

John Newton Lecture 2018

From Painful Past to Shared Future?

(Transcript edited slightly for clarity and flow)

With Denis Bradley

John Hume taught me history for two years. I was a very young man and he was a young teacher. For the first year, it was probably one of the best learning experiences I had. The second year wasn't so good. The first year, he challenges us to go beyond ourselves, to go past the dates and the character of history and to explore the realities in the current affairs of the time. I remember once I had to speak at a debate that he put in front of us whether Nationalist students should join the Unionist party and change it from within. That summer, John became President of the Credit Union and so for the second year, he reverted to the books so we ended up reading the dates and learning the rather boring parts of history. I'm going to do a bit of both tonight. The boring bits are the dates and times but hopefully, we'll do a bit of exploration beyond that into some of the meaningfulness, the currency and the import of history. There are three dates I want to concentrate on:

- One is the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920.
- The second is the Good Friday Agreement of the 10 April 1988
- And the third is the Brexit Referendum of 23 June 2016.

This Ireland was partitioned under that Act (20 December 1920). That was when partition became formalised. And there are many complex issues around that, all of which we have lived in conjunction with over the last 100 years (it is almost 100 years since that act - we are getting very close to the anniversary or commemoration of that.)

One of the things that was of import and which is impacting upon us now in a fairly immense way is the head count, the decision as to what would be included in Northern Ireland.

Carson, who was one of the main spokespeople, believed that four counties would have been sufficient. Craig did not agree with the British option (the whole of Ulster - nine counties). Craig opted for six counties on the grounds that if you went for the nine counties, the balance would be too small. There would not be a large enough gap [between the nationalist and unionist populations] and that would carry danger in the coming years. He won the argument and the six counties became Northern Ireland or the North. It is interesting to look at the figures, the demographics of that period.

There were 420,000 Catholics out of a population of 1,257,000 - around 34%. If it had been the nine counties the percentage would have been 45% to 55% and in Craig's opinion that was too close.

Interestingly enough, in 1971, close to the break out of the Troubles, the percentage of the population was still 34% Catholic and the rest were Unionist or Protestant. Very little had changed in the demographics.

By 2001 (30 years later), the Catholic population had risen to 43.8%. By 2011, that had increased to 45%. As we stand the nationalist population is 45% and the Unionist population is 48% (the rest made up of others including immigrants, etc.) and that gap is narrowing fast.

Paul Nolan in Queen's University has done an interesting piece of work. He is claiming that by the anniversary of the setting up of the Northern Ireland state, the nationalist community will outnumber the Unionist community. By that stage, Catholics will have out populated Protestants. Looking at the breakdown, of the number of workers in Northern Ireland 44% are Catholics and 40% are Protestants. Among the school children, 51% are Catholic and 37% are Protestants but among the over 60s, 57% are Protestants and 35% are Catholic. Based on those findings, Nolan is saying that by 2021 the non-Unionists will out number the Unionists. That is very important and it feeds into something that I will touch on later.

The Good Friday Agreement

What we do know is that by 1970, Troubles had broken out once again within the Anglo Irish relationship. It was almost 30 years later that we moved towards some form of reconciliation in which we tried to stop the killing and all that goes with it. Like any moment in history, it is complex and a good historian would slap you for tying this down to one particular event. But given that we haven't time and space and we are not historians, I would put the change down to one moment that took place in 1990 but hasn't received all that much attention. There had been for a number of years a back link between the British government and the IRA. Peter Brooks sent a letter to the IRA through that back link giving details of a speech he was going to give in Coleraine. He wanted them to know he was making the speech and to note one particular sentence within it.

“That the British Government had no selfish strategic
or economic interest in Northern Ireland.”

In many ways that one sentence was the beginning of the possibility of dialogue and negotiations between the two extremes. The main protagonists were the British Government and the IRA. At that stage, they were refusing to engage with one another (even though they had engaged in 1975). Peter Brooks' statement led to a situation where people were talking to one another. It was quiet and secretive at the start and gradually it moved into the public space.

