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Authors(s)	Mallon, Seamus, Phoenix, Eamon
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**NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND
FROM PARTITION TO THE BELFAST
AGREEMENT**

**—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE
Seamus Mallon, MP, MLA**

**— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE
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IBIS working paper no. 29

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No. 1 in the lecture series “The path to peace: negotiating and implementing the Belfast agreement”, organised in association with Co-Operation Ireland

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ABSTRACTS

NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND FROM PARTITION TO THE BELFAST AGREEMENT — A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper reflects on the challenges and difficult contexts which hindered the process of negotiation that resulted in the Good Friday agreement. Problems included past political experiences, the novelty of negotiation for many of the parties, acceptance of negotiating partners, and the chaotic and *ad hoc* nature of negotiation. The paper refers to some of the difficulties of implementation that followed the agreement, in particular tensions that have arisen over structural resistance to the establishment of the new Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The paper concludes by highlighting the challenge that is facing all political parties on the island: the need to create a new political idealism.

NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND FROM PARTITION TO THE BELFAST AGREEMENT — AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

This paper provides an historical introduction to nationalism in Northern Ireland, from partition to the Belfast agreement. The author traces the emergence of contemporary nationalism from the early days of Joseph Devlin through the trauma of the civil war, partition and the consolidation of unionist domination. The paper goes on to consider the changing role of nationalism during the 1960s and the emergence of the SDLP, and concludes by pointing to the growing threat to the SDLP that is posed by Sinn Féin.

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This contains a summary of a lecture presented by Seamus Mallon, and the revised text of a lecture presented by Éamon Phoenix as part of the seminar series “The path to peace: negotiating and implementing the Belfast agreement”, organised jointly by Co-Operation Ireland and the Institute for British-Irish Studies. The lectures were presented in UCD on 16 May 2002.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Seamus Mallon was an MLA for Newry and Armagh in the Northern Ireland Assembly. He has been an MP for Newry and Armagh since 1986, and was first elected to public office in 1973, before which he was a teacher. Mr Mallon was Deputy First Minister in the new Assembly for the period 1999-2001. He is married with one daughter.

Éamon Phoenix is a Senior Lecturer in History at Stranmillis University College, Belfast. A well-known broadcaster and journalist on historical and political issues, he is the author of several books on modern Irish history, including *Northern nationalism: nationalist politics, partition and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland 1890–1940* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 1994).

**NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND
FROM PARTITION TO THE BELFAST AGREEMENT —
A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Seamus Mallon, MP, MLA

I

In any discussion of the negotiation and implementation of the Good Friday agreement it is very important to put these processes, as well as their results, into context. This is particularly important when highlighting the difficulty of achieving a positive conclusion.

My 30 years of political experience have been strongly negative. It became clear to me at an early stage that negotiations did not necessarily work. We all remember Sunningdale, the Atkins conference, the Prior initiative and the Brooke and Mayhew talks. Experience taught me that promises and commitments agreed during dialogue would not necessarily be kept. The British government had a habit of backing away from agreements in the face of unionist opposition.

That said, I do believe that during all these initiatives there were indications of what was to come—a kind of belief or hope or feeling that things were changing, and that the future would hold something better.

The second thing to remember when talking about the context of the process of negotiation is the fact that for many of the parties negotiation was a totally new experience. They had not been involved in previous initiatives, and this lack of experience proved an important factor in influencing their approach. For years, all of the negotiations had been conducted between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party in its various forms, and this experience made for a cosy relationship between the two parties. However the Good Friday negotiations changed all of that: they were a whole new ball game with many new players.

Another difficulty was the “chill factor”. It was very difficult to find ourselves sitting beside terrorists, terrorists who had killed our friends and families—and not only to find ourselves sitting beside them, but also to have to start talking to them. Before we could even begin the process of negotiation we had to overcome this major barrier.

One must not forget the difficulty that is inherent in large-scale negotiations with many actors, what I call the “disparate factor”. The negotiations were a very complicated process with all kinds of things going on. There were subtleties that it was hard even to have been aware of. It was difficult to know exactly what was going on, and who was talking to whom. Not surprisingly a sense of paranoia developed, making the talks even more difficult than they already were. An interesting example of this disparity was the fact that strand one was barely touched on during the ne-

gotiations; in fact, Sinn Fein never even discussed it. The real negotiations on Strand one did not begin until Holy Thursday evening. This was not an accident; it was a tactic in order to try and deal with the issue of "parallel consent". There was a belief that we, in the SDLP, would not cause the collapse of everything that had been achieved for the sake of just one issue. I believe that parallel consent was essential, as it was the only way to overcome the distrust that had built up over the years.

