

**The Cambridge seminar on the future of the island of Ireland  
Cambridge Centre of Geopolitics and Sidney Sussex College, University of  
Cambridge**



*Reconciliation and mutual trust - the crucial unfinished elements of the Good  
Friday Agreement, with Hugo MacNeill  
11 October 2021<sup>1</sup>*

There has been much talk recently about the topic of a Border Poll on Irish unity and specific discussion has been held in this lecture series. Reference is always made to the Good Friday Agreement and the specific point (on page 4 ) relating to the ability of the Secretary of State to direct a Border Poll be held on the issue. Much less attention, and frequently none at all , is given to topics that are raised at the beginning of the document and I would argue are absolutely crucial.

On page 2 the document reads ‘ we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation , tolerance and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights of all’. On page 3 it reads ‘we will endeavour to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement’,

Topics such as tolerance and reconciliation are sometimes seen as rather ‘soft ‘ topics. Nice to have rather than need to have. I firmly believe that in this context and given the very specific and painful history of Northern Ireland they are anything but. True reconciliation and tolerance remain crucially unfinished parts of the Belfast Agreement. I will contend in this short address that they are absolute requirements not only for a Northern Ireland that ‘works’ for the majority of its citizens today with specific acknowledgement of the growing number of citizens who are not defining themselves in the traditional binary way . They are also the essential requirements for a Northern Ireland or North which reflect the longer term ambitions of both the major traditions. Either a United Ireland or a Northern Ireland remaining in the United Kingdom. It is highly questionable whether the Republic would vote for unity with a Northern Ireland that was not at peace with itself-reflecting much greater levels of reconciliation and tolerance than are evident today. I would also argue that from a Unionist perspective , a reconciled Northern Ireland is likely to engender a much more positive view from the rest of the United Kingdom than exists at present.

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<sup>1</sup> A recording of Hugo’s intervention and conversation with Prof Biagini is available here:  
<https://bit.ly/3mX702l>

The aspiration towards a United Ireland is an entirely legitimate one . Many have held it for a long time and consider it as a genuine dream to be realised . Many nationalists in the North had to endure a lack of civil rights for a long time and felt abandoned by the Republic. Even though those have been largely addressed (although issues such as Irish language rights can prove divisive) and have seen a considerable passage of time, the effects of what they saw as a lack of respect still can be seen .

At the same time many attitudes in the Republic towards Northern Ireland remain simplistic. Many travel North rarely if at all unless they are based in the border regions. The history that we are taught at school in the Republic is the story of the journey , with all its ups and downs , towards an independent Ireland. Independent in this case meant 'not British'. Therefore it is sometimes hard for people in the Republic to genuinely appreciate what it means to be 'British ' and 'Irish ' at the same time. BT Sport made a documentary on how rugby brought people together on this island independent of their political or constitutional allegiances. Two recent captains and former close teammates and British & Irish Lions Brian O'Driscoll from Dublin and Rory Best (CBE) from Belfast were talking and Brian expressed his confusion. 'Rory you play for Ireland and yet are British at the same time'. 'That's right' replied Rory. 'I just don't get that ' said Brian without in any way seeking to be provocative or cause offence. I would respectfully say this attitude reflects that of many in the Republic who have real difficulty understanding the concept of genuinely being British and Irish at the same time. It echoes the well known point emphasised by Ulster poet John Hewitt when expressing the various components of his identity 'I always maintained that our loyalties had an order to Ulster, to Ireland, to the British archipelago, to Europe and that anyone who skipped a step or missed a link falsified the total'.

There is still relatively little understanding or real discussion in the Republic of the key issues , both emotionally and practically , for Ulster unionists . More importantly there is little real engagement on these topics. Despite the claims of some groups that 'everything is up for discussion' little generosity of spirit has yet been seen. Issues such as rejoining the Commonwealth, the importance of the British monarchy, a meaningful role for Stormont, new flag and constitution ,the NHS, the Somme, July 12<sup>th</sup> and so on and so on. Every year at the start of the rugby season there are letters to the papers complaining about the singing of 'Ireland's Call' (an anthem specifically designed to reflect all the identities on this island given that rugby and a number of other sports are played on an all island basis without threatening anyone's identity). Some have even claimed that this Anthem (as opposed to Amhran na BhFiann (the anthem of the Irish Republic ) )has had a dispiriting impact on the performance of the Irish team. Until it is pointed out to them that the two most successful teams in the history of rugby union -New Zealand and South Africa-specifically adapted their anthems to reflect the different ethnic compositions of their national teams . If you are having problems with Ireland's Call , as many obviously are, wait until you get onto the hard issues!

At the same time I would respectfully suggest that there is a need for Unionists to develop a more constructive and inclusive Unionism. This is both necessary for a Northern Ireland that works better for all its citizens but also to engender a more positive attitude from the rest of the United Kingdom. Having lived in England for almost twenty years until 2000 and continuing an active engagement in British Irish affairs since then I have seen many

examples of detachment. Who has provided a positive inclusive vision of Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom?

