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## **Irish Pan-nationalism: Myth or Reality?**

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## Introduction

Inputs to the Irish peace process of the 1990s came from a range of sources. Some accounts indicate the centrality of changes in British policy, characterised by moves towards disengagement<sup>1</sup> Confirmation from the British Government of its lack of a 'selfish strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland helped facilitate the process. Others downplay the importance of the policies of the British Government. Cunningham indicates how Northern Ireland has always been of marginal importance within British policy-making.<sup>2</sup> Bew and Patterson indicate how the conditionality of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom is not new.<sup>3</sup> This paper contends that the biggest single component in the construction of the peace process, however, was the development of a common, or 'pan' nationalist front, a factor emphasised in other accounts.<sup>4</sup> In Northern Ireland, pan-nationalism appeared to involve the adoption of an increasingly united approach to conflict resolution by Sinn Fein and the SDLP, although this paper also indicates the limits to unity. Ryan argues that Sinn Fein's involvement in a pan-nationalist alliance amounted to a movement away from the traditional concerns of republicanism.<sup>5</sup> He claims that incoherence in British policy and historic compromises globally have disoriented the republican movement. From a less critical standpoint, this paper concurs that republicanism has changed. However, the degree of movement from traditional ambitions should not be exaggerated, nor should the impact of

global developments upon an enduring problem. Instead, the most salient factors producing change were local war-weariness and recognition by republicans that their goal of Irish unity was unattainable in the short-term.

In the peace process, pan-nationalism is a term used to describe the approach held not merely by the northern nationalist parties but also by the Irish Government and Irish America. The validity of the term has been disputed. A leading member of the SDLP dismissed it as a 'derogatory term used by loyalists'.<sup>6</sup> In order to establish whether pan-nationalism is indeed a reality, four main dimensions must be assessed: the similarity of historical approach amongst differing strands of nationalism; the extent of agreement surrounding Britain's present role in the conflict; the assessment of the identity and future role of unionists and, finally, the extent of convergence surrounding the most appropriate future means of conflict resolution.

### **Unitary or dual nationalism? Sinn Fein and the SDLP compared**

The northern nationalist 'family' has always shared a similar historical analysis. This has influenced political remedies to the problem. Central to this analysis is the belief that partition was unjust and that British involvement in Ireland has often been to the detriment of the Irish people.<sup>7</sup> It follows from this contention that the SDLP and Sinn Fein have supported the right of the Irish people to self-determination and promoted the desirability of Irish unification. Equally,

both parties have insisted that a purely internal settlement in Northern Ireland is impossible.

Each of these aspects of historical analysis and political prescription was shared by the Irish Government and Irish America. Any construction of a pan-nationalist alliance did not require a fundamental shift in the historical principles upon which nationalist political actors operated. Significant shifts were required, however, in the *modus operandi* of these actors, to the extent whereby common historical analysis was accompanied by agreement over how to achieve the desired end.

The republican pursuit of Irish unity has traditionally been based upon notions of ethno-geographical determinism.<sup>8</sup> The island of Ireland should amount to self-contained unit, embracing all the people of the island, governed by a single unitary authority. Whilst republican pledges concerning the security of unionists in a united Ireland are commonplace, formal recognition of the differing traditions in a unitary state was abandoned in the 1980s, following the dropping of the federalist proposal of *Eire Nua*, which included plans for separate parliaments based on the geographical boundaries of the ancient four provinces of Ireland, including Ulster.

The presence of a pro-British population in the north-east of Ireland served, if anything, to strengthen republican perceptions that the struggle was anti-colonial. Unionists were colonial settlers providing a spurious legitimacy

to British claims to sovereignty. The economic advantages enjoyed by the Unionist population emphasised the imperial basis of Britain's retention of 'Irish' territory.

Such an analysis provided the rationale for armed struggle to remove the British presence from Ireland. Northern Ireland was a state created against the wishes of the majority of the Irish people, last fully expressed in Sinn Féin's 1918 election victory, now granted 'legitimacy' only through a spurious consent principle which amounted to a Unionist veto upon change. Constitutional nationalism always lacked the holistic claims of republicanism. Instead, the SDLP claimed to represent only its supporters amongst the northern nationalist minority, rather than offering itself as the embodiment of the people's will. Formed on the back of the civil rights campaigns of the late 1960s and designed to offer a more dynamic brand of politics compared to the old moribund Nationalist Party, the SDLP was anti-partitionist from the outset. Its 1972 policy document, *Towards a New Ireland*, urged British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, preceded by the establishment of a London-Dublin condominium.<sup>9</sup>

However, there were considerable differences to the analysis and methodology proffered by republicans. First, the SDLP accepted the equal legitimacy of the Unionist-British-Protestant tradition.<sup>10</sup> Second, evolving from this analysis, was the emphasis upon national reconciliation not liberation.