II

As everyone is aware, the problems have not ended with the signing of the agreement. We are still in the throes of a very difficult implementation process, one that is exacerbated not least by the impact of those forces that do not wish to see the new structures survive. As an early example, there has been some strong resistance from within the civil service. This was illustrated by the fact that after David Trimble and I were elected we very quickly went to Stormont. But there we discovered that we did not even have office space, suggesting that senior civil servants did not particularly want us. In the midst of a difficult political situation, including the Drumcree crisis, we did not even have a telephone line.

It may sound pessimistic, and it is a sad thing to have to say, but my advice to anyone would be simple: trust no one but yourselves. In other words, it is important not to take it for granted that just because a formal agreement has been reached, the implementation of this agreement will follow automatically.

III

Politicians both in the North and the South of Ireland are facing a very serious challenge; we need to create a new type of political idealism to take the place of violence. We need to achieve a new political reaction. The misguided ideals of the past have failed; it is easy to mobilise support if you are going to use people's emotions, but hoisting the Union flag or the Tricolour is no longer sufficient.

We can see that the politics of conviction is in decline. Unionism has been associated with sashes and Lambeg drums; republicanism with dead bodies and blood; and loyalism with tattoos and hatred.

The challenge, then, is to create a new idealism, even though this, and the pursuit of peace, might be considered "wimpish" because one has to say nice things about everyone. The great North-South experiment now is how to get belief back into our lives in terms of political conviction. It is very difficult to get people to knock on doors at election time if you cannot tell them what the basic belief is that you are asking them to support. You cannot simply smile your way through this question.

Neither unionism nor nationalism will be able to continue unless each develops a body of idealism for itself, and a belief in the future. How long will unionism be able to limp along in a British, six-county context, knowing full well that Britain some-

where down the line is leaving? How long can nationalists limp on in a six-county context? Does our world stop there? Do nationalists have to become some kind of political eunuchs in a partnership administration?

Things have been changing in a fundamental way, and we have to gear ourselves for the future. But this does not mean that I am predicting a 32-county unitary state, or an imminent British withdrawal.

I think we could draw on what Bill Clinton meant when he said that he could go anywhere in the world and tell them not to give up on peace because "they have done it in Northern Ireland". This could be the new political idealism, recognition that Ireland now has the opportunity to give something back. As in monastic times, Ireland could become an example to the world, showing that politics was not just about accountancy reports but about something much more fundamental to people's lives.

**NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND
FROM PARTITION TO THE BELFAST AGREEMENT —
AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Éamon Phoenix

I

From 1900 until the 1916 Easter Rising, Ulster Catholics, in common with their co-religionists in the rest of Ireland, gave their allegiance to the Home Rule Party (Irish Parliamentary Party) and its goal of a united, self-governing Ireland.

In the north the party was closely controlled by John Redmond's co-leader, the West Belfast MP, Joseph Devlin (1872-1934). A captivating orator and superb organiser, Devlin's iron grip on Ulster Catholics was closely associated with his revival in 1904 of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), a Catholic sectarian secret society which became the primary nationalist organisation in the rural north.

Northern nationalist hopes of inclusion in a Home Rule Ireland were dashed by determined Ulster unionist resistance after 1912 and the willingness of the Irish Parliamentary Party to accept Lloyd George's scheme for six-county exclusion in June 1916. The "black Friday" conference of nationalists in Belfast, which endorsed the proposals, split northern nationalism irrevocably along east-west lines and paved the way for the rise of Sinn Féin in the nationalist-majority counties of Tyrone, Fermanagh and Derry City. Only in Devlin's power base of Belfast and east Ulster did the Irish Parliamentary Party retain a substantial following.

II

Northern nationalists saw partition rather than "home rule versus republic" as the critical issue during 1918-21 and fears of unionist domination resulted in a "green pact" between the Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin in Ulster in the 1918 general election. Despite the Sinn Féin landslide in nationalist Ireland, Devlin's popularity in Belfast enabled him to defeat the Sinn Féin leader, de Valera by a margin of three to one.

While Sinn Féin established the First Dáil, Devlin attended Westminster where he unsuccessfully opposed partition and demanded minority safeguards in the new Northern Ireland state, including a protective senate. Catholic hostility to partition was intensified by the unremitting sectarian violence of 1920-22 and especially the expulsion of some 8,000 Catholics from their employment by loyalists. Nationalist anger was further inflamed by the establishment of the aggressively sectarian Ulster Special Constabulary by Westminster in 1920.

The Irish Republican Army (IRA) emerged in the north during the Anglo-Irish war but, despite their largely defensive role in the pogroms, they never enjoyed majority nationalist support.

