

## A return to respect, mutual and real.

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To look upon the past two decades of politics on our island is to be struck by the decline in relations North-South.

In the noughties the Fianna Fáil leader and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern was markedly clubby with the unionist leaders and the various loyalist groupings. The Irish President Mary McAleese and her husband were close and active with the Orange Order and loyalists.

We could refer to this as a time of “hand-holding” and “nursing”. Not of nursing old animosities, but of nursing the worries and concerns of the minority tradition on the island by the Dublin government. A time of narrowing the gap and difference, North-South and between the two traditions across the island. Reconciliation, not retrenchment, was the name of the game.

Added to this age came 2011 and the Royal Visit, prompting the renowned columnist Fintan O’Toole to declare “the end of Anglophobia.”

However, the Brexit vote of 2016 changed everything for North-South and Anglo-Irish relations, utterly.

Adding to the turmoil has been the graphic tail end of the Decade of Centenaries. Vivid images of base brutality from 100 years ago have flashed across print, television screens and oration platforms, reinvigorating all the age old sentiments and freshly ploughing the old furrows of division North-South and East-West.

Even as we stood in the turmoil of Brexit and the centenary tensions, I expected the “hand-holding”, in the mode of Ahern and McAleese, to continue. That Dublin would categorically look to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland and secure the interests of nationalists, but also be seen to be actively mindful of the interests and concerns of unionism. Be clubby I certainly thought. It wasn’t so.

Tom McTague of the Atlantic Magazine reported on events that led up to the signing of the Withdrawal Agreement and the NI Protocol, and quoting a high placed EU official in Dublin he recorded, “We just could not believe the British had accepted the text. We knew it would not be acceptable to the unionists.”

Given the Good Friday Agreement created scaffolding and institutions that delicately managed the two traditions (including N-S bodies), it was remarkable to see that GFA spirit of scrupulous balance thrown by the wayside.

I was certainly taken aback by the degree to which Taoiseach Leo Varadkar was moved by the concerns of northern nationalists, yet seemingly totally unmoved by the concerns of unionists.

Loyalist groups who had good relations with Dublin and stood steadfast in support of the Good Friday Agreement have now withdrawn support for the historic accord. Nobel Peace Prize winner and co-architect of the GFA David Trimble feels “betrayed” by the NI Protocol, adding that it “rips out the heart of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.”

Would Bertie Ahern and Mary McAleese have allowed this drift and chill to set in on key N-S relations?

It has been back to the trenches. A total break with the North-South protocol of the past.

The mood between the two blocs on this island is at an all-time low. The “hand-holding” and “nursing” has ended. The corridors and channels of communication and good natured repartee have shrivelled. The rise of Sinn Fein in the south, with a distinct wind of populism, has forced the greening of all other parties.

President Biden and his administration has been openly partisan, siding with Dublin and threatening to London and largely dismissive of unionism. Putting weight behind the drift in North-South relations.

The fall in relations has been in full public view. At turns the Belfast and Dublin administrations have struck stinging verbal blows against one another. Leading politicians on both sides have been drawn in to childish Twitter battles.

Arlene Foster said to the Sunday Times, “Relationships with the Dublin government have never been at lower ebb... particularly with Coveney and Varadkar.”

Foster described the latter as “truculent. While Sammy Wilson called him “vile Varadkar”. As leader of the DUP, Edwin Poots said North-South relations have “never been worse”.

Current DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said Foreign Minister Simon Coveney had not engaged with him for months and that “there isn’t even engagement with unionism.”

Adding weight to this drift caused by Brexit has been the full calendar of centenary events, which has put patriotic and tribal remembrance over reconciliation and N-S relation building. Eyes more definitely on the old past than the new future.

The Decade of Centenaries started off slowly and rather mildly, with an emphasis on the two traditions. At the tail end, the Dublin government has put a real emphasis on nationalist and republican history, and where attempts have been made to act with parity of esteem and a cross-community ethos, there has been glaring public hiccups.

Three quick examples - a planned RIC centenary commemoration was cancelled after deep and sustained public backlash; Michael D Higgins declined an invitation to attend an ecumenical church service that marked the NI centenary (a very popular move with the ROI public according to polling); a wall of universal remembrance was seriously damaged at Glasnevin Cemetery, whereupon the decision was made to remove it permanently.

Even the bullish and partisan Leo Varadkar acknowledged that the prospect of a united Ireland has been pushed back and reconciliation undermined by the RIC commemoration controversy.

Against this backdrop of deteriorating N-S relations, all shades of nationalist opinion and politics have declared a unified Ireland closer than ever.

You expect calls for unity to come after sustained reconciliation and from a position of close relations, not from the trenches. Not so.

Though Leo Varadkar has pumped the breaks a little, saying that an imminent border poll would be like “setting a date for a marriage before you’ve had a courtship”.

Arguably that courtship had been happening steadily prior to 2016, with Enda Kenny following very much in the statesman and post-partisan mould of Ahern.

Even the eminently moderate former Ulster and Ireland rugby player Andrew Trimble has said that “people in the Republic are not ready for a united Ireland”.

And this is where I stand. We need to see the return of hand holding and nursing the “other”. We also need true parity of esteem, ironically a phrase uttered most frequently from the green side of the aisle.

On Brexit, the Dublin government needs to be as concerned about northern unionist concerns and northern nationalist concerns. While the three successive Taoisigh in office since 2016 have no direct mandate in Northern Ireland, they have obligations to all the people and both communities north of the border.

Dublin knew from the moment they saw the text that unionists would object totally to the Protocol. With better lobbying before Brussels on the concerns of unionists (the people they purport to want to share this island with), good faith could have been banked for any future “courtship”. To the contrary, fresh furrows of bad faith and grievance have been ploughed.

As Arlene Foster in her farewell address said, “short term advantage comes at the cost of long term harm”.

Likewise, the centenaries need to be given equal footing. We cannot publicly and loudly mark the burning of Balbriggan and Cork by the British and not mark the burning of the Custom House in Belfast and the docks in Liverpool by the IRA.

The President Michael D Higgins has said we cannot fall to “amnesia” and “othering”, but that is exactly what the museums and institutions in the republic have been largely doing.

Where Constance Markievicz is very well known, Irish unionist women are effectively unknown. Likewise, Cumann na mBan is a part of daily discourse in the Republic of Ireland, while the Ulster Women’s Unionist Council is unheard of. Even though the latter had a far bigger membership than that of the former, with estimates that put membership at between 115,000 and 200,000 women.

Mutual respect and understanding is impossible when the institutions of the state almost exclusively articulate one tradition.

The National Print Museum made an official reissue of the Irish Proclamation, but not the Ulster Covenant. This represents the reburnishing of old sentiments, not the creation of new modes of thinking North-South.

John Hume said that Ireland is not divided by geography, but by its two traditions. Yet here we are in 2022 and, to reuse the words of WB Yeats, we stand in a stagnant pond filled with two old boots of nationalist absolutes and unionist absolutes.

We need a true return to true mutual respect whereupon we can create something new that truly cherishes both traditions North, South, East and West on the island.

#### About The Author

Brian is an artist and writer from and working in Belfast, and represented by Canvas Galleries. He has written for eamonmallie.com and Slugger O'Toole and his political cartoons are regularly on Slugger O'Toole and in the Belfast News Letter.

More at

[www.brianjohnspencer.com](http://www.brianjohnspencer.com)

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