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A PLACE APART

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BRENDAN O'LEARY: A widely voiced cliché is that Northern Ireland is "a place apart", unique in its atavistic antagonisms, unamenable to statecraft. Indeed it's considered a mark of high intelligence to conclude that Northern Ireland is insoluble. British wits used to say that when they find the answer the Irish always change the question. Oscar Wilde replied that Irish history is something which Irish people should never remember and British people should never forget.

But the idea that Northern Ireland is unique does not withstand examination. National wars, conducted between religiously labelled nations, are commonplace in what was the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Elsewhere ethnic conflicts alternate between paramilitary violence and state repression, on the one hand, and protracted negotiation on the other: think of Palestine or Israel or, indeed, South Africa.

And the thesis that Northern Ireland is insoluble is a facile "thought-stopper". It stops us thinking about how national conflicts have been resolved elsewhere, notably in western Europe; it prevents us examining what can be done; and it makes us complacent about the status quo. As Peter Robinson, Deputy Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party explains, complacency is not in order:

PETER ROBINSON: We face a situation where there is widespread instability; there are no political structures dealing with the regional government of Northern Ireland; over three thousand people have been murdered; over thirty five thousand have been maimed and mutilated. Only a fool would suggest that that was a satisfactory situation. Clearly the status quo is not acceptable.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Under the status quo Northern Ireland is governed directly from Westminster, in a quasi-colonial and bureaucratic fashion. The Secretary of State, together with the Northern Ireland Office, administers the region, unchecked by any local assembly. Local government does little more than empty the bins, bury the dead and sweep the streets. However, the status quo is tempered by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed in 1985, under which the Irish government is consulted on all aspects of public policy affecting Northern Ireland.

Direct rule was supposed to end political and economic discrimination against the minority, inequalities between the two traditions, unionist and nationalist, and is defended as a second-best option, necessary until there could be widespread agreement in both communities about how the region should be governed. That interpretation has won some academic backing, notably from Paul Bew, Professor of Politics at Queen's University, Belfast:

PAUL BEW: I do think that direct rule .. reformist direct rule does make this conflict significantly more manageable than it would otherwise be. One party unionist rule was not a successful means of managing the conflict. The only other alternative we've had is direct rule and latterly direct rule with a green tinge. Essentially what one is talking about here is reform from above. Now, in significant areas of society the consequence has been more equality between the two traditions. This does not mean that there is complete equality but it does mean that significant changes have definitely occurred, the Catholic middle class has definitely expanded, and there have been very radical changes in the composition of government employment. To some degree it depends which statistic you take here. If you say Catholics are 38 per cent of the workforce but 35 per cent of those in employment it doesn't look too bad. Now that statistic is true. If you say on the other hand, if we look at the unemployed, Catholics are twice as likely to be out of work as Protestants, then that statistic is frightening. And both statistics are actually true. And it gets at the point that for all its success in establishing, for example, or expanding the Catholic middle class, direct rule has also left untouched, the hard core of unemployment in Catholic urban ghetto areas, precisely those areas which provide support for Sinn Fein. While I accept that this is the nub of the problem, you can make progress towards the objective of equality of treatment of the two main traditions.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Paul Bew refers to the status quo as direct rule with "a green tinge", the tinge being the Anglo-Irish Agreement, so resented by unionists. They regard it as unwarranted interference by a foreign government and would like it scrapped.

Some unionists insist that Northern Ireland should be treated no differently from any other part of the UK - in their words it should be fully integrated into the Union. But most, while affirming their Britishness, now accept that Northern Ireland is different, and must therefore be governed differently, with greater local democracy. For many that means not just devolution but the recognition that British institutions, such as the first-past-the-post electoral system, single party government and adversarial politics, are inappropriate for deeply divided societies, like Northern Ireland. Peter Robinson:

