

Irish nationalism's self-regarding single certainty.



United Ireland, inevitability and Brexit.

In his excellent study of [Ideology and the Irish Question](#), Paul Bew quoted a Ballymoney Free Press editorial of May 1912 at the height of the Irish Home Rule crisis. **'The statement of Unionist Ulster'**, it announced, **'is that it merely wants to be let alone'**. Unfortunately, **'since Satan entered the Garden of Eden good people will not be let alone'**.

This editorial captured a universal truth of Ulster Unionism - the desire to be 'let alone' – a truth with ambivalent consequences.

On the one hand, this desire seems to explain much about the psychology of traditional unionism; its frustrating passivity and lack of political engagement - as well as the career of Jim Molyneux. On the other hand, it explains much about the psychology of loyalist protest, as well as the career of Ian Paisley.

The first retreats to quietism, the latter chases the devil, and often neither is particularly effective. Both were evident during the decade 2006-16. The DUP-SF dominated Executive gave succour to the first in the hope that unionist voters could do other and better things; it also fed the second in its struggle over flags and emblems.

Though unionists want to be 'let alone', unfortunately, nationalists/republicans are determined not ensure that that never happens.

We are again at one of those moments which echoes that Ballymoney Free Press editorial of May 1912.

Today, unionists encounter two familiar and related propositions: that their allegiance is not to be reasoned with, for ultimately it is an obstacle to be removed; and that a united Ireland is inevitable. These are related because the second is the ascribed historic destiny of the nation, and the first is its temporary frustration.

These two propositions often make headlines in a twenty-year (or so) cycle, or once every generation: in contemporary history, in the early 1970s, in the early 1990s and now in 2017 (only a few years late, but the cycle isn't exact and 2016 was meant to be the big year).

Urgency and opportunity?

What is different in the present nationalist/republican cycle is the sense of urgency and opportunity.

Usually Irish unity would be pitched another generation away. It was always (another) '20 years' hence - near enough to disturb unionists who want to be left alone but distant enough not to test the practicalities of nationalist destiny.

Now we have breathless announcements of the march of history resuming at last and the end being finally in sight:

“For the first time in my life, the prospect of a united Ireland is not only credible but inevitable.”

“Growing up in Belfast at the tail end of the Troubles, the so called “Irish question” always seemed a hypothetical one... Reunification was a position which I always considered somewhat fanciful; a naive sentiment which was expressed in republican pockets in Belfast and Derry, meriting few serious contingency plans. But Ireland now looks set to join the roster of political shocks and upsets we have seen rippling across the world”

[Siobhan Fenton](#)'s is a classic example of history-less, evidence-free, journalism but its interest lies in its unselfconscious repetition of communal tropes.

In 1971, for example, John Hume argued that most unionists concede **‘the inevitability of a united country’**. There was **‘little point in evading any further the inevitability on which all are agreed.’**

Hume's view of unionism assumed that its opposition to Irish unity was **‘primarily psychological’**. As a politics of maintaining **‘division’** in Ireland, it was really the product of ill-founded fears.

In other words, it was irrational. Unionism, anxiously clinging on to Britain for support, denied its real affinity with the rest of the island. And because historically, if cynically, the British - for their own reasons - underwrote that relationship, they were and remain responsible for unionist intransigence.

To nationalists/republicans (patronisingly), unionists simply don't understand their own condition: they believe the British 'connection' is necessary for their well-being when all it denotes is their dependence; either unionists become enlightened enough to free themselves; or the British government should persuade them to act according to their real interests; perverse unionist suspicions, self-doubts and prejudices should not stand in the way of the inevitability of a United Ireland.

True, the SDLP took the democratic route of 'spilling sweat' rather than 'blood'. Yet Hume's trademark re-definition of unionism as an 'Irish tradition' - which needed to sort out its relationship with the rest of the island - gave primacy to the nationalist claim to unity. It was that perspective from which all must be seen and from which everything must be deduced. It is an understandable rhetorical device and perfectly legitimate. Hume is a nationalist, after all, the SDLP a nationalist party and Irish national sovereignty is the objective.

