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**ETHNIC CONFLICT AND THE TWO-STATE
SOLUTION: THE IRISH EXPERIENCE OF PARTITION**

John Coakley

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ABSTRACT

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Although the partition of Ireland in 1921 was only one of several in which this strategy was adopted as Britain withdrew politically from territories formerly under its rule, it was marked by a number of distinctive features. This paper examines and seeks to interpret some of these features. It begins by looking at the roots of partition in the history of Ireland's long political relationship with Great Britain, and explores the emergence of partition as a major question in the early twentieth century. Following a general assessment of the impact of partition on the two parts of Ireland, it turns to the manner in which partition survived as a political issue up to 1998. Some brief remarks comparing the Irish with the Palestinian experience are made in conclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

The political partition of Ireland was one of the more traumatic aspects of the manner in which the island's relationship with Great Britain was restructured at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a defining movement in the relationship between the two islands. In this, the Irish experience resembled that in a range of other places in which the British role was being redefined, though in each case the distinctiveness of the local context drew the attention of observers more to unique factors than to shared ones.¹

This paper thus looks at a case that indeed illustrates the extent to which common features in partition processes need to be weighed against the individuality of particular instances. From a Palestinian perspective, it is not easy to find a close parallel to the history of the past six decades. Ireland presents only limited scope for the identification of similar experiences, but the manner in which it coped with partition is nevertheless worth examining. The present paper does so first by looking at the roots of partition and by exploring its emergence as a major question in the early twentieth century, and then by examining the manner in which partition survived as a political issue up to 1998. A short concluding section makes some comparisons with the Palestinian experience (though it must be acknowledged that the differences are more striking than the points of similarity).

THE ORIGINS OF PARTITION

As in other well-known cases of partition, such as those of India and Palestine, the background to the partition of Ireland must be sought in a fluid mixture of internal and external circumstances. Partition was not simply a response to "facts on the ground". The imperial capital (in each of the cases mentioned, London) had a major role to play; it had, after all, presided over the process by which local realities had developed in a direction that enhanced the utility of partition as a solution. The Irish case in many respects broke new ground for the British empire. The issue of independence (and, consequently, partition) arose at an early stage, before elites had adapted to the pattern of decolonisation that was to assert itself after the second world war, and it affected Britain's relationship not with a remote colony but rather

¹ For a comparison of the process of partition in Ireland and India, see Mansergh, 1997; the partition of Ireland, India and Palestine is discussed in Fraser, 1984. For discussion of other similarities between the Israeli/Palestinian and Irish cases, see Akenson, 1992, and on the peace processes Guelke, 1994, and Gilmore, 1990.

with part of its own immediate territory. For this reason, pressure on elites to arrive at a settlement that would minimise damage to Britain's long-term global interests was all the greater.

In examining the background to the partition of Ireland, then, we need to consider three sets of circumstances. The first is the long-term legacy of Ireland's relationship with Great Britain: the slow and frequently bloody process by which the larger island asserted its control over the smaller. The second is the set of ethno-demographic realities with which political leaders were confronted by the late nineteenth century, when popular political mobilisation took off. The third is the set of institutional compromises that emerged from the confrontation between the apparently incompatible demands of radical Irish nationalism and conservative British imperial interest—and specifically its Ulster unionist derivative—in the early twentieth century.

The British-Irish relationship

To describe the British-Irish relationship as having extended over more than seven centuries would be something of an oversimplification, at least if we are to use this expression in its strict sense. Great Britain, after all, only came into existence as a political entity in 1707, when the Act of Union between England and Scotland replaced what had been a union of the Scottish and English crowns by a fuller form of institutional integration. Even the England whose crown had passed to the Scottish monarch in 1603 had not always been "English". When the relationship with Ireland began in the twelfth century, the culture of the ruling class in England was Norman-French, and the first waves of settlement that reached Ireland from 1169 onwards were spearheaded by Norman barons who quickly managed to conquer most of the country. Only the northern province of Ulster and more isolated regions in the rest of the country remained under indigenous Gaelic control. Politically, this new relationship was expressed in a formal claim to English sovereignty over Ireland.²

Behind the appearance of English control, however, lurked the reality of Irish autonomy. This was expressed at two levels, one cultural, the other political. First, many of those districts that had been conquered by the Normans retained their Gaelic character, as their new rulers assimilated, in varying degrees, to native culture and shook off dependence on the crown. Second, to the extent that rule from England existed—and by the fourteenth century this was substantially confined to the "Pale", a district around Dublin, and certain cities and their hinterlands—it was indirect, exercised through autonomous Irish institutions, including a local parliament and government.

These two characteristics of the English-Irish relationship were to change out of all recognition. In the late sixteenth century, English rulers managed to translate their claim of sovereignty into de facto control of the island of Ireland, through a mixture

² For general histories of Ireland, see Lydon, 1998, Beckett, 1981, and Foster, 1988. The more specific theme of Irish nationalism is explored in Boyce, 1995. The British-Irish relationship, in so far as it has had a bearing on the Northern Ireland problem, is discussed in Arthur, 2000.

of bargaining with local elites and military intervention (see Ellis, 1998). In Ulster, the last stronghold of Gaelic Ireland, this policy was underwritten by an ambitious colonisation strategy, as thousands of Scottish and English settlers were encouraged to move to lands confiscated from the native Irish—large numbers of whom, though, remained in Ulster, with consequences that became clear in later centuries. The new settlers were not just loyal subjects of the monarchy; they were also Protestants, a feature that distinguished them from the mainly Catholic Gaelic Irish. As the decades passed, the grip of the Protestant elite on the island of Ireland was tightened, as many Catholic landowners converted to Protestantism or lost their lands. Furthermore, the autonomous character of Irish institutions changed in 1800, when the Act of Union merged the Irish parliament with its British counterpart and brought a new, more integrated state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, into existence.