PETER ROBINSON: I believe because the .. there is a considerable remoteness from Northern Ireland to the centre of government in the rest of the United Kingdom which basically is in and around London, that there is a need and it is desirable to have a form of devolved government for Northern Ireland. That form of devolved government can be exercised in many ways, but there is a recognition on our part that with a deeply divided society such as we have in Northern Ireland, that it is beneficial if one can bring together those of the different divides in our community and get them to work together for the benefit of the community. And we provided for other parties a proposal which indicates that proportionately, all the political parties in Northern Ireland who are supporting the constitutional politics rather than violence, would play a part in the politics of the province and would share in the government of the province through a committee system. If one is proportionately giving positions of Vice Chairman to all the political parties, and if one is proportionately giving the Chairmanship of those committees, the Chairman being effectively the heads of the departments, then one is sharing the power. Each party, according to the number of votes they receive and the number of members who are returned, would share in the responsibilities of running Northern Ireland.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Peter Robinson's idea sounds very reasonable. If a party gets 25 per cent of the seats in a future assembly it might expect to get 25 per cent of the committee chairs. But constitutional nationalists say that unionist ideas on proportionality are still too "majoritarian". If Sinn Fein is excluded from any deal, unionists would get about 75 per cent of the committee chairs.

Nationalists prefer a much more generous model of power-sharing, like that briefly adopted in 1974, in which they were roughly equal partners with unionists, even though they had a minority of seats. They want "grand coalition government" and point out that in local government experiments they've implemented their principles. Adrian Guelke, Reader in Political Science at Queen's University, draws some comfort from these power-sharing trials.

ADRIAN GUELKE: The Dungannon experiment has worked particularly well. The sharing of power, the sharing out of jobs on the council seems to have run smoothly. It's resulted in development of trust between the two communities there that hasn't existed before and I.. I mean, I think that is a model for Northern Ireland as a whole. It's worked at local level because, on the ground, the population balance is such that the .. the two communities don't really have much other option but to try and share power. And there's a dramatic contrast between that situation and the situation that exists in .. in Belfast which is a sectarian bear garden. The fact that Belfast City Council doesn't have very much power hasn't prevented it from becoming a sectarian bear garden. So there are examples of how local councils can contribute to sectarianism as well as ones where it has helped to diminish sectarianism.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: There are then some local signs that unionists and nationalists can share power and some unionists have, at least, moved to the idea of proportionality. In other countries power-sharing has worked with religiously, linguistically and ethnically divided communities, like the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. But can power-sharing work in societies divided by nationality?

For nationalists, power-sharing is not enough. They want an Irish dimension. For unionists that threatens the thin end of the wedge, pushing them into the Republic of Ireland, which, after all, claims sovereignty over Northern Ireland in Articles 2 and 3 of its Constitution. Do unionists see any role for the Republic? Peter Robinson:

PETER ROBINSON: If the Government of the Irish Republic is prepared to remove their irredentist claim, then quite clearly we are prepared to enter into arrangements with the Government of the Irish Republic. The first step is quite clearly theirs; and I would point out to you that both of the traditions in Northern Ireland reach out beyond the confines of Northern Ireland itself. The nationalist community reaches out towards the Irish Republic; the unionist community reaches out towards Great Britain for its United Kingdom recognition and identity. Therefore it seems to me that the umbrella which covers all of those relationships is a British Irish umbrella rather than a North-South exclusive relationship. But that doesn't mean that there can't be areas of co-operation, areas where it is to the mutual advantage of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, that politicians from both of those areas should attempt to resolve problems to try and have good co-operation to the benefit of both our communities.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: So what you're suggesting in terms of British-Irish relationships is perhaps something like the Nordic Council, neighbourly co-operation between neighbouring states. Nothing more fancy or complicated than that ?

PETER ROBINSON: Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic share one land mass and, therefore, there are many areas where there can be co-operation, one country with the other, whether it is in tourism, whether it is in agriculture, whether it is in matters of roads, drainage, whatever else it happens to be. It is quite clear that decisions taken on one side of the border can have an effect on what happens on the other side of the border. I could think of a very long list of areas where that would be possible and I think to that extent you will find that there perhaps would be a much longer and larger agenda than in the Nordic Council or anywhere else.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: So a British-Irish dimension is fine, as is voluntary cross-border co-operation; but no executive role for the Irish government and no erosion of UK sovereignty. They're out of the question.

