IBIS CONFERENCE

A major conference on the theme *Old structures, new beliefs: religion, community and politics in contemporary Ireland* was organised by the Institute with the support of Diageo Ireland. The academic convenor was Dr Claire Mitchell, Guin-ness Newman Scholar in British-Irish Studies. The conference took place on 15 May 2003 in the University Industry Centre, UCD, and brought together eight speakers and an audience of about 55, drawn from the public service, the diplomatic corps, voluntary and other bodies, and the academic community.

The proceedings were divided into four sessions. Two papers were presented at each. Presentations were structured to allow time for discussion initiated by a pre-designated discussant.

**Protestantism and the union**

The first session was chaired by Rev Brian Kennaway, former convenor, Education Committee, Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, with Jennifer Todd, UCD, as discussant.

The session opened with a paper by Dominic Bryan of Queen’s University Belfast, who suggested that there was strong evidence that the Orange Order is in rapid decline. He argued that the Orange Institution has failed to adapt to social, political and economic changes.

The second paper, by John Brewer, also of Queen’s University Belfast, explored current trends in belief and practice in Ulster Protestantism. He concluded that there are strong elements of continuity and change, but argued that Protestant religiosity has not altered to the point that it constitutes secu-
larisation, nor are trends in religiosity weakening ethno-national identities in Northern Ireland.

**Catholicism and the nation**

The second session was chaired by Tom Inglis, UCD, with Rev Tim Bartlett, St Mary’s University College, Belfast, as discussant.

This session opened with a paper by Claire Mitchell, UCD, who drew attention to a common misconception that religion in Northern Ireland is politically important only for Protestants, whereas for Catholics the causes of conflict are social, economic and political. Her paper challenged the assumption of the purely social significance of Catholicism and urged re-examination of how relationships between religion and politics are conceived and measured for this group.

Mary Harris, National University of Ireland, Galway, examined nationalist discourse in nineteenth-century Ireland, which, she argued drew on both religious and political grievances. After independence, the Church’s involvement in formal politics was no longer necessary, but successive governments promoted Catholic values and relied on the Church to address most social problems. The more recent challenges to the Catholic world-view were not, she argued, incompatible with an ongoing interest in religion.

**