There was (and remains) a profound gulf between the brutalism of the IRA vision and the discourse of the SDLP. Their respective political cultures were (and remain) radically distinct. Indeed, one of the motivations of the IRA was to make sure that common ground between unionists and nationalists was impossible to achieve. As Henry Patterson cites one Tyrone republican in his book [Ireland's Violent Frontier: The Border and Anglo-Irish Relations during the Troubles](#), the murder of local security force personnel was intended to stop 'the Unionists doing a deal with the SDLP.' Perhaps nothing captures better the difference between constitutional nationalism and republicanism than such cynical and casual viciousness.

However, Peter McLoughlin's important [John Hume and the revision of Irish nationalism](#) argues that at Sunningdale Hume had lost sight of the SDLP's founding principles and 'appeared to assume that Irish unity could be achieved through Unionists' acquiescence rather than their active assent.'

This was an assumption which reappeared at the beginning of the 1990s – another example of the 20 year cycle - in the form of what became known as **‘Hume-Adams’**.

Hume-Adams consisted of, first, an attempt to maximise the advantage of friends – a pan-nationalist front - against a permanently marginalised Unionist enemy; and, second, it involved a requirement of the British government to be a persuader for Irish unity. **Hume-Adams** was a classic expression of the nationalist calculation of, on the one hand, indifference in London towards Northern Ireland's place in the UK and an evangelical faith that Dublin would value the goal of Irish unity.

Certainly, unionists were concerned about the first if only because it would encourage the latter. Like the Duc de la Rochefoucauld's maxim unionist concern about the commitment of the British government could be summed up thus:

“The reason why we frequently criticise those who act on our behalf is that almost always they lose sight of their friends’ interests in the interest of negotiation itself, which they make their own concern for the honour and glory of having succeeded in what they have undertaken.”

From Heath to May, the Unionist anxiety has been that British politicians and diplomats would look at Northern Ireland as a means to an end (stability on the island) rather than as an end in itself (upholding the rights of British citizens).

Unionists have rightly been concerned that the game of negotiation and an agreed outcome takes precedence over the integrity of the state. Not only unionists thought this, of course (see [Richard Rose: Is the UK a state? Northern Ireland as a test case](#)). And if one is looking for an explanation of the career of Jim Molyneux and his celebrated detestation of ‘high-wire acts’ then one need look no further.

As a consequence, the danger is this. In negotiations and trade-offs, who is friend and who is enemy can become inverted. The politics of maintaining the Union may seem a greater irritant to British policy-makers than the politics of those wishing to remove part of its sovereign territory.

This syndrome is explored in [Jim Bulpitt’s: Territory and Power in the United Kingdom](#) and it can be read clearly in the diaries of Alastair Campbell.

For Bulpitt it is the interest of the ‘centre’ in getting stability in the ‘periphery’; in the case of the second, it could be either a sneaking regard for the terrorist, or a disdain for dour Presbyterians.

Nationalism has returned to Hume-Adams territory, though it might be thought suspect that some never left it. The pan-nationalist front and demands for the British government to be a persuader for Irish unity are making their re-appearance.

In the 1970s, IRA violence was the justification for this objective. In the 1990s ending IRA violence was the justification. Today, the justification is Brexit. The last decade appears now as an ecumenical moment but the evangelists of Unity now deliberate on the old theological points. We are back with calculations across London’s indifference and Dublin’s evangelism.

A persuader for unity?

Let’s consider first the nationalist notion that the British government has a ‘responsibility’ to be a persuader. Seven years ago [Seamus Milne, then a Guardian journalist](#) and now the Labour Party’s Executive Director of Strategy and Communications announced that:

“The conviction voiced by Sinn Féin leaders and SDLP assembly member Conall McDevitt at the London conference that Irish reunification is inevitable is surely right. The crucial question on this side of the Irish sea is whether Britain will help that process or hinder it”

In short, that is a replay of the line that unionists should not be reasoned with, but rather jollied along by London to accept the inevitable because, as mere cyphers and dupes, it is an offer that they can’t refuse. It fits well with the history of the present Labour Party leadership’s attitude to Northern Ireland.

