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TERRITORIAL POLITICS AND IRISH CYCLING

Kevin Howard

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ABSTRACT

TERRITORIAL POLITICS AND IRISH CYCLING

This paper explores a particular sporting activity in which the complexities of the relationship between the two parts of Ireland, and between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, are vividly illustrated. Originally, cycling in Ireland was organised by two internationally recognised bodies, the Irish Cycling Federation (founded 1954) in the Republic and the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (founded in 1949) in Northern Ireland. Alongside these was a third body, the National Cycling Association (founded in 1932), which operated on an all-island basis. Tensions between the three organisations were overcome in 1979 by a tripartite agreement, under which a new, internationally recognised all-Ireland body, the Federation of Irish Cyclists, appeared five years later. But this did not end the matter, and the paper discusses the failure of Northern Ireland Cycling Federation members to endorse this solution, the resulting split, and continuing efforts by that organisation (both before and after the 1998 Good Friday agreement) to define itself as a British- rather than an Irish-linked body.

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TERRITORIAL POLITICS AND IRISH CYCLING

Kevin Howard

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a case study of the territorial organisation of one particular civil society activity, namely competitive cycling. The case study brings into sharp relief the tensions that can arise as a consequence of the endemic ambiguity over what precisely is “Ireland”, the state or the island. In other words which of these two is the country? Consider the publication by UK Sport, in early 2005,¹ of a document setting out how the organisation of sport in the UK could be improved. One of the document’s key proposals was the recommendation that there ought to be one governing body for each sport in each country. The reasoning behind this move to rationalisation is hinted at when the document briefly observes that “in the past there have been some anomalies to the application of the ‘one governing body’ rule” (UK Sport, 2005: 1). These anomalies are not explained. Instead, couched in the jargon of contemporary “management-speak”, the document stresses the advantages of organisational rationalisation on a countrywide basis. As we have seen in two earlier papers, the problem with this in the context of Northern Ireland reduces to a simple question: what is the relevant country, is it Ireland the island or is it Ireland the state (Howard, 2006)? Put simply, the successful implementation of a “one governing body, per sport, per country” policy presupposes the country’s parameters.

Through an examination of how competitive cycling has been and is organised on the island of Ireland this paper shows how, for some, politics and sport are inextricably linked—and are likely to remain so. The contested legacy of partition means that the normal frictions associated with any form of administrative management easily transmute into ethnonational identity conflicts. When functional cooperation breaks down underlying political divisions became clearly visible. We present an analysis of a period of breakdown to show how (between 1984 and 2004) disagreements over the organisation of competitive cycling symbolised the wider dynamic of ethnonational politics in Ireland—in particular, the lack of confidence on the part of some unionists in the political settlement of 1920-25 that consolidated the political division of Ireland. We show how the deeply-embedded unionist fears of 32-county irredentism influence perceptions of organisational change.

Special attention is paid to the period from the early 1990s up to 2004—from the advent of John Major’s Conservative government increasingly reliant on Unionist support across the five years of its existence, through the seminal Labour landslide of 1997, and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, up to the rapprochement in Irish

competitive cycling that was signalled in December 2004. We argue that the mid-1990s represented a kind of highpoint of Unionist intransigence against both the evolving cooperation between the British and Irish states and moves towards all-Ireland functional integration. Unionist effectiveness in opposing political change for Northern Ireland, in particular rejecting the mandate of Republicans, was radically reduced after 1997.

The Good Friday Agreement and its complex administrative architecture represents the most sophisticated set of mechanisms yet devised to frame the relationships between nationalists and unionists on a basis of equality and mutual toleration. The Republic has abandoned its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland; it will remain part of the UK for as long as the majority of its people want it that way. Formally, Northern Ireland remains a conditional part of the UK, though practically this is unlikely to change in any reasonably foreseeable future. Unionists, on this view, have been the constitutional winners. Irish 32-county nationalism as a set of political aspirations and an ethnonational identity has been granted *de jure* and increasingly *de facto* “parity of esteem” in Northern Ireland.

The December 2004 rapprochement reached in competitive cycling mirrors the new realities of post-1998 Ireland. It applied the discourse and institutional architecture of mutual ethnonational co-existence foreshadowed in the Good Friday Agreement to the organisation of a sport. Moreover, in light of the failure of the intra-Northern Ireland entities to agree their roles, an agreement between the Dublin-based Federation of Irish Cyclists (renamed Cycling Ireland in 2000) and the London-based British Cycling Federation was imposed. There are now two cycling organisations in the north: the six-county Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF) and the nine-county Cycling Ulster (CU), the semi-autonomous provincial arm of Cycling Ireland. The NICF studiously avoids any recognition of the latter’s existence.

An additional reason for highlighting the particular example of competitive cycling is an “added value” argument. The bulk of the literature that addresses sport and territorial politics in Ireland deals with three main activities and associated organisations: with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), Association football (soccer) and Rugby Union football. Explicitly or otherwise, each of these sporting activities and their academic analysis relies on a particular territorial conceptualisation:

- Gaelic games and the GAA’s organisational structure can be understood as symbolising a *boundary denying*, 32-county nationalism
- Association football, whether in its southern (FAI) or northern (IFA) guise can be understood as symbolising *boundary reinforcing* 26-county and six-county nationalisms
- Rugby Union can be understood as *boundary transcending*, all-Ireland transnationalist.

The tensions and conflicts involved in the territorial organisation of cycling combine all these dimensions. This analysis therefore makes a valuable and novel addition

¹ This is the statutory, centrally funded, distributor of funds to British sporting organisations, an umbrella governing authority for sport in the UK made up of the “national” governing bodies of Sport England, Sport Scotland, Sports Council for Wales, and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland (see UK Sport, 2005).

to the existing literature that deals specifically with territorial politics and sport in Ireland and, more generally, to the impact of partition on civil society organisational activity as a whole.

