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"Everything that in the material line can render life noble and charming has been gathered into it with a profusion which makes the whole place a monument to past opportunity."
Series B: The Changing Agenda of British Politics
Paper B10

The State of the Union
Dr Brendan O’Leary
Sir Anthony Meyer, MP

This paper contains two separate essays on The State of the Union by the above authors.
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RESOLVING NORTHERN IRELAND?

THE OPTIONS FOR BRITISH & IRISH POLICY-MAKERS IN THE 1990s

“To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy power, which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear, to hope till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change nor falter nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free”

– P.B. Shelley, English poet

“The important thing is never to hope.
It is hope that brings turmoil, destruction.
Acceptance, resignation, stoicism – yes!
But never hope.”

– J. Hewitt, Ulster poet

Peter Brooke, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, has been hoping to preside over talks between constitutional parties to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland ever since he was appointed to his post in 1989.

The declared purpose of such talks is to construct a long-term political settlement which would transcend the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed in 1985 (O’Leary, 1987, 1989). The talks would address the four central antagonistic relationships at stake in the conflict: those between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland; those between the unionist in Northern Ireland and nationalists in all of Ireland; those between Britain and Northern Ireland; and finally, those between Britain and Ireland.

As this paper is being written, there is considerable doubt as to whether the Northern Ireland political parties will agree on an agenda for talks, let alone conduct substantive discussions. Indeed Mr Brooke's skilful diplomatic
manoeuvring seems to have sown considerable confusion. One leading nationalist MP’s political adviser put this riddle to me when I questioned him on the prospects for the Brooke initiative: Question: “What do you get when you cross Peter Brooke with the Mafia?” Answer: “An offer you cannot understand, but cannot refuse.” At least two inferences can be drawn from this joke: first, the leaders of Northern Ireland’s constitutional political parties feel obliged to demonstrate their willingness to talk, and will endeavour to avoid responsibility for the breakdown of any prospective talks; but, second, none of them presently believe that an agreement is feasible which will command widespread consent. This view is privately and publicly shared by many British political commentators, politicians and civil servants who relish declaring that ‘there is no solution to the Northern Ireland problem’. They may be correct. Northern Ireland seems to illustrate Galbraith’s maxim that politics “consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable”.

Any settlement to the Northern Ireland imbroglio must answer three tough questions:

(i) To which state should Northern Ireland belong?
(ii) In which form of state should it be organized?
(iii) Which is the best way of organizing decision-making within and across its divided communities?

These questions will continue to frame the options available to British and Irish policy-makers in the 1990s (see McGarry and O’Leary, 1991).

1. WHICH STATE?

There are five logical ways in which Northern Ireland’s statehood can be arranged. First, Northern Ireland could be incorporated into an all-Ireland state as Irish nationalists have traditionally wanted. However, an all-Ireland state is opposed by a considerable majority of Northern Ireland’s electorate, and vehemently and almost unanimously opposed by Ulster’s Protestants who believe that they are British, and as a local majority believe their preferences should be ‘paramount’. They believe they would be economically impoverished, politically dominated and religiously oppressed in an all-Ireland state.

Whether or not these fears have legitimate foundations in evidence or logical inference is less important than palpable fact that they are widely and deeply held by unionists. Some unionists, especially self-styled loyalists, have regularly demonstrated their willingness to fight to prevent their assimilation into an all-Ireland state. Indeed all unionists agree that the major external cause of the conflict in Northern Ireland is what they call the irredentist claim of the Irish state to the sovereignty of the entire island of Ireland. The major weakness of

Irish nationalism, past and present, has been its signal failure to persuade Ulster Protestants that they are Irish, and that an all-Ireland state is a desirable proposition on economic, cultural or political grounds. The form of persuasion exercised by the Provisional IRA, and other nationalist paramilitary organizations, has been to put it mildly, counter-productive.

