

TOWARDS A UNITED IRELAND

AN UNCOMPLETED JOURNEY



Billy Leonard

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TOWARDS
A
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An Uncompleted Journey

by Billy Leonard



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To Valerie

COUNTIES OF THE ISLAND OF IRELAND BY PROVINCE 2012

ULSTER

(Northern Ireland): Antrim, Armagh, Derry/Londonderry, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone.

(Republic of Ireland): Cavan, Donegal, Monaghan.

MUNSTER

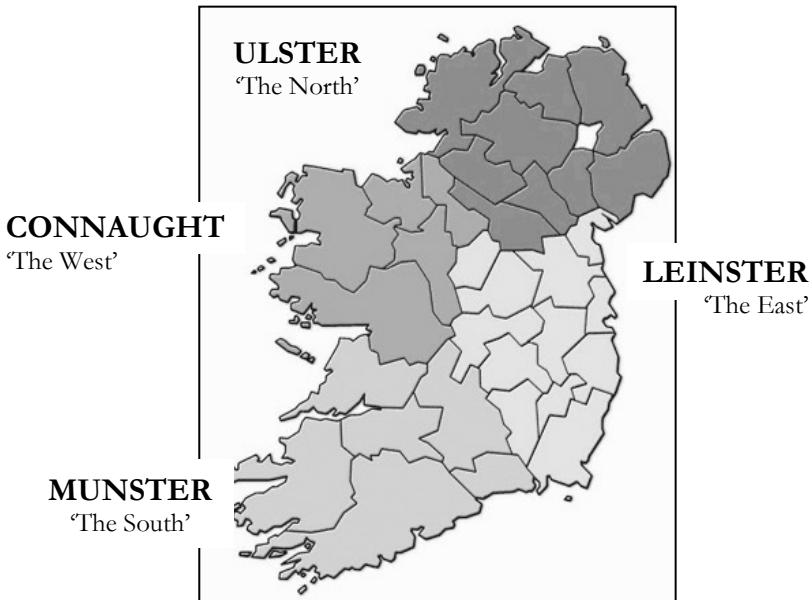
(Republic of Ireland): Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, Waterford.

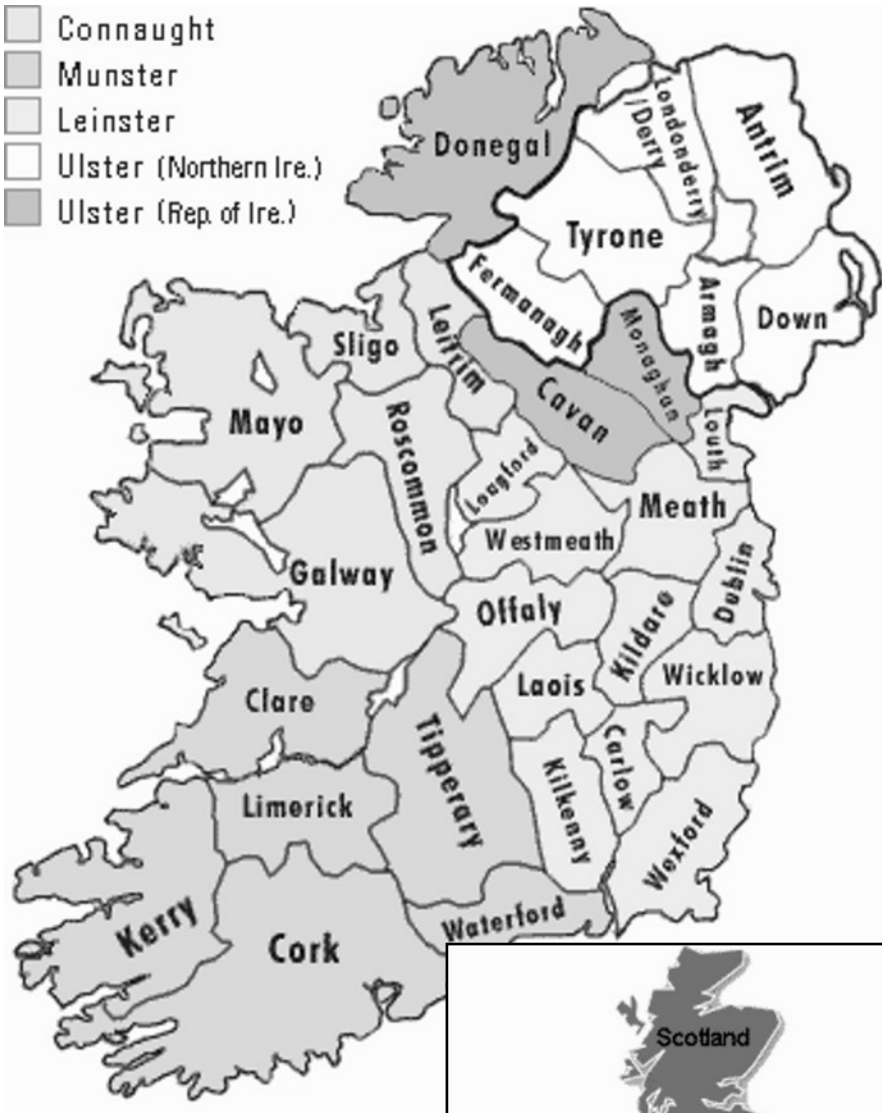
LEINSTER

(Republic of Ireland): Carlow, Dublin, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois, Louth, Meath, Offaly, Westmeath, Wexford, Wicklow.

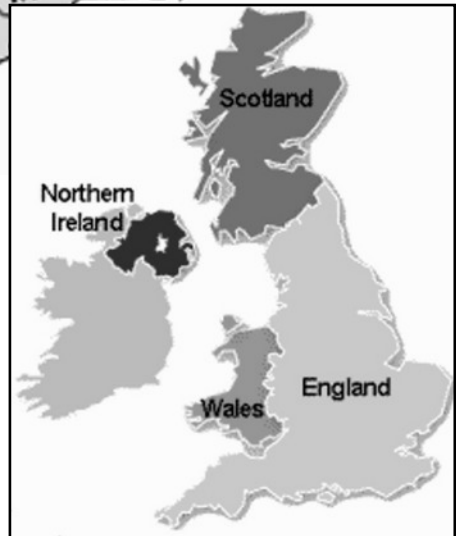
CONNAUGHT

(Republic of Ireland): Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo.





*The United Kingdom 2012 (right):
England, Wales, Scotland
& Northern Ireland*



GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation
- BBC NI – British Broadcasting Corporation, Northern Ireland
- BRIC – Brazil Russia India China (collectively referred to as the BRIC countries)
- CAL – Culture Arts & Leisure Committee (one of the Departmental Committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly)
- Dáil – Irish Parliament
- DUP – Democratic Unionist Party
- ECB – European Central Bank
- EEC – European Economic Community
- EU – European Union
- FDI – Foreign Direct Investment
- FF – Fianna Fáil
- FG – Fine Gael
- FOI – Freedom of Information
- GAA – Gaelic Athletic Association
- GB – Great Britain
- GFA – Good Friday Agreement
- IBEC – Irish Business & Employers Confederation
- IFA – Irish Football Association
- IMF – International Monetary Fund
- INLA – Irish National Liberation Army
- IRA – Irish Republican Army (used interchangeably with PIRA – Provisional IRA)
- IRB – Irish Republican Brotherhood
- MI5 – one of the British intelligence agencies
- MLA – Member of Legislative Assembly (Northern Ireland Assembly – often referred to as the Belfast Assembly)
- MP – Member of Parliament (British Parliament)
- NI/N Ireland – Northern Ireland
- NIO – Northern Ireland Office
- OFMDFM – Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister

OSCE – Organisation for Security & Co-operation in Europe
PM – Prime Minister
PSNI – Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUP – Progressive Unionist Party
RD – Regional Development Committee (one of the Departmental Committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly)
R&D – Research and Development
RTÉ – Radio Teilifís Éireann (Ireland’s National Broadcaster)
RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary
RUCR – Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve
SAS – Special Air Service
SDLP – Social Democratic & Labour Party
SF – Sinn Féin
SNP – Scottish National Party
STV – Single Transferrable Vote
Taoiseach – Irish Prime Minister
TD – Teachta Dála (member of the Dáil / Irish Parliament)
The North – Northern Ireland
The South – Republic of Ireland
UDA – Ulster Defence Association
UDP – Ulster Democratic Party
UDR – Ulster Defence Regiment
UK – United Kingdom
US – United States of America
USC – Ulster Special Constabulary (part of which was the ‘B’ Specials)
UTV – Ulster Television
UUP / UU – Ulster Unionist Party
UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force
UWC – Ulster Workers Council

* * *

INTRODUCTION

The centenary of the 1912 Third Home Rule Bill in Ireland was marked in April 2012 with the first of many planned events in a decade of commemorations scheduled to run until 2022. The occasion of marking important milestones in Irish history against the international backdrop of ‘The Gathering’ of the Irish diaspora in Ireland in 2013, is I believe, the perfect opportunity to launch a book that outlines a realistic and pragmatic vision for a united Ireland. We can only hope that the decade of commemorations will provide the Irish people with more hope and inspiration than some of the disquieting socio-political and financial events of recent years.

