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Chapter

Ireland’s Ethno-Religious Conflicts: Path Dependence and its Legacies

JOSEPH RUANE

On his arrival in Belfast for the final phase of the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of April 10, 1998, Tony Blair famously declared: ‘A day like today is not a day for sound bites, really. But I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders.’ When the Agreement was signed two days later, the statement did not seem like hyperbole. Rather it seemed that the final piece of the jigsaw to settle a centuries-old conflict had been put in place. By establishing two states on the island, the settlement of 1921 had addressed – sufficiently if not fully – the concerns of Southern nationalists and of Northern unionists. It provided little or no protection for the substantial number of nationalists who lived north of the border, and were now subject to unionist majority-rule. Their dissent from and challenge to the Northern state eventually brought it down, and the failure to put quickly in place an agreed alternative meant decades of violent conflict. The GFA was the long-sought settlement and it was designed to address the concerns of both nationalists and unionists. It established the conditions of constitutional change, ensured equality and rights for both communities in Northern Ireland and provided for incremental change towards greater North-South institutional integration. In addition it provided for referendums, North and South, which would give the settlement a legitimacy that no prior agreement had enjoyed. It offered, in the words of the Declaration of Support, a ‘truly historic opportunity for a new beginning’.

The optimism that followed the signing of the Agreement did not last. The following August saw the worst single atrocity of the troubles, a Real IRA bomb in Omagh that killed 29 people. There would be further deaths. Unofficial Provisional IRA actions continued and it took until 2005, and major political pressure, for it to de-commission its weapons and cease operations, while loyalist paramilitaries did not de-commission until 2009. It took a further
agreement (the St Andrews Agreement of November 2006) for Sinn Féin to support the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to support the new institutions. The full implementation of the original agreement took ten years. The new institutions have been working effectively since 2007, but low-level conflict is routine at communal interfaces, peace walls have been extended rather than demolished, and sectarian attacks continue. More than one ‘dissident’ IRA remains in existence and seeks to exploit the disillusionment of many republicans with the outcome of their struggle. Loyalist ex-paramilitaries are inactive but maintain a shadowy existence. There is an almost universal desire to maintain the peace, but as currently envisaged, it rests on separation and accommodation rather than on far-reaching transformation.

The Irish government and majority public opinion have long distinguished the treatment of the Protestant minority in the South from that of the Catholic minority in the North. It is accepted that there were instances of ill-treatment of the Southern minority during the first four decades of the state, but they are viewed as exceptional and relationships in recent decades are judged to be excellent. There are more critical voices however. A recurring issue is the decline in Southern Protestant numbers between 1926 and 1991 – from 7 per cent of the population to 3.2 per cent. If relationships were so good, why did the numbers decline and by so much? The explanations include attacks on Protestants during the war of independence and civil war, their political and cultural marginalisation within the new state and the tendency to consider them as (at best) less than ‘fully Irish’. It has also been suggested that the principal reason relationships have been more tranquil in the South than the North is that the Southern minority was more prosperous materially and smaller in size than the Northern one. The implication is that once allowance is made for differences in demographics, class profiles and methods of protest, the culture – as distinct from the practice – of Protestant-Catholic relationships, North and South, may not be that different.

This paper asks why Catholic-Protestant conflict has been so long-lasting in Ireland, and to what extent the Good Friday Agreement deals with the remaining conditions of conflict. It proposes an explanation for the persistence of conflict over the long term and in the two parts of Ireland since partition. It is offered as a tribute in a different disciplinary register to Professor W J Smyth, whose historical geography of the Irish longue durée has fascinated and challenged me for more than three decades. More personally, it is an expression of thanks for an equal number of years of collegiality and friendship.
Explaining persistence

In a world where many things are changing, why do some things remain the same – or change so slowly that they appear immobile? According to Robert Dodgshon, the question is not asked as often as it should: his central argument in *Society and Space in Time* (1998) is that ‘inertia’ is a crucial factor in social life, requiring as much attention as change. He points to three sources of inertia. The first, relevant to understanding landscapes, is the existence of complex systems of information storage and communication which make the longer-term past more accessible and more relevant to the present. The second is the inherently inertial tendencies of organisations, the ‘constitutive core’ of modern societies. The third, of particular relevance to understanding the built environment, is the manner in which industrial concentration has ‘locked vast amounts of capital into particular configurations of geography’.6

Dodgshon is right that mainstream social theory has given a lot more attention to change than to continuity, but this is especially a feature of the recent period. Historical and regional geographers and some political scientists (notably Stein Rokkan) have made much use of stratificatory models of change that see processes of layering and sedimentation in which the old survives as a substrate of the new.7 First-wave modernisation theorists allowed for processes of incorporation in which the old continued as a component of the new, usually with altered meanings and functions, for processes of displacement where the old survived for a time in its own (usually self-enclosed) spaces, and for forms of regression where a breakdown in modernisation led to a reversion to earlier forms.8 The dependency and world-systems theorists of the 1970s and 1980s went further, foregrounding continuity while conceptualising and explaining it differently.9 The neglect – if not denial – of continuity is primarily a feature of 1980s and 1990s theorists of modernity who took one strand in Marx’s view (capitalism as a solvent of pre-capitalist structures) and made it the basis of a dissolutionist theory of late modernity.10

