Northern Ireland And The Antimonies Of Unionism

Abstract

Unionism swept back to power in the United Kingdom in December 2019 in a new Conservative government whose Prime Minister is also Minister for the Union. It committed itself to swift withdrawal from the European Union, with the likely effect of weakening the Union with Scotland and with Northern Ireland. Meanwhile unionism in Northern Ireland – in the form of the Democratic Unionist Party – has already undermined the union by its support for – and eventual betrayal by – hard-line British Conservatism. Why unionisms – which promise progressive and flexible politics – have such effects is the topic of this article. (This is the theme of a Special Issue of *Irish Political Studies*, edited by Jennifer Todd and Dawn Walsh, to be published in 2020. See Todd 2019).

Unionism is a form of territorial politics that differs from nationalism in its emphasis on polity as prior to peoplehood, in its recognition of a multiplicity of peoples united in the polity, and in the tendency to a thin polity-centred identity rather than a thick embedded cultural identity. Unionisms are important in the contemporary world because they offer an alternative form of politics to zero-sum national conflict: they promise more flexible interrelations between peoples and their polities, allowing asymmetry in the relations of various members of the polity (Weller and Nobbs, 2010; Keating, 2018). Unionisms recognize the importance of peoplehood – the situated character of moral perception, solidarity and sense of political authority – without reducing peoplehood to nationhood, and without basing political norms on any one people's culture. They loosen the links between cultural identity, political power, and rights (Keating, 2019); in Nicolaidis' (2013) terms, they encourage each member of the union to 'internalize the externalities of the other'.

If, in the past, imperial and conservative unions were held together by force, now the glue is the democratic will of the constituent peoples.[1] So, contemporary Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) has been – by popular consent – part of two unions (the UK and the EU) and with weak linkages within a third putative union (the island of Ireland). Any plausible future scenario will involve unions rather than Northern Ireland being integrated into a singular nation state. The possibilities include:

Northern Ireland in a differentiated United Kingdom. *The Johnson deal, Oct 2019*
Restoration of the GFA, either with the UK in a customs union/single market, or in the European Union. *The May deal November 2018*
Assertion of a more muscular UK unionism and central sovereignty. *The DUP/Johnson proposals September 2019*
United Ireland as a union of peoples: with differentiated access to Scotland/Wales; with British linkages; and with territorial and/or non-territorial autonomy allowing some level of belonging in both British and Irish unions. *Possibilities still to be articulated*

If, however, unionisms can in principle be pluralist, welcoming difference and asymmetry within a state, and distinguishing themselves from the particularism and the assumed homogeneity of 'narrow nationalisms', in practice things are more complex. Unionisms may also be brittle, strident and resistant to negotiation as the examples of Miloševic's Yugoslav unionism, Algérie Française and much of the history of Irish unionism attest. Even seemingly constructive and civic forms of unionism easily turn to reaction in the face of challenge.

British and Irish history reveals contrasting types of unionism: from the conservative (focussed on the traditional British state) and the imperial (focussed on the wider global British 'family'), to the ethno-religious (focussed on the religious heritage of the British people) and the constructive (willing to negotiate a modus vivendi with nationalisms in Scotland and Ireland) to the civic (focussed on the citizens of the UK) and the project-oriented (focussed on the shared values governing the union) (Todd, 2019). Unionist movements and leaders merge ideas from several traditions, sliding between one ideology and another depending on audience and situation. Sometimes this allows considerable flexibility and – for long periods in Scotland and shorter ones in post-1998 Northern Ireland – removes the contradiction between unionism and nationalism (Kidd, 2008). More often, at least in the Irish and Northern Irish cases, unionism has involved repression, lack of attention to and dismissal of Irish voices.

Why do unionisms frequently turn to reaction rather than negotiation? There is a cultural logic to this. Unions – made up of a multiplicity of territories and people – are vulnerable to fission. Even more, the unionist political alliance – made from a multiplicity of ideological perspectives and from groups with different interests and identities – is itself fissile. Nationalist movements survive successive defeats and adapt to changed circumstances: they can afford to be pragmatic. But if a union breaks up this is likely to be definitive; in a Northern Irish unionist phrase, 'unionism only has to lose once'. Unionists, conscious of the dangers of fission, are tempted to use state resources to repress challenge even when this holds out longer-term dangers to the union.

