

The Cambridge seminar on the future of the island of Ireland
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'Beyond identity politics: building bridges and uniting people'

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Context

In order to consider what the future holds for relationships between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland we should consider a number of issues reflecting on what has gone before, and where we are now in order to identify the future opportunities together.

Relationships and Brexit

The UK and Ireland are neighbouring jurisdictions linked by a land border and a narrow strip of water, but inextricably linked in governance, business, culture, sport, science and agriculture. And it's this link with regard to geographic closeness and identity that has proven to be such a challenge for hundreds of years with struggles and stresses, collaborations and confrontations, and the constant push and pull of a 'love hate' relationship. No other nation realising independence from the 'empire' has demonstrated these levels of tensions or complexity. There is no doubt that proximity and cultural identity have played a key role in forming this relationship.

The future relationships are shaped by the past but must not be held ransom to it. Everyone must focus on the road ahead but be cognisant of the view in the rear view mirror. We can always learn from the past and learn from mistakes. As Warren Buffet said 'in business, the rear view mirror is often clearer than the windshield'.

¹ A recording of Ian's intervention and conversation with Prof Richard Bourke on 13 July 2021 is available here: <https://bit.ly/3BxcPJc>

On the 23rd of June 2016 the citizens of the UK took a position based on information available and the information provided to them regarding what Brexit entailed. A decision we must respect, but more importantly understand, fuelled by ideology, insecurity and fear, but more fundamentally made in the absence of accurate truthful information, analysis, and examination. The UK has changed and is changing; Ireland has changed and is changing.

Brexit has happened and will present both challenges and opportunities. We all have a responsibility to listen to concerns and to recognise and address the difficulties, to consider solutions to problems and not to dismiss or discount fears, concerns, or insecurities by any community across the islands. The insecurities accentuated at the referendum for the citizens of the UK was about sovereignty, identity, autonomy and taking back control. It was about a message that some promoted to instil fear of the European Union and the threat of watering down the national values and promoting the idea that a federal Europe was imminent, where a cocktail of diverse cultural identities would prevail and all national values would be lost for ever.

For Ireland, there were also issues with ghosts of the past that sometimes influence opinion and give rise to their own insecurities. A constant power struggle with its British neighbours and the strain of dependence and independence has created an environment conducive to a complicated relationship where Ireland is linked to England through business, trade, education, popular culture, sport, and music. An Ireland where Irish citizens watch British TV, follow British football teams, go to British universities, have family living and working in Britain yet still have an underlying discomfort with the British; or is this just healthy competitiveness between two neighbouring nation states? It's certainly something that manifests itself when the England football team play or when the England rugby team perform; and maybe it's a perfectly normal phenomenon and traits that all demonstrate!

For Ireland, a nation that fully embraced all that Europe presented, the referendum was the realisation that its nearest neighbour and biggest trading partner was proposing to 'leave the club', and the feeling of betrayal, desertion and disappointment that would accompany such a proposition resonated with many people.

The significance for Northern Ireland as part of the UK, with trade and travel arrangements on the island of Ireland and simultaneously with Great Britain, developed over hundreds of years, where the relationship east/west is equally important as north/south. The referendum result highlighted insecurities and uncertainties and facilitated a sense of 'being let down' for some, whilst others were nervously optimistic about a new 'freedom' they were told they could enjoy.

Only time will tell how Brexit manifests itself.

Identity

Torn between Northern Irish, Irish or British presents a complicated conundrum of identity and a degree of complexity that many outside the province can't fully understand. The last 100 years has defined and formed many opinions and perspectives. Concluding in some people within Northern Ireland embracing their Irishness whilst rejecting their Britishness; some embracing their Irishness whilst being comfortable with their Britishness; others rejecting their

Irishness completely, whilst many remain nervous that any recognition of Irishness would be some sort of betrayal of their Britishness. Or finally, those who find the uniqueness of a Northern Irish identity the ‘best fit’ for their position as part of the UK on the island of Ireland, with no desire to be confined by the binary or corralled to a position of defining themselves as one or the other.