It took the best part of 8 years. Political parties were antagonistic towards it at the beginning. These things don't happen quickly. When things are as deeply rooted as our troubles have been, they have false starts and they have many manifestations. Sometimes you think they are falling apart but the interesting thing when you look back at history is that you can see trends and markers that changed the flow of the river or changed the temperature, which allowed people to do things that up until those moments, they would not have done.

Then came the years that followed the Good Friday agreement. We had good days and bad days. We had developments that took us by surprise such as Mc Guinness and Paisley. We had institutions up and running (assembly and executive). The two governments were involved. All of that was happening over those years.

Could we, and were we creating a new reality on this island? Were we creating a place called Northern Ireland where people were settling down and creating an identity around Northern

Ireland... where they weren't completely British and they weren't completely Irish...? Was there a new possibly that this was a way forward?

People began to feel that the two governments had become lazy around the situation. There were things happening that were ill conceived but in general there was a coming together, a closeness, and that politics, even though it wasn't brilliant, was better than it had been. And people were flying throughout the world and saying Northern Ireland is a great place - come and live here, come and build you factories here, come and put your money here, this is a great place to be.

All that was hopeful and creative, in its own way because it showed the possibility that people could live together. Whether it was fully real and whether it was fully touchable is a big question. And I think that will be left to history.

My own feeling is that the Anglo Irish situation could never have been resolved only within the narrow context of Northern Ireland. Ireland and Britain had to resolve this at a deeper level than the Good Friday agreement but the rest that the agreement had given us and the indicators it had given and the good days that it gave us were important in their own right. They showed that which was possible and they showed that which was desirable.

For example, out of my own experience, within the agreement there were two things that were not resolved... one was policing and the other was the way we deal with the past.

I got involved in both. The policing one we resolved reasonably well. The last time I looked, about 80% of people in NI had a strong trust of policing. Within any country, 80% trust is quite strong so that seemed to have resolved itself reasonably well.

The past, we never even got off the starting blocks. We were fighting those old antagonisms, those old entrenched identity issues about Britishness and Irishness, or unionism and nationalism. We fought a moral battle about who had the right to do things and who was wrong, who were the goodies and who were the baddies, we created things like a hierarchy of victims. There was a lot of anger on one hand around former paramilitaries being released and on the other an antagonist situation where the government didn't want former soldiers to be prosecuted. By not handling that we always left potholes and any time that a storm came up, we fell into the potholes. Having not resolved, the past the likelihood of resolving the future was very unlikely.

Brexit

An interesting thing is that something came along that blew and blew and the house was not strong enough to survive and that was called BREXIT.

This is such a complex issue and there has been so much written about it. It deserves a lecture in its own right. I picked on person who wrote about it better than most. Fintan O'Toole (when he is good, he is very, very good and when he is bad, he is still good.)

Fintan O'Toole is an important commentator. I picked him because he wrote this piece before Brexit had happened and it is quite interesting:

"When you strip away the rhetoric, Brexit is an English nationalist movement. If the leave side win it will almost certainly be without a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland... The passion that

animates Brexit is English self-assertion and the inexorable logic of Brexit is the logic of English nationalism.”¹

What Fintan O’Toole was saying is that Brexit is about the thing that England and other countries have accused Ireland of being overly jealous about - nationalism. The irony is that within Brexit, England became more nationalistic even than Ireland. And of course the irony of all of that is that England doesn’t see itself as just being England but “Britain”(four nations)... and yet the nationalism seems to be mostly coming from the English dimension because it doesn’t include Scotland and Northern Ireland.

“Over time, the main political entity that is likely to emerge from Brexit is not a Britain with its greatness restored or a sweetly reunited kingdom, it is a stand-alone England because Scotland will have a second referendum on independence and this time, with the lure of staying in the European Union”

This time around the Scottish nationalist party has the argument that England is going to bring us out of Europe and that will damage us economically - Scotland will probably be quite badly affected by leaving Europe and that will encourage people to vote yes to leave.

“Northern Ireland will be in a horrendous bind, cut off from the rest of the island by a European border and with the UK melting around it. Its future as an unwanted appendage of a shrunken Britain is unsustainable.”