In recent years a cross-disciplinary literature has emerged that explains persistence in terms of the middle-range concept of ‘path dependence’. The central idea is that there are moments (‘critical junctures’) in social life – in the economy, in politics, in culture – when a particular way of doing something emerges that then gets ‘locked-in’, such that things continue to be done in that way regardless of whether it is the most rational, efficient or even normatively acceptable way of doing things. Lock-in may result from ‘positive feedback mechanisms’ or ‘increasing returns’, but it may also be due to the difficulty or cost of changing from one way of doing
things to another. Whatever the reason, things are now on a path and remain on it until the mechanisms of lock-in are undone. This may take a relatively short period of time or it may take centuries.\footnote{11}

The clearest examples of path dependence come from short run studies of technology where persistence is easy to track and the mechanisms of lock-in are easy to spot.\footnote{12} More complex forms of path dependence can be found in information systems, regional economies, public policies, organisational structures, law and political life.\footnote{13} The concept can also be applied at the macro level, and has long been implicit in the work of historical social scientists.\footnote{14} Historians stay clear of such explicitly theoretical concepts, but they routinely use the concepts of ‘crisis’, ‘rupture’, ‘aftermath’, and ‘consequences’ to say much the same kind of thing. In other words, the phenomena to which the concept of path dependence refers are already familiar. Its value as a concept is that it pays more attention to them and specifies the mechanisms involved.

Three further theoretical points are relevant to what follows. Firstly, the concept of lock-in can be used to explain change as well as persistence. If a particular condition has persisted over a long period of time and then changes, one possible explanation is the undoing of one or more mechanisms of lock-in. Secondly, a distinction can be made between structural and cultural lock-in.\footnote{15} Structural lock-in operates at the level of social practices and relationships rooted in economic and/or political interests. Cultural lock-in operates at the level of cultural practices, collective representations and social imaginaries. Where structural and cultural lock-in co-exist they reinforce each other, but one may persist after the other has been undone. Finally, the end of a particular path dependence sequence does not necessarily mean the dissolution of all the relationships, institutions and cultural representations associated with it. There can be a legacy that lasts a further period.

**Irish history as path dependence**

Irish history readily lends itself to interpretation in path dependent terms: the early modern period of conquest and colonisation when a land system was created that endured into the twentieth century; the multiple crises of the late 1700s that prepared the way for more than a century of the Union; the shift from tillage to livestock in the post 1815 period and the demographic and subsistence crises of the Great Famine that gave a shape to rural Ireland that lasted until the 1950s; the cultural and political conflicts of the closing decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century that led to partition and set the two parts of the island on different
courses; the economic choices made in the Republic at the end of the
1950s that opened the way to today’s outward-looking, EU-supported
and external investment-dependent economy; the challenge to the
original Stormont regime that led to thirty years of violence and to the
establishment of the present power-sharing government.

In particular, Ireland’s history of ethno-religious conflict invites a
path dependent approach, with an initial critical juncture, strategic
choices that resulted in structural and cultural lock-in, and associated
mechanisms of stabilisation and reproduction. The critical juncture was
the early modern period, a time of English state-building, economic
dynamism, reformation and the start of a long period of imperial
expansion. As far as Ireland was concerned, the crucial decision by
the Crown was to seek to reconstruct it on English lines, to rely on
English Protestant administrators, soldiers and fortune-seekers to carry
this out and, when this was resisted, to implement a policy of
displacement and colonisation using Protestant settlers from England
and Scotland. The crucial decision by the native Irish elite was to resist
the process and to rebel, leaving themselves open to displacement and
colonisation. By the time the process had run its course, most of its
members had been replaced, with further displacement at lower
levels, particularly in Ulster. The new elite consisted overwhelmingly
of the descendants of the Protestant settlers of the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries; the mass of the population was descended from
the older inhabitants of the island, whose leading families had been
displaced, and whose ancestral rights had been usurped. The result
was a society divided ethnically and religiously with the divisions
rooted in the landscape, property relations and institutions.16

If this explains the origins of Ireland’s ethno-religious divisions, it
does not explain their intensity or persistence. To understand that, the
ethno-religious divide has to be seen in the context of Ireland’s
distinctive geo-politics: one in which an ethnic and religious minority
ruled a dispossessed and disenfranchised majority with the support of
an external power on which it was dependent. To protect their fragile
position, the new rulers put in place a battery of repressive measures.
But in doing so they reproduced the disaffection which lay at the root
of their political vulnerability.17 Despite the weaknesses inherent in
such a political order, neither the British government nor the (local)
ruling minority made a serious effort to change it. At most they made
incremental adjustments to diminish the intensity of majority
disaffection: repeal of the penal laws, union, the commutation of
tithes, Catholic Emancipation, church disestablishment, land reform.18
Land reform was the most radical and potentially far-reaching of
these, but it came too late to make a political difference.
Why was no attempt made at a radical restructuring of the political order and sufficiently early to have a chance of success? Beyond the particular interests, cultural and political assumptions, resistances and inertias at play, there was the political reality that even if the most promising alternative – one based on the loyalty of Catholics as well as of Protestants – was pursued, there was no guarantee that it would be secured. On the contrary, it carried the risk of simply undoing what (fragile) stability had been achieved. In path dependent terms, this was structural lock-in: however unsatisfactory the situation, it was better than any evident alternative. This security dilemma rested on and was reinforced by a cultural lock-in that was equally resistant to change: the system of oppositional identities, historical narratives and communities that was the legacy of decades of war, massacre, displacement and dispossession.19

