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Comment on Chapter 5
Brendan Walsh

I propose to discuss Dr Compton’s paper under two headings: namely, the projection of the future religious composition of the population of Northern Ireland (NI), and the scope for repartitioning the province.

Projected Religious Composition of the Population
Dr Compton refers to what he calls the ‘steady rise’ in the proportion of Roman Catholics (RCs) in the population of NI since 1937. In fact, between 1937 and 1961 the increase was very slight, but it has accelerated since 1961. If the average rate of increase that was recorded over the entire period 1937-77 were to continue, it would take another 99 years for the RC population to attain a majority. If the more rapid increase in the RC share that was recorded over the period 1961-77 were to persist, a majority would be attained in 61 years.

These crude calculations bear out the point made by Dr Compton that, even on the assumptions most favourable to the growth of the RC share of the total population, it would be well into the next century before the province would have an RC majority. No early solution to the NI problem will emerge from the dynamics of population growth. Not that a bare RC majority would represent a basis for a solution to the problem, any more than a fairly substantial non-RC majority has averted conflict in the past. For some generations after the RC share of the total population had passed 50 per cent, there would be a non-RC minority of at least one-third. The existence of a sizeable minority with a different set of national/ethnic loyalties from the majority would remain as great a potential source of conflict when the Loyalists became the minority as it has been with the RC population in the minority.

It would therefore be mistaken to place too much an emphasis on the question of when the RC population attains a majority in NI. Many of the problems of the province today derive from an excessive emphasis on the presumed legitimacy conferred on a political entity by the existence of a majority of its population in favour of its Constitution. There is no reason to believe that these problems will disappear if the
numerical balance of power shifts from one community to another at some time in the future.

Repartition as a Solution

It is impossible to discuss the merits of repartition without taking a view of the wisdom of the original partition of Ireland. Dr Compton regards the 1920 partition as a logical application to Irish circumstances of the ideas that were in the air at the end of World War I for settling the problem of conflicting political loyalties among the populations of Europe. He should have mentioned that many of these attempts to reconcile national and ethnic differences proved even more spectacularly unsuccessful than the NI experiment. He claims that the grant of self-determination to the small nations of Europe at Versailles ‘created the modern map of the continent’ without drawing attention to the further carnage and mass population movement that were necessary to put the finishing touches to this new map.

In essence Dr Compton’s verdict on the partition of Ireland is that, if only the politicians had paid more attention to the human geography of the situation in 1920–25, the result would have been a success. It is strange that one who is aware of the 1925 Boundary Commission could take such a view of the Irish experiment. A review of the background to the work of this Commission, and the reasons for its ultimate failure, is helpful in assessing the scope for trying to put the province on a sounder basis by a new partition.

During the Treaty negotiations there was some discussion of the appropriate basis for the partition of Ireland.[1] A crucial issue was the unit of area which should be allowed to decide by local option in favour of self-determination. At one extreme the case was made that the starting-point should be the historical entity ‘Ireland’ – that is, the entire island – and that a simple majority of this population should be allowed to decide the fate of the whole population. A less extreme version of this argument was put by Sarjeant Hanna to the Boundary Commission when he talked in terms of the secession of the Ulster Unionists from the Free State. In fact, the possibility of defining NI in 1920 to comprise the historical province of Ulster with its nine counties seems to have been considered. Some Loyalists favoured this idea because they realized that a majority of the province would have wanted to opt out of the Free State, but others realized that the inclusion of counties Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan, where the Protestant proportion was only 18.2 per cent in 1911, would have threatened the viability of the Unionist majority in the new territory by raising the RC share in the
population from 34 per cent to 44 per cent. (This proportion was 43 per cent in 1971.) Arthur Griffith appears to have favoured the use of local option at county or poor law union level as the basis for the final settlement of the issue. If local option at county level had been followed, then the Free State would have gained counties Tyrone and Fermanagh. If local option had been extended to poor law unions, then the Free State would have gained in addition large areas of counties Londonderry, Armagh and Down. This would have reduced NI to an area closely resembling the unshaded area on Dr Compton’s map of version A (Figure 5.3, p. 82).

