European Integration and the Northern Ireland Problem

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This paper considers how the project of European integration has impacted on the Northern Ireland problem. In doing so, it considers the early hopes of Irish nationalists, and indeed the early fears of Ulster unionists, that the process of European integration would ease the path towards the reunification of Ireland. The paper also looks at less partisan perspectives, especially the 'post-nationalist' thinking which became popular in the literature on Northern Ireland in the 1990s, and which suggested that European integration might lead to the transcendence of competing nationalisms in the region. The paper argues that all of these viewpoints proved unfounded, showing instead that Europe's greatest impact on Northern Ireland has been indirect, through changing the nature of British-Irish relations. By establishing a greater equality between the British and Irish states, and providing a context for the regular interaction of their political elites, European integration helped to produce more co-operative relations between London and Dublin *vis-à-vis* Northern Ireland. Thus, whilst Europe did make an important contribution towards the region's peace process, the paper shows that it did so in ways that were more subtle than either its supporters or its opponents imagined.

The political movement for Irish independence from Britain led to the establishment of an autonomous state in 1921, which later gained full sovereignty with its departure from the British Commonwealth and the declaration of an Irish republic in 1949. But this state did not encompass the whole island of Ireland, which had been partitioned in 1920. Whilst the greater part of the island gained independence, six counties in the North-East of Ireland remained under British rule. Within these counties was a unionist majority – a Protestant[1] population who continued the support the Union with Britain. Indeed, it was their opposition to Irish independence, and their demographic superiority in this part of the island, which led to partition and thus the creation of Northern Ireland. However, also within the borders of Northern Ireland was a sizable Catholic community, approximately one third of the population, which was nationalist in its aspirations and thus wished to be part of the independent southern state.

   Although the unionist population held a majority in Northern Ireland, they retained a sense of being a minority on the island of Ireland. Accordingly, they feared that the southern Irish state, in conjunction with the nationalist population within Northern Ireland, would eventually overthrow the region's Unionist government. This fear led to significant discrimination against the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, whom it was believed could not be trusted to hold positions of power or influence within the state. However, even beyond the senior civil service, police and judiciary – all overwhelmingly staffed by 'loyal' Protestant unionists – the nationalist community were routinely discriminated against in the allocation of public employment and housing (O'Leary and McGarry, 1996: 125-32).

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[1] The terms 'Protestant' and 'Catholic', and 'unionist' and 'nationalist', are used interchangeably when referring to the two main communities in Northern Ireland, this to allow for variety of expression in the text. For the same reason the appellations 'majority' and 'minority' are also used in reference to the unionist and nationalist communities respectively.

Until the 1960s, nationalists in Northern Ireland felt largely powerless to change their position or challenge the discrimination which endured. However, by the end of this decade, partly inspired by the black civil rights movement in the US, the minority developed a similar campaign for equality. Initially, this produced a number of reforms to address nationalist grievances, but unionist fears that the campaign was being used to undermine the Northern Ireland state, and also manipulation of the civil rights agenda by more radical nationalists, led to increasing confrontation between the two communities, degenerating into outright violence. Although the London government eventually steeped in by deploying British troops to Northern Ireland in August 1969, nationalists soon came to see this force as being impartial, and ultimately helping to prop up an unjust and discriminatory unionist regime. As the situation continued to degenerate, militant nationalists sought to revive the republican tradition which had led to independence for the south of Ireland, and formed paramilitary organisations with the intent of destroying the Unionist government, overthrowing partition, and uniting the island by force. Unionist paramilitaries, also reviving a 'loyalist' tradition of resistance to Irish nationalism, mobilised to counter these efforts. From this, the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', as they were euphemistically termed, were born.

Europe, Partition and Irish Nationalist Perspectives

Even before the re-opening of the 'Irish Question' with the outbreak of the Troubles, voices within Irish nationalism had begun to speculate on the role which the project of European integration might play in bringing an end to the partition of Ireland, and facilitating the peaceful reunification of the island. Indeed, as early as 1954, the future Irish Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, made a speech to Dáil Éireann in which he suggested that the dissolution of economic barriers between the two parts of Ireland would encourage Ulster unionists to contemplate their unification. Similar thinking informed the decision made Seán Lemass upon becoming the Irish premier in 1959 to abandon the autarky economics of previous governments and apply for membership of the European Community (EC) (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995: 279). Though this application was unsuccessful, Lemass continued to prepare the ground for Ireland's entry to the EC by signing a free trade treaty with the UK in 1965, and undertaking an historic visit to Northern Ireland in the same year. The latter event signalled the beginning of an unprecedented era of co-operation in North-South relations, with their common economic interests becoming a common theme of the new dialogue between Dublin and Belfast. However, Lemass was keen to stress that his new policy did not involve acceptance of partition *per se*. Rather, North-South economic co-operation, which would be further enhanced with the expected entry of Britain and Ireland into the EC, was presented as a means to remove the rationale for the border, and gradually win unionists over to the idea of a united Ireland (Patterson, 1999: 157). Such ideas clearly fitted what would, in integrationist theory, later become known as neo-functionalism (see Hass, 1969).