Both forms of lock-in were configured and embedded in ways that made them resistant to reconstruction or change. One of these was the extent of interdependency in the relations of difference, power, and community: power and community were based on difference; unequal power added to the hostility that attached to difference; power was a critical resource in defending difference; communal solidarity was a source of power, and the context in which difference was reproduced. Each of these had further sub-components. Power could be economic, cultural, or political, or – viewed from a different angle – structural, institutional, geo-political or coercive, with different possible combinations of each. One form of power underpinned and could be used to secure another; weakness in one (for example, demographic) could be compensated for by strength in another (for example, coercive). Difference was also multiple – religious, ethnic, cultural, political – with overlaps between these, and with similar binary logics present in each of them. Community could be confessional, ethnic, spatial, national or supranational. The different forms of community overlapped (for example, confessional and local community) and smaller ones nested within larger ones (for example, confessional community conceived as the basis of the national one). The effect was an over-determination of identities, interests and power relations that intensified conflict and left few escape routes for those caught up in it.20

The persistence of these relationships over extended periods depended on effective mechanisms of reproduction. These were, crucially, the family, kin group and local community. The family, inserted into the local relations of church and neighbourhood, was the major site for the intergenerational transmission of religious, ethnic, and political identity. It was the primary agency of
transmission of property, wealth, status, and social, symbolic and cultural capital. It was also through the family and the local community that each generation learned who their wider community was and who belonged to it. What was transmitted to the next generation was never exactly what had been received from the previous one. Identities, cultural practices and allegiances were open to revision, wealth and social position could be increased or dissipated, internal and external communal boundaries could change over time. But this happened within structural constraints that ensured that the shape of things remained the same.

Further stabilisation came from the fact that these relationships were integrated into wider ones which also showed continuity over time. Irish Catholicism was a local version of the universal Roman Catholic Church; the Established Church was part of a wider Anglican religious world that had crossed the Atlantic; Irish Presbyterianism maintained its close affinities with Scottish Presbyterianism and its North American offshoots. Irish debates about progress and backwardness, tradition and modernity, nations and nationalisms replicated wider European ones. The politics of the British-Irish relationship were an integral part of the geo-politics of the British union and empire. None of these was static, but they changed in patterned ways and had their own continuities.

While all of this severely limited the scope for undoing the mechanisms of path-dependent lock-in, it did not completely rule it out. Path dependence is a tendency, not an iron law. If reform efforts had been sufficiently radical and sustained, Ireland’s ethno-religious divisions might have softened and in time lost their importance, and today both parts of Ireland might still be within the United Kingdom. But the reforms were never adequate to the problems they addressed. The motor of change was the Catholic recovery and the shift in the communal power balance. Home Rule was a final attempt to create a context in which Catholic grievances could be addressed while providing Protestants the continued protection of the union. Ulster unionists resisted it in any form, and when radical nationalists got the opportunity, they pushed for independence. Each thought the price for this – partition – worth paying.

The Irish Free State/Republic of Ireland since independence

For centuries the relationship between Irish Protestants and Catholics had been shaped and made (further) conflictual by their different relationships to the British state. British withdrawal in 1921 undid structural lock-in in the greater part of the island and opened the possibility for relationships to be re-built in new and more positive
ways. But there was still the matter of cultural lock-in: the oppositional identities, historical narratives, and communities. Did these continue and, if they diminished over time, to what degree? The following attempts a general answer to this question which necessarily skirts over significant variations of class, region, and locality.24

For Catholics, the vast majority of whom were fervently nationalist, British withdrawal meant that they could now give full and effortless expression to their religious identity, begin the process of de-Britishising the state and the public culture, and put in place an ‘Irish-Ireland’. For Protestants, most of whom had been unionist in politics, British withdrawal meant the loss of their traditional source of political protection and privilege and a fracturing of their relationship with the Crown and the wider British world. Their vulnerability increased as their numbers declined – from 11 per cent of the total population in 1911 to just 3.2 per cent in 1991 – after which a recovery began: to 3.7 per cent in 2002 and 3.9 per cent in 2006.25 The sharpest decline was between 1911 and 1926 when numbers fell by one third, most of this in the period 1919-23. It was due to a combination of factors: the withdrawal of the British administration and British forces, the departure of those for whom a post-British Ireland had no appeal, changes in the economy, the destruction of their businesses and homes during the Troubles, the loss of family members, and threats to their safety.26 Later decline is attributable to higher rates of Protestant emigration during the earlier period; lower levels of Protestant fertility and (from the 1960s) high rates of marriage with Catholics.27

The demographic decline of Protestants is attributed by some writers to their ill-treatment by the new state, the Catholic Church and the majority community. The case can certainly be made. No indulgence was shown to their lingering British identity or loyalty, either in their schools or in public commemorations. The measures inserted into the 1922 constitution to safeguard their position were removed by the 1930s. The nationalist ethos of the state made employment in the public sector unattractive and the Irish language requirement was a further impediment to entry. In 1950 the Irish Supreme Court gave legal status to promises made under the Catholic Church’s _ne temere_ decree. On the other hand, Protestants remained materially prosperous, they continued to enjoy easy access to jobs in business, banking, law and retail where there was a strong Protestant presence, and their schools and hospitals enjoyed government support on the same terms as Catholics.28

There were numerous sources of tension between the two communities: religious prejudice and intolerance on both sides,
confessionally-based differences in cultural *habitus* and style that had ethnic resonances, and Catholic resentment of the superior social position of Protestants. But the most important source of division was political and ideological. For ex-unionist Protestants, the new state was an affront to their centuries-old British identity and loyalties that also brought with it a sense of cultural dismemberment. For nationalist Catholics, it was the realisation of their historic aspirations and the opportunity to undo the destructive legacy of centuries of British rule. Independence had been pursued to realise this project and achieved at great cost; there was no question of a small minority with an opposing viewpoint holding it back.

