

Nationalism and the Continuation of Political Conflict in Ireland

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The Persistence of Nationalism

ONE OF THE CENTRAL QUESTIONS OF POLITICAL THEORY has been how societies can achieve a level of accommodation which would provide for the stability of the political system while at the same time allowing for political change. In liberal democratic societies achieving this aim may be difficult unless most voters accept some minimum set of rules about how the political system should function (Girvin, 1994b). In the absence of such agreement, it may be impossible for a political system to evolve peacefully. Nationalism can provide one of the strongest sources for political legitimacy but it may be the main source of instability if national identity or sovereignty are in dispute. Mill (1861: 207–8) suggested that at least three conditions are required to achieve stable norms:

The people for whom the form of government is intended must be willing to accept it; or at least not so unwilling as to oppose an insurmountable obstacle to its establishment. They must be willing and able to do what is necessary to keep it standing. And they must be willing and able to do what it requires of them to enable it to fulfil its purposes. The word 'do' is to be understood as including forbearances as well as acts. They must be capable of fulfilling the conditions of action, and the conditions of self-restraint, which are necessary either for keeping the established polity in existence, or for enabling it to achieve the ends, its conduciveness to which forms its recommendation.

In the contemporary world, the most likely source for undermining these conditions is nationalism, and to a lesser degree religion and race.

This view has been rejected for post-war western Europe by some writers (Deutsch, 1953; Dogan, 1994; Kearney, 1997), but nationalism and national identity continue to provide an essential building block for political stability. Some studies on nationalism confuse the absence of

conflict over nationalism with the disappearance of nationalism (for criticism see Kellas, 1991; Connor, 1994: 28–66). An alternative approach takes the view that nationalism is now a universal phenomenon and will remain so, even in Western Europe. The reason for this is that nationalism provides a sense of political identity and emotional satisfaction for the vast majority of people which no other political value does. Moreover, with its emphasis on community, territory and sovereignty, nationalism offers a source of moral superiority to its members, expressed through patriotism.

There are a number of features which characterise nationalism. The first of these is its universal nature. Though each nationalism is particularist in its historical origin, all nationalisms share common features. There are recurrent themes in each variety of nationalism, including distinctness, common origin, shared history and unique traits. Secondly, all nations claim special rights as a consequence of nationality. This is a very powerful emotional tool for nationalism when challenging a numerical majority in a state. Though a numerical minority in a state, a nation will claim special recognition for its status as a nation. On this basis, it will argue that the statistical basis for making decisions must be the majority of the nation *not* the state.¹ Once nationalism has acquired moral superiority in respect of other political forms, it will become the means by which all political communities express political demands. This process is ineluctable, otherwise a community will be designated a cultural minority within a state and will not gain the rights usually ascribed to nations. If the only method of acquiring rights is through the assertion of nationality, then the likelihood is that when a majority and minority culture clash within a state each will claim sovereignty and self determination on the basis of its nationality. This process has accelerated in the course of the twentieth century and is likely to continue.²

That nationalism has not been exhausted in Western Europe can be appreciated from the importance of nationalist political movements in Scotland and Catalonia, and from the deep regional divisions which affect Belgium and Italy. Moreover, it would be mistaken to ignore the latent influence of nationalism in either Germany or France. Yet nowhere is the influence of nationalism more potent than in Ireland. Whether in Northern Ireland or in the Irish Republic, nationalism seems to retain its emotional

¹ This tension between the majority in a state and a majority nationality within a region of a state can give rise to conflicting notions of legitimacy. This is of particular importance in Northern Ireland, but can be appreciated from other examples such as Quebec in Canada.

² This discussion is based on a review of the literature on nationalism. Important contributions are Gellner, 1983; Kellas, 1991; Connor, 1994; Smith, 1991; Hutchinson, 1994; Hutchinson and Smith, 1994; Anderson, 1991; Giddens, 1985; Llobera, 1994. This is not an exhaustive list, as the literature is now expanding exponentially.

strength even when, as in the latter case, it is a force for stability rather than division. Nor in this context should the relevance of national identity be ignored in the British case; not only is this true of Scotland but it also has a resonance in England and Wales. The Irish case is not unique, although the conflict in Northern Ireland may be seen to be because of the violence. This conflict can be understood as a by-product of the particular historical circumstances which led to the growth of political nationalism in modern Ireland. This historical sequence established the context within which nationalism can contribute to either stability or instability in very similar sets of circumstances.

History and Identity in Ireland

The appearance of nationalism and unionism in Ireland reflected one possible outcome in the process of modernisation and democratisation which characterised Europe from the middle of the eighteenth century. Prior to this time, identities were often localised and linked to discrete (and often overlapping) cultures (Kearney, 1989). In Ireland, three distinct sub-cultures can be identified: Catholic, Presbyterian and Anglican. Each of them had a distinct history, and in the case of Presbyterians were concentrated in the north-east of the island. Nationalists (Gallagher, 1957; Lemass, 1959; Adams, 1986) have argued that all those who live on the island are members of the Irish nation and that state formation should reflect this. Unionists have challenged this view (Foster, 1995; Porter, 1996), emphasising the distinct and separate evolution of Protestant Ireland. Nationalism and unionism are engaged in different exercises in this argument. Unionists focus on actual outcome and draw attention to the existing political divisions in Ireland. Nationalists engage in a thought experiment involving the belief that unity is (and was) possible if the right circumstances exist(ed). Whatever merit there may be in what might have been, the important question is why the current situation remains so polarised.

Outcomes are never inevitable, but decisions taken at particular historical moments can affect how the outcome will look. In the Irish case a number of features can be identified. Among the most important is the failure of the English crown to successfully integrate Ireland into its state. In this respect Ireland is different from Scotland and Wales, regions which were successfully integrated. The Reformation further compromised relations between the English and the Irish, giving divisions a decidedly religious flavour by the seventeenth century (Ellis, 1991; Lennon, 1994). The wars of the seventeenth century compounded these divisions, creating, as Bradshaw (1988/89; 1994) has argued, the core historical myths for both

the Irish Catholic and the Ulster Protestant. The crucial moment, however, may have been the failure to realise Wolf Tone's objective of uniting the three religious sub-cultures in a common national movement in the 1790s (Elliott, 1989; Curtin, 1994). Not only was this period a fluid one politically, but it also coincided with the dawn of nationalism as a political movement. If, and it is a big if, a unified political movement had been successful, a single Irish nationality might have emerged (Girvin, 1994c: 53–81).