As I started to write this book in detail, Ireland had just elected a new Fine Gael–Labour coalition government with the political, economic and social parameters firmly set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Union in general (EU). The public south of the border are now very well versed in terms such as ‘primary bondholders’, ‘hair-cuts’, ‘bail-outs’, ‘burning bondholders’ and ‘toxic banks’ while some, and I stress *some* north of the border look on with glee, smugly viewing these financial difficulties as verification of their political allegiance to the United Kingdom.

So for me, writing a book advocating a united Ireland in this particular context is quite a challenge. But we must be brave enough to look beyond the immediate context. When one of the great European heroes Václav Havel died there were many fond memories of his prodigious achievements. One described how Havel’s participation in the Prague Appeal to western countries to bring down the ‘iron curtain’ was considered naïve at the time (Jan Kavan in *Irish Times* 19 Dec 2011). But time has proven the doubters wrong and Václav Havel is now seen as one who was capable of seeing through the difficult times, to something better.

I have lived long enough to remember attitudes in the mid-1960s when Unionists articulated their smugness in the rather transitory ‘politics of tarmac’ whereby the quality of northern roads was sufficient evidence of how better-off they were than their ‘poor cousins’ in the South. However, the slide into ‘the Troubles’; reliance on public service employment while traditional northern industries faded into history; the rise and fall of the ‘Celtic Tiger’; and the financial realities of open markets have all changed attitudes many times since. I have therefore no doubt that we will not be tied to recession thinking forever, and we will all move to yet another episode where the parameters will again be different, and will hopefully lead to better times.

On the other hand, some say that we should leave things as they are. Generally, these are people satisfied with a status-quo that employs the multi-party Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as the endgame, a theme to which I will return. However, for reasons that will become clear later in the book, I would be of the alternative school saying this should not be the case. These competing views were strongly reflected during Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Ireland in May 2011. Channel Four’s Jon Snow interviewed southern writer Sebastian Barry and northern commentator Jude Collins. My impression of the words chosen was that the former contextualised the visit as ‘a meeting of Irish and British *equals* in a *settled* political environment’, whereas Collins—correctly in my opinion—had to remind viewers that there was still ‘the question of the North’.

I therefore believe that as the decade 2012 to 2022 unfolds further, important debates will be held as we commemorate key landmarks in Irish history. The evolving campaign for home rule; the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912; the 1916 Easter Rising; the Somme; the 1918 general election; and all the political events of post-First World War Ireland that led to partition and the Irish Civil War will, with many other such events, provide contemporary platforms for reflection and debate. I hope this work will contribute to those discussions.

It is perhaps best to say what this book is not. Readers will I am sure, be relieved to hear that this is not an autobiography. Even with my personal journey from Unionism to Republicanism, I do not flatter myself that there is enough in my life to warrant an entire book. Neither is this an academic work. Despite having worked in that environment—and perhaps because of that experience—I have no desire to restrict myself

solely to that type of enterprise, but I do of course hope to bring a certain rigour to the work. Therefore, this book is a personal polemic in the best sense of the term, outlining ultimately my belief that a united Ireland is the best possible solution for our island in the future.

I will of course weave some of my personal experiences into the book as they were shaped in the harsh political realm of a partitioned Ireland. Those experiences came from my direct involvement in northern politics, while at the same time being a follower of politics in the South. Indeed I lived, paid my taxes and voted in a couple of elections in Dublin. I would like to think therefore that my work is well-informed from a generally inclusive ‘all-Ireland’ basis, and will be received as it is genuinely offered; as a work for the Ireland of the future.

While the main theme of this book is, in my opinion optimistic, positive and forward-thinking, we must nevertheless tackle with frankness and candour some of the more thorny issues that have bedevilled the North of Ireland in particular since the time of partition. I hope that the time I spent living and working in different communities will afford me the licence to offer some sincere critiques, without causing offence or alienation to any particular group, faith or political party. For example, because I was a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve (RUCR), then later was involved in Irish Nationalist and Republican politics, I obviously gained a deep knowledge of the Protestant and Catholic communities. I would therefore ask that all readers, from whatever background, evaluate in the spirit of openness, the ideas in this book from an objective perspective that puts the future of Ireland and that of our children first, and places the overall collective good *before* the short-term agendas or political goals of any particular group or creed.

The book begins by outlining some of my personal background so that readers are generally aware of where I am coming from personally, and socio-politically; I will then look back to partition and examine some of the different experiences North and South of the border, as well as reviewing the all-important ‘identity question’. Moving on to the often-difficult relationships between political parties who are actually aligned on the ideal of Irish unity, we reveal why certain traditional-historical positions make real cooperation difficult on the bigger-picture issues. Two chapters are then devoted to a vision of what a united Ireland could look like and how we could go about achieving that aim using a strategy

of progressiveness, professionalism and pragmatism that draws on the best of the various contributors. I make a central proposal for setting up a non-party-political organisation to drive forward and facilitate much of this work; I will call that body 'Vision Ireland' and further outline a broad strategy for its potential endeavours.

I stress again the importance of working all this through the decade of commemorations and looking beyond the current recession. Ninety years have passed since partition: over the next ten years we can have informed conversations about the future of Ireland, thankfully, now in a peaceful context.

Finally, one does not go through the type of change in Ireland that I have without experiencing various difficulties. I have never dwelt on these and have always placed them in proper perspective, as so many people have had greater difficulties than I have had. However as this book contains a vision that is very important to me, I have to express my deepest gratitude in two particular ways.

Firstly and collectively to my six sons who had the added tension of a political father in a difficult location during their formative years. They always reacted positively to me and more importantly did not negatively react to the difficulties and challenges that were sometimes thrown up to them because of their dad. I say a profound thank-you to Chris, Jamie, Adam, Seán, Marc and Ruaidhrí.

And to my wife who has always been loving, brilliant, supportive and understanding. No-one else will ever know how superb she has been, and that is what makes it such a wonderful privilege to be her husband. I say another profound thank-you to Valerie.

Chapter One

Personal Background

I promised that this book would not be autobiographical, but I think devoting this chapter to outlining my personal and political development and the evolution of my identity will help put a lot of the succeeding pages into a more meaningful context.

I was born into a Protestant and Unionist family. Both my grandfathers were in the Orange Order although each hailed from very different backgrounds, one a South Armagh farmer, the other a Belfast shopkeeper. Interestingly, my farming grandfather's family was just the second Protestant owner of that farm, the first having been the settler-planter family who dispossessed the original Irish owners in the late seventeenth century. The descendants of the dispossessed lived at the edge of the farm right down until the early 1930s. My mother remembered as a small girl the last of that Irish family passing away, and later related the story to me. I was flabbergasted at the very direct link to such an important period of Irish history within my family circle, and tried to imagine the feelings of successive generations of the dispossessed watching 'the planters' farm their land.

I also remember my mother relating to me her father's opinion on the partition of Ireland. Given that his farm was in Armagh and he sold cattle in the neighbouring County Monaghan just down the road, he had lived a life which didn't see any difference between these Ulster counties, yet they ended up in two so-called 'separate' states. He told my mother that he considered Ireland much too small in many ways—including socially and economically—to be partitioned!

My mother became a teacher and met her Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) husband when he was posted to a South Armagh police station in the war years. My father was then transferred to Lurgan, where they settled for the rest of their lives. With a little irony I can share that when my Protestant father first arrived in Lurgan to start his work, an RUC 'colleague' refused to meet him at the train and assist with his baggage because with a name like Leonard, he assumed my father would be a Catholic.

It was in that deeply divided Lurgan town that I spent my formative years, where I would be educated, and which I only left after I married my wife Valerie.

My upbringing was therefore a Unionist one, with both parents content with the steady, pensionable state employment. They were part of the generation born immediately after partition and were satisfied with that political situation. I went regularly to the local Presbyterian Church as expected, and attended a 'state' primary school and then the local grammar school. Catholics were as rare as hen's teeth in these establishments except for the last two 'A' level years in grammar school, when a number of Catholic students joined us from other schools. The schools that I attended had that British/Unionist/Protestant ethos marking royal occasions. I remember being lined up to wave our Union Jacks when a young Prince Philip was helicoptered into Lurgan Park, and seeing Protestant Ministers being wheeled into school Assemblies to deliver their sermonettes in rather patronising terms. Meanwhile, our schools had nothing to do with things Irish, such as St Patrick's Day for example.

