



Title	A changed Irish nationalism? The significance of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998
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Publication date	2003-11-28
Publication information	Ruane, Joseph, and Jennifer Todd. "A Changed Irish Nationalism? The Significance of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998." UCD Press, 2003.
Publisher	UCD Press
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2444

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Chapter 7

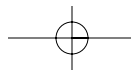
A changed Irish nationalism? The significance of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998

Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd

Introduction

Irish nationalism has been among the most intense of the peripheral nationalisms of western Europe. If Portugal is unique among the Atlantic states in having successfully resisted the pressures of a powerful centre, Ireland is unique in having seceded after centuries of incorporation into an even more powerful one. As such it has been a model for radical nationalists elsewhere in the world, as well as a test case in assessing the costs and benefits of secession. Secession was not of course complete. In the face of Ulster unionist opposition, one third of the population of the island, its second city and its most industrialised region remained within the United Kingdom. Nationalists refused to accept the legitimacy of partition or to regard it as final. They rejected British claims to sovereignty over any part of Ireland and declared that there could be no reconciliation with Britain as long as Ireland was divided. The Republic's 1937 constitution defined Northern Ireland as part of the Irish national territory. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) remained in existence throughout. It launched an ineffectual border campaign against the existence of Northern Ireland in the late 1950s and, for a quarter of a century from 1970, fought an undefeated guerilla campaign against the British army and security forces.

This historical provenance makes the peace process of the late 1980s and 1990s and the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998 all the more remarkable. The peace process was launched by the republican leadership and then taken up by the British and Irish governments. The Agreement emerged out of multi-party talks and was subject to referendum in both parts of Ireland. It recognised the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's union with Great Britain while this was the will of the majority of its population. The Republic changed its constitution by referendum, turning its territorial claim on Northern Ireland into an aspiration to Irish unity which acknowledged that this could

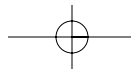
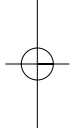
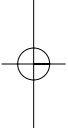


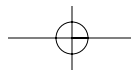
only be achieved with the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. This was part of a package which put in place a power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland, North-South and East-West (British-Irish) institutions and elaborate guarantees for the rights of both the Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist communities. Republicans equivocated on whether they now considered British sovereignty in Northern Ireland to be fully legitimate, but they supported the Agreement as did the overwhelming majority of nationalists, North and South.

The Agreement raises important questions about the nature of contemporary Irish nationalism. Has its intensity abated to become a moderate and pragmatic nationalism akin to that of (say) Scotland or Catalonia, flexible on matters of ultimate sovereignty?¹ Perhaps the change is deeper again – a shift beyond nationalism altogether to post-nationalism (Kearney, 1997; Delanty, 1995)? Or is the explanation altogether simpler, and less reassuring to those who wish to see an end to nationalism: there has been no fundamental change in Irish nationalism – in a changed situation, the Agreement is simply a new way of pursuing traditional nationalist goals.

The questions have comparative theoretical relevance. Throughout the European Union, peripheral nationalisms are accepting settlements that give much less than they once demanded, albeit with intermittent returns to more far-reaching demands or even militant action. Competing theories attempt to explain these changes. On a post-nationalist reading, there is now a blurring of once-clear boundaries and once-polarised oppositions. Increasing population movement has led to increasingly plural and dispersed ethnic, place, state and national identities and a resulting prominence of 'hybrid' identities (Appadurai, 1990). In this new context, one-time nationalists are becoming new post-nationalist regionalists who welcome multi-levelled hybrid identities and linkages, without the felt need to prioritise some loci or units over others (Nederveen Pietersee, 1995). A radically opposed argument points to the historic depth of nationalisms, their persistence through major institutional and structural changes and re-emergence after decades, sometimes centuries, of dormancy; on this account, nationalist strategies and assertion may vary, but underlying identities and aims remain (Smith, 1987, 1995; Connor, 1978, 1993). A third, post-sovereignist, interpretation holds that while historic national identities and the desire for self-determination remain strong, they are increasingly uncoupled from the state, which is losing its capacity to form public attitudes (Castells, 1997, pp. 6–12). The new European institutional context allows a refocusing of aims away from separatism to recognise the value of a level of autonomy which bypasses rather than challenges state sovereignty (Keating, 2001a).

Each of the theories suggests a plausible interpretation of the changes in nationalism in Northern Ireland. Since these changes are crystallised in the





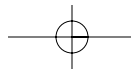
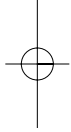
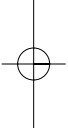
almost unanimous nationalist welcome of the Good Friday Agreement, we begin by outlining the core provisions of the Agreement and the changes they represent from classic nationalism. We go on to show how each of the theories suggests a different interpretation of what these changes imply national identity and nationalist aims. We then assess the theoretically informed interpretations in light of evidence of change or continuity in the aims and identities of Northern Irish nationalists. Our questions are the following: Has the Agreement arisen from a change in Irish nationalist goals and identities or is it simply a new way in which Irish nationalists are pursuing their traditional goals? If it has arisen from a change, what is the character of that change? We argue that the evidence reveals no fundamental shift in the nature of Irish nationalism or in the aims and identities associated with it, although it does suggest some more subtle changes. In conclusion we assess existing interpretations of the Agreement and suggest an alternative interpretation: that the changes are less a sign of post-nationalism or even post-sovereignty than of an interim indeterminacy of aims typical of periods of change and transition. Moreover, if nationalism has in this sense moderated, it is because moderation is consistent with continuing nationalist advance.

The ambiguous nature of the Good Friday Agreement

The core provisions of the Good Friday Agreement

On any reading the Good Friday Agreement marks a change in Irish nationalism. The point of departure of classic nationalism was that the Irish nation comprised all the people of the island of Ireland, Catholic and Protestant; that the Irish national territory consisted of the island of Ireland; that the Irish state and nation should be sovereign and independent of Britain (Boyce, 1982; Healy 1945; Campbell, 1941; Gallagher, 1957). A significant section of nationalists believed that in seeking to achieve this, violence was a legitimate weapon. Nationalism founded these claims on the principle of the right to self-determination of the Irish nation. It rejected British state involvement in the island of Ireland as the involvement of a foreign power which had colonial intent. The British presence was antithetical to Irish self-expression and self-determination: Britishness corrupted and deformed Irishness; to express an authentic Irish identity, all aspects of Britishness had to be cast off (Garvin, 1987). It took Protestant and unionist resistance to nationalist claims as the resistance of a privileged settler minority to the rightful claims of the nation as a whole; it assumed that, once the British state presence was removed, Protestants would recognise themselves as part of the Irish nation.

In the Agreement, the Irish nation is no longer defined territorially, and membership is a right and a choice rather than an imposition. It is 'the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland . . . to be

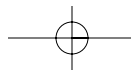


part of the Irish nation' (Constitutional Issues, Annex B, article 2). This permits, but does not require, Protestants and unionists to identify as part of the Irish nation. The Agreement recognises the right of the people of the island of Ireland to self-determination, but states that this right is to be exercised by agreement between the two parts of the island, and that a united Ireland can come about only with the consent of a majority of the population of Northern Ireland (Constitutional Issues para.1.ii). Moreover, since the current wish of a majority of Northern Ireland is for union with Great Britain, British sovereignty in Northern Ireland is now deemed legitimate (Constitutional Issues, para.1.iii). The Agreement also declares a 'total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues, and . . . opposition to any use or threat of force' (Declaration of Support, para. 4).