Third, the SDLP condemned political violence. Fourth, there was acceptance of the need to construct internal power-sharing arrangements within Northern Ireland as part of a 'healing process', provided that internal arrangements were accompanied by a wider Anglo-Irish framework.

Under the leadership of John Hume since 1979, the SDLP has increasingly emphasised the significance of external referents. Supportive of the ill-fated power-sharing executive of 1974, the party declined to participate in the Northern Ireland Assembly between 1982 and 1986, due to a lack of an accompanying all-Ireland dimension. Increasingly, the SDLP came to favour Anglo-Irish intergovernmentalism as the means of advancing constitutional nationalism. An 'agreed Ireland' was to involve accord between the London and Dublin governments in addition to the local unionist and nationalist populations. The SDLP marked out, therefore, a substantially different political terrain than the centrist Alliance Party, which emphasised internal power-sharing solutions in Northern Ireland.

Institutional arrangements were to reflect the complexity of relationships between the people of both islands. Whilst distinct from Sinn Féin's markedly territorial approach to unity, the SDLP's efforts to construct an 'agreed Ireland' nonetheless contains several areas of tacit agreement with Sinn Féin. Firstly, there was an emphasis upon the need for self-determination for all the people of Ireland. This appears to recognise the existence of distinct traditions on the



island, but yearns for political expression as a single unit. Secondly, despite the wider post-nationalist political frameworks preferred by Hume, involving Anglo-Irish and European interests, these ambitions are ranged against the belief that an Irish nation state can be constructed.<sup>11</sup>

### **Sinn Fein: No longer 'Ourselves Alone'**

Central to the idea of nationalist convergence is that Sinn Fein is no longer a 'political leper'. The origins of the peace process stem from Sinn Fein's search for inclusive dialogue. Coogan argues began as early as 1979, when Gerry Adams, later to become Party President, sought dialogue with the Catholic Church over the concept of a just war.<sup>12</sup> Sinn Fein finally began a formal abandonment of its position as the sole liberator of Ireland with recognition of the Irish Republic in 1986. From now on, victorious Sinn Fein candidates would take their seats in a Dail denounced as late as 1985 by Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein since 1983:

The only thing Irish about the Irish Parliament in Leinster House is its name - the Dail - otherwise it is a British parliamentary system handed down by ex-colonial rulers.<sup>13</sup>

Not until Caoimhghin O'Caolain's 1997 election success in Cavan was such a victory enjoyed by Sinn Fein under the new policy. The decision to end

abstentionism was nonetheless hugely important in symbolic terms, the single biggest factor in the building of a peace process. From this point, Sinn Fein was prepared to accept the idea of a government representing the twenty-six county Irish state speaking on behalf of a 32 county Irish nation. Sinn Fein now sought the help of the Dublin Government in promoting the aspirations of northern nationalists. For the Dublin Government, this presented no problem. Such a role was enshrined in the 1937 constitution. For Sinn Fein however, it meant acceptance of the fact that the 26 county Republic was a state endorsed by the overwhelming majority of its citizens, not an 'illegitimate' partitionist state.

Undoubtedly the move at the 1986 Ard Fheis transgressed purist republican principles. It was unsurprising that a significant (one-third) proportion of the delegates walked out in protest to form Republican Sinn Fein, particularly when one considers that the formation of the Provisional IRA in 1970 owed much to hostility to the very move now endorsed by the leaders of Sinn Fein under Adams. Sinn Fein's president recognised the futility of the continued pursuit of undiluted republicanism. There were clear advantages for Provisional Sinn Fein in that acceptance of the southern state could bring the Dublin Government 'onside'; weaken British portrayals of Sinn Fein as a Marxist organisation determined to overthrow both states in Ireland and build support for Sinn Fein in the Republic. Only in his belief in the lattermost was Adams overoptimistic.

The decision to recognise the southern state was a necessary but insufficient condition for the construction of a pan-nationalist agenda. Without some policy changes, or at least new emphases, pan-nationalism might have amounted to no more than the choosing of new allies by Sinn Féin. Instead, Sinn Féin policy was to undergo internal scrutiny in three key areas; the effectiveness of republican 'armed struggle'; the interpretation of the struggle as anti-colonial and the question of Unionist identity.