The impending threat of partition produced an electoral pact between Devlin's party and Sinn Féin for the first Northern Ireland elections in May 1921. The two parties each won six seats on a platform of "non-recognition" of the new parliament. Northern nationalists looked to Sinn Féin to undo partition but the treaty of 6 December 1921, with its formal recognition of the border, induced confusion and alarm. Article 12, which included an ambiguous boundary commission to redraw the 1920 border only deepened the divisions in nationalist ranks with the border nationalists—mainly supporters of Sinn Féin—regarding the Commission as a means of transferring large areas to the Irish Free State and the East Ulster nationalists fearing permanent minority status.

III

During 1922, the nationalist position was further eroded by the treaty split in the south and Michael Collins's confusing blend of "non-recognition, diplomacy and IRA violence towards the Northern Ireland government". Collins's two pacts with Craig dissolved in violence, but the abortive March agreement was the only serious attempt during the whole period 1922-68 to involve the minority in the workings of the state.

The civil war and death of Collins, their chief protagonist in the south, left northern nationalists demoralised as peace slowly returned to the six counties. The new Dublin government of WT Cosgrave adopted a "peace policy" towards the north, reversing Collins's non-recognition policy in favour of accelerating the Boundary Commission.

Meanwhile, the nationalist boycott of the Northern Ireland parliament during 1922-25 ensured that the basic framework of the state was laid without any constructive input from the Catholic minority. The abolition of proportional representation for local elections in 1922 and the subsequent gerrymander of ward boundaries to consolidate unionist domination, together with the 1923 Education Act (which penalised voluntary or Catholic schools), underlined the indifference of the unionist administration to minority interests. Under pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, Devlin took his seat in April 1925, before the Boundary Commission had reported.

The collapse of the Commission in November 1925 and the Free State's signature of a tripartite agreement confirming partition came as a shattering blow to the border nationalists, and, by 1928 this section had joined Devlin in a new united movement, the National League, dedicated to pursue Irish unity by constitutional means. Devlin now led a party of ten in the regional parliament, but his appeals for the redress of nationalist grievances were repeatedly rejected by the unionist majority. His hopes of a new political alignment along class lines were finally dashed by the abolition of proportional representation for parliamentary elections in 1929. Devlin

abandoned the regional parliament in 1932. His death in 1934 marked the end of the National League as a political force, as abstentionism began again.

IV

Nationalists began to look to de Valera (now returned to power in Dublin) to re-open the partition issue. De Valera failed to match these expectations, though his intervention helped to prevent the extension of conscription to Northern Ireland in 1939. During this period, notably after the 1935 Belfast riots, the British government rebuffed nationalist appeals to intervene in Northern Ireland and, by the 1930s, the minority had formed a “state within a state”, equipped with its own social and political infrastructure. During World War II only the two Belfast nationalist MPs attended Stormont, which continued to regard the minority as “a fifth column”, in Lord Brookeborough’s phrase.

In 1945, the return of a Labour government in Britain signalled a major upsurge of anti-partitionist activity in Northern Ireland and the various nationalist strands coalesced in a new mass movement, the Anti-Partition League (APL). Under the leadership of James McSparran, MP, the APL adopted a policy of active opposition at Stormont and Westminster after a decade of abstention, and launched a worldwide campaign against partition. However, its single focus on the constitutional issue, rather than on well-founded grievances, alienated the Attlee government and the subsequent Ireland Act (1949), reinforcing partition, was a major blow to the APL which rapidly declined, challenged by a revived IRA.

The post-war years marked a period of stagnation in Northern Ireland politics despite the introduction of the British welfare state after 1945. By the 1950s the Nationalist Party had lost its former Belfast bastions to the Republican Labour Party which, under Harry Diamond and Gerry Fitt, combined republican principles with a radical socialist programme geared to the needs of Belfast Catholics. This reduced the Nationalist Party to a role analogous of “local notables”, lacking even in a formal party organisation; they were “like bishops, answerable to no one”.

Mounting nationalist frustration was reflected in the 1955 Westminster elections when Sinn Féin—the political wing of the IRA—secured 152,000 votes. This was largely a protest vote and the subsequent IRA border campaign (1956-62) failed to win significant nationalist support.

V

By the early 1960s, nationalist politics were being influenced by three factors: the more liberal policies of the new unionist Prime Minister, Terence O’Neill (1963-69), the conciliatory northern policy of Sean Lemass (Taoiseach, 1959-66) and the demand for change from the growing numbers of articulate, middle class Catholics, products of the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act, some of whom formed the progressive National Democratic Party in 1965.

Following the O'Neill-Lemass meeting of January 1965—the first north-south summit since 1925—the Nationalist Party under Edward McAteer agreed to assume the role of official opposition for the first time. However, O'Neill's failure to introduce much-needed reform angered nationalists. By the mid-1960s the old Nationalist Party's "rigid immobility" was being assailed by an array of forces including the rising young Derry schoolteacher, John Hume, the Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ), a middle class pressure group, and radical MPs such as Austin Currie and Gerry Fitt. Elected to Westminster in 1966, Fitt had made a major impact in parliament, effectively raising civil rights issues with the new Labour government of Harold Wilson.