This more progressive brand of Irish nationalism – articulating a positive, peaceful, and consensual approach towards Irish reunification rather than a traditional, irredentist discourse – was severely setback by eruption the Troubles. Indeed, with this, the Irish government fell back to a more familiarly anti-partitionist discourse (Fanning, 2001: 67). At the same, in Northern Ireland itself, militant nationalists, seeking to exploit situation of growing disorder, began making plans to unite the

island by force. Moreover, elements within the Irish government were implicated in the conspiracy at this early stage, with two cabinet ministers dismissed from office after it was suggested that they had been involved in plot to provide arms to northern insurgents (O'Brien, 2000).

Despite the political turmoil which followed – producing a chain of events which ended with the toppling the Unionist government, and London imposing direct rule over Northern Ireland in March 1972 – more moderate nationalist voices persisted in their efforts to articulate a peaceful and gradualist approach to Irish reunification. Amongst these voices were commentators and political actors who continued building a case for a united Ireland advanced through the process of European integration. Indeed, this case became even more popular at this time due to the fact that both parts of the island were about to enter the European Community (EC) – this following the eventual acceptance of the British and Irish applications to join in 1972.

The most notable and considered contribution in this vein was Garret FitzGerald's *Towards a New Ireland* (1972), written during the collapse of the Unionist government in Northern Ireland, and in the final stages of the process of British and Irish entry to the EC. The book reflected both developments, as FitzGerald – one of most pro-European politicians in history of Irish state – provided a number of overlapping arguments detailing how British and Irish membership of the EC would ease the path towards the eventual unification of Ireland. Firstly, he argued that, with the two parts of Ireland working together in a system which included other countries with very different cultures and traditions, people in both parts of the island would realise their essential similarities, and their common interests. Thus, 'at the psychological level, the more involved the Irish people, North and South, become in the wider community, the less significant will appear their internal differences (FitzGerald, 1972: 104). Secondly, FitzGerald, an economist before he entered into politics, noted the various ways in which EC membership would allow Northern Ireland to come under the rule of Dublin without sacrificing the many economic benefits which it enjoyed through the Union with Britain. For example: 'The right of unrestricted access for all agricultural products to the British market, enjoyed by Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, but not hitherto by the Republic, will within the EEC automatically be extended to the whole of Ireland' (FitzGerald, 1972: 106). Thirdly, FitzGerald argued that the idea of transferring sovereignty from London to Dublin would be made easier for Ulster unionists in the context of European integration, as this process would also involve giving over certain powers to Brussels. Moreover, FitzGerald suggested that the two parts of Ireland, both largely agricultural in their economies, would find that their interests in the EC would be more similar than those of Northern Ireland and Britain, which had a much more industrial economy. In this respect, Dublin rather than London might better represent Northern Ireland at European negotiating tables (FitzGerald, 1972: 112). Thus, even in advance of formal reunification, FitzGerald proposed a system whereby the Irish Republic would give over to Northern Ireland part of its representation in the European parliament (FitzGerald, 1972: 112). However, in the longer term he felt that participation in the EC would lead Ulster unionists to rethink their relationship with the south of Ireland, and for matters of economic interest above else, negotiate some form of political unity between the two parts of the island (FitzGerald, 1972: 112-13).

FitzGerald's book remains the most detailed case made by a southern Irish politician in favour of a united Ireland achieved in conjunction with the process of European integration. However, at the same time as he was writing *Towards a New*

Ireland, similar arguments were being made by nationalists in Northern Ireland. Indeed, for 1970 saw the birth of a new, left-leaning nationalist alignment in the region, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). This brought together a new generation of leaders from Northern Ireland's minority population, who had been influenced by the more progressive nationalist ideas being articulated since the late 1950s. Also, like many southern Irish politicians of this period, senior members of the SDLP held very pro-European outlooks (McLoughlin, 2010: 20)

It may be more than a coincidence, then, that the SDLP's first published proposals – released the same year as FitzGerald's *Towards a New Ireland* – employed the exact same title, and made similar linkages between European integration and Irish reunification. Indeed, the main author of the SDLP's document, the party's deputy leader, John Hume, was particularly close to FitzGerald. However, this is not to suggest that he simply took his arguments from FitzGerald, for as early as 1970 Hume had published his own early musings on the subject of European integration and its implications for Irish unity (Hume, 1970). Thus, it is more likely that there was an exchange of political ideas between Hume and FitzGerald in this period, when their political relationship and friendship was being formed (McLoughlin, 2010: 132, n18).