PARTITION AND ORGANISED COMPETITIVE CYCLING

In this section, we return once again to John Whyte's preliminary reconnaissance of the impact of partition on civil society organisations (Whyte, 1983). As we saw previously (Howard, 2006), Whyte highlighted the Byzantine complexity of the organisation of sport on the island of Ireland. In attempting to give some shape to this complexity, he hypothesised that sporting bodies founded on an all-Ireland basis prior to partition have generally remained that way. Moreover, this was even more likely if these sports were "middle class" in terms of their participant base—his primary example being Rugby Union football. Competitive cycling emerged in Ireland before partition was implemented. The wider context was the proliferation of organised sporting activity that took place across Great Britain and Ireland in the latter decades of the nineteenth century (Cronin, 1999). Therefore, we would expect that cycling would be more likely to be organised on an all-Ireland basis. On the other hand, Whyte categorised cycling as a "proletarian" sport. He suggested that proletarian sports were less likely to be organised on all-Ireland basis, and he identified cycling as being organised separately on either side of the border (Whyte, 1983: 305).

This indeed was true at the time when Whyte researched his article (drawing on databases from the early 1970s)—but only partially so. The international governing body for the sport of cycling, the Union Cycliste International (UCI), recognised two separate "national" governing bodies, each operating on either side of the border. These were the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation (NICF, founded in 1949); and the Irish Cycling Federation (ICF, founded in 1954). As the name implies, the first body organised itself solely within the six counties; the second was a solely 26-county organisation. However, also in existence at the time of Whyte's research was the National Cycling Association (NCA, founded in 1932). The UCI deemed the international boundary as the proper boundary for the sport's national governing bodies. The NCA therefore had no official standing. Hence, those NCA members who refused to recognise the international boundary and continued to organise their sport as if the boundary did not exist could not compete in UCI-sanctioned events (such as the amateur Olympic Games and the professional World Championships). As a concession, the UCI ruled that the "Ireland" team for international events could be drawn from the 32-counties in that it could include members drawn from both the 26-county and the six-county organisations, *but not from the 32-county NCA*.

In response to its international isolation the NCA, in the early 1950s, organised the *Rás Tailteann*, an island-wide stage race that for the first 20 years of its existence was used explicitly to promote a 32-county nationalist agenda. The green-nationalist symbolism surrounding this race is obvious and was consciously promoted. The

very name served to associate the race, its organisers and participants, with the Tailteann games, a form of pre-Christian, "Celtic Olympics" (Daly, 2003: 15).² Class as well as an urban rural dimension characterised the differences between the NCA and the ICF. The NCA was strong in the countryside and regarded the Dublin-based, internationally orientated, ICF as pro-British and as having sold out on core nationalist principles. Daly quotes Joe Christle, one of the NCA's leading figures and ideologues:

In the field of sport we could never be denied complete independence. No doubt, we could lose certain privileges by maintaining that independence, but we prefer national honour to international dishonour (cited in Daly, 2003: 20).

In Rome in August 1955, in pursuit of "national honour", four members of the NCA disrupted the start of the men's road race at the UCI's world cycling championships. Italian police arrested four NCA members after a scuffle had broken out at the start line; these included Mick Christle, the brother of the above-mentioned Joe.³ The animosity, evident in Rome in 1955, reached its nadir nearly two decades later at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The northerner Noel Taggart (an NICF affiliated rider) was riding for the Ireland Olympic team and was pulled from his bike by the NCA affiliated Kerryman John Mangan who, incredibly, had breached whatever security arrangements were in place and infiltrated cycling's blue ribbon Olympic event, the men's road race. The international outcry at this politically motivated disruption to a sporting event, coming within a few days of the murder of Israeli athletes by Palestinian paramilitaries at the same Olympics, was regarded as a national disgrace in Ireland. The opprobrium was such that it bolstered those within the organisations who were seeking to breach the rift. Under the auspices of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, a tripartite agreement between the ICF, the NCA and the NICF was reached in 1978. The Sports Council describes this arrangement as:

A working relationship which permitted open competition for cyclists of any organisation in any event in Ireland. The committee was also charged with the responsibility of representing Irish Cycling, selecting and fielding international teams. The three domestic organisations retained their individual autonomy over domestic affairs. The "Tripartite Agreement" replaced the ICF/NICF Bilateral Agreement (Sports Council for Northern Ireland, 1990).⁴

The tripartite agreement was formalised at a special conference in the presence of the UCI's Secretary General at a meeting in Dublin on 11 November 1979. Fundamentally, under the agreement each association agreed to recognise the other as

² The fledgling Irish state in the 1920s engaged in a similar project of legitimacy building through association with the ancient version of the games by staging an event that combined sporting and cultural activities and calling it the Tailteann Games.

³ The Italian police detained Christle for five days; he was then released, tried in his absence and sentenced to six months imprisonment. Ten years later, a fine notice for £14 from the Italian authorities arrived at Christle's home in Drimnagh, Dublin. He chose not to pay!

⁴ The correspondence between the NICF, BCF, FIC, ICF and UCI upon which this paper is largely based are the private property of Jack Watson, Bangor, Co Down, honorary secretary of Cycling Ireland and former secretary of the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation.

sociations' affiliated members for the purposes of domestic competition in Ireland, while at the international level "one unified team shall participate in the world championships". At the same time, "each of the three bodies will preserve its sovereignty and its independence". The agreement led to the establishment of a 15-member tripartite committee (five from each entity). It was this committee that functioned effectively as the governing body of cycling for whole of Ireland and was recognised as such by the UCI. The period of the tripartite committee (1979-1984), in contrast to the political situation in the island as a whole, is regarded as a kind of golden age of associational and organisational harmony. The acrimony between the NCA and ICF had declined and the northerners organised into the NICF and the Ulster region of the NCA co-operated under the tripartite committee's umbrella. Nonetheless, the tripartite committee was neither a seamless nor a harmonious organisation; the arrangement still allowed a significant degree of autonomy to its constituent partners, and in some cases each entity sent its own Ireland team to international events.

REDEFINING IRELAND

For the UCI the relative autonomy of the tripartite committee's constituent entities was, in the long-term, untenable. In 1984 at its congress in Los Angeles the UCI delegates passed a motion declaring that henceforth it would only recognise "one governing body per country". It was to be through this governing body that internationally approved licenses and hence access to international events would be issued. However, what constituted one country as far as the UCI was concerned was Ireland the island, rather than Ireland the state. The Irish Cycling Tripartite Committee that had governed the sport for the previous five years was wound up and a 10-member board, scheduled to sit for two years to oversee the embedding of the new organisation, took its place. This new organisation was to be comprised of the three autonomous entities. In the event, the isolationist but anti-partitionist 32-county NCA merged with the internationalist but partitionist 26-county ICF to form a new 32-county, internationally recognised entity—the Federation of Irish Cyclists (FIC).