It is perhaps inevitable that commentators tend to label the territory over which a plebiscite is likely to yield a convincing majority for their preferred solution the ‘natural’ area and any other division ‘artificial’. It is in this tendentious sense that these adjectives are used about the present division of Ireland. Dr Compton is justified in deploring the pejorative use of these words, but he should not ignore the force of the proposition that the territory which was labelled ‘Northern Ireland’ in 1920 was probably the largest area within which the political system that was thus inaugurated had the longest life expectancy. It is very unlikely that this system would have survived fifty years in any larger definition of NI.

Any discussion of the scope for repartition should take account of the United Kingdom government’s insistence that the future of NI as delineated in 1920 shall be decided by majority vote for the province as a whole. Consistent with this policy, the results of the 1974 Border plebiscite have not been released on anything other than a provincial basis, despite the wealth of interesting analysis that could be undertaken by looking at these figures on a county or electoral ward level.

In the light of these historical facts, it is difficult to know how much attention should be paid to Dr Compton’s proposition that a more satisfactory division of the island could have been implemented if only more attention had been paid to local conditions in 1920–25. It is strange that he does not discuss the extraordinarily detailed work of the Boundary Commission in the townland data from the 1911 Census of Population on the religious distribution of the population within NI. He seems to be unaware that something very close to his proposed repartition (version A) was in fact discussed by the Commission and rejected. It is illuminating to study the reasons given by the Commission for rejecting any repartition that involved the claim that large areas of NI as delineated in 1920 should, in view of their RC majority, be transferred to the Free State:
This claim, so far as it is based on indications of the wishes of the inhabitants of the areas concerned, relies on the assumption that the wishes of the inhabitants of large areas, in which the majority of the population are opposed to the suggested transfer of jurisdiction, should be overruled in favour of the wishes of inhabitants of other areas, on the ground that if the whole group of areas is taken together the wishes of a majority of the inhabitants are shown, on the basis of the religious statistics, to be in favour of such a transfer of jurisdiction.

The general method, adopted in this claim, of using majorities in one area, who are in favour of change, to overrule the wishes of a majority in another who wish to remain where they are is inconsistent with the view stated by the Commission as to the interpretation of Article XII and the principles which should govern its application.[2]

These arguments appear somewhat disingenuous in the light of what was to prove the ultimate undoing of the Commission’s work, namely, the very restrictive interpretation taken by Judge Feetham of its powers. Witnesses from the Free State put the case that the Commission had powers to dismember the existing territory of NI, hoping that it would be reduced to a small, uneconomic area around Belfast, rather similar to the unshaded area in Dr Compton’s map of version A. Against this possibility Feetham argued, ‘it is not the duty of the Commission to start de novo on the reconstruction of the map without any regard to the existing boundary... Northern Ireland when its boundaries have been determined must still be recognisable as the same provincial entity...’[3] And, ‘...no wholesale reconstruction of the map is contemplated... the Commission is not to reconstrue the two territories, but to settle the boundaries between them.[4]

The Commission executed this interpretation of its remit with almost comic diligence, discussing whether individual canal locks and railway bridges, fields and ditches, should be transferred North or South. It ultimately prepared an Award which would have transferred 31,319 people to the Free State and 7,594 to NI, with minor adjustments to the boundary. However, this Award was never carried out owing to the withdrawal of Dr MacNeill from what the Free State had come to regard as a pointless exercise in shoring up the original partition. Thus the failure to implement Dr Compton’s version A in 1925 cannot be attributed to a lack of demographic or geographical sophistication. It was, however, in keeping with the view that the purpose of the original boundary was to delineate the largest possible
territory consistent with an enduring Unionist majority.