However they influenced each other, the outcomes were striking in their similarities. Like FitzGerald's book of the same name, the SDLP's *Towards a New Ireland* had a particularly pro-European bent:

> Old and bitter enemies are settling their differences and are working together in a new and wider context of a United Europe. We in this Island cannot remain in the seventeenth century. We cannot participate in this vision while at the same time continuing our outdated quarrel (SDLP 1972: 2).

And the SDLP's solution to this 'outdated quarrel', of course, was that Ireland, like Europe, should be one (SDLP, 1972: 2). To this end, the party consciously drew upon the European model by proposing political institutions which would actively encourage co-operation between the North and South of Ireland, harmonise structures and services in the two polities, and thus create the basis for their reunification (1972: 6).

This type of thinking continued to influence the arguments of both FitzGerald and the SDLP in the 1970s. Moreover, after Hume became leader of the SDLP in 1979, having been elected to the European parliament only a few months earlier, he began to guide his party along an even more pro-integrationist path. Indeed, in a piece also written shortly before he took charge of the SDLP – and which served as a something of manifesto for the party under his leadership – he provided his most recognised celebration of the European project as paragon of political reconciliation:

> [T]he peoples of Europe have been locked in the savagery of two world wars … that goes far beyond anything that we have experienced on this island. Yet … as a result of an agreed process, they have been able to create one parliament to represent them, one community – and the Germans are still German, the French are still French. They … have a unity in diversity. ... Can we too build a unity in diversity? (Hume, 1979: 310)

Hume also sought support for his position in the European parliament itself, in which he served from 1979 right through to 2004. Indeed, Hume used this quarter century well, building a formidable network of contacts amongst the European elite, and winning considerable sympathy for the Irish nationalist position in doing so (McLoughlin, 2010: 106-8; Laffen, 2005: 175). However, Hume did not seek solely political support from Brussels; he also appealed for special financial aid from Europe

in order to help Northern Ireland's ailing and conflict-damaged economy. Also, in pursuing this goal, he was able to win the assistance of Ulster unionist representatives in the Strasbourg assembly. Indeed, despite their profound disagreements over the political situation in Northern Ireland, unionists were happy to follow Hume's lead and present a united front for the region in the petitions for economic aid which they made to the European parliament. This common approach helped to secure many millions in extra European funding for Northern Ireland from the 1980s through to the early 2000s (Meehan, 2006: 347, 355 n45). However, Hume and his unionist colleagues at Strasbourg held very different views regarding purpose of this collaboration. For the unionists, such co-operation was purely pragmatic − a way to maximise the funding which Northern Ireland received from Brussels. Hume and the SDLP, on the other hand, hoped that this co-operation in areas of common economic interest might imitate the European process in leading to better political relations between former foes. Again, this demonstrated the belief amongst pro-European Irish nationalists that participation in the integrationist project could only aid the path towards the eventual reunification of Ireland (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995: 279).

FitzGerald also sought to put his pro-European ideals into practice in the 1970s and 1980s, firstly as Ireland's Foreign Minister from 1973-77; and then as the country's premier from 1981-2 and 1982-87. In this time, FitzGerald, like Hume, made great effort to win the support of other European leaders for the Irish nationalist position on Northern Ireland. In doing so, again like Hume, FitzGerald was largely successful in winning over European sympathies, and this, in turn, undoubtedly helped encourage the British government to adopt more progressive policies on Northern Ireland (Guelke, 1988: 159-60; Kennedy, 1994: 179).

Europe, Partition and Ulster Unionist Perspectives

After considering Irish nationalists' views of Europe in relation to partition and the Northern Ireland problem, the Ulster unionist position on the same subject is more easily explained. Put simply, unionists were wary of or actively opposed to the process of European integration for all the reasons that nationalists favoured it. They feared, as nationalists hoped, that European integration would undermine Northern Ireland's position within the UK, and aid the path towards Irish reunification.