However, it would be wrong to think that my earlier years were totally isolated from Catholics/Nationalists/Republicans, as I also had friends from that community, particularly in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of 'the Troubles'.

As well as being Unionist/Protestant, I would also describe my upbringing as conservative. My parents were certainly not ultra-conservative, but the small-town, small-community atmosphere and the conservative religious and education systems were all conditioning influences which even at an early age, I strongly resisted. Ironically, it was via international issues that I first noticed how I differed from the local and family authority figures.

I was intrigued by the Martin Luther King era, and remember being incensed at the grainy TV pictures of white policemen beating black civil rights marchers in the US. The images of separate drinking fountains for blacks and whites in some southern US cities astounded me. I also remember a local (and Christian) doctor, who was accepted as the paragon of virtue, education and social standing, being absolutely racist in his attitudes as he discussed with my father the issue of African nations fighting for their independence. I was the ‘not to speak until spoken to’ young lad listening to these adults but, even at that tender age, I was alert and sensitive enough to be extremely unforgiving in my summation of this so-called ‘authority figure’ with a stethoscope around his neck. His views were straight from the white-supremacist colonial textbook. It was no surprise that in the following years I would admire the likes of Helen Suzman and Beyers Naudé, both white anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, as people who went against the norm in their community and who stood up for others simply because they believed it was right to do so. It is also therefore no surprise that I was enraged—some years later—when I heard Margaret Thatcher describe Nelson Mandela as “a terrorist” while at the same time upholding Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet as a good man: it’s wonderful the difference a few years make!

My reference to these events very obviously points to my interest in history, politics and current affairs: history was my favourite school subject, and I always felt very comfortable studying it, even more so when it was Irish history. My grammar school history teachers were all what I would regard as Protestant establishment figures, especially my ‘A’ level teacher. It seemed to me he was playing the soldier-type figure through his commander position in the ‘Army Cadet Force’—a more military version of the boy scouts. Somewhat cynically perhaps, I thought it was some sort of substitution for him not having had an army career; that being the authoritarian in a uniform perhaps helped his self-esteem. He taught me the all-important seventeenth century Irish history, and his summary dismissal of the previous Irish social systems pointed to his view that reformation, royalty and plantation were good for Ireland. In short, I was taught Irish history from a British perspective, and I fully appreciate that the other side of that coin is often referred to as the ‘Christian Brother’ (Irish-Catholic-Nationalist) version of the same history. However, even though I did well in my studies I never totally accepted the school version of Irish history. I remained very

interested in the subject, doing my own reading and eventually having a strong Irish history component to my doctoral studies at the University of Ulster.

This natural interest and historical questioning was very important to the evolution of my identity and the development of my political views, especially at a time when the history of the classroom was tragically supplemented by the history of the early ‘Troubles’ being played out on the streets of Northern Ireland.

As the incidents of unrest increased, and changed from street protests to attacks on the police, I had my first experience of conflict narrowing the field of conversation. Opinions hardened, and even those who usually found it hard to articulate a personal opinion had plenty of them when an attack by Republicans occurred for example, or when a Civil Rights march took place in town. I knew of quite a few friendships between Catholics and Protestants dissolving during these times, as physical division followed mental division.

‘The Troubles’ witnessed some of the Unionist and Protestant authority figures displaying their true and often dark colours. I remember standing outside the Presbyterian Church when a local (and very well-thought-of) businessman, who was also an Elder in the church, stood with his Bible under his arm addressing the recent disturbances in Lurgan at the time of the Civil Rights marches. His solution was that the police and army should go down the main nationalist streets with their guns and basically shoot where they liked! That attitude obviously spoke volumes to me as a teenager. It was widely understood that one local schoolteacher had a major role in the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). He would later become the local ‘warlord’ deciding in the 1974 Ulster Workers Council (UWC) strike who could get petrol from the commandeered petrol station in the heart of Unionist/Loyalist Lurgan.

It was also a locally-held belief that a 1975 booby-trap bomb placed in the desk of a primary school office that killed one police officer and seriously injured another was not just part of a burglary as often reported; it was understood to be a direct personal attack on that teacher. I knew the injured policeman, and undoubtedly it seriously affected the rest of his life and that of his wife, who took the burden of all aspects of family life including caring for her husband.

But some of the worst examples of raw sectarian hatred surfaced when the Pope visited Ireland in autumn 1979. Valerie and I were only a few months from our wedding and were out for a quiet Saturday evening drink, on the same day that the Pope addressed a crowd estimated at anything between 200,000 and 300,000 in Drogheda Co. Louth. This is where he made his famous plea for peace. There had been a lot of media coverage of the number of Catholics from the North who travelled the short distance to Drogheda. A Salvation Army Christian came into the lounge selling the denominational paper propagating their Christian worldview. He would have known me and my family name and maybe thought he was on safe ground for voicing his opinion, but he clearly didn't know that Valerie was from a Catholic background. As he offered me a copy of the paper and held his collection box hoping for a donation, he started to lament about how many Catholics had gone to "see the Pope". The whole idea and event was clearly irritating him, but then he added the following in really serious tones: "It's a pity there won't be a few bombs along the road for them returning." Needless to say, he didn't get a donation—we quietly ushered him away—but much more importantly, Valerie was astonished. She wasn't, like many young twenty-plus-year-olds at that time, a practising Catholic, but to hear one alleged Christian representative wanting her co-religionists blown to pieces as they headed home from Mass and the Pope's homily was truly shocking even by Northern standards.

But returning to earlier times, tragic events and attitudes were dreadfully intertwined. A pupil attending my school lost his Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) father in an IRA gun attack; there was absolute disbelief that this could happen. 'One man one vote' (now one person one vote), was scoffed at in a youth club conversation I heard, and, according to most young Protestants I knew, Civil Rights marchers were mere 'troublemakers'; it followed in their logic that the Ian Paisley's counter-protests were therefore entirely justified, and all the blame for any subsequent trouble was naturally transferred to the Nationalists. When Rev. Ian Paisley walked in front of UDA paramilitaries passing my home, they were in turn headed by a police officer directing traffic to ensure their parade was not hindered; even at that early time in my life I scoffed at how bizarre and perfidious it all appeared. I was also in the classroom when the old Unionist-Stormont regime was prorogued by the British Government in March 1972 just a number of weeks after the shocking events of Bloody Sunday, something, not surprisingly, that wasn't even discussed in my school the day after those murders.

But the first time I was very directly affected, in the sense of family, with the violence of 'the Troubles' was a Saturday morning in the middle of my 'A' level exams in 1972. My father took a phone call and was quickly calling up the stairs that his brother, my uncle Jack, had been shot in his shop on the Crumlin Road in Belfast. An older brother was immediately told to get ready, and he and my father headed off to Belfast. I can remember only a little information coming through during the rest of the weekend. His injuries were serious but not life-threatening, but I remember walking off to my Monday-morning exam without a word from anyone about sitting the exam in this context: it wasn't the generation for counselling, it was quite simply a matter of getting on with it. It later transpired the gunman was a young UDA member who decided to get some money for himself by robbing my grandfather's and uncle's shop. My uncle tried to dash from the shop towards the rear of the building and he was shot in the back. I was told years later that a local UDA leader, who owned a shop nearby, had assured my uncle that his attacker had acted alone without sanction, that he had subsequently been 'dealt with' and wouldn't bother him again. I think my uncle always assumed this meant the robber had been killed by more senior UDA people, and maybe not just solely because of this incident.

The second time violence had quite a direct effect in my family circle was in September 1975. I was making breakfast with my mother, and the early morning news bulletin started to give information about an attack on Orange Lodge members in Tullyvallen, South Armagh. As the basic details (not the names) of the ages and relationship of two of the victims were broadcasted, my mother immediately knew who they were. James and Ronald McKee were her relations and two of five people murdered that night, and my mother was greatly shocked by the killings. Tullyvallen is one of the most remembered incidents of 'the Troubles' and everyone believes the death toll could have been much higher but for an off-duty police officer at the Lodge meeting who returned fire with his personal-issue gun. Republicans carried out the attack, but there is some debate as to whether it was directly the responsibility of the IRA operating under a different name, or, if there was some Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) involvement.

My mother attended the funeral service, and I remember her telling me how sickened she was when Rev. Ian Paisley arrived at the church. She always thought that a lot of the responsibility for 'the Troubles' lay directly at his door.

