

Tracking progress

Dominic Murray

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The conflict in Northern Ireland is all about trust—or, rather, the lack of it. It has been perpetuated through unchallenged axioms as to how people on both sides of the border view each other.

For example, on looking south many unionists imagine a 'sleeping lion', waiting to pounce on the north if defences are even marginally lowered. Experience suggests that the culture of the republic is typified much more by apathy than acquisitiveness, yet this perception continues to engender the 'not an inch' response.

In the republic, meanwhile, the 'unfortunate northerner' can sometimes be regaled with such commiserations as 'we can't understand why you can't live together up there'. Such remarks may seem incongruous, being articulated in a country which—only comparatively recently—experienced a bloody rebellion, followed by an equally bloody civil war. But then it is easy to advocate tolerance if no threat exists.

A leading northern politician once confided that on his many visits southwards people related to him well until he began to demonstrate that he was, indeed, a unionist. In the republic, unionists are often seen as somehow misguided in their desire to be associated with 'the old enemy'—and any proposed 'solution' is thus perceived largely as a case of making unionists aware of the error of their ways.

Within Northern Ireland itself, perceptions and institutional identities—just as strongly held, and equally distinct—similarly hold sway. Unionists remain vigilant against any 'slippery slope' forwards to a united Ireland, while nationalists are wary of any slippage backwards to the bad old days of unionist domination. It is these emotions which have made the conflict so intractable and enduring.

These cross-border images are, unfortunately, as strong as they are ill-informed. They significantly influence relations between the two parts of Ireland, especially at a political level.

But there are new perspectives on identity in Northern Ireland, arising from the growing scrutiny of the concept of the 'nation-state'—particularly since the breakdown of the former USSR. Within these discussions, the state is most often defined in terms of geographical boundaries, with politics, law and citizenship essential elements. The nation, on the other hand, is seen as a construction from such ingredients as culture, ethnicity and sometimes religion.

Simply put, statehood implies citizenship while nationality suggests ethnic affiliation, and a nation-state is claimed to exist when all those living within the borders of the state identify with it—a polity where juridical and ethnic boundaries coincide. France and Spain are often put forward as ideal-type nation-states, though it is questionable (as Bretons and Basques would contend) whether this is in practice fully achievable.

In Northern Ireland, unionists identify with the state and relate to it as their (British) nation. Nationalists differ on both counts, tending to identify with an all-Ireland entity and viewing that as their natural nation.

Caird (1985) argues that national identity supersedes the requirement of submission to the prescription of the state, though there have been times in the histories of most European nations when the state has restricted some of its citizens' expressions of their identity. Northern Ireland nationalists might point to the 1954 Flags and Emblems Act in this regard, while the Orange Order might cite the restriction of its 'traditional' freedom to walk the Garvaghy Road in Portadown.

Problems tend to emerge when emblems of power and authority are paraded as tokens of national identity and given chauvinistic expression. It is not difficult to find examples of such action on both 'sides' in the recent past. In this context, the main task of the Northern Ireland Assembly, in attempting to develop a state more acceptable to all, will be to moderate these definitions of identity and accommodate different perceptions of nationhood.

Here a further conceptual innovation of recent years is also valuable—the notion of 'governance'. Accommodation is essentially an attempt at achieving good governance. This concept takes in the state but transcends it to include civil society and the private sector.

All three strands are critical: the state creates a conducive political and legal environment; civil society facilitates political and social interaction by mobilising groups to participate in economic, social and political activities; and the private sector generates jobs and income. The central premise of good governance therefore is *inclusion*: all sections of the community should be involved in the developing state, especially those which may have been hitherto excluded.

Such inclusion would seem incontestable in theory, though in Northern Ireland it might be argued to entail the full participation of former paramilitaries in political and social life, the introduction of a widely accepted police service and reintegration of prisoners into society. These are the very issues which are proving so intractable for the embryonic assembly.

The departmental structures and north-south arrangements agreed by the parties in December 1998, if they are best to contribute to the search for lasting peace, should be conceived in the context of these three aspects of governance. In this light it is helpful to refer to the similarly differentiated character of diplomacy.

Track I (top-down) diplomacy refers to institutional initiatives and government-to-government negotiations. The Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Downing Street Declaration and the December 18th agreement are examples.

