IDENTITY IN IRELAND
Self-Description & Significance

In addressing identity in Ireland, one needs to begin by mapping out historically the various traditions that have developed or been introduced over the centuries.

Ireland is now understood to have known human habitation dating back 33,000 years in an interglacial period and there may yet be further discoveries that will lead to revision even of that most recent calculation. (The earliest trace of homo sapiens in Britain so far has been dated back to 40,000 years ago.)

But the first identifiable tradition is that of the Gaelic with only perhaps substratal traces of pre-Celtic to be found in it. For over two thousand years, Ireland has experienced Gaelic culture and language to one extent or another. There is an ongoing debate as to how initially this came about, with various contending theses being put forward, latterly particularly sparked by archaeogenetical research and seeking to examine the very genesis of the Celts in Europe. However, they need not detain us here as our focus in this memorandum is on culture and society today, not DNA and blood-lines or geographical provenance.

The initial addition to the Gaelic ethos was Nordic from the 8th through to the early 11th century, to one degree or another, in the shape of the Vikings. They left lasting marks, evident in some cultural remains, ethnic characteristics (e.g. red hair) and especially town-building (often signaled

by the suffix in nomenclature of 'ford'). But one cannot say that there is currently a pervasive Nordic phenomenon of a cultural and identifiable nature in Ireland.

Next, came the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century. While often spoken of simply as 'the English', they were as much (at least the commanders) notable for their French as their Anglo-Saxon speech, perhaps more so, and influenced the Gaelic language to a degree (e.g. 'boy' – 'garçon' [Fr], 'garsún' [G]). Gradually, many of them were Gaelicised and came to be described as 'more Irish than the Irish'. However, that did not necessarily lead to a switch in political allegiance. A further complication was introduced in this group with the onset of the Reformation, leading some of them to convert to Protestantism, while others remained Roman Catholic.

In the wake of the eventual completion of the conquest of Ireland under the Tudors, the 16th century witnessed the start of significant migration into the island from the Britain of that time. The Confederation of Kilkenny (1642-49) saw those adhering to Roman Catholicism among the original Gaels and the Anglo-Normans and their descendants becoming broadly integrated ethnically, religiously and politically (albeit not linguistically) in resistance to British Protestant hegemony. But, the Confederation was defeated by Cromwell and a new wave of land confiscation and settlement followed.

In the case of Ulster, unofficial and subsequent official 'plantation', as it was called, involved Protestant dispossession of the Catholic natives There were plantations elsewhere in Ireland, but these did not endure in the long run, while those in Ulster did. The end result is that, today, there are two broad political traditions in Ireland, namely unionist and nationalist, as well as two jurisdictions, namely Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It is in regard to the traditions mentioned that the consideration of identity has to take place.

There has been a tendency on occasion to go on to speak of **two identities** in Ireland as well as the **two traditions** just referred to. However, the reality of the situation is much more complicated than that. Research has shown that, in Northern Ireland alone, there have been at least five expressions of identity over the years, which can of course be overlapping to one extent or another. These are: British, Irish, Ulster, Ulster-Scots, and Northern Irish. In the Irish Republic, most people seem to refer to themselves simply as Irish, but anthropologically one could break this down analytically into Gaelic and Hibernic. We introduce the latter neologism in order to cover those who are not imbued with the Gaelic language and its particular culture, but nonetheless categorize themselves as Irish along with their fellow citizens who are so imbued.♥ (At the same time, those in the Hibernic category usually tend to be sympathetic to the Gaelic ethos and most of them, not least due to the education system, are not totally unfamiliar with it.) A Gaelic-Hibernic breakdown would appear to be evident among nationalists in Northern Ireland as well.

There is a point, which arises in the case of unionists, and that is about commitment to perpetuation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and **Northern Ireland,** and where one lives. There is an obvious adjectival logic arising from the latter consideration in the designation 'Northern Irish', while at the same time not precluding the option of also classifying oneself as British. In fact, in recent times, Doug Beattie, Arlene Foster and Edwin Poots are all on record as not disdaining to describe themselves as being Northern Irish in some measure.

Given the variety of self-descriptions referred to, there is the question of the socio-cultural content of some or all of these. One might approach this in terms of **everyday culture** and **political culture**. In the first instance, if one looks at the ways in which people conduct their everyday lives in respect of elementary customs and speech, it is hard to say that there is much if any difference under this rubric across the communities in Northern Ireland. Even in English speech, there are distinctive traces everywhere of Ulster-Scots, irrespective of religious or political affiliation. It is with regard to political culture that differences become evident. These are apparent concerning flags, emblems, songs, historical memories and preferred self-descriptions. In the last case, as we have already noted, the situation is complicated. At the same time, a nationalist, while perhaps, additionally to 'Irish', accepting 'Ulster' and 'Northern Irish' to an extent, is unlikely to endorse the classification 'British'. On the other hand, some unionists, while not excluding 'Irish' and 'Northern

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♥ We do not use 'Hibernian' because of its association with the likes of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Irish', and perhaps preferring or adding 'Ulster' or 'Ulster Scots', would only do so in the context of also being 'British'.

In recent years, there has been a tendency to suggest that everybody might be got to describe her/himself as Northern Irish, while choosing, for example, to hold either a British or Irish passport.

The position with regard to sport is also somewhat involved. It depends on whether one is talking about soccer, rugby, or Gaelic athletics. We are all familiar with the kaleidoscopic perspective under this heading and there is no need to go into it here. The situation in regard to the Irish language is also becoming involved. While the preponderant attitude among Unionists is indifferent or hostile concerning that language, there is of course the phenomenon of some unionists beginning to take a cultural interest in it. Of course, some nationalists see an expression of their nationality in the language and demand rights for it accordingly. Unfortunately, this has been perceived by some as a 'weaponising' of the language. It is important, therefore, for Irish language speakers to continually make clear the distinction between rights and imposition, as the latter should not rise in any instance.

It is against this background that one seeks to realize peace and harmony in Northern Ireland. However, this task has to be set in the context of the constitutional position. Following the Good Friday agreement, this can be stated as settled in recognizing that Northern Ireland is currently a part of the United Kingdom in accord with the wish of unionists, while it is accepted that, should a majority in a border poll opt for a United Ireland, that will then be brought about in some form or other.

That means that there should be in place structures, laws, policies and practices which are suitable for the conduct of everyday life in the immediate future. The basic structures are there in the shape of the Legislative Assembly and the Executive. The laws have also been significantly amended to ensure the necessary equality. Policies flowing from these arrangements must be agreed by both unionists and nationalists. Practices have to be monitored officially to be consistent with the foregoing. There is then the question of individual practices, behaviour and attitudes among people in general. This is where the maximal amount of understanding and tolerance are required. It is also where, not only official bodies, but institutions and associations have an important role to play in taking account of the points addressed in this memorandum and promoting, through educational and social efforts, the necessary changes in outlook beyond those which have prevailed hitherto.

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

[First published on website of the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic & Social Studies, 30/11/21.]