In company with thousands of others, I too became part of ‘the Troubles’ generation when we tried to make important local decisions even as the normal societal links between our communities declined, although the links were never completely obliterated as some commentators have tried to imply. But there is no doubt it was a tremendously bleak time; we tried to convince ourselves we could lead ‘normal’ lives when in reality, our lives were very far from that.

As the mid-1970s descended into deep conflict, I was starting out in the world of work. There are three events from this period I want to refer to, two of which would have major implications for my life. The first, however, was the virtually inconsequential issue of joining the Orange Order. Although the media loved to point to this period when I later became a Sinn Féin public representative, for me, joining the Orange Order was something of a non-event, although (as I will illustrate later in the book) it did cast up a few very interesting anecdotes. I had joined the Order with a few mates without much thought; over the months and the associated meetings I got totally bored and disillusioned with it, and finally stood up at a meeting to announce my departure.

The second event was much more important. I decided to join the part-time RUC Reserve. As on many other occasions when numbers were needed to supplement the full-time police in troubled times, a part-time force was organised. The RUC Reserve was one leg of the move to replace the infamous ‘B’ Specials; an almost exclusively Protestant-Unionist ‘Special Constabulary’ disbanded in 1970. I thought for quite a time about taking this step. A few of my peers had already gone to the paramilitaries. My decision was to go with the law-and-order approach, although it soon became a case of on-the-street learning about the intricacies of the old chestnut question: ‘*whose* law and order?’ I did three tours of duty each week while continuing my full-time work. I will refer later in the book to some of what I regard as important experiences during this time, but overall I can confidently say that this episode was a major learning curve in my relatively young life. I saw the good, the bad and the downright unacceptable of policing in a divided society in those six years as a part-time policeman, and it was definitely important in influencing some of my opinions about the North, and about Ireland as a whole.

The third ‘event’ was when I started going out with Valerie. As I said earlier, she was from a Catholic background, but the added ingredient

was that she lived in the very staunch Republican estate of Kilwilkie in Lurgan. There were therefore certain dangers associated with my part-time police work and Valerie's home location. Undoubtedly I could have been a target, and we also had to think of Valerie's position as an isolated local girl 'going out with one of the enemy'.

I was told by some I was mad, even advised to marry and emigrate to Australia. Clearly, we had to be very careful as to where and when we met. I didn't regularly call at Valerie's home. We met at different times and locations to avoid a routine which would have been a distinct security weakness. On one occasion, I did go to her Kilwilkie home, taking a Tuesday off work, to meet Valerie's mum Kathleen for the first time and have lunch with her. We regarded a mid-week day and time as being a little safer. However, within a few days I got a message from an observant and kindly neighbour via a mutual friend telling me not to take that sort of risk again. We didn't. In fact on the day we got married Valerie didn't even leave for the church from her own family home!

Through my relationship with Valerie, I began to get personal knowledge of how her community saw things in our divided society, which at this stage was in deep conflict. Her father Jim had converted to Catholicism when he married Valerie's mother Kathleen; he was ostracised by his birth family at that point and would relate to his children that he never appreciated what discrimination was until he became a Roman Catholic. It was only then that he saw the real scale of unemployment in Nationalist/Republican areas and the consequent lack of money in families around him. He never had a problem with the police before his marriage and conversion, but he did afterwards. One key event was during the Ulster Workers Council strike in 1974, when the North was in chaos with illegal Loyalist road-blocks; businesses closed by intimidation; people threatened because they defied the strike by trying to get to work; and petrol stations commandeered by Loyalist paramilitaries. It was on one such occasion that a policeman 'booked' Valerie's father for double parking in one of Lurgan's broadest streets as he collected gas! Jim died very suddenly at the early age of 47 within a few weeks of that encounter, and the summons to appear in court for his 'crime' was brought to the house by police officers after his death. He actually died from a heart attack in his local Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club in which he played a large role. I never met the man but heard a lot about him from Valerie, who followed in her dad's footsteps

helping out at the busy GAA youth club. Overall, while it was a dangerous time, it was also an intriguing time for me as I was a questioning and observant member of the Unionist establishment while gaining a lot of knowledge of a community largely antagonistic to that establishment.

At one point in the late 1970s I noticed a report in a local paper about a certain John Robb of the New Ireland Movement. The fact that he was from a Protestant background and was prepared to put his head above the parapet on the Movement's view on Irish unity impressed me. By that stage I was strongly of the opinion that we had to look beyond Northern Ireland to the entire island to get the solution, and Robb was courageously articulating a version of that view. However, I have to admit I didn't follow up the interest at the time, but curiously I met John some twenty years later and we have enjoyed numerous conversations on Irish history and politics since.

All these personal and state-policing experiences (some of which I refer to later in the book) combined with my historical interest, meant that as we entered the 1980s I was moving inexorably towards what I have often described as being 'a very contented Irishman'. The schizophrenic experience of being 'Irish on holiday, but British at home', or labelling oneself as 'being British' as a specific 'anti-Irish' statement, waned completely for me. And as I have also previously said, my full acceptance of an Irish identity was never a negative or antagonistic commentary on things British or, towards those people who regard themselves as British. It was simply a case of me responding sincerely and thoughtfully to my own experiences in context of a very challenging socio-political environment.

Another event encapsulates this identity evolution. When Republican hunger striker Bobby Sands was elected Member of Parliament (MP) for Fermanagh South Tyrone in 1981, I was attending a family member's funeral. The election count result came through as many of us milled around the deceased's home after the funeral. I remember many furious reactions to this very significant outcome. One of the strongest statements came from a Unionist who was totally convinced that there were over 30,000 voters in Fermanagh South Tyrone who supported terrorism. I, on the other hand, now understood the situation very differently: to life-time Nationalists and Republicans that vote was very

understandable. But for those coming from a Unionist background and therefore *not* being part of the tap root of Republican struggle, protest and hunger striking, it was obviously a different picture. In addition I knew then that I was seeing things very differently from possibly all within that particular Unionist/Protestant group that afternoon.

I make these points about my identity now because all else flows from there. My later political involvement was premised on my identity as an Irishman wanting to make a contribution; my political disenchantment with the Social Democratic & Labour Party (SDLP) and decision to join Sinn Féin (SF), as the only main political party organised on an all-Ireland basis, was totally based on my aspirations for Ireland, something I will expand on later. However, I will now refer to how both parties viewed me as one from a Unionist/Protestant background.

There were a lot of members from both parties who gave me great support and got on with the politics rather than worrying about the religion. However, some in the SDLP made too much of the religious label and, as I had already jettisoned all such pigeon-holes, I found that tiresome. The worst was when I was preparing to enter my first electoral contest in 2001. A senior long-time member of the party in East Derry told me that I shouldn't enter because I was 'the wrong sort' apparently, a reference to my religious background. At the other end of the scale, when I attended my first SDLP party conference, Alasdair McDonnell—who became party leader in November 2011—introduced me to many of the party hierarchy as well as visiting politicians from England and southern Irish parties as 'one from the other side' which in contrast, appeared to be a trophy-like approach. The religious label also surfaced in other unconstructive ways, such as when I was accused by another member of 'playing the religious card'. This occurred when I was competing with that person for an internal position. This shows how easy such attitudes can surface when internal competition comes to a head. Interestingly, it was in the same context within Sinn Féin that the worst sectarian attitudes against me were displayed. I was in a tough competition to win an internal vote for a position in the party when a trusted colleague told me in very frank terms how two members in particular were scathing in their sectarian description of me. I believe there were others involved as well. So, from within both parties I saw how easy attitudes can harden in the age-old sectarian way, especially when you put yourself forward competing for positions and trying to get

support from others. And at a grass roots level there were many 'shinners' who reverted to the 'orange B' description of Unionists/Protestants at the drop of the hat.

However, I have to say that the only time I experienced the sectarian head-count principle being applied was when I canvassed in East Derry elections with a senior member of the SDLP. When I suggested canvassing certain homes where the people were more likely to be Unionist and/or Protestant, she quickly described it as a waste of time, that we had to approach it as a sectarian head-count and get the 'Catholic vote' out.

But there was an additional dimension within Sinn Féin. Trusting an ex-RUC Reservist was far more than just a question of me coming from a Protestant background, and there were differing attitudes. Some were very welcoming and reminded me that I wasn't the first from the security forces that had moved to Republicanism. Some were very trusted colleagues who supported me in very practical ways, but there were of course some who saw it differently. When I gave a talk in Belfast as part of a festival week, I was told by Laurence McKeown (one of the 1980s Maze hunger strikers) that one Republican steadfastly refused to come to the event, saying that he wouldn't have anything to do with me. I was also told that I was lucky being based in East Derry, that had I been in one of several other constituencies there was 'no way' that I would have been accepted. In addition, a long-time RTÉ journalist informed me he knew from his many contacts in the party that there was a lot of suspicion about me joining SF and numerous members were hostile to me.