My point is that most people see Brexit as a disaster. I don’t. I see it through the eyes of a very narrow perspective of Northern Ireland. From that perspective, Brexit is a godsend. It brings us to a position of demanding a re-definition of our relationships and that is a golden, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity . My fear was that it was drifting back into a small sectarian battle. My mother would say, “What are yous up to up there... nobody can put up with yous!”

Northern Ireland was drifting back into that narrow divide with the two governments well away, ignoring us. Brexit came right through the middle of that situation. It forces us out of the smallness of Northern Ireland into the British and Irish situation and into the redefining of who we are.

Towards a shared future?

Some people worry about the border. My view on that is... and I’ve written on this and I wrote early about this is... My view is that there is never, ever, ever again going to be a border on the island of Ireland. I don’t care who thinks there will be one. That is an extreme position and an arrogant position. Today, I will state even stronger. There will never ever again be a border on the island of Ireland.

People began to argue about how would this happen. And the big argument from the British was that we don’t want a hard border and it will have to be the EU who will impose it. The EU was saying that if there is going to be a hard border the British has to solve it.

My view was, “Not a problem!” We solved the border problem a long time ago. There is no border and nobody is going to resurrect it. It is not going to happen for a number of reasons. The

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/18/england-eu-referendum-brexit>

last border we had was a security border. 20 years ago, the British government lifted the sandbags. For the last 20 years, people have been free to breathe and you cannot put it back. People will not allow you to. It is like asking people to go back to a place where they did not want to be and that is not possible, particularly when you look at the demographics.

The nationalist community is in the majority from Derry to Dundalk. Within Derry the people who identified as British were 19%, in Newry it was 16.4% and if you look at the whole border area you are talking at the very highest 18 - 19%. It is not doable.

The most bizarre thing has been the insinuation that if there is a physical border it will be the other side's fault! Neither side gets it. It is far more simple and uncomplicated. There is never going to be a border. It doesn't need a solution because it is already solved. Most people felt a burden lift off their shoulders. They were free of the inconvenient and the scar on the language. They have lived with that freedom and they have judged it to be right and good

The British army isn't big enough and the Europeans don't have an army. The silliest thing of all is the suggestion that the Irish government would have to police a border in Ireland!

The media don't get it either. This is not about bandit country it is about there being a time in the affairs of men. About how the river flows when it bursts its banks. Nature reclaiming ground.

If there can't be a border. What happens? Not our problem. The Europeans and the British have to solve it but they can't solve it around the possibility of any kind of border and that is what is beginning to happen. We are very close to that moment when the British are saying we have to stay within the customs union. They are now all beginning to say, you can't do this around the border. I didn't say that there couldn't be a border in the Irish sea...

That brings me to the next part of the puzzle, the relationships in NI and the greater relationships between Britain, Ireland and Scotland and Wales.

In Northern Ireland, we have no government and there appears to be a souring of relationship between the British and Irish governments that are fighting over Brexit. Some people are worried about that. I'm not. I think that will be solved and overcome.

It leaves us with the situation of what is going to happen with NI. DUP and Sinn Fein are on two different sides of the same fence. The DUP is actually blaming the Irish government for getting involved! Sammy Wilson accused the Leo of being nationalistic. Within the middle of all of that comes another issue.

Within the Good Friday agreement, the settlement that brought an end to violence and the ultimate dissolution of the IRA, it states that when the demographics have changed sufficiently for a border poll to be won, then that would have to be implemented. It would have to be accommodated by the Secretary of State.

If the Secretary of State deems that a border poll would result in the majority voting for a united Ireland then they have to call a border poll. Those most strong in calling for a border poll are Sinn Fein. They have every right to do that because it is within the agreement. The chairman of Sinn Fein has said it could happen next year or in seven years time.

This is complicated by the fact that Brexit has soured relationships and that there is a strong nationalist party who calling for the poll to take place. It appears as if relationships could not be worse, as if it is all very negative and antagonistic and it is! People are getting very passionate around this stuff.