The UCI enthusiastically endorsed the formation of the FIC:

We received from the 3 Irish Federations; Irish Cycling Federation, National Association of Ireland, Northern Ireland Cycling Federation the announcement of the creation of the Federation of Irish Cyclists ... Congratulations. We hope that all Irish cyclists and their leaders will take part of your federation and Irish cycling will have its right place in the international cycling family (Jekiel, UCI Secretary General, to FIC, 15 January 1988).

As for the NICF, it was proposed that it would merge with the Ulster Council, the northern region of the defunct NCA, to become the Ulster Cycling Federation, a new nine county northern region of the FIC. In other words, after nearly 40 years of independent existence the governing body for cycling in Northern Ireland was being asked to disappear into a nine-county, provincial subsidiary of an all-Ireland "national" governing body with its headquarters in Dublin. The proposal to amalgamate the NICF with the Ulster Council of the old NCA was put to the NICF's AGM on 21 November 1987. For the proposal to be approved it required a two-thirds majority of

the 85 present and eligible to vote. This meant that 57 votes were required as a minimum. At one level, the bulk of cyclists within the six-county NICF were willing to follow the same logic as that of the 26-county ICF 40 years before, that is, to accept the UCI's edicts to ensure access to international competition. Only this time cycling was to be organised into a single, *boundary transcending* 32-body. This would facilitate an internationally endorsed island-wide racing and events calendar, as well as government funding only available to internationally endorsed "national" governing bodies. In the event, 56 delegates voted in favour, leaving the motion one vote short of the 57 required. The casting vote was left to the chairman, Jack Watson, who in his role as a member of Toyota North Down Cycling Club had voted against the measure. However, as an independent Chairman honour-bound to vote in the interests of Northern Irish cycling as a whole, rather than as a delegate of a local club, Watson voted in favour of amalgamation.⁵ Nevertheless, some members of the NICF sought to resist the incorporation of their organisation into the new all-Ireland body; a High Court action was initiated to prevent the motion's passing. The High Court declared that the "motion regarding the amalgamation was ... not valid"—it had not reached the required two-thirds majority and the High Court granted the injunction and suggested that a recount take place. The NICF reconvened its AGM in February 1988 at which a clearer rejection of the motion to amalgamate with the Ulster Council emerged (55 for, 29 against, one abstention). So, the proposal to merge was defeated because *the required* majority was not achieved even though a majority of NICF members were in favour of amalgamation.

In response, clubs withdrew unilaterally from the NICF to join the all-Ireland body. In March 1988, the Ulster Council of the former NCA and the defector clubs from the NICF formed the Ulster Cycling Federation (UCF) and affiliated to the all-Ireland Federation of Irish Cyclists (FIC). Later that year, in Seoul, cycling's international governing authority recognised the FIC as the one governing body for cycling in the whole island of Ireland. In April 1988 the Sports Council for Northern Ireland followed suit, withdrawing its recognition of the NICF and with it of course any future possibility of grant-aid. In December 1988 the Sports Council of Northern Ireland affirmed its decision that the nine-county UCF, *not the six-county NICF*, was the official governing body and would therefore receive what grant aid was available for the sport of cycling in Northern Ireland.⁶

⁵ In terms of political orientation, Jack Watson is a British Unionist. Born in the Shankill Road, he has lived most of his life in Bangor, Co Down an overwhelmingly "unionist" town. Yet in terms of sporting allegiances Watson gravitated from the NICF, of which his father was a founding member, to the all-Ireland Federation of Irish Cyclists on the basis that this was in the best interests of cycling in Ireland and in the belief that opinions regarding the political boundaries of the state should and could be kept separate from assessments regarding cycling's optimal organisational form. A picture of Watson adjudicating a cycling event appeared in the *Mid-Ulster Mail*, the caption for which was not sufficiently clear for at least one observer who wrote to Watson, suggesting that he "get in touch with the newspaper and let them know that you are the President of the Cycling Federation of the Republic—not N. Ireland. I am sure that the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation would not want scum like you associated with their name". At the time there was no Cycling Federation of the Republic; the FIC was an all-Ireland body.

⁶ However, and somewhat contradictorily, the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Council continued to endorse the NICF as the official governing body for cycling in Northern Ireland. So, at the end of 1988, two officially recognised entities governed cycling; for the purposes of the Commonwealth Games it was the six-

MOBILISING UNIONISM

The primary catalyst for the territorial dispute in Irish cycling was the international governing body's ruling regarding "one national governing body per country"; Ireland the island, rather than Ireland the state was deemed the country. Nonetheless, some within the NICF interpreted this as old-style, unreconstructed NCA irredentism under another name given that none of the Irish representatives in Los Angeles had raised any objections at the world governing body's conference to the "one country, one licence" proposal. The formation of the *boundary-transcending* FIC necessitated the disappearance of the *boundary-ignoring* 32-county NCA. The suspicion that the whole matter was an NCA ploy was given some credence by the comments of one former NCA official Eamon Cregan recorded in the *Irish Times*: "the promotion of [32-county] nationalism was more important than the promotion of cycling" (*Irish Times*, 27 October 1987). In other words, the disappearance of the stalwart NCA was acceptable if it meant international recognition for an alternative 32-county entity.

While the Sports Council for Northern Ireland had accepted the authority of the all-Ireland body, individuals within the NICF were remarkably successful in tapping deep-rooted unionist fears of being sold out and subsumed within an all-Ireland framework (Clayton, 1996). In January 1989, the NICF wrote to all 26 Northern Ireland's district councils asking for their assistance in stemming "the progress of the 32-County Body". The spin put on this appeal was that NICF members were being penalised by a Swiss-based and French dominated foreign entity because they had "decided against 'Dublin Rule'" (NICF to local authorities, 9 January 1989). Moreover, it seemed as though the British government was conniving in compelling those loyal to the British crown into an all-Ireland, nationalist-dominated, entity.⁷ The NICF conveyed to unionist councillors its view that the newly formed nine-county UCF was:

In fact a new name for the Ulster Council of the National Cycling Association, a body which from 1933 had been expelled from International Recognition because of its Nationalistic claim on both parts of Ireland ... the NCA ... has never accepted the 6 County border, of British Northern Ireland ... The Dublin based Federation of Irish Cyclists is ... a new name for the National Cycling Association and The Ulster Cy-

county NICF; for all other international purposes it was the UCF, the nine-county regional body of the all-Ireland FIC.