The belated efforts by the Nationalist Party to create a more modern party organisation were soon overtaken in 1967 by the mobilisation of Catholic protest in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) with its inclusive slogan, "British rights for British subjects". The worldwide reaction to the use of police batons on a civil rights march in Derry on 5 October 1968 ended Westminster's indifference to Northern Ireland affairs. As the unionist government hurriedly introduced a reform package, it seemed that NICRA had achieved more in 40 days of agitation than the nationalists had in 40 years of parliamentary opposition. The demise of the party came in the Northern Ireland general election of February 1969 when it was eclipsed by the election of key civil rights leaders, including Hume, reflecting Catholic support for the new style of politics.

The scene was set for the amalgamation of the various civil rights progressive MPs into the left-of-centre Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) under Fitt's leadership in August 1970. The new party was wedded to political participation and constructive reform and, as such, it helped to negotiate the Sunningdale agreement (1973) and participated in the short-lived power-sharing executive of 1974. For the next 25 years the SDLP would be the voice of moderate nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland.

VI

The collapse of the Sunningdale agreement was a watershed for the SDLP. It was in the wilderness years of the late 1970s and early 1980s that John Hume (who replaced Fitt as party leader in 1979) began his remorseless shuttle diplomacy between Dublin, London, Strasbourg and Washington, winning the ear of successive American Presidents, the influential "Friends of Ireland" led by Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy in Congress, and the leaders of the European Community. Hume's election to the European Parliament in 1979 gave him an enhanced international status.

By the early 1980s, the SDLP was faced with the emotional trauma of the hunger strikes, mounting IRA and loyalist violence and the refusal of unionism to accept power sharing or the Irish identity of nationalists. Hume's response was two-fold. He successfully exhorted the Dublin political establishment to set up the New Ireland Forum to outline a shared vision of a future united Ireland. But his supreme achievement was to persuade the British and Irish governments of the need for a

new framework in which the question of “the totality of relationships” could be addressed. The result was the Anglo-Irish agreement (1985) which sought to transcend the “narrow ground” of Northern Ireland and gave the Irish government a consultative role for the first time since 1922.

While the accord outraged unionism, we now know that it began the painful process of reappraisal by the Provisional republican leadership. The hunger strikes of 1980-81 also marked the emergence of Sinn Féin—hitherto anti-parliamentary—as a serious political force with 10 per cent of the vote in the 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly elections. Over the next decade Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness pushed republicanism towards greater political participation while pursuing a “twin-track” strategy. By 1986 they had successfully overthrown the southern-based “Old Guard” and secured Sinn Féin recognition of the legitimacy of the Dáil, a prerequisite to its ultimate acceptance of a partitionist settlement.

VII

As early as 1972 the SDLP had engaged in efforts to persuade the Provisional IRA and loyalist paramilitaries to end their campaigns. This was a theme Hume returned to in his initial contacts with Adams in 1988 on a peaceful resolution of the conflict. These conversations were dramatically resumed in 1992 and led directly to the groundbreaking Downing Street declaration of December 1993 by prime ministers John Major and Albert Reynolds and the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994.

The Good Friday agreement, which resulted from the all-party talks launched by the new Labour government in 1997-98, reflected essentially the type of “balanced constitutional chance” long envisaged by the SDLP. The party’s achievement was reflected in its attainment of the largest share of the vote in the 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly elections and four ministerial posts in the Stormont executive, including Seamus Mallon as Deputy First Minister. Yet, ironically one of the effects of the peace process was to blur the distinction between the SDLP and Sinn Féin in the nationalist mind and to enable Sinn Féin to attract the youthful nationalist vote. This was certainly a key factor in Sinn Féin’s eclipse of the party in the 2001 Westminster elections.

VIII

The growing threat from Sinn Féin, with its much-vaunted claim to be the only all-Ireland party on the island, has been the greatest challenge facing the SDLP. The challenge to Mark Durkan, therefore, is to stem this tide and broaden the SDLP’s base by appealing to young nationalist voters and liberal unionism. The importance of transfers from pro-agreement unionists is central to this.

An important side effect of the peace process and the agreement is the growing self-confidence of the northern nationalist population in political, economic and cultural terms. This reflects in part a significant demographic shift in Northern Ireland

generally (with a rise in the Catholic population from 33 per cent in 1921 to around 45 per cent today) and especially in Belfast. This confidence is matched by a corresponding sense of demoralization in the unionist population, particularly in loyalist areas such as North Belfast. Thus the convergence at Stormont level is countered by deepening polarization at community level, constituting a vital test for the agreement, for pro-agreement unionism and for the future leadership of northern nationalism.