There are cases where unionism is more far-sighted, responding to challenge by negotiating the distribution of benefits and

recognition, and loosening the union in order to strengthen it. This 'constructive unionism' can be seen within the EU, in the out-workings of devolution through the first decade of the 2000s in the UK, in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in Northern Ireland, and in the state of the autonomies in Spain for close to a quarter century after 1978. When it is dominant, territorially-based conflicts of interest remain but they are disaggregated and therefore resolvable (Keating 2001). Without a shared project, however, this is a difficult path to maintain. In focussing pragmatically on the mutual interests and reciprocal benefits of the parts of the union, the union becomes one of interest and convenience and is likely to fission with the changing interests and resources of its members. As unionists sense this, they oppose such bargaining because of the danger it poses. Caught between indulgence and authoritarianism, it is hard to maintain a flexible negotiating stance. Thus unionisms, in the UK, in Spain, in Northern Ireland, and arguably also in the EU, tend to flip-flop from flexibility to rigidity and back.

This concertina effect is seen historically in (Northern) Ireland where policies of openness and compromise were followed by closure and polarization. What Gailey (2001) calls 'constructive unionism' in 19th century Ireland was followed by militarist unionism in the early 20th century. Modernizing, globalizing, constructive Ulster unionism in the 1950s and 1960s was followed by the rise of Ian Paisley (founder and leader of the DUP) and unionist reaction to Terence O'Neill (Prime Minister of Northern Ireland), followed in turn by a re-opening of unionism at Sunningdale, followed again by reaction (Gailey, 1995; Mulholland 2000, 2013; Walker, 2004). In the 1990s, unionism turned to compromise in the Good Friday Agreement, then unionist support fell off; it was revived again in the St Andrews agreement of 2006, it fell off again by 2012 with mobilization around the 'flags' protest, followed by polarization around Brexit (2016-19), followed in late 2019, it appears, by a new phase of unionist flexibilism.

Unionist commentators say that reaction is a response to nationalist pressure, but this claim does not stand up to scrutiny. Nationalist desire for a united Ireland fell quite dramatically in the period from 2010-2015 when unionists were hardening their positions.[2] Unionist reaction is not a response to threat, but rather to a sense of insecurity as 'their' state changes without any clear sense of project or direction. The concertina movement has become faster in recent decades because the GFA can underpin a shared project that some of unionisms' Protestant support base is open to. But the unionist parties have failed to articulate such a project, and as their support base itself begins to split, they have allowed reactive defence of the existing union to take priority over the values that could underpin its evolution.

Only project-oriented unionism can flexibly negotiate relations within and among the parts of a union in light of shared values, which are themselves further developed in this negotiation. From this perspective, unions can be a moving balance of their parts, held together by shared and evolving ideals and institutions. But what values can be appealed to in unions that have been built on conflict and that have already experienced what Habermas (1975) called a legitimation crisis? The crisis of authority of the union is particularly difficult to resolve democratically and dialogically because there are several demoi involved. Nicolaidis (2017) argues for demoicracy, in which she includes a systematic embrace of dialogic democracy and of subsidiarity, and in which identities and ideologies are remade in light of dialogue. This process, however, requires prioritising the values of dialogue over the fact of existing union: in situations of conflict, project values have to be about overcoming opposition, permitting greater deliberation about the future, creating more permeable boundaries and delinking community-belonging and political rights, allowing these values to determine whether constitutional change or constitutional renewal should occur (see Todd, 2018, 219-221). Without such an ideal, unionism reverts to repression and zero-sum territorial conflict.

In face of the uncertain geopolitics of Brexit, unionists in Northern Ireland have many triggers for further reflexion. The traditional rationales for maintaining the Union – economic, material and security – are being undermined by Brexit and the more so the more assertive and threatening unionist politics becomes. The wider unionist public in Northern Ireland is – for the first time in over a century – faced with hard choices as to the sort of Union it wants, and the price it is willing to pay for it. Whether or not a consensual and open UK union can be restored after Brexit, and after the breakdown of trust within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and Westminster that it involved, remains very uncertain. And what sort of Irish union – if any – could help overcome opposition, create more permeable boundaries, and delink community belonging

and political rights is a question that is only now beginning to be seriously discussed.

[1] How this is to be conceived differs depending on the type of federal, confederal or non-federal union, and how precisely it is to be assessed varies even more radically.

[2] See the results in the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey, constitutional preferences, NIRELND2: What do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be?

https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/polatt.html#conpref

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