This did not prove to be the case and the Act of Union integrated Ireland institutionally into the British state. However, due to the Protestant nature of the British state Catholic grievances were not addressed and this alienated significant sections of Catholic opinion. Daniel O'Connell successfully mobilised Catholic opinion by emphasising religious issues while linking them to nationalist aims (Girvin, 1991). The nature of this movement excluded most Irish Protestants, though this was not O'Connell's intention. By the 1830s Irish nationalism had taken on the form it was to maintain thereafter. It was democratic, Catholic in composition (but not essentially priest ridden), anti-British and separatist in aims. It was also a political movement which was predominantly English speaking, anti-liberal and with a strong rural social base (Hindley, 1990; Girvin, 1997). Irish Catholicism may have been unusual in the nineteenth century, but Irish nationalism was the model for many other subsequent types of nationalism (Kellas, 1991). For the most part the appeal of Irish nationalism has been limited to Catholics and its imaginative reach (Anderson, 1991) has never extended to the Protestant population in the north-east.³

While the majority of Catholics became nationalists by the 1830s, the majority of Protestants became unionist in the sense that they believed that political and institutional arrangements should be maintained within the British state. However, this was not simply a relationship to the union as an institution, but reflected the growth of a British consciousness among Protestants, especially those in the north-east (Gibbon, 1975; Miller, 1978; Coulter, 1994). It was relatively easy for Presbyterians and Anglicans to become British as it was possible for them to identify with what Colley (1992: 5–8) characterises as the main features of Britishness: the monarchy, Protestantism, the Empire and patriotism. Ulster Protestants could share in notions of Britishness while remaining Irish in the same way that the Scots and Welsh could. For them, at least, there appeared to be no contradiction between being Irish and British (Robbins, 1990: 4–18). The richness of Ulster Protestant history has yet to be integrated into an understanding

³ Individual Protestants have, of course, been nationalists, but were probably rarer than unionist Catholics.

of the Irish historical process, and this prevents a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the relationship between the two main identities in Ireland. A contrast should be drawn, however, between the Anglican ascendancy which dominated the Catholic majority in the southern regions and the Presbyterian majority in the north-east. The Presbyterians were a self-conscious, independent and distinct culture. Strong links with Scotland provided a cultural milieu which allowed for autonomous political development independent of London or Dublin. In religion, politics, culture and trade Presbyterian Ulster was more like Scotland than Ireland or England (Brooke, 1987; McBride, 1993; Walker, 1995).⁴

What nationalist writers have often failed to recognise (see Lee, 1989: 1–14) is that the attractions of nationality were just as strong among Ulster Protestants as Irish Catholics. They were expressed in different terms, but unless one wishes to deny the legitimacy of these attributes they need to be recognised. For some writers (Anderson, 1980; Adams, 1986) Ulster Protestants do not constitute a nationality, for others (Whyte, 1978; Ruane and Todd, 1996) any such claim has limited application. Yet this is to ignore the political reality that Ulster unionism has provided consistent evidence for its political difference from nationalist Ireland. Electoral politics as early as the 1830s reflected the tensions between nationalism and unionism in Ulster (Coakley, 1986) and this was to continue throughout the century. When Home Rule appeared in the 1880s, Ulster Protestants quickly developed a self-conscious notion of separateness from Irish nationalism, a clear identification with Britain and a distinct sense of themselves in Ulster (Heslinga, 1971; Hennessey, 1993). McBride (1996: 1–18) emphasises the importance of the association between Ulster and Britishness at this time: ‘The invention of “Ulster” as a separate entity, endowed with particular characteristics and virtues, constitutes one of the central themes of the period.’ While nobody denies the existence of an Irish nation with specific rights, there is an extreme reluctance to concede such status to the Ulster Protestants (Whyte, 1978: 262–3; Ruane and Todd, 1996: 82; however see Gallagher, 1990; 1995 for an alternative view). The available evidence suggests that there has never been a single nation on the island of Ireland, that when an Irish nationalism did emerge it was predominantly Catholic and that another distinct nationality emerged in the northern area which considered itself to be Irish (or Ulster), British and overwhelmingly Protestant. This leads to a further conclusion; that is that partition in Ireland predates the political arrangements of the

⁴ I have stressed Presbyterianism in this section because of its crucial contribution to the creation of the identity of the Ulster Protestant. Such an emphasis is not intended to exclude Anglican or other Protestant denominations from consideration.

early 1920s. What the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and the 1922 Treaty settlement did was institutionalise an already existing social and political reality. That Irish nationalism has refused subsequently to accept partition is closely linked to the refusal to recognise a separate nationality in Northern Ireland.⁵

Irish Nationalism After 1922

Partition did not resolve the conflict in Ireland, but it did change its nature. It became more polarised and sectarian. Both sides failed to achieve what they had sought to do before 1914, but neither did they fully accept the outcome in 1920 or 1922. Britain changes most after 1920; the state distanced itself from the Irish question in the belief that most outstanding difficulties had in fact been resolved. Nationalists however, were outraged at the outcome. Despite any evidence to the contrary, nationalists continued to insist that the island of Ireland should be a single political unit. The island was considered to be a 'natural' unit unjustly divided by the British. From the Home Rule period to the War of Independence, Irish nationalism in all its expressions refused to acknowledge that a distinct community existed within Ireland which refused in turn to acknowledge the Irish nationalist version of history (Saorstat Eireann, 1923; Gallagher, 1957; Adams, 1986)

Though the two parts of Ireland developed in quite different ways after 1920, the nationalist insistence on sovereignty and the alienation of Northern Irish Catholics from the Unionist government combined to weaken the possibility of accommodation between North and South and within the North. Nor did the actions of the Unionist government after 1920 contribute to creating the conditions in Northern Ireland for consensus or conciliation. In retrospect, Direct Rule from Westminster would have been a more appropriate policy for such a divided region. Yet considerable possibilities for accommodation did exist, especially after the Irish civil war and the establishment of the first *Cumann na nGaedheal* government after the 1923 general election. Garvin (1996: 183–5) has shown that W. T. Cosgrave accepted the right of the North to remain outside the Free State. He accepted this reluctantly and with regret, but nevertheless his government's policy was to pursue a policy based on Northern Ireland remaining in the United Kingdom. The foreign policy of the new state implicitly upheld this position until *Fianna Fáil's* election in 1932 (Harkness, 1969). *Cumann na nGaedheal* were realists, believing

⁵ I discuss the nature of unionist nationalism in more detail below, in particular the approach taken by Gallagher (1995).

that more could be achieved by negotiation and by defending the Treaty than by destabilising the politics of Northern Ireland. This effective recognition of the North and the possibilities it held out was undermined by the Irish government's mishandling of the Boundary commission, by a failure to insist on repartition and by the success of Fianna Fáil in providing a more nationalist alternative to the incumbent government by 1932 (Girvin, 1989; 1999).