There was little hope of reconciling these viewpoints, in the short term at least, and conflict was contained by each side keeping its distance from the other. Willingly or unwillingly, Protestants ceded the public domain to Catholics, kept the expression of their allegiances to the private realm, and concentrated on providing for themselves, their families and community. The key institutions were the family, the church community, the wider kin group, and social and sporting clubs, many of them church-based. An overriding concern was to avoid intermarriage, and both the distancing from Catholics and the internal organisation of Protestant social life were designed to ensure that it did not happen. They also stayed clear of anything that seriously challenged their identity or compromised their loyalties, including the Irish army, the GAA, and nationalist commemorative activities.

This protected the community during the period of transition, but it was not a strategy for the long term. For better or worse, the Republic of Ireland was their home and the basis of their citizenship. The older generation found it difficult to open up, later generations less so. The process began in the 1950s and quickened in the 1960s. It was propelled by wider developments – religious ecumenism, a rapid expansion in second and third level education, the arrival of foreign industry, the amalgamation of indigenous banks and businesses, the dissemination of new forms of international youth and popular culture by the mass media, the transformations of old bastions of Protestantism – the *Irish Times*, Trinity College, Protestant secondary schools – into confessionally-mixed zones. It went farther again during the 1990s and 2000s. It remains uneven, however, and even today some Protestants live primarily within their own community, with little desire to move outside it.

The process just described is one of integration – the movement by Protestants out of their community and into the mainstream of national life. It is not to be conflated with assimilation, which would mean the absorption by Protestants of Catholic culture and the loss of
their own. Some writers have suggested that such a process may be under way. It is certainly the case that as a tiny minority, Protestants have to pay close attention to and adapt their position to take account of the views of the majority, whereas Catholics are not under the same obligation. But the idea of assimilation assumes too much. Firstly, there is no longer (if there ever was) a single, coherent ‘Catholic culture’ to which Protestants might assimilate. Secondly, both Catholics and Protestants are being influenced by the same socio-economic changes and international cultural influences. Finally, there is the persistent British and Protestant cultural and institutional legacy which post-independence nationalists tried – but failed – to undo. On the other hand, if assimilation is not taking place, there is evidence of substantial convergence.

In understanding what convergence entails, including its limits, a distinction has to be made between the political/ideological and socio-cultural spheres. Political/ideological convergence has to do with the relationship to the state and national culture, the sense of nationality and the narrative of history. At one level there is very little difference today in the relationship of Catholics and Protestants to the state or to Irish nationality. For the vast majority of Protestants there is no residual loyalty to, or cultural affinity with, Britain; their identity is Irish Protestant with Protestant as a historic, religious, and family identity. However, this does not rule out different reference points, identifications and emotional responses to the national culture today and – even more so – to the past. Most Protestants maintain a distance from the more ‘nationalist’ parts of the public culture, they are drawn more to ‘revisionist’ versions of Irish history than to nationalist ones, and they have little if any of the anti-British reflexes of many Catholics.

Socio-cultural convergence has to do with habitus, manner of speaking, accent, dress, bodily adornment, interpersonal style, social attitudes, values, and life-style. Difference here is more often the subject of stereotyping and anecdotes than of systematic research, but Florence Craven has recently documented both convergence and difference across a range of social attitudes, including church-related ones. Changes in the more subtle expressions of culture (for example, bodily habitus, styles of dress) are more difficult to pin down, but the picture that emerges from interview research is one of a diminution of some differences and less use of public cues to express difference, but not of all differences. Three factors would account for this (uneven) convergence. One is the absorption by both sides of international cultural trends as transmitted by the mass media. A second is the levelling effect of the replacement of
confessionalised zones by confessionally-mixed ones. The third is a wish to make a difference that is now understood in more private terms less immediately visible.

In a context of convergence, what today is the state of the ‘classic’ Protestant community with its distinctive codes, traditions and memories, and is its future secure? The community still exists and there is still a distinctive Protestant cultural track. But there are threats to both. The most serious is the combination of inter-marriage and secularisation. Even where the children of mixed marriages are baptised Protestant, it is very difficult for the Protestant parent to transmit the ‘classic’ Protestant identity and heritage, in particular where contact with the church is limited and Catholic-Protestant mixing is routine. Another challenge is that of new arrivals: Catholic converts and Protestant immigrants. They buttress numbers, but they do not share, and do not easily assimilate to, the historic culture of the community.

While relations between Catholics and Protestants in the Republic today can justifiably be described as good, there are issues that continue to trouble Protestants. One is the tendency to overlook their presence in the society and to speak as if they were not there at all. This includes media discussions that assume that the entire population has had a Catholic upbringing or that reference to the bishop of a particular diocese can be assumed to be a reference to the Catholic bishop. More troubling is the reluctance of some Catholics to accord them a full claim on Irishness either by definition (because they are Protestant), or because they do not appear sufficiently nationalist in their politics or sufficiently ‘Irish’ in their socio-cultural style. A third indicator of unresolved issues is the emotions aroused in discussions of the past where religion and nationalism intersected. There is no controversy today about the sectarian component in the Fethard-on-Sea boycott, but the suggestion that the IRA was sectarian or that politically uninvolved Protestants were victimised during the period 1919-23 arouses strong feelings.