The fullest expression of an Irish dimension would be a united Ireland, an objective articulated most forcefully by Sinn Fein which was excluded from the recent talks because of its support for political violence. After twenty years of what Republicans call "the long war" Martin McGuinness, a member of Sinn Fein's Executive still believes a united Ireland will occur, politically, and sooner rather than later. Because of government restrictions his words have been revoiced:

MARTIN MCGUINNESS: Opinion poll after opinion poll in Britain shows that the British public, if they had the opportunity, would vote for British disengagement from the six counties. I am convinced that there are people who are beginning to think along these lines. Whenever the British Conservative party finally comes to that position, then I think we're going somewhere. I think then we can credibly put forward to the international community the suggestion that Ireland should be united, gain support in the international community, in the United States and in the European Community and throughout the world at the United Nations for reunification. If such a scenario was to develop, then I think that we would then be very much on the road to a permanent peace in Ireland within a very short period of time.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: A withdrawal of British troops is indeed consistently favoured by a majority of British public opinion. And Irish unification generally wins more support than any other option when opinion is canvassed in Great Britain and the Republic - as opposed to Northern Ireland. But should British majority opinion determine government policy? Kevin Boyle, a former activist in the Northern Ireland civil rights movement, and now Professor of Law at the University of Essex, points out that neither a British withdrawal nor a united Ireland are the simple solutions they appear to be:

KEVIN BOYLE: There is a community of close to a million people in Northern Ireland - the Protestant unionist community - who define themselves as British, who do not wish to be part of a united Ireland and the reality is that they would resist any such moves. So a British withdrawal, as such - by which I mean a withdrawal of British sovereignty, British authority in Northern Ireland, British military - would result in greater conflict. Some people pooh-pooh that, say, oh, the unionist population would come to accept that they were now within an island of Ireland and would join a single political system. I think that the evidence for that view is very sparse indeed. So I think that the simple solution of withdrawal is unacceptable from the point of view of the consequences; but it's also unacceptable in principle because it is not a democratic way to treat the clear wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom as . . . part of an expression of their British identity. In international law, a state is not free to expel a portion of its population against its wishes. The reality of public opinion in Britain is very important but I don't think that it is a mandate for withdrawal even though people, when given that option, go for it. So that solution's out.

BRENDAN O'LEAREY: There is at least one other practical difficulty with a united Ireland, according to Dr. Paul Teague, Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Ulster:

PAUL TEAGUE: Currently Northern Ireland enjoys a subvention of about two billion pounds from Britain. Somewhere that level of money would have to be found if the British were to withdraw and an all-Ireland economic union established. Now it either has to be found through increases in taxes or borrowing. If taxes were to increase, then in Northern Ireland the tax rate would have to increase by 50 per cent. In Southern Ireland it would have to increase by 25 per cent. If the money was raised through borrowing, then the new economic union would have to borrow the equivalent of 10 per cent of the Republic of Ireland's GNP. Now both scenarios are not sustainable. With regard to taxes, in Southern Ireland taxes are already at a very, very high level and another additional 25 per cent would make tremendous inroads into personal income. And I do not think that people in southern Ireland could sustain that. Southern Ireland is still paying the price for high levels of borrowing that it conducted in the '70s and it'd be very, very reluctant to go down such a route again.

BRENDAN O'LEAERY: That suggests a united Ireland where the citizens of the Republic could feel rather like West Germans, elated by unification, but regretting the bills. Taxation aside, there are major political obstacles to Irish unity by consent. It must await either a further growth in the number of northern nationalists or an unlikely transformation of unionist attitudes.

However, the status quo, an essentially British status quo, is unacceptable to nationalists and part of the problem. Northern Ireland, it seems, cannot be democratic and stable, if it's purely British or purely Irish.

We must surely look for solutions which offer packages with something in them for both nationalists and unionists but where each has to make fundamental concessions.