⁷ For the majority of cyclists however, the prospect and practice of Dublin rule was not nearly as worrying as the prospect of being isolated from the wider cycling scene in Ireland and internationally. By 1990 the Ulster Cycling Federation had approximately 1400 members spread across 39 clubs; the NICF had 350 members spread across eight clubs. Of course, the UCF is a nine-county entity, but as organised cycling in the north of the island is geographically concentrated east of the Bann, the greater territorial reach of the UCF was not a significant factor in the discrepancy of scales of membership between the two organisations. Indeed, as a conciliatory move that would have had little impact in practice, the FIC proposed a restructuring of the northern area that would result in the dropping of the name UCF and a redrawing of its boundaries back to the six-counties of Northern Ireland, the name of the new entity to be "Northern Region". The NICF rejected this as another attempt at Irish encroachment.

cling Federation its 9 County Ulster Council (NICF to Unionist Councillors, 9 January 1989).

Both Ards Borough Council (8 May 1990) and Ballymena Borough Council (4 June 1990) passed resolutions in support of the NICF:

That this Council refrains from co-operation with the Ulster Cycling Federation [the northern region of the FIC] in view of them discriminating against members of the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation ... that this Council writes to the [international governing body and the BCF] ... asking them to allow the NICF to obtain British licenses instead of having to apply to Dublin for FIC licenses ... [to] make them aware of the NICF's pressure regarding their citizenship and the pressure put upon them to join the Irish Republic's federation by the UCF (Ards Borough Council, Ballymena Borough Council, June 1990).

The inferred interpretation of is that the border delineates two ethnonational communities with separate institutional representations. But, to labour the point once more, the FIC is not the federation of the Republic, it is an internationally recognised transnational, transethnic entity. Ballymena and Ards councils forwarded their resolutions in support of the NICF to the other local authorities in Northern Ireland to gain their support. The councils' responses fall into three categories: one, outright support; two, acknowledgement of the resolution but no endorsement; and three, outright rejection. Only one local authority, Moyle Borough Council took the third option and rejected outright the call for support. Craigavon fudged the issue, passing it on to the Sports Council of Northern Ireland. The majority of local authorities (19) took the second option, mainly on the grounds that it was not their policy to adopt resolutions agreed by other local authorities. However, in addition to the motion's sponsors, three other local authorities were unequivocal in their support for the NICF. Significantly, these included the largest and most important local authority Belfast City Council.⁸ Unionists on Belfast City Council argued that "it would be ridiculous for a Unionist controlled council like our own to sit down and let this discrimination continue against an organisation whose basic principles are the same as our own" (Frank Miller, Independent Unionist, *Irish News*, 16 July 1990).

The NICF also sought to mobilise unionist sentiment amongst members of the British Cycling Federation (BCF). The NICF from its inception in 1949 up until 1987 had been an autonomous member of the UCI. It had never been a regional member of the BCF in the same way as England, Scotland or Wales. This was recognised in the constitution of the BCF, which defined its territory as Great Britain and the crown dependencies (which are neither part of the UK, nor of the EU, but are British nonetheless). The BCF had never sought to include Northern Ireland within its functional jurisdiction. Nonetheless, through persistent lobbying, the NICF sought to have a motion put on the agenda of the international governing body's meeting at the Junior World Championships in England in 1990 to the effect that cycling in Northern

⁸ The other three local authorities that supported the Ballymena/Ards motions were North Down, Larne and Antrim Borough Councils.

Ireland come under BCF control. Putting its case to the amateur cycling branch of the UCI, the NICF declared:

We will accept an international licence for Northern Ireland or that our international licence comes through the British Cycling Federation. As you know the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland are two separate countries. As you have separate licence arrangements for North and South Korea and East and West Germany, we request similar consideration ... Governments throughout the world recognise Northern Ireland as a separate country. The Northern Ireland Cycling Federation is simply asking the UCI ... to do the same (NICF to UCI, 3 May 1990).

The NICF was aiming for both a maximal and a minimal outcome. The maximal outcome would be for the NICF to be reinstated as an autonomous “national” governing body for Northern Ireland. The minimal outcome was for its members to be granted international licenses through the BCF, with the UCI treating Northern Ireland as a shared space administered by both the FIC and the BCF. The Australian Cycling Federation proposed the motion that the international governing body declare:

That since the Country of Northern Ireland is constitutionally a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland the sport of cycling will, in future, be under the direct control of the British Cycling Federation. It is agreed that cyclists living in Northern Ireland will have the choice of being licensed by either the British Cycling Federation of the Federation of Irish Cyclists and the British Cycling Federation shall recognise either license for competition in Northern Ireland (Australian Cycling Federation, 15 July 1990)

The context of the meeting being held in Great Britain, the absence of FIC representatives, and assiduous lobbying on the part of the NICF resulted in both the international governing body and the BCF accepting the minimalist proposal. The world governing body’s executive committee “decreed” that “all parties interested in cycling in Northern Ireland should be free to issue licences in the interests of the riders concerned. The British Cycling Federation would also enjoy such freedom”. The BCF indicated that it would implement this immediately. Within a week, pictures of NICF riders proudly displaying their British licenses appeared in the cycling press. Both the NICF and sympathetic journalists in the unionist press spun the story to imply that the NICF would be the sole governing body for Northern Ireland within a UK wide organisation. For the cycling correspondent of the *Belfast Newsletter*:

It seems realistic to assume that the world body views the claim by the NICF not to forge ties with the all-Ireland Federation of Irish Cyclists and to maintain its autonomy as a separate identity on the island of Ireland as a legitimate right (*Belfast Newsletter*, 19 July 1990)

As far as the all-Ireland FIC was concerned this was a direct challenge to its sovereignty, a sovereignty that the international governing body itself had granted three years previously. The FIC’s suspicion was that the BCF was covertly attempting to extend its jurisdiction: “Members of the FIC board have been aware for some time now of your ambition to obtain control of the Northern part of our area of jurisdiction. It would appear now that you have realised that ambition” (FIC to BCF, 20 July

