

The evolution of modern UK-Irish relations

Written by Ivor Roberts

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IVOR ROBERTS, APR 10 2011

The relations within and between the British and Irish islands are now routinely described as never having been better; a description regarded as a cliché. A cliché? Good. It was not so long ago that such a belief would have been dismissed as an attempt at humour.

The Good Friday or Belfast Agreement is a remarkable one. The process to implement it has not be an easy one. But we now have a settlement rooted in the principles of consent, justice and equality in which politics has replaced violence as the way people do business. But the difficulty with an agreement is that whatever language the signatories use in binding themselves to implement it; they cannot create the ingredient of mutual trust. An old Spanish poem illustrates the problem. "Traveller, there are no roads, roads are made by walking". Trust, in other words, can only be built on the basis of experience, common experience, and common fruitful experience.

Unfortunately, relations within and between these islands have been defined for far too long by nationalism. It has of course been one of the main factors shaping human history in the 20th century. Along with totalitarian tyrannies of both right and left, we have seen the explosions of nationalism, racism and, in places, religious bigotry.

On the island of Ireland, we had two branches of Christianity literally at each other's throats in the name of nationalism and mutual religious intolerance. Why was this? The answer to the question comes, I think, in an essay by Freud nearly 100 years ago on the subject of what he called "the narcissism of small differences". Freud's contention was that it was precisely in the groups which had relatively little to distinguish each other that the jealousies, the narcissism most easily led to violent attempts to mark that difference and to want to obliterate those who most nearly resembled you. The read across to Northern Ireland is clear enough.

To circumvent these "minor differences", to move away from nationalism and tribalism/sectarianism involves reducing the extent to which people feel secure and understood only among people like themselves. Put another way, we need to find a way to overcome what has been described as social autism. The Canadian author and latterly politician Michael Ignatieff put it well "the pathology of groups so enclosed in their own circle of victimhood or so locked into their own myths or rituals of violence that they can't listen, can't hear, can't learn from anybody outside themselves." We need to overcome, in Northern Ireland, this bell-jar mentality by discounting and rejecting sectarianism in all its sinister forms and promoting not just trust but the kind of individualism that can survive only in conditions of trust. The murderous attack made against NI police officer Ronan Kerr for daring to join the new integrated police service in Northern Ireland is, of course, anathema to that approach and a classic example of intolerance and of the collective gangsterism in which paramilitary structures thrive.

The phrase "human rights" trips off politicians' tongues with increasing frequency. But what does this mantra actually mean? It is not a concept to be worshipped for its own sake. It is because justice and equality for all before the law and in every part of society form the glue which hold a society together. Where the opposite obtains, injustice and inequality, you have a solvent which breaks down the fabric of society. It is only by correcting the historic wrongs suffered by Catholics in Northern Ireland by the thorough reform of policing, criminal justice and human rights that the glue will work its magic and that those who had been brought up to regard the border and partition as a gerrymander of gargantuan proportions could be reconciled to the principle of consent for a united Ireland not coercion or violence.

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But although Sinn Féin signed up to the Belfast Agreement and have been rewarded by a high position in government, not all Republicans see that as an end in itself. They see it as a transitional phase where the British government is being or should be dislodged from many of the parapets it has occupied. It is in this context too that there grows the Unionist perception that all the concessions have been made on their side, that their world (and with it all its certainties) has been turned on its head and that they are under siege not just from the nationalist and republican community but from the two governments as well. This Manichaean view ignores many of the real gains for the Unionist community of the Belfast Agreement. The consent principle which constitutional nationalists accepted in the 1920s has been adopted by the republican movement and has been reflected in the new language of the constitution. As the events of the last few days has shown, there is still violence, but at a far, far reduced rate – in 1972, 470 people died. Last year, a handful. Even one, NI police officer Ronan Kerr, is one too many, but let us recognise the progress made. The transformation in the economy has been enormous: new jobs, new investment and a new way of life, as anyone who walks through Belfast city centre, or that of Londonderry or any other town can see.

Seamus Mallon once described the Belfast Agreement as Sunningdale for slow learners. It was depressing that it took nearly 30 years to develop and implement a strategy which commanded widespread consent across both communities in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, despite many setbacks the two governments sought, with varying degrees of success, to promote an agreement sustained by majorities in both parts of the island.

Now that the agreement is firmly in place the strategic objective of both Governments must be continued normalisation.

There was much to normalise. Of course, some good things carry on as before. The Common Travel Area remains a corner-stone in the British-Irish architecture. And we all know that the UK is the largest market for Irish goods, and Ireland the fourth largest market for the UK. The cross-fertilisation of talent in academia, professional bodies, culture, entertainment and sport has never been stronger.

But at a higher more symbolic level the process was set in train over a decade ago.

Let me give some practical examples over the last few years:

- The unveiling in 1998 by Her Majesty the Queen and President McAleese of the Memorial to those from throughout the island of Ireland who died in the First World War.
- The address to both Houses of the Irish Parliament by Tony Blair in the same year.
- The exchanges of national day greetings between the two Heads of State which only became possible following the removal from the Irish Constitution of the territorial claim to Northern Ireland.
- The visit by the Irish Guards to the Republic for the first time since Independence in 2002.
- The highly personal and poetic speech delivered by Prince Charles at Glencree in 2002. I found it remarkable that the Irish Tricolour flew at half-mast over Government buildings, including the GPO in O'Connell Street, as President McAleese attended the funeral of the Queen Mother in London in that year.

Changes in the governance of the UK, and in particular the 'variable geometry' created by devolution, helped the process of normalisation enormously. Devolution was a bold and radical change to the way the UK is governed – in British terms a constitutional revolution. Successive British governments wrestled with the paradox of regarding devolution as the starting point for the resolution of the problems of Northern Ireland while at the same time having deprived the people of Northern Ireland of its devolved government 30 years ago. Now Northern Ireland has joined two other Devolved Administrations, firmly on their feet. These administrations provide 'bite-sized chunks' which Ireland, I think, finds easier to deal with.

There are subterranean trends too. One is closer co-operation on European issues. Not just in policy areas such as social security, tax, justice and home affairs and economic reform. This is a far cry from the days when Irish officials were instructed to speak French at EU meetings. And recently when the Irish government needed European financial support to help it through its banking crisis, it was the British Chancellor of the Exchequer who spoke of helping a

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friend in need. Such language would have been unthinkable 20 years' ago.

Both our countries have matured in ways which are easier to see and feel than describe. Ireland is of course undergoing profound change from the halcyon days of the Celtic tiger. But Ireland compared to the Ireland of the 1960s and 70s is now and will remain a modern, open economy with some of the best business brains around. It has leaders in popular culture, a country part of the European mainstream.

Famously, Winston Churchill once said that Britain and America were divided by a common language. The United Kingdom and Ireland have often been divided by a common history. But these divisions are narrower than they have ever been, and the bridges wider.

It is because the bridge is now wide that the most symbolic event of all can now take place, the State Visit by the Queen. She will pay her first visit to Ireland of her long reign and indeed the first visit by a reigning British monarch for exactly 100 years. George V in 1911 was visiting part of his realm then. Elizabeth II will be visiting a foreign, though not so foreign, country. Like that great Irish man of letters, Hubert Butler, I look to the day when the border on the island of Ireland becomes a mark of distinction rather than one of division.

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