Second, Northern Ireland could remain within the United Kingdom as Ulster unionists insist it should. However, this option is strongly opposed by the nationalist minority within Northern Ireland, who make up most of Northern Ireland’s Catholics, and since the early 1970s it has not been supported by a majority in public opinion polls conducted in Great Britain. It is also formally opposed by the majority of the citizens of the Republic of Ireland. Traditional Irish nationalists, self-styled republicans, argue that the Irish people were denied their right to self-determination when the island of Ireland was partitioned, and unjustly and badly partitioned, after the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 and the Treaty between Britain and Ireland signed in 1921. Partition and the treaty in their view was imposed by British imperialists might rather than agreed by the Irish people. For them, like most Irish nationalists, the primary external source of the conflict in Northern Ireland is the past and present actions of the British state, which have served to divide the Irish people. They believe that the Irish state is right to claim sovereignty over Northern Ireland in its 1937 constitution. The current Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Charles Haughey, argues that Northern Ireland has proved to be “a failed political entity” in which systematic sectarian domination and economic discrimination have been endemic since its inception. (1)

Thus far, Ulster unionists have never been able to persuade more than a minority of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland that the British state can treat them as full and equal citizens. The Great British themselves, whether their governments, political parties, or their peoples have also not regarded Northern Ireland as authentically British. Despite Mrs Thatcher’s remarkable assertion at the time of the Bobby Sands’ hunger strike that Northern Ireland “is as British as Finchley”, successive British governments, including her own, have not taken measures to integrate Northern Ireland fully into the United Kingdom. Indeed Northern Ireland is governed differently from the rest of the United Kingdom, and the major Great British political parties do not contest all the elections there. Moreover, not only do the Great British lack enthusiasm to keep Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, but they also know that as long as Northern Ireland simply remains part of the United Kingdom, the IRA’s campaign of violence is likely to continue.

Third, Northern Ireland could be made into an independent state, as the former British Prime Miniser James Callaghan, some loyalist paramilitaries, and a few sturdy independent intellectuals have some times suggested (Moore and Crimmings, 1991). However, independence is opposed by most actors within
Northern Ireland. Unionists reject it because it would mean that they would no longer be British, whereas nationalists reject it both because they would not be part of Ireland and because they would be a minority within the new state. British and Irish policy-makers reject this option as unworkable, primarily because they do not believe such a state could be stable. Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is very revealing on this issue: it allows a majority in Northern Ireland to determine whether the territory is to belong to the UK or to the Republic of Ireland, but it does not permit such a majority to opt for independence.

Fourth. Northern Ireland could be subject to the joint authority of the British and Irish states. However, this option has been consistently rejected by recent British governments: first, because of the Thatcher government’s acrobatic distaste for losing one iota of sovereignty; and second, because it is considered undemocratic – since it would have to be imposed against the wishes of a majority of Northern Ireland’s citizens. The fact that the British government has been prepared to go in considering this option is presently embodied in the Anglo-Irish Agreement – which was imposed against the wishes of a majority of the province’s electorate. (2) As a result of the Agreement, the British government undertook to consult the Irish government on all matters of public policy affecting Northern Ireland, through the forum of a regular Intergovernmental Conference, and to make “determined efforts . . . to resolve any differences” between the two governments (Article 2). The outraged and fulminating reaction of Ulster unionism to this very limited British move in the direction of tacit joint authority, and the difficulties both governments have had in managing the Agreement, suggest that joint authority’s prospect of promoting peaceful coexistence would at best be very long term. Nonetheless it is possible that in the 1980s the new Conservative Prime Minister John Major, or a future Labour government might consider exploring the joint authority option with the Irish government in a more vigorous way.