Recently, much of the running in the propagation of the inevitability thesis has been made by Kevin Meagher, a former special adviser to Shaun Woodward who was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from 2007 to 2010. Articles based on his book: [A United Ireland: Why Unification is Inevitable and How It Will Come About](#) have appeared regularly in the press in the UK and Ireland. The argument - summarised in [‘Why reunified Ireland offers best outcome for North’s future’ Irish Times Dec 28, 2016](#) - begins with the familiar argument according to British disinterest.

“Successive generations of British politicians have longed to jettison Northern Ireland, but at critical points they lacked the will and the choreography to do so. Now things are changed. Changed utterly, in fact. The turn of the historical wheel presents new opportunities.”

“In fact, beyond the unionist tribe, is anyone in British politics bothered about maintaining the link to Northern Ireland?”

That view has been and remains common on the British Left (and by John Hume). Put simply, it is that unionists do not deserve the same protections and sympathy as other minorities in the UK - because they are a local majority and somehow not like ‘us’.

For those who are rightly appalled by those advocating the ‘repatriation’ of ethnic minorities in Great Britain to their ‘natural homelands’ and who have been outraged that EU citizens in the UK should be used as ‘bargaining chips’ in the process of Brexit, are quite happy to ‘repatriate’ one million unionists and to ignore matters of citizenship when it comes to the unification of Ireland.

The argument would not be made if it did not connect with a strand of reality (even in a ‘post-truth’ culture) and Meagher does write of a real and historical tendency in British politics ([though it doesn’t make his book any more than a rhetorical rant](#)).

Roy Jenkins for example, confirming a long-standing liberal view, thought that unionists were outside the parameters of the British political tradition altogether and feared ‘the barbaric standards of Northern Ireland spreading to the rest of us’ ([Bernard Donoughue Downing Street Diary: With Harold Wilson in No. 10](#)). Even mainstream academics like [Ian McLean and Alistair McMillan in their State of the Union: Unionism and the Alternatives in the United Kingdom since 1707](#) have argued something similar.

McLean and McMillan distinguish **primordial** unionism - ‘British’ as an end in itself - from **instrumental** unionism – ‘British’ as a means to an end, such as welfare, prosperity and security. McLean and MacMillan thought that primordial unionism was now dead. Unionist primordialism could be only of historical interest today with the one exception of Northern Ireland. This atavistic form of unionism, they argued, has little or no resonance elsewhere in the UK.

If by ‘**primordial**’ one means Orange Order marches, sashes, flute bands, Lambeg drums and bowler hats then they have a point. This academic interpretation plays into the sort of political calculation favoured by Meagher – that it should be discounted, especially when the future beckons and belongs to others. And one can understand why such an argument appeals to those who believe they have the real sort of national identity in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and possibly England.

Unionists are placed outside the norm, a problem to be dealt with or, as in [David Miller’s influential study Queen’s Rebels](#), a peculiar throwback to the 17th century who need to be modernised. This view of all Unionists has returned in public discourse after June 2017 – consider the vilification of the DUP and its pact with the Conservative Party and the consequent smearing of a whole community as a corrupting element in society. The lineage of that disturbing political trope in European history did not prevent liberal critics indulging it, as [Jenny McCartney says](#):

“Yet journalists who should and do know better wrote about the DUP exactly as if it were the roaringly sectarian Paisleyite party of the early 70s, rather than one that has been sharing power with Sinn Fein at Stormont for the last ten years. They lambasted its opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage as proof that it was politically irredeemable – while neglecting to point out that the DUP’s abortion policy is exactly the same as that held by the SDLP, Labour’s sister party in Northern Ireland, or that 136 Conservatives, 22 Labour, and 4 Lib Dem MPs voted in Parliament against the 2013 gay marriage bill: should those individuals be denied access to government too?”

Evidence-free and history-free

When Meagher writes: **We’re just not that into Northern Ireland. Perhaps it’s time we said so**, who is the ‘we’? Or to put that otherwise who are ‘the people’?

This view represents a peculiarly stunted – and, ironically, a very Anglo-centric view of identity and allegiance. A left-liberal political ideology which elsewhere makes a virtue of inclusion, tolerance and diversity makes an exception when it comes to unionists. Historically and conceptually, it wilfully misunderstands the character of the United Kingdom.