Fianna Fáil rejected the underlying assumptions of the Free State, especially those in respect of Northern Ireland. De Valera had little understanding and no sympathy for Irish unionists (Coogan, 1993; Garvin, 1996). In contrast with the liberal constitutionalism of the outgoing government, de Valera redefined the character of the Free State by making it more Catholic, nationalist and Gaelic. In articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 Constitution, de Valera effectively withdrew the recognition of Northern Ireland and insisted on the unification of the entire island under Dublin's jurisdiction. This remained the official position of successive Irish governments until May 1998, though as discussed below, the emphasis had already changed prior to this. After de Valera's retirement in 1959, his successor Seán Lemass, while moderating his approach, continued to insist on the integrity of the island. However, the main difference between Lemass and de Valera is important. De Valera was inflexible on Northern Ireland, a simple assertion of right seemed adequate for him. In contrast, Lemass recognised the complex loyalties which existed and understood that traditional nationalism had failed to either undermine the unionist government or to attract the unionist population into a united Ireland. Moreover, Lemass became Taoiseach at a time when the Irish Republic was suffering unprecedented economic dislocation. The response to this had economic and political consequences for the future of the Republic, but it also opened the opportunity for a more innovative and conciliatory approach to Northern Ireland for the first time in thirty years (Girvin, 1997).

The changes which took place in the Republic during the 1960s are significant and include a greater openness to the Orange and Unionist traditions; for example 12th of July marches were reported as cultural events for a short period, unthinkable since the early 1970s. The exchange of visits between Taoiseach and Prime Minister reflected this openness further, although Lemass was in a stronger position politically to do so than Terence O'Neill (Herz, 1986; Cochrane, 1996). Perhaps the most important departure was the willingness to reconsider the nature of the Irish Constitution. The Committee on the Constitution (1967) recommended that significant changes should be considered, and that the claim to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland should be revised. The importance of

this discussion can be overrated. Public opinion remained solidly nationalist, even while reform was being considered. The fiftieth anniversary of 1916 served to remind nationalists and unionists of their differences, rather than what they had in common (Keogh, 1994: 284). Furthermore, changing attitudes in the Republic were restricted to a fairly narrow elite. Outside of this elite, more traditional views were dominant, though they were no longer asserted with the conviction of de Valera. The breakdown of public order in Northern Ireland in 1969 dissolved any consensus in the Republic for decisive change. The primordial nationalist consensus quickly came into play (Smith, 1991) and public opinion identified with the nationalist population under threat in the North. What is of interest after 1969 in the North and the South is how quickly each community identified with its historical culture and mobilised in terms of this relationship. Between 1969 and 1973 views hardened within Northern Ireland and between North and South. Ironically, the most significant adaptation during these years took place in Britain, where there was increasing support for the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland (Hayes and McAllister, 1996: 65–70).

Within the Republic the onset of conflict and violence destabilised the political system. Fianna Fáil was most seriously affected by this as it was in government and was also the most nationalist of the political parties (Joyce and Murtagh, 1983; Lee, 1989; Keogh, 1994). Serious divisions emerged in the party around the issue of how to respond to the escalating violence. It is possible to identify a number of possible approaches to the question within nationalism by the middle of the 1970s. The most extreme would involve the active support for the IRA by the Dublin government. There is some evidence to suggest that arms were shipped to the IRA and a number of former Fianna Fáil cabinet ministers were charged, and then acquitted, of complicity in such action (Keogh, 1994: 306–14). Another option, and one not inconsistent with the first, would have involved sending the Irish army into Northern Ireland in the event of a major crisis. In 1970 some 17 per cent interviewed in the Republic believed that this might be necessary under certain circumstances. However, on the one occasion when popular opinion might have sustained such a move, after Bloody Sunday in 1972, the government decided not to pursue such action. This confirms a long-standing feature of liberal democracy, that democratic states do not go to war with one another (Russett, 1993). Other approaches from within a nationalist framework included United Nations deployment, repartition and British withdrawal, all of which received some support during this time. The more moderate nationalist approaches included revising the Constitution, reforming aspects of Irish society and generally making the Republic more attractive to Northern Protestants. While moderate nation-

alists sought to attract unionists into a united Ireland the more traditional view usually involved an element of coercion (Fitzgerald, 1973).

Opinion in the Republic during the 1970s may have been more volatile and hard-line in relation to the North than is sometimes suggested (see Davis and Sinnott, 1979), with some polls reporting that as many as one in five were prepared to support violence in Northern Ireland. However, the strategy of the Fianna Fáil government up to 1973 and the coalition government which succeeded it (1973–77) involved containing violence within Northern Ireland, supporting the nationalist minority there and negotiating a ‘solution’ with the British government. There is little evidence that at the level of the political elites any significant change had taken place in respect of traditional nationalist aims or objectives. A survey of the parliamentary elite in 1973/74 (Sinnott, 1986: 15–31) highlighted some differences between the main parties. Fianna Fáil members were more likely to emphasise British withdrawal and improving the Irish economy to make the Republic more attractive to unionists. No Fianna Fáil respondent was prepared to de-emphasise the goal of Irish unity, whereas 46 per cent of Fine Gael and 36 per cent of Labour respondents were. Another significant difference is evident in respect of the IRA; whereas 35 per cent of Fine Gael and 27 per cent of Labour respondents considered action against the IRA to be a central feature of Northern policy, 3 per cent of Fianna Fáil took this view (see also Cohan, 1977).

Although these are elite responses, they are important in that political elites are frequently in a position to implement their policy priorities. The tension between elite and popular opinion was highlighted when a Fine Gael-Labour coalition government was elected in 1973. Fianna Fáil was highly critical of government policy for much of this time, but was incensed by the position taken by Conor Cruise O’Brien on Northern Ireland. O’Brien became Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the new government and proved to be the most persistent critic of Irish nationalism between 1973 and 1977 (Akenson, 1994: 374–425). O’Brien’s book *States of Ireland* (1972) provided the cornerstone for his criticism, while his subsequent intervention in controversy changed the nature of the debate in the Republic. He challenged the self-image of Irish nationalism, claiming that Irish unity could not be achieved without violence and that in any event there would be a violent backlash from the unionist population to prevent this happening. In effect, O’Brien was claiming that one of the main objectives of Irish nationalism should be abandoned. He further outraged opinion by highlighting the denominational nature of Irish nationalism and the Catholic ethos of the Irish state. His intervention led to accusations that he was ‘anti-national’ and a unionist (Murphy, 1978: 156–60; Hume, 1980/81). In contrast to O’Brien, Garret FitzGerald

(1973) provided a more moderate, if still nationalist, approach but one which sought reconciliation. O'Brien and FitzGerald agreed on the need to defeat the IRA and protect the state, but they drew radically different conclusions from their respective surveys of history, especially in respect of policy towards Northern Ireland (FitzGerald, 1982)