### **The aims of the Hume-Adams dialogue**

Sinn Féin rethought its approach to the above questions because it was encouraged to leave the political wilderness. The Hume-Adams dialogue, which began in 1988 and was revived in 1992, was partly an attempt by John Hume, as SDLP leader, to explore the extent to which Sinn Féin remained wedded to its traditional analysis and methodology. Hume's approach represented an attempt to persuade Sinn Féin that Britain was neutral over whether Northern Ireland should remain in the United Kingdom or form part of a unitary Irish state. The SDLP leader wished to convince Sinn Féin that the central problem was, therefore, not Britain but the presence of 900,000 Unionists whose wishes had to be taken into account as part of a process of national self-determination.

Hume had greater grounds for optimism than in previous dealings with the IRA in the 1970s. The unreconstructed militarism of Irish republicans from

1969-1981 had already been replaced by parity of emphasis between electoral and military strategies, articulated most famously in Danny Morrison's question at the 1981 Ard-fheis:

Who here really believes that we can win the war through the ballot box? But will anyone here object if with a ballot paper in this hand and an Armalite in this hand we take power in Ireland?<sup>14</sup>

From 1988 onwards, IRA 'spectaculars' notwithstanding, the political activity of the republican movement became of greater importance than the military campaign. Yet the years immediately prior to the Hume-Adams discussions appeared unpromising for such a switch of emphasis. Sinn Féin's political support appeared to have stalled following the bolstering of constitutional nationalism via the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. Violence in Northern Ireland had increased and it appeared that the IRA was capable of sustaining a substantial military campaign for the foreseeable future.

This unpromising backdrop to Hume-Adams was highlighted by the uncompromising reassertion of republican beliefs in Sinn Féin's policy document *A Scenario for Peace*.<sup>15</sup> This scarcely formed a basis for negotiation, as, despite its title, it stated the following:

1. Britain must withdraw from Northern Ireland.

2. The use of armed force to eject Britain is legitimate.
3. The 'armed struggle' is a war against a colonial aggressor.
4. British security forces must be disbanded.
5. All republican prisoners must be released unconditionally.
6. Unionists unable to accept a united Ireland could accept voluntary repatriation grants.

However, despite vocal public opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the stridency of *A Scenario for Peace*, influential figures within Sinn Féin conceded privately that a change in British strategy had occurred.<sup>16</sup> Sinn Féin's analysis of the conflict began to switch, as the party leadership began to question the extent to which the conflict was anti-colonial.

According to Hume, the Northern Irish conflict was a dispute between two differing traditions in Ireland. As McGovern notes, this modern analysis rests somewhat uneasily with the SDLP's historical perspective in which British involvement in Ireland has been a source of division.<sup>17</sup> However, Hume felt that there had been significant changes in British policy. The 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement had emphasised that Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom was conditional upon the preservation of a unionist majority in the Province. The British Government also recognised that a purely internal settlement was impossible. The Dublin Government would be involved in any future settlement.



Hume believed that the new role granted to Dublin as the guarantor of northern nationalist rights and aspirations made it imperative for nationalists and republicans to draw closer together to present a stronger, united front. The British Government, Hume argued, was increasingly amenable to the idea of Irish unity. This perception was assisted by the declaration in 1990 by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, that the British Government had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest' in Northern Ireland.

Hume began the task of persuading Sinn Fein that the armed struggle was a barrier to national reconciliation. Morally repugnant, the pursuit of violence had no pragmatic basis. National self-determination could only be achieved without the threat of violence or the coercion of unionists. Hume reasoned that with Britain now neutral, unionists would no longer be supported to the degree found in previous eras.

In arguing this case, Hume accepted that republicans were unlikely to accept at face value the idea of Britain merely 'changing its mind' on Northern Ireland. What Hume could offer however, was the prospect of a substantial cross-nationalist coalition of forces if Sinn Fein was prepared to end its political isolation. Already, the Anglo-Irish Agreement had emphasised the duality of a political solution to Northern Ireland. A European dimension could also be offered, alongside pressure from Irish America, as Britain's will to stay appeared to weaken. Britain would not stand in the way and indeed would act

as a persuader for the establishment of the structures for a new Ireland demanded by Hume since the foundation of the SDLP.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, British public opinion, persistently favourable to Irish unity, offered scant comfort to the Unionist position.<sup>19</sup>