In this regard, unionists' opposition to European integration might be seen as simply a reaction to nationalists' tendency to support the process. However, unionists' suspicion of the European project is in keeping with mainstream thinking in Great Britain, particularly on the political right. Indeed, like most members of the British Conservative Party − with whom the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) recently re-established its historic political link (Murphy, 2009: 598) − most unionist politicians have opposed European integration on the grounds that it diminishes British sovereignty − not just over Northern Ireland, but more generally in terms of the powers which London gives over to Brussels. Nonetheless, the pro-European arguments and activities of leading Irish nationalist politicians, and particularly their linking the processes of European integration and Irish reunification, have made it difficult for any unionist to articulate a case favourable to the former, concerned for being labelled a supporter of the latter. Moreover, the enormous goodwill which figures such as Hume and FitzGerald generated within European political circles made it even harder for unionist leaders to engage with Brussels in a positive fashion (Laffan, 2005: 176). Again, then, it can be argued that the positive approach of Irish

nationalist politicians to Europe has encouraged a defensive reaction from their Ulster unionist counterparts. However, this reflects a general suspicion of the international community on the part of unionists, and their sense that outside observers tend to sympathise with the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, thus reinforcing unionists' 'siege mentality' (Guelke, 1988: 3, 17-20; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995: 304, 305, 328).

However, unionist attitudes to Europe are not simply a reaction to Irish nationalists' pro-European tendencies. Nor are they shaped solely by political considerations. Indeed, some unionists' views of European integration are also informed by their religious beliefs. In particular, there are Protestant fundamentalists who have constructed a specifically theological critique of Europe. Most notably, the former leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Reverend Ian Paisley, articulated an opposition to European integration which drew heavily on the ideology of the Free Presbyterian Church – an institution which he founded – and his belief that the Catholic Church represented an existential threat to the Protestant faith. For example, in one of his least worrying sermons, Paisley warned his religious followers of the dangers of a political system in which Protestants were greatly outnumbered by Catholics. However, in more extreme moments, Paisley's distrust of Europe has been conjoined with his fervent opposition to the Catholic Church, and the belief that its leader is the anti-Christ. In this interpretation, the EU – whose founding document was entitled 'The Treaty of Rome' – is simply a tool of the Vatican, and a means by which the anti-Christ will seize political power on a global scale as a precursor to the 'end times' – a conception of the world's ending which is based on a particular Protestant fundamentalist reading of the Bible's Book of Revelations (Ganiel, 2009: 576, 577-8).

Though Paisley's views of the Europe project and its supposed links with the anti-Christ may be coloured by a rhetoric common to evangelical preaching tradition, they were not expressed solely from the pulpit. Indeed, despite his fierce opposition to the Strasbourg assembly, Paisley chose to represent his party there, presumably to challenge in person its satanic agenda. Accordingly, in 1988, when Pope John Paul II addressed the European parliament, Paisley seized his opportunity, holding aloft a poster with the words: 'John Paul II Anti-Christ'. Before being ejected from the parliament, he also shouted abuse at the Pope and claimed that the empty seat number 666 in the chamber was reserved for the anti-Christ (Ganiel, 2009: 578, 579-80).

It is likely that such fanatical ideas and behaviour has embarrassed as many unionists as it has won supporters. However, despite this, Paisley topped the Northern Ireland poll in all five of the European elections in which he stood. This suggests that, whatever their opinions of Paisley's views on the link between Europe and the anti-Christ, many unionist voters agreed with his essential opposition to the integrationist project. However, for most, Paisley's position was supported for political rather than religious reasons, and primarily the concern that European integration undermined British sovereignty over Northern Ireland, and aided Irish nationalists' efforts to bring about a united Ireland.

Beyond Nationalism and Unionism?: 'Post-Nationalist' Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Problem

Besides nationalist and unionist views on Europe, there was a third and less partisan interpretation of the integrationist project and its implications for Northern Ireland

that emerged during the early 1990s. This interpretation was inspired by the radical changes that had taken place in Europe from the late 1980s – a time when the integrationist project achieved arguably its greatest momentum. Indeed, these changes – the creation of the Single European Market, the movement from the economic co-operation of the EC to the political union of the European Union (EU), and so on – led many pro-integrations to believe that Europe was heading towards the creation of some form of supranational or post-nationalist polity. This kind of thinking clearly fed into debate on Northern Ireland, which was, in the same period, being opened by the optimism of a burgeoning peace process (on this see Dixon, 2008). Thus, by the early 1990s, there was a certain coincidence between political developments in Northern Ireland, and political developments in Europe. As such, various ideas and initiatives that were emerging in Northern Ireland in this period showed a particularly European influence. For example, in 1992, actors from civil society who had been activated by the first stirrings of the peace process decided to set up Opshal Commission in order to encourage the discussion of ways forward for Northern Ireland. Opshal clearly displayed a European flavour in some of the political ideas which it considered, and the particular submissions which it received from the public (see Pollack, 1993).

