

# New Decade, New Approach, New Ireland

*JASMINE MAEDBH THOMPSON argues for an identity-focused approach in determining Ireland's future.*



Brexit protest at Stormont House in October 2018.

*Image: Sinn Féin | Wikicommons*

It is far from controversial to assert that the Brexit referendum of 2016 was deeply contested, most significantly post-result. Whilst Brexit was controversial, as a second Scottish independence referendum will also inevitably be, neither has the potential to ignite a resurgence in conflict. A future referendum about national determination in Northern Ireland would, however, create such potential due to its history of ethnic and political violence. The May elections are expected to return an Irish nationalist majority for the first time in the history of the Northern Irish Assembly

(RTÉ News 2022)<sup>1</sup>. In this context, it is crucial to consider the means by which a substantive and robust proposal can be made that reconciles unionist concerns, both in terms of identity and state institutions, with the right to national determination. This text argues that contemporary efforts have not sufficiently included identity elements when considering the issues that need to be reconciled prior to a referendum.

Two lessons for academics can be drawn from the mistakes of the Brexit referendum. Firstly, the United Kingdom is in deep danger of destabilisation

<sup>1</sup> The May elections occurred between writing and publication of the article.

and disentanglement. Devolution, the revival of four distinct cultural nations evidenced by the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (EU), is often understood to be a symptom of English nationalism (Esler 2021). In this light, it has stoked a new wave of discourse surrounding Scotland and Northern Ireland choosing independence or to unify with the South respectively. Within this context, it is essential to consider how Irish unification might happen. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) makes provisions for a future 'border poll,' with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland morally and legally obligated to call for one should public opinion shift (Garry et al. 2021, 444). However, the GFA contains little guidance for how this shift in public opinion might be determined, leaving the decision to hold a referendum subject to the political whims of the presiding Westminster government. Whether due to reluctance based upon a lack of knowledge, fears of exacerbating tensions or, perhaps most commonly, a misplaced sense of 'closure' borne from the 1998 Agreement, literature on future unification has been rare and often limited in substance. Based upon prior work and the new wave of academic study and public literature on a 'New Ireland,' this text maintains an identity-based focus, critiquing its absence in emerging scholarship that advocates for institutional provisions without laying sufficient groundwork for cultural reconciliation and recognition. It argues that if we are to strive towards a United Kingdom based upon shared values, respect for differing identity elements, and a minimisation of potential violence as guiding principles, we must re-evaluate the content of these identities and, as academics, encourage the state to support and incentivise the display of traditions not rooted in antagonism.

It is critical to understand Irish and British identities present in (but not exclusively restricted to) Ireland as mutually and relatively constructed. For example, in a political capacity, 'Britishness' is conceived differently differently in Ireland than it might in Great Britain (just as it would be different

in Scotland, England, or Wales). Orange parades and other distinct cultural artefacts are alien to those identifying as British in London or Cardiff (Bryan, 2000). Within the context of a unified Ireland, the question becomes: does British identity in the North depend on the Union? If yes, it is impossible to include it within a unified state. If not, then the inclusion of British identity in a unified Ireland becomes possible. Conversely, if Britishness is to be recognised and integrated into a unified Ireland structure, it must be transitional in nature and should move towards a definition that is more rooted in cultural heritage than in a constitutional position. However, this reorientation of Britishness presents a number of difficulties. While shedding all elements unique to Ireland is not necessary to achieve such a British identity, much Northern Irish historical and cultural identity is deeply entangled in a resistance to Catholicism and Irish culture generally.

Todd (2021) outlines a conception of Britishness that is distinctly asymmetric in nature. She asserts that Ulster Britishness is state-focused, not only in its conception of 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people,' but also in its expectation of a certain set of values among its people in terms of religiosity and other traditional values (Todd 2021, 57). She contrasts this with Irish identity, which she understands to be malleable, dynamic, and people-led. Even in putting aside the exceptions to this rule, Todd seems too focused on Northern Ireland itself, failing to consider the institutionalisation of Irish culture, which is understood to be deeply embedded in traditional Catholicism in the south. In this light, it is perhaps more prudent and accurate to extrapolate this dichotomy to a hegemonic-minority identity distinction, rendering unionist concerns of cultural minimisation justified. One may consider, as Todd does, that 'Irishness' does not need to undergo the same process of re-evaluation and re-conceptualisation, given that it is already understood as loyalty to a more nebulous and abstract 'idea' or sense of nationhood than to a currently existing state. In this light, it would not go through the same 'shock'





Anti-hard border protest at Stormont House in 2017.

Image: Sinn Féin | Wikicommons

that Ulster Unionism would, in the case of a united Ireland.