As the political scientist [Michael Keating argued in *The Independence of Scotland: Self-government and the Shifting Politics of Union*](#):

“Understandings of the Union in England and in Scotland (not to mention Wales or Ireland) meant that Britishness had rather different meanings in each.”

And **Colin Kidd**'s important study [Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000](#) pointed out that Scotland's relationship with England was compatible with depths of cultural nationalism and its 'grammar of assent did not preclude criticism of England'.

For Kidd, the characteristic tone of Scottish politics was often 'incomprehensible or even offensive to English ears' and much the same may be said about the historical relationship between Northern Irish Unionists and England. Or as JCD Clark put it succinctly in [Protestantism, Nationalism, and National Identity, 1660-1832](#) unionism is no abstract formula but has had 'the greater strength of seldom demanding of its members a deeper acknowledgement of kinship with their neighbours than they were willing, informally, to give'.

Meagher's historical ignorance informs his simplistic partisanship. Moreover, there is also an echo across to the Scottish National Party play book. In run up to the referendum of 2014, one of the arguments developed by advocates of independence – as McLean and McMillan anticipated – was that only romantic sentimentalists or 'primordialists' could support the Union. The modern, progressive case was for Scottish sovereignty. Today is the age of nimble, small European nations (especially with all that oil) in a globalised economy.

Meagher says:

"What is clear is that, as this debate unfolds, Irish reunification will be the pragmatic, modernising position to advocate. The case for the status quo, for the retention of Northern Ireland, will be made by nostalgic romantics. Indeed, the evidence-based case for unity will be made in flat, sober tones."

Like Fenton's article, [Meagher's effort to proffer an 'evidence-based' case for unity is not only history-less but also evidence-less](#). Rather like the SNP's expectation of keeping use of the pound and modernising proposition being underpinned by Treasury guarantee, the UK will continue to pay Northern Ireland's bills (until when is left unclear).

“Britain's role in all this should be to promise to maintain a significant financial contribution over a number of years until both jurisdictions are sufficiently harmonised.”

Though Brexit is the latest reason for the inevitability of Irish unity

“The proposition of a United Ireland has become not just acceptable in political discussion but, according to some, pragmatic since the seismic shift in the political terrain caused by last year's Brexit referendum”

There is a curious naivety here.

Those selfish English nationalists (as even the restrained Fintan O'Toole has taken to describing them), having decided irresponsibly to vote everyone out of the EU on the promise of £350 million a week, are required to do the decent thing by the Irish and continue to subsidise half of all public spending in Northern Ireland to the tune of £10 billion a year.

It would be interesting to see how that proposition would go down in Sunderland or Hull – especially since Meagher's argument is that Northern Ireland makes no economic sense.

“Northern Ireland’s best bet, economically, is to join with the South and align its economy to benefit from the Republic’s strong record of attracting foreign direct investment’. At the moment, Northern Ireland and the Republic ‘are the only dinner guests positioned at opposite ends of a banqueting table.”

Meagher’s economic case, it should be noted, is also evidence-free, with reference only to a ‘major report’ on the feasibility of Irish unity by Dr Kurt Hübner, a report given little credence by serious academic economists.

Meagher’s conclusion is:

"It’s not good enough anymore to just say, ‘we’re glad there’s peace.’ We now need to say, ‘we need to sustain the peace, sustain political dialogue and we need a longer term view. And the long term view is that Britain will not have sovereignty over Northern Ireland.'"

Here is an open invitation to visionary politicians in London to become persuaders once again, and for Dublin to make the most of this opportunity.

And yet...

The May factor

Yet what of the proposition that the UK government will look favourably upon its so-called obligation to persuade unionists, irrespective of finance – or perhaps because of finance – to accept the inevitability of Irish unity?

There is an irony here. If the nationalist case is that Brexit changes everything and makes Irish unity inevitable, the alternative is that Brexit makes the Union even more important for the UK government to maintain.

In the balance of probabilities, this latter argument would seem the weightier one. It should give unionists some confidence when they encounter the strategy of demoralisation.

When Theresa May delivered her first statement as Prime Minister before entering 10 Downing Street, she reminded the country that the full title of her party continues to be the Conservative and Unionist Party, announcing that the word ‘unionist’ is ‘very important to me’. For Mrs May it meant that the party believes in the Union, ‘the precious, precious bond between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’.