The tendency to ignore Protestants in statements about Irish society could be attributed to demography: they are a tiny minority, and large majorities everywhere ignore small minorities. But the reluctance to accord Protestants the status of ‘fully Irish’ suggests that there is more to it: that despite frequent claims about the pluralism and inclusiveness of Irish nationalism, many Catholics continue to have difficulty with that particular difference, whether on religious or on ethno-historical grounds. In this context, hyper-sensitivity to the charge that Irish nationalism was sectarian suggests unresolved tensions beneath a placid and reconciliatory surface.
At one level this is surprising. In recent decades Irish nationalism has engaged in both robust self-criticism and imaginative self-reconstruction. It willingly admits that the nationalism of the early years of the state – of ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ – was inward – and backward-looking, intolerant of difference, culturally exclusivist, defining the (ideal) nation in Gaelic and Catholic terms. But it also insists that today’s nationalism is outward-looking, future-oriented, inclusivist, pluralist and cosmopolitan, and accepting of minorities. Moreover the ‘Celtic Tiger’ years saw the triumphant announcement of an Irish identity no longer constructed in ethno-historical terms, one that defined the Irish today not in terms of ethnicity, religion or history but in terms of culture and character: their openness, adaptability, acquisitiveness, entrepreneurialism, internationalism, globalism. This was accompanied by a new ‘global’ geo-politics, a characteristic of the elite in particular, but also of wider sections of the population: one that imagined the Republic as reaching out from its 26-county base (understood as ‘Ireland’) to the rest of the world, still geographically part of the island of Ireland and British-Irish archipelago, but no longer part of it culturally, politically or emotionally. Why, in these circumstances, would the position of Protestants still be an issue?

The answer is that the earlier nationalism was only partly reconstructed and, in particular, its ‘de-colonising’ strand has persisted as an undercurrent. According to it, the British presence was colonial in origin, Britishness was an alien implant, and the cultural goal of independence was to get rid of it. This strand became less prominent after the 1960s, but it did not disappear. The revivalist project was treated as less urgent, but it was not abandoned. The Irish language was to be revived by more innovative and imaginative means and British influence was to be reduced by opening the country up to other influences, in particular that of Europe. During the Celtic Tiger period there was occasional, somewhat rueful, recognition that foreign investment might have been more difficult to secure if Ireland had become wholly Irish-speaking. But the goal of reviving Irish was not abandoned; indeed it was given new meaning as a way of affirming national difference at a time of globalisation and reassurance was taken in its continuing signs of life.

The de-colonising theme had two consequences for political attitudes in the new state. One was to make anti-Englishness and anti-Britishness a political imperative, not simply an ethno-cultural disposition. The other was to problematize the position of Protestants since their origins as a community lay in the English conquest, their ancestors had played a lead role in the process of Anglicisation, and they had consistently supported the link with the Crown. A nationalist public
culture that was more liberal, pluralist, inclusive, and cosmopolitan than its predecessor, was certainly more accepting of the Protestant distinctiveness than its predecessor had been. A ‘Celtic Tiger’ national identity and a ‘global’ geo-politics were as open to Protestants as to Catholics. But the de-colonising theme – even if just as an undercurrent, though it is sometimes more than that – meant that Protestants were still seen as the descendants of those who had oppressed the Catholic Irish and destroyed the indigenous culture of the island. As a majority in an unassailable position Catholics give little thought to what that means today; Protestants do not have such luxury.

This answers the question posed at the beginning of this section: what happened to cultural lock-in after structural lock-in was undone in 1921. There has been no radical unpicking of it by either side, though Protestants have done more than Catholics to get beyond it. In particular they have wholeheartedly accepted the state and affirmed an Irish identity shorn of its past Britishness. In contrast, post-1960s Catholics/nationalists have experimented with different versions of the national narrative – revisionist, post-nationalist, ‘Celtic Tiger’, and now post-‘Celtic Tiger’ – while leaving its foundations largely untouched.

**Northern Ireland since partition**

Viewed from one angle, North and South in the post-partition period were mirror-images of one another. In both parts of the island the minority – Catholic in the North, Protestant in the South – became a ‘society within a society’, keeping its distance from a public culture and state with which it could not identify. But the concept of mirror-image works only so far: the geo-political contexts, claims to legitimacy and internal power dynamics were radically different in the two parts of the island. In the South, the Protestant minority was small and it accepted both the legitimacy and finality of the state; in the North the Catholic minority was large and rejected the legitimacy of the state. Despite the continued links to the Crown, the Irish Free State was a radically new kind of geo-political entity; in the North the continuities with the past were striking. Protestants were a substantial majority of the population (65.6 per cent), but not (in their minds) a secure one. As in the past they depended for their survival on a British government in which they did not have full faith, and they attempted to buttress their position by discriminating against the Catholic population. These policies also came at a similar price – continued Catholic disaffection and a reproduction of the underlying weakness of the state.

There was a further continuity: the communal power balance continued to change and over time the Protestant position was
subject to erosion. In 1921 Unionists were sufficiently strong to secure the state they wanted and to impose this on the Catholic population. By the 1960s they no longer had that capacity. Some of the reasons for this were economic – the decline in the traditional industrial sector and the need for British exchequer funding for investment in infrastructure and education. Others were social – the greater education and urbanisation of the Catholic population – or political – greater international concern for minority rights making it more difficult for the British government to turn a blind eye to unionist excesses. The extent to which the Protestant position had slipped became apparent in the late 1960s when a campaign for ‘civil rights’ generated mass Catholic support, loyalist opposition and public disturbances. The disturbances were on a relatively minor scale (much less than in 1921-2) but they precipitated a crisis in the state. The request for British troops to contain them led to the direct involvement of the British government and the further weakening of the Unionist position.