Despite this, should the result of the elections be in favour of unification, Irish nationalism and similar elements must be careful not to provoke hostility nor give indication of triumphalism. In the contemporary political context, Sinn Féin, an Irish Republican party, has been careful to readjust its policy to focus on more bread-and-butter issues such as housing (Evershed and Murphy 2021). However, should they gain dominance in both the North and South, this will open the party up to more tensions as they have the capacity to flex new political muscle. Thus, questions of emotion and perception will become more salient. Of course, Todd (2021) notes the inherent oppositional nature present in each identity. Due to this, goals of the collective recognition and presence of both elements of the traditional dichotomy seem idealistic and potentially more harmful than beneficial (Todd 2021, 55). Expanding on this, in the long term, it will be necessary to create not only an institutional framework but a robust focus on cultural knowledge and social integration to

allow for a re-conceptualisation of identity outside of opposition, a direct relational focus, or mutual contingency. Similarly, decisions must be made both with the awareness of current intercommunity role and identity conception, and an intent to minimise antagonistic elements. The immediate question here is how this policy can be implemented tangibly. Concerns of contested public space post-Agreement have inspired some cases where murals or cultural goods are amended to alleviate tensions, for example, moving from the glorification of paramilitaries to commemorations of Martin Luther, the Belfast Blitz, or VE Day (Kehoe and Dunne 2021, 10). Notably, these elements are not apolitical, neutral, or shying away from social issues. Instead, they maintain identity, or elements of exclusivity, whilst shifting it away from antagonism in its structuring. In this way, re-contextualisation allows for the expression of identity without allowing it to dominate the public space.

Having established the nature of identity conception on the island, it is now possible to assess potential constitutional proposals. The current wave of research on this topic began around 2020, amid

the cultural zeitgeist of the restoration of Stormont through the 'New Decade, New Approach' Agreement, and, eventually, the COVID-19 pandemic. With the reorientation towards a potential border poll, new focuses aim to test the elements that may shift public opinion and decrease the risk of violence. Prior focus groups betrayed a more robust anti-unification sentiment in unionism and resistance was articulated through the zero-sum dichotomy of British defeat and Irish triumphalism (Todd 2021).

By contrast, Garry et al.'s (2020) research indicates a more civic sense of national identification, with the reasoning for pro-unification views or at least open-mindedness being based upon economic concerns, a desire for movement away from hostility and antagonism, and Brexit. In a 'one-day citizens assembly,' attendees were offered presentations and discussions based on two frameworks of unification: full integration versus a devolved system whereby Stormont remains as a functioning body within a Dublin-led state (Garry et al. 2020, 434). The researchers found that opinions, particularly in unionist respondents, shifted from the latter framework into the former as the day went on (Garry et al. 2020). Whilst this did not substantively translate into a visible increase in support for a united Ireland overall, it is clear that focus group engagement made a high proportion of participants aware, seemingly for the first time, that there could be a range of potential frameworks and that specific policy decisions and measures can be a lot more flexible than is often suggested by political leaders in the region. Additionally, EU membership was perceived as a strong advantage of Irish unity, a fact that elucidates the rising salience of the debate as well as the recognition that a re-entering of EU economic frameworks and cultural investment may go some way towards finding a middle ground. Furthermore, the functioning of institutions is important for citizens who are undoubtedly influenced by the failure of Stormont as a legislative body and exercise in power-sharing (O'Carroll 2022).

This article has considered a multitude of ele-

ments that must be reconciled in academia and guaranteed in legislative provision moving forward. Not only has it outlined specific necessary provisions, but it has advocated for a new paradigm in research. Cross-disciplinary frameworks are crucial as exclusively quantitative, political science-focused pieces using quantitative data obscure the identity elements present at a conscious or subconscious level in different communities, and which inform their fears and uncertainties. Whilst inevitably contested and hard to reconcile with narratives held by communities, historical context must be utilised to inform state organisation of cultural events, commemorative occasions, and national holidays. Similarly, a sustained focus at the individual and community level is necessary to elucidate elements in need of active legislation or intellectual investment before a poll can be committed to. Of course, the arguably more isolated environment of a focus group cannot be extended smoothly into a referendum campaign. Misinformation, high tensions, and political action represent some of the additional variables that may be present in this context, a recognition that may be made in any polity but enhanced in the context of an ethnically divided community with legacies of violence. One may view this as the very reason why a sustained, people-led process of investigation and referendum construction is so critical. Informed and holistic frameworks limit any misguided assumptions of political will and limit provocative community figures from misrepresenting discourse or provisional models on offer to voters. These frameworks oblige citizens to take responsibility for reconciliation, encouraging a re-evaluation of one's own identities, their constituent elements and those of other people. In terms of future study, Garry et. al (2020) suggests that this research must be replicated and continued in the South and in a number of capacities. This could be a new project that assists legislators and political figures in framing the parameters of future referenda and ensuring a framework that, if implemented, can inform re-evaluations and policy decisions to come.

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