In addition to that territorial understanding of Union she added a complementary civic meaning, one ‘between all of our citizens, every one of us, whoever we are and wherever we’re from’. It was interesting that this restatement of the party’s name and its rededication to its unionist vocation, territorially and civically, came at the beginning of Mrs May’s speech and not as a rhetorical afterthought.

Moreover, in addition to that very ‘primordial’ statement of purpose, there is also a pragmatic consideration. The Prime Minister has a vulnerable majority in the House of Commons and the votes of unionist MPs are an important cushion in the very process of exiting the EU. In that situation, even if Mrs May were disposed to act against the spirit of her ‘high unionism’ – and there is no evidence that she is so minded – the position she is least likely to adopt is to become a persuader for Irish unity. And then, Scotland...

If May declines to be a persuader is it likely that the Republic of Ireland endeavours to take up this ‘once in a lifetime’ (until the next time) opportunity to secure the inevitable?

That old pan-nationalist front again?

Irish Government officials have tended to point out that the intention of Dublin’s Northern policy is benign and constructive - that involvement in Northern Ireland is dedicated to stability (consensual ecumenism) and not unity (ideological evangelism).

That sounds like ‘putting words into the mouth of history’. As [Clare O’Halloran famously claimed in Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism: An Ideology under Stress](#), there has always been at once naivety and hypocrisy in this position: ‘a united Ireland would end divisions in Ireland and between Ireland and Britain’ when the truth was that ‘such divisions centred on the very question of unity’.

O’Halloran thought that being dishonest about unity had become Irish policy, retaining the evangelism of unity but bound up with an ecumenical wish to keep both sides in Northern Ireland at a distance. It can be argued that the Irish government has three perspectives on Northern Ireland: the ‘directional’, the ‘positional’ and the ‘relational’.

the directional

For the Irish state – officially - direction meant Irish unity. Paradoxically, this one direction was predicated on a very static picture of British purpose – it was up to the UK to bring about Irish unity, subscribing at least until Hume-Adams, that it was the role of London to ‘persuade’ unionists to accept it.

This was, of course, congenial to some British officials and politicians, possibly too many for unionist comfort. But it was politics as the crow flies: that is above the thickets, contours and realities of politics. More recently, one might ask, the crow has changed course.

The Belfast Agreement is understood as the logical unfolding of the benign wisdom of intergovernmental relations. It is a variant of the old European thesis of functional spill-over: in this case intellectual spill-over.

As Irish and British official minds engaged to deal with what Roy Foster refers to as the ‘big, mad children’ in Northern Ireland - Foster’s is an eagle’s view rather than a crow’s - the rational framework of a settlement formed. Here is a re-written direction based on benign official wisdom. The Belfast Agreement is a child of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is a child of Sunningdale – the locals were just slow learners, who shot too often at the crow.

This isn’t a united Ireland, but an agreed Ireland. There is one direction but it has been plotted differently in the files of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

the positional

In his [British-Irish Relations and Northern Ireland: From Violent Politics to Conflict Regulation](#), [Brendan O’Duffy](#) describes Irish policy as a re-positioning ‘from hierarchy to symmetry’ in intergovernmental relations over Northern Ireland. Though Duffy admitted that the ‘British claim to sovereignty trumps the Irish aspiration’ he still subscribes to O’Halloran’s tradition of collective dishonesty on Northern Ireland. The UK’s status is not a claim. It is a fact as [Paul Bew makes clear in Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006](#). In short, this is status-referential, perhaps self-regarding. Nevertheless, there is evidence to identify positional change in relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Of course, Ireland and the UK are not symmetrical in world power terms – but Irish membership of the European Union along with the UK was one way to disguise this fact.

Brexit has upended that common status and can only have some (as yet unknown, because no-one in the Irish Government had planned for Brexit, and everyone is still winging it) effect on Dublin’s position in relation to London and to Belfast.

the relational

The relational understanding of UK-Irish relations captures whatever truth there is in the first two perspectives but gives a more accurate historical sense of – to paraphrase Foster’s essay on Anglo-Irish Relations in Paddy and Mr Punch – the place of ‘boundaries and connections’.