If "good fences makes good neighbours" it might seem sound to re-draw the boundaries of Northern Ireland. A successful repartition would create more nationally homogeneous political units: a diminished, but more British Northern Ireland, and a larger Republic. It would make up for Lloyd George's botched partition of 1920 - which established a Northern Ireland to which a third of its residents were opposed.

And repartition might seem obvious and easier in the light of the latest census results, which not only show a rising number of Catholics - on some estimates 43 per cent of the population - but also an increasing geographical segmentation of the two communities. Catholics are increasingly dominant in the west and south of Northern Ireland, and taking a larger share of unionism's most famous heartland, Belfast.

Dr. Liam Kennedy, Lecturer in Economic History at Queen's University, once advocated repartition as one way of resolving the irreconcilable goals of Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists. What does he think now?

LIAM KENNEDY: Clearly people are moving on the ground. There is an informal repartitioning going on. In relation to south and west Ulster, it does raise the real possibility of the great bulk of the people there being able to opt for .. integration into the Irish state. It doesn't offer total victory to either side. Irish nationalists still aspire to a united Ireland and not much by way of compromise on that and Ulster unionists still want to be part of the United Kingdom, fully part of it. So it's not the .. the first option of either nationalists or unionists. And that's particularly true in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, one of the .. the great dangers, it strikes me, would be a kind of pre-emptive ethnic cleansing: that once this possibility came seriously onto the agenda there might well be attempts by both loyalist extremists and nationalist extremists to carve out territory which they would control in a post-partition situation.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Repartition, therefore, won't necessarily end political violence, and might make it worse. And nobody in Northern Ireland actually wants it. And don't forget that the British aren't very good at organizing partitions: consider the cases of Palestine, India and for that matter Ireland.

Another way of splitting the differences would be to create an independent Northern Ireland. It's initially plausible. Both sides would lose their preferred nation-state but would have to work together to make the new entity viable and there are many in Great Britain and the Republic who'd be only too relieved to be rid of the place. But, although the idea was touted in the 1970s, today it has few takers in the region, other than those unionist politicians and loyalist paramilitaries who see it as an option of last resort - or as a bargaining threat to be used to warn against a united Ireland. But that may be a rather hollow threat; according to Paul Teague the economics of independence are even less attractive than those of a united Ireland:

PAUL TEAGUE If an independent Northern Ireland had to stand alone without any British subvention and if living standards were to maintain, it would still have to .. to raise two billion pounds. In the short run, there's no way that an independent Northern Ireland could raise that amount of money. So very quickly again an independent Ulster .. or an independent Northern Ireland would actually face a .. a massive economic constraint and really it's not sustainable.

Despite the sums, James Molyneux, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, won't rule out that option. He recently suggested that Northern Ireland should have the constitutional right to independence, if Westminster decided to alter the Union:

JAMES MOLYNEUX: This House here could, if it wanted to, expel Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. But it could not practically move Northern Ireland into another sovereign state. The Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985, contains a curious phrase that, if the majority of people in Northern Ireland should express a wish, democratically through the ballot box, to become citizens of the Irish Republic, the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of the Irish Republic undertake to promote and support in their respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that desire. But there is another one .. little clause which could be inserted very, very neatly. And I have, I might as well tell you, put this across the polished table during the discussions. There would have to be another clause which would read roughly like this: if circumstances should persuade the people of Northern Ireland to change their status, then Her Majesty's Government would undertake to introduce and support in the Parliament of the United Kingdom legislation to give effect to that desire. That would effectively land you with an independent Ulster.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Is there anything more plausible which might be pushed across the "polished tables"? What of the idea that sovereignty over Northern Ireland should be shared by Great Britain and the Republic. The word "sovereignty" arouses so many emotions that some prefer to speak of joint authority or shared responsibility; but the idea is simple enough.

Representatives of the British and Irish governments would form an executive and possibly share their authority with elected representatives from Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's residents would be full citizens of both nation states. Both communities would lose because their national aspiration is accomplished at the expense of sharing land and power with another community and nation state; but both would gain because their national identity would be protected by full membership of their preferred nation state. Joint authority has been on the agenda since 1984 when it became one of the recommended options of all the constitutional nationalist parties meeting in Dublin at the New Ireland Forum.