Finally, Northern Ireland could be destroyed, and its territory and people divided between the British and Irish states in a second, and presumably final, partition of Ireland. This solution would work by creating a smaller, more homogeneously unionist and Protestant British Ireland; and a larger Republic of Ireland which would incorporate the majority of Northern Ireland’s nationalists and Catholics, (3) However, it is an option not publicly favoured by any British, Irish or Northern Irish political party. Organizing a just and stable re-partition would also be very problematic given the distribution of the relevant populations: and the numerous lives lost in previous British-administered partitions of their former imperial possessions (India, Palestine and Ireland) can hardly inspire confidence in the merits of any proposal to rectify Lloyd George’s botched settlement of 1921.

Therefore each of the five logical ways in which Northern Ireland’s statehood can be resolved entails obvious and profound costs, and much less obvious and more intangible benefits. None of the five logical options commands widespread support across the major actors who would be vital to ensuring a stable settlement. Nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland, British and Irish governments, political parties and public opinion, all have conflicting and deeply held preferences. Note that the status quo, under which Northern Ireland is directly governed from Westminster, also has considerable and predictable costs: continuing violence; and constant strains in British-Irish relations being the most obvious.

However, the question ‘To which state should Northern Ireland belong?’ is merely the first of a set of further complex and nested questions which must be addressed in any successful resolution of the conflict.

2. WHICH FORM OF STATE?

There are three modes of organizing sovereignty in liberal democratic states: in unitary, federal, or confederal forms. In their turn unitary states, federations and confederations can be more or less centralized or decentralized, depending up on the structures of government, intergovernmental relations and the allocation of powers and functions.

An Irish unitary state, advocates by Fianna Fáil in the Irish Republic, does not appeal to unionists, even if it were accompanied by extensive devolution of authority to the existing region of Northern Ireland. They find it unacceptable since it would vest sovereign power in the hands of the nationalist/Catholic majority in the island of Ireland. The fact that since 1982 it has also been the goal of Sinn Féin and the IRA to obtain a unitary Irish state does nothing to enhance its attractiveness to unionists.

An Irish federation or confederation, by contrast, would either have to be a two-unit federation or confederation, or it would have to be built upon three or more freshly created political provinces throughout the island of Ireland. The problem with a two-unit entity is that the historical track-record of such political institutions in bi-communal societies is universally disastrous. They have proven consistently unstable elsewhere in the world. And the problem with any more than two unity entity is that it would entail a dramatic disruption of the institutional fabric of the Republic of Ireland, a price which neither a political elite nor its people seem prepared to pay.

The United Kingdom is presently a unitary state. Since 1972 Northern Ireland has been centrally governed, under direct rule from Westminster and the Northern Ireland Office, tempered after November 1985 by the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the workings of the Intergovernmental Conference. The centralization of government within the British unitary state has not proved much more legitimate than the Stormont arrangements it superseded, nor has it
produced successful conflict-regulation. Northern Ireland used to have a
devolved government within the UK’s decentralized unitary state: the Stormont
parliament which preceded over institutionalized discrimination against
Catholics and nationalists.

Since 1972 all British attempts to establish an agreed form of devolved
government within Northern Ireland have failed. The Executive established after
the Sunningdale conference in 1973 was brought down within a year. The
Constitutional Convention of 1975-6 was wound up without agreement.
Negotiations with Northern Ireland’s constitutional parties by Secretary of State
Humphrey Atkins in 1979-80 proved fruitless. ‘Rolling devolution’, the scheme
devised by Secretary of State James Prior in 1982, founded on nationalist
abstention and the refusal of unionists to advance proposals which might win
nationalist consent. Historically informed pessimists therefore have good
reasons to suppose that Brooke’s round of ‘talks about talks’ about a new
settlement is likely to go by the way of its precursors.

The United Kingdom has never formally been a federation or a confederation.
However, even if it were to become more like a federation or a confederation,
let us say after the establishment of Scottish and Welsh devolution as well as
powerful English regions by a radical reforming Labour government in the
1990s, it is not clear what significance this transformation of the UK state would
have for solving the problems of Northern Ireland. Ulster unionists would
presumably seek a UK federation which gave them control within Northern
Ireland and a bulwark against Irish nationalism; whereas a UK federation or
confederation would deny Irish nationalists’ aspirations for an Irish dimension,
and provoke fears that it might become a vehicle for the re-establishment of
a new Stormont regime.