Track II (bottom-up) refers to sub-political endeavours—to bodies existing exclusively or primarily to develop strategies and create an environment for the resolution of conflict. Cooperation Ireland, the Community Relations Council, Democratic Dialogue, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and the Glenree Centre for Reconciliation are all instances.

And one could add a third track. This would refer to groups with no particular concern for peace or reconciliation but which engage in cross-community or north-south co-operation as a result of a shared interest (such as in business, sport or music). This common interest may be strong enough to transcend cultural, religious and political differences. After all, the conflict (and peace) is the responsibility of the whole people of the island of Ireland.

The December agreement identified six areas for north-south co-operation through existing arrangements: transport, agriculture, education, health, environment and tourism. And six more were designated as appropriate for 'implementation bodies' (executive agencies): inland waterways, food safety, trade and business development, special European Union programmes, language (Irish and Ulster-Scots), and aquaculture and marine matters.

As the Social Democratic and Labour Party has pointed out, to date much north-south co-operation has been essentially *ad hoc* (SDLP, 1999): "It has lacked overall co-ordination and has not been addressed on a strategic, medium to long-term basis and still suffers the inhibiting effects of the different bureaucratic and fiscal systems that operate on both sides of the border."

The North-South Ministerial Council in general and the trade and business development body in particular will serve to exchange information and co-ordinate work in areas which the two administrations agree are in their mutual interest. Specific responsibilities include promotion of north-south trade and supply chains, cross-border trade events and enhancing all-Ireland market awareness.

Not unnaturally, all of the bodies smack of a track I mentality, given their structural character. The ministerial council should be aware, however, that potential attitudinal problems lurk within them—to underestimate these would be a cardinal error.

A salutary lesson has been the all-Ireland tourism campaign (Fitzgibbon, 1998). This was launched in November 1996 with the support of Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. When Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats replaced the 'rainbow coalition' the following year after elections in the republic, the taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, gave responsibility for tourism to Jim McDaid of FF. Mr McDaid decided that there was something missing in the tourism campaign—the shamrock, which had been subtly replaced by a logo representing an embracing couple. By ordering the reinstatement of the shamrock, he sparked a small-scale diplomatic crisis.

The NITB had contributed £500,000 towards the all-Ireland rebranding and was not going to be railroaded into backtracking. With the Northern Ireland minister, Adam Ingram, accusing Mr McDaid of "unilateral action", the board confirmed it would retain the old logo.

Fitzgibbon comments that the *débâcle* was hardly an advertisement for north-south co-operation. It represents a warning that initiatives which are not properly considered, or sufficiently sensitive to different attitudes, actually have the potential to do more harm than good.

A further point of no little concern is the fact that not one of the proposed departments or north-south bodies is specifically directed at track II activities, eroding 'enemy images' and promoting reconciliation. Indeed the only place for this in any of the structures is the inclusion of (northern) 'community relations' along with fully 25 other spheres of activity within the office of the first and deputy first ministers.

It is to be hoped this is not indicative of the assembly's priorities. For the extent of consensus behind such initiatives will be much more likely to determine their success than any sophistication in their construction.

Finally, while the NSMC will be composed of formal political representatives, the other proposed north-south bodies will be greatly enhanced if such representation is at a minimum—thereby removing potentially off-putting political baggage. They should rather include experts in the respective fields.

This will be especially important for the consultative north-south civic forum, should it be established. It behoves those non-governmental organisations already active in the field to ensure that they are involved and their voices heard in the appropriate areas.

TRACK II

Two main approaches can be employed to address frustration and grievance in any society. Structures can be reformed in the hope that attitudes may change. Yet no structural change can succeed in a democracy without concomitant popular support. It is here that the second dimension, building a strong civil society, becomes important.

In this context, Northern Ireland may have an advantage over other states where conflict has occurred. McCabe (1999) contends that the introduction of 'direct rule' from London meant regionally-elected politicians no longer had decision-making powers and responsibilities. This 'democratic deficit' allowed (even necessitated) a range of alternative activities to develop: "Northern Ireland has witnessed the growth of a vibrant civil society—community-based organisations, business and trade unions who became used to policy development and lobbying government directly, so leapfrogging over local politicians."