Since 1998 (one can claim) the force of the idea that there is in Irish history some destiny or fate that awaits - which has been the curse of directional thinking for nationalists (Irish unity) and for unionists (also Irish unity) - seemed to weaken. It was the major, perhaps only, achievement of the Belfast Agreement.

Of course, events or moments are never of such revolutionary significance that all is changed utterly - again Foster points to this illusion in Irish thinking - but things seemed sufficiently different in Anglo-Irish as well as unionist/nationalist relations to assume that some things had changed.

Patrick Keatinge's 1978 classic on Irish foreign policy [A Place among the Nations](#) put unity as only one major issue for Ireland along with independence, security and prosperity. The latter three have normally taken precedence.

Today it is not possible to assume simple (directional) progress - the political materials are what come readily to hand and these may not be constructive at all. Northern Ireland always shows how true this is. In 1972 Dennis Kennedy wrote in *The Irish Times* that the 'question on Irish unity might be not how or when, but why'. The Belfast Agreement provided an answer to the how and when - consent - and left the why to sort itself out - sometime, maybe, never.

If it is not possible to assume simple directional progress, then how is it possible to pin all hope on the inevitability of Irish unity, still?

Inevitable, being opportune.

One good response to arguments according to inevitability is this: 'if something is inevitable then why are you banging on about it?'

The frustration and urgency and the call to action is really a sign that those who speak of inevitability appear to think it is far from inevitable (one recalls all those old arguments about the 'inevitability of communism'). So what is the purpose of the argument around 'inevitability'? There are at least three.

The first is about demoralisation. If you can convince your opponents that the game is up and that there is no alternative but to accept your interpretation, then you are more than half way on the road to success. Of course, the inevitability argument has been a consistent part of nationalist discourse and it is not new. It simply re-appears with periodic urgency and Brexit has pumped new energy into it.

The second has already been mentioned - there is a possible left-liberal intersection of opportunity to associate the politics of Remain with the politics of Sinn Fein. Republicans have now an issue, rather like the old pseudo 'anti-imperialist' struggle of the 70s and 80s, to connect and find common purpose with a substantial cohort of opinion in Great Britain. Once again, unionists can be identified as supporting the reactionary move in British politics and are best persuaded out of the UK and into a united Ireland where they will, of course, see sense.

The third is a local variation of left-liberal thinking, mainly Protestant, with its mixture of self-righteousness and collective guilt about Northern Ireland's history. The first is expressed by maintaining a supposed 'equidistance' between unionism and nationalism. Yet, insofar as Sinn Fein is pushing the boundaries of the acceptable, collective guilt conscripts it to following in its wake. Sinn Fein believes that if this group can be persuaded of the first in terms of the values of the second (hence all the virtue signalling of Sinn Fein on equal marriage and other issues) then it puts the maintenance of the Union under pressure.

A combination of the three can be witnessed in the response to the Assembly election which has been read widely as a sign of the inevitability of a united Ireland - though since dulled by the subsequent Westminster election, and then buoyed by the Irish Government giving wings to the 'poke the Prods' strain of nationalism (under cover of Brexit: perfidious Albion).

Brexit has encouraged northern nationalist expectation of a 'tipping point' for Irish unity, which Meagher has assiduously promoted. Steven Agnew leader of the Green Party, has claimed that even some unionists 'are saying for the first time in their life they would vote for united Ireland, having never contemplated it before'.

The thought that unionism too has 'tipped' feeds rather dangerous nationalist speculation that unity is now but a border poll away.

The Brexit effect

Ironically, for unionists the Belfast Agreement helped to take the border out of politics - and to their advantage. Equally for nationalists, the Agreement helped to take the border out of the island allowing them to feel more comfortable within Northern Ireland as part of the UK.

Opinion polls suggested that northern nationalism did not accord unity any pressing significance. In an irony of inversion, north/south interactions in practical matters demonstrated first, a lack of integrative ambition on the part of the Irish government and second, any credible strategy for unity on the part of northern nationalists.

There is still no evidence of either integrative ambition on the part of the Irish government or any credible strategy for unity on the part of northern nationalists. Nevertheless, Brexit has brought old questions back onto the Irish agenda – albeit too soon to see any coherence in the Irish Government's direction, position or approach to future relationships within our islands.