I record these issues which relate to both parties now, to simply show that while I may have many challenging things to say about Unionism, I also have to be fair across the board and say that there are still journeys to be travelled by many within Nationalism/Republicanism in order to really put sectarianism to bed. True Republicanism cannot be sectarian in any shape or form, and Nationalism cannot be the nationalism of any one faith or creed. But let us maintain hope and confidence in the knowledge that even since these events occurred improvements are happening. There is an imperative for all of us to rise above the 'isms', be they sectarian, racist or any other type.

But there were broader and equally challenging issues which relate to my time in Sinn Féin from 2004–11.

Undoubtedly I met people in Sinn Féin who were major players in ‘the Troubles’, many who lost relatives and friends during those years and were genuinely committed to the political path. I knew such people at both constituency and central level and there were many examples of good attitudes and actions never conveyed by the media or, which rightly happened away from the glare of publicity. However, there were also examples of that difficult tension between the long-established ‘army’ approach, and the political path.

When I became a member of the party, I had to ride out the immediate publicity about, and the reactions to my decision. However, the first really bigger-picture issues were the December 2004 Northern Bank robbery in Belfast which netted £26 million, and the January 2005 murder of Robert McCartney after a fight in a Belfast bar. Internal SF reaction to the bank raid was interesting to say the least. There was deep ambivalence and cynical laughter among many, but also deep anger by some party members who obviously saw the bigger picture. One of those furiously declared to me that there were people in ‘the movement’ who simply weren’t aware of, and maybe didn’t even give a damn, about the long and difficult work involved in politics. No one believed the largest bank raid in Irish and British history was carried out by anybody other than Republicans, but the most bizarre reactions came at a meeting held in Derry to inform SF members of the ‘political line’ to be taken and how the party would ride out the media storm. One member said from the floor that he didn’t want to believe it was anyone other than Republicans as that would mean there was another group with similar ‘professional expertise’: there was laughter across the hall.

But the mirth of the night betrayed deeper issues as did the McCartney murder, which had led—directly or indirectly—to the suspension of a number of SF members. There were obviously people affiliated with Sinn Féin/Republicanism who weren’t capable of seeing the larger political picture, who felt they were above the hard graft of political representatives and of those who supported their day-to-day work. A calculated bank robbery and a drunken brawl after some had attended the Bloody Sunday anniversary march are hardly the work of those with political vision. And if the bank robbery was a group running solo then

where was the internal discipline? Or, if not 'solo' then what was the relationship between the robbers and others? In addition there was the Belfast syndrome. Many SF party members were privately very critical saying there were too many Belfast people who thought they could do as they pleased and would not be dealt with by the mainly 'Belfast' leadership.

During the long-running reaction to both these incidents, I was announced as Sinn Féin's Westminster candidate and also a candidate for the local elections to Coleraine Borough Council, both in May 2005. I met with a senior Sinn Féin official to discuss the Westminster candidacy and, when I said that our mission to keep increasing our percentage vote in East Derry was not helped by people robbing banks and murdering people, he was quite taken aback. His reaction was tame, simply saying the party had been through worse situations and we would just have to accept the context, and do our best. He offered no criticism whatsoever of both incidents. I know for definite these incidents seriously harmed our campaign. I met enough people who were honest enough to say that they had no problem with me personally as the candidate, but both the seriousness of the issues and the ambivalence and lack of any real action by Sinn Féin, meant they could not vote for me.

The tensions between the long tentacles of 'army' approaches, the ingrained loyalties that extended from 'the Troubles' and the evolution to politics, manifested themselves in many ways. When the IRA finally ordered an end to its armed campaign in July 2005, I had a conversation with Dominic Adams, brother of SF President Gerry Adams. He genuinely expressed to me that the 'historic' decision to disarm left him feeling strange, as he felt the defence for his community had now gone. I found Dominic to be a quiet-spoken, reflective person, so I always regarded that opinion as sincere, and certainly not just some Republican jingoism. Within a few months the decommissioning of 'all' weapons as witnessed by two clergymen, was met with anger by many SF party members who thought that the IRA should never give in to the demands of Unionists and the British on weapons. Many of those who were most angry were non-combatants, whether through non-involvement or simply being too young to have been involved. When the IRA was finally disbanded in September 2008, the one remaining link that kept many in the party only relatively happy was the fact that the Army Council stayed in place.

As one who came from the outside, I always found interesting the whole spectre of central leadership, Army Council and the ‘democratic structures’ of Sinn Féin. One elected Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Belfast expressed to me in very open terms that he knew who really held the power in the party, and accepted that this was the best way to get on with the work. In essence he knew that the elected representatives didn’t hold the real power, rather it was held by a blend of Ardchomhairle and Army Council members: everyone was meant to be equal but in classical terms some were more equal than others. In that context I found the unending references to ‘the leadership’ and ‘referring issues to the leadership’ somewhat amusing. On the one hand we were told the local cumann (branch) and comhairle cheantair (constituency organisation) could make their own decisions, but at the end of the day all the little networks with ex-army personnel on those local structures meant that divergence from the leadership either didn’t happen or, could be quickly corrected. Internal democracy was often massaged to put the ‘right people’ in the important positions, and during my time the ‘right people’ were still mostly ex-army.

This ambivalence between army and political elements was particularly clear when it came to an issue in my constituency of East Derry as I started my work as an MLA in January 2010. One of the leading members Sean McGlinchey had been ‘stood down’ just before Christmas 2009. Who actually stood him down became a moot question. There was uproar as Sean was a very popular member. He served time for bombing Coleraine, came from a strong Republican family which included Dominic McGlinchey and worked very hard, particularly in the Dungiven area. East Derry Sinn Féin members then had to sit in a Sinn Féin office being addressed by two senior Sinn Féin members who said the standing-down was not a Sinn Féin action! But neither of the two ‘leadership’ figures would say who stood him down and what for: it was totally bizarre and the elephant in the room was never named!

This type of incident, including higher-profile episodes such as the fall-out from Denis Donaldson’s outing as a British agent, and his subsequent April 2006 murder, as well as the seemingly-endless ‘unofficial’ meetings between key constituency personnel (mostly ex-army) and ‘the leadership’ of Sinn Féin, led to some distrust and frankly, often to the question, who do you believe? When one considers that some of those in relatively important local party positions had, in the opinion of

many, little political prowess, it is easy to conclude that various tensions affected the day-to-day politics within the party particularly when it came to election planning and strategies. I stress these were important points in East Derry: I don't know the detail from other constituencies, but similar feelings from other areas were, from time-to-time expressed to me.

But at the same time, when the leadership wanted to move a significant issue forward, they could very effectively get discussion moving at what were called in my area 'family meetings'. These were much broader than cumann/branch meetings and included activists of all kinds down through the years. Senior party figures could be produced to address these meetings and this method was used extensively in the policing debate which ended with the January 2007 decision by Sinn Féin to accept, and enter the policing structures in the North. These were the only meetings in which I heard real dissent by those who held strong opinions on this crucial issue, and admittedly, party figures handled everything well. When it came to the actual Ard Fheis debate and vote it was noteworthy that very senior Republican families—some of whom had lost relatives during the conflict—were selected to speak in favour of the motion.

So out of these bigger-picture experiences that I personally witnessed, and the many other issues in early twenty-first century Irish politics, it is clear that Sinn Féin is now on the move, evolving from what it regards as a war, but still with some features of the centralism and loyalties of the established 'army' approach. I personally think this has to evolve further and I will take up some more specific issues about Sinn Féin and the other parties in the context of working for a united Ireland later in the book.

But for now the focus in the next chapter will be on partition.

Chapter Two

Partition

From the 1870s to 1920, the debate about ‘Home Rule’ was the single most dominant feature of Anglo-Irish political life. Essentially, Home Rule was the method by which it was hoped that Ireland could be reconciled to the British Empire. An ‘Assembly’ in Ireland consisting of two chambers would conduct Ireland’s internal affairs, while the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster retained control of areas such as foreign policy, armed forces, security and major taxation policies. With some exceptions the Liberals in England, initially under William Gladstone, supported Home Rule while their rivals the Conservatives, opposed it. In Ireland, Irish Nationalists worked strenuously for the ideal while Unionists opposed it fearing their position as a minority—and mainly Protestant group—would leave them open to control by a strongly Roman Catholic led country. The vagueness of the term ‘Home Rule’ as it was debated through the decades also created difficulties. As Republicanism in Ireland gained political strength with an evolving campaign for a free Irish republic it became clear that ‘Home Rule’ would not deliver enough for them.