Similarly, in academia, the 1990s also saw a notable growth in a literature which either advocated or at least considered 'post-nationalism' – namely the idea that Europe was moving beyond traditional forms of nationalist identification and political organisation – and debated the implications which this might hold for Northern Ireland (Boyle, 1991; Meehan, 1992; Kearney and Wilson, 1993; Geoghegan, 1994; Delanty, 1996, 1996; Kearney, 1997; McCall, 1999). Of particular note here was the paper co-authored by the southern Irish academic, Richard Kearney, and the Northern Ireland activist, Robin Wilson, and which was submitted to the aforementioned Opshal Commission. This provided one of the most enthusiastic arguments in favour of Northern Ireland finding a solution to its political problems by becoming part of what was termed a post-nationalist 'Europe of Regions'. Again, this reflected contemporary developments in Europe itself, and particular the creation of a Committee of the Regions in 1994. With this, many pro-integrationists felt that that the continent's nation-state system would begin to be eroded, not only by the continued transfer of sovereignty to Brussels, but also a significant devolution of powers to sub-national regions of Europe. However, authors like Kearney and Wilson related such thinking to Northern Ireland specifically as a means to transcend the conflict there. The idea in this was that a Northern Ireland polity could exist as part of a larger federation of similar sized European regions. This, it was argued, would help to delink Northern Ireland from the source of its conflicting nationalisms – the British and Irish nation-states – create a more common regional identity amongst its citizens, and make its constitutional position less anomalous in relation to other European regions (Kearney and Wilson, 1993).

Other of authors cited above made variations on these arguments, but without wishing to oversimplify the different emphases in their writings, all tended towards the conclusion that the then changing nature of Europe had positive implications for Northern Ireland – that continued integration would help to erode oppositional identities in the region, or that the new forms of political association exemplified by Europe might help to escape the zero-sum debate over political sovereignty in Northern Ireland. In essence, they suggested that the seemingly radical political developments of Europe in the early 1990s would help Northern Ireland to move beyond its clash of rival nationalisms to a situation where different political identities need not be cause of conflict, and could be accommodated in more plural

constitutional structures such as had emerged through the process of European integration.

Even the SDLP – always pro-European, but similarly always nationalist in its aspirations – seemed to be effected by the post-nationalist thinking and related debates of the early 1990s. As the party's leader wrote in 1993:

> [T]he democratic nation-state is no longer a sufficient political entity to allow people to have adequate control over the economic and technological forces that affect people's opportunities and circumstances. The task is … to optimise the real sovereignty of the peoples of Europe rather than ossify our democratic development around limited notions of national sovereignty ... [T]he nation-state is not the last word in polity creation (Hume, 1993: 227, 229).

Looking at the political proposals that the SDLP were submitting to the inter-party talks that began in Northern Ireland in the early 1990s, it seems that it was trying to achieve what Hume was suggesting here – that is to resolve the problem by moving it beyond the bounds of traditional nation-state sovereignty. Most notable was the *Agreeing New Political Structures* document which the SDLP submitted to the talks process in 1992. This paper went as far as to recommend that the EU play a direct role in the governance of Northern Ireland, with a delegate from the European Commission sitting on a regional executive alongside representatives of the British and Irish governments, and three locally elected politicians. In addition, the party proposed a 'North-South Council' – clearly modelled on the EU's Council of Ministers – to develop co-operation between the two parts of the island and, as one of its special functions, to deal with European issues which had an all-Ireland dimension (Kennedy, 2000: 156, 158; McCall, 1999: 47).

These proposals were immediately rejected by the unionist representatives at the talks. Unsurprisingly, they opposed any idea of a role for Dublin in the governance of Northern Ireland, but felt that the involvement of the European Commission would signal a further dilution of British sovereignty over the region. More generally, they remained suspicious of Hume's new discourse, believing that his constant talk of 'reconciliation' and 'integration' was just verbal camouflage for the SDLP's long-standing aim of Irish reunification. Indeed, as Kennedy bluntly argued, Hume's ideology was not post-nationalist, but simply 'traditional nationalist thinking dressed up in new European clothes' (1994: 185).