Taoiseach, Enda Kenny felt obliged to establish the All Island Civic Dialogue. At its first meeting, he acknowledged "the deep concern arising for many in Northern Ireland at the prospect of being outside of the EU project that has delivered so much for political stability, peace, reconciliation and economic prosperity." However, [the new Taoiseach seems intent on an aggressive](#), though ultimately self-defeating, towards both Unionists and the British Government - though [seems to have stepped back for now](#).

Fianna Fail leader, Michael Martin, argued that Brexit compelled 'an immediate end to the hands-off detachment of recent years'. He later speculated that Irish unity was now possible within his lifetime – in this case, a united Ireland which would retain the structure of the 1998 Agreement but in which sovereignty would shift from London to Dublin. MEP Mairead McGuinness has been prominent in arguing that Brexit has changed sceptical attitudes towards Irish unity in the Republic. [Senator Mark Daly has produced a Report on Unity](#) that is as evidence light as Kevin Meagher's book.

Sinn Fein, of course, takes Brexit to be an opportunity not only to attract younger nationalist voters but also to agitate for a 'border poll'. It judges that the space has opened up to mobilise on an Irish unity agenda both north and south of the border.

According to Michelle O'Neill:

"To us in Sinn Fein that increases the urgency for the need of a referendum on Irish unity and that needs to happen as soon as possible."

For the Secretary of State to concede a border poll would effectively turn Northern Ireland into Neverendumland, turning up the sectarian heat and turning back the clock. If it is so in Scotland, it is more so the case in Northern Ireland that the 'time is not right' for a referendum.

Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern expressed the sentiment precisely in evidence to the Irish Senate Committee on the Withdrawal of the UK from the EU:

"The last thing I want out of Brexit, the last thing, the very last thing, is anyone on about border polls. The only time we should have a border poll, in my view, and I'll argue this for the rest of my life, is when the nationalists and republicans and a respectable, sizeable amount of unionists and loyalists are in favour, and on the basis of consent."

But, demography

Having a 'sectarian headcount' is the last thing Ahern thought any Irish government needed, and during the UK's withdrawal from the EU was certainly not the time for one.

“I think we should all do our best to get to that time by convincing people and winning people over – but don’t put it into this debate.”

As ever, [Eoghan Harris stated in the *Sunday Independent*](#) good reasons for not responding to the Sinn Fein play book. The Irish political parties should reject Sinn Fein's proposals to set up an all-party committee on Irish unity **‘because any such “unity” committee is simply a sly version of a pan-nationalist front’**.

He summarises:

“A pan-nationalist front is Sinn Fein's major aim because it both raises tensions in Northern Ireland and seduces centrist parties to get into bed with Sinn Fein only to rise with fleas. But what is the point of a pan-nationalist front?”

There isn’t one. The only danger to the Republic is the cult of Sinn Fein; parties ‘can't fight Sinn Fein while they subscribe to Sinn Fein shibboleths’.

Or, as [John Bew put it in *The New Statesman*](#): the attitude of the Irish government acknowledges that its economy faces a convergence of threats:

“...from Brexit (as an EU state that depends on trade with the UK); from Brussels (which is asking questions about Ireland's sweetheart deals for multinational corporations); and Donald Trump (who has promised to repatriate US companies attracted by Ireland's low corporation tax). The last thing it wants is a rusty old ghost ship from the north sailing into view, with Grizzly Adams on board licking his chops.”

However, one of the most notable and curious factors missing in the ‘Irish unity inevitable/border poll now’ cult is this: no one making that case in Northern Ireland considers asking if it is something the people of the Republic want.

This is another example of the arrogant self-importance which Sinn Fein ascribes to its own felt needs. Of course, this is playing the evangelic card of Irish historical destiny that cannot but strike a chord in a State which has just spent a whole year lauding the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

Yet the notion that people in the south may be ecumenical about their shibboleths requires Sinn Fein to try to bully such thoughts out of the popular mind.

What needs to be done?

It is difficult to make any definitive judgement on how Brexit will impact on the current devolved institutions – except as a future crisis point for Sinn Fein to again throw out its teddy bear - but [Graham Gudgin, in a recent article in the *News Letter*](#), helps to put things into perspective.