At the very time when this debate was underway, a survey in Dublin (MacGréil, 1977) identified some changes in popular opinion. Some 27.5 per cent of respondents agreed that the British army are 'cruel and brutal', 36 per cent claimed not to like the British government, while 17 per cent would be happy if Britain 'were brought to her knees'. Over a third believed that violence was necessary 'for the achievement of non-Unionist Rights', while a majority agreed that unity was required to obtain a just solution to the conflict. Paradoxically, over 40 per cent considered that Northern Ireland and the Republic constituted two separate nations. University educated respondents and those in higher professional positions were more likely to endorse the use of violence and to reject the existence of separate nations. Yet these same groups were less willing to support a 32 county republic and were more open to federal options. There was also a gender difference; women were more likely to believe that two nations existed and less likely to endorse violence. What is surprising given the levels of violence at this time is that the 'nationalist' questions did not receive stronger support (MacGréil, 1977: 336–81).

Despite the polling evidence, there was little change in government policy during the 1970s. All parties in the Republic seemed mesmerised by the escalating violence in Northern Ireland and by the failure to achieve a settlement or an agreed government there. The failure of the power-sharing executive in 1974 hardened nationalist attitudes to the British government and the unionist population. FitzGerald (1991: 234–44) suggests that the British army could have broken the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike, but does not address O'Brien's view (1994: 165–7) that the insistence on the Council of Ireland provided the basis for weakening Protestant support for Brian Faulkner (Girvin, 1986a: 121–5). While power-sharing failed, it also provided some evidence for changing attitudes. Some sections of unionism had wished for accommodation, though this search was weakened by divisions within the political community. For the first time since the 1920s an Irish government had recognised the status of Northern Ireland, even if this was a rather qualified acceptance. In particular, the Irish government accepted that change in Northern Ireland had to be based on the stated wishes of the majority before the status could be changed. This posed a dilemma for Irish nationalism and government policy. It remained clear that the overwhelming majority of Protestants and some Catholics wished to retain the union (Rose, 1971;

Moxon-Browne, 1983), but if this were to be recognised how were Protestants to be persuaded to accept a united Ireland? In contrast to the IRA, constitutional nationalists were opposed to the direct coercion of unionism, but by the end of the 1970s there was a belief that the British should play a more active role in persuading unionists that their future should be in a united Ireland.

The Failure of Traditional Irish Nationalism

By the end of the 1970s the nationalism of de Valera and of the Independence generation had failed to either persuade the British to leave Northern Ireland, the unionists to accept a united Ireland, or to protect nationalist communities from Protestant extremists. The IRA argued that constitutional nationalists could not achieve nationalist goals and only a war of liberation could assure success (O'Malley, 1983: 258–88). In contrast to this, O'Brien called for the abandonment of the entire project. Neither of these positions received support from the Republic's population, though Mair (1987b: 90–1) reports on polls between 1978 and 1984 which found that a third or more of respondents admired the ideals and motives of the IRA, but disapproved of their methods. Consequently there was considerable ambiguity among nationalists about how to proceed. One response was to modify the traditional nationalist approach. A neo-traditional strategy was adopted by John Hume and Charles Haughey which involved persuading the British government that it should no longer guarantee the union between Northern Ireland and Britain. The reasoning behind this approach was that once the guarantee was removed the unionists would negotiate a settlement (Hume, 1980/81; Hume in O'Malley, 1983: 100–6). This was accompanied by a demand for British withdrawal leading to Irish unity by the SDLP and Fianna Fáil (Haughey in Mansergh, 1986: 327–38; 450–81; Girvin, 1994a: 18–22). These policies were vigorously prosecuted by Haughey when he became Taoiseach in 1979 and maintained throughout the early 1980s, a period of considerable tension due to the H-Blocks campaign and the Falklands War.

However, another approach to this question also appeared within Irish nationalism. A more moderate and gradualist position, often associated with Garret FitzGerald and Fine Gael, emphasised the need for reconciliation, for changes in the Republic to make the state more attractive to Protestants and for a less confrontational stance in respect of Britain. In 1981 FitzGerald launched his 'constitutional crusade' in an attempt to transform Irish political culture and reform the constitution. While there was some support for the initiative in general, most of the polls carried out

in 1981 indicated that on specific issues opinion remained quite conservative. Thus, while a plurality considered that FitzGerald had the best policy on Northern Ireland (39 per cent), a majority believed that constitutional change would not improve prospects for a united Ireland and 46 per cent disapproved of any change in the claim over Northern Ireland in the constitution (*Sunday Tribune/IMS Poll*, 1981). FitzGerald, in the event, was unable to achieve his objectives even when he formed a stable government in 1982. Fianna Fáil remained resolutely opposed to change and in the referendums on abortion in 1983 and on divorce in 1986 a majority of those who voted did so to maintain or extend the denominational nature of the Constitution (Girvin, 1993).

A further setback for FitzGerald's reformist nationalism occurred with the publication of the New Ireland Forum Report (1984). The bipartisan nature of the Forum and the need to sustain the SDLP against the electoral challenge of Sinn Féin led to the primacy of neo-traditionalism over more moderate approaches in the final report. Although the report produced three options for the future of Ireland, Haughey insisted (*Irish Times*, 24 May 1984) that the unitary option was the 'only option which will bring peace and stability'. In fact, FitzGerald also favoured this option, though he recognised that this might not prove attractive to unionists (*Irish Times*, 7 May 1984). Despite this, subsequent developments highlighted the differences between neo-traditionalism and moderate nationalism by the mid-1980s. Whereas Fianna Fáil and the SDLP continued to demand British withdrawal and Irish unity, the Fine Gael/Labour government maintained close contacts with the British government on issues such as extradition, border security and general cooperation. This continuing process laid the framework for the successful negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 (Girvin, 1986b; O'Leary, 1987; FitzGerald, 1991: 460–550).