By the nineteenth century, then, on the eve of the democratic revolution in the political system that was to transform Ireland and other European countries, Ireland's Protestant ruling class governed a predominantly Catholic underclass, except in Ulster, where much of the underclass, too, was made up of Protestants. In all, Protestants accounted for about a quarter of the population, though they comprised a small majority in the province of Ulster. As the large-scale political mobilisation of the later nineteenth century was to make clear, however, these two groups were separated by much more than religion: there were significant economic differences between a rapidly industrialising, Protestant north and a more agrarian Catholic south. Politically, too, there were pronounced differences: Catholics were increasingly attracted to a programme of autonomy (or even independence) for Ireland, while Protestants overwhelmingly supported maintenance of the union with Great Britain on which, they believed, their privileges depended. This political divergence was articulated in a clear division, especially from 1885 onwards, between a Unionist party that was almost entirely Protestant in its support base and a Nationalist party which, apart from a handful of leaders, was almost entirely Catholic.

The conclusion that we may, then, draw from the English effort to create a unified sociopolitical community is that it was rather unsuccessful. A single political system encompassing the islands of Britain and Ireland had been established, and this had acquired many—though by no means all—of the characteristics of a unitary state by 1800. But this initiative in state building was not matched by a comparable achievement in the area of nation building. The United Kingdom never managed to attract the committed emotional support of its citizens in the same way as the French state; a nation corresponding to the post-1800 state never came into existence. Scholarly analysis has focused on the question—never satisfactorily answered—as to why the Irish disrupted the political settlement by refusing to become “British”. But a more pertinent question might well rest on the assumption that peripheral areas are precisely that, and that in any state building project the onus is on the centre to assimilate its outlying areas culturally and in a social psychological sense. The most demanding question, then, relates not to the failure of the Irish to become “British”, but rather to the failure of the English to adopt the peoples of the United Kingdom as their “imagined community” and to create a shared nation with them.

The North-South relationship

If the failure of the British to assimilate the Irish was the dominant characteristic of the long-term relationship between the two islands, this very characteristic gave rise to a second issue within the island of Ireland. The Irish Catholic population had not become “British”; but neither had the Irish Protestant population become “Irish”. It is true that in the late eighteenth century the political class in Ireland had embraced a form of colonial nationalism, based on defence of Irish interests and political privileges against Great Britain (see Canny, 1988). This was expressed in the form of a struggle for parliamentary independence that enjoyed some success in 1782. But this was a form of settler nationalism, analogous with the contemporary independence struggle of the North American colonists, with the slightly later Creole-based independence movements in Latin America, and even with the much later Boer nationalist movement in South Africa. Its key assumption was that the native population had been subdued and rendered politically irrelevant. But when a rebellion in 1798, spearheaded by the “United Irishmen” (a radical organisation founded and led largely by activists of settler background; see McDowell, 1940), showed the ferocious potential of peasant mobilisation and drew attention to the implications of democracy for the interests of the Protestant minority, the seeds for a progressive differentiation of Protestant and Catholic interests were sown (see Elliott, 1982).

This clash of interests became clearer as the nineteenth century progressed. Mass political mobilisation saw the clustering of Irish Catholics initially behind the Whig or Liberal party and then behind a succession of parties representing distinctive Irish interests. From the 1880s onwards, with the introduction of mass suffrage, Catholic voters overwhelmingly supported a new Nationalist Party, committed to the cause of “home rule” or autonomy for Ireland. By contrast, Protestants (concentrated, as will be seen in figure 1, in the northern counties) supported the Unionist Party, determined to maintain the union with Great Britain and, as the threat of home rule increased, to defend their position using increasingly ruthless means. Initially, following the introduction of legislation designed to implement Irish home rule in 1886, this took the form of wide-scale public protests, but a parliamentary revolt by government supporters in any case ensured the defeat of this measure. Later, after 1912, when it appeared certain that a government newly dependent on Irish nationalist votes would force home rule through parliament, it took the form of a threat of violent rebellion, made real by the creation of a new paramilitary body, the Ulster Volunteer Force.

The last stage in the formation of the crisis that was to lead to the partition of Ireland was largely a response to unionist resistance. Historically, the origins of this development might be traced back to a secret, oath-bound society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), formed in 1858 and known popularly as “the Fenians”. Though rather ineffective in its efforts to foment rebellion and establish a separate Irish republic, it had managed to infiltrate a new, open movement, the Irish Volunteers, founded in 1913 to defend the interests of nationalist Ireland. It may well have been only the outbreak of the first world war in 1914 that prevented civil war between the two sides at this time; but almost two years later the IRB, using the Irish Volunteers, planned and executed the “Easter rising” in 1916, when rebels managed to gain

control of the centre of Dublin and hold it for almost a week. Following the overthrow of the rebellion and relatively harsh—but, in particular, politically unwise—repression of those accused of having taken part, a new radical party, Sinn Féin (the name means “ourselves”), was able to make major gains among nationalist voters, and to overthrow the Nationalist Party at the 1918 general election, when it won 73 of Ireland’s 105 seats in the British House of Commons. Sinn Féin MPs subsequently met in Dublin and attempted to bring into existence their own separate state. In this they were supported by the reorganised Irish Volunteers, now a paramilitary force known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which took advantage of a changed political climate and waged a guerilla war in 1919-21. The leadership of this new republican movement went much further than the old Nationalist Party, demanding not home rule but an unpartitioned republic, with full independence from the United Kingdom.

Disentangling two communities

Given the polarisation of the two communities in Ireland, it is not altogether surprising that partition was one of the options considered by the British government. But the shape of the partition settlement as it eventually unfolded was rather more surprising, and it is not clear how far it was compatible with longer-term British interests, or even with the interests of the two communities in Ireland. It is important to look at these interests to place the issue of the partition of Ireland in context.

The origins of partition were deeply embedded in a complex of powerful nationalist and imperialist emotions on the part of British ruling elites that in many respects overshadowed two more hard-headed considerations that gave Britain a particular interest in Ireland. The first of these considerations was Ireland’s long-standing strategic importance to Britain. From the era of the Spanish armada in the sixteenth century to that of the German U-boat in the twentieth, Ireland constituted a crucial strategic asset, providing vital control over the Atlantic coast and offering itself as a buffer against attack from the West—but also presenting itself as a potential, if oblique, stepping stone for invasion by Britain’s European enemies. Second, as a central and ancient component of Britain’s vast empire, Ireland played a major role as a model for developments elsewhere. Demonstration effects based on the relationship between Ireland and its external masters had potentially enormous implications for other British possessions. If tiny Ireland, right under Britain’s nose, could threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom itself, of what might not India, the restive jewel in the imperial crown, be capable?