For everyone in Northern Ireland the future will demand leadership to break from identity politics. It will demand leaders to lead and not just default to type spinning old rhetoric and stirring the fears of the electorate to cling ‘solely’ to traditional values. It will demand building an inclusive future together whilst respecting all nationalities, cultures and creeds. Something that will be central to building future relations north south, east and west.

To subscribe to a collective identity whilst retaining our individuality is not new. We’ve done it for the last forty years as individual member states within the European Union whilst under the EU collective identity. Furthermore, the United Kingdom is a union of four nations with a collective identity where citizens define themselves as English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish whilst being part of the collective identity of being British.

Legacy

Legacy was always going to be one of the more difficult issues within the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and would always present tensions and difficulties across all communities where the hurt, pain and sense of loss is still very real and heartfelt on a daily basis. Legacy is one area within the GFA not fully or satisfactorily addressed as yet, but something that must be dealt with. Both governments have a responsibility to do so, and owe it to all the citizens of NI, ROI, and the UK to find mechanisms that will allow society to move forward in the full knowledge that victims on all sides can feel that their concerns have been heard and that satisfactory arrangements have been put in place to deliver answers, truths, or closure as those families and individuals still waiting so desire. This will demand great courage and leadership but will also require an ability to acknowledge the past, to understand the current complexities, recognise the hurt still evident, and offer the next generation an opportunity to work together for a better future

We all have a responsibility to leave our ‘baggage’ at the door, and build a bright future, in spite of the past; something that was reaffirmed when I had great pleasure in meeting and speaking with a group of French Foreign Legion veterans in Dublin, in 2018.

As I listened and learned of stories of extreme heroism and bravery something very profound occurred to me.

This was a group of Legionnaires with backgrounds so diverse and different, coming from a mixing pot of every religion and culture imaginable, from every strata of society, who had laid their lives on the line for a common cause. So how did they do it, and why?

The answer I concluded was by leaving their ‘baggage’ at the door, by parking everything that had gone before in their lives, wiping away all previous misdemeanours and starting with a clean slate in a ‘company of equals’ Because one of the things that makes the Legion unique is the fact that when you sign up you are not questioned on your background or past, anything

that has happened before is irrelevant, you leave behind anything that would create a point of difference from your comrades. Your colour, creed and social standing have no significance when you become a Legionnaire.

And interestingly, unlike all other regiments in the French army, NOT swearing their allegiance to the French government but taking an oath to 'the legion' because it is The Legion that binds them together.

I believe we should learn from this. Supporting a common identity cognisant of diversity can only be good. Especially as we live and function in a truly global community, with a global marketplace as technology opens up connectivity and communication, and brings all nations closer. Globalization has little time for national values.

To quote the Dalai Lama, "I find that because of modern technological evolution and our global economy, and as a result of the great increase in population, our world has greatly changed: it has become much smaller. However, our perceptions have not evolved at the same pace; we continue to cling to old national demarcations and the old feelings of 'us' and 'them'."

A future together must be built on trust and understanding. It must be about combined strength as Great Britain and Ireland work together in a global context, respecting and understanding each other.

If we deal with the demons of the past, we have a fantastic opportunity to build strong relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and between Great Britain and Ireland. What the future holds for our relationship will depend on the ability to recognise and respect the other perspective and the vision to see the bigger picture. Failure to show leadership and a united position today will adversely impact generations to come.

Uniting People

The human mind has been described as being like a parachute; working best when it's open, and for this reason the discussion about the future can only be facilitated by strong leadership and open minds. Leaders comfortable in their identity and open to alternative thinking, receptive to considering ideas not normally within their comfort zone based on the merits and values of any such proposals, devoid of any prejudice or preconceptions or previous thinking. Good shepherds, a farming term and not a religious reference, don't lead from the front but always direct their flocks from behind by identifying the leaders in the flock and letting them guide the rest. We will need a few good shepherds!