What about a federation or confederation of the British Isles or the archipelago
of the Celtic Sea, as some utopians are wont to suggest? Would not such an
institutional transformation satisfy the dual national aspirations of the peoples in
Northern Ireland? Perhaps, but the British and Irish states are unlikely to
surrender sovereignty over all their territories to solve the Northern Irish
question, if they currently find it so difficult to manage their conflicting
sovereignty claims over a region of the island of Ireland. Moreover, Irish
nationalists understandably see any proposal for a federated or confederated
British Isles as a ‘Trojan horse’ for the re-incorporation of Ireland under British
control.

What of the idea that Northern Ireland’s problems can be transcended within the
framework of an emergent European federation or confederation? Joint
membership of the EC has aided the development of neighbourly relations
between the London and Dublin governments, but it is not obvious what impact
spillovers from increasing European unions will have on intra-communal
relations within Northern Ireland (for a sophisticated discussion see Lyne
(1990)).

Key issues surrounding dual national identity, the administration of
justice, militarized policing, paramilitary violence, discrimination in
employment opportunities and the distribution of local political powers are not
likely to be resolved by products of a ‘pose-1992 Europe’. The removal of tariff
barriers and increased cross-border co-operation between the Republic of
Ireland and Northern Ireland, if it materializes, will not resolve a conflict
centred on ethnic conflict. Moreover, the border across Ireland is likely to
remain one of the most heavily policed in the EC whatever the fate of the ‘1992’
project for a single European market. European co-operation is something
desirable in its own right, not something to be favoured as a panacea for
Northern Ireland.

Unitary, federal or confederal formulas for a Northern Ireland which stays in
the UK, or becomes part of an all-Ireland state, do not appear to advance the search
for a solution, at least upon cursory inspection. The same argument holds
true for applying these formulas to an independent Northern Ireland or for a
Northern Ireland governed under joint authority although I have not the space to
defend this assertion. One reason these formulas are unhelpful is their
imprecision about the nature of their implications for political decision-making.

3. WHICH TYPE OF DECISION-MAKING?

The key question for Northern Ireland, whichever state it belongs to, and
whatever its constitutional nomenclature, is straightforward: how should
political and policy-making power be organised across, and within the respective
communities? There are basically four ideal typical ways in which this question
might be answered: through arbitration, majority-rule, cantonization and power-
sharing. Each of these four types could be permuted in multiple ways but I have
not the space to do so here. (5)

Arbitration: first, an external power might be given the role of arbiter in
Northern Ireland, refereeing conflicts and adjudicating disputes in the absence of
consensus. This rule has been exercised by Britain since 1972, or at least this
has been the way in which successive British governments have presented
themselves to the outside world. After the Anglo-Irish Agreement arbitration
has been exercised in consultation with the Irish government, providing ‘direct
rule with a green tinge’. In principle, at some future juncture, arbitration
might be exercised by both Britain and Ireland in a system of joint authority.
More fancifully, arbitration might be exercised by the EC or by the UN.

The most fundamental problem with arbitration as a strategy for resolving
Northern Ireland is that the arbitrated do not regard the most likely arbiters,
namely Britain and Ireland, as sufficiently disinterested to be neutral. Irish
nationalists, with considerable justification, regard direct British rule in Ireland
as
as responsible for continuing economic discrimination and inequality (see Figure 1), and regular abuses of human rights by the security forces. Unionists, by contrast, constantly fear a British betrayal and appear to find repulsive the mere idea of institutionalized consultation with the Irish Republic. The conditions for successful arbitration, a willingness to trust the arbitrator, are absent.