Unionists and nationalists had very different expectations of British involvement. Unionists looked to it to re-stabilise the security situation; nationalists hoped it would act as a counter-balance to unionist power. The contradictions inherent in the British government’s position soon became apparent. Northern Ireland was part of the Union and its population were British citizens entitled to the equal rights under the law. But the society was composed of communities, not simply individuals, and it existed by the will of just one of the communities. Did the British government have an equal obligation to both communities – as nationalists believed – or did it have a greater obligation to the majority and loyal one – as unionists believed? The contradictions would have been difficult to manage under normal circumstances. But a resurgent (Provisional) IRA deliberately intensified and exploited them, making reform more difficult and provoking security force actions that magnified the Catholic sense of grievance and elided in their minds the difference between the Unionist and British governments. Within a short period the Catholic population was becoming alienated, not simply from the Unionist government, but from the British one as well.

What had happened was dramatic. A divided but stable society with a contested but functioning government had become a terrain of violent communal confrontation which the local state was unable to control. When the metropolitan one intervened to restore order, violence increased and the legitimation deficit of the local state was generalised to the metropolitan one. In fact the possibility of this happening had been inherent in the situation from the outset. The
survival of the local state depended ultimately on the superior power resources of the dominant community and on the uncritical support of the metropolitan government. Once these were lost a moderate political and security challenge was sufficient to start the process of de-stabilisation, and a well-organised and ruthless armed campaign was able to do the rest.

The political fall-out from the killings of Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972) brought clarity to the situation and convinced the British government that simply reforming the Stormont government was no longer an option. It prorogued (and later abolished) the devolved government and established direct rule. Direct rule was intended as an interim measure – to allow the negotiation of a new form of devolved government, one that would have the support of both communities. The first attempt at this – the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 – appeared initially to be successful, but was brought down after seven months by mass loyalist industrial and paramilitary action.56 Direct rule continued for another twenty-five years accompanied by paramilitary and communal violence that blocked any real hope of a settlement. For many observers and for many years the 1976 observation of Richard Rose that ‘the problem [with Northern Ireland] is that there is no solution’ best summed up the situation.57

Eventually, a solution was found. What made it possible? Most explanations focus on the tactics, strategies, motives and timing of the key actors. More important were changes in the conditions under which they made their decisions: a further shift in the balance of communal power, and the (slow) process of British re-positioning. The original 1921 settlement had collapsed because the power advantage that unionists had enjoyed at that time had been eroded. The conditions of a new settlement were clarity on the new power balance, agreement as to what it was, and willingness on both sides to accept its implications. For a long time none of these conditions held, but by the late 1980s and early 1990s they were emerging. Protestants were still demographically the larger community and retained a political and economic edge. But Catholic numbers were growing, they formed the majority in the younger age cohorts, their position in the economy and state was strengthening, they were increasing their share of the popular vote, and the British government was moving towards even-handedness in its relationship to the communities.58

Once the new power balance was clear, the conditions of a settlement were present. The challenge now was to work out and get agreement on its precise terms. Despite the improvement in their position, the most that Catholics/nationalists could still hope to achieve was equality, with Irish unity left open as a possibility in the
future. But the equality they could insist on was more than simply in employment, educational support, or political or cultural representation. It now included the British government moving to a position of neutrality in respect of the communities, and the Irish government having a substantial role in policy making. For Protestants it was evident that any hope of a return to majority rule was long gone; it was in any case this no longer in their interest since they might not be a majority for much longer. But they could still insist as fundamental conditions on a guarantee that the Union would remain as long as a majority supported it, on changes in the Irish constitution to reflect this, and on an end to the Provisional IRA’s campaign of violence. This was a substantial achievement. There was still a Protestant majority in Northern Ireland and even if Catholics became a majority, they were divided on the question of Irish unity and were likely to remain so. With the end of the IRA’s campaign and a return to stability, there was every hope that the Union would last indefinitely.

The agreement that emerged out of the year-long, all-party, negotiations on Good Friday, 1998, rested on these new political realities. Moreover, it did this in a way that ensured that, while no party to the negotiations got everything that it wanted, each got sufficient to feel that its struggle or its resistance or its efforts for peace had been worthwhile, that its interests were protected, and that it would be free to pursue democratically any goals it wished to pursue. The document was detailed, intricate and finely crafted. It built on existing provisions but added new ones and it made up a complex and interdependent whole. It offered a constitutional guarantee that there would be no change in the position of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people, reinforced for the first time by a similar guarantee in the Irish constitution, while also providing for Irish unity if that became the wish of the majority. It established power-sharing institutions, mainstreamed equality legislation, established cross-border bodies and British-Irish institutions, and provided for police reform, de-commissioning and a Human Rights Commission. In the process it confirmed British sovereignty and changed its nature and meaning.