The Agreement keeps open the possibility of Irish unity in the future should a majority of the population in Northern Ireland (together with a majority of the population in the Irish state) so express their will (Constitutional Issues, para. 1.i-ii), and sets in place procedures for referenda in which that will may be expressed (Constitutional Issues, Annex A). The Agreement is conceived as a process: it is presented as a 'new beginning' (Declaration of Support, para. 1); the powers and range of some of its most innovative institutions are expandable with democratic consent (Strand Two, para. 12); its far-reaching equality, rights and security provisions (Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity) have potentially radical implications for political identities and attitudes.

Rather than aiming towards nation/state coincidence, the thrust of the Agreement is to disaggregate the functions of the state, dividing them between different institutions and different loci: the British authorities, the Northern Irish Assembly, the North-South Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. A small, although expandable, amount of North-South integration is achieved through the North-South Council (Strand Two). Rather than rejecting all British symbolism and expressions of identity, an egalitarian binationalism in the institutions and public culture of Northern Ireland is now affirmed (Declaration of Support, para. 3; Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity, Human Rights, para. 4). There is, moreover, provision for closer British-Irish integration in the form of a British-Irish Council (weaker than the North-South Council) (Strand Three, British-Irish Council).

There are different ways of interpreting the significance of the Agreement: as a sea change which has transformed Irish nationalism into post-nationalism; as a move from classic nationalism to post-sovereigntist nationalism; as simply a strategic change which does not signify any fundamental break in nationalist aims or identity.



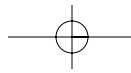
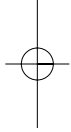
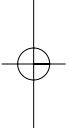
The significance of the Good Friday Agreement

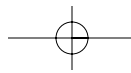
Interpretation 1: The Good Friday Agreement as expressing a sea change towards post-nationalist aims and identities

It is not hard to read the provisions of the Agreement as expressing a sea change in nationalist aims, identities and underlying assumptions. On this interpretation, it is a radically post-nationalist settlement which no longer prioritises the island of Ireland as the political or cultural focus of loyalty and which moves towards not just a mixture but a level of integration of Irishness and Britishness. If there is remaining 'nationalist' language in the text of the Agreement, this is merely to allow nationalist and republican politicians to ease their supporters gradually into the new order.

This interpretation notes, first, that Irish unity and independence are relegated to very low priority in the Agreement. Democratic agreement and respect for the rights of each community, rather than territorial unity, are the overriding principles. Rather than political unity being a precondition of reconciliation on the island, reconciliation is now seen as a precondition of political unity which may in fact never happen because the overriding principle is a democratically agreed Ireland rather than a united one. But not just Irish unity, even increasing linkages between Northern Ireland and the Irish state are given relatively low priority. This agreement is not a surreptitious gradualist integration of the island by economic or administrative means (as unionists suspected the 1995 British-Irish Framework Document to be). Rather, the North-South Council is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Irish Dáil, and the North-South bodies are weak in range and scope (Coakley, 2002). This is a settlement which prioritises equality in Northern Ireland over the Irish dimension.

Irish identity is also transformed from a bounded national to a hybrid, post-national identity. Whereas once any nationalist involvement in British institutions was seen as a threat to the survival of Irish culture and identity, the Agreement is built upon the inclusion of Irish nationalists in British institutions. In the past it was assumed that participation in British state institutions and culture was inevitably compromising and corrupting; the nurturing and survival of an Irish identity could only take place within specifically Irish institutions. Under the terms of the Agreement, however, even republicans participate in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and use office space in Westminster, although they do not (yet?) take their parliamentary seats there. Nationalists from North and South participate in the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body.² In this new situation, Britishness and Irishness are no longer in opposition, and Northern Irish people may choose to be British or Irish or both (Constitutional Issues, para. 1.vi.). By implication, Irish identity is now seen as quite compatible with British institutions, able to flourish within British sovereignty.

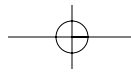
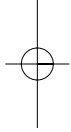
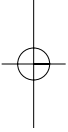


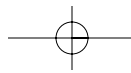


The locus of Irish identity is also questioned. Now the region of Northern Ireland is prioritised, in institutions, and most importantly in terms of constitutional rights. In the agreement, as in the Irish constitution, it is made clear that the only legitimate and possible path to unity is by majority vote in both parts of the island. This recognises the democratic right of a majority in Northern Ireland to determine (some aspects of)³ the future of the region: as such it recognises the existence of the ‘people of Northern Ireland’ as a partially self-determining body, normatively prior to the ‘people of Ireland’ whose will is simply a sum of the wills expressed in separate if simultaneous referendums in Northern Ireland and the Irish state.

Meanwhile, the Agreement affirms the legitimacy of partition and of British rule in Northern Ireland and sets up a British Isles-wide framework of institutions which will involve the Republic in new and much closer relationships with other parts of the United Kingdom. It puts in place, through the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body the framework of a new archipelagan regionalism, in which the distinction between British and Irish, though not elided, is certainly made ambiguous. It is as if Irish nationalists have become British–Irish (if not British Isles) regionalists, unconcerned with what this means in terms of older notions of national sovereignty.

How might such a sea change in political and cultural attitudes have come about? It might be seen as the end point of a long process in which structural and institutional changes were impacting on the conditions of identity and goal formation. Some of these changes were general in form. In the past thirty years, Southern Ireland has experienced the internationalisation of its economy, membership of the EU, the removal of all restrictions on cultural imports (including the end of strict censorship laws) and new waves of population movement, first emigration to US and continental Europe, and more recently immigration. This has been a condensed and sharp experience of globalisation, which in Ireland as elsewhere has led to a partial uncoupling of national identity formation from state direction, and an increasingly prominent hybridity of identity. In Ireland this is expressed in the celebration of the Irish national soccer team composed in large part of British players (with an Irish grandparent) (Holmes, 1994). In the Irish case, specific factors have also been operating. From 1970 there was a return of violent nationalism in Northern Ireland which led to a major revulsion in the South and a re-interpretation of what nationalism had meant historically. A generation of political commentators distanced themselves from classic nationalism and from Northern Ireland, emphasising instead class politics within the partitioned state, or the transcendence of sovereignty in the European Union (O Séaghdha, 2002). This ‘revisionist’ nationalism rejected the nationalist past in favour of a modern civic state which distanced itself from its founding nationalist ideals. A generation of historians revised the myths of Irish history, and





subjected the founding fathers of the state (and of the contemporary armed struggle in the North) to relentless criticism (Foster, 1986).