Majority-rule: second, power might be exercised according to majority-rule principles. This fundamental norm of the Westminster parliamentary model is, however, problematic in ethnically divided societies. Under the Stormont government there was one-party rule by the Ulster Unionist Party for over fifty years, between 1920 and 1972, and there was no prospect of the nationalist opposition achieving governmental authority through the alternation in power that characterizes functioning liberal democracies (O’Leary and Arthur, 1991). Indeed majority-rule devolution provided a milieu for the systematic abuse of political power; and the application of majority rule decision-making procedures in unitary, federal or confederal government would create the same threat, whether Northern Ireland was Irish, British, jointly governed or independent.

And in any case in Northern Ireland the question always arises: “Which majority?” Nationalists claim that Northern Ireland is illegitimate because its borders were drawn so as to create an artificial majority. They claim that, since the genuine majority in the island of Ireland as a whole, By contrast most unionists, and all loyalists, claim that since they are a majority within Northern Ireland they should be allowed power commensurate with that status. (6)

British nation-builders, by contrast, argue that the true majority is in the United Kingdom as a whole. They contend that if “real” British political parties, viz., the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, were to organize and compete in elections in Northern Ireland, then its ethnically based politics would be transformed. This argument, currently fashionable amongst English Conservatives rests on false foundations. It presupposes that Northern Irish residents will vote for British political parties in large numbers if given the opportunity to do so. The evidence to date is not persuasive. The Conservatives, the solitory British political party to have organized in the province, have lost deposits in both the European Parliamentary election 1989 and the by-election in Upper Bann in May 1990, and have performed adequately in only one very unpersuasive local government district.

Organisations seeking to persuade Labour to stand in the province have received dismaying votes. The argument of British nation-builders also rests on the assumption that Northern Irish voters who will vote for British political parties do so for non-sectarian reasons. However, polling evidence suggests that the Conservatives would appeal most to those in favour of the Union, i.e. Protestants; whereas the Labour Party would appeal most to those in favour of Irish unity, i.e. Catholics, because Labour favours achieving Irish unity by consent. Therefore, far from transcending sectarian politics the organization of the major British political parties in the province would directly embolden them in its national and religious conflicts.

Finally, the argument of the British nation-builders erroneously assumes that the major cause of conflict in Northern Ireland since 1920 has been the absence of
British party competition in the province. In fact the Ulster Unionist Party was directly connected to the British Conservative Party until 1972, with UUP Westminster MPs taking the Conservative whip. Indeed the UUP only shed its last institutional ties with the Conservatives after signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The arguments of these British nation-builders, who are also known as electoral integrationists, favour majority rule in the UK as a whole, but they are as wildly idealist about the benefits of the Westminster two-party majority-rule model of government as Gaelic romantics are about Irish unification. Political romanticism is not an exclusively Irish commodity.

Cantonization: Northern Ireland could also be cantonized, in a manner similar to the Swiss mode of government, that is to say the province could be subjected to a micro-partition in which political power would be devolved to new and very small political units – averaging between 20,000 and 40,000 people (although Swiss cantons are in fact much larger). Such political units could be designed either to create religiously and ethnically homogeneous units where majority rule would be practically coetaneous with the self-government of all the relevant community or to achieve a very local form of power-sharing government of nationalists/Catholics and unionists/Protestants. Where intra-ethnic conflict is high then the partitioning of units to create homogeneity would be the operating administrative principle, and where such conflict was low, local power-sharing might be encouraged through the design of balanced ‘mixed’ cantons.