Evaluating the Impact of European Integration on the Northern Ireland Problem

Despite unionists' negative reaction to the SDLP's proposals, some concession to the party's pro-European ideas was apparent in the Joint Declaration for Peace – or the Downing Street Declaration (DSD) as it is more commonly known – made by the British and Irish governments in 1993. In this document, the two governments set out the essential parameters for a new political settlement in Northern Ireland, and in doing so recognised the need for 'new approaches to serve interests common to both parts of the island of Ireland, and to Ireland and the United Kingdom as partners in the European Union' (HMSO, 1993, para. 3). This, albeit limited, recognition of a European dimension to the Northern Ireland problem – and a consideration of the way that cross-border co-operation of the kind championed by the SDLP could contribute to its resolution – was fleshed out in the Frameworks Documents of 1995. These

showed that London and Dublin were giving considerable thought to the ways in which they could promote social and economic interchange between the two parts of Ireland, and through this advance the process of integration on the island which Europe was already encouraging. Thus, one of the key proposals of the Framework Documents was the creation of cross-border institutions that would have both executive powers and the capacity to develop in such a way as to 'keep pace with the growth of harmonisation and with greater integration between the two [Irish] economies' (HMSO, 1995, para. 38). In addition, the Framework Documents showed that the British and Irish governments had given particular thought to the SDLP's suggestion that many EU-related issues could be addressed more effectively on an all-Ireland basis (HMSO, 1995, para. 26).

Such ideas clearly fed into the political settlement that was eventually agreed by the two governments and the Northern Ireland parties in April 1998. Indeed, many of the political structures created by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) bear a particular resemblance to the European-style cross-border arrangements long championed by the SDLP. Most notable in this regard is the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC). Though less powerful than the North-South body which the SDLP had advanced in its *Agreeing New Political Structures* document in 1992, the idea of the NSMC clearly drew upon the party's proposals, and their particularly pro-European bent. Indeed, even in its basic mode of operation – meeting in both plenary and in different sectoral formations – the NSMC closely resembles the practice of the EU's Council of Ministers (Laffan, 2005: 173: Meehan, 2006: 346). Also, like the SDLP's 1992 model, the NSMC was given specific authority to deal with EU matters which had an all-Ireland dimension.

In addition to the NSMC, the GFA also created a number of cross-border 'implementation bodies'. These were intended to promote co-operation in particular areas of common interest between the two parts of Ireland, for example agriculture or tourism. However, one of the new bodies was given an exclusively European remit. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) assumed responsibility for the administration of all existing and future cross-border programmes developed by Brussels. In this, by developing an all-Ireland basis to the management of certain EU matters, both the NSMC and the SEUPB are close to the thinking of the SDLP, and reflect specific proposals which they had submitted to the settlement process (Laffan, 2005: 182; Kennedy, 2000: 156, 158; Murray, 1998: 205-6, 217, 218).

But European influences were also evident in the internal structures of government which the GFA created for Northern Ireland. Most notable in this regard is the method of inter-communal power-sharing which the Agreement established. Again, this created a system with European parallels, consociationalism having a distinctly continental pedigree (Meehan, 2006: 348-9; see Lijphart, 1977). Indeed, this is something which the SDLP had long stressed in its advocacy of power-sharing as an alternative to adversarial, British-style majoritarian democracy. Also, the d'Hondt mechanism which decides the composition of the Northern Ireland executive is the same as that used to allocate political offices according to the share of seats in the European parliament. This is no coincidence: the SDLP insisted that the d'Hondt mechanism was included in the Agreement, arguing that this was the surest method towards proportional representation in the executive (Hennessy, 2000: 125).

However, despite the various European elements to the 1998 settlement, it is fair to say that the GFA did not provide the truly radical restructuring of the Northern Ireland problem which some pro-Europeans, including the SDLP, had been hoping for at the outset of the peace process. Indeed, the proposals which the SDLP put forward in

1992, in which it was imagined that Brussels would play a direct role in the governance of the region, never gained any credence. But even the more modest ideas mooted in the DSD of 1993, and further developed in the Framework Documents of 1995, suggested that the British and Irish government intended to establish institutions that would transform economic and political relations on the island of Ireland. However, unionists remained fiercely opposed to the creation of any political structures that might be seen as an engine of Irish reunification. As such, in the talks leading up to the GFA, unionist negotiators insisted that both the scope and dynamism of the North-South institutions originally proposed by the two governments were significantly scaled back. Fearing that the UUP would walk out of the talks unless its demands on this issue were met, London and Dublin eventually agreed, and so the cross-border dimension of the GFA is clearly circumscribed (Mallie and McKittrick, 2001: 260-66; Tonge, 2005: 166, 187).

