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A Northerner in the South

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When I came to think about this discussion and this panel, I wondered whether I should be here at all because I felt I did not fit neatly into this box.

Yes, I am a Northerner. I was born and grew up in small town Mid Ulster and I spent another 19 years in Belfast before moving to Dublin. But both my parents were from the west of Ireland; my mother from North Mayo, my father born in Mayo and brought up in Galway. Almost all my relatives lived in the South and I spent my summer holidays every year in Mayo or Donegal until I went to Queens in 1962.

"Home" to my mother always meant Mayo and she never understood or got used to the invisible sectarian apartheid that meant we barely knew our Protestant neighbours next door or across the street in our small town in South Derry.

So do I really belong on this panel? Was I really a Northerner who had moved to the South? But then I thought maybe it would do no harm, especially coming at the end of the discussion, to demonstrate that things are not all as black and white (or even as Orange and Green) as they may seem.

People of my parents' generation, born before Partition, still had an all-Ireland outlook and regarded the Border as an inconvenience rather than an international boundary or an ethno-cultural dividing line. Cross-Border mobility declined after Partition but it did not stop completely, especially in the Border areas, and the two territories were never hermetically sealed off from one another.

So when we moved to Dublin in 1981, with a little encouragement from other parties, it was not as traumatic an event as it might have been for some.

What we found when we got there was a mixed bag. There was prejudice, hostility, suspicion from some. This was the era of the broadcasting ban on RTE and there was a certain level of paranoia and Provo-hunting in sections of the media. It was even suggested at the time that if Gerry Adams were interviewed on RTE, he might use it to send coded instructions to IRA units in the South.

There was also a certain resentment at Northerners supposedly arriving South to take the locals' jobs. A Northern accent was enough to attract suspicious looks and muttered remarks. I always felt sorry for people from Donegal because most Southerners could not distinguish a Donegal accent from a Derry one.

I even felt constrained in the liberal Irish Times, where I started working, to stress my Southern roots. It was a bit ironic since the distinguished editor, Douglas Gageby, and the soon to be distinguished News Editor, Conor O'Clery, were both fellow Northerners, though there was certainly no prejudice from them.



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Contrary to what some Unionists may have thought at the time, there was no red carpet rolled out for members of the 'persecuted Northern minority fleeing from their oppressors'. I suspect there rarely is in such circumstances.

Those were difficult times, however. Violence in the North was at a high level and atrocities were being committed on all sides. People in the South were alienated and frightened at what they saw on their TV screens. They were afraid that it might spill over into the 26 counties, as it had done in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings in 1974. They were concerned at a time of crippling unemployment and renewed emigration that the general image of Ireland as a place of violent conflict would drive away investors who did not know the difference between North and South. It was not all that surprising that Northerners were not universally welcomed.

I began working as a journalist and I spent the first year doggedly, even masochistically, watching Prime Time, RTE's main current affairs programme night after night trying to get a grasp of the dynamics of Southern politics and society. It was tough going. RTE's current affairs style in those days did not make for riveting viewing. But the main thing that I learned was that the South had its own conflicts and struggles that unrolled at their own pace.

The Northern conflict was there. It hung like a baleful cloud over events in the South, but it was not as all-consuming as Northerners assumed. The South was grappling with other, more immediate issues like unemployment and emigration, inadequate health services (some things never seem to change), persistent pockets of appalling urban dereliction. And it was struggling to break free from the stifling legacy of the dominance of the Catholic church in the decades since Partition.

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by a succession of referenda on abortion and divorce, arguments about decriminalising homosexuality and about church control of hospitals and schools. Essentially the South was trying to escape from the straitjacket of a confessional state and become a modern secular one instead.

These were serious conflicts. The first divorce referendum in 1986 was lost by almost two to one in a society that already had a very high incidence of marriage breakdown. I was taken aback at the result and began to learn about Irish solutions to Irish problems. Housing estates were full of couples living in what was officially adultery and was mortal sin by the rules of the Catholic church, yet nobody batted an eyelid. Yet try to regularise the situation and allow people to formalise their new loving relationships and you were accused of undermining the moral fibre of society.

The first abortion referendum in 1983 had been a bruising experience. It was intended to doubly prohibit something that was already illegal and led to vicious and



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hurtful abuse of often quite religious people who did not believe in imposing the views of the moral majority on others. It was carried by three to one. Nine years later there was another Irish solution to an Irish problem when another referendum established the right to information about abortion and the right to travel to have an abortion but maintained the prohibition at home. The problem of unwanted pregnancies persisted but now we could officially export it across the Irish sea.