This combination of national strategic and global imperial interests pointed in an obvious direction as regards Irish policy: Ireland would have to be held close to the imperial bosom. In 1914, as in 2004, this implied an alliance with the Irish majority as a long-term strategy: it is Dublin and the Catholic south, not Belfast and the Protestant north, that have always been in principle the most important ally for the British. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this cold reality of British state self-interest was overlooked in the heat of ethnic identification between emotional British imperialists and their “kith and kin” in Ulster, resulting in a settlement that arguably jeopardised Britain’s own long-term interests.

The position of Irish nationalists was similarly complex. The first question was the degree of autonomy that was desirable: nationalists were divided as to whether the ideal solution was home rule (or devolution within the United Kingdom), independence under the British crown, or full, separate statehood without any links to Great Britain. They were agreed as to the territory over which autonomous Irish institutions should extend—the whole island of Ireland—but this failed to take account of the extent and depth of Ulster Protestant hostility to any form of Irish autonomy. Figure 1, which presents the distribution of the Protestant population in 1911, also acts as a reasonably accurate political map: because of the strong correlation between religion and political perspective, those areas which were predominantly Protestant were also those which wished to defend the union with Great Britain. The question of how a new Irish state would cope with this potentially lethal opposition had not been seriously considered.

For unionists, too, there were difficult questions. While the agreed goal was maintenance of the union in its fullest sense, it was becoming increasingly clear in the early twentieth century that this was not realistic. Given unionist concentration in Ulster, an obvious response was to seek to exclude that province from the jurisdiction of any new Irish parliament—in other words, to partition Ireland. As to which areas should be hived off, there were several options. One was to draw the border to separate the entire nine-county province of Ulster from the rest of Ireland. But this would leave a very large Catholic minority in the excluded part (this would have amounted to 43.7% of the population). An alternative was to exclude only the four counties with Protestant majorities, thus reducing the proportion of Catholics to 30.2%. A whole range of other alternatives was also available at least in theory, but in the end it was the British government that made a decision that was seen as best reflecting the interests of its unionist allies.

Following protracted political negotiations, the shape of the new Ireland was finally laid out in British legislation (the Government of Ireland Act) in 1920. This modified the earlier blueprint for Irish autonomy by partitioning the island and giving autonomy to both parts—with the partition line grouping the six counties that had the largest Protestant population into the new northern state (on the background, see Gwynn, 1925; Laffan, 1983; Hennessey, 1998). It raised at least three fundamental questions that were to colour the British-Irish relationship in the following decades: about the nature of partition itself, and about the character of each of the two states that it created.

For nationalists, there were two problems with partition. The first was the very concept: the people of the island of Ireland, nationalists argued, constituted a historic unit, and although a minority dissented, a collective decision to pursue autonomy had been taken. Resistance to the majority will was therefore seen as undemocratic. The second problem was that, even if the principle of partition were to be accepted, the British proposal did not seek to implement it fairly. Instead, it proposed to allocate two predominantly nationalist counties to Northern Ireland, with a view to increasing the territory and population of that state to the maximum level that could comfortably be controlled by the unionist majority (the settlement thus left an overall Catholic minority of 34.4% within Northern Ireland). The unionist perspective was

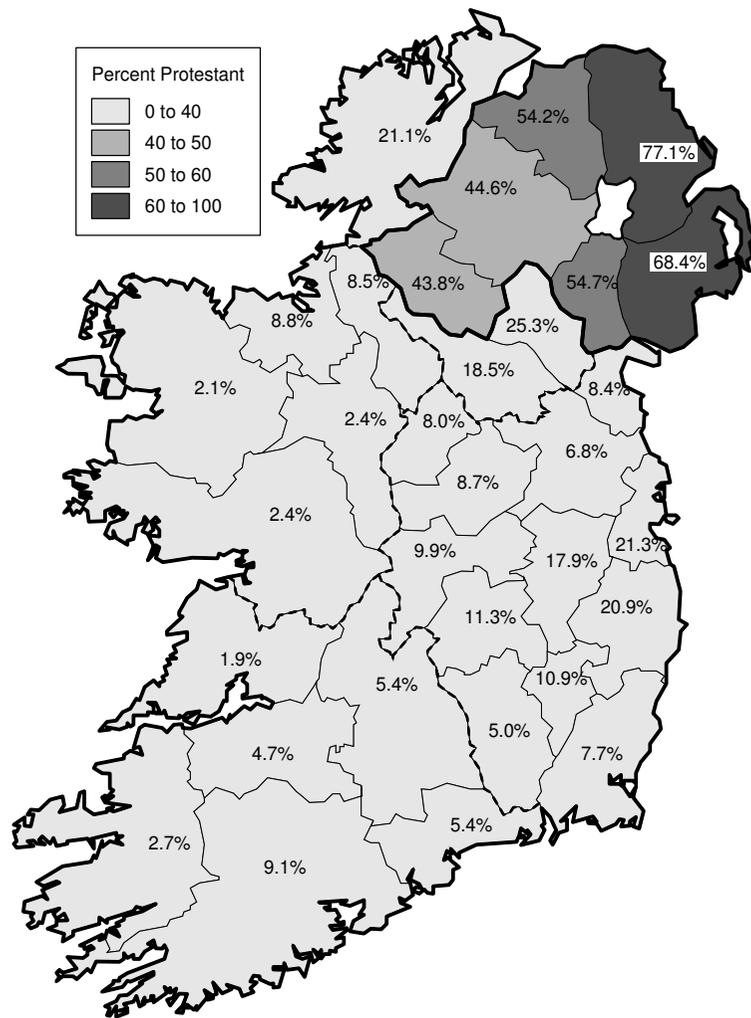


Figure 1: Distribution of Protestants by county, 1911

Note: light lines indicate boundaries of counties, hatched lines boundaries of provinces and the heavy line the border of Northern Ireland.

