

# The Case for a United Ireland

## And for a new republican party to promote it

**Brian McClinton**

**N**ORTHERN IRELAND, as the late Charles Haughey famously said, is a failed political entity. For half a century it was a sectarian state, a 'cold house for Catholics', governed by one party in the interests of Protestants. For another thirty years it was the focus of a vicious war waged by some Catholics who sullied the republican ideal. Now, after the utter futility of that campaign has finally sunk in to the minds of its fascist leaders, it looks set to be governed by the two most extreme parties in the province. The sectarianism will remain, but it will be 'fairer', an uneasy sharing out of the poisonous components of hatred and intolerance.

Northern Ireland is also a failed social entity. A recent survey found that it is the western world's centre of bigotry. Not only do many Protestants and Catholics detest each other and live segregated lives but also they detest other minorities, such as Gays, Muslims and foreign workers. Attacks on these groups are frequent and nasty: Anna Lo, the Alliance candidate of Chinese origin, has been subjected to a torrent of racist threats. These minority groups are paying the price of an imposed 'accommodation' between the two main tribes who, unable fully to vent their hatred at each other, now turn it on anyone else who is 'different'.

Northern Ireland is also a failed religious entity. Each tribe identifies itself at least partly in Christian terms, yet the essential Christian message to 'love your enemy' is largely lost on most of them. Each is convinced that their brand of Christianity is Persil-white whereas the other is a cheaper substitute. Each largely refuses to worship with the other or to send their children to the same schools.

Northern Ireland is also a failed economic entity. It is the poorest region of the UK, with the highest economic inactivity rate at 28% and until recently it had the highest level of unemployment. The public sector accounts for 63% of the economy, and 30% of jobs, which is substantially higher than 43% for the UK as a whole. Indeed, it has the highest percentage of the population dependent on the public sector of any area of Europe. There is a subvention to the region of about £5bn per year, about 20% of Northern Ireland's economic output, which represents the shortfall between the total money that is raised by the government and the total amount spent, and it has been rising steadily in the last three decades.

These are catastrophic weaknesses. No society can sustain itself effectively on the basis of failed political, social and economic structures. But would a united Ireland transform the north into a better society? Let us take the economic argument first. In a single all-Ireland state firms would benefit from economies of scale. These are the reductions in costs which result from producing for a large market. If the island of Ireland was a single market, then firms could benefit from production for 6 million people (instead of 1.7m) in the same way that the free market of the European Union has benefited member countries. This bigger market for Northern Ireland firms would also lead to greater competition with firms from the Republic. This would bring all the benefits of greater competition, especially greater efficiency and lower prices for consumers.

Again, unity would attract more investment to the North. Throughout the Troubles many firms in America, Europe, Japan etc were deterred from investing in the province by the violence (some businessmen were captured and a few killed, factories were blown up).

On the other hand, the peace, stability and skills available in the Republic attracted this investment and the Republic's economy grew faster than any other in Europe. Google recently set up its first headquarters outside USA in Dublin. Peace and integration would lead to businesses flooding in to the North as well. Of course, another incentive for investment is the 12.5% rate of corporation tax, compared to 30% in the UK.

Employment in the Republic is predicted to rise by 50,000 a year and Ireland will have to lure workers from the EU's new entrants in Eastern Europe. Integration with Northern Ireland would create job opportunities for Ulster people throughout the island. Already, many are going south to work.

50 years ago, Northern Ireland's output per head was 27% higher than the Republic's. Today, the Republic's is 21% higher than Northern Ireland's. The Irish Republic is also now more prosperous than the UK as a whole. In terms of GDP per capita, the UK is about 18th richest on 2005 figures, while Ireland is fourth.

The great strides accomplished in the Irish Republic in the last 50 years is also indicated by the level of child wellbeing. After the war, child poverty in Ireland was endemic. Now, according to a UNICEF report in February (*Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries*), the UK comes bottom of a league table for child wellbeing across 21 industrialised countries, while Ireland comes 9th. Under-investment and a 'dog-eat-dog' society were to blame for Britain's poor performance.

Irish unity would also facilitate the integration of the island's infrastructure. Indeed, instead of having two policies on health, education, energy, transport, and other infrastructure matters, there could be one co-ordinated policy for the whole island and this would greatly improve efficiency and the quality of life. ➤