In the North, different processes led to similar results. A new generation of upwardly mobile middle-class Catholics emerged as a result of governmental educational and later fair employment policies (Gallagher et al., 1995, pp. 47, 83–4). Many recognised the benefits they had gained from the British context, did not identify with the Irish state and were ambivalent about – sometimes hostile towards – their ‘nationalist’ heritage (O’Connor, 1993, pp. 13–43; Keenan, 1987).

These new currents were clearly evident by the 1980s; they were prominent in the media; they were reflected in the increasing openness and ambiguity of the nationalism of the SDLP and the Irish government. By the 1990s this ambiguity and openness had begun to characterise the language of important sections of the republican leadership. On this radical interpretation, the Good Friday Agreement crystallised this trend. It marks the coming of age of Irish nationalism: an acceptance of the realities of Irish history and contemporary culture and their historic imbrication with Britishness, an acceptance of the hybrid nature of Irish culture and identity, an opening up to new thinking internationally on culture, politics and nationality, and an adaptation to the new era of European integration and a global economy (O’Toole, 1998).

Interpretation 2: The Good Friday Agreement as a change towards post-sovereigntist nationalism

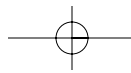
The Good Friday Agreement can be seen, alternatively, as a move towards a new form of nationalism. This post-sovereigntist nationalism retains a strong sense of Irish national identity, and the core nationalist values of self-determination and autonomy. But it no longer prioritises Irish unity and independence. It now accepts that a united sovereign Irish state, even were it politically possible, is not ideal. Lesser levels of integration, linkage and autonomy on the island short of unity and independence may better fulfil the nationalist need for cultural recognition and for an effective say in determining their own destiny.

This interpretation emphasises that *nationalists* – in the SDLP and the Irish government as well as in Sinn Féin – negotiated this Agreement. Their aim in the negotiations which led to the agreement was not to achieve Irish unity – it was clear that this was not on offer – but to maximise joint North–South political institutions and as far as possible to balance British input into Northern Ireland with Irish government input. This interpretation admits that the terms of the Agreement do not fully reflect this aim, instead prioritising reform within Northern Ireland over strong North–South links. However, this was a necessary compromise, albeit one with which many of the Northern nationalist negotiators were disappointed.⁴ They take comfort in the fact that the North–South institutions in the agreement are expandable.

The question of unity is put off for another day when – and if – a majority wishes it. However this postponement does not mean a lessening of national identity, of a sense of the unity of the island, or of the desire for self-determination. It is rather that nationalists now see more than one road to unity and national self-determination.⁵ They accept that increasing North–South integration and cultural linkages short of Irish sovereignty can give them much, perhaps all, of the cultural recognition and affirmation that they have always desired.

The Agreement, on this account, recognises Northern Irish nationalists' Irish identity and Irish nationalist aspirations more fully than ever before. The Agreement is in important respects bi-national. The Irish state was a key party to the negotiations and continues to play a key role in Northern Ireland after the Agreement. An Irish identity and an aspiration to Irish unity are officially recognised as valid. Declared nationalists within the Assembly have exactly equal powers and safeguards as declared unionists (Strand One, paras. 5d, 15–18).⁶ Cultural recognition and respect of both Irish and British identity is called for in the Agreement, and promise of support for the Irish language in Northern Ireland is given (Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity, para. 4; Economic, Social and Cultural Issues, para. 4). If the 'people of Northern Ireland' are recognised, so too are the Irish people. Indeed the foundation of the legitimacy of the whole agreement, and thus of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland, is the simultaneous ratification of the Agreement in both parts of Ireland by referendum; the self-determination of the people of Ireland is the basis of sovereignty, not the decision of the Crown in Parliament (Constitutional Issues, para. 1. i., ii). On this interpretation, Irish identity is now recognised as a complex identity, containing as one of its parts a Northern Irish identity, but it remains clearly distinct from British identity and both requires and has the right to institutional recognition.

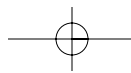
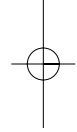
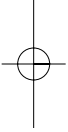
Nationalists, on this reading, see the Agreement as an open-ended process, a 'new beginning' in which they hope North–South integration will increase. They do not see it as a final settlement which involves an acceptance of the British character of Northern Ireland: on the contrary, to paraphrase a reported comment of the Irish Minister of Foreign Affairs, the only thing that remains British about Northern Ireland after the Agreement is sovereignty.⁷ Moreover, British sovereignty becomes less burdensome because of the disaggregation of policy-making institutions – devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the North–South Council and implementation bodies, Equality and Human Rights Commissions. The agreement uncouples sovereignty from policy making and almost rids it of content. It allows the people of Northern Ireland, with very strong nationalist input, to determine their internal affairs. Given the important role of North–South bodies in EU affairs, the new institutional configuration also promises to allow elected representatives in Northern



Ireland to bypass the British state on some important international, as well as many domestic, matters. The autonomy that nationalists have always aimed for is thus partially realised in the new institutions. Nationalists on this reading are still nationalist, but they are no longer separatist because they see that the autonomy and self-determination which were at the root of their politics can now be achieved short of separatism.

How might such a qualitative change in the form of nationalism have come about? The answer lies in the development of EU institutions and the interest and involvement of nationalists in both parts of the island in the process of EU integration. Over thirty years, developing EU institutions and legal structures exemplified new models of shared sovereignty, of disaggregation of state functions and of multi-national administration and provided avenues for regional autonomy and networking among regions, bypassing the states. Irish diplomats and political leaders were quick to see the benefits of these models for resolving the Northern conflict. The institutions set up under the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, proposed in the Joint Framework Document of 1996, and later agreed in the Good Friday Agreement, were not copies of EU institutions, but they would not have been possible without the loosening of notions of sovereignty exemplified in the EU (Kennedy, 1994; Meehan, 2000; Ruane and Todd, 2002). The very notion of a joint intergovernmental secretariat, of institutionalised and substantive intergovernmental co-policy-making without formal challenge to sovereignty, the notion of integration proceeding by expanding and expandable administrative bodies with defined economic or administrative functions, all of these features of recent British–Irish agreements would have been politically unthinkable without the working models provided in the European Union. Moreover, EU integration proceeds by piecemeal institutional development, which does not resolve all problems at once but holds the future open; this too has been the approach of the Agreement. Together, these features provide models which have been used to reduce the role of the British state in Northern Ireland and institute steps towards a bi-national culture and mode of administration, without challenging formal British sovereignty.

Developments in Britain and in Ireland have provided encouragement for this view. Asymmetric devolution in Britain suggests that the British government is now prepared to loosen its hold on its historic regions; a Northern Ireland with loose but practically useful linkages both to the UK and to the Irish state is no longer inconceivable. At the same time, the increasing popularity of the notion of ‘diaspora nationalism’ in the Irish state, whereby being Irish is a matter of identification, not a matter of where or under what jurisdiction one lives,⁸ has uncoupled national from state identity and allowed Northern nationalists to continue to ‘be Irish’ in Northern Ireland. A regionalist politics within Northern Ireland is no longer incompatible with a strong Irish national



identity. Moreover, Northern nationalists who look for North–South linkages short of a sovereign united Irish state are encouraged by the fact that this has also been the approach of the Irish government at least since the New Ireland Forum of 1983–4 (New Ireland Forum Report, 1984; FitzGerald, 1991, chapters 15–17).