quite different. It responded to the nationalist claim that partition violated Ireland's historic unity with a counterclaim that Irish autonomy violated the historic unity of the two islands that made up the United Kingdom, and argued that, in any case, if nationalists wished to leave the United Kingdom they should not be allowed to coerce unionists into leaving too. This argument served to justify not only the principle of partition but also the shape that the border finally took, on the grounds that it sought to safeguard the interests of the maximum number of "loyal" citizens.³

Aside from the principle and the details of partition, southern Ireland had further grievances. The level of autonomy it was awarded by the 1920 act was compatible with the provisions that had earlier been acceptable to the Nationalist Party: a parliament and government would be established in Dublin to exercise jurisdiction over all aspects of domestic policy, but the country would continue to be a part of the United Kingdom, in whose parliament it would continue to be represented. As described above, though, southern public opinion shifted in a more militant direction during the years 1916-18. But neither moral nor paramilitary pressure was sufficient to achieve Sinn Féin's more radical goal; instead, a divided movement was forced to settle for a compromise with the British. Southern Ireland would be allowed to leave the United Kingdom, but it would have to remain within the British Empire or Commonwealth. The new Irish Free State thus came into existence in 1922, recognising the king as its head, but with its own army and separate institutions. Its boundary with Northern Ireland was confirmed in 1925, when the British, Irish and northern governments agreed to bypass the recommendations of a boundary commission which disappointed Dublin by proposing only minimal changes to the existing border, and the idea of a Council of Ireland that would link the two parts of the island was dropped. The Irish Free State managed to extend its autonomy further in its first 15 years, culminating in the adoption of a new constitution in 1937 that made no mention of the king or the Commonwealth and that renamed the state "Ireland". It was, however, only in 1949 that the state was formally declared a republic and left the Commonwealth, thus ending the last formal ties to the United Kingdom.

Developments in the other part of the island took a surprising form. Instead of remaining an integral part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland was given an autonomy it had not sought in 1921, but it quickly came to accept this as a mechanism for fending off pressure from the south. This policy initiative may have been designed by the British in the interests of a uniform policy of devolution for Ireland; but the autonomy given to unionist governments both in theory and in practice allowed them a free hand in dealing harshly with the Catholic minority and, ultimately, resulted in the collapse of the settlement. Following the outbreak of civil unrest, as discussed below, Northern Ireland's institutions were suspended in 1972 and control was assumed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a new minister within the British cabinet. Apart from experiments with devolution in 1973 and since 1998, this has remained the position ever since.

³ For three very different political perspectives on partition, see Gallagher, 1957 (representing the traditional nationalist perspective), Sheehy, 1955 (one of the earliest expressions of a more muted southern viewpoint that was disposed to accept partition) and Shearman, 1942 (a unionist perspective).

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF PARTITION

In order to understand the circumstances that brought the partition of Ireland forward once more as a political issue, it is important to look at a range of background factors. The first is the separate political evolution of the two states whose constitutional development has been sketched above. The second is the reorientation of the northern nationalist community away from the partition issue in the direction of civil rights in the 1960s. Third, we need to consider the re-emergence of the issue of the border as a consequence of changes in the internal balance of power within Northern Ireland and of a new relationship between Ireland and Great Britain. Finally, it is important to consider the pattern of attitudes towards partition that is currently to be found in the two parts of the island. A further very important question—the impact of partition on social life, economic behaviour and civil society—lies outside the scope of this paper.

Political evolution in partitioned Ireland

The new independent Irish state was born in circumstances of political turmoil. The IRA split in 1922 on the terms of the settlement reached in 1921 and embodied in the Anglo-Irish “treaty” that brought the Irish Free State into existence. One part became the core of the new national army; the other fought against the new state in a bitter civil war in 1922-23. On its defeat at that time, the anti-treaty IRA retired into the shadows, maintaining only a token resistance to the new settlement, but it survived organisationally over the decades that followed. Its most notable subsequent manifestation was its “border campaign” of 1956-62, when it launched a series of ineffective attacks on the Northern Ireland security forces (see English, 2003).

The subsequent history of the IRA’s political ally, Sinn Féin, was rather different. When this movement split in 1922 on the issue of the Anglo-Irish treaty, the core of the present southern Irish party system was born. The pro-Treaty faction reorganised itself under the name *Cumann na nGaedheal* (“party of the Irish”, the name of an older nationalist group dating from 1900 that had been absorbed by Sinn Féin). It governed the state for the first decade of its existence, but shortly after losing office in 1932 it merged with two smaller groups to form *Fine Gael* (“the Irish nation”), now the second largest party in the state. The anti-Treaty faction retained the old party name, Sinn Féin. Following the defeat of the IRA in the civil war of 1922-23 it sought to advance its objectives by electoral means, but in 1926 split again. This time, the party leader, Eamon de Valera, led more pragmatic elements out of the party and formed his own alternative movement, *Fianna Fáil* (“party of Ireland”, though a more exotic translation, “soldiers of destiny” is also possible). *Fianna Fáil* managed to outperform its rivals in 1932 and began a 16-year period in government. Indeed, it has been the largest party at all elections since 1932. Apart from *Fine Gael*, the small Labour Party has been the only other important party since 1922 (see Coakley and Gallagher, 2004).

What remained of Sinn Féin after the 1926 split was politically insignificant. By the 1960s its surviving elements contemplated an alternative way forward: involvement in left-leaning social causes in both parts of Ireland rather than resorting to force to

end partition. This new strategy raised significant questions for the party following the outbreak of civil unrest in Northern Ireland after 1968, as discussed below. It split in January 1970 precisely on this issue. The party leadership managed to maintain the course adopted in the late 1960s—attempting to bridge the sectarian division in Northern Ireland by emphasising social concerns—and became generally known as “Official” Sinn Féin. It later renamed itself Sinn Féin The Workers’ Party, and later, simply, The Workers’ Party; most of its parliamentary representatives left in 1992 to form a new group, Democratic Left, and this group merged in 1999 with the Labour Party. The group that seceded in 1970 became commonly known as “Provisional” Sinn Féin. These visible political developments echoed changes in the secret world of paramilitary organisation. The IRA, too, had split in December 1969. The “Official” IRA eventually embarked on a campaign against the security forces, but declared a ceasefire in 1972; the more militant “Provisional” IRA campaign to force the British to withdraw and bring about a united Ireland continued until 1994.