Divorce was finally legalised by another referendum in 1995 when it was carried by a whisker but who now would dream of turning the clock back.

Homosexuality was not decriminalised until 1993, five years after a decision against Ireland in the European Court of Human Rights but when the ban was actually lifted there was hardly a whimper of protest. Things moved fairly swiftly after that. The clerical sex abuse scandals in the late 1990s and early years of this century dealt a near fatal blow to the crumbling power of the Catholic church establishment. The South was no longer subject to Rome Rule. It was now a democratic and reasonably secular state like any other in Western Europe and a good deal more secular than some of the new states that have recently joined the European Union.

Abortion is still prohibited in the South and there are other church-state issues to be resolved but these no longer hold out the prospect of the titanic struggles of 25 years ago.

Most of the impetus for these changes did not come from the formal political system. It came from civil society and a growing new NGO sector. By the 1990s I was fairly actively involved in the Irish Council of Civil Liberties and in some of these conflicts and had a good vantage point from which to observe the development of this vibrant alternative political force.

Was/is the new South a partitionist society? Is it indifferent to what goes on 100 miles or so to the North? Has the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger led to a selfish consumerism whose horizons do not stretch beyond the non-existent Border post at Carrickarnon?

The Republic today is certainly not an irredentist society. People do not spend their days pining for the return of the fourth green field that is still in bondage. But when the violence ended and the smoke cleared, people felt freer to express their views. The broadcasting ban had been lifted. It was no longer seen as supporting terrorism to be critical of the RUC or British army or to suggest that discrimination had not completely gone away in the North.



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There was enormous support for the Hume/Adams political dialogue and the slow and tortuous progress of the peace process. Successive Dublin governments, led for the bulk of the time by Fianna Fail, invested very considerable time and effort in the long drawn out negotiations that eventually led to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, and the equally long drawn out negotiations afterwards to set up the Executive and try to keep it in place.

Fianna Fail is noted for its exceptionally sensitive political antennae. Fianna Fail governments do not put their time and energy into projects that they know are going to be unpopular with the electorate. In the referendum in the Republic, the Agreement was approved by the extraordinary majority of 94% to 6%. The turnout was less than in the North, about 55/56%, but that was normal for the Republic, especially where the outcome was obviously a forgone conclusion.

And in the nine years since the Agreement, with all the frustration and false dawns, the Dublin Government has remained engaged, has pushed for the development of North-South bodies, and has even, in the acid test, put its money where its mouth is and has earmarked funds in its National Development Plan for projects in the North.

And very interestingly, and I am not sure that I understand quite what is behind it all, Fianna Fail has recently been talking publicly about organising or forming alliances in the North. Once again, the canny political pros in Fianna Fail do not embark on new political ventures if they think they will go down like a lead balloon with the electorate and unless they think there is something in such ventures for the good of the party.

There are all sorts of reasons for the continuing interest, at least by the political classes, in engagement with the North. Some are political and idealistic. There is still a belief in Irish unity in the South, though there is no desire to force it on anybody. There is a genuine concern to see a final and irrevocable end to violence and bloodshed and the development of a fair and just society in the North.

There are also hard-headed practical reasons as well. Violence in the North did frighten off some investors. It is in the South's economic interest to have stability and peace north of the Border and not just a hastily patched up cosmetic settlement, but one that will endure by catering for the aspirations of both the major communities.

And recently at least, with the Southern economy booming, the North has provided an opportunity for investment of some of the surplus cash that has been sloshing around. There are also simple common sense advantages - cross-Border cooperation in the area of hospitals, third level education, transport and infrastructure all make perfect sense and offer advantages to the electorate in hitherto neglected areas of the Republic.



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So I do not think the South is going to lose interest in the North any time soon, even if it is not top of the electoral agenda. However, that could change at some stage in the future as a generation grows up to whom the conflict and the Troubles are only something out of history books. For those who want to see strong North-South links and institutions it is important to build them now when the interest and commitment is still fairly strong.

What sort of North-South links do we really want? There will be plenty of people to advocate economic and political links. I want to look a little at another area, one I have already touched upon in relation to the South, a vibrant civil society and NGOs committed to human rights.