1990). The response to this charge on the part of the BCF is particularly interesting, reminiscent of long-standing British attitudes towards the “irrational”, “warring” tribes of Ireland:

Nobody in the BCF has any ambition to expand into Northern Ireland if the interests of the riders are properly catered for by another organisation or organisations ... The formation of the single [all-Ireland] Federation of Irish Cyclists has obviously not had universal acceptance. This is a pity, but not surprising in the political context ... I do not believe that the British Cycling Federation should refuse the requests for licenses from British nationals whether they happen to live in Belfast, Bristol, or Birmingham. That said ... the BCF has no objection to riders opting to have an FIC licence ... I do not believe that we can abdicate our responsibility as a national organisation, although ... [someone in our organisation] considers that our being “kneecapped” is a possibility ... How tragic ... We are talking about sport aren’t we? ... many of my colleagues in the BCF will consider we are in a “No Win” situation (BCF to Watson, 9 October 1990).

The problem, as the BCF saw it, was that the international governing body had, initially, shown a remarkable lack of political sensitivity in recognising the FIC as the sole governing authority. By so doing it had:

Ignored a major dispute on national borders that has remained unsolved ... the current unhappy situation with regard to cycle sport in Northern Ireland proved that the border dispute can’t be ignored ... we have no ambitions in Northern Ireland other than a service for British riders who do not wish to join an organisation they (the riders) consider politically unacceptable ... We would, however, far rather you all came to an agreement (BCF to Watson, 30 October 1990).

The tone of the BCF’s observations mirrors the hegemonic self-understanding of the British in relation to the obdurate and violent Irish. The British are “honest brokers” who in the absence of Irish ability or willingness to sort out their own mess are honour-bound to support those people in Ireland whose identity is self-defined as British. The early 1990s context is instructive, and the BCF’s comments are reminiscent of the seminal declaration that Britain had “no selfish strategic or economic interests” in Northern Ireland.

For the FIC the matter was simple: the internationally recognised sovereignty of a 32-county governing body (that contained the majority of Northern Ireland’s cyclists from both ethnodenominational traditions) was being challenged by the separatist NICF and was doing so with British backing, despite the BCF’s claims to be merely arbitrators. The FIC continued to lobby the international governing body to bring pressure on the British organisation, given that a proposal was being mooted for the BCF’s AGM in December 1990 to fully integrate the NICF as a *body* into a newly configured organisation at the level of the UK (and crown dependencies).

Fudging the issue, the BCF’s AGM voted not to include Northern Ireland as one of its constitutionally endorsed member regions of the British federation but voted to allow those British passport holders resident in Northern Ireland who wished to take out *individual* membership of the BCF and thus qualify for the issue of a BCF racing

licence. The NICF's reaction to the BCF fudge is a poignant mixture of defiance towards Dublin and a not unconditionally required allegiance to Britain:

Some riders say "Let's stop the dispute"—they must be reminded that the NICF did not start it but only acted to protect its Constitution and had always been willing to share in Ireland's International affiliation. The FIC stole that right and now try to deny NICF competitors International recognition through the British system ... Because the BCF did not receive the two-thirds majority to include the word Northern Ireland in their Constitution does not in any way alter our link to them—six more votes would have swung the day (NICF, January, 1991).

The UCI showed some pragmatism in relation to the "one governing body, one country" ruling by allowing the British governing body to issue internationally valid membership licences to *individual* cyclists in Northern Ireland, while still maintaining that the FIC was the sole governing body for Ireland. In other words, individuals could maintain their "Britishness" while members of an Irish organisation. The FIC conciliated in an effort to promote inter-organisational dialogue by temporarily lifting its ban against the participation of NICF teams and riders with British licenses for the coming (1991) racing season. This was of special significance given that 1991 was a UN-designated year of sport, and the concession would have implications for NICF participation in the 1991 Northern Ireland Milk Race, a prestigious UCI sanctioned six-day stage race sponsored by the British Dairy Council. For the NICF, however, this "temporary concession" meant little. It once again made representations to Northern Ireland's 26 local authorities, this time asking them not to support the race because of what it regarded as the ongoing discrimination against its riders on the part of the Dublin-based body. Larne Council was the first to respond, announcing that it was withdrawing its (admittedly modest £500) financial support for the Milk Race. The DUP councillor Bobby McKee accused the FIC of seeking to enforce the Irish Republic's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland in the cycling world; they should be told to "get on their bikes" (*Larne Times*, 11 January 1991, *Larne Guardian*, 16 January 1991).

The issue of licences was partly resolved in March 1991 at a meeting in Banbridge between FIC and NICF officials (*Ulster Newsletter*, 4 March 1991). Indeed, in a March 1991 FIC press release, the words of the Good Friday Agreement were foreshadowed when it was observed that "cyclists in Northern Ireland have a choice of an FIC or a BCF licence or both" (FIC, 3 March 1991). Of course, this raised a question as to the utility of the NICF. It was not a governing body; it could not organise internationally sanctioned races; it could not issue international licenses; individual cyclists in Northern Ireland could access membership of the Irish and or British governing bodies directly. It was, in effect, irrelevant in relation to internationally validated cycling in Ireland.

However, the dispute over territorial jurisdiction remained in flux. We recall the NICF's wistful observation of how the 1990 proposal to extend the BCF's jurisdiction to include Northern Ireland had been defeated. In December 1991 the same proposal was again put forward. Following a debate in which some Scottish delegates reworked notions of the "innate" difference between Northern Ireland and the south,

and the natural affinity of the former to Great Britain, the motion was again defeated—but this time by only one vote (*Cycling Weekly* 21-28 December 1991). From the perspective of NICF officials the narrowness of the vote vindicated their view that they were stimulating a groundswell of support within the British organisation that would see the NICF incorporated into a UK wide entity sooner rather than later. These hopes were deflated when a year later, the BCF once again formally recognised the FIC as the sole governing body on the island of Ireland and re-trenched its own territorial reach to the island of Great Britain. So, by 1992, the UCI, the BCF, and the Northern Ireland Sports Council, all recognised the jurisdiction of the 32-county FIC. As a concession, British identifiers in Northern Ireland who did not want to join this all-Ireland body could take part in UCI sanctioned events through *individual* membership of the BCF.