In this respect, it is fair to that both nationalist hopes of European integration, and unionist fears, have not been fulfilled. Although Europe did create a context for increased co-operation between the two parts of Ireland – and, particularly during the early days of the peace process, provided very generous funds and political support for initiatives towards that end (Tonge, 2005: 176, 177-8) – it did not radically change the Irish border. To put it another way, European integration did not affect the Irish border any more than it did any other border in the EU. Thus, it did bring down trade and other economic barriers between the North and South of Ireland, but it has had no significant political impact. It has not in any way affected Northern Ireland's position within the UK, and it has not significantly advanced the cause of Irish reunification.

Similarly, European integration has not had the radical impact on political identities in Northern Ireland that some, particularly those of a post-nationalist persuasion, had imagined in the early 1990s. Indeed, McGarry has used a wealth of electoral and survey data to refute the suggestions of those who believe that participation in the European project has caused any significant erosion or even softening of political identities in Northern Ireland (2001: 301-4). In doing so, he dismissed any idea that the peace process or the GFA represented a move 'beyond' nationalism for Northern Ireland: 'It is more sensible … to see the Agreement as a *compromise* between rival nationalist communities who grasped the opportunity for peace than as evidence of transformed or weakened identities' (McGarry, 2001: 307).

European Integration and the Transformation of British-Irish Relations

Although European integration did not directly effect political developments or help to modify attitudes and identities in Northern Ireland, it could be argued that it did have an indirect and more subtle influence on the region. For common participation in the European project has helped to transform relations between the British and Irish governments in a way which, in turn, helped to facilitate the Northern Ireland peace process.

Firstly, Europe has had a levelling effect on British-Irish relations. Indeed, even in joining the EC in 1973, the two countries became – at least formal terms – equal partners. However, this formal equality achieved greater reality through the actual experience of integration. In particular, European membership gave Ireland an international standing which it would never have held as a small and geographically peripheral state outside the EC. Indeed, and a symbolic demonstration of this new standing came as early as 1975, with Ireland's first Presidency of the European

Council of Ministers (Harris, 2001: 212; Laffan, 2005: 168). This greatly enhanced Irish political confidence. By contrast, Britain's entry to the EC severed to puncture the imperial pretensions which it had continued to hold to in the post-WWII world. It made clear that the British government could no longer afford to stand apart and aloof from its European counterparts. Thus, EC membership served to raise Ireland's self-esteem, whilst bringing home a realisation to the British political establishment that it was no longer leading a world power which could act with little regard for the interests of its neighbours. In this respect, European integration helped to overcome what Gillespie called the 'inherently asymmetrical relationship' (2006: 330) that hitherto existed between Britain and Ireland.

In economic terms, too, the EC helped to rebalance British-Irish relations. Most importantly, it allowed the Irish economy to diversify and to expand as it gained access to new markets beyond Britain. Thus, prior to EC membership in 1971, 61% of Irish exports still went to the UK. By 1998, this had fallen to 25% (Laffan, 2005: 168). Clearly, this helped to reduce the excessive economic dependence which Ireland continued to have on Britain long after it had gained formal independence (Gillespie, 2006: 321). As such, both politically and economically, Ireland's position in relation to Britain was much enhanced by EC membership. This greater level of equality in turn provided the basis for the more effective inter-governmental approach to the Northern Ireland problem that evolved from the early 1980s (see O'Kane, 2007).

On a practical, even personal, level, governmental elites from Britain and Ireland also became more familiar with one another through their frequent interaction in European institutions. Through this, closer relations developed between senior actors on both sides, and this clearly helped them to understand better the different concerns and the different pressures which each government faced in relation to Northern Ireland (Harris, 2001: 203, 206-7). For example, the British came to appreciate the difficulties which the Irish government had in offering security co-operation over Northern Ireland when it appeared that the Catholic minority there was suffering the worst from often excessive military policing. Similarly, Dublin came to understand the fact that it was the British government who paid the cost – financially, but also in terms of the lives of its soldiers – in trying to maintain a level of order in Northern Ireland, whilst also protecting citizens in Great Britain from frequent attacks by republican paramilitaries.