Different players with vastly different political goals meant the overall fifty-year journey to ‘Home Rule’ and partition was arduous, with many twists and turns. The considerable extension of the franchise for the all-important 1885 and 1886 Westminster elections and the first Home Rule Acts of 1886 and 1893 were the building blocks to a period that witnessed astonishing changes in Ireland. There were also major changes

across Europe and other parts of the world where lines were drawn on maps by masters of empires. These were meant to be solutions but unfortunately, and many times predictably, only led to further difficulties.

Those who would interpret history retrospectively in an effort to validate their political allegiances and conditioning might argue that the division of Ireland into two separate entities comprising 6 and 26 counties was inevitable. But this is not the case. Reading history backwards is unfortunately a regular habit in the North. It is bad enough for so-called senior politicians in the Belfast Assembly to fall into this trap when speaking, for example, about 'Northern Ireland in 1916' when it obviously didn't exist, but it is worse again when educators regularly make similar statements, as I have personally witnessed. The bigger tragedy is they didn't even appreciate the point.

I am not going to give a comprehensive account of the decades of history leading to partition. It is readily available in numerous excellent publications which have been crafted to do that very thing. I have though relied mainly on two works which refreshed my memory about the many historical twists and turns, but also give some good commentary on the political compromises and contradictions of the period. They are JJ Lee's acclaimed book *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Diarmaid Ferriter's excellent work *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (Profile Books, 2004).

The first key point to note is that Irish Unionism didn't want Home Rule of *any* kind never mind a partitioned Ireland. Theirs was a campaign in context of being part of the British Empire, desiring to remain within that empire ruled from its centre, England. The well-known quote 'Home Rule is Rome rule' epitomises the sectarian fear behind the Unionist tactic; they dreaded Home Rule from Dublin where indigenous people voted for their own Parliament, and in which Unionists would be a minority voice instead of being aligned with the mighty British Empire. Ferriter is ultimately correct when he says that the Unionists may not have wanted Home Rule, but unfortunately the Empire did.

The Home Rule stakes were particularly raised when the Parliament Act of 1911 removed many of the legislation-blocking powers of the House of Lords and thereby asserted the supremacy of the House of Commons

in London. This meant that the Tory-dominated House of Lords in London would no longer be able to move against Home Rule. The issue now had to be resolved by the elected British parliament much to the chagrin of Irish Unionists. But the Unionists had ‘friends’ whose London/English/Empire agenda would be helped by continuing the fight against this constitutional reform, most notably the Conservative party. One key player was the Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law who used the Home Rule issue to maximum effect. He played the Empire card, saying the Empire would be in peril if Ireland got its way, and thus increased the political pressure on the Liberal supporters of Home Rule in the British Parliament. He sought an election on the Home Rule issue and wasn’t afraid to stir the Unionist masses at a major rally in Balmoral, Belfast in 1912. The subsequent signing of the Ulster Covenant, as well as the Ulster Unionist Council decision to deny the right of any people, including a British Government, to impose Home Rule were also significant milestones. Irish Unionism’s ‘democratic credentials’ were severely compromised at this time. They were further diminished as this was the era of Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) growth (established January 1913) which witnessed many ‘law and order’ unionists again, compromising this laudable concept.

These events were all pivotal to the tactic of trying to block Home Rule *per se* not just Home Rule for Ulster. It has to be stressed that the wording of the Ulster Covenant spoke of using all means necessary to “defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament in Ireland”. The fact that some of the more fervent signatories to the Ulster Covenant signed in their own blood, illustrates the strength and depth of the passions involved.

Even the context of the First World War (1914-18) and the Dublin Easter Rising (1916) did not materially change the core questions of constitutional reform, Home Rule for Ireland and how Unionism would fight against it. Please note I say the “core questions”: the reaction of Unionists, particularly those who fought in World War I may have further hardened, but the war did not mean the questions were put to bed. They weren’t: Britain’s game plan may have been disastrous, but they did not renege on pursuing how they could progress the central question of Home Rule in the aftermath of war. The sacrifice of many Unionists at the Somme and elsewhere is often seen by succeeding generations of Unionists as proof of their willingness to fight for Britain

and the Empire, and therefore how ‘different’ (and therefore more loyal) they were, thus validating partition. But thankfully it is now recognised that countless Irish men and women also sacrificed their lives in the First World War, many of whom most probably supported Home Rule for all of Ireland and believed, or hoped, that it would be delivered.

As the myriad issues at play unfolded, one of the crucial issues which I believe sums up many of the weaknesses of partition is, ironically, the province of Ulster itself. The idea of a ‘covenant’ is cherished by Unionists and is of course graphically characterised by the 1912 signing of the Ulster Covenant. The original Unionist tactic at the Buckingham Palace Conference of 1914 was for the inclusion of all nine counties of the province in any act of partition; in fact Edward Carson of the Irish Unionist Alliance accepted that a nine-county Ulster would either be included or excluded in its entirety. However, as things worked out, it was clear that the Unionist covenant with the Protestants of Counties Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan was not so strong as in the remaining six Ulster counties; the subsequent compromises and betrayals by Irish Unionism of their fellow Unionists in these three counties epitomise some of the profound ambivalences that underpinned partition.

Joe Lee presents a very concise number of points which I have gleaned from his book and with which I find it hard to disagree. I also believe it would be difficult for many Unionists to reject them.

Lee claims the Government of Ireland Act 1920 that created Northern Ireland represented capitulation by the British cabinet to Ulster Unionist pressure. The contract between Unionist leader Edward Carson and the Unionist/Protestant minded men and women of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan was truly broken when those counties were excluded; Catholic majorities in Fermanagh & Tyrone were greater than Protestant majorities in Derry and Armagh; Unionists conceded the North Monaghan constituency which had 33% Protestants but insisted on the South Armagh constituency which had 32% Protestants; Unionists also conceded the East Donegal constituency with 40% Protestants.

Lee continues by saying that Unionist claims to the effect that this was the only democratic solution seem difficult to reconcile; in fact, the decision to concede the three counties provided Unionists with as much territory as they could safely control, and delivered Protestant-Unionist

supremacy over Catholic-Nationalists even in predominantly Catholic areas. Lee also rebuts the erroneous argument that the border was devised ‘because two peoples could not live together in peace’; the author correctly claims partition brought two warring groups *together* in the North, more than it separated them.

All these points are valid and powerful in highlighting some of the central inconsistencies which gave rise to partition and the creation of Northern Ireland, and the final point is particularly strong but simultaneously tragic. We do not need to work with the hindsight of ‘the Troubles’ to realise just how politically unworkable the Unionist administration in the North was, and the results it set in train and presided over. I have spoken to many people who lived in the first few post-partition decades; they testified to the societal tensions, the infamous ‘Unionist siege mentality’ allied to supremacy attitudes which caused many Nationalist/Republican grievances. There are many examples of such attitudes, but one that stuck with me was a very local case and certainly not the usual type recorded in other books. A Lurgan shop had a notice in the window saying Catholics need not apply for jobs, yet the same shop stocked school uniforms for the main Catholic school in the town. Catholics were good enough to give the owner trade and profit, but were not good enough to work there! Being Irish in the North was a second-class existence.

I have purposely used the phrase ‘being Irish in the North’ at this stage of the book because I firmly believe the simplicity of labels has led to superficial and misleading analysis that has suited some, but served no-one. For example, for many years we have had the constant drip of commentary that the North has a sectarian problem and if only the ‘two tribes’ could live peacefully, be more tolerant and inclusive, all would be fine. That enables people, north and south of the border and in Great Britain, to see things as an internal problem: this is not—and has never been—just an internal problem. Of course sectarianism has been a disgusting reality, many times played out with tragic results, but it has been used as a convenient byword to avoid dealing with a much more profound problem.

For example, people who belonged to that most Irish of all institutions, the GAA, were many times treated like second-class citizens. I personally know of many supporters and teams travelling to matches that were stopped by the RUC and deliberately delayed for no apparent reason.

Some northern media outlets wouldn't even report on their games. The now defunct *Ireland's Saturday Night* sports paper continued right to its final edition refusing to cover anything of GAA games. The GAA organisation was also excluded from public funding opportunities, and I will later refer to my own experience on Coleraine Borough Council in this context. However, when one considers that despite First Minister and DUP leader Peter Robinson attending a GAA match, we had the former Ulster Unionist party leader Tom Elliot still refusing in 2010 to attend such a game, one can see that the North is not just about religious labels. It is, as Brian Feeney put it, an "ethno-political problem" (*Irish News* 13 April 2011): it is, among many things, primarily about the challenges of being Irish in the North.