The NICF was nothing if not dogged. It once again appealed to the UCI for autonomous membership status on the grounds of tradition, international consistency, and ethnic incompatibility. The NICF had for years been a loyal member of the UCI; the UCI had therefore *de facto* recognised the political boundary that continues to be recognised by the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), the organisers of the Commonwealth Games, and, at least formally, the International Olympic Committee. The UCI's position therefore was contradicting its own history and international practice, which is increasingly moving towards a state-centric standard. In addition, it was claimed that "That the island of Ireland is made up of two Nations. [The] Irish Republic now known as Ireland (Irish) and Northern Ireland (British)". The implication was that the political boundary demarcated two distinct ethnolinguistic communities. However, the implied British exclusivity of Northern Ireland was then undermined by the additional argument that, for "Olympic and other International competition *competitors from Northern Ireland with Irish aspirations* may opt to compete with Irish affiliation under the flag and anthem of the Irish Republic" (emphasis added).⁹ In 1995 the UCI President Hein Verbruggen wrote to the presidents of the FIC, BCF and NICF setting out his views on the NICF's wish to be affiliated with the BCF. Verbruggen emphasised that the BCF's constitution did not include the territory of Northern Ireland; the UCI considered the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as constituting a whole. He was emphatic that the FIC was the one and only governing body for the island of Ireland. In truth, Verbruggen found British-Irish differences unfathomable. He said that he could not understand why it was not "possible to sit around a table with an open mind and look to the future and not the past". As he saw it, the UCI recognised the all-Ireland body as the rightful authority for cycling; the FIC moreover, was willing to grant the northern body a package of rights and entitlements within this overarching unity. Resolution, however, was impossible without dialogue, and the NICF and FIC would not engage (Verbruggen to FIC, BCF and NICF, 16 October 1995).

The NICF's continued lobbying of the BCF for full inclusion of Northern took the form of a kind of "no taxation without representation" argument, or, more accurately, an argument that taxation should entitle representation. NICF clubs were not mem-

⁹ NICF President Maurice Foster to Hein Verbruggen UCI President 20 June, 1993.

bers of the BCF, but individuals were, and these members contributed to the BCF's coffers therefore they should be entitled to a voice in the BCF's deliberations. Their doggedness paid off, in that at the BCF's December 1995 AGM, the North London and East Midlands Divisions put forward two proposals:

That the British Cycling Federation enters into an agreement with the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation to afford the same status to our Northern Ireland members as is enjoyed by members of the Scottish Cyclists' Union and the Welsh Cycling Union

That item 2, line 2 of the BCF Constitution be amended by deleting the words 'Great Britain' and replacing those with the words "United Kingdom" (document in Watson Archive, 11 December 1995).

Quite disingenuously, the proposal's notes contained the claim that the "NICF is the affiliated cycling body to the Northern Ireland Sports Council". In addition, the notes stated that "any agreement between the BCF and the NICF will not affect any existing agreements between the BCF and the Federation of Irish Cyclists". Although both claims were inaccurate the proposals were carried. The BCF amended its constitution, re-casting its territorial jurisdiction this time to include Northern Ireland, prompting protest from both the UCI and the FIC. For the politically sensitive in the NICF, the BCF's re-expansion was greeted with triumphalism; they had seen off the all-Ireland FIC and its continental ally the UCI.

The level of pettiness to which this dispute over territorial jurisdiction could push elected representatives appeared, at times, to be very high indeed. In September 1996, the Portglenone-based Bann Valley Road Club (an FIC affiliated club) requested financial support from Ballymena Borough Council to the tune of £50 towards the staging of the Irish Cycling Championships. It will be remembered that Ballymena Borough Council passed a resolution in support of the NICF's assertion of its expression of Britishness, and then lobbied other local authorities to follow suit. In the debate over the merits of the Portglenone club's request the case was made that it was a local club and a positive force in the community. On the other hand, it was affiliated to an all-Ireland body, unlike the NICF-affiliated Ballymena Road Club. When during the council meeting it was argued that sports and politics ought not to be mixed up, the GAA's membership bar against crown force personnel was cited as evidence of how this was not respected by other sporting organisations. Moreover, the chairman of the council's Policy and Resources Committee argued that it had become tradition to support NICF clubs, and the Portglenone club's request was turned down. While the sum of money was very small, the wider political symbolism informed the reportage of the story in the local newspaper: "Council re-affirms support for Northern Ireland Cycling Body" (*Larne Guardian*, 25 September 1996).

THE MULTI BELFAST OR GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT, 1998

The pressure on the BCF from the UCI to retrench to Great Britain was relentless. Through 1996, 1997 and 1998 it worked to persuade the BCF once again to accept

the FIC's jurisdictional authority over the island of Ireland. Success in this was signalled by the agreement to propose two motions to the BCF's 1998 AGM, namely: a) "to remove the word 'United Kingdom' from the constitution and replace it with 'Great Britain', b) To withdraw voting and speaking rights to the NICF". However, while the pressure on the BCF was intense so was the resistance from the NICF.

In the aftermath of the Good Friday agreement's popular endorsement in both Irish jurisdictions, the UUP's emergence as the largest political party in the north's new Assembly, and David Trimble's emergence as First Minister, new rhetorical and political resources became available for resisting the UCI's and the FIC's demands. Twenty MPs in the House of Commons "signed a cross-party motion noting that the Northern Ireland Federation (sic) was entitled to belong to the British group [the BCF] under the Olympic charter".¹⁰ In addition, the unionist press invoked the Good Friday agreement, drawing direct parallels between the referendums that guaranteed that "Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK as long as that is the will of the people" and the wishes of the NICF not to be part of an all-Ireland body (*Belfast Telegraph*, 3 November 1998). Clearly, this is rather disingenuous. The NICF did not represent the majority of Northern Ireland's cyclists, even of those who could be broadly described as Unionist. The democratic credentials of the Good Friday agreement were being used to defend the non-democratic resistance of the NICF. Nonetheless, the NICF successfully lobbied David Trimble who personally intervened to frustrate the attempts of the UCI to have the BCF comply with the international body's procedures. Trimble wrote to the BCF and the UCI stating that for him "it is inconceivable that British citizens in Northern Ireland, who belong to the Northern Ireland Cycling Federation and who wish to be affiliated to their British parent body, would be prevented from doing so" (First Minister Designate to Cookson, BCF, and Verbruggen, UCI, 30 October 1998). We need not labour the point that the BCF had been the NICF's "parent body" for a mere three years, that is, since 1995. Nevertheless, the retrenchment motions for the BCF's Annual Congress in 1998 were withdrawn, prompting the *Belfast Newsletter* headline "Boost for the NICF" (*Belfast Newsletter*, 9 November 1998). The Assembly member for North Down, Peter Weir, struck a more cautionary note:

While I welcome this decision [to withdraw the retrenchment amendments] as a significant victory, we must not be complacent. This is only round one in a fight for sporting justice. The British Cycling Federation should now take the next logical step and produce arrangements which would put the NICF on a par with their Welsh and Scottish compatriots (Weir in *Spectator*, 12 November 1998).

For the FIC Trimble's intervention was seen as seeking "to perpetuate the divisions which so many on the political and sporting front strive to heal". It wrote to Trimble stating that:

The Ulster Cycling Federation, which is one of our four Provincial Federations, has in excess of double the membership of the NICF. The members of the UCF are from

¹⁰ According to the British Olympic Committee's charter, Great Britain is defined as "the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland".

both sides of the religious and political divide in Northern Ireland and have no problem whatsoever in being part of an all Ireland Federation ... The emergence of the FIC contributed to a great deal to the breaking down of political and religious hatred within cycling, both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. It is very unfair to the vast majority of cyclists in this Island, that a small number of cyclists who would appear to have more of a political, than a cycling agenda can cause so much upset to the smooth running and development of cycling in Ireland ... you should also listen to representatives of the majority of cyclists in Northern Ireland and hear their views, bearing in mind that it is very much a multi political and multi racial group (FIC to Trimble, 24 November 1998).

The UCI's response to such a high-profile intervention on the part of the Nobel-prize winning First Minister was to seek a meeting to set out the UCI's and the FIC's position. The BCF urged Trimble to agree, while reiterating its own position that the NICF could and would continue to be able to avail of BCF membership as individuals:

The only point at issue, is whether the NICF should itself be permitted to enter into an agreement with the BCF. This would effectively contravene the constitution of the UCI which permits only one governing body per territory. For Northern Ireland, and for the Republic of Ireland, the UCI recognises the Federation of Irish Cyclists ... an All-Ireland body that draws its membership from all sections of the community in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic ... I can assure you that neither I, nor the Executive Board, nor the National Council of the BCF wish to do anything whatsoever that might permit this matter to affect the wonderful progress that has been made in bringing the Peace Process so far ... Please note that I am also seeking some guidance on this matter from the UK Sports Council, who are, as you know effectively our link to the Government (BCF to Trimble, 12 November 1998).

The UK Sports Council, on the other hand, was not getting involved. As far as it was concerned the question of territorial jurisdiction was a matter for the UCI. The First Minister agreed to meet the UCI President Hein Verbruggen and the UCI's chief legal adviser on 25 January 1999. Unannounced, two representatives of the NICF were also present though no representative of either the BCF or the FIC attended. According to the UCI's report of the meeting, the First Minister began by questioning the validity of the world governing body's decision in 1988 to recognise the FIC as the "one governing body" for Ireland. We recall that the High Court ruled that the NICF's vote on whether or not to amalgamate with the NCA's Ulster Council was unclear on whether or not the required two-thirds majority had been reached. The NICF's subsequent rejection of a motion to amalgamate was rejected by the FIC as it was based on an out-of-date register of members. At best, the interpretations of that decision-making process are contested. But Trimble took the NICF line that the formation of the FIC was the outworking of decisions by the irredentist NCA and the suppliant ICF to form a 32-county organisation. The UCI had then endorsed this all-Ireland entity and penalised Northern Ireland's cyclists who sought to resist their incorporation.

One of the pragmatic reasons that the FIC advanced for an all-Ireland governing body was that this reflected the Olympic Council of Ireland's pattern of organisation.

The OCI is a paradigmatic example of territorial ambiguity. The governing bodies of most of the sports represented at the Olympics are organised on an all-Ireland basis. And, in response to our survey, the OCI defined itself as having been formed in 1922 and as being an all-Ireland body, both in terms of its territorial area of activity and its membership base. However, the British Olympic Association also claims jurisdiction over Northern Ireland. The Olympic Council of Ireland is an all-Ireland body; the British Olympic Council encompasses Northern Ireland also. The First Minister referred to the British organisation's constitution that defines its territory as the United Kingdom (plus, though it was not mentioned, the crown dependencies and British overseas territories). The UCI's interpretation of the meeting was that:

[Trimble's] basic approach was that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and this has been recognized by the Irish Republic in the Good Friday Agreement. The Irish Republic has abandoned its claim (written down in the constitution) on Northern Ireland. In conformity with that agreement, FIC and NICF should be on the same basis in Northern Ireland. (I note that this implies the FIC's jurisdiction in Northern Ireland is accepted, but not on an exclusive basis). (Verbruggen,UCI, to BCF and FIC, 1 February 1999).

In response, the UCI President suggested that the NICF could take the FIC to court and it could decide jurisdiction one way or the other. The meeting concluded with the First Minister's assistant suggesting that some kind of resolution using the GFA as the template could be worked out—with the UCI once again offering to act as intermediary.