This strategy would decompose Northern Ireland into islands of nationalism, unionist, and power-sharing cantons: simultaneously combining majority rule, partitionist and what political scientists call consociational principles. Some areas with high political violence would have to remain under direct rule, and a province-wide anti-terrorist force would obviously still be required. However, under ‘rolling cantonization’ policing and judicial powers could be gradually devolved to those areas where the population expressed a wish to exercise such powers, and where the British and Irish governments judged that the experiment had some prospect of success. Cantonization is fraught with potential difficulties, notably the difficulties in drawing and policing appropriate units of government, winning consent for them, and the ever-present threat that any cantonization of policing and judicial power might be used by paramilitary organizations to seize control of parts of Northern Ireland, and treat them as ‘liberated zones’. However, cantonization is at least as realistic a pushing traditional unionist or nationalist position, or commanding joint authority. Cantonization is also more gradualist in its implications than direct separation because it permits both governments freely to reverse such an experimental process. For these reasons it deserves to be debated more widely.

Power-Sharing: finally, political relationships in Northern Ireland might be organized according to a fourth principle, power-sharing. Known as consociationalism to political scientists, it is characteristic of some democratic and stable societies which are nonetheless deeply divided by ethnic or religious cleavages.

Consociational democracies usually have four features. First, a grand coalition government incorporates the political parties representing the main segments of the divided society. Second, proportionality rules throughout the public sector: the proportional representation of each segment in public institutions (the administrative system, executive, legislature, judiciary, and the bureaucracy) is matched by the proportional allocation of public expenditure to each segment. Third, ‘segmental autonomy’ means permit each group self-government over those matters of most profound concern to them: for example, each group may be proportionally and equally funded to run its own educational system. Finally, consociation entrenches constitutional venues for minorities (see Lijphart, 1971).

Since 1972, successive British governments (when they have been thinking as opposed to reacting) have been trying to promote a consociational solution to Northern Ireland’s problems, seeking to persuade its constitutional political parties to share political power in a devolved government which recognizes, both nationalist and unionist traditions. Under Article 4 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement both the British and Irish governments have re-committed themselves to this solution, and Mr Brooke has been actively seeking to encourage it in recent months. However, consociational solutions, which are very desirable for divided societies like Northern Ireland, failed to work before 1985 for clear reasons – although British governments took a long time to learn them. Consociational solution cannot work effectively where the rival segments in antagonistic societies are fundamentally divided over their national as opposed to their linguistic or religious identities. "Northern Ireland is not Belgium" as one sage has put it. Nationality conflicts appear to have an irreducibly zero-sum character, a view daily reinforced by paramilitaries who kill for the proposition that "one nation = one state".

The majority of constitutional unionists rejected institutionalized power-sharing as 'unBritish', i.e. foreign to the Westminster parliamentary tradition, and contended they could not share power with people who wanted Northern Ireland to belong to a foreign country. The majority of constitutional nationalists, by contrast, rejected any consociational proposals if they were not accompanied by an institutionalized linkage between Northern Ireland and the Republic. In any case, political leaders of nationalist and unionist parties who were personally prepared to compromise fundamentally on a consociational settlement rapidly found themselves swamped by revolts within their parties and their ethnic communities. Finally, since both the nationalist and unionist communities were internally divided into 'ultras' and 'moderates' the latter were insufficiently free.
to negotiate a consociational settlement. The SDLP had to look over its shoulder at Sinn Fein and the IRA, whereas the Official Unionists had to watch out on their extremist flank for fear of being outmanoeuvred by Paisley’s Democratic Unionists and loyalist paramilitaries.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was meant to break this stalemate and create conditions for a power-sharing settlement. By entrenching an Irish dimension, it was intended to weaken Sinn Fein, strengthen the SDLP and make them more disposed towards power-sharing. Sinn Fein had been politically weakened (see O’Leary, 1991); but not as much as was hoped, and the SDLP have not shown themselves to be as keen to negotiate on devolution as British governments hoped. The SDLP’s spokespersons have emphasised that the party has “no ideological commitment to devolution”; even if it is to be based on power-sharing. Moreover SDLP leader John Hume has consistently argued that only when unionists have “sawn out” their relationship with the rest of the people of Ireland, can a general accommodation between nationalists and unionists be reached. Since 1989, Hume seems to have been canvassing pan-Irish solutions to the conflict rather than advocate an internal settlement, contending that any settlement arrived at through negotiation should be put to the Irish people, north and south, in simultaneous referenda. Meanwhile the IRA has continued to create mayhem, supported by Sinn Fein, and to disrupt whatever limited prospects exist for political negotiations.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was also intended to encourage unionists to negotiate a consociational settlement since Article 4 clearly provided that in certain policy-domains where nationalists and unionists agreed to share power, the role of the Intergovernmental Conference would become less important. However, unionists have been nearly unanimously in explicitly rejecting the Agreement, and campaigned particularly vigorously for its abandonment throughout 1986-7 (see Aughey, 1989). Enthusiasm for power-sharing within their ranks has remained isolated, while the majority insist that they will only negotiate with nationalists if the Agreement is removed, or at least suspended. Indeed seasoned observers believe that the strategic aim of key unionist leaders remains that of destroying the Agreement rather than a new one which transcends it; negotiating a consociational settlement with an Irish dimension is not their central concern. These unionist leaders remain hopeful that one of a number of ‘scenarios’ (a change of British policy, a hung parliament at Westminster, or a catastrophic deterioration in Anglo-Irish relations) will accomplish the objective of breaking the Agreement. James Molyneaux, the leader of the Official Unionists, is known to be hostile to devolution in principle (and to favour Northern Ireland’s complete integration into the UK) which is why his current involvement in talks with Mr Brookes has provoked scepticism amongst journalists and analysts of Irish politics.