Apart from the growth of the IRA and Sinn Féin, the events just described affected in particular, but not exclusively, the southern part of Ireland. Politics in Northern Ireland followed a rather different trajectory. There, the old party system of the nineteenth century—with its straightforward Nationalist-Unionist polarisation—survived substantially intact. Sinn Féin had an electoral impact in 1918 and later, but it was not as devastating for the Nationalist Party as in the south. Indeed, in the 1920s the Nationalist Party once again resumed its position as voice of the Catholic community. Its role in this respect survived until the outbreak of civil unrest in Northern Ireland after 1968. Then, the party system underwent fundamental change. On the unionist side, the old party continued under a mixture of modernising and conservative leaders, but was subjected to severe challenge, in particular from Rev Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (founded formally in 1971 through a reorganisation of an earlier party of Paisley’s). On the nationalist side the old Nationalist Party finally disappeared, replaced in 1970 by an entirely new formation, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). This party, too, faced a radical challenger, as a renewed (Provisional) Sinn Féin party managed to compete successfully against it in the 1980s (see Aughey and Morrow, 1996; Mitchell and Wilford, 1999).

The shape of the resulting party systems in the two parts of Ireland is described in table 1. This shows relative party strengths in three periods—separately for the two parts of Ireland, itself a revealing comment on the depth of the political division that both caused partition and was further solidified by it. The relative stability of the southern party system emerges clearly, as does the extent to which it has been dominated by two parties, *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael*, that themselves grew out of the early Sinn Féin movement. The survival of the older, nineteenth century party system in Northern Ireland is also clear; but in the early 1970s it disintegrated, to be replaced by a more divided and fragmented system.

Changing the question: from partition to civil rights

Much of the turmoil in the Northern Ireland party system of the 1970s may be explained by a radical redefinition of the political agenda. As in the case of many other national and ethnic groups in the late 1960s, the nationalists of Northern Ireland un-

Table 1: Mean support for parties by period, northern and southern Ireland, 1921-2003

Party	Period		
<i>Republic of Ireland</i>	<i>1922-69</i>	<i>1973-92</i>	<i>1997-2002</i>
Fianna Fáil	41.7	45.2	40.4
Fine Gael	30.9	32.4	25.2
Labour Party	11.6	11.1	10.6
Sinn Féin	.	.	4.6
Others	15.8	11.3	19.2
<i>Northern Ireland</i>	<i>1921-69</i>	<i>1973-82</i>	<i>1996-2003</i>
Ulster Unionist Party	69.6	28.3	22.7
Democratic Unionist Party	.	16.2	20.8
Nationalist Party	15.7	.	.
Social Democratic and Labour Party	.	21.5	20.2
Sinn Féin	.	3.4	18.9
Others	14.7	30.6	17.4

Note: figures refer to average percentages of the party vote in elections to the Dáil and to Northern Ireland assemblies, except for Northern Ireland in the period 1921-69, when they refer to overall share of seats in the Northern Ireland House of Commons. Fianna Fáil includes the anti-treaty Sinn Féin in 1922 and 1923; Fine Gael includes the pro-treaty Sinn Féin at that time, and Cumann na nGaedheal from 1927 to 1933.

derwent a fundamental political re-orientation at this time. Their efforts to undermine the state by means of a full-frontal attack had met an impenetrable brick wall; unionist governments were able to use their superior demographic, political and military resources to fend off the traditional nationalist challenge without difficulty. Furthermore, the government of the Republic of Ireland appeared to be moving towards acceptance of partition in the long term; this was implicit in the first-ever visit of the southern prime minister (taoiseach), Sean Lemass, to meet his Northern Ireland counterpart in 1965. Acceptance of the framework of partition appeared to be the only route towards effective political advancement for the minority.

As in the case of other movements of ethnic protest at the time—and, indeed, at other times—Catholic mobilisation in Northern Ireland went through two phases. In the first, the key demands were for civil rights: for the same rights as other *British citizens*. In the second, this emphasis on individual rights was supplemented by a demand for a form of recognition of group rights: for recognition of the separate identity of *Irish nationals*.

The creation of a powerful demand for civil rights represented a sharp shift on the part of the leadership of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Instead of denouncing the evils of partition, the new generation attacked instead the unwholesome practices over which successive unionist administrations presided with a view to maintaining their hold on political power within Northern Ireland (see Purdie, 1990; Ó Dochartaigh, 1997). As codified in the “six demands” of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, these called for:

- “one man, one vote” in local elections, a reference to the fact that an unreformed electoral law confined the franchise to ratepayers and their spouses (thus disenfranchising Catholics disproportionately) and gave additional votes to occupiers of business premises (who were disproportionately Protestant)
- an end to gerrymandering of electoral boundaries, a particularly important issue in cases such as the city of Derry, where a biased system of boundary delimitation succeeded in converting a nationalist electoral majority into a unionist political majority on the local council
- an end to discrimination in employment, which had contributed to significant Catholic under-representation in the public and private sectors
- introduction of a points system for the allocation of public housing, so that accommodation would be allocated not on the basis of religion (with an advantage to Protestants) but on a basis of need
- repeal of the Special Powers Act, an item of emergency legislation that gave the Minister for Home Affairs extraordinary powers (designed to be used in particular to quell Catholic unrest)
- disbanding of the Ulster Special Constabulary, popularly known as the “B-Specials”, an entirely Protestant paramilitary police reserve.

These demands, couched in language that would be familiar to human rights lawyers anywhere and that in practice owed much to the influence of the British Council for Civil Liberties, appeared so reasonable that they attracted widespread support outside Northern Ireland, and especially in Great Britain. Combined with the moral pressure of mass marches and demonstrations of a kind that—unlike armed rebellion—the unionist administration was poorly equipped to counteract, they succeeded in undermining the authority of the Northern Ireland government, which, under pressure from the British government, had conceded most of the demands in principle by August 1969.