The court case did not happen, but the lobbying of politicians continued. While UK Sports was not getting involved, the FIC proposed a meeting with the UK's Minister for Sport, Kate Hoey. As far as Hoey was concerned this was the responsibility of the Minister for Culture in the new Northern Ireland Executive, Michael McGimpsey (Minister for Sport to FIC, 19 December 2000). However, a round table discussion hosted by McGimpsey never happened; wider political events intervened to the extent that the British government unilaterally suspended the Assembly on 11 February 2000. Although the Assembly was reinstated five months later, it was much weakened and was suspended *de facto* for the final time in October 2002. Nonetheless, the UCI was not for turning. In 2002 the UCI congress passed another resolution confirming CI's all-Ireland jurisdiction, prompting a headline in the weekly journal, *Cycling*, "UCI unifies Ireland" (*Cycling*, 19 October 2002). At the same time, the UCI's ongoing pressure on the UK's governing body to accept this ruling was beginning to take effect. At a tempestuous AGM in December of that year the British Cycling Federation once again agreed to change its constitution and fall into line with the UCI's ruling. This left cyclists who were members of clubs affiliated to the six-county NICF once again isolated, facing the institutionally, financially and internationally far stronger FIC alone. Once again, the political allies of the NICF rallied to its support. Kate Hoey MP lambasted the UCI's president Hein Verbruggen; she wrote:

I was very concerned indeed to hear that the ICU has passed control of cycling in Northern Ireland to Cycling Ireland rather than to British Cycling. Northern Ireland is categorically a part of the United Kingdom and not Ireland. All other countries, includ-

ing Ireland itself accept this. The people who live and come from the region, as I do myself, are British citizens and as such it is ludicrous for the ICU (*sic*) to independently reallocate Northern Ireland's sovereignty. I hope that you will urgently reconsider this decision and I would be interested to hear the reasons behind the ICU's decision (Kate Hoey MP to Hein Verbruggen, 3 February 2003).

There appears to be a marked reluctance to recognise that cycling's international governing body had decided on the "one country one governing body" rule nearly 20 years previously. Almost two decades of resistance on the part of the NICF had been conceded to in the sense that individual cyclists could be members of the British organisation but that Northern Ireland could not, either at club or regional level. Because the FIC (renamed in 2000 as Cycling Ireland) was the governing body and accepted as such by the Sports Council of Northern Ireland, this meant that sports funding went to the northern subsidiary of that body, the nine-county Ulster Cycling Federation. Sports funding in the north therefore supports *boundary-transcending* entities. For a unionist such as Hoey this is deeply objectionable. She followed up her letter to Verbruggen three weeks later in her *Daily Telegraph* column, decrying the fact that some of the money she spent on lottery tickets:

Is being used to help the development of sport in a foreign country, namely the Republic of Ireland ... there is no doubt that Sports Council money has funded equipment that is being used for the advancement of Irish sport, not British ... If citizens of Northern Ireland, indeed any part of the UK, wish to compete for Ireland, they should be free to do so ... [but] Irish teams should be funded by the Irish Government, not the British ... British money must be for British sport—not to help competitors from a foreign country (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 February 2003).

Lip-service is paid to the right of individual choice in a multicultural society in that "citizens from the UK should be free to compete for Ireland if they wish but if they do so they must be regarded 'competitors from a foreign country'". Indeed, the implication is that all-Ireland transnational teams are foreign teams that should be funded solely by their foreign government. Any lottery money spent in Northern Ireland by implication is also exclusively British. All-Ireland teams are the Trojan horses of Irish irredentism, the inference being that Irish supporters in the north are disloyal fifth columnists. There is little sense of Northern Ireland as a shared political space.

CONCLUSION: A RAPPROCHEMENT—OF SORTS

Following its inception, the membership of the FIC's Ulster regional body increased dramatically as clubs gravitated to it from the NICF. The primary reason stated over and over again for why Northern Ireland's cyclists voted with their licence fees and moved over to the all-Ireland body is precisely that which prompted the Republic's cyclists 50 years earlier to defect from the all-Ireland NCA and form the 26-county IFC: the endorsement of the international governing body and the possibility of competing in UCI sanctioned international, national and regional events. As we saw, the *Rás*, Ireland's leading stage race, was developed to provide a high-quality racing forum for cyclists affiliated to the internationally isolated 32-county body. Ironically, given its origins, the *Rás* is now the most important UCI sanctioned event on

the island. NICF clubs could not compete in this event, or any UCI sanctioned event, so long as they refused to accept the authority of the FIC. In the end, the UCI brokered a resolution that in effect represents a return to the 1970s, except that this time there is no 26-county body. The dominant entity is the 32-county FIC (renamed Cycling Ireland in 2000). The BCF and Cycling Ireland, over the heads of the NICF, ratified the agreement that allows the NICF to remain in existence, no longer as a regional branch of the British Cycling Federation, but with member clubs now allowed to compete in all-Ireland and UCI sanctioned events.

The NICF continues to maintain a studied indifference to Cycling Ireland:

The Northern Ireland Cycling Federation is a governing body for Cycling in Northern Ireland, and draws its members from clubs around the province. The NICF has been in existence since 1949 and caters for every cyclists needs whether it be Racing, Time Trialling, Touring, Mountain Biking or simply leisure cycling. In this web site you will find details on how to contact your nearest NICF Club, details of events, results, news and much more ([http:// www.nicycling.homestead.com/](http://www.nicycling.homestead.com/))

A visitor to the NICF's website is given no indication that the association's territory is part of an island in which cycling is actually governed by a much larger organisation. The website hosts links to the UCI and BCF but not to Cycling Ireland. Indeed, Cycling Ireland is entirely invisible in the NICF's self-presentation. Paralleling this, the UCF's website (Cycling Ulster as it is now known) also maintains a studied indifference to the NICF. While Cycling Ulster's website maintains a link to the Tour of the North organised by the NICF in which many Cycling Ulster clubs and riders competed, it does not host a link to the NICF. Both "governing bodies" look past each other to their external allies and the international governing bodies. Both claim governing body status: the NICF describes itself as "a governing body Cycling in Northern Ireland" (emphasis added, www.nicycling.homestead.com); Cycling Ulster describes itself as "the provincial governing body of 'Cycling Ireland' for the nine counties of Ulster. Cycling Ireland is the only internationally recognised governing body for cycling in Ireland" (www.cyclingulster.com). Cycling in Northern Ireland in some sense parallels the segregated co-existence of the two major communities. Moreover, there appears to be little impetus to dismantle this apartheid structure.

One of the tentative hypotheses to be drawn from John Whyte's seminal paper is how private organisations in Ireland can act as a counterweight to the boundary reinforcing effects of the development of two separate states. The boundary transcending potential of civil society organisations relies on a clear separation of the political and the private. However, this paper has shown how quickly seemingly apolitical organisational change can be reinterpreted in terms of a threat to ethnopolitical identity and the political institutions that reflect and protect that identity. It shows how easily political sensitivities can be raised in the context of a divided island. The example of cycling shows how "uncivil" civil society can be.

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