However, both the British and the Irish governments remain committed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Only a broader agreement which unionists negotiate with nationalists could produce change in London and Dublin on the text of the Agreement. Therefore, short of a miracle, which would be desirable even for those of us who are rational atheists. Mr Brookes’s current talks to establish a devolutionary consociational settlement cannot succeed in the near future for one simple reason. To get rid of the Agreement, unionists must offer nationalists a new Agreement which transcends the previous one and in which the Irish dimension is at least as significant as the present one, as well as offering nationalists a power-sharing devolutionary settlement within Northern Ireland. If unionists are prepared to do that, and offer it as the widest package of both the principal parties, i.e. the Official Unionists, and Paisley’s DUP, then Mr Brookes will win the Nobel peace prize nomination in 1992, and along with many others I will have to diet on my hat.

CONCLUSION

The constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, and the British and Irish governing parties, are best seen as engaged in a complex war of manoeuvre in which each agent’s prime objective is to ensure that they are not held responsible for the breakdown of ‘talks about talks’. It is when they get to the negotiating table, the differences between the contending parties are likely to result in a renewed stalemate. Mr Brookes is trying to do the impossible by bridging the impassable.

Consociational solutions, while ostensibly desirable, seem destined to fail on stony ground in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future. There are several ways in which the British and Irish governments might react if they recognize this increasingly palpable fact. They may simply opt, as they usually do, to engage in crisis management. Alternatively, they may opt to play a long term strategy, reforming Northern Ireland’s discriminatory economy (see Figure 1) and the administration of justice to win the political confidence of nationalists, isolating the IRA and Sinn Fein, whilst simultaneously gently coaxing unionists out of the cold. The logic of this strategy would be to accomplish all of the institutional features of consociationalism, except a grand coalition government – which would have to wait until a later date. In other words, the two governments would aim to ensure proportional representation of each community in non-elected political institutions (including, eventually, the police), segmental autonomy, a bill of rights, guaranteeing equality of citizenship and entrenching some minority rights. Simultaneously they have to ensure their co-operation against paramilitaries stays within the rule of law.