Ideally, both top-down and bottom-up initiatives should proceed simultaneously, and with equal status. But in the Irish case the former have received more attention and been accorded a higher profile.

It is true that more support of all kinds has been afforded to track II bodies in Northern Ireland than in the republic. This may be a consequence of the traditional southern view that the conflict is a 'northern' problem. The huge amounts of money directed towards the region through funds such as the International Fund for Ireland and the EU 'peace package' may also be responsible.

In this context, it is gratifying to note that in April 1999 the Department of Foreign Affairs in the republic announced an eight-fold increase in the funding directed towards the work of peace and reconciliation bodies.

The EU special support programme has been described by the outgoing regional affairs commissioner, Monika Wulf-Mathies, as 'bottom-up' in emphasis. And there is no doubt that the 'peace package' has involved a larger proportion of the population in decision-making than hitherto. The objective was to reach out over the heads of squabbling politicians to see if ordinary people could be persuaded to work together at the grassroots.

It has been argued that the decision-making process has simply been shifted from formal government departments (track I) to NGOs such as Co-operation Ireland, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust and the Combat Poverty Agency (track II), with little power devolved to groups already otherwise active on the ground (my 'track III').

This is not, however, borne out by the mid-term programme evaluation by NIVT (1998) which suggested that 60 per cent of beneficiaries claimed to have played a major role in developing and implementing projects. The allocation of comparatively small seeding grants, providing an access point for small and relatively undeveloped groups, has also helped in this regard.

Yet while the next round of structural funds and a 'PEACE II' programme will broadly sustain Northern Ireland's receipts from the EU in this domain, the responsible actors in the European institutions are anxious that the region does not develop a 'dependency culture'. In the medium term, especially in the context of EU enlargement, funding can only decline.

Projects will therefore increasingly have to demonstrate their *intrinsic* merits, rather than depending on vague and largely unquantifiable aspirations towards reconciliation.

In this environment, the implementation body with responsibility for common EU programmes may play an increasingly vital role. The SDLP document *Innovation, Investment and Social Justice* (SDLP, 1999) argues that the body will be in a position to contribute in highly significant ways through such initiatives as INTERREG III, LEADER III, EQUAL and PEACE II. In particular, it will have a central role in devising the common north-south submission for the coming round of structural funds. The document also claims that the partnership approach to implementing much of the peace-and-reconciliation fund has had a cohesive effect at local level and that this should be considered for wider application in the context of EU or other community-based programmes.

There may be negative long-term effects on the intermediate funding bodies of the handling of such funds. NIVT has expressed concern that its new responsibilities might undermine its independence and distort its priorities, and that the vastly increased availability of relatively short-term resources may overshadow the necessary *qualitative* support for community development. CI may have similar cause for concern.

Of equal import in this regard are the criteria which these major funds impose on applicants: by and large, the latter must be located in Northern Ireland or the six border counties in the republic. Yet this implies that need is greater there than in the rest of the island—in terms of knowledge and mutual understanding of ‘the other side’, the reverse is likely to be the case. And what has been achieved, arguably, is the drawing of a new border on the island, one county south of the political boundary. This policy should be reconsidered.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the funding has made a significant contribution to reconciliation. While much of what has been achieved is unquantifiable, Smyth (1998) contends that by making much of the money conditional on the creation of cross-community partnerships and by pumping cash into the non-governmental sector, the EU hoped to foster a climate which would support a political process conducted at another level.

Dougal (1998) points out that 20,000 applications have been made for cash and 11,000 grants approved. If each group involved only 20 people, that represents an engagement at some level of nearly 250,000 people with projects aimed, at least in part, at reconciliation.

It is anticipated that the EU programmes implementation body will have managerial functions in respect of INTERREG III and north-south elements of other programmes. The time may be opportune for bodies such as DD, NIVT, CI, Glencree and so on to re-evaluate their objectives, identify their strengths and ensure they play an increasing role in any proposed initiatives. This has particular relevance in the context of representation on the possible north-south consultative forum.

In recent years, through its strategic plan, CI has been engaged in exactly this kind of process. Its emphasis now is on development and long-term sustainability, rather than one-off initiatives.