Central to Hume's approach was the promise of the consolidation of Dublin's affairs in the North. With such a role enshrined in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, northern nationalists could begin to enjoy parity of esteem. Intergovernmental co-operation was seen as the most obvious means through which this could be achieved this, although north-south co-operative bodies linking the two parts of Ireland were also seen as vital. These East-West and North-South linkages provided the necessary all-Ireland dynamic for the SDLP, which would otherwise be confronted by the problem of political stagnation given the absence of the 'agreed Ireland' it craved. Unionists were informed that such institutions arising from these frameworks would not amount to a Trojan horse for a united Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

### **Pan-nationalism as agreeing the agreed: the limited impact of Hume-Adams upon Sinn Fein**

The outcome of the Hume-Adams dialogue illustrated the extent and limitations of pan-nationalism. Acknowledgement of some of Hume's arguments could be seen in Sinn Fein's policy approach and in the documents of the peace process



in the 1990s. Sinn Fein produced *Towards a Lasting Peace in Ireland* in 1992, a policy document which offered a substantial switch in approach.<sup>21</sup> Downgrading emphasis upon armed struggle, it urged Britain to engage in a process of constructive disengagement.<sup>22</sup> 'Brits out' had in effect been updated to 'Brits go, but persuade unionists for Irish unity before you go'.

However, Hume-Adams appeared to kick at an open door in many of the 'agreements' which it claimed. In short, it agreed the already agreed. In 1993, a joint statement by the two party leaders declared:

...we accept that an internal agreement is not a solution because it obviously does not deal with all the relationships at the heart of the problem.

We accept that the Irish people as a whole have the right to national self-determination. This is a view shared by the majority of the people of this island, though not by all its people.

The exercise of self-determination is a matter for agreement between the people of Ireland.

All of this could have been said prior to the commencement of the Hume-Adams dialogue in 1988. The limits of pan-nationalism were indicated by what did not emerge from the discussions. Sinn Fein did not publicly accept that Britain was neutral on the future of the Union. Furthermore, Hume-Adams skirted around the question of whether Unionist consent was a consequence of Irish unity, or as the SDLP accepts, a pre-requisite.

In July 1994, at its special Letterkenny Conference, Sinn Fein acknowledged that 'the consent and allegiance of unionists are essential ingredients if a lasting peace is to be established' whilst simultaneously declaring that Unionists 'cannot have a veto over British policy or over political progress in Ireland'. Unionist consent did not appear to be a prerequisite for constitutional change. Instead, Sinn Fein offered vaguer notions of covenantship with unionists. Such covenantship did contain some concessions in terms of identity. For example, unionists could retain their British passports.<sup>23</sup>

Dual identity in recognition of the Protestant-Unionist-British tradition marked a shift in Sinn Fein's attitude to the identification of Irishness on the island towards the SDLP's two traditions approach. It was however, highly constrained revisionism, a nod to historical tradition, not a guarantee of parity of esteem within a new Ireland. As Patterson notes, the republican guarantee meant that the British citizenship of Unionists was 'reduced to the same level as that of certain Hong Kong Chinese after the handover to Communist China'.<sup>24</sup> Sinn Fein's difficulty in moving towards the SDLP's appraisal of Protestant identity lay in abandoning policies based upon the absorption of unionists into a united Ireland, within which recognition of non-Irish identity amounted to the politics of concession. Sinn Fein had however developed a greater awareness that Unionists in the north would not 'come quietly' in the event of British withdrawal. In urging reconsideration of Unionist fears, Sinn

Fein's Chairman, Mitchell McLaughlin, in his address to the 1996 *ard-fheis*, revisited an earlier speech in which he emphasised the separateness of Unionists' 'whole history, aspirations, culture and sense of stability...formed, nurtured and reinforced within a British political, intellectual and emotional environment'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Bringing Dublin inside: the Downing Street Declaration and Framework Documents**

Despite its limitations, dialogue between northern constitutional nationalists and republicans helped create the formal documents of the peace process produced during the 1990s. With the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, the Irish Government was given a formal role in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The Agreement has, variously, been described as 'eminently reasonable and minimalist'<sup>26</sup>; signalling a desire for British disengagement<sup>27</sup>; increasing substantially the conditionality of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom<sup>28</sup> and reducing the cost of Britain's necessary involvement in the Province.<sup>29</sup> Irrespective of which perspective is correct, the Agreement emphasised the dual nature of the problem, ensuring that future attempts at producing a solution would be conducted in an Anglo-Irish framework.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement took scant account of the irredentism of Irish nationalism as expressed, albeit in very polite language, in the New Ireland

Forum of 1984. However, it made the Dublin Government a focal point for northern nationalists seeking influence in Northern Ireland. Whilst unionists spent much of the following decade opposing an agreement which confirmed their place in the United Kingdom, northern nationalist parties were more perceptive in devising strategies designed to gain political influence in an intergovernmental framework.