Anthony Kenny (former Master of Balliol College Oxford and one of the founders of the British Irish Association) made an observation in the 1970s that still remains of relevance today. 'What used to bind Britain to Northern Ireland were three things . Sentiment. Self Interest. Morality. Sentiment -we hold an affection for the place and feel a connection to its people. Self Interest-it used to be of practical use -going back to the Northern Ports during World War 2. Morality-we did not submit to Nazi bombardments and neither will we do the same in response to IRA violence. He said that 'now' (ie in the 1970's) only the last of these applied . Comments from leading UK politicians over the period , some in recent times, have only heightened Unionist concerns about British attitudes. This is all set in the context of potential shifts in the UK itself. I recall some years ago being at a British Irish Association committee meeting where certain Welsh and Scottish issues were being discussed at length. A senior English former diplomat shook their head . 'This is all getting very tiresome' was the comment. I remarked to the then Chairman of the BIA to my right Conor Brady 'The sleeping giant of English nationalism is awakening'. A trend we have only seen increase since then. This is not good for Ulster Unionism  
Ulster unionists deserve better than this but they have to have constructive and inclusive leadership.

Taoiseach Michael Martin has shown a consistent commitment to and understanding of Northern Ireland issues over a long political career. He has talked about going there frequently and the value and understanding gained by talking to people after the formal meetings and spending time often in a social setting. We understand this clearly from our experience with the British Irish Association where the main benefits are often gained in informal discussions outside the set piece events of our annual conference. In addition to the BIA I consider myself very lucky that rugby brought me to Northern Ireland on increasingly regular occasions from my early twenties. Up to then I only had met people from a nationalist background but now this was hugely amplified going to Belfast, Bangor, Ballymena, Dungannon , Derry/Londonderry and many more locations. Rugby was and is mostly played by people of a unionist background . People used to say that it was great that you played on the Irish team and the 'Troubles ' were not mentioned. This was fine as far as it went, I thought , but it did not go very far. If you had got to know and respect someone as a teammate in the intense atmosphere of international rugby and at the end of the day you could not sit down and really try to understand the unionist background how could you expect young people from polarised communities to do the same. So we talked and talked. Principally with my great friend Trevor Ringland , but with many others as well.

After the Canary Wharf bombing in 1996 I together with Trevor organised the Peace International which brought together many of the best players in the world to play Ireland in an invitation team captained by Francois Pienaar as a statement against all terrorist violence.. Francois had captained South Africa to winning the world Cup the previous year in 1995 and whose image with President Nelson Mandela wearing a South African jersey (long seen as a symbol of Apartheid)had gone around the world. We filled what was then Lansdowne Road (now the Aviva Stadium) and the guests of honour were all children whose lives had been dramatically impacted by terrorist violence. Darren Baird who lost both his

parents and sister in the IRA bombing of the Shankill Road fish & chip shop, Tommy Mullen whose brother was killed in a UVF attack on the Rising Sun pub in Greysteel a week later and Gareth Bouldsworth whose best friend Tim Parry who was killed in the IRA bombing of Warrington in England. It was a very emotional event as many people who attended were not rugby supporters and many had never been to the Lansdowne Road stadium before that day.

We need to build mutual respect and understanding. Without threatening anyone's sense of identity. We need to maximize the potential of bodies such as the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council. I believe the Shared Island initiative (in the Department of the Taoiseach) has genuine aspirations and real potential. This is despite its difficulties in having real interpersonal contacts due to Covid (and also the refusal of some unionists to engage given other issues such as the NI protocol). Civic groups (such as Cooperation Ireland, the Ireland Funds and the BIA) are important and can expand their activities. There is a role for real Citizens assemblies. Much greater progress needs to be made on integrated education which remains stubbornly low. And real focus on working class areas where the prospects of many are few. I would also highlight a recent victory for Northern Ireland in Belfast being chosen as host city for One Young World in 2023. This is the world's largest annual gathering of over 2,000 young social activists and is the only event (apart from the Olympic games) where there is representatives from every country in the world. Belfast was chosen in a very competitive process because of the warmth of its welcome, its history, its resilience and its humour.

Northern Ireland has been a huge part of my life. I love the place and its people. All its people. To achieve true reconciliation and tolerance we need civic and political leadership. Who on the nationalist side is consistently reaching out to unionists with a positive and inclusive vision of the future? Who on the Unionist side is consistently doing the same to nationalists? We are seeing the growth of the middle ground who increasingly do not want to be labelled in this way. True reconciliation and mutual respect will build a Northern Ireland that works better for all its citizens. It also is the absolute requirement for the longer term constitutional ambitions of both major traditions. This is a big prize. For everyone. A prize worth going for.