The re-emergence of the issue of partition

But concession to civil rights demands carried a heavy additional price for the unionist administration.⁴ After decades of ineffective opposition within Northern Ireland, Catholics had discovered that the state was not invulnerable. The lesson learned during the civil rights movement was immediately applied in respect of a more fundamental issue: the national question was reborn, and partition acquired renewed salience. From the 1970s onwards, nationalist demands took two forms. First, the traditional republican movement represented by Sinn Féin and the IRA was given a new lease of life, and demanded nothing less than an end to partition: Irish unity was to be achieved by forcing the British to withdraw from Northern Ire-

⁴ For background on the Northern Ireland conflict, see Arthur and Jeffery, 1996, and Darby, 1983. For reference material, see Elliott and Flackes, 1999, and CAIN, 2004.

land (recognition that this would not solve the problem of Northern Ireland's Protestant majority came only later). Second, the old Nationalist Party, as we have seen, was replaced by a newer configuration, the SDLP, which since the beginning of the 1970s has stood for a settlement based on two principles, both of them amounting to recognition of partition but seeking to redefine its meaning. The first is the introduction within Northern Ireland of a government based on power sharing between the two communities. In addition, the party stands for the institutionalisation of an "Irish dimension" (in the form of some kind of formal link between Northern Ireland and the Republic) that would acknowledge the Irish identity of many people within Northern Ireland, acting as a kind of bridge across the border.

The subsequent strategy of the SDLP (which rested on force of argument within Northern Ireland and outside it, as well as on ambitious forms of international diplomacy masterminded by John Hume, leader of the party from 1979 to 2001) was overshadowed by the more militant strategy of Sinn Féin and the IRA. By the date of the IRA ceasefire in August 1994 that ushered in a new era of negotiation, there had been almost 3,300 deaths arising from civil unrest (these are described, together with later deaths, in figure 2). These were inflicted mainly by the IRA (60%), with loyalist paramilitaries accounting for a further 29% and the security forces for the remaining 11%. Since the ceasefire, paramilitary groups have been responsible for approximately 170 further deaths (see Bric and Coakley, 2004).

The nationalist agitation of the early 1970s and unionist failure to cope with it resulted in some striking institutional changes. By far the most notable of these was the decision by the British government in March 1972 to suspend devolution in Northern Ireland and transfer responsibility to a member of the British government. This development was traumatic for unionists; the Ulster Unionist Party was deeply divided as to how to react, and for decades afterwards vacillated between restoration of autonomy and complete integration with Great Britain as preferred long-term aims. The party also lost much of its support to a more radical rival, the Democratic Unionist Party, as we have seen.

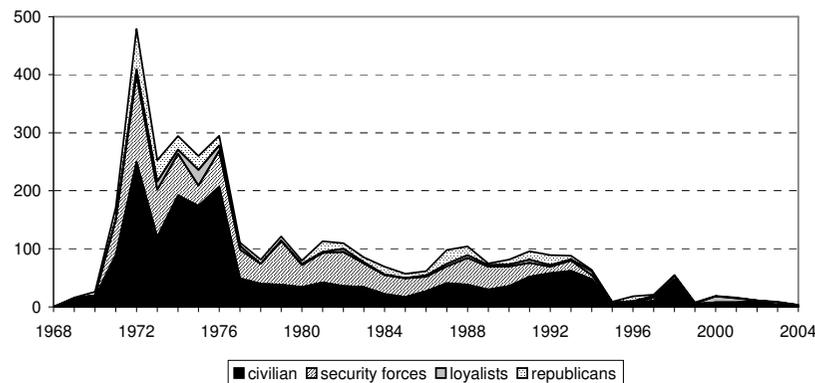


Figure 2: Deaths arising from civil unrest, 1969-2004

The positions of the two main external actors with an interest in Northern Ireland also shifted in the early 1970s. In the early years of the troubles, the British government stuck to the line it had held since partition, and especially since Ireland's departure from the Commonwealth in 1949: Northern Ireland was a domestic United Kingdom matter, and was no business of the Irish government. The Irish government reciprocated with a rejection of this position, claiming Northern Ireland as part of its national territory—a claim incorporated in the constitution in 1937—and proposing Irish unity as the only solution. Following the suspension of devolution, however, a rapprochement between the two governments took place, and both came to accept the two principles advanced by the SDLP (devolution with power sharing, and creation of cross-border institutions).

These two principles were incorporated in the first major attempt at resolving the problem—an agreement between the two governments and Northern Ireland parties at Sunningdale in England in December 1973. This provided for a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland including the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and a small centrist party, the Alliance Party, and an inter-parliamentary, cross-border Council of Ireland. It also incorporated de facto Irish recognition of partition: it was accepted that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom could only be altered by vote of the people of Northern Ireland.

Although the institutions provided for in the Sunningdale agreement never came fully into force and those which did collapsed in May 1974 following a political strike organised by militant unionists, they became a model for all subsequent negotiations, including the more ambitious and more inclusive Belfast agreement of April 1998 (the Good Friday agreement). In the political stalemate that followed the collapse of the 1973-74 experiment, Northern Ireland continued to be administered directly from London, but there was a significant development in November 1985. On this occasion the British government, having given up for the time being on the prospect of re-introducing power sharing through devolved institutions in Belfast, entered into an arrangement with the Irish government by which the latter would be given a consultative voice in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland. This was given effect through an Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference, serviced by a permanent secretariat in Belfast made up of British and Irish civil servants. This new arrangement was a valuable mechanism for facilitating northern nationalists by giving them a voice, through the Irish government, on issues of particular concern to them. But it also served two crucial strategic interests. First, it is believed to have helped the SDLP in its electoral struggle with Sinn Féin by showing that non-violent activities could deliver dividends. Second, it provided Ulster Unionists—traumatised by what they saw as British treachery—for the first time with an irresistible motivation for supporting a power-sharing executive: should such an executive be established, the right of the Irish government to intervene in internal Northern Ireland matters would be severely curtailed (for background studies, see Ruane and Todd, 1996; McGarry and O'Leary, 1996).