Strong leadership will demand that all opinions, views and sensitivities are understood and respected and all impacts and outcomes or actions are fully appraised and evaluated.

'To Kill a Mockingbird' is a novel by Harper Lee published in 1960, and is something I've referenced before. The plot and characters are loosely based on Lee's observations of her family, her neighbours and an event that occurred near her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama in 1936, when she was 10 years old. The story is told by the six-year-old Jean Louise Finch.

The primary themes of the novel involve racial injustice and the destruction of innocence. It also addresses issues of class, courage, compassion, and gender roles in the American Deep South. The book is widely taught in schools with lessons that emphasise tolerance and decry prejudice, and although it has become quite contentious in some curriculum's more recently, it's fundamentally about understanding and respecting another perspective.

It's through the eyes of a ten-year-old that gives this novel a very important perspective from a very simple uncluttered uncomplicated viewpoint. What I am convinced of is that the vast majority of residents in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and in Great Britain need to understand and respect the different perspectives on the past and aspirations for the future in a similar uncluttered uncomplicated fashion.

To quote Atticus Finch from the novel 'you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you get inside his skin and walk around in it'

This must be the basis to build our future relationships. To find whatever unifies us and to build on our synergies and benefits of collectively working to achieve greatness in a global context.

We all have a responsibility to build relationships for the future. The first tasks are to encourage better understanding, build bridges, break down barriers, and unite people across the island to create an inclusive society and a culture of mutual respect and parity of esteem built on the principle of consent as defined in the GFA.

Borders

Climate change, terrorism, disease, the internet, cultures, creeds and communities. Just some of the things that don't recognise borders.

For some, borders 'keep out', for others they 'keep in', but for many they are about marking 'our' territory. Something that is especially the case in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

As someone who was born in South Armagh, grew up a few miles from the border, and still lives in close proximity to the border, I understand something about the psyche of ordinary people living in these areas.

For most it's about the day to day convenience and inconvenience to their lives, the interruption to their businesses and families, and the direct and indirect costs it presents. For others it's more about territory, identity and perceptions.

It's a complex and complicated matrix of identity where some identify as being Irish, some identify with being British, some with both and some with neither, and all the combinations in between. The border for some represents a delineation of freedom, for some a symbol of oppression whilst others see it as a line on a map indicating where responsibilities begin or end for one country or another.

But for many in Ireland, north and south, this is about power, control, and more importantly the symbolism that a border or lack of a border presents. For many people, especially those

living and working in the countryside it's the 'baggage' of land ownership, and the critical part that land ownership plays in the rural fabric, that is paramount.

It's something I always find best illustrated in the 1990 movie, 'The Field', an adaptation of a 1965 John B Keane play, where the lead character 'The Bull McCabe' played by Richard Harris highlights the passion and emotion placed on possession of a parcel of land and the lengths they will go to, to protect it. The Bull McCabe states at one point that 'there's a stronger law than common law; the law of the land'. It's something that I believe is misunderstood by many outside the rural, primarily agricultural, land owning communities. You need to live and work in this environment and be part of the cycle of responsibility placed on families regarding ownership of land and a charge to retain it at all costs, and pass it on to the next generation.

Land ownership is such a charged subject that it has divided and separated many families down the years, either on marriage, on death or on the sale of the asset. It's something that often overrides logic and rational thinking. Don't underestimate the importance of territory in this border conundrum.

And it's this perspective and perception of a border and of identity and whether a culture feels threatened or protected that will define whether there is support for or opposition to the border. This presents a charged climate where nationalism and protection of identity is paramount even though the advent of technology, ability to travel, and access to information has hastened the globalisation of cultures. In fact, cultural globalisation has involved the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and cultural identities bringing increasing interconnectedness among different populations and cultures and arguably breaking down barriers and borders.

'Sapiens', A Brief History of Humankind, and 'Homo Deus', A Brief History of Tomorrow are two bestselling novels written by Yuval Noah Harari. And he has just penned a third novel titled '21 Lessons' For the 21st Century.