Finally, the reform process which accelerated after the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, and culminated in the reforms of the Good Friday Agreement, made life much more tolerable for nationalists in Northern Ireland in terms of employment prospects, policing and security and cultural rights. A strategy of gradually increasing Irish input and bi-national structures in Northern Ireland delivered results, not just in terms of material conditions but also in terms of self-respect and a sense of self-determination. On this interpretation, the Good Friday Agreement shows that nationalism's main aims can be achieved short of Irish full sovereignty.

Interpretation 3: The Good Friday Agreement as simply a change in strategy

It is also possible to read the Good Friday Agreement in a radically different way: as a mechanism through which nationalists can – and ultimately will – advance towards their traditional goals of Irish unity and independence. This is the interpretation of the Agreement advanced by many pro-Agreement republicans and almost all anti-Agreement unionists. In their view, there has been no fundamental shift in nationalist belief or aspirations and no abandonment of nationalist principles. What appear as important concessions of principle are simply strategic compromises to achieve the same goals by less costly and more effective means.

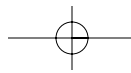
On this interpretation, nationalists, having come to the realisation that Irish unity cannot be gained in one step, are now pursuing a gradualist path. Having discovered that unity cannot be achieved by an armed campaign, they have set violence aside (at least for now) in favour of constitutional means. Having realised that unity will be achieved more quickly with Protestant support, they are now stressing pluralism. But none of this signals a change in nationalist identities or long-term goals: the new direction is simply a strategic adaptation to the potentials and constraints of the new situation. Irish nationalists have the possibility of further building up their resources, in part by bringing powerful new international alliances into play; the quid pro quo is that they abjure violence, adopt a more moderate rhetoric and concentrate on interim goals. But they do not have to abandon their long-term goals. From this perspective, a strong case can be made that the Agreement is not only *a possible*, but *the most effective*, path towards Irish unity and independence.

On this reading, nationalists have – uneasily and as an interim measure – accepted continuing formal British sovereignty in Northern Ireland, to secure a major strategic advance. They have gained a strong voice within Northern

Ireland in a consociational devolved Assembly in which weighted voting rights guarantee them a veto on contentious issues and in which proportionality rules guarantee them a very strong role in the executive, and they have gained effective equality legislation and an emergent rights culture (O'Leary, 2001; McCrudden, 1999; Livingstone, 2001). On the very contentious issues of the security forces in Northern Ireland, the Agreement promised wide-ranging reform of the police force following the report of an independent commission (see Patten, 1999), release of (qualifying) paramilitary prisoners, review of the criminal justice system, demilitarisation, in conjunction with a promise that all parties to the agreement will use any influence they may have to achieve decommissioning of paramilitary weapons (for discussion, see Ruane and Todd, 1999). These benefits allow a strengthening of the nationalist support base and organisation which is likely to speed demographic advance. The institutional changes also disorganise the unionist opposition, forcing cultural change, internal division and communal reconstitution upon unionists (see Ruane and Todd, forthcoming, chapter 11), and thus further weakening opposition to Irish unity. Moreover the North–South Council and implementation bodies, while so far dealing with only limited policy-making functions, have begun radically to change civil service culture at least in the Irish state. Now one may hear pragmatic senior Irish civil servants acknowledging that (part of) what they are doing in implementing the Agreement is smoothing the way for possible future Irish unity.

On this interpretation, what is normally read as the core change in nationalist principles embodied in the Good Friday Agreement – the acceptance that the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland is necessary for a united Ireland – has much less significance at the level of practical politics. The changing socio-political context has produced change in the demographic balance in Northern Ireland. Catholics made up a third of the population of Northern Ireland from the 1920s to the 1950s: in 1971 their share of the population had risen only to 36.8 per cent: it rose again to 38.5 per cent in 1981, to 42.1 per cent in 1991 and to 44 per cent in 2001.⁹ The changing demographic balance means that now, far from prohibiting Irish unity, the provision that constitutional change is subject to majority consent may hasten it.

Why and how would nationalists – and particularly republicans – come to accept this interpretation of the Agreement? First, there is good reason to believe that this is how they view it. They do not see it as a 'historic compromise' if by that is meant a final settlement which accepts current constitutional arrangements in perpetuity. Rather, it is more like the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty – a pragmatic acceptance of the current balance of power and of what is possible within it. Those commentators who took some satisfaction in observing republicans busy 'slaughtering sacred cows' ignore the pragmatic strand within Irish republicanism. The civil war of 1921–3 was not

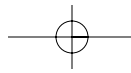
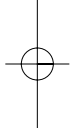
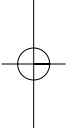


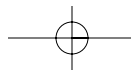
fundamentally a conflict of nationalist ‘moderates’ and republican ‘extremists’ (both were agreed on the desired end, a united independent Ireland) but a conflict over the strategic benefits of the settlement – whether it would threaten their longer project or help advance it. On that occasion those who favoured an interim settlement won out though at the cost of bitter civil war. The bitter division of 1921 was avoided in 1998 – although the Good Friday Agreement left a dissenting rump. There is no evidence that the support of the republican leadership for the Agreement implies any fundamental weakening of the desire for a united independent Ireland.

That a change in strategy was needed seems clear enough. The goal of reunification had made no progress since partition. Unionists had not budged in the slightest from their earlier opposition to Irish unity; if anything their resistance had hardened. The classic republican analysis was that only force would get the British to leave. But twenty years of intense armed struggle made no impact on British policy. If Britain’s strategic and economic interests in Northern Ireland had diminished – as secretaries of state for Northern Ireland began to proclaim in the 1990s – the British government could not easily disengage from a situation where the majority of the population wanted it to remain, particularly not while under pressure from a terrorist campaign. The IRA’s campaign could block a settlement and maintain Northern Ireland in a constant state of crisis; it could not force a British withdrawal. Republicans could persist with their traditional – and clearly futile and costly – strategy; or they could explore other possibilities as they emerged.

By the 1980s, new possibilities were emerging. EU-inspired models of shared sovereignty, the disaggregation of state functions, and multi-national administration were being used in the 1980s by the Irish government and constitutional nationalists to reduce the role of the British state in Northern Ireland and to institute a bi-national aspect to the culture and institutions. The gains were real. If weak, revisionist or post-sovereigntist nationalists could achieve this degree of progress, with republican backing and determination much more might be possible. Moreover, once an intergovernmental strategy was adopted by the two states, as it began to be from 1985, the prospects of success through any other strategy of nationalist advance (particularly armed struggle) decreased dramatically. By the 1990s, it was clear to republicans that their armed strategy was not simply counterproductive but increasingly risky: it promised permanent political marginalisation. The alternative was to work with the new trend: to use intergovernmentalism and bi-nationalism not simply to achieve internal reform but to advance along the road towards Irish sovereignty – this possible future is explicitly allowed within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

The gradualist path to Irish unity was all the more attractive because the power balance was continuing to change in the Catholic favour. Membership



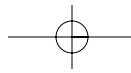
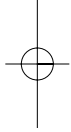
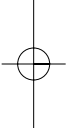


of the EU increased the status of the Irish state relative to the British, making possible more egalitarian relations between the states and thus opening the possibility of a joint management of the Northern Ireland conflict. The Irish state moved from being a 'semi-detached' part of the British Isles (considered by the British and unionists as on a par with the devolved Northern Ireland government rather than the sovereign UK government), to gaining equal status (not power) to the British state within the European Union. On a global level, too, nationalists were finding new international allies and power-resources: the US was a particularly important source of support (Dumbrell, 2000; Finnegan, 2002). US support for Irish government strategies helped broker the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. Even more important, the US supported (even against British objections) the nationalist-initiated peace process which included Sinn Féin (Arthur, 2000, pp. 155–9).