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is the point of departure for the changing relationship between neo-traditionalism and moderate nationalism in the Republic, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. The detail of the Agreement has been examined extensively elsewhere (Girvin, 1986b; 1994a; Mair, 1987b), but its significance has been greatest for the Republic. When the Agreement was signed the Tanaiste, Dick Spring, claimed that it 'goes beyond a right to consult or be consulted'. The Irish state for the first time gained considerable leverage within Northern Ireland. The relationship between the Irish state and Britain also changed out of recognition; in effect the Agreement provided the basis for a partnership between the two states in Northern Ireland. The Agreement also weakened the position of unionism within the United Kingdom and strengthened that of the SDLP explicitly. Moreover, the Agreement weakened Fianna Fáil politically, prompting the expulsion of a leading

member of the party and the establishment of a new pro-Agreement party the Progressive Democrats. There was also a cooling of the relationship between the SDLP and Fianna Fáil, a consequence of the overwhelming support which the SDLP and the Catholic community in Northern Ireland gave to the Agreement. Nor did public opinion in the Republic support Haughey or Fianna Fáil in its principled opposition to the Agreement. Of those interviewed 59 per cent immediately after the Agreement approved of the Irish government signing it, while only 32 per cent supported Haughey in his opposition. One of the interesting features of the original poll was the realism of the respondents. While 66 per cent agreed that it would improve relations between Ireland and Britain and 50 per cent that it would bring about better relations with Northern Ireland, only 30 per cent thought it would bring a united Ireland closer and 31 per cent that it would improve life for the unionists (MRBI, 1985). A poll in February 1986 (MRBI, 1986) reported that support for Haughey's position had fallen further, even among Fianna Fáil supporters, but also that overall approval had reached 69 per cent. This poll also displayed greater optimism among the public on the possibility of reconciliation and ending violence.

The immediate impact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on Irish politics was to generate considerable support for the government's moderate strategy. This successfully challenged the traditional *methods* of pursuing Irish unity, but not the objective itself. FitzGerald made clear on a number of occasions that while his ultimate aim was a united Ireland, in the short term he was more concerned with reconciliation than pursuing a narrow constitutional claim. In this he must have been disappointed as the evidence suggests (Cochrane, 1993: 1–20) that little was actually achieved within Northern Ireland in the five years after the Agreement. Increased violence and communal polarisation were the chief consequences of the Agreement *within* Northern Ireland (Cochrane, 1993: 19; O'Leary and McGarry, 1993: 271–4). Consequently, the impact of the Agreement has been greatest on the internal politics of the Irish Republic and on the diplomatic relationship between Britain and Ireland. A new moderate consensus on Northern Ireland was forged within Dáil Éireann, by 1987 a majority of TDs supported the government on this issue. Moreover, Fianna Fáil was placed on the defensive throughout the 1987 general election despite the unpopularity of the outgoing government. This election was the last opportunity for Fianna Fáil to challenge the moderate nationalism of the Agreement, but because of the strength of support for FitzGerald's position, Haughey had to concede that his party would maintain the Agreement if elected. Forty-one per cent believed that Fine Gael had the best policy on Northern Ireland, while only 29 per cent considered that Fianna Fáil's policy in this area was best. Furthermore,

21 per cent of Fianna Fáil supporters considered that Fine Gael had the best policy, with only 56 per cent supporting their own party position (*Irish Political Studies*, 1988: 139). Fianna Fáil went on to form a minority government, but the consensus on Northern Ireland was maintained, despite some criticism of the way in which the new government went about this process. Likewise, after the 1989 election, when Fianna Fáil formed an unprecedented coalition government with the Progressive Democrats, similar constraints on the neo-traditionalist position were maintained.

While the seam of neo-traditional nationalism was largely exhausted by 1989, this does not mean that nationalist aspirations have disappeared. The new consensus is a more moderate set of aspirations, operating in a context where gradualist assumptions take priority. In particular, there is a recognition that successful negotiations with the British government can bring about change even when there are obstacles to change within Northern Ireland. A 1988 poll (*Irish Political Studies*, 1989: 157) highlights the subtle shifts in opinion by this time. Three-quarters of those questioned believed that the Irish government should take steps to begin discussions with the unionists. When prompted on the possible objectives of such discussions, 49 per cent considered that improving North-South relationships should be the main aim while 27 per cent opted for political unity. This highlights an important contrast between those who believed a united Ireland should be the main objective of policy and other options which emphasise a reconciliation strategy.

Much of the support for the new departure was based on the premise that the process was changing the nature of power within Northern Ireland and between nationalists and unionists. The unionist response to the Agreement was easily defeated by the British and Irish governments, while by 1990 it was clear that any further changes would be in large part on terms acceptable to the Irish government and within the framework of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Though a new departure, this process was not a radical change for Irish nationalism. This was confirmed in 1990 when the Irish Supreme Court rejected the claim by the McGimpsey brothers that the Anglo-Irish Agreement contravened Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution (Incorporated Council of Law Reporting for Ireland, 1990). The Supreme Court concluded that the Agreement advanced the objectives of the Irish Constitution as contained in Articles 2 and 3 and did not therefore contravene it. The Supreme Court's finding confirmed both the fears of unionists and the claims made by moderate nationalists; that the Agreement promoted the aim of Irish unification. In a number of respects FitzGerald's moderate realism achieved more for Irish nationalism in under a decade than had been the case for physical force, traditional, or neo-traditional nationalism in over fifty years. By the early 1990s the

British were effectively neutral on outcome, while British opinion was broadly in favour of either an independent Northern Ireland or unification with the Republic. Less than a third continued to support the union (Hayes and McAllister, 1996: 68). The process further weakened the unionist position while enhancing that of the Irish government, if not always that of the nationalist population in Northern Ireland. This new set of relationships led to the Joint Declaration in December 1993, the IRA cease-fire in August 1994 and the Framework for the Future in February 1995 (for assessments see Girvin, 1994a; O'Leary, 1995). Between 1985 and 1995 the political and diplomatic initiative remained with the Irish government and, though weakened by the IRA's return to violence, this capacity remains strong. This capacity to influence the outcome also constrained the IRA's use of violence once it resumed its campaign. The IRA remained sensitive to the Irish government and to the reaction of public opinion in the South, a factor which contributed to the relatively low level of violence between February 1996 and July 1997. Nor did the resumption of violence lead to a breakdown in relations between the Irish and British governments. Despite some short-term difficulties, the two governments worked together to secure agreement within Northern Ireland.

The Nature of Opinion in the Republic of Ireland

Public opinion in the Republic also began to change in response to these developments. A debate in Dáil Eireann on a motion by the Workers Party to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution was only narrowly defeated by 74 to 66 votes in December 1990. Fianna Fáil was the only party to oppose the motion on principle, and the leader of Fine Gael John Bruton not only supported the motion but linked the constitutional aims with the terrorism of the IRA. This is a connection usually denied by constitutional nationalists. It is perhaps not surprising that the new leader of Fianna Fáil, Albert Reynolds, called Bruton 'John Unionist' during the 1992 general election. These features draw attention to the nuances of elite political debate, but show little enough about any changes in public opinion.

Large proportions of Irish public opinion consider themselves to be nationalists and believe that Irish unity is something to hope for, as can be seen from the responses to polls by MRBI, as shown in Table 1.

