

The economic arguments for unity are compelling and unanswerable, not only for the citizen of the present Northern Ireland but also for the rest of the country. Initially, there would be a cost in terms of the subvention already mentioned. The Republic would have to fill the gap left by the UK to the tune of about € 6bn, which would necessitate an unpopular increase in taxation. However, the economic advantages in terms of economies of scale and so on would soon override this cost.

Of course, man does not live by bread alone. The economic arguments for maintaining the union with Britain have clearly withered away, but what of the political, social and religious arguments? On the first count, there is no doubt that the border issue poisons politics in the North. The statelet was created as the result of a trick, not including all 9 counties of Ulster because nationalists had a majority there but including 2 counties where they also had a majority in order to make it a viable unit.

This injustice has to be undone sooner or later. To be sure, a democracy accepts the wishes of the majority on a state's identity, but the unionist population must be persuaded that they are wrong and that their destiny lies in an all-Ireland context. Ultimately, nationalists will become the majority anyway.

The border issue poisons Northern Ireland because it is a constant source of bitterness and instability and subverts 'normal' politics. The really important issues such as health, education, the infrastructure and water charges invariably take a back seat to the 'constitutional question', which divides the people and weakens their opposition to the imposition of measures not in their general interest.

An obvious example is the 11 plus. Northern Ireland has retained this examination long after it disappeared in the rest of the UK, largely because working class Protestants, who suffer greatly from its bias against poor children, vote for parties which wish to maintain it. Indeed, this is just one example of the many ways in which Protestants generally

are badly served by the two main parties who receive the bulk of their votes.

The two main unionist parties are reactionary and illiberal, generally opposing progressive policies in education, sex and gender, crime and law and order, young people, the separation of church and state, and art and culture. They are dominated by mean, petty, stubborn old men lack magnanimity and a vision to take the people forward to a better, happier future. They have essentially betrayed Ulster Protestants in the cause of a union which is alien to them and was never in their best interests.

The fundamental emptiness of unionism does not imply that Protestants should rush to vote for the SDLP, still less for Sinn Fein. For, if unionist parties have betrayed Protestants, nationalist parties have betrayed republicanism.

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Initially, the SDLP under Gerry Fitt tried to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter, but under John Hume it became a green Catholic party and abandoned its appeal to Protestants. The Hume-Adams talks created further mistrust among Protestants and give Adams a respectability which neither he nor his party deserved. The SDLP brought Sinn Fein in from the cold, only to be ruthlessly crushed for their efforts.

Sinn Fein was, of course, much more culpable in its sectarianism. Its military wing, the Provisional IRA, waged a futile, dirty war for 30 years. In the guise of a 'liberation struggle' they killed overwhelmingly fellow Irish people living on the island of Ireland, mostly in the most nasty and brutal fashion.

Yet its political leaders have not learned the lesson of that conflict, namely that it is impossible to coerce or manipulate 1 million Protestants into a united Ireland. Sinn Fein arrogantly strut the Irish stage, still playing the victim and still totally lacking in remorse for the heinous deeds which they themselves ordered or perpetrated. Sinn Fein can never unite the Irish people, for they

have risen on the back of the division and hatred which they fostered.

We have now reached a situation where Northern Ireland is dominated by two bigoted and sectarian parties, neither of which has more than a shallow interest in seeing a DUP-SF executive work. What kind of a society will it be in which the government is not fully committed to its own survival?

The politics and society of Northern Ireland is in a shambles. Its people are currently enslaved to a bigoted Puritan party on the one hand and a Catholic fascist party on the other. They desperately need a third way and a third party which is beyond Orange and Green, which in fact unites the people through their common humanity.

Over the border lies a richer, more vibrant, stable society in the South. It is no longer a priest-ridden theocracy but a liberal, cosmopolitan state which has transcended the narrow, closed ethnic nationalism of the past. Indeed, in a united Ireland the state could not favour any religious group and would therefore be closer to being a truly secular society than the UK. Protestants are assertive enough as it is, so why should they fear a bogeyman who no longer exists?

The people of Northern Ireland need to stop fighting shadows and ask themselves how they can kick-start the mechanism by which they become an integral part of that better 32-county Irish society. The four existing parties cannot hope to achieve this transition, being composed of leaders and programmes representing the troubled and destructive past. Northern Ireland is crying out for a genuine republican party, untainted by the crimes and errors of its historical forebears, which will not only truly represent Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter but also seek to replace them with the common name of Irishman. □