It is hard to understand why Dr Compton ignores this historical background and claims instead that the ‘messy execution’ of the basically ‘logical’ idea of partition is the ‘root cause of the present difficulties’. The mess is attributed to ‘following county boundaries in preference to a boundary more exactly reflecting the geographical distribution of the two groups’. I hope that the above discussion of the work, and terms of reference, of the Boundary Commission has dispelled this view of the origins of our present difficulties. Ironically, Dr Compton’s own research, and his ultimate verdict on the scope for putting the partition of Ireland on a firmer basis by redrawing the boundary, agree with the judgement implicit in the Report of the Boundary Commission: namely, that no redrawing of the original boundary would have resulted in a securer basis for the political entity that was created in 1920.

Partition can be a logical solution to a conflict of loyalties between two communities, provided certain conditions are met. The most crucial of these seems to be that it should be possible to segregate the two populations geographically. In the cases of Belgium and Cyprus, for example, this pre-condition seems to be reasonably well met, although problems remain in the field of external relations and mixed areas (such as Brussels). This pre-condition was not met in the area delineated as Northern Ireland in 1920, and Dr Compton’s research shows that no feasible repartition would create an area that comes any closer to meeting it today. He acknowledges as much by saying that ‘a solution to the present conflict based on new boundaries, more closely reflecting the religious/national divide, would be even more difficult to achieve now than in the 1920s’. This conclusion is very hard to reconcile with his view that partition was a sound strategy, flawed only in its execution. The evidence of history, as well as the burden of research from the Boundary Commission to Dr Compton’s own study, is that partition was an inappropriate strategy for the NI problem.

At the risk of repeating some of the points he himself raised, it is worth dwelling on Dr Compton’s version A, for which he sees some major advantages. If the map of version A is superimposed on Figure 5.2, the reader can obtain a picture of the areas of RC majority that would remain inside the new, reduced NI under this proposal. These are mainly in North Antrim, along the eastern shores of Lough Neagh, and in Belfast City. The province would still contain about a quarter of a million Catholics, who would form about one-quarter of the total population. This minority might be even less disposed to support the new arrangement than the existing system. The diminution of NI
might encourage the remaining minority to anticipate the eventual collapse of the whole entity. The population that had previously been part of NI but was no longer under the jurisdiction of the RUC and the British army might not refrain from continued involvement in the affairs of the province. Above all, the neighbourhood basis for communal strife that seems to be so important in the present conflict would remain, especially in Belfast. In cities such as Derry and Newry, the Republic’s government would, for the first time, acquire significant working-class areas with a population that did not accept the legitimacy of the State.

It might be worth exploring the possibility of delineating a jurisdiction that was not limited by the restriction of contiguity. It is obvious that a more homogeneous population could be obtained if the jurisdiction of NI were to be defined over small local areas where a majority is in favour of the link with Britain. But the resultant territory would lack all geographical cohesion, and despite Dr Compton’s impatience with the idea of a ‘natural’ spatial unit, some such cohesion seems to be a prerequisite for political viability. A review of the historical experience with corridors (Poland) or wings (Pakistan) is not encouraging. However, despite the improbable shape of the jurisdiction that would emerge from this exercise, it might hold some promise for a future constitutional arrangement based on some mixture of local autonomy, provincial, and all-Ireland structures.

Even though the inferences one is forced to draw from his analysis are gloomy, Dr Compton’s paper is a most useful compilation of material relevant to the Northern Ireland problem. His failure to arrive at a rearrangement of the boundary that offered any promise of greater success than the existing one indicates, to my mind, that the partition option was the wrong one from the start. Its failure has been due not to imperfections in the way the basic idea was implemented in 1920, or to the fact that the Boundary Commission was not allowed to contemplate any radical new configurations of the province, but rather to the fact that the two communities in NI are very intermingled territorially. No conceivable redrawing of the boundary between the two parts of Ireland can produce a Northern Ireland that is homogeneous enough to be a viable political entity either on its own or in union with Britain. It is therefore not to the skills of the demographer or the geographer, but to those of the politician, the political scientist and the constitutional lawyer, that we must look for a way forward from the impasse that was created by the partition of Ireland in 1920.
Notes