Though he accepted that Sinn Fein had managed to exploit nationalist fears over Brexit, their success was built upon the weakness of their previous claims that there was a drift towards inevitable Irish unity:

“Even together with the SDLP they will command only 44% of the seats. The new factor is that unionists are also short of a majority and the Alliance will have a deciding say except when petitions of concern are invoked, which may be rather often. None of this is likely to involve instability in constitutional issues, including Irish Unity.”

Gudgin’s conclusion is worth quoting in full.

Finally, what of Irish Unity? Some unionists tell me that we should support a border poll while Theresa May is PM and get it out of the way for once or all. This is unlikely to happen, but if it does, the result is a foregone conclusion. Northern Ireland depends utterly on financial support from GB. This pays for half of all public spending in NI, and is worth £20,000 a year to a family with two children.

Neither the Republic of Ireland, nor anyone else, is in any position to replace this finance. The funds coming in from the EU are a tiny fraction of UK support and in any case are just UK money recycled back to NI through Brussels. It is perhaps understandable that successive UK governments have preferred not to keep reminding Northern Ireland of its financial dependency. This is the reality and it means that Northern Ireland is, and always will be, far better off inside the UK.

There are three arenas which should be considered going forward, and one issue of presentation that should be addressed.

In the United Kingdom: Despite the dramas of a possible Irish border poll and a Scottish IndyRef 2 (which Sinn Fein as well as the SNP link together), the Prime Minister's sensible 'now is not the time' response is likely to prevail. The unionist case now cuts with the grain of politics at Westminster and is more vibrant in British politics today than it was a few years ago (think of Ruth Davidson in Scotland, for example). This is a reason to be cheerful and not despondent.

In the Irish Republic: Equally, unionist arguments cut with the grain of self-interest in Dublin. The parties should take a positive towards attitude to working within the institutions of the Agreement to minimise the risks of Brexit for the island. This is another reason to be cheerful – though the recent hissy fit out of Dublin may be a cause for concern that self-regard may eclipse self-interest.

In Northern Ireland: There is a requirement for unionism in Northern Ireland to think seriously about the drift of votes away from the two main parties. There is a need to speak to an important constituency of (mainly) liberal unionist opinion which is not concerned about the issue of misconceived heating schemes alone but about the sort of issues with which unionist politics has become so easily tarred and feathered by republican virtue-signalling.

Finally, find a common voice. Until recently both Governments expressed a desire to find a 'common voice' to achieve the best Brexit deal for Northern Ireland. For Secretary of State Brokenshire (2016), the questions is: how collectively can the institutions meet the '**challenges but also at the opportunities to make a success of Northern Ireland within the UK but outside of the EU, while still being sensitive to and reflective of the Belfast Agreement and the subsequent agreements**'. Similarly, the immediate past Taoiseach Kenny asked for '**a shared view of priorities, on a North-South as well as an East-West basis, in the context of forthcoming negotiations at EU level**'.

That desire for a common voice seems to have been lost in Leinster House recently, probably for selfish electoral (internal Party positioning as much as external) reasons. Here [Dan Hannan has a little advice in the round](#) that makes obvious sense for everyone, and in point 8:

"8) No hard border in Ireland

A border is a demarcation of jurisdiction; it doesn't need to be a line of control. The border between EU Sweden and non-EU Norway is barely noticeable: there is free movement of people, and customs checks may happen within 15 miles on either side. Millions of EU nationals cross the border every day to work in Switzerland, which is also traversed by some of Europe's main north-south and east-west transport routes. The main purpose of the Swiss frontier is to check that foreign drivers have purchased the discs that allow them to use that country's beautiful roads. Since Great Britain and Ireland are both islands, with a limited number of points of entry, it should be logistically easier to find a workable arrangement here than in either of those cases, one based on the sharing of information between the two states – something that already happens under the terms of the Common Travel Area."

Where there is a will...

Where there isn't, and should Sinn Fein's negative strategy (shared, or echoed by other nationalist voices) come to dominate Irish political discourse or frustrates a common voice, then unionists should be ready and prepared to ensure that the origins and consequences of fault and failure are properly assigned to the history books.