There is a wonderful play starring Liam Neeson and the actor Jason Nesbit. It was about reconciliation and one of them had been involved in the killing of the other person's brother. Reconciliation didn't happen because Nesbit walked out. He wanted to kill the other boy. The point was there was a big scrap... the "reconciliation" was that they had fought themselves out. They reconciled not in great harmony but in exhaustion. How could Ireland and Britain reconcile themselves? My hope was that there would be a great political coming together where there would be a recognition of the various strands and relationships and people would say, "Let us redefine these relationships." I'm told by those who are close to the action that the possibility of that happening is zilch! So if we cannot dream those dreams, what can we hope for?

We need a pragmatic response to a very complex, deep seated, old and historic position. I think what we can hope for is that first of all we don't have a border poll. I am not a believer in a border poll. I think that will result in more conflict. Even if the demographics have changed. I still think that will leave major hurts and anger and bitterness that will be incredibly difficult if near impossible to reconcile.

So what do I think needs to happen? I think that there are voices within the unionist Protestant community that are capable of reading the signs of the times and who are capable of actually challenging their own people to face up to some of these signs and to begin to speak out of themselves and for themselves, to speak in a fashion that is mature and brings some wisdom.

There are very few voices that are speaking with any authority and conviction. Unionism is slow to speak and sometimes it doesn't speak at all; it lets some of its more extreme people shout.

It doesn't speak with the maturity and insight it should. I still have a hope that that voice will find itself and it will begin to speak and that people within the business community, within the churches, within the professional world and in the community will begin to understand the demographics and say, "How do we live within this island?" Whatever happens, the economy of this island is coming together by the day and it is wise to come together at all kinds of levels. Unionism has a pragmatism, which if it is encouraged will find that voice.

Many commentators are saying to the Irish Government, don't drive Unionism too far. I think the Irish Government has every right to be strong. They should do that. They should speak up and stand up for the people of Ireland.

I believe that the relationship between English and Ireland will heal itself in a very pragmatic way.

There is a difficulty in England and we should be careful in taking too much delight in the in-fighting. England is a fine country. There are many thousands of excellent people. Brexit was much more about the economics. There was a strand within English history that was hard for those of us on the receiving end (a superior attitude) but it is not the totality of England. And I think that the Irish and British will come to a better place.

They may not be hugging each other and complete forgiveness but it will be based on economics and politics and the realities; things are so bad that we have to cooperate. We cannot afford to build speciality hospitals everywhere. What happened in Derry with the cancer service shows this. Specialisms within health are becoming so expensive that you are best to share them. We shared children's heart conditions in Dublin. We got through the politics. We will get through this.

I have great hope and belief in Europe. Europe came out of the hurt and bitterness and violence of two world wars. Europe knows this stuff well. Europe, on the whole, deals with this stuff well. I don't believe that Europe is perfect or without its faults. It has got big and burdensome and bureaucratic but at its core it knows how to cooperate and make deals and how to avoid the clash of avoiding violence. It understands the art, not only of the possible, but the art of avoiding war. I also think that they understand the relationship between the north and south of Ireland.

I'm incredibly hopeful about the future. I see the definitions being driven to where it is real and not false. People are being forced into talking. They might shout and roar at each other but they are shouting about real things. Part of what will happen is some kind of renewal of antagonism between Scotland and England. I think that will turn into a real dogfight but that too will settle.

I think it will look a lot different. I do think it forces us out into the open to where the relationships are equalised to a point where people can cooperate. They lose their arrogance. Some people will be lost - they are the right wing of the Brexiteers.

When the peace process started to kick in the NI, when that statement came from Brook... at that time, John Major was PM and he had a majority of 12 in the House of Commons (an echo into the present). There was a group of 20 backbenchers that were incredibly antagonistic firstly to talking to the IRA (and Major knew that he could lose his premiership over that) and secondly over Europe. The group who are now leading the charge against Europe are a throw forward of that same group. I think they will lose. I think they have to lose. I don't mean that they should be humiliated but they should lose politically.

When we look back in 100 years, I think we will say that these were the moments when these islands got themselves together and the future became brighter as a result of that.