The 1998 Agreement was something genuinely new in the history of British-Irish relationships. For the first time the British government had addressed within the framework of its own state the problem that had dogged Irish Catholic-Protestant and British-Irish relationships since the seventeenth century: that British geo-political interests in Ireland were being secured by the privileging of loyal Protestants at the expense of (presumptively) disloyal Catholics. This ended in the greater part of the island in 1921 as a result of British withdrawal.
This time withdrawal was not considered an option, and – faced with an apparently interminable conflict – the British government eventually moved to deal with the problem internally. It did so in two ways. Firstly, it declared that it had no ‘selfish strategic interest’ in Northern Ireland and would remain only as long as this was the wish of a majority of the population. Secondly, it adopted a position of radical even-handedness in respect of the communities and put in place mechanisms to undo the inequalities inherited from the past. In path dependent terms, this represented the undoing of structural lock-in, not by withdrawal but by internal political re-positioning and social and economic reconstruction.60

The GFA was – and is – a remarkable achievement. It brought to an end one of the longest phases in the centuries-long history of the conflict and put in place a variety of institutional mechanisms to contain continuing tendencies towards conflict. But does it offer the hope of a final – if gradual – end to communal conflict in Northern Ireland, and ensure that violence will not break out on this scale again? Here there are fewer grounds for optimism. Firstly, the undoing of structural lock-in in Northern Ireland has not undone cultural lock-in: there has been no change in the oppositional nature of the ethnic and religious identities, the historical narratives and the communal memberships, or the tendency each of these has to feed off and to reproduce the other, further reinforced by 30 years of violent conflict. This means that the cultural and communal conditions for conflict are still present and, if conflict begins, for serious escalation.

Secondly, the new communally-based power-sharing institutions are uneven, indeed contradictory, in their effects. Where communal interests coincide, they support cross-community cooperation and a culture of trust; where interests conflict, they encourage competition and nurture a spirit of competitive communalism. At the moment there is an evident wish on both sides to work together and to keep conflict within bounds, but two factors could erode this. One is the need to deal with the legacy of inequality of the past, including contrasting viewpoints about it. Many Catholics believe that they still have substantial ground to make up; many Protestants believe that they have already given too much.61 The difficulty of reconciling these contradictory viewpoints is made greater by unevenness in the experience of different social strata and local areas.62 A second is pressure for a tougher line from those who supported the struggle in the past and today feel disillusioned by the outcome. Many republicans feel betrayed by the GFA, either for the limited material benefits that it has brought to the most disadvantaged in their community, or for what they see as the abandonment by Sinn Féin of
the goal of Irish unity. Loyalists take satisfaction in the role they played in defeating the republican campaign, but they remain fearful that victory in the war may be followed by defeat in the peace, in the sense of a further slippage in their position.

Dissident republican or loyalist violence is likely to be on a small scale and containable for some time to come. But ultimately the GFA rests on the deferment, rather than the resolution, of the question of Irish unity. The risk of a return to serious violence lies in the possibility of majority support for unity. The situation may never arise. A Catholic demographic majority is likely but this does not mean a nationalist majority, still less a majority supporting Irish reunification. If it does arise, the GFA provides for its coming into effect in an orderly way. However, the unresolved issues about the status of Protestants in the national life of the Republic, and continued divisions in the North, make the likelihood of it happening peacefully remote. Faced with the prospect of unity, the vast majority of Protestants (80 per cent) indicate their willingness to go along with it, but 18 per cent say they would find it ‘almost impossible to accept’. It would take much less than that number to begin a process of violent de-stabilisation that could spread to the whole of the island.

None of this is now on the horizon. Most pronouncements by Sinn Féin on the question of unity are moderate and seek the support of both communities for it. There is a rationale for this: reunification will come more quickly if some Protestant support for it can be secured. The question is what will happen if insufficient Protestants respond, Sinn Féin finds it is getting nowhere, and feels under pressure from disillusioned republicans to become more assertive. If by then a Catholic majority has been achieved, a more assertive campaign would become a serious temptation.

Conclusion

The essay began with two questions: why Catholic-Protestant conflict has been so long-lasting in Ireland, and whether and to what extent the Good Friday Agreement deals with the remaining conditions of conflict. Using the concept of path dependence, the answer given to the first question is that the conflict was long-lasting because the difference was one component in a structurally-embedded, path dependent conflictual system of relationships based on multiple forms of difference, an imbalance of power and tendencies towards communal polarisation. The answer given to the second is that the GFA has addressed one of the major sources of conflict: the centuries-old mechanism of structural lock-in that persisted in modified form in
Northern Ireland after 1921 and ensured continuing conflict. But it has not addressed all of the remaining conditions.

Cultural lock-in persists and the identities remain sharply opposed; the Agreement contains but also encourages competitive communalism; there is still inequality and there are painful issues of memory and justice; there is the likelihood of a further, potentially de-stabilising, shift in the communal power-balance in Northern Ireland; and the question of Irish unity has been deferred rather than resolved. The last poses the greatest challenge in terms of the risk of serious violence. It is not an immediate threat: there seems little prospect of majority support for unity for a long time given the relative demographic balance in Northern Ireland and the limited popular support for Irish unity, even among Catholics. But it remains the aspiration of most nationalists, North and South, and the political project of Sinn Féin. If ever this should come to a point of decision, it is difficult to see it happening peacefully.

This leads to a policy conclusion. One way of reducing the risk of future conflict would be to address the problem of continuing cultural lock-in: the construction of the identities and communities in sharply oppositional and zero-sum ways. On both sides of the border, each community has the right to affirm its identity. Establishing that right was a necessary step to securing peace. But it does not eliminate the risks associated with such oppositional identities, particularly in Northern Ireland where conflict has been recent and intense. This raises the question of whether those who hold these identities would be open to reconstructing them in less oppositional ways. The decade of commemorations that has now begun, which many fear will renew and reinforce divisions, provides an opportunity for considering such an undertaking.

