allegiance remains a major issue connected with a colonial past, with conflicting cultural and linguistic identities and above all with a sense of belonging or not to one or the other nation. In turn, the nation cannot be separated from the territory on which it exercises its jurisdiction, and territorial claims have always been a source of conflict, something not specific to Ireland. The possibility of a referendum on self-determination in a near future is a way of settling the dispute, yet it is an issue as divisive as it used to be in the past and it represents a serious risk of igniting tensions between communities. To nationalists, and republicans in particular, the referendum would give the people the power to end partition and recover full fledged sovereignty over the national territory. Seen from a loyalist perspective, the referendum initially seen as a means of hammering the last nail in the coffin of nationalist expectations has now become a real threat, hence the fears in loyalist quarters in the aftermath of Brexit and Northern Irish assembly elections in 2016, 2017 and more particularly in 2022. Besides, in Northern Ireland the issue of the legitimate territory of the nation became less of an issue in the years accompanying the peace process as the border grew invisible until Brexit reopened the case.

Eventually, political parties have no option but to find a way forward through a negotiated settlement, even though it may be considered temporary. Pushing for an early referendum is in the interests of none of the parties, not to mention the British and Irish governments. One can hardly see how the same question could not generate another tight result and end up in crisis with nationalists stuck in case of a no majority rejecting the legitimacy of reunification, or loyalists staging a desperate opt out option in case of a (tight) yes majority.

Brexit and the border issue have made it impossible for Sinn Fein and the DUP to work together for a while, even though the RHI (Renewable Heat Incentive) scheme scandal was the reason advocated when the late Martin McGuinness resigned as deputy First Minister in January 2017, thus bringing down the executive. The restoration of the devolved institutions did bring back a consociational executive, though on the border issue viewpoints seemed totally irreconcilable. The conflicting relation between Sinn Fein and the DUP was underlined by the abortion crisis of February-March 2021, which led the British Secretary of State to bypass the local assembly and government, and again by the DUP's boycott after the last assembly election.

Obviously, this is walking on the thin edge, as much rests on the balance of strength that has come out of the last Assembly election in Northern Ireland. Power-sharing has so far survived in the North despite several temporary suspensions of the institutions. The question is whether it would survive the crash test of a referendum on self-determination. After months of tension, it is becoming a matter of emergency to find new compromises before any referendum on self-determination is held, as the fragile constitutional edifice rests chiefly on the promise of this ultimate settlement.

This explains why republicans act with caution, as they expect time to work for them. The transformation of republican paramilitaries into social activists, the acknowledgement by the European Union as well as by the British and Irish states of an organization such as *Coiste na nIarchimi* as an important tool for peace and reconciliation, have given the republican movement both credibility and respectability in both parts of Ireland (Reinisch 2017). There have been fears that Brexit, as it revived the possibility of a hard border between the two parts of Ireland, could lead to the collapse of the whole process that presided over the return of peaceful politics. The diplomacy and political restraint displayed by the republican movement so far expresses its political strength, and a belief that for once the fortunes of British politics may benefit the ultimate goal of a reunited Ireland. Brexit, in short, is seen as a catalyst that may speed up the process, and now that the clock is apparently ticking in their favour, republicans have no reason to give loyalists an excuse for the return of violent politics.

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