The Hume-Adams dialogue provided the major input, albeit in highly qualified form, to the Downing Street Declaration (Joint Declaration for Peace) in 1993. Crucially, the basic tenets of Hume-Adams were adopted and crystallised into the Declaration by the Irish Government as pan-nationalism developed a more solid base. Despite the numerous alterations to the drafts of the document, the changes produced by the Dublin Government were relatively minor. The Irish Government nonetheless acquiesced in the changes inserted at the instigation of the British government which insisted that association with Hume-Adams would be the 'kiss of death' for the document.<sup>30</sup> Under the initial Hume-Adams drafting, a declaration of eventual British withdrawal was requested, along with acceptance of the need for Irish self-determination. What transpired was a Declaration in which co-determination replaced self-determination. The North and South of the island would exercise self-determination on a separate basis. Inevitably the exercise of self-determination in the North would not yield a united Ireland. What was also of importance was

the accompanying 'Not the Downing Street Declaration' statement produced by the British Government, which ruled out any prospect of Britain acting as a persuader to Unionists for Irish unity. In effect, the Declaration adopted the language of pan-nationalism and accepted the principles of constitutional nationalism, but only marginally advanced nationalist goals.

The proposals adopted in the Downing Street Declaration provided the mechanics of the 1995 Joint Framework Document, produced by the British and Irish Governments, with Dublin presenting a nationalist cross-border agenda. Part I of the Document contained the British Government's proposals for the optimum means of governing Northern Ireland, including the establishment of a 90 member devolved assembly. Part II provided intergovernmental proposals which, in addition to strengthened East-West links, advocated the creation a North-South body with executive, harmonisation and consultation functions. Membership of this body would be compulsory membership for heads of departments in Northern Ireland, who would also chair assembly committees.

It is not wholly implausible to interpret the Framework Document as a triumph for the pan-nationalist alliance. Adams commented:

the ethos of the document and the political framework envisaged is clearly an all-island one. It deals with the general concept of one-island, social, economic and political structures and moves the situation close to an all-island settlement.<sup>31</sup>



Undoubtedly the document consolidated the all-Ireland dimension to any settlement. Its intergovernmental framework overshadowed internal institutions. Moreover, compulsory membership (a 'duty of service') of the North-South body for heads of departments in the new Northern Ireland devolved administration placed internal government Northern Ireland within broader parameters.<sup>32</sup> Within the Northern Ireland Assembly itself, the extensive system of checks and balances proposed offered substantial nationalist safeguards. Most of the ideas of the framework document reappeared in the draft of the Anglo-Irish propositions produced for multi-party talks in 1998. There was, however, one significant addition. The Ulster Unionist Party's idea of a Council of the British Isles had been adopted as a proposal by the two governments, labelled an intergovernmental council. This linked legislatures in Dublin, Belfast, London and Edinburgh, plus the Welsh assembly. Unionists believed this Council would strengthen the intergovernmental dimension of any settlement and weaken the cross-border dimension.

Crucially, the requirement for dual participation in northern *and* north-south bodies offered Sinn Féin's leadership the possibility of selling the idea of participation in a 'partitionist' Northern assembly to its members. If activity within such as assembly was placed within a substantial all-Ireland context it possessed a rationale and did not represent a return to the one-party triumphalism of pre-1972 Stormont, or the inadequate all-Ireland dimension of

Sunningdale in 1973.

The forward march of pan-nationalism appeared to have been halted by the British Government's refusal to become a persuader for a united Ireland and its insistence upon majority consent. However, it was revived by plans which allowed internal political co-operation within Northern Ireland, but arguably circumvented the consent requirement by installing substantial all-Ireland structures. It is within this context that Sinn Féin's willingness to enter roundtable talks and engage in a 'historic handshake' with Tony Blair should be seen. Equally, Blair's sidelining of the requirement that the IRA decommission its weapons facilitated Sinn Féin's entry into multi-party talks.