On the other hand, in the light of the proposed new bodies and the changing political climate in Northern Ireland, it is important not to become preoccupied with north-south relationships to the extent that important elements of co-operation within each jurisdiction are overlooked. This is a possible danger in the context of the current publicity and attention accorded to the NSMC, the implementation bodies and the British Irish Council.

This *caveat* is especially germane in the light of separate polls, north and south, published in February of this year (Market Solutions (NI)/*Belfast Telegraph* poll, 1999; MRBI/*Irish Times* poll, 1999). These not only confirmed continued minority opposition to the Good Friday agreement but also indicated a significant erosion of support in both parts of the island.

More positively, however, the *Register of Cross Border Links in Ireland* (Murray, 1999: 211) notes the emergence of a more permissive climate for north-south initiatives in recent years: “in responses to first edition questionnaires in 1995, many bodies in Northern Ireland referred to their cross border contacts but commented on their reticence to promote them publicly because of the possible ‘political baggage’ that might be attributed to them. In 1998 there seems to have been a significant sea change in this regard. Gone is the reticence to be replaced by forthrightness and pragmatism.”

TRACK III

Track III diplomacy is epitomised by groups with no specific interest in politics or reconciliation who nevertheless engage in cross-community and north-south co-operation out of common interest. The existence of a myriad of such groups in Ireland has arguably served, through the worst of times, to control the conflict and perhaps prevent it spiralling into a Bosnian scenario.

Such groups have received little attention in ideological debates on political initiatives and institutions. Yet it is almost a truism that top-down strategies will simply not work without acceptance on the ground. The recent history of Northern Ireland is littered with initiatives which foundered as a result of mutual suspicion, unfavourable stereotypes and mistrust.

Stereotypes depend on ignorance: an informed stereotype is an oxymoron. Therefore the first (and essential) rung on any ladder towards the acceptance necessary for innovation or initiative must be an increase in mutual knowledge. Too often in the past, bodies seeking reconciliation have treated their objectives as attainable in isolation.

Yet one cannot have reconciliation without tolerance, there cannot be tolerance without understanding and understanding is impossible without mutual knowledge and awareness. It is very important, therefore, that the departments and bodies constituting the new political architecture pay particular attention to the bottom rung of the ladder.

Track III initiatives provide ideal opportunities. Take the visit earlier this year of the Ulster rugby team to Dublin. Although many claims as to shared objectives—even shared identity—surrounding the event were exaggerated, it did provide the first opportunity for many people in Northern Ireland to gain first-hand experience of the city and the reception they might expect to receive there. Many found both surprising and impressive.

There are many instances of track III co-operation—*The Register of Cross Border Links in Ireland* identifies more than 500 organisations—and these are likely to increase as and when the implementation bodies are established. Perhaps the most common example of diplomacy is the everyday north-south contact involving industry and commerce.

A lot of this is supported by the Joint Business Council of the Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation and the Northern Ireland region of the Confederation of British Industry, which is establishing a north-south inter-company network. And many firms have developed their own *modus operandi* to deal with north-south relationships.

Recently, several businesses operating across the border have come together, with the help of the IBEC/CBI Joint Business Council, to address the difficulties faced by southern firms recruiting staff resident in the north, given the differential tax arrangements. The *North-South Business News Summary* (IBEC, 1998) is an excellent source on all such activities.

In the world of agri-business, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers' Association has had strong links for many years with the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association. Recently, the ICMSA launched a north-south forum to promote the interests of farm families in all parts of Ireland. The forum focuses on issues relevant to the mutual benefit of the farming sectors north and south. The Ulster Agricultural Organisation Society and the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society have established a north-south secretariat, training courses for co-operative directors and managers are run jointly, and a north-south co-operative development officer has been appointed.

Golden Vale's headquarters may be in Charleville, Co Cork, but in recent years it has increased its Northern Ireland business, which now accounts for nearly half its Irish activities. Over the years, the company has developed strategies to deal with the problems, of sensitivity and logistics, of trading in a jurisdiction other than one's own.

The opportunities afforded by a strengthening EU have also influenced north-south relationships. Representatives of major farming groups on both sides of the border have suggested that the major influence on their all-Ireland initiatives has been the changing programmes and market context arising from the commission's *Agenda 2000* blueprint. Much research is required to determine if and when north-south initiatives can optimise benefits from an expanding union.