The responses to the questions posed are fairly uniform across age, party and class. When asked about the territorial extent of the nation a majority supported the 32 counties as the unit, whereas about one-third considered it to be the 26 counties. Of interest is the view that national identity in Northern Ireland is a complex one, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 1. Attitudes to a united Ireland (%).

	1983	1987	1991
Something to hope for	76	67	82
Prefer not to happen	15	19	13
No opinion	9	14	5
N	1,000	1,000	1,000

Source: MRBI (1983, 1987, 1991).

Table 2. Percentage response to the question 'Do you consider the people of Northern Ireland to be:'

	1983	1987
Irish	41	33
British	13	15
Both	39	42
Neither	5	6
No opinion	2	5
N	1,000	1,000

Sources: MRBI (1983, 1987).

On this reading, opinion was subtle, with significant proportions of the public recognising the complex nature of identity in Northern Ireland. A survey carried out in 1988/89 (MacGréil, 1996: 235) reported that 44 per cent *disagreed* with the proposition that: 'Northern Irish Protestants have more in common with the rest of the Irish people than they have with the British.' The same survey (Ibid., 1996: 236) also reported that 49 per cent agreed that Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic were two separate nations, while 42 per cent disagreed. These views did not prevent 50 per cent of respondents from holding the belief that national unity was 'an essential condition for a just solution of the present Northern problem'; some 25 per cent disagreed.

Opinion in the Republic is fairly evenly balanced between a realistic assessment of what is possible and an idealistic hope for what might be achieved. This can be seen in Table 3.

The 1993 data (MRBI, 1993) highlights important differences between those who believe that unity will be achieved within 25 years and those who consider it will take 50 years or will never happen. The main difference appears to be concentrated on age, with those over 50 more likely to endorse the traditionalist view. In addition, women are more likely than men to take a realist view on unity. Fianna Fáil identifiers are more likely to

Table 3. Percentage response to the question 'When is a united Ireland likely to be achieved?'

	1983	1987	1991	1993
Never	39	49	30	34
100 years	9	11	9	6
50 years	16	13	15	12
25 years	17	9	21	16
10 years	9	7	20	23
No opinion	10	11	5	8
N	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Source: MRBI (1983, 1987, 1991, 1993).

Tables 4. Percentage response to retaining Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

	1991	1992	1993	1995
Retain	58	41	28	20
Change	25	39	51	60
No opinion	17	20	21	20
N	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Sources: MRBI (1991, 1992, 1993, 1995).

endorse the traditionalist view than other parties. There is, additionally, considerable resistance to paying higher taxation in the event of a closer relationship between the Republic and Northern Ireland; only 19 per cent of respondents were prepared to support such a suggestion. The refusal to pay for unification, in contrast to the situation in Germany since 1989, suggests that Irish support for unity may be quite weak, especially if the cost is considered to be high (MRBI, 1993).

In respect of Articles 2 and 3 one finds a mixture of realism and ideological sentiment, but with a willingness to change opinion in the light of evolving circumstances. Table 4 shows opinion on this question since 1991.

Three factors contributed to the change in opinion during the 1990s. The first was the recognition that unionist sensitivities had to be taken into account. The second was the hostility to IRA terrorism and a recognition that the Irish and British governments were making considerable progress in negotiations. The third factor was that the polling questions were changed from ones which offered a stark contrast between support for or opposition to the territorial claim to ones where the alternative provided was between retaining the claim and including an *aspiration* to unity. Furthermore, a poll in 1991 reported that 81 per cent of those questioned would be prepared to postpone efforts to achieve unity if this helped to

secure an internal settlement in Northern Ireland. In 1993 (MRBI, 1993) 81 per cent agreed with the view expressed by Dick Spring in his six principles of government policy, that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the support of a majority.

None of this means that Irish nationalism has changed its essential nature. There appear to be no circumstances where Irish nationalism considers that unity should be abandoned or that Northern Ireland should remain in the United Kingdom in perpetuity. These are fixed 'Absolute Presuppositions' (Collingwood, 1940) and as such seem immune to existing political reality. This is not, however, to reject the view that Irish nationalism has changed some of its strategic priorities or that different political coalitions are not now dominant. Traditional and neo-traditional nationalism has been appreciably weakened. Changes in the Fianna Fáil leadership in the 1990s moved the party towards a more realistic position within constitutional nationalism, though it retains traditional instincts often reflected in its unthinking anti-unionism. The changing nature of the Irish political system has also contributed to this. Coalition government now seems to be the norm and in these circumstances some, if not all, of the parties which make up any coalition are on the realist wing of constitutional nationalism. Most importantly, perhaps, realist nationalism seems to work. Although less demonstrable, and more volatile, is the impact of opinion on nationalism. The polls discussed here highlight the continuing importance of nationalism in Irish politics, but its impact may have weakened somewhat in the 1990s. A significant proportion of the public is more pragmatic in terms of options, more realistic in regard to Northern Ireland and less tolerant of the use of violence by the IRA for the promotion of nationalist objectives. For example when, between January and March 1994, Sinn Féin and the IRA effectively rejected the Joint Declaration, there was a considerable increase in the proportion of those who agreed to exclude Sinn Féin from any talks process while violence continued. In addition, some three-quarters of those questioned supported a security crackdown by the British and Irish governments if IRA violence did not end (*Irish Political Studies*, 1995: 298, 319). This type of pressure, along with that from the British, Irish and US governments, contributed to the IRA's decision to call a second cease-fire in July 1997. The strength of constitutional nationalism can be further demonstrated by the successful negotiation of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, its endorsement at the subsequent referendums in the North and the South while the elections for the new Assembly held out the prospect of consensual government in Northern Ireland. The referendum in the Irish Republic in May 1998 amended Articles 2 and 3 of the constitution, removing the most objectionable features contained in the original. The public response to the Omagh

car bombing confirmed the shift in opinion in the Republic, but also indicated that the commitment to constitutional politics had advanced significantly in Northern Ireland as well. With very limited exceptions, Irish nationalists in the North and the South are now committed to constitutional politics for the first time since the present conflict began in the 1960s.

Unionism as a Problem for Irish Nationalism

Despite the considerable changes within Irish nationalism over the past decade unionism as a political movement and as a source of identity remains a serious problem for those who believe there is one nation in Ireland and that a united Ireland is the only solution to the conflict. Unless unionist claims are ignored, as traditional and neo-traditional nationalists do, the existence of unionism and its assertion of self-determination is the weakness at the heart of the nationalist view of history and politics. In a context where Britain maintains that it has no 'selfish interest' in continuing partition and that it will support the wish of the majority in Northern Ireland to *change* its status, this traditional view is of diminishing relevance. What constitutional nationalism has yet to come to terms with is unionism as a distinct nationality with a status within Ireland and the United Kingdom, similar to that of Irish nationalism over the past two centuries and not as a cultural minority within the island or a cultural majority within Northern Ireland. The difficulty continues to be the refusal of Irish nationalism to give up its moral claim to control the North, while refusing to acknowledge the Ulster Protestants as a distinct nationality. There is a brutal logic to this: to accept that Ulster Protestants are a distinct nationality would undermine the moral legitimacy of the nationalist demand. To all intents and purposes this means that Irish nationalism continues to deny unionists the right to be unionists.