These new sources of power brought with them new constraints on strategy. The very founding principles of the EU are opposed to nationalist irredentism: EU support for nationalist demands for reform in Northern Ireland, including North-South linkages, has required a clear rejection of older irredentist demands. Equally, US support for the peace process was dependent on republicans ending their armed struggle. But on the ground, within Northern Ireland, the Catholic position was strengthening. The economic, political and cultural power resources of the Catholic community increased as those of the Protestant community fell (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 139–46, 166–70, 194–200). Inequality between the communities remained in the late 1990s, but it was considerably less than in the 1970s. Most of all, the changing socio-political context was producing changes in the demographic balance. If these trends were to continue, the peaceful path towards Irish unity (through democratic constitutional referendums) could soon achieve its goal.

In this context, what republicans needed was a settlement which would offer them a new arena in which to build up their power resources, which would give them the respectability they needed to secure the mainstream nationalist vote, to get experience of government and political negotiation, to further divide and disconcert unionists and strengthen the nationalist position to the point at which unity could easily be secured. All of this depended, of course, on negotiating a good settlement. On balance republicans believe that the Good Friday Agreement was such a settlement.

On this reading, Irish nationalist support for the Agreement does not reflect change at the level of fundamental goals or identity, but simply a more effective strategy for achieving those same nationalist goals.



Assessing the readings of the Good Friday Agreement

Which interpretation is correct? Does the Agreement mark a change in nationalist attitudes, aims and identities, and if so how radical a change? Or is it simply a new strategy for achieving traditional nationalist goals? Sinn Féin politicians typically take the minimalist interpretation when speaking to republican audiences, although they are more nuanced when speaking in wider arenas. SDLP politicians range across the spectrum of views. However, stated political aims cannot give an answer to the questions we have posed: politicians' stated views may be consciously or unconsciously dissimulating or strategically phrased. Moreover, nationalist political elites may themselves be unclear or ambiguous as to their aims and long-term strategies. It is likely that some of the actors are not themselves sure how they view the Agreement. It is rational for them not to come to closure on an interpretation, at least not until they see how the institutions of the Agreement are working (see Ruane and Todd, 2001). Indeed one of the reasons that the Agreement is so attractive to Irish nationalist politicians may be precisely because it is open to several interpretations, and attractive to all strands of their voting constituency.

To leave the question at such indeterminacy is, however, both unsatisfactory and unnecessary. At issue is the significance of the Agreement in terms of the longer-term trajectory of Irish nationalism, not simply its current meaning for nationalist elites. By drawing on the available quantitative and qualitative data, we can go much further in assessing the adequacy of the different interpretations of the Agreement.

Changes in national identity and nationalist aims

Each of the different readings of the Good Friday Agreement involves an interpretation of the character of and changes in national identity and nationalist aims. We turn now to the survey data and use it, together with existing qualitative data, to assess the extent to which national identity and nationalist aims have changed, and the direction of change in each respect.¹⁰

National identity

How far are the changes in Irish nationalism embodied in the Good Friday Agreement underlain by changes in national identity? On the post-nationalist interpretation, Irish identity has lost its opposition to Britishness. On the post-sovereignist interpretation Irish national identity remains strong, although it is no longer so closely related to the Irish state as before. On the strategic interpretation, there has been no fundamental change in Irish national identity.

Irish identity in Northern Ireland has always stretched beyond the immediate region, to the island and to include the diaspora, which has typically

been understood as the old Irish diaspora (Irish Americans sympathising with nationalist demands) rather than the new diaspora of contemporary emigrants now emphasised by the Irish state. Moreover in the North, unlike in the South, nationalists' Irish identity was always constructed relationally to unionists' identity(ies).

Opinion polls and surveys show changes in the self-reported identities of Protestants and Catholics over time. Table 1 shows that Irish identity has declined dramatically for Protestants since 1968. However, since few Protestants and almost no unionists see their Irish identity as a national identity, and almost all distance themselves from nationalist political aims, we do not discuss them here. Rather we focus on the figures for Catholics in Northern Ireland, who have traditionally had a strong Irish national identity. The figures for Catholics in table 1 suggest a slight decline in self-reported Irish identity, although it remains a majority choice. British identity has also weakened. Northern Irish identity has become the choice of around a quarter of Catholics, particularly among the middle class (Duffy and Evans, 1997, pp. 125–6).

Table 1 Identity: Northern Ireland

	1968	1978	1986	1989	1994	1998	2000	2001
<i>British</i>								
Protestant	39	67	65	68	71	67	72	65
Catholic	15	15	9	10	10	8	9	9
<i>Irish</i>								
Protestant	20	8	3	3	3	3	3	2
Catholic	76	69	61	60	62	65	59	62
<i>Northern Irish</i>								
Protestant	Not asked	Not asked	11	16	15	18	15	19
Catholic			20	25	28	24	28	23
<i>Ulster</i>								
Protestant	32	20	14	10	11	10	7	9
Catholic	5	6	1	2	0	0	1	1

Sources: Rose, 1971; Moxon-Browne, 1983; Smith, 1987; Trew, 1996b; Life and Times (Northern Ireland) surveys, Community relations modules.

Moreover, as we see in table 2, when Catholics are asked about the strength of their feelings of identity, more feel themselves strongly to have an Irish identity than report themselves to be Irish (the same is true of Protestants). It is also significant that while nearly 30 per cent of Catholics feel themselves weakly to have a British identity, over 60 per cent feel themselves not to have

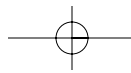
such an identity at all. A level of hybridity (Irish/British) exists for about a quarter of Catholics, but for most, Irish and British remain opposed identities. It is a Northern Irish identity rather than a British identity that a majority of Catholics tend to combine with an Irish identity, although a Northern Irish identity remains less strongly and less widely felt than an Irish identity.