In many respects, then, the Belfast Good Friday agreement of 1998 represented the culmination of tendencies already clear in the British-Irish relationship. At its core lay the kind of power-sharing arrangements already anticipated in 1973, though now

more mechanically inclusive, and a more modest version of the kinds of North-South institutions planned in 1973. Alongside this lay a formal provision for British-Irish intergovernmental cooperation that amounted to a continuation of the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement. But the 1998 agreement went much further in extending also over a whole range of additional areas (such as policing, demilitarisation, inter-communal equality and human rights) that earlier initiatives had ignored. It also went much further, arguably, in legitimising partition; it resulted in amendment of the Irish constitution to replace the territorial claim to Northern Ireland by an aspiration to Irish unity, and to ensure that any future merger of Northern Ireland and the Republic would be underpinned by the explicit agreement of the two sides, presumably by referendum.

Perspectives on partition

The changes already described had an impact on public opinion, but in an important sense they reflected—or, at least, were facilitated by—significant shifts in political perspective. The relative strength of the political parties will tell us something—but not much—about public opinion on the issue of partition. The three main traditional parties in the south formally and unwaveringly supported Irish unity, as did the Nationalist Party in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party was equally emphatic in its commitment to maintaining partition (though some unionists were less emphatic on the need to defend the union with Great Britain, exploring instead the option of an independent Northern Ireland). But these monolithic party positions disguised significant internal differences, especially at the level of party supporters and voters, by no means all of whom unambiguously supported the formal position of their leaders.

Furthermore, all of the parties moved gradually but decisively away from their traditional positions (Ivory, 1999; Coakley, 2002). By the 1990s, all three traditional southern parties had fully accepted the reality of partition, and were committed to Irish unity only with the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. By 1998, most dramatically of all, even Sinn Féin had come to accept this position. On the other side, the Ulster Unionist Party also came to accept in the 1990s that the only deal available would be based on power sharing within Northern Ireland and institutionalised links with the Republic. By the end of 2004, it was clear that the leadership of the Democratic Unionist Party also accepted this position.

Public opinion polls also reflected these new realities. Before commenting on the position within Northern Ireland, it is worth noting the position in the two territories with the most direct interest in that region. In Great Britain, survey data consistently showed strong support (by a margin of about two to one) for Irish unity over maintenance of the union with Northern Ireland in the 1980s (Brook et al, 1992). In the Republic, similarly, clear majorities have endorsed Irish unity as a long-term goal (though enthusiasm for this wanes when survey questions refer to costs that might have to be paid for unity). Within Northern Ireland itself, opinion is predictably split. This may be examined in terms of two characteristics: attitudes towards future territorial arrangements for Northern Ireland and self-identification as regards national identity (which may well have long-term implications for political preferences).

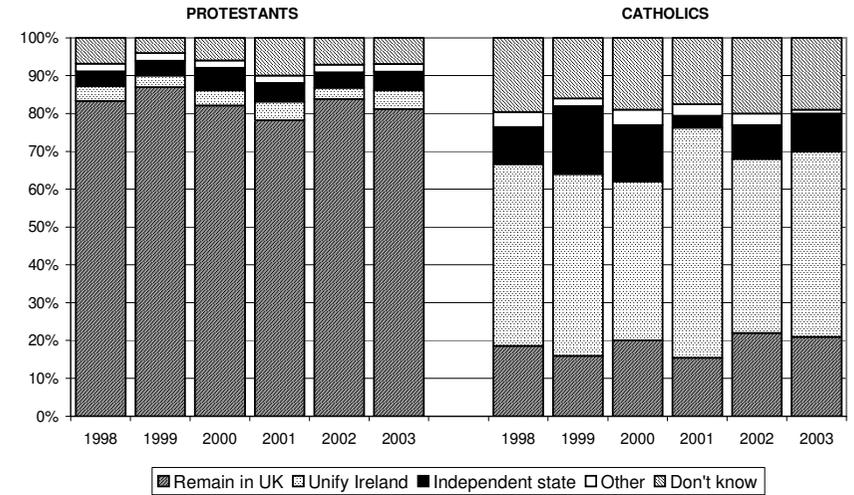


Figure 3: Protestant and Catholic constitutional preferences, 1998-2003

As early as 1968, it became clear from survey data that while Northern Ireland Protestants were committed to defending the union with Great Britain, there was no consensus among Catholics as to the desirability of a united Ireland (though most favoured this; Rose, 1971). Later surveys confirmed this pattern, which is reported in figure 3 for six recent surveys. These data show that while Protestants opted overwhelmingly for the union (with only 3-5% identifying a united Ireland as their preferred settlement), only about half of Catholics interviewed stated a preference for Irish unity (with 15-22% opting for the union with Great Britain in surveys over this period, 1998-2003).⁵ Of course, these figures need to be interpreted with caution: the significance of the border, the meaning of partition and the implications of the union have all changed, especially in the years since the 1998 agreement, so the process of inferring stable political preferences from these data, and of projecting these into the future, is especially hazardous.

It is clear that the attitudes discussed above are not rooted particularly in religious belief, but rather in underlying ethnonational identity patterns. Figure 4 contrasts Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics in this respect, reporting responses to the question "Which of these best describes the way you think of yourself?", where the options are as indicated in the figure. It is clear that most Protestants (66-75% in the years 1998-2003) identified as British, and most Catholics (59-68%) as Irish; but a sizeable proportion of Protestants identified as "Ulster" (6-10%), while even large proportions of Protestants (14-22%) and Catholics (22-28%) identified as "Northern Irish".

⁵ These data, and those in figure 4, are taken from the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys, 1998-2003; see <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/> [2004-12-15].