The idea was pioneered by a Dublin-based nationalist intellectual, Dr. Desmond Fennell. He also proposed combining joint authority with cantonising Northern Ireland, carving it up into three regions - one nationalist, one unionist and one mixed - and allowing each canton maximum governmental autonomy, on the lines of Belgium and Switzerland. All this from a man who originally thought that the case for a united Ireland was unanswerable.

DESMOND FENNEL: The choice I had to make, at a certain stage of thinking about and writing about the north, was: did I want full justice, which is a united Ireland giving adequate recognition to the Ulster/British, or did I want as my priority peace? If I want peace as my priority, then I recognise that peace can be obtained by less than full justice. Now that can be done by joint sovereignty; it can be done by an imaginative Belgian approach to the North: that's to say the west and south of the North as a region, Belfast as a mixed region and east of Northern Ireland as an Ulster/British region. Above all in policing which is, for me, at the root of the whole problem. There has to be a constitutional arrangement which is felt on the streets of Derry, in the countryside of Tyrone and in South Armagh and Down, by the people there to be a real recognition of their belonging to the same nation as the people of Kerry and Wexford. Anything less than that - for instance the Anglo-Irish Agreement - doesn't get down to grass-roots feeling in the nationalist areas and, therefore, does not prevent a continual supply of recruits and zeal and enthusiasm to the IRA. My whole point is to undercut the IRA by supplying a solution which satisfies what nationalist people really want in the nationalist majority areas of Northern Ireland. Now what they really want is not a united Ireland. What they want is to get rid of interfering alien presences in their streets and countrysides and of oppressive alien symbols in their environment. If that can be done, the motivation which supports the IRA and which leads to the continuing IRA insurgency would, in my view, disappear.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Nationalists would accept joint authority as a substitute for a united Ireland, and it might undercut the IRA. But what of practicalities? Desmond Fennell said that policing was at the heart of the problem:

DESMOND FENNEL: Probably the greatest sin against political common sense committed during the past twenty three years by the British government in the north is insisting that a single police force, unacceptable to a large part of the population, continued to operate. After all in England you have local police forces. Why not in Northern Ireland? Now imagine that you had a police force there which the nationalist people had confidence in, recruited primarily from among themselves; immediately you have removed a great deal of the security problem and indeed you have removed... you have removed most of the targets.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: In transit to that system though wouldn't there be a major difficulty because the people most likely to want to be recruited into that system would be either IRA personnel or ex-IRA personnel?

DESMOND FENNELL: Wonderful if that were to occur. It's exactly how the Gardai were formed down here and it means that you give the IRA a formal and legal role where they become administrators of the law. There would initially be trouble because initially there would be a die-hard IRA element would reject this as a sellout. But popular feeling would prevent, on the one hand, the IRA regarding the new police force as legitimate targets and, if in fact another portion of the IRA were to join the police force, so much the better - they become part of the framework.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: The logic of your position may be impeccable but people might suggest that unionists and members of the RUC and so on will find it extremely difficult to accept that scenario emerging. How do you think unionists would react to the imposition of joint authority arrangements?

DESMOND FENNELL: I think they would need to be pressured and ultimately compelled. It requires coercive actions of financial or ultimately, if necessary, of security force type to get them to comply and that is the resolution to which the British government has not brought itself.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Desmond Fennell's arguments, as he recognises, are not likely to appeal to unionists. John Hume, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, nevertheless argues that joint authority can respect and protect differences and have attractions for unionists. However, while most democratic schemes for joint authority have envisaged a five person executive, made up of one representative from each government and three elected by the people of Northern Ireland, of whom two would certainly be unionists, John Hume's recently been floating the idea of a six person executive which would add a European dimension, thereby ensuring that neither nation has an inbuilt majority:

JOHN HUME: What Northern Ireland represents is the failure of Britain and Ireland to sort out their differences at the beginning of this century and they pushed the failure into a corner. They called it Northern Ireland, and they left it there to fester until it finally burst in the '60s. We will not solve it in purely internal terms because the problem is a wider problem. You begin where you are recognising the differences, accommodating the differences, accepting the differences are not a threat; and then building institutions which allow us to work the common ground together because we're a divided society. The basis of democracy is first of all agreement on how we're governed. You will never unite either Cyprus or the Serbs and Croats or any peoples who are divided unless you respect their differences. And that's what we've got to do in Northern Ireland. We have proposed that there be a proportional election of three people to run and administer the affairs of Northern Ireland and that, in addition, the British Government and the Irish Government, given the conflict of identities, would appoint Commissioners as well. And because we're now part of the new Europe and because we think it would help us recover the incredible economic losses that we have had, then we would have a European Commissioner as well....

BRENDAN O'LEARY: If a critic looked at your proposals they might suggest that the European Commissioner is an irrelevance and unlikely to be conceded by all the other European powers because it might set a precedent for the diminution of state authority, that none of the other member-states of the European Community would like. Would you be prepared to see a system of power-sharing which involved a British and Irish representative with three elected representatives from Northern Ireland?

JOHN HUME: We're .. we're quite prepared to have a hard look at any counterproposals as long as those counterproposals take into account the fundamental principle of accommodating both identities. Ours is only one way of doing that and we thought .. we thought that by proposing the European Commissioner we would make it a bit easier for other people to accept. I'm rather surprised that people see the appointment of a European Commissioner as some sort of threat.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Thus John Hume appears willing to negotiate the details of a deal on joint authority. But critics maintain that any such scheme would probably have to be imposed. Dr. Claire Palley, a former Professor in Belfast, is now an adviser to the President of Cyprus, another divided island. She argues that joint authority would be a mistake, not least because its imposition might prevent an evolutionary development towards a federation or confederation:

CLAIRE PALLEY: There is no reason why a foreign government, because one day the population may decide that they want to go under that government's jurisdiction, should in the interim have some form of jurisdiction. What you need is co-operation between a Northern Ireland government and that government. They will work together, co-operate, and when those advantages are seen and the divisions gradually - and it will take a long time - fade away, co-operation will be converted into institutional change. And, in fact, if one looks at the history of federations, in many cases there has been that change. The Swiss, of course, had a confederation for eight hundred years. Of course, it was accelerated by a war, but the United States started off as a confederation. In most places where there have been federations, there have been histories of institutional co-operation. The federations which really have not in the long-run worked are those where there've been elements of compulsion and one only has to look at former Yugoslavia, the USSR and Czechoslovakia and you see that' if you have things held together by a compulsory structure - in this case the .. the Communist Party - then you fall part. Things must be voluntary rather than imposed.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Nationalists complain that the status quo is an imposed rather than a voluntary structure and that a purely British Northern Ireland won't work. James Molyneux, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, objects to joint authority on grounds of democratic principle. He also argues that any such system would face problems of fiscal accountability.

JAMES MOLYNEUX: Well, I think you would have a very nice situation if the .. talking to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, if you were to say to him: now, how are we going to finance that particular housing scheme in Northern Ireland; what about that new bridge and rail link over the River Lagan, in Belfast? The Chief Secretary here get in touch with his opposite number in Dublin and say: now, fair dues, fifty fifty, cough up!. What would the taxpayers in the Irish Republic say about that? At some stage, there would be elections in Northern Ireland and, remember, we have them roughly near every year when you think of it with assemblies and councils and Euro elections and General Elections. There's usually only one year of the cycle when you don't have an election. And my forecast would be, at the election following the mythical establishment of any sort of joint authority, that sort of structure would be repudiated by the electorate in any one of those, whichever election was nearest. So the two governments are then faced with a little tricky problem: do they suppress the freely expressed wishes of the people through the ballot box; do they suppress democracy?