Table 2 **Strength of identification (1999)**

<i>How strongly do you feel yourself to have a . . . identity?</i>	<i>Strongly</i>	<i>Weakly</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
<i>British</i>				
Protestant	78	18	4	1
Catholic	8	28	62	2
<i>Irish</i>				
Protestant	7	41	51	2
Catholic	77	14	9	1
<i>Northern Irish</i>				
Protestant	54	31	15	1
Catholic	40	32	28	1
<i>Ulster</i>				
Protestant	44	39	16	1
Catholic	8	30	61	1

Sources: Life and Times (Northern Ireland) Community Relations Module, 1999

The traditional rhetoric of Northern Catholics assumed unity between their place, national and ethnic identity. Up until the recent period there has been much less evidence of hybridity of identity in nationalist ideology than in unionist. More recently, however, the rhetoric of John Hume and the SDLP, suggests a growing sense of nestedness of identities. This appears to be confirmed by the figures in table 2 (although we do not have a time-series for comparison). A continuation of a strong sense of Irish identity (even among some who do not report themselves as Irish) is clear. However the fact that over a third of Catholics now acknowledge some British element in their identity is significant. Northern Irish identity is also an important factor for many (see Trew, 1996a, 1998). While we cannot be sure if this element of hybridity has increased in extent over time, it has certainly increased in prominence – in the past only Catholic unionists would admit in public to British elements of their identity. It has not, however, eclipsed an Irish national identity among Catholics in Northern Ireland; rather it appears to sit alongside an Irish identity. This is what we would expect from the available qualitative



evidence.¹¹ It is also confirmed by a reading of nationalist ideology: John Hume, for example, at once emphasises a variety of loci of identification (Northern Ireland, Ireland, Europe, the linkages between Ireland and the US) and priorities Irish identity (Todd, 1999, pp. 53–6).

For the majority of the Catholic population, then, the data suggest that the post-nationalist interpretation is incorrect. Less than a third combine an Irish and a British identity; even of those who combine an Irish identity with a Northern Irish and/or British identity, for most the Irish identity remains strong. There is no evidence to support the thesis that there has been a radical transformation of identification which has displaced national identity from its former prominence. Far from the Good Friday Agreement being accompanied by – much less caused by – a move away from national identification, a continuing importance is given to national identity, even if it is now (for many if not all nationalists) more explicitly combined with other identities.

There does, however, appear to be an increasing public acknowledgement of a level of hybridity in identity, particularly among the almost thirty per cent of Catholics with a weak British identity. This is likely to have facilitated greater political openness. The acceptance of multi-levelled and multi-located political institutions, such as those in the Good Friday Agreement, is easiest when one's identity spans a variety of locations, and where it is not challenged by wider arenas. But if the acknowledgement of hybridity is consistent with a post-sovereignist interpretation, it is not telling evidence for this thesis. Recall that nearly two thirds of Catholics believe they have no British identity at all, thus implicitly retaining a British-Irish opposition.

Nationalist aims and aspirations?

Have nationalist aims changed, as well as nationalist strategies? Are the traditional aims of unity and independence still relevant to the public? Are they still held?

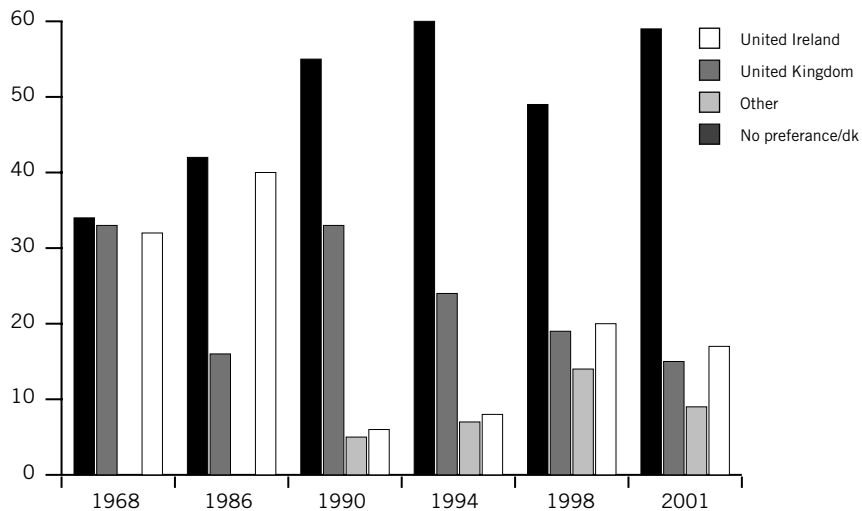
The questions are difficult to answer because nationalist aims – particularly concerning unity and independence – cover a very wide range of time-scales, intensity, and preference structurings, existing on a continuum from long-term low-intensity aspirations through to immediate demands. Intensity, time-horizon and preference structuring change with the perceived real possibilities. Moreover, self-reported goals vary depending on whether the questions asked pose a straight choice between belonging to one state or another, or offer a wide range of innovative constitutional arrangements. However, accepting these points, the mass of existing survey data allows us to reach some conclusions on changes in nationalist aims over time.¹²

In Northern Ireland, aspirations to Irish unity are almost exclusively confined to the Catholic population – now a growing 44 per cent of the total population. Among Protestants, only around three per cent favour Irish unity;

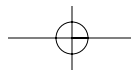
the percentage has decreased slightly since 1968. For clarity of exposition, therefore, we will look at trends in nationalism in Northern Ireland by considering only the data on Northern Catholics.

Comparing the survey data from 1968, one may identify some broad over-time continuities as well as changes. Then, as now, over half of Catholics want some form of constitutional change. Then, as now, a united Ireland is the first preference option of only a minority of Catholics. However, subtle changes can be discerned. First, one finds a definite decrease in the number of vague and 'don't know' responses between 1968 and 1997. The willingness to state definite and often complex preferences increased. Only in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement do Northern Catholics again become undecided about the constitutional question. Second, one finds a gradual but definite increase in nationalist preferences over time. When respondents are offered a straight choice between the united Kingdom and a united Ireland, there is an increase from a third disapproving of the constitution in 1968 to a half preferring a united Ireland over the united Kingdom in the 1990s. See Figure 1. When they are offered a wider range of policy options, there is an increase from 14 per cent stating a clear first preference for a united Ireland in 1968 to a plurality – well over a third and reaching 43 per cent in 1997 – doing so in the later 1990s. When the issue is an Irish dimension, there is a marked increase from over half wanting either a united Ireland or some Irish dimension in 1968 to around 80 per cent wanting this in the 1990s.

Figure 1 Constitutional preferences of Catholics in Northern Ireland



Sources: Rose, 1971; 1985 Ulster Marketing surveys/Spotlight BBC (May 1985); Smith and Chambers, 1991; Social Attitudes Surveys; Life and Times surveys.



If one adds to these data the fact that the percentage of first preference votes given to nationalist political parties has steadily increased from under 30 per cent in the local government elections in 1985 to 42.7 per cent in the 2001 Westminster elections the increasing strength of nationalist feeling appears clear (Mitchell et al., 2001, pp. 734–5).

However, nationalist preferences are nuanced. Given a range of preference options, a united Ireland is a first preference among a significant and growing number of Catholics; by the 1990s, this first preference came clearly to outweigh a preference for power sharing which had been the most popular first preference through most of the 1970s. However, Irish unity (at 32 per cent) is a less popular first preference than some form of Irish dimension short of Irish unity (at 41 per cent to include the various forms of joint authority and the Anglo-Irish Agreement). Moreover while a united Ireland is an intense preference among some, it is not an extensive lower-order preference; as table 3 shows, it gets significantly fewer second and third and fourth preferences than do options involving an Irish dimension.