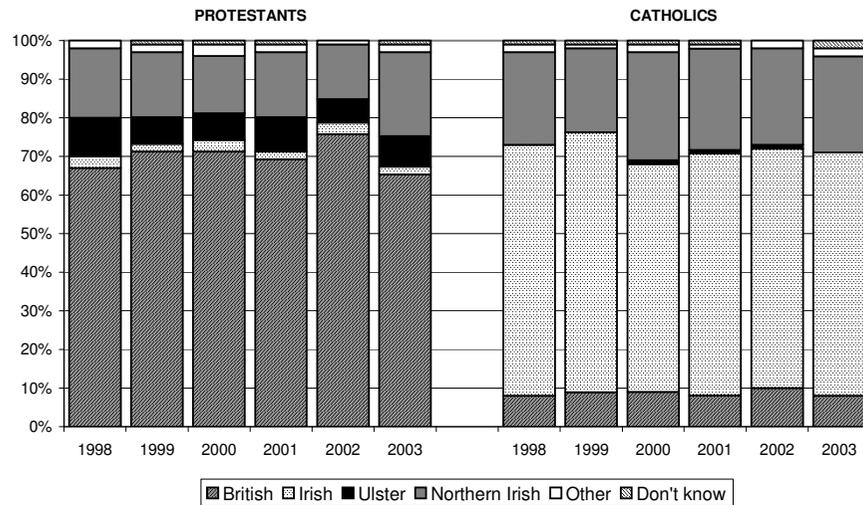


Figure 4: Protestant and Catholic national identities, 1998-2003

These attitudinal data need to be considered in the light of hard demographic information. For decades, unionists have worried about the rising Catholic population, fearing that nationalists would ultimately become a majority and take Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. On the likelihood of a Catholic majority, these expectations may well be justified. Figure 5 breaks down the population recorded in the 2001 census by religion and age group (omitting those who stated that they had no religion, and were not brought up in any religion). This shows a strong tendency for Catholics to be over-represented in the younger age cohorts; indeed, they constitute a majority of the population in the younger age groups. It is also clear that as Catholic fertility rates fall rapidly, this demographic position will change; but it is undoubtedly the case that the proportion of Catholics will continue to rise from its present level (45%) in the coming years. If we consider this alongside the survey data already discussed, it would appear that even if there is eventually a Catholic majority, there will never be a majority in favour of a united Ireland, because of the large group of pro-union Catholics. It must, however, also be pointed out that attitudes can change, and that Catholics who are at present lukewarm supporters of the union may in the future be prepared to contemplate other constitutional options.

CONCLUSION: IRISH-PALESTINIAN SIMILARITIES?

The notion of “partition”, though common to many areas of ethnonational conflict, has very different connotations in Ireland from those which it evokes in Palestine. The similarities and differences may be seen if we consider two dimensions of comparison: the nature of the conflict, and the resources available to the two sides.

Apart from clear points of structural divergence, the most obvious difference between the two conflicts has to do with its intensity. In Northern Ireland there was a

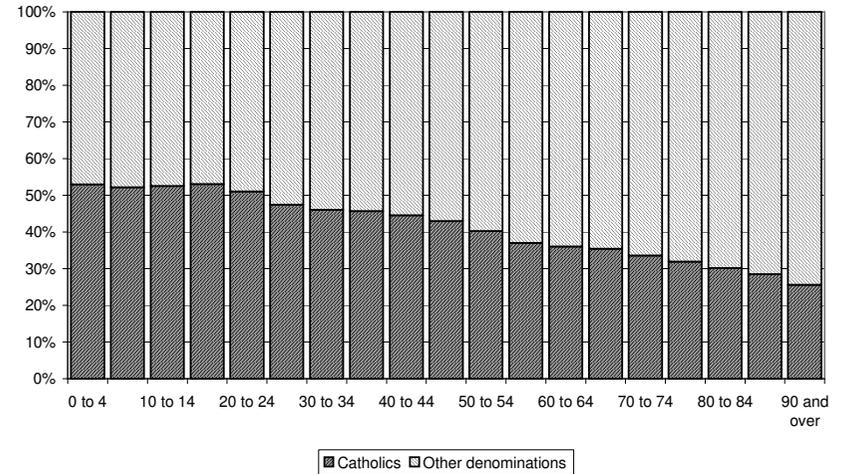


Figure 5: Religious distribution by quinquennial age group, 2001

time in the seventeenth century when the conflict divided not just two Christians denominations, Catholics and Protestants, but also two language communities, mainly Irish- and English-speaking. Later, however, religion came to be the main marker that differentiated settlers from natives, as the latter largely abandoned their language in favour of English. But the Israeli-Palestinian cleavage is not just one between two religious communities (indeed, there are internal divisions on each side); it also separates two language communities (though, again, linguistic diversity especially on the Israeli side must be noted). Furthermore, the issue of confiscation and colonisation is not, as in the Irish case, a centuries-old memory; it is a live contemporary reality that renders more implacable the hostility between the two sides. This is reflected also in settlement patterns. While entirely Catholic- and Protestant-inhabited areas may be found in Northern Ireland, especially in working class districts of cities, these are the exception to a more normal pattern of extensive intermingling between Catholics and Protestants—at least by the standard of daily Israeli-Palestinian contact.

Finding a resolution to the Irish conflict has been facilitated by a more even balance in the resources available to the two sides. While demographic trends may bring about Palestinian and Catholic majorities in the future even in their currently contested territories, the political position of Northern Ireland nationalists was reinforced by other inter-related factors—socio-economic, political and international—that distinguish their experience from that of the Palestinians. First, their post-1968 mobilisation was associated with a socio-economic resurgence that saw a steady improvement in the capacity of Catholics to advance economically and in terms of their educational attainments, a circumstance that greatly assisted the process of political mobilisation. Second, in the 1970s the nationalist community was substantially unified electorally behind the SDLP, and although a deep gulf developed between that party and the more militant republicans of Sinn Féin and was clearly to be seen in

the 1980s, the nationalist advances of the 1990s were marked by an unwritten alliance between these forces. But, most crucially of all, Irish nationalists enjoyed powerful external support from the Irish and American governments and, some would argue, at least a benevolent neutrality on the part of the British government, circumstances entirely lacking in the Palestinian case.

The Irish experience of partition, then, reflects the unique character of the circumstances that gave rise to it. What the future holds for the status of the Irish border is unclear. On the one hand, so many generations have now been born into a partitioned Ireland that the border itself has become solidified in a socio-economic and psychological sense. On the other hand, as the process of European integration continues the significance of the border is likely to diminish in the longer term. Whether this erosion of the role of the border will ever lead to its disappearance is unlikely; but as its role in dividing communities diminishes it is likely that its salience as a political issue, too, will be undermined.

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