It also became common for issues relating to Northern Ireland to be discussed by British and Irish elites at the margins of European meetings. (Harris, 2001: 203, 208-11.; Laffan, 2005: 171; Gillespie, 2006: 322, 330). As Laffan suggests, these informal meetings on the subject of Northern Ireland became so frequent that 'officials began to prepare for them as a matter of routine. In addition to their business content, they provided an important opportunity for relationship building between the heads of government' (Laffan, 2005: 171). However, as well as increasing trust and understanding between the two governments, such meetings often led to significant political developments. For example, Garret FitzGerald's memoirs suggest that a European Council meeting in Milan in 1985 was a vital staging post in the process which led to the Single European Act, but also – through the discussions which he held with Margaret Thatcher on the same occasion – to the Anglo-Irish Agreement (AIA) which was signed just a few months later. Just as the Single European Act signalled a great advancement in European integration, so the AIA announced a huge step forward in the British and Irish governments' joint-management of the Northern problem, causing FitzGerald to reflect on the dual achievement at the Milan meeting:

'That day was to prove to be crucial for the future development of Europe as well as Northern Ireland' (1991: 544).

Whilst FitzGerald and Thatcher developed a certain understanding though such meetings, some of their successors closer still. The best example comes in the relationship that developed between John Major and Albert Reynolds. Before their respective premierships, Major was the British Chancellor, and Reynolds the Irish Finance Minister. Accordingly, they were well-acquainted with one another through their interaction in Europe's various economic fora. Thus, when Major and Reynolds became leaders of their governments in the early 1990s, they had already established a personal intimacy. As Major recalled: 'the great point about my relationship with Albert Reynolds was that we liked one another, and could have a row without giving up on each other' (cited in Gillespie, 2006: 327). This kind of attitude certainly helped Major and Reynolds through the very difficult early years of the Northern Ireland peace process, when each man took considerable risks in their efforts to end the violence in the region. Following them, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern showed a similar understanding (Gillespie, 2006: 327), without which it is hard to imagine the development of an inter-governmental partnership which was strong enough to weather the various trials of the peace process. Moreover, it is clear that their interaction in Europe helped to foster such intimate relations between the two elites (Harris, 2001: 203, 208-11; Laffan, 2005: 171).

In addition, the common experience of Britain and Ireland in Europe – where together they learnt the lessons of political co-operation and shared sovereignty – provided a context within which the constitutional innovations of the peace process – the interstate structures of the AIA, or the cross-border institutions of the GFA – simply became more 'thinkable'. Indeed, as Ruane and Todd suggest: 'The institutions set up under the Anglo-Irish Agreement … and later agreed in the Good Friday Agreement, were not copies of EU institutions, but they would not have been possible without the loosing of notions of sovereignty exemplified in the EU' (Ruane and Todd, 2003: 129). In summary, then, it can be argued that European integration has impacted on political elites in London and Dublin more than it has on the two communities in Northern Ireland, but has done so in a way that has facilitated the creation of a peaceful settlement in the region.

Conclusion

Irish nationalists, Ulster unionists, and liberal-minded 'post-nationalists' all believed that European integration would have a radical impact on partition and the Northern Ireland problem. Nationalists hoped it would bring an end to partition; Ulster unionists feared the same; and post-nationalist commentators imagined that it would lead to the transcendence of both nationalists' and unionists' competing political aspirations and a settlement of the Northern Ireland problem within the wider context of a radically reordered Europe, which established a genuinely supranational political entity. However, all of these viewpoints proved unfounded.

European integration did not significantly effect the Irish border. Moreover, from a contemporary vantage point, it is evident that Europe has not had the radical effect on politics within Northern Ireland that many authors writing in the 1990s had hoped for. Indeed, some years on from the beginning of the peace process, it is clear that an end to armed conflict in Northern Ireland has not had a transformative effect on attitudes or identities in the region. Northern Ireland may be post-conflict, but it is certainly not

post-nationalist. However, there has also been a considerable slow-down in the process of European integration, and a decline in the pro-integrationist optimism of the early 1990s, when a radically new political order did seem possible. Thus, whilst Northern Ireland has not become post-national, it is hard to argue that any other part of Europe has either.

   This is not to say that that European integration has had no impact on Northern Ireland. However, its effect has been less direct, less radical, and perhaps less obvious than many pro-European commentators on Northern Ireland imagined in the 1990s, or than either of the two communities and their political representatives imagined in the 1970s and 1980s. Europe's main influence has been to reshape British-Irish relations in a way that has, in turn, made positive change in Northern Ireland more possible. By establishing a greater equality between the British and Irish states, providing a context for the regular interaction of their political elites, and inculcating notions of shared sovereignty, European integration has helped to produce more co-operative and consensual relations between London and Dublin *vis-à-vis* Northern Ireland. Thus, whilst Europe did make an important contribution towards the region's peace process, it did so in ways that were more subtle than either its supporters or its opponents imagined.

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