Table 3 Preference orderings among Catholics 1996

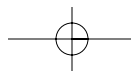
	Irish State	Joint authority plus power sharing	Joint authority plus separate institutions (no power sharing)	Anglo-Irish Agreement	Power sharing (no joint authority)	Independence	Other ¹
% 1st preference	32	24	3	14	11	8	9
% 2nd preference	9	26	9	17	16	9	14
% 3rd preference	6	23	11	21	22	2	14
% 4th preference	6	11	12	21	23	4	22

1 Other combines full integration into the British state and direct rule by the British state.

Source: MRNI survey, April–May 1996. Reported Hadden, Irwin and Boal, 1996, 16–17.

A follow-up series of surveys which focused on preference orderings and priorities suggests that, while nationalist aims remain, the immediate priorities for most Catholics are issues of justice rather than issues of nationalism (Irwin, 2000).

The complex and nuanced preferences of the population revealed in the range of answers to different types of survey questions cohere well with the available qualitative data.¹³ A united Ireland remains an important aim for many Catholics – one which they have been unwilling to give up even when it appeared unrealistic – but one which is also abstract and not high on immediate priorities. It has as often been linked to dissatisfaction with their conditions in the North as with any positive desire for unity with the South.



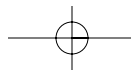
The relative preference for an Irish dimension over Irish unity may suggest that those who aspire to unity in the long term would prefer to get there gradually, getting their feet wet first and seeing how it feels, rather than in one leap.

The data summarised above suggests that among the majority of Catholics in Northern Ireland, nationalist aims remain. We have not entered a post-nationalist stage. A majority of Northern Catholics still value Irish unity as an aim; relatively few are willing to rule out Irish unity should it come onto the political agenda; a significant and growing minority keeps Irish unity as a first policy preference. However the majority of Northern Catholics do not retain strong and unchanged classic nationalist goals. Most are willing to look at alternatives to a unitary state, and many may prefer such alternatives, at least in the interim. This does not necessarily imply a move towards post-sovereigntist nationalism. It may simply be a preference for gradual progress towards traditional aims – a desire not to provoke a unionist reaction by moving too quickly to a united Ireland.¹⁴ For others, it may be a sign of an emerging post-sovereigntist form of nationalism which involves a desire for an Irish dimension short of Irish unity. If this is the case, one emergent division among nationalists in Northern Ireland in the contemporary period may cross political parties and lie between those whose priority remains a united Ireland, and those whose preference is for a strong Irish dimension short of a united Ireland – those who see the Good Friday Agreement as a stepping stone for nationalist aims, and those who see it as an end in itself. Given, however, that the aspiration for eventual Irish unity remains strong, it is premature to signal a strong post-sovereigntist nationalist constituency. It is more consistent with the evidence to posit a moderation of the urgency of nationalist goals and a willingness to try alternatives, rather than a definitive giving up of those goals.

The changing structure of nationalism in Northern Ireland: an assessment

What can we conclude from these data about the nature and extent of change in nationalism and about the different interpretations of the Agreement?

The quantitative data show that change is significant but subtle. On the one hand, national identity and nationalist aims remain strong, but are more nuanced and qualified than in the past. Identity is now more explicitly open to nested, hybrid forms than before, but this hybridity coexists with, rather than replaces, a strong national identity. Nationalist aims have become more widespread within the Catholic population over time, but they have also moderated, both in the sense that unity is no longer considered an immediate priority, and in the sense that for some Catholics, an 'Irish dimension' in Northern Ireland (a level of Irish government involvement short of unity) is

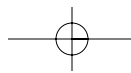
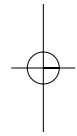
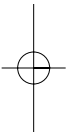


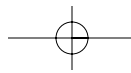
considered either acceptable or even preferable to a united Irish state. As nationalism – and within that the desire for a united Ireland – becomes more widespread within the growing Catholic population, its tone is changing.¹⁵

The data thus suggest that a purely strategic interpretation of nationalist support for the Good Friday Agreement is not sustainable. The classic nationalist focus on Irish unity as the only legitimate goal, on the opposition between Irish and British identities and on the inauthenticity and illegitimacy of unionist goals is only compatible with the provisions of the 1998 Agreement if we assume duplicity among its supporters. Classic nationalists could not sincerely welcome the Good Friday Agreement; they could accept it only as a temporary stepping stone to further change, concealing their deeper opposition to some of its provisions (for example the principle of consent and the right of people in Northern Ireland to choose to be Irish or British or both). Even if some negotiators acted in bad faith, it is psychologically implausible that all the nationalist politicians involved in difficult negotiations on the implementation of the Agreement should so dissimulate over a period of years. Nor is it plausible that the mass nationalist public should remain committed to the Agreement despite the crises it has faced if they held such principled objections to its provisions. In any case, as we have seen, there has been a move towards more hybrid identities and towards a greater openness of aims, and these attitudinal shifts were important background conditions which allowed such massive nationalist support for the agreement. It is, however, quite plausible that – given overwhelming nationalist support for the Agreement – a minority of nationalists with ambivalent attitudes towards it should see it as the best option at present and support it for purely strategic reasons.

At the same time, the radically opposed post-nationalist interpretation – that the level of support for the Agreement represents a major shift away from traditional nationalist aims and a hybridisation of Irishness and Britishness – is not borne out by the data. Some have undoubtedly broken completely with traditional nationalist goals, but this is a minority response. Nationalist aims are more moderated and more gradualist than before, but they remain strong among a majority of Catholics. Irish identity remains, no longer so threatened by Britishness but still more often opposed to it than combined with it.

Is then the post-sovereigntist interpretation correct? The data show a significant minority of the Catholic population who prefer an Irish dimension to Irish unity. But even they are not necessarily post-sovereigntist in the sense of a principled lack of concern about sovereignty. They may simply be cautious, unwilling to move too quickly towards any sort of radical change, wishing to conserve whatever personal happiness and resources they have put together through hard times, or they may be genuinely sensitive to (or scared of) unionist objections to unity and wish for a united Ireland only if it can be achieved through agreement. Moreover, the majority of nationalists wish to keep open the

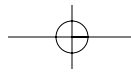
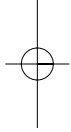
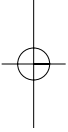


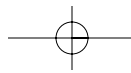


option of a united Ireland; a significant section has a policy preference for Irish unity; and a large majority retains an aspiration for Irish unity. Classic nationalism may be on the wane, now replaced with a more pragmatic, project-oriented nationalism willing to define its proximate aims in light of emergent institutional opportunities. But it is much less clear that it has yet put aside its longer-term aims; indeed it may be because the Good Friday Agreement could be presented as a step on the way to their fulfilment that it was so widely accepted.