Turning to the North for a moment, the Troubles gave birth to highly effective and committed NGOs like the Committee on the Administration of Justice and to statutory bodies aimed at securing justice and equality like the Fair Employment Authority and the Equality Commission, which has now absorbed the FEA, the Police Ombudsman and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

While I welcome the formation of the new Executive, though I am still rather bemused about how it all came about, there is now a significant opposition deficit up at Stormont. And with the best will in the world, Grand Coalitions with utterly unassailable majorities can have a tendency to become arrogant or deadlocked or both. There needs to be someone out there who will continue to campaign for justice, equality and human rights even when it is awkward or inconvenient to those in power. And there needs to be some basic charter or Bill of Rights against which executive actions and legislation can be tested so that they do not infringe fundamental rights.

There is a danger that with a political settlement achieved, people will feel that the human rights bodies have done their job and can be let wither away. But if the settlement is to endure and especially if we want it to endure even if the political structures and boundaries change, then it is essential that the rights infrastructure be kept alive and with all its teeth in good condition.

Turning back again to the South, while it is a democratic and moderately secular state, the political system has not been good at defending basic rights. Indeed many of the newer human rights and accountability bodies and protections, like the Human Rights Commission, the Garda Ombudsman Commission and the partial incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, only came about under the pressure of the settlement in the North and the commitment in the Good Friday Agreement to ensure "at least an equivalent protection of human rights as will pertain



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in Northern Ireland". In passing it is interesting to note that the wording of that clause assumed that human rights protections in the North would be better to begin with.

The Republic would need its human rights mechanisms in any event, but two factors make them more important and necessary.

No matter what form the ultimate political settlement takes in Northern Ireland and in the island as a whole, there is going to be a lot more mobility between North and South. And more of that traffic is likely to be from North to South where the economy is much stronger, even if the pace of growth is slowing, and it will no longer be all or almost all Catholics or nationalists fleeing from the Troubles. Powerful and effective human rights bodies and legislation and a culture of human rights may help to protect the interests of new groups of Northerners moving to live in the South.

In addition, Southern society has changed quite radically in the last 10 years. There was a major influx of asylum-seekers in the late 1990s and, much more dramatically, of migrant workers in the last five years. The 2006 census figures showed that 10% of the population were born outside the state and there was net immigration of almost 70,000 in 2005/6. You can see the changes quite visibly in one short stretch of the street where I work in Dublin's north inner city. On a quick count there are three Chinese take-aways, two Polish supermarkets and one Romanian one, an Indian restaurant, a halal take-away and what appears to be a Chinese gambling club. And a lot of the counter staff in the other shops are east European.

This exciting and welcome, to me, influx of what the Government calls "non-nationals" has happened so far without any major outbreaks of racial violence or tension, thanks in part to the strong NGO sector which has worked hard to counter racism and promote integration. Indeed, having criticised authoritarian Catholicism earlier on, it is only fair to say that the Catholic church and the other churches in the South have played a very positive role in combating racism and providing help and support to the immigrant communities.

But while the early years of immigration provide one danger point, the treatment of immigrants thereafter is just as important. If they are not welcomed and integrated and if segregation is allowed to develop in housing and schools, the seeds of future conflict will be sown. And there are signs of that happening already. When the new school term began in September, some new schools had to be established catering almost exclusively for immigrant children. And some housing estates on the outskirts of Dublin now have around 50/50 immigrant and indigenous families or even immigrant majorities.



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There will also inevitably be cultural problems and we have seen one small instance of official insensitivity and lack of imagination in that area recently with the Garda refusal to allow a Sikh recruit to the Garda Reserve to wear his turban.

This is an area where the work of the human rights NGOs and independent statutory bodies will be vital in the future in opposing racism and official policies that may unconsciously and unintentionally lead to racial conflict, and in offering remedies where discrimination or racial abuse and tension occur.

And of course the North has also experienced a major influx of migrant workers as well and the small towns of Mid Ulster where I grew up have been visibly transformed in recent years. Indeed the house that I grew up in has now become a Chinese restaurant. The experience here may have been more fraught than in the South and there seems to have been a fair amount of low-level ethnic violence and intimidation already. Hard work by the NGOs and human rights bodies will be required to keep it under control and create a better climate in the future.

Both areas will need a culture of tolerance and human rights, strong rights legislation and the structures to implement it. And with the growth in cross-Border mobility, even without closer political integration, there will be a need for the closest possible cooperation and coordination between the human rights bodies, North and South. And I am happy to say that with considerable foresight the Good Friday Agreement provided for a Joint Committee of the two Human Rights Commissions, North and South, and I am pleased to be a member of that Joint Committee from the Southern Human Rights Commission.

Being a 'Northerner' in the South has been an interesting and an enhancing experience and perhaps those of us who have moved from one area to the other have our own particular contribution to make to building a new culture of tolerance, inclusiveness and human rights protections throughout the island that we all inhabit.