In this latest book, Harari questions whether our focus on nationalism, immigration, terrorism and trade tariffs is misplaced, and whether our conversation should be about climate change, technological disruption, artificial intelligence and bio engineering. The issues that will really impact the global economy and political stability.

He goes on to state that 'the problem with the past few years is that while we now have a global ecology, a global economy and global science, we are stuck with only national politics. To have effective politics we must either de-globalise the ecology, the economy and the march of science. Or we must globalise our politics'.

Building for the future whilst recognising the past

Anyone familiar with Northern Ireland will understand the sensitivities of language, flags, emblems and colours even though it's 23 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Although much has changed and all have enjoyed a long period of relative peace and stability some of the more contentious issues around culture and identity, human rights concerns, and the constitution still thwart society's ability to deal with issues and move on, and the capacity to condemn the horrors of nearly 30 years of violence on all sides to the past.

Understanding the Irish Unity question north of the border begins with understanding the people of Northern Ireland and it's not just as simple or as binary as one might think. The old orange and green lines although still evident are now blurred by a large cohort of people, many of whom are the younger members of society, motivated by education, careers and ambition and less and less interested in being defined by religion or politics, and less likely to see themselves as any particular group or party. Rather, they have a desire to listen to arguments and be convinced of the merits of either argument and take a position on 'what's better for themselves'. Whether a future is best served as part of a new Ireland or as part of an island partitioned by the divisions and borders of the past reinvigorated with new thinking. Many still need to be convinced that change would have benefits, or that change would be truly inclusive.

If we have learnt anything from our past it was that partition on the island of Ireland undoubtedly produced different outcomes than envisaged at its inception. Furthermore, for those who believe that partition was a huge mistake and that the forced separation of land and people was a fundamentally flawed idea then logic would follow that the forced unification of land and people against their will would be equally misguided and wrong. Indeed, a united Ireland can only work when all the people on the island subscribe to the idea that it's the right thing to do and that the timing is right. However, the absence of any templates about what this entity would or could look like certainly won't endear the concept to many across the island, especially in protestant, unionist, loyalist communities. The lack of any modelling or studies to establish impact and outcomes, or the failure by those protagonists to consider the advantages and disadvantages of any such venture will result in a nervousness by the electorate to consider radical changes worthy or worthwhile. Many in Northern Ireland will feel that ideology and aspirations are fine but only become meaningful and tangible when citizens know the implications of any divergence from the status quo and how it would impact their lives financially, how education and health services would be affected and in simple terms, would they be richer or poorer, better or worse off in such a scenario. For many however, the very thought is simply considering the unthinkable.

The priority objective should be to unite people across both jurisdictions as we build a shared future. An all island ecology and economy where north and south complement each other, where seamless frictionless trade exists north and south, east and west, both on the island and between the two islands of Great Britain and Ireland must be the ambition. A unity of people presents the advantage of reducing tensions and friction where changes or amendments to legislation, rules, and regulations, in situations such as the implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol where sensitivities exist across perceived or real threats to identity and culture.

Everyone has a responsibility to end the contention of 'north south' interaction versus 'east west' interaction and consider a model where working together across the islands and between the islands will deliver greater benefits for all.

The Irish Unity conversation has been reenergised as a consequence of Brexit but shouldn't be conflated or confused with the conversation about whether Brexit will be advantageous or detrimental to either jurisdiction on the island. Although Brexit and Irish unity are not mutually exclusive they must be considered as separate topics and one should not define the other.

Conversations must be based on facts and evidence and not muddled with opinion and conjecture, governments must make decisions furnished with information and data to underpin good policy formulation.

In conclusion

The future will be about respect and understanding and an aspiration to build an inclusive environment where everyone can consider either north or south on the island as a place they can all call home. A society where conversation and dialogue are built on the founding principles of mutual respect and parity of esteem and a position of consensus as defined in the GFA.

Fundamentally, the future will be dependent upon moving beyond identity politics, building bridges and uniting people.