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Indeed, many unionists argue that the Anglo-Irish Agreement marked the beginning of a slippery and coercive road to joint authority, a position close to the Democratic Unionists' Peter Robinson. He's regularly threatened that unionists would prefer independence to joint authority, let alone a united Ireland:

PETER ROBINSON: I indicated in 1985 that the Anglo-Irish Agreement put Northern Ireland on the window-ledge of the Union. I indicated that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was a process, albeit gradual, drip feed, whatever terminology you want to use, in which they were attempting to take Northern Ireland out of its rightful place and desired place, as part of the United Kingdom and move it into an all-Ireland Republic, that that process could well be a process that would take it through joint sovereignty or shared responsibility between the two governments, that that was unacceptable to me and I would never accept Northern Ireland being jointly administered by the Republic of Ireland and by the United Kingdom Government. That would not be acceptable. And, therefore, the answer quite clearly is that I would look at all alternatives to that because it would only be a step on the road to Northern Ireland being completely absorbed within an all-Ireland Republic.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Clearly, if joint authority is to have any prospect of appealing to unionists, it must not be designed as a staging-post to a united Ireland; it has to be advocated as a permanent settlement. Those who argue for joint authority when nationalists are a minority in Northern Ireland, must accept that their arguments would apply equally if and when demographic trends convert unionists into a minority. Any durable deal would require a redefinition of the Irish nation; the Irish government would have to persuade its people to alter Articles 2 and 3 of its Constitution and unequivocally indicate that joint authority was the limit of their ambitions. And, even with these provisos, unionists would still take some convincing.

There is obviously an impasse in Northern Ireland and the gap to be bridged between nationalist proponents of joint authority and unionist supporters of a British-based settlement remains very wide. Surely in these circumstances it's up to the British and Irish Governments to indicate ways forward and declare their endgames?

When tackled about what he wants, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew, appears to say that nothing is out of the question.

SIR PATRICK MAYHEW: When you say well, should they not describe their endgame, I really can't do better than to say that the British Government is anxious to play its full part in helping the other participants achieve an accommodation of legitimate conflicting interests. There're plenty of 'em and we would like to help as best we can. But we do not have a blueprint. We don't have a kind of template and we don't have an endgame. Very boring, untidy, but we don't. And the history of Englishmen, as my predecessor Peter Brooke once said, trying to impose political solutions with all the great benefit of English common sense upon Irish problems is not a very encouraging one.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: There are no British inhibitions on any constitutional settlement that might be arrived at, if the internal parties agreed to some kind of diminution of British sovereignty, if they agreed to a Bill of Rights, if they agreed to constitutional arrangements that would be foreign to British historical traditions - that would be fine as far as the British Government is concerned?

SIR PATRICK MAYHEW: I think it terribly difficult to visualise any arrangement or accommodation, which had the agreement across the board of the community in Northern Ireland, that would get up our nose. I think there would be great relief that at last the parties in Northern Ireland, all together, the communities, had reached broad and general agreement. And I don't think we would mind at all if that constituted a substantial innovation. If there's broad general agreement, then I find it very difficult to see that we would not be prepared to accept that.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Critics say that Sir Patrick's open-mindedness and nasal sensitivity come cheap, precisely because they're not likely to be tested as long as broad-based agreement remains elusive.

What of the open-mindedness of an incoming Irish Government? Doesn't it have a responsibility to forswear unification in favour of joint authority? Shouldn't it show willing to alter Articles 2 and 3 of its Constitution? Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, former Irish Prime Minister, and joint architect of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, once advocated joint authority. However, now he, like his successors, appears wary about prescribing solutions:

GARRET FITZGERALD: We sought a particular solution, it came about in a very modified form, but it's clear that any solution must involve a north-south relationship of a constructive kind - one with which the minority can feel comfortable - and one that doesn't threaten the majority, the unionist majority in Northern Ireland. Now, how you organise that, together with an internal co-operation in running the internal affairs, is a practical matter to be addressed as and when the situation arises. I don't think anybody should be dogmatic about it.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Articles 2 and 3 are core parts of the constitution. Do they need to be transformed in advance of any grand settlement or should they only be transformed with a settlement?