The British and Irish governments might also take the more risky and drastic step of threatening a major new initiative, such as moving towards joint authority or repatriation, in order to increase the pressure on unionists and nationalists to arrive at a power-sharing settlement. Professor Arend Lijphart, the pioneering political scientist who has developed the theory of consociational
democracy, argues that partition is the most stable and least undesirable solution when constitutionalism fails, and that threatening partition might sometimes be the relevant actor to the negotiating table. In the concluding chapter of our recent book, The Future of Northern Ireland, John McGarry and I sketched a similar argument for Northern Ireland.

No one can be confident of what the future of Northern Ireland will be like in the 1990s. We do know that most prophets of the future do best by predicting the continuation of the present: in this case the weekly grind of political murder would be expected to continue, accompanied by constantly failing political initiatives. However, I believe it is more likely that more radical options will be pursued by British and Irish governments in the coming decade, even though I am well aware that to talk of options, or to consider possibilities for progress, is regarded as a sign of cognitive deficiency by some public policy analysts in Northern Ireland. For the present though, I leave it to the reader to debate the rival poetic perspectives on the merits of hope which form the epigraphs to this paper. Their relevance to the study of Northern Ireland should be obvious.

* * * * * * *

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For most people Wales still means coal mines, steelworks and sheep. The sheep are still there, and the glorious countryside on which they roam, Shangri-La, within three hours drive from London. But the coal mines are disappearing fast, the steel industry has been drastically rationalised and streamlined; today there are more people employed in financial services in Wales than in both of these great traditional industries of the past.

In no part of the United Kingdom has the Thatcherite treatment, by which I mean the amputation of injured or idle limbs without anaesthetic, been more effective or more brutal. Unemployment in Wales, which had been down to 38,000 in 1974, had doubled under the 1974-9 Labour Government to 80,000. But under the incoming 1979 Conservative Government and the starkly deflationary budget of 1981, Welsh unemployment shot through the 100,000 barrier and came uncomfortably close to 300,000 before it began its downward trend in early 1986.

The likelihood is that after 12 years of Conservative rule, Welsh unemployment will stand at about the same level as it stood when Labour left office in 1979. The Conservatives will be able to claim that the total numbers in work are substantially higher than in 1979; Labour will retort that many of these additional jobs are low paid, part time jobs for women. Behind this battle of statistics lies a profound transformation of the Welsh economy which, in its turn, is transforming attitudes and social structures.

Wales is no longer the country of coal and steel, though it now has one of the most efficient steel plants in Europe. Soon it may also have one of the most productive coal mines, if the South Wales miners can make the final effort to show Arthur Scargill the door. But Wales is above all the home of modern, science based industry: it has a huge, still not fully developed tourist potential, and is becoming a most attractive location for financial and other business services. In this transformation, inward investment, notably from Japan, but also from the United States, and, increasingly from the rest of the European Community, has played a crucial role.

When I came to North Wales in 1970, the area was characterised by very low unemployment, and, with one exception, by excessive dependence on three major employers: British Steel (the former Summers works) at Shotton, Courtalds at Greenfield and Flint and Hawkers (now British Aerospace) at Broughton. British Aerospace is still very much alive, thanks largely to the vision of its directors, with little encouragement from governments of either party, in participating in the European Airbus project. But Courtalds has 'struck its tent' and moved away; and British Steel, in Europe's biggest single closure, shut down steel making at Shotton, with the abrupt loss of 12,000 jobs; only a couple of thousand are now employed in its successful steel-coating complex.

The exception was, of course, Wrexham, the 'Slough of North Wales', where diversity of industrial employment enabled the area to survive the closures of its coal mines which had been the mainstay of the town's economy. It is noteworthy that Wrexham, despite its rather inconvenient location and its poor communications, has proved more attractive to inward investment than other parts of North Wales, though they are beginning now to catch-up.

In North Wales today, unemployment is no longer a serious political issue; and the economy is in many ways better placed to withstand the recession than it was for the last one. But the transition has been an extremely painful one.

Industrial development and employment levels are obviously determinant factors in the political scene. But so, almost equally so in Wales, is culture and the Welsh language.