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Traditions, Lives and New Identities in a Dynamic Political Landscape

A RESPONSE TO ‘UNIONISM, IDENTITY AND IRISH UNITY:
PARADIGMS, PROBLEMS AND PARADOXES’
BY JENNIFER TODD

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The Brexit referendum immediately brought a discernible change to diplomatic and intergovernmental relations between the UK and Ireland and across the EU, and with it came dichotomies: progress and backsliding; problems and opportunities; fear and hope. Jennifer Todd’s fascinating article focuses specifically on a key aspect of any discussion around the constitutional status of the islands: unionism. Todd explores a question: what form of a united Ireland could accommodate unionist identity? Pragmatically and considerately, Todd contemplates the ontological and physical security issues emerging from this question. I preface my response by admitting my background as a political scientist and researcher of conflict and peace, not of constitutional law. My response is also stimulated by the arguments advanced by Todd and undertaken in the spirit of discussion and debate. This response considers the implications for identity politics in a dynamic political landscape.

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Todd traces the complexities and evolution of unionist political life since 1998 and considers its fate in the post-Brexit landscape. A first point to respond to is the focus on pragmatic and symbolic gestures proffered by Todd which are thought-provoking and practical initiatives. By proposing adaptations to the Irish Constitution, specifically Articles 2 and 3 which have been so significant to unionist psyche and its understanding of the Irish republic. The removal of the 62-year-old territorial claim to Northern Ireland and replacing it with the principle of consent was a key aspect of the Good Friday Agreement for unionism. Todd's two proposals offer an important gesture towards Northern unionists. Yet, a question emerges: does the Two Traditions—Paradigm then enshrine the status quo? We already have experienced the problems of enshrining ethno-nationalism in a framework agreement. When peace agreements and constitutions are codified, when they are written down, the problem becomes one of evolution: in accommodating unionism through a Two Traditions paradigm, a risk is that a reunited Ireland emerges as an island of binary identities. This has been one of the key existential dilemmas of the Good Friday Agreement, whereby the system of governance is based on difference: ethnonationalism has become essentialist, thereby disguising and often depoliticising diversity and complexity. During devolution in the north, mechanisms exist for plurality and democratic governance, but ethno-sectarianism and segregation have prevailed. A second, and interrelated point: if a reunified Ireland is about an Ireland of equals, what is it to be Irish and to not be Irish on the island of Ireland?

A third point, in Todd's concept for consideration for a new Constitution of Ireland, is the Two Traditions Paradigm within the language of the preamble, specifically on the point of 'distancing'. A reminder that language is important: for distancing was not only within the agency of unionism, but also perceptions and reality of being alienated on this island. Language and symbolism are important but so too is the pragmatic outworking of such initiatives. Erosion of unionist and loyalist identity is a commonly articulated view, and here, Todd offers some avenues into practical discussion. What can inspire mutual trust and shared recognition of identity? Todd's vision of the ways forward being both 'imaginable and negotiable' is inspiring, but my question is how achievable will this be? In the north, the 'imaginable and negotiable' have at best been characterised by 'fits and starts'. While not an extensive list by any means, lowlights include: republican outreach to unionism has been problematic; the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition has not delivered any tangible proposal for dealing with political

cultural issues of memory and identity; and there remains an impasse on how to deal with justice, truth, recovery, acknowledgement and accountability.

Todd's piece reflects upon the deep connections and attachments of cultural and civic unionism and loyalty to Britain. One hundred years ago, this was a united and shared island. Histories and memory are shared, intergenerational; identities are fluid. Before the outbreak of bloody violence, Richard Rose's survey in 1968 found that 39% of Northern Ireland's population was British, while some 20% of Protestants gave 'Irish' as their foremost identity. Since 1998, much of the nuance within unionism has been concealed: the Flag Protests reflected a microcosm of the anger and dismay felt. Northern Ireland has also been a place apart from its closest neighbours: among other aspects, it has been slow to recognise marriage equality and provide equity of access to reproductive rights.

A fourth reflection emerging from Todd's article is that Brexit will dominate, yet so too will the pandemic and the ability of governments to respond to political crises. The economic collapse of the early 21st century and subsequent austerity measures on both islands have left profound structural problems that have ensured that those who could and should benefit from political progress since the Good Friday Agreement have not. Educational and employment statistics remain highly problematic, deeply rooted in sectarian inequality and public sector segregation. Indeed, the failure to adequately address the inequity of educational attainment of Protestant working class boys remains another key failure of power-sharing in the north.

The paradigms of a New Ireland and Two Traditions Ireland both have existential dilemmas facing them: agency, power and exogenous forces will continue to impact. The salience of the Black Lives Matters protest and ongoing deliberations around colonialism will exert influence. Therefore, a final point to raise is that the paradigms outlined here could usefully be extended. The anniversary of 100 years of partition, as well as a burgeoning of identities through displacement and migration, enables what might well be a challenging conversation. Indeed, therein lies the power of this paradigm shift, what is in many ways a very natural evolution of the Hume vision. The Europeanness of the six counties has been undervalued: it provided investment and support for peace and it opened a space for dialogue and diplomacy, hollowing out narrow conceptions of identity.

A further key contribution offered by Todd is the structured insight into contemporary unionism, which establishes a credible starting point to create equally nuanced understandings of 'the others'. The steady growth in the

north of the Alliance Party as well as sustained success for the Greens and People Before Profit undercuts ethno-centric politics. As Todd points out, Hume's views have salience: the constitutional question in Ireland was re-framed through European membership. Brexit transformed this and it is now an English constitutional question and any reflections about an Irish border poll or unionism within a reunited Ireland cannot be decoupled from emotional and political discussions about constitutional issues in England, Scotland or Wales.

In sum, Todd's piece has prompted a reflection about identity on the island of Ireland: where class, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender remain defining features and cleavages. The past century has provided sufficient evidence of the malleability of identity, as the generational shift tilts towards those without a visceral memory of violence. Political agency and decision-making are central. In sum, yes, identities matter, yet Irishness is not simply northern nationalism; likewise, northern nationalism is not alien to political unionism, and Todd is right to encourage imagination, discussion and negotiation.

Read Jennifer Todd's article,
'Unionism, Identity and Irish Unity:
Paradigms, Problems and Paradoxes',
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