We all know that gerrymandering constituencies, housing allocation and 'one man one vote' were central issues when 'the Troubles' were brewing, but the malaise went even deeper than those particular difficulties. The genesis of all this was partition. People were clearly not kept apart, but were in fact corralled into what many saw as a false entity—in the sense of normal democracy and shared ambition—with a large schism in a small population. It not only rendered a Unionist majority but also, a sizeable Nationalist/Republican minority community which was in fact too sizeable for permanent and safe domination. Unionist reliance on a 1920 number-crunch could not hold back the rise of an educated population and of more liberal principles of equality. The festering sores grew over a period of time and the inevitable socio-political fractures happened. While it would be difficult to say that the extent of 'the Troubles' was totally predictable, the society that partition 'made' had not—and still doesn't have—enough shared ambition to be truly successful.

The ironic tragedy is that at the time of partition, Unionists did not actually like the 'solution' of partition imposed upon them by the British Government, and were not at all shy at the time articulating that they felt they were caught up in bigger-picture English-and Empire-politics.

Many people will have heard of Edward Carson's reaction in his speech in the House of Lords in December 1921. The leader of Irish Unionism exclaimed, "what a fool was I" and described himself, Ulster and Ireland itself as "puppets" in the game of getting the Tories into government. A lesser-known reaction, but nonetheless a very illuminating one, is

recorded by Diarmaid Ferriter: Lady Lilian Spender, wife of Wilfred Spender who had commanded the UVF, was perfectly positioned in the Unionist campaign to see events unfolding. Lady Spender said she “never really believed England would do this thing” [partition]. She regarded it as reward for Irish treachery, treason and crime of all kinds; she also thought England had penalised their loyalty in passing the Act and didn’t want the Unionists. These are hardly views which point to successive Unionist generations seeing partition as somehow inevitable, understandable or natural, and regarding the North as being totally different from the rest of Ireland or even God-ordained, as some have claimed.

To emphasise the point in a historical context: partition was *not* the result that Irish Unionism—which became Ulster Unionism—wanted.

The Partitioning of Experiences

The newly-partitioned parts of Ireland did not go their distinct paths overnight. Trenchant disagreements over what London was actually giving, the failed Boundary Commission and the eventual collapse of The Council of Ireland all meant a period of transition marked by uncertainty, fear and death, most tragically in the Irish Civil War and the Belfast pogroms. Financial arrangements, Ireland’s status in relation to London and retention of port access for the British, as well as many other factors, rendered years of difficulty and challenge.

Again my purpose is not to chronicle the detail; that is not the thrust of this book. I have adopted a different approach to highlight how partition resulted in different experiences, South to North and *vice versa*. My examination will run into the next two chapters.

The South was always going to face many ‘Everest-sized’ challenges. The well-established spirit of independence that had sprouted under British rule now had to face the harsh reality of being a small agrarian economy on the periphery of Europe. One of the greatest achievements in the South was actually surviving the deep-rooted impact of the Irish Civil War. Over a period of time the South established key political structures and public service organisations. The Dáil (the new Parliament in the South) was able to survive a key power transition to de Valera’s Fianna Fáil (FF) from Cosgrave’s Cumann na nGaedhael in 1932. The import

of this should never be underestimated. One civil-war enemy democratically handed power over to another civil-war enemy without military influence, in an era that provided examples such as Poland and Yugoslavia, which did not achieve this democratic fundamental. A state army, a civilian police service, An Garda Síochána, all became firmly established in the South and a civil service took its proper place in society. There were of course still many steps before the South became a republic and left the British Commonwealth, but the organs of state did become firmly embedded.

There were many difficulties in the South during this period, including how Protestants felt in this Roman Catholic-dominated country, and debates still occur on whether killings of Protestants in Cork and other counties were sectarian. These debates have been given fresh impetus by, for example, the very powerful RTE programme *An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence, 16 April 2012). It gave the account by Canon George Salter of how his Protestant family was forcibly moved out of Cork in April 1922 and also how his father received a deathbed confession of sectarian murder by a local IRA man. Undoubtedly, over the years the Protestant population in the South declined. However, as Protestants, particularly in Dublin, have said to me, they held a privileged and disproportionate role in business and the professions in the South for numerous years. As time went on, many were very relaxed about becoming strong Irish citizens in this new state. I also think Protestants in the North sometimes exaggerate the negatives of the status-quo for their co-religionists in the South, relying on past experiences rather than on contemporary facts. This was highlighted by Protestant Labour TD for Dublin Mid-West Robert Dowds, who confronted northern Protestant sceptics by saying southern Protestants had ‘moved on’ and in addition, those who voted for him in the South were basically disinterested in his religious label (*Irish Times*, 21 March 2012).

The North was of course a different story. Even with its industries it was never able to make a net contribution to the British Exchequer; rather it has always been subsidised. In December 1922 Unionists moved quickly to opt out of the Treaty clause allowing them to join with the South. Despite Unionist disappointment at what they saw as Home Rule of sorts, their leader James Craig lost no time getting plans drawn up for a new home for his ‘Protestant parliament for a Protestant people’. This was of course Stormont, an establishment I worked in as an Assembly member. This imposing building was more suited to 1930s Germany

rather than the 1930s administration headquarters for a small region that includes ‘the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone’. Every corner and brick of that building epitomises an attitude of unwarranted Unionist superiority, which actually delivered division based on majoritarianism premised on an artificial majority. Ironically, by the time I served in it, Peter Robinson of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was First Minister in the power-sharing Assembly, and Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness was Deputy First Minister. Robinson’s Unionist political predecessors were responsible for misrule, bad governance and grave mistakes in handling the mainly Nationalist/Republican fight-back via the early Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. On the other hand, McGuinness’s milder political predecessors had had no real effect in Stormont, but there were always more radical Nationalist elements willing to fight to bring about Stormont’s downfall, a political strategy that would later be adopted by Martin McGuinness himself.

In addition to ‘central government’ in the North, the police and civil service did not come from and therefore failed to be integrated into, all sections of the community. Policing became one of the most contentious matters. A predominantly Protestant/Unionist RUC backed up by the infamous ‘B’ Specials, which were only disbanded in 1970, were in the main, organs of the state definitely perceived and acting as pro-Unionist and anti-Nationalist/Republican. Some individual officers or their families may be angered by that description because of their individual outlook, but I feel history has already judged the accuracy of this narrative and is seen by many as totally self-evident. It wasn’t until after the 1999 Patten recommendations were mostly implemented and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was established, that the potential for policing change was in place. At the time of writing much has been achieved, but much more needs to be done. Likewise, local government officials and the Civil Service were predominantly Protestant/Unionist, especially in senior positions. People in my generation spoke of the ‘green ceiling’. This essentially evoked the invisible ‘glass ceiling’ that prevented women from getting higher positions in organisations because of their gender: it was the same for many Nationalists and Republicans in the North.

So, whereas the bigger-picture issues in the South calmed and settled over those important first decades after partition, the North became a ‘factory of grievances’ as succinctly captured by Patrick Buckland in his

book; (*The factory of grievances: devolved government in Northern Ireland, 1921-39*, Gill and Macmillan, 1979). However, I believe the effect of partition goes deeper and is more protean than this brief bigger-picture approach has outlined. I will therefore refer to aspects of nation or state building in the South before devoting the next chapters to the North.

Nation or State Building

My reference to nation or state here has political overtones which I want to deal with briefly. Of course there are many Irish people who say that the Irish nation is not complete while Ireland is partitioned. They will view the nation as being more than the 26 counties of the Republic in terms of those people who reside in the North and view themselves as Irish. Others will, justifiably in my opinion, stretch the concept of the nation further to include the diaspora Irish dotted around the world. This is a 'community' that we are now better aware of thanks largely to the efforts of previous Irish President Mary Robinson. However, we still haven't given either the Northern or the diaspora Irish a vote for the office of President as a concrete demonstration of their respective inclusion in that nation. Other Irish in the South are quite at ease with thinking in terms of the Republic as a completed entity and are satisfied with looking upon it as their state which stops at the border. I recall many irksome occasions for Nationalists/Republicans in the North, when hearing Fine Gael representatives from the South, and Progressive Democrats (when they existed) always talking about 'the State' as if intimating exclusion of all those living North of the border.

Despite the occasional attraction of this debate, I will use the terms 'nation' and 'state' interchangeably, as the purpose of this book is not to decide the 'correct' approach definitively but to propose a broader position.