Unsurprisingly the lack of ringfencing to executive cross-border bodies alarmed Unionists, who feared the dynamics of such co-operation. In respect of the North-South body, the Framework Document declared that the British Government had 'no limits of their own' to impose on the nature and extent of functions which could be agreed for designation at the outset'.<sup>33</sup> The pan-nationalist coalition could also take comfort from the warning to unionists if they failed to cooperate. Direct rule would be reintroduced, but with a commitment to promoting North-South co-operation as agreed by the two governments in the Joint Declaration. The vagueness of the Joint Declaration led to (exaggerated) Unionist fears that joint authority was implied.<sup>34</sup>



### **Pan-nationalism and the collapse of republicanism?**

It is possible to argue that the Framework Documents represented the defeat of the ambitions of pan-nationalism. British sovereignty was safeguarded by the insistence upon no constitutional change without majority consent. Change in Northern Ireland, according to Labour's 1997 election manifesto, would be at the micro level, facilitating parity of esteem, mediation on contentious parades and some reforms of policing.<sup>35</sup> The assertion of the importance of consent was expressed in strident fashion by Blair in his first speech in Northern Ireland after Labour's election victory. He insisted:

My agenda is not a united Ireland and I wonder just how many see it as a realistic possibility for the foreseeable future? Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as a majority here wish...A political settlement is not a slippery slope to a united Ireland. The Government will not be persuaders for unity' <sup>36</sup>

The question begged was whether pan-nationalism has been a project designed to sideline militant republicanism, in which the Irish and American Governments, along with the SDLP have combined to dilute republican principles, assisted by muted British protestations of a lack of interest in Northern Ireland. According to Seamus Mallon of the SDLP, the Anglo-Irish nature of the Framework Document amounts merely to 'Sunningdale for slow

learners' <sup>37</sup> The themes of power-sharing and Anglo-Irish co-operation which underpinned the Sunningdale Agreement are indeed replicated in the Framework Document. Although the cross-border dimension is much stronger in the Framework Document, Sinn Fein's willingness to negotiate around a set of proposals which substantially short of a united Ireland indicates how republican horizons have been lowered. Ryan speaks of the 'death of republicanism' amid the vagaries of pan-nationalism and the reduction of Sinn Fein to just another political party, brought into ever closer contact within the northern state.<sup>38</sup>

That a revisionist version of republicanism had emerged within the pan-nationalist alliance can scarcely be questioned. The downgrading of physical force, increasingly displaced by political activity, was a necessary precondition to the construction of a nationalist consensus. More importantly, in ideological terms, the centrality of the British state to the problem began at least to be questioned. This should not be overstated, as Britain, according to Sinn Fein's analysis remained the problem in the last instance. For example Adams' 1997 Ard-fheis speech asserted that 'the British Government remains the continuing source of the major political difficulty endured by the people of this island'.<sup>39</sup>

Sinn Fein's project was revisionist in its de facto recognition of the Northern Irish state, despite the insistence, (shared by the SDLP) that the state had failed. Sinn Fein's 1997 general election manifesto included such proposals for a cross-border development commission and financial backing from the

British Government for development of the Irish language in Northern Ireland.<sup>40</sup> Republican purism this was not. Demands for rapid British withdrawal had been downgraded to a non time-specific 'objective to end British rule in Ireland'.<sup>41</sup> Modern Sinn Fein spoke of a process of British 'constructive disengagement'.<sup>42</sup>

A reductionist view of republicanism might indeed assert that Sinn Fein has abandoned its principles to the point that it is scarcely a republican party. This view is shared by unreconstructed militarists and Republican Sinn Fein, who offer a purist republicanism seemingly marooned in a post-1916 world of rebellion, abstentions and Thompson Guns. For such groups, negotiations should take place only within the context of an explicit declaration of British withdrawal.

Republicanism - of the new cooperative variety - has indeed reformed but denies it has become reformist. Thus the IRA's Tactical Use of Armed Struggle document indicated the existence of the strongest mass of nationalist political forces available with which republicans could do business: a major northern nationalist party now willing to co-operate with republicans; an Irish Government willing to assert nationalist principles and an increasingly pro-active and sympathetic American Government.