It is not the purpose of this section to provide a detailed discussion of unionism or a critique of its government in Northern Ireland (see Porter, 1996; and Bew this volume). It is however, to suggest that the polarisation and conflict in Northern Ireland and between Ulster Protestants and nationalist Ireland, is about conflicting views of nationality. It is also to insist that the criteria usually applied to nations can be successfully used in Ireland to demarcate distinct nationalities within the island and within the United Kingdom. The levels of polarisation are well known. Boyle and Hadden (1994: 6–66) have described in detail the extent of segregation between Catholics and Protestants, a gap which may have widened since 1968. The evidence presented to the Independent Review of Parades and

Marches (1997) highlights the lack of understanding between Catholics and Protestants on the issue of Orange marches, though this is simply a microcosm of more general divisions. What is painfully obvious is that Northern Ireland is a polarised and pillarised society, but one which does not have the institutional arrangements for consociational accommodation. Consociationalism has worked in deeply divided societies only when the sources of identity are shared, as in the Netherlands or Austria; where identity is contested it has proved to be virtually impossible to achieve the agreement necessary to achieve this (Lijphart, 1982; McGarry, 1990). In a crucial sense, if national identity is what is at stake the likelihood of agreement is limited.

Nor is this new; Rose's (1971: 334, 269) 1968 survey captured the continuing polarisation of Northern Ireland and the denominational basis for the distance between the two communities. Indeed, since the early nineteenth century questions of nationality and identity have polarised Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, a confrontation which continues to be reflected in historical memory, anecdote and perception by each community. There are, in reality, two histories in Northern Ireland. This polarisation is expressed most directly in the political system. If Lipset and Rokkan (1967) are correct in suggesting that party alternatives freeze at certain stages of mobilisation, then alignments in Northern Ireland are a classic expression of this phenomenon. Rose (1971: 235–6) found that Protestants overwhelmingly voted for unionist parties, while a majority of Catholics voted for nationalists. When asked for a second preference, only 2 per cent of Protestants indicated that they would vote for a nationalist while 8 per cent of Catholics said they would vote for a unionist. A decade later this pattern had been maintained despite the fragmentation of the Unionist Party during the 1970s (Moxon-Browne, 1983: 65). The absence of a cross-over effect has been evident in every election and survey since 1968, reflecting the continuing distance between nationalists and unionists. As Breen (1996: 38) reports 'No Protestants call themselves Nationalists and no Catholics call themselves Unionists'. This is a society which is radically segmented on political issues. Not only do Catholics and Protestants not share the same political parties, but on a wide range of issues related to the status of Northern Ireland, the role of the Irish government and security matters the gap between Protestant and Catholic can be overwhelming (see *Irish Political Studies*, 1995: 316). This polarity in attitudes is reflected in Table 5.

There is a close relationship between religion, attitudes to a united Ireland and political identity evident in this table. This is reinforced from data in the Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland surveys (Breen *et al.*, 1996) In the 1994 survey 45 per cent of Catholics and 24 per cent of Protestants

Table 5. Attitudes towards a united Ireland (%).

	For a united Ireland	To remain in the UK	Don't know
Total	25	61	14
Ulster Unionist	0	100	0
Democratic Unionist	1	97	2
Sinn Féin	95	5	0
Social Democratic and Labour Party	52	33	16
Alliance Party	19	61	19
Conservatives (Northern Ireland)	9	87	4
Democratic Left	25	50	25
Protestant	3	90	7
Catholic	52	28	20
Other Religion	5	55	45
N	214	517	119

Source: Ulster Marketing Surveys for ITN, 17–18 December 1993 as reported in *Irish Political Studies* (1994: 225). Total sample 848.

claimed they were neither unionist or nationalist, but no Protestant claimed to be a nationalist and no Catholic claimed to be a unionist. Additionally, Catholic/neither and Protestant/neither voted for parties which expressed their traditional religious loyalties (Breen, 1996: 37–9). This emphasises how the two denominations inhabit quite separate and distinct political domains. The reason for this becomes clearer when the data in Tables 6 and 7 are assessed.

Protestants overwhelmingly identify themselves as British or Ulster, whereas Catholics identify themselves as Irish or Northern Irish; there is little overlap or shared identity. It would be significant if a Protestant identified as a nationalist or a Catholic as a unionist and if a Protestant who adopts the category 'neither' identified as Irish and supported a united Ireland or if a Catholic 'neither' choose to be British or opted to remain in the United Kingdom. The evidence for Protestants suggests that they do not identify as Irish, as nationalists, with nationalist political parties or support a united Ireland. Likewise, though not as strongly, Catholics do not perceive themselves as unionists, do not vote for unionist parties, tend to favour a united Ireland and do not identify themselves as British or Ulster.⁶

It is possible to accept the extent of polarisation described here, yet refuse, as most Irish nationalists continue to do, to accept that Ulster

⁶ I am grateful to Richard Breen for access to data from the Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland surveys. This section contains very preliminary analysis of these data, which I hope to develop in more detail at a later stage.

Table 6. Protestant self-identity, 1968–94 (%).

	1968	1978	1989	1991	1993	1994
British	39	67	68	66	70	71
Irish	20	8	3	2	2	3
Ulster	32	20	10	15	16	11
Northern Irish	—	—	16	14	11	15
Other	9	5	3	3	3	—

Sources: For 1968, Rose (1971); for 1978, Moxon-Browne (1983); for 1989–94, Breen *et al.* (1996).

Table 7. Catholic self-identity, 1968–94 (%).

	1968	1978	1989	1991	1993	1994
British	15	15	10	10	12	10
Irish	76	69	60	62	61	62
Ulster	5	6	2	2	1	—
Northern Irish	—	—	25	25	25	28
Other	4	10	4	1	2	—

Sources: For 1968, Rose (1971); for 1978, Moxon-Browne (1983); for 1989–94, Breen *et al.* (1996)

Protestants have a distinct nationality. Indeed, despite a wealth of evidence highlighting the strength of this identity and its distinctiveness from Catholic and nationalist identity, there is a general reluctance to concede that the Ulster Protestants are indeed a nation. Various objections have been advanced for this. They include the religious basis of identity, the volatility of Protestant identity, that its Britishness might be a temporary phenomenon, that Britishness is not a nationality, that the British themselves do not acknowledge that the Ulster British are British as well as the conditional nature of Ulster Protestants' loyalty to the state (Whyte, 1978; 1990; Miller, 1978; FitzGerald, 1982; Lee, 1989; Gallagher, 1995; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995). Trew (1994; 1996; see also Benson and Trew, 1995) has explored this question in considerable detail. This research and that of Ruane and Todd (1996) draws attention to the distinct nature of identity in Northern Ireland, though they also suggest that new forms of identity (European or Northern Irish) may emerge to provide an alternative source of identity.