GARRET FITZGERALD: I don't think that they help the situation. And the down side of the damage they've done to .. potentially to the north/south relationship is greater than any possible gains from them. Insofar as issues arise of people in Northern Ireland having a right to Irish citizenship, that could be accommodated without using this particular formulation. I've never liked those Articles of the constitution. Perhaps I'm prejudiced. I certainly have not got a prescriptive model and it would be quite wrong for anybody in retirement to say what other people should do. I felt that the Agreement could bring things a certain distance. It didn't work out in some respects as well as I thought and it worked out a bit differently to what I thought. It hasn't resolved the problem. It has been my hope since 1987, when I first saw a change of government, that a new Government here and the British Government would find some way of transcending that Agreement in conjunction with the parties in Northern Ireland and arriving at a new form of Agreement, different from what I had proposed, going beyond it.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: There's a certain symmetry here. British and Irish governmental officials portray themselves as generous facilitators and spectators, suggesting the real movement must come from within Northern Ireland. And they're remarkably coy about their own prescriptions. Many contend that this is a recipe for continuing stalemate.

But any talk of a "grand settlement" is probably idle if it does not address or undermine die-hard republicans. Though Sinn Fein is willing to condemn specific IRA actions, literally and metaphorically it's not prepared "to bite the bullet" and condemn the IRA's use of violence, which is the only way its presence at the negotiating tables would be acceptable to the two governments. But how does Sinn Fein react to the idea of joint authority? Again, because of Government restrictions, Martin McGuinness's words are revociced.

MARTIN MCGUINNESS: I can't negotiate for or on behalf of Republicans on the scenario that you have painted but we are prepared to listen to all proposals that are being made by every side and we're prepared to have open minds about all sorts of suggestions. But, at the end of the day, it has to be stated that all political parties go into discussions on the back of their own policies and our policy is clearly that we want to see an Ireland established which is free of foreign interference. We would have serious and grave reservations about the scenario you've just painted on the grounds that such a settlement may not and probably will not give the Irish people full control over their own affairs. Our preferred option is to see the establishment of a thirty-two county republic. Now how that's established and what internal workings would compose such a republic would be subject to discussion and debate. And, as I've said earlier, we're prepared to discuss every option. But we can't negotiate on a programme like this. It would be wrong and very unfair of anyone to expect us to do that.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: Even as the IRA steps up its campaign in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, it's clear that Sinn Fein would like to come in from the cold. It has serious and major reservations about joint authority but it does not say no. And, whatever Sinn Fein thinks, various mainstream forces are converging on joint authority: the apparent impossibility of a purely internal agreement; Great Britain's readiness to become more detached from Northern Ireland and accept constitutional innovation without abandoning it altogether; the declining interest in outright unification in the Republic; and northern nationalists insistence on full parity for their national identity as well as full civic equality. Yet it remains an idea for the future.

All our scenarios assume that Northern Ireland is a conflict between British and Irish national identities. Nationalism at its simplest means that the people are to rule. The idea of self determination is all very well but somebody has to decide who are the people and how should they rule.

In western Europe "pooling sovereignty", through the European Community, is one way in which the sometimes conflicting interests of nations and states can be reconciled or transcended. Perhaps this possibility is also open to Northern Ireland, either through joint authority or through European Union or both. Yet some, like Kevin Boyle, believe we need to go beyond even pooling sovereignty to break the bind.

KEVIN BOYLE: I see solutions based on states and solutions based on a soul and exclusive allegiance and identity with states and territory as being superseded, as being .. in effect, anachronistic in the context of these islands. We need to move away from the ideas which are encapsulated in concepts like the nation state, the independent state, national sovereignty, sharing sovereignty to .. a different view where we .. we try to think in .. in terms of institutions which will adequately reflect the interdependence. For me the best way to think about the solution .. solutions for the future is to change ideas, is to change our discourse, our language.

BRENDAN O'LEARY: For the present, though, the deadlock and manacles imposed by the modern logic of nations and states remains intact. Two centuries after the Jacobins of the United Irishmen promised to "abolish the memory of all past dissension" in Ireland, the politics of antagonism are daily being reformed. Skilled statecraft is still required to guide Northern Ireland into calmer waters.