The 'alternative' to TUAS appeared to be attrition, with attendant political and military stalemate. Whilst adherence to the TUAS risked eventual

dilution of republican principles and a steady process of legitimisation of the northern state, maintenance of fundamentalism offered an unpromising, possibly infinite armed conflict. Hume's assertion concerning the ultimate futility of paramilitary action as *the* means of forcing British withdrawal had been privately recognised by the republican leadership for some time. Furthermore, British withdrawal, whilst still demanded as a means of breaking the political logjam, was no longer seen as a panacea. Construction of a nationalist alliance offered better prospects in isolating and dividing unionism, indicated by the fears espoused by unionists over the Framework Document and exemplified by the splits over whether to join roundtable talks in 1997. As Patterson puts it:

The TUAS strategy was not a recipe for the negotiated surrender of republicanism but rather, a relatively rational wager on the inflexibility and lack of imagination of the Unionist leadership - something which over two decades of IRA violence had done much to encourage.<sup>43</sup>

### **The acceptable face of pan-nationalism? Irish America**

Pressure from Irish-America upon the Clinton administration to adopt a more pro-active stance in Northern Ireland formed the fourth dimension within the pan-nationalist alliance. With 44 million Americans claiming Irish origin, the Irish-American lobby is strong. American involvement in Northern Ireland had increased through its financial support, with around £250m provided to bolster

the Anglo-Irish Agreement during the first three years.<sup>44</sup> American involvement thus far had concentrated mainly upon economic measures including emphasis upon the MacBride Principles designed to reduce employment disparities between Protestants and Catholics. By 1995, 46 United States companies were located in Northern Ireland.<sup>45</sup> This factor, allied to the prosperity of Americans of Irish descent, contributed to what Mallie and McKittrick describe as the new phenomenon of 'corporate Irish America'.<sup>46</sup>

Irish America contains such a variety of organisations and political views that it has been described as a case of 'hyper-pluralism'.<sup>47</sup> Despite this diversity, moderation has uniformly characterised the responses of American administrations to the conflict. Greener nationalistic elements were traditionally marginalised by the hegemonic position of the 'Four Horsemen' of Tip O'Neill, Edward Kennedy, Daniel Moynihan and Hugh Carey. Furthermore, traditional republican supporters in the fund-raising organisation NORAID, divided in the late 1980s. American involvement in Northern Ireland in the 1990s took on a different form. Firstly, global historic compromises appeared to offer an encouraging enticement for a more direct form of intervention. Secondly, Clinton had been elected President after a campaign which hinted at greater involvement in Northern Ireland. Such hints helped gain the support of Irish Americans, who historically had shown a greater tendency to vote for Democrats. Thirdly, institutional changes facilitated direct American



involvement, as Clinton bypassed the pro-British state department in favour of the use of national security council advisers.

For Sinn Fein, gaining sympathy from the American administration was a major feature of the consolidation of its international diplomatic effort. The party perceived Clinton's election as its first opportunity to influence United States policy, with a President now, as Adams put it, 'willing to ignore bad advice from London'.<sup>48</sup> Sinn Fein's portrayal internationally had always been tailored by the party to particular audiences, not least to counter British propaganda that it wished to establish an 'offshore Cuba'. In the second half of the 1980s, Adams had steered the Party away from its left-wing stances of the early 1980s towards more 'democratic socialist' positions. Whilst Sinn Fein duly preached and (sometimes) practised local socialism via community politics, its increasingly pro-European stance and jettisoning of left-wing baggage represented a major overhaul of the garrison Irish state socialist politics of part of the previous decade.

The American administration believed it could play a worthwhile role in ending armed conflict by emphasising the possibilities engendered by Sinn Fein's entry to the political mainstream. By exploring, through the US senator George Mitchell the possibility of weapons decommissioning, the Clinton administration strengthened its position. The US Government engaged in a rapid 'decontamination' of Sinn Fein, permitting an entry visa for Adams against the

urgings of Britain and the State Department. Britain was hostile to America's unwillingness to 'quarantine' Sinn Fein. However, the US Administration's overall aims of seeking decommissioning and supporting investment in Northern Ireland, were not at odds with those of the United Kingdom government, itself not adverse to a broadening of international involvement, particularly if the British subvention could be reduced. Accordingly, Clinton's involvement was the 'culmination of a long-term tendency towards greater involvement in the Northern Ireland conflict'.<sup>49</sup> Such involvement sought economic and political dividends from public sympathy with nationalist ambitions of equality of opportunity and parity of esteem. This approach shares many features with that pursued by the Irish Government.

### **The limits of pan-nationalism**

Electoral and ideological barriers to the development of pan-nationalism exist. Ironically, as ideology declined in importance, electoral considerations have, if anything, increased in salience. Pan-nationalism has been characterised by informality. Whilst nationalist forces have coalesced, they have not advocated formal coalition. The changing demographic balance in Northern Ireland has led to calls for electoral pacts between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. The increased nationalist vote means that both parties end up as 'winners' in terms of vote share. However, as the parties converge on similar political territory,



competition between the two is likely to intensify for a nationalist vote increasing in size and salience.