One might, of course, split the difference between the interpretations. The data could be read as suggesting that up to a third of Catholics are classic nationalists (wanting Irish unity), more than a third are post-sovereigntist nationalists (wanting an Irish dimension more than they want unity) and – leaving aside the Catholic unionists and the undecided – the remaining sixth are some form of non- or post-nationalist. However this reading would still be much too definitive for the evidence. We know that aims and perspectives are wavering, differential, qualified and still in process of change. We know that similar policies may be preferred for very different reasons: Irish unity can be desired for non-classic reasons by those with hybrid identity; an Irish dimension may be preferred as a policy option despite a traditional nationalist identity and a personal desire for unity or because of a post-nationalist identity; some of the rest of the Catholic population far from being post-nationalist are simply apolitical or undecided.

There is a further possibility which emphasises the uncertainty of the situation. On this interpretation, nationalists' welcome for the Agreement is based in part on its ambiguities which have opened up a space for nationalists to make up their minds as to what they want. The very openness of the future – the uncertainty as to whether the Agreement ushers in a new phase of British sovereignty, European regionalism or gradualist liberal nationalism – allows nationalists to postpone their decisions about the constitutional future until they see how the new institutions work in practice. This postponement is not indefinite: demographic change is likely eventually to force Catholics and nationalists to make up their minds on the constitutional issue. But until that time, there is no urgent need to decide on constitutional priorities. The Agreement gives nationalists their minimal interim aims, while leaving the future open. Its very ambiguities, and the disagreements about its interpretation, mean that neither classic nationalists, liberal nationalists nor regionalists need admit defeat. Moreover by the time more definite constitutional decisions are necessary, indecision and conflict about the constitutional future (at least within the Catholic population) may have decreased; the social changes ushered in by the Agreement are likely themselves to affect nationalists' aims and identities, thus clarifying their decisions for them.¹⁶ In this sense, the Agreement's virtue is that it bypasses the constitutional issue, but only temporarily. If it were permanently to bypass it, it would be unacceptable to





a significant section of nationalists; it is acceptable precisely because the bypass is temporary. This notion of ambivalent nationalism, still waiting to decide what direction it wishes to take, and welcoming an Agreement which gives it an acceptable context in which to make its decision, may best characterise a large section of the nationalist population in the present conjuncture.

This interpretation has the virtue of cohering well with a contextual analysis of the situation. The rapid institutional transformations within Northern Ireland and in Britain and Ireland more generally, the increasing international input into the Northern Ireland conflict, the unpredictability of the current international political conjuncture, the sense of rapid transformation of economic situations and cultural identities, all create a sense of uncertainty, not solely in Northern Ireland but particularly forcibly there. In such a context of rapid social change, little stability or certainty of aims and attitudes can be expected (Bauman, 1991). The rational attitude is to wait, to forego premature closure, to see what opportunities emerge, and how one's own aims and assumptions are changed by the changing situation. The very ambiguity of the data and the disagreements on interpretations of the Agreement suggest that this is what many nationalists in Northern Ireland are currently doing.

Conclusion

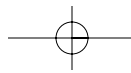
Throughout the European Union the trajectory of peripheral nationalisms raises similar problems of interpretation. How are we to interpret nationalist acceptance of levels of autonomy within the central state? Does it signal a move towards post-nationalism? Is it a recognition of the real possibilities of autonomy without separatism in a post-sovereigntist age? Or is it simply an interim strategic pause, an amassing of resources before a further nationalist push? There are good theoretical and historical arguments for each view.

The very high level of nationalist political elite and mass public support for the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland raises precisely these questions. An analysis of the data allows an assessment of the interpretations. An examination of changing nationalist aspirations rules out the 'post-nationalist' model: there has been no 'sea-change' in nationalist attitudes or aims, and Catholics in Northern Ireland remain broadly speaking nationalist; post-nationalism and regionalism overstate the extent and misjudge the character of the changes which have occurred. A post-sovereigntist model of the changes also gives an inappropriate clarity and definition to them; if nationalists in Northern Ireland are willing to entertain post-sovereigntist possibilities, it is as an interim measure, without prejudice to their ultimate aims. But neither can we accept the strategic model; changes have occurred, more subtle than post-nationalists or post-sovereigntists imply, but significant none the less.

The changes that have occurred in Irish nationalism include: first, a willingness to accept less than Irish unity and independence as a temporary settlement; second, a movement towards a more processual approach, where changes are welcomed as part of a process whose outcome has yet to be decided; third, the emergence of a more plural and less oppositional form of national identity, less resistant to involvement with a 'foreign' state. The combination of a change in identity, of a willingness to accept an interim settlement far short of traditional aims and to leave the future open suggests real change. But how far does it go? Is this the beginning of a process that will end in post-sovereignism or post-nationalism, or are the long-term aims merely temporarily dormant? Do Irish unity and independence remain the ultimate goals, together with a commitment to working to achieve them as soon as the means of doing so become clear? The data indicate change, but do not point to any strong post-sovereignist or post-nationalist trends. It is possible that, at a time of such rapid political change and indeterminacy, many nationalists are keeping their options open, waiting to see how the Agreement will work and what prospects the new institutions will offer, allowing themselves time to assess their own responses to the new situation before coming down on one side or another. That this is also a rational response gives added support to the interpretation.

It has to be borne in mind, however, that the change in nationalism has occurred in a very specific context, one in which nationalist power resources – not least demographic – have been growing. The more 'relaxed' nationalist approach is, at least for some nationalists, importantly bound up with the sense that the historical grain is running their way. If nationalists are now taking their time to make up their minds about the constitutional future, they also believe that they are moving into a situation where, for the first time, they will be able effectively to determine it. Some feel they can afford short-term moderation precisely because they think that they are advancing towards – and if anything, strengthening – their now more gradualist long-term goals. Others may be moving in the other direction, away from a settled post-sovereignism, beginning to reopen for themselves the question of Irish unity now that it is becoming a real possibility.

Of course, if nationalism is 'winning' in Northern Ireland – and objectively this is not clear, nor do all nationalists themselves believe it to be true – this is itself a product of increasing gradualism. 'Winning' has been redefined in pluralist terms, but nationalist unity and international alliances would be put in jeopardy by extreme, exclusivist or irredentist claims. It is the fact of nationalist advance in a carefully regulated environment which favours the indeterminacy and moderation which we have described. Would it continue if this advance were seen to falter? It follows from our argument that the open-endedness of the political process is an essential prerequisite of this change: if the real possibility of attaining nationalist goals by gradualist,



peaceful and democratic means were perceived to have been closed, then nationalists in Northern Ireland would reassess their options. Precisely the difference between the Northern Irish and the Basque cases is that Northern Irish militants see a real medium-term possibility of success by peaceful, negotiated means, while Basque militants do not.

If the Northern Irish case can be generalised, it suggests that contemporary peripheral nationalism is changing, but it is not (for the most part) in process of becoming either post-sovereigntist or post-nationalist. It is taking stock and keeping its options open, compromising in the immediate situation but without changing its fundamental principles or abandoning past ideals. Moreover, nationalism is changing in the context of open-ended socio-political change from which it hopes ultimately to benefit.