A number of these objections confuse state and nation. The conditional nature of loyalty to a state is quite congruent with the claim that a group is a nation. As noted earlier, the nation defines the majority not the state. Nations in a multi-national state will always have conditional loyalty,

because their primary loyalty is to the nation not the state. The 'volatility' of Ulster Protestant identity cannot be sustained from the evidence. The change between 1968 and 1978 was a product of a challenge to the Protestant self-image as Irish and British. When Irish was appropriated by nationalism and the Britishness of the Ulster Protestant was challenged from that position, the vast majority of Ulster Protestants confirmed their identity explicitly as British. Opinion on identity among Protestants has been very stable since 1978. Nor is it likely that British identity is temporary, though if Northern Ireland were to be expelled from the United Kingdom a reformulation of identity might be expected. Even such a radical change would not affect the underlying sources of identity, however. The objection that British may not be a nationality has some strength, as this confuses state and nationality. There is some ambiguity between Britain as a state and Britain as a nationality, which is not easily resolved. Colley's view (1992) allows for a distinction to be made between state and nation while continuing to recognise the individual nations which compose Britain. On this view there is no necessary contradiction between English and British or Scottish and British and allows for British to be used in Northern Ireland for those who live in Ireland and identify with Britain to give expression to that. The refusal of the British to accept the Ulster British as British does not invalidate the latter's claim, though it does make it more difficult for them to gain support for their political aims. A stronger objection is that religion cannot be the basis for national identity (Oommen, 1997: 79–90). In a strict sense this is true, but it fails to recognise that nationalism and religion are not necessarily synonyms, but that the particular culture which forms the basis for the nation has a strong religious tradition which informs concepts of nationality. This aspect of nation formation is particularly strong when two religions confront one another in adjacent territories (Martin, 1978: 109). There is little evidence that new identities are forming in Northern Ireland; a more realistic reading of the evidence suggests that the two identities are as far apart as ever. This is to confuse the possibility of cooperation between the two nationalities to give effect to shared government with the dissolving of differences between them. While the first is possible, the latter reflects a lack of understanding of the nature of nationalism (Kellas, 1991).

These objections and suggestions misconceive the strength of nationalism in the modern world; even when multiple identities exist there is usually a dominant one especially if identity is challenged. National identity cannot easily be dissolved and is more 'hard wired' than some suggest (Kearney, 1997). Culture is the arena within which change takes place, not national identity (Girvin, 1997). A number of recent studies suggest that the existence of a distinct national identity among the Ulster

British should be considered seriously (Pringle, 1985; Hennessey, 1993; Coulter, 1994; Porter, 1996). Gallagher (1995) has made a careful analysis of the various theories in respect of the Ulster Protestants concluding that the most useful approach to the question of identity is a model which allows for 'three nations' or 'two nations and part of another'. This reluctance to accept the Ulster Protestants as a single nationality distinguishable from the English, Scots and Welsh on the one hand and the Irish on the other is based on the view that the divisions within the Ulster Protestant community are associated with national identity. This is an overstatement of the case. It is more accurate to link these differences to disagreement over political tactics and objectives, differences which exist in any political system. As Gallagher notes, Moxon-Browne (1983: 8) drew attention to the strong overlap between the Ulster and British identity among Ulster Protestants. While the evidence is open to a number of interpretations, the one most consistent with other evidence is that the differences between Ulster and British do not constitute differences based on nationality.

If Tables 6 and 7 are compared, opinion on identity within the Catholic community is just as diverse as within the Protestant. Yet this rarely raises questions about the identity of Catholics in Northern Ireland, who are normally presumed to be Irish. In contrast to Protestants who have increased their British identity since 1968, the percentage of Catholics who identify as Irish has actually declined; in 1994 more Protestants considered themselves to be British than Catholics considered themselves to be Irish. Nor is this diversity of opinion on questions of identity unusual in a comparative context. In Scotland, Catalonia, Andalusia and the Basque Country extremely complex notions of nationality and identity appear. It would be unacceptable to deny that Scotland, Catalonia or the Basques were nations despite the multiple responses to questions about identity (Moreno and Arriba, 1996; 78–97; Keating, 1995). A re-evaluation of these data is required, but it can be suggested that the position of Ulster Protestants is not unique in a comparative context; there are a number of examples where members of nationalities describe their identities in complex terms. This however, does not undermine their claim to be a nation, but draws attention to the sophisticated notions of identity and loyalty in the specific cases, particularly the relationship between state and nation. It might be concluded then that within Ireland and the United Kingdom and in a wider comparative context the position of the Ulster Protestants (or the Ulster British more accurately) is not an anomaly. Indeed, if the same criteria are applied to the Ulster British as are applied to Irish or other nationalisms, then it would be difficult to deny to it that status. If Irish nationalism were to acknowledge this status the political consequence for the future could be quite dramatic.

Conclusion

To accept that two nations exist in Ireland has various consequences. The most important is that each nation has to recognise the legitimacy of the other, and the rights and responsibilities concomitant with that status. If nationalism is the main source of identity in the contemporary world, the recognition of the equality of this status can change the context within which relations take place. Nationality has a different status to all other identities in existence and it is clear that once they have been formed, as they were in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century, it is almost impossible to break down the basis for it or to dissolve it into something else.

A thought experiment can conclude this chapter. Seamus Heaney (1983) once wrote angrily that:

be advised
my passports green.
No glass of ours was ever raised
to toast the Queen.

Heaney's rejection of British identity would probably be welcomed by most nationalists, but would they reject as easily the denial of the Ulster British that they are Irish? The same applies for the Ulster British in respect of Irish nationalism. Denial brings reassertion not assimilation and this leads to further conflict; the historical record is clear on this. It also allows more extreme forces to dictate the political environment. Porter (1996), writing as a unionist, has sought to provide an alternative approach by invoking a 'civic unionism' which could treat Irish nationalism as an equal in political terms. The move towards a civic understanding of nationalism in Ireland will only occur if due recognition is given to the status of each nationality. The changes which have occurred in 1998 go some way to providing this recognition. The actions of the political parties in the new Assembly and their ability to co-operate in governing Northern Ireland will provide the evidence of this over the coming years.

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