I would propose that, despite all the recent difficulties in the Irish Republic, especially the dreadful 2007 recession, banking scandal and the outing of rogue senior politicians by the March 2012 Mahon Tribunal (and others), the people of the South have had the privilege of charting their own course and building their own state. Taking responsibility for one's own affairs through the decades was much the better proposition than being under rule from England. Their privilege is a far greater one than the position in the North. Unionist political dominance was clearly

wrong, and even in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland, there is only a perfunctory accommodation of power-sharing, leaving an ethno-political divide still causing difficulties. I will expand on this in the next chapter.

I know that readers from the South will have many criticisms of the Irish State in the time after partition. There were the early financial struggles, and poor standards of housing and health provision; the longer wait for modernisation of services and economic approaches; the overriding social control of the Catholic Church buoyed by the piety of thousands of its members only to be let down by extraordinary and depressing clerical sex abuse scandals; abuses of political power including the brown-envelope culture and excessive salaries whereby the Irish Taoiseach was paid more than the US President; the more recent bursting of the 'Celtic Tiger' bubble in the recession and banking crisis; the questions of sovereignty not only in the straightforward context of membership of the EU but also in the punitive context of the 2010 ECB and IMF loan 'deals': the list could be expanded.

However, giving itself the power to make decisions through its own people and political offices; being internationally recognised in its own right; and negotiating and taking positions in its own right, are all complete statements of independence not to be dismissed or belittled, even in difficult times. Even if there have been abuses of power, mistakes or exceptional learning curves, the right to correct and make good the negative and build on the positives, for the people by the people, is a political position to be cherished, protected and continually renewed. Let me try to illustrate with a blend of some personal thoughts from experiences and practical examples.

My family was certainly not one of those northern Protestant stereotypes that never crossed the border. In fact in terms of day trips and holidays we saw quite a bit of Donegal, the east coast counties and Dublin. But despite this, and regretfully, I still think of myself as one who was cut off from life in the South through some of the influences that I have already referred to and those that I will describe as the book progresses. And when I juxtapose my teenage interest in apartheid South Africa, civil rights US and the Vietnam War, it becomes apparent I knew more about far-away continents than the affairs of people and places only forty miles down the road. I am therefore very aware, and will never underestimate,

the power of education and societal influence via community and media; in context of my own upbringing, I look upon such influences as being extremely limiting.

Valerie and I then holidayed in Connemara in 1976 and used the opportunity to visit some of Valerie's family circle in Ardrahan, south Galway. We became very regular visitors to their home while also using many weekends and subsequent summer holidays to visit different areas around Ireland. Through these visits and by increasingly following the Irish media, I began to see the socio-political structure of the country, noting it was a lot more complete when compared with the North as an appendage of London structures. And, of course, my increasing personal knowledge contrasted with the limited coverage northern media gave on the South. I never heard the good stories but when, for example, the 'recession' of the eighties happened and the numerous elections of that era occurred, northern media outlets were keen to carry the negative. The average Unionist, even if interested, would have received a very limited and value-laden diet. When one adds in those who were disinterested and downright hostile, it is clear that Unionist knowledge of the rest of Ireland was so limited it really was a testament to small-town isolationism. This mindset wasn't only limited to the 'ordinary working person', I tragically found that well-educated professionals were similarly conditioned and more interested in Downing Street than Dublin. However, my interest in *all* aspects of the island became the norm for me, and continued to increase when much later, we moved as a family to Dublin. Some of the issues that struck me were as follows.

I was in a position to learn of the decisive moves that Ireland was able to make down through its short history, such as its membership of the League of Nations, then the United Nations and the EEC/EU. The North, always as an appendage of Great Britain, could not make such decisions in its own right. One decision which I feel has given Ireland great credence as a small nation was in adopting a serious peacekeeping role, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. Ireland's reputation is enhanced by its army's service, whereas the British armed role has, in more recent times, led mostly to negative perceptions as one that has followed the US into highly questionable wars. That freedom to decide and carve out one's role in such organisations is for me an incredibly important right which Unionists have lost out on by only being a small part of the UK, hence having a very limited political role.

Readers will identify to some degree with the EU even if working knowledge of it is limited. Membership has had both very practical and symbolic benefits for Ireland. I met Dublin businesspeople who spoke of the importance of the British market but also spoke of ‘leapfrogging’ over Britain to Berlin to do European business. This confidence and pragmatism came from EU membership. For the country to be an equal member with the UK was highly symbolic given the very difficult nature of the relationship between the two nations. But the practical benefits were also immense, and a lot of those benefits came from the freedom the Dublin administration had in working the EU machine.

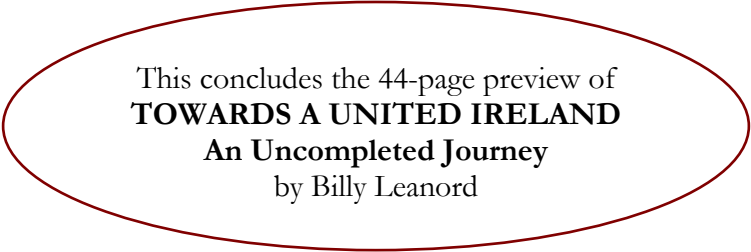
I met many of the Irish ‘team’ in Brussels via a European project I worked in with the University of Ulster, and then as a member of an NI Assembly and Business Sector study tour. The resources devoted to the Irish team and the actual work these people did to maximise benefits for Ireland was very impressive. They were in there networking and influencing to make sure Ireland’s interests were protected. The North was the poor relation and northern businesspeople on the study tour recognised this. When one thinks that although there was ‘peace money’ available, the North did not benefit from the EU in the way the South did over decades. So something it seems was amiss in the Northern Irish approach. The weakness was very apparent: London civil servants looked after England’s interests first and foremost, as the long fight for ‘special status’ for the North displayed. This was the EU categorisation that would render maximum benefits for Northern Ireland, but because the UK as a whole couldn’t get such status it meant that London government priorities did not deliver for the North for a long time. The appropriate London government Minister didn’t even attend important Brussels meetings on fish quotas for example, something that was very important to the North. Nowadays Ministers from Belfast attend, but I have to admit that I feel the Assembly has a very long way to go to maximise influence and benefits within and from the EU. During my time in the Assembly there was a report on improving their ‘EU performance’, but if they are only reporting at this stage they will take a long time playing catch up.

Ireland has, in 2012, taken up the chair of the 56-member-state Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) which is the world’s largest regional security organisation. This is another example of the country punching above its weight as it leads that organisation in its

human rights, conflict prevention and crisis management work in the incredibly important post ‘Arab Spring’ era. It is also another instance of something of standing and repute being open to an independent country.

These are only a few illustrations, and I will refer to others later in the book. I totally appreciate the sovereignty issues associated with the economy, which I believe will be eventually repaired, but suffice to say at the moment that Ireland had the freedom to establish its own positions on many crucial issues in stark contrast with Unionism that wanted to be integral to the UK but has had a very compromised integration. A semi-detached status has not served Unionism well. The central point is that Unionism loses out by being an appendage of London; that loss is about real political freedom and maturity.

I will now move to a more detailed look at the North.



This concludes the 44-page preview of
TOWARDS A UNITED IRELAND
An Uncompleted Journey
by Billy Leonard

Available from all major booksellers in paperback and ebook format

Official Book Launch
June 27th 2012, Buswells Hotel, Dublin.
June 28th, Linenhall Library, Belfast

Visit www.billyleonard.ie for more details



Dr Billy Leonard brings a wealth of personal and political experiences to bear on his subject of a united Ireland. His journey from unionism, including a period in the part-time Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve, to republicanism, including his time as an elected representative, help make this a unique book. The author lifts the topic away from the mere aspirational call to outlining the political work that needs to be done. It is constantly punctuated with personal recollections and strong recommendations. Whatever your opinion on Irish unity this book makes a major contribution.

This is a timely and thought provoking book at an important time in the history of Ireland. The author's own unique perspective and background adds greatly to its insights.

Niall O'Dowd, founder and editor of the Irish Voice and founder of IrishCentral.com., extensively involved with President Bill Clinton in the Irish peace process.



You don't have to agree with Billy Leonard's detailed road-map of the way to a united Ireland, but it's impossible not to admire the practicality and detail of his analysis. The book's bonus is the behind-the-scenes glimpses we get of this remarkable man's journey from RUC police reservist to Sinn Féin MLA. Let's hope others interested in - or opposed to - national reunification respond to his analysis with similar non-partisan intelligence.

Jude Collins, Writer & Broadcaster

The author believes, as many people do, that we must ratify an entirely new constitution which will address adequately the needs and feelings of the Irish people as a whole. Consequently it is now essential that we move away from the old sterile debate and build the bridges that we must cross. Billy Leonard's book is therefore a must read.

John Robb, Founding Member of the New Ireland Movement (1972) and member of Seanad Éireann 1982-1989.



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