References
1. The Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations, Declaration of Support, para 1 (10 April 1998).
4. Compare the policy documents, A shared future: improving relations in Northern Ireland (March 2005) and Programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (July 2010). For a comprehensive assessment of the state of the peace, see P. Nolan, The Northern Ireland peace monitoring report, number one (Belfast, 2012).
5. See H. Crawford, Outside the glow: Protestants and Irishness in independent Ireland (Dublin, 2010).


12. The survival of the QWERTY keyboard long after the technical reasons for its adoption have disappeared is the classic example.


15. For an application of the concept of ‘cultural lock-in’ to innovation behaviour, see R. Foster and S. Kaplan, *Creative destruction* (New York, 2001).


21. F. Wright, *Two lands on one soil: Ulster politics before Home Rule* (Dublin, 1996) is rich in insights on these interconnections.


24. What follows is informed by interviews carried out by the author, David Butler, Philippe Rigoulot and Karen Lysaght in two funded studies: HEA north-south programme for collaborative research, strand 1 for ‘Catholic-Protestant relationships in Ireland, north and south: A study of three “frontier communities”’ (2004-6); IRCSS Government of Ireland Research Projects Grants in the Humanities and Social Sciences ‘Irish Protestants in the European context’ (2005-7). My thanks to Jennifer Todd for comments on a previous version of this article.


30. This was not universally the case and does not describe TCD fellows and students in the decades up to the 1940s. See P. Dempsey, ‘Trinity College Dublin and the new political order’ in M. Cronin and J. M. Regan (eds), *Ireland: the politics of independence, 1922-49* (London, 1999), pp 217-31.

31. The form this took varied considerably since the community included Anglo-Irish gentry, old Protestant business families, TCD fellows, middle class professionals, big and small farmers, teachers, shopkeepers and tradesmen. For West Cork, see D. Butler and J. Ruane, ‘Identity, difference and community in southern Irish Protestantism: the Protestants of West Cork’, *National identities*, 11 (2009), pp 73-86.


35. Nor does it not rule out a residual British attachment among some in the older generation or, indeed, in younger generations (for an example, see Ian Beamish, Letter to the editor, *Irish Times*, 02.11.2005).

36. Interviews; see note 22; Crawford, *Outside the glow*, ch. 7.


38. The comparative research necessary to pick up such differences would have to be truly ethnographic; in-depth interviews alone are not sufficient.

39. On the difficulty of transmission within mixed marriages, and the sense of loss that accompanies the failure to do so, see Victoria White, ‘Why a hymn from childhood helps the year end on a high note’, *Irish Times*, 24 Dec., 2010.

40. Interviews.

41. Crawford, *Outside the glow*, ch. 7. This troubles Protestants all the more because, as they see it, no account is taken of the effort their community has made to adjust to the post-independence order.

42. See T. Fanning, *The Fethard-on-Sea boycott* (Cork, 2010).

43. For an example, see P. Heaney, P. Muldowney, P. O’Connor and others, *Coolacrace* (Millstreet, 2008).

44. The equally small Protestant minority in France makes similar criticisms.


47. For an evocation, see T. Inglis, *Global Ireland: same difference* (New York, 2008).
48. The most important was the success of the Gaelscoileanna.
49. The old themes were much in evidence in media commentary during the visit of
Queen Elizabeth to Ireland in May 2011, in particular in the different responses
to the ceremonies in the Garden of Remembrance and in Islandbridge.
52. B. O’Leary and J. McGarry, *The politics of antagonism: understanding Northern
54. For the twists and turns of British policy during this period, see W. B. Smith,
55. Ruane, ‘Contemporary republicanism and the strategy of armed struggle’ in
J. Coakley (ed.), *From political violence to negotiated settlement: the winding
path to peace in twentieth century Ireland* (Dublin, 2004).
56. See P. Dixon, *Northern Ireland: the politics of war and peace* (second edition,
57. R. Rose, *Northern Ireland: a time for change* (London, 1976). See also John Whyte,
58. A. M. Gallagher, R. D. Osborne, and R. J. Cormack, *Fair shares: employment,
unemployment and economic status* (Belfast, 1995) ; J. Ruane and J. Todd,
‘Beyond inequality: assessing the impact of fair employment, affirmative action
and equality measures on Northern Ireland’, in G. Brown, A. Langer and F. Stewart
60. It is worth stressing that though the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 established
power-sharing, its equality provisions were weak and would not have put the
communities on an equal footing. For that reason it is a mistake to view the
GFA as (in Seamus Mallon’s words) ‘Sunningdale for slow learners’.
61. Republican ex-prisoners are still debating whether or not Northern Ireland is
reformable and whether full equality is possible. See P. Shirlow, J. Tonge,
J. McAuley, C. McGlynn, *Abandoning historical conflict? Former political prisoners
and reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2010), p. 110.
62. For example, by the 2000s Catholics were at least proportionally represented in
professional, managerial and administrative occupations, and ahead in
educational achievement, but had higher poverty levels and more health
problems for each age-level. See P. Hilliard, G. Kelly, E. McLaughlin, D. Patsos,
M. Tomlinson, *Bare necessities: poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland*
(Belfast, 2003); R. D. Osborne and I. Shuttleworth (eds), *Fair employment in
Northern Ireland: a generation on* (Belfast, 2004).
64. See P. Shirlow, J. Tonge, J. McAuley, C. McGlynn, *Abandoning historical conflict?
Former political prisoners and reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Manchester,
2010), pp 105-7, 136.
65. Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, Political attitudes module, constitutional
preference (2010), www.ark.ac.uk/nilt.