Both Sinn Fein and the SDLP opposed in principle the Northern Ireland Forum elections of 1996, implemented despite only the most tentative recommendations from the Mitchell Commission. Indeed Sinn Fein would have boycotted the elections if the SDLP had followed suit, but such a strategy could not be agreed.<sup>50</sup> Prior to the 1997 general election, John Hume made an offer to Sinn Fein that he knew would be refused; if Sinn Fein would end abstentionism in the event of elections to Westminster, the SDLP would engage in an electoral pact. Hume had pointed to one of the non-negotiable areas for republicans. In the event, such a pact would have yielded little. Only Tyrone West would have been added to the seats won by one or other of the two nationalist parties.

Attempts to build the strongest pan-nationalist alliance possible are confronted by the need of the SDLP and Sinn Fein to maintain distance for electoral purposes and, potentially, to justify separation. For the SDLP in particular, this requires a reappraisal of its approach to Sinn Fein which enables redefinition of its opponent within the terms of constitutional politics. Ironically, the SDLP's willingness to back the new constitutionalism of Sinn Fein had provided the major nationalist party with the strongest ever challenge to its position. The adversarialism of internal nationalist politics remains a barrier to

pan-nationalism, but one which may become increasingly grounded in electoral rather than ideological divisions.

Sinn Féin oscillates between advocacy of constitutional politics and occasional polemical flourishes in other directions. For example, Mitchell McLaughlin, an architect of Sinn Féin's new constitutionalism, was nonetheless prepared to tell his Party's 1996 Ard Fheis that, thus far in the peace process, constitutional politics 'has neither the stomach nor the dedication for the challenge'.<sup>51</sup> The John Bruton, taoiseach from 1994 to 1997, emphasised how constitutional nationalism continued to define republicans in terms of traditional agendas. Urging support for the SDLP during the 1997 election he declared that 'a vote for Sinn Féin is a vote for the IRA and the IRA's campaign of killing and murder'.<sup>52</sup>

There remain tensions amongst nationalists surrounding the efforts to sway unionists into acceptance of their role. By the mid-1990s, Sinn Féin appeared to move towards a position which refined their view that Unionists would 'come to their senses' if the British Government left. Yet Sinn Féin's new analysis has not always been sustained. It continues to assert that the 'central problem is the British presence' despite the risk of an independent Protestant backlash. The SDLP, whilst accepting the consent principle, has persistently sought to decrease its relevance. The difference over the consent principle, still seen by Sinn Féin as upholding a 'unionist veto' remains *the*

substantial formal policy difference between the two parties.

## Conclusion

If one is prepared to define pan-nationalism as the establishment of a dynamic for Irish unity, rather than the production of an identikit ideology transcending parties and institutions, use of the term is appropriate. Even defined within these narrow parameters, pan-nationalism is a fragile project, liable to episodic fracturing. During his brief spell as taoiseach, John Bruton was criticised by Sinn Féin for his 'partitionist analysis' when the peace process underwent temporary collapse.

Pan nationalism therefore does not equate to homogenous nationalism. Whilst partly speculative, it is possible that the old divisions within nationalism may become increasingly redundant, based as they were around constitutional versus extra-constitutional approaches to Irish unity; the centrality of armed struggle in history and contemporary politics and the legitimacy of the twenty-six county state. New nationalism in Ireland appears based upon addressing modern questions and displacing older ones. Issues of cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity have replaced ethno-geographical determinism whilst the possibilities of cross-borderism have displaced rhetorical anti-partitionism.

Northern nationalists have looked to the assertion of their Irishness from other quarters. In absolutist form, this was attempted by Irish irredentism,

through Articles 2 and 3 of the constitution. Pan-nationalist alliances have been developed through the exertion of Irishness through more intermediary, means in addition to constitutional imperatives. Ultimately, the preservation of a pan-nationalist alliance depends upon the further advancement of Irish dimensions to the politics of the north, achieved through cross-border dynamics and stress upon cultural Irishness. Failure to advance may mean the fracturing of pan-nationalism via the return to traditional republican concerns of absolute sovereignty. Whatever the ambitions represented by 'Humespeak', pan-nationalism has yet to be converted into post-nationalism.

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