There are many other examples of organisations which have developed policies and strategies for handling north-south relationships, representing a largely untapped reservoir of experience and expertise. This resource may prove invaluable, given the many remaining impediments to north-south co-operation.

Fitzgibbon (1998) highlights some of these obstacles in claiming that the republic's decision to sign up for economic and monetary union, and its promotion of the 10 per cent corporation-tax rate, will act as a brake on the ambitions of those who seek to accelerate economic co-operation with "sterling dominated" Northern Ireland. The Irish-language requirement for employment in the civil service in the republic might also be seen as not particularly helpful.

Though they do not fit entirely comfortably under the heading of track III, the churches and education have perhaps the greatest potential to contribute, through the breakdown of enemy images, to reconciliation across the island. Research on the churches, and their place in the life of Northern Ireland, remains sparse. This is surprising when one considers that they represent the largest non-governmental institutions in Ireland, with representation in every part of the country.

As Morrow (1995) puts it, "the clergy are important figures in integrating private and public life in Northern Ireland. They are active at the crossroads between public life and personal concerns. Clergy are involved at every level of public life 'below' that of elected representatives." Faul (1998) sees the churches playing an increasingly interventionist role: "The [Belfast] Agreement itself is a fine document but it exists at a high level. We must work at agreement and co-operation street by street, townland by townland, local area by local area."

There is no doubt that clergy tend to have an intimate knowledge of their communities and to be held in high esteem. They may thus be most appropriately positioned to engage in micro-social organisation, promoting community relations and community development. They may in fact be the only people in a position to facilitate mutual awareness via cross-community contact, through parochial groups and the like.

They may, however, be ill-equipped to do so. Of equal significance, therefore, is the capacity of clergy to perform such tasks and their expertise in reconciliation. It is vital they are fully apprised as to the contexts within which, and the strategies by which, they can make an optimum contribution. Information is urgently needed on what initiatives—such as training—might be required to increase their effectiveness. The Centre for Peace and Development Studies at Limerick is seeking funding for a project to study these questions.

Education is also likely to play a major role. The need for increased mutual awareness has been stressed throughout. One of the best ways of achieving this is through increased mobility between the two education systems in Ireland. Yet Murray *et al* (1997) have identified several obstacles.

Respectively north and south, the different curricular requirements for A-level and the Leaving Certificate, and the differing UCAS and CAO third-level admission arrangements, impede the natural mobility of students across the border. As for teachers, different tax structures, qualifications and stage payments remain a problem. While EU legislation has led to the mutual recognition of qualifications, there remains the requirement of Irish to teach in the republic. Although this appears to run contrary to EU directives, it is in fact legal because of the constitutional position of Irish as the first language of the state and other EU regulations with regard to minority languages.

While debates about the role of education in promoting cross-community and north-south relationships in Ireland have been taking place for years, few (if any) radical reforms have ensued. To enhance awareness, co-operation and entrepreneurship across the island, curricular reform within, and harmonisation between, the two education systems is urgently needed.

As with any *tour d'horizon*, this survey of the demands of north-south rapprochement in Ireland has raised more questions than answers. A concrete agenda for the future could be:

- Might Democratic Dialogue consider the establishment of a forum including bodies and groups of all kinds which have experienced the problems of initiating north-south activities and have developed strategies to address them?
- How can NGOs and others ensure representation on north-south bodies, while maintaining their independence and individuality?
- What can formal government structures do for track II organisations, and *vice versa*?
- What curricular and structural innovations are required in education to increase knowledge of the EU, entrepreneurship and each other?
- Are the various churches playing an effective role in post-agreement Ireland?
- To what extent do legal, financial and social differences impede mobility and economic development across the two parts of the island?
- How do we evaluate and quantify the benefits of co-operation?
- How can we determine when (or if) north-south initiatives can optimise accrued benefits from an expanding EU?
- Is there a need to monitor attitudinal shifts, in relation to emerging structures?

- What role should the media play in a developing Ireland?

Even posing these questions—and others could, no doubt, be added—demonstrates how much there is to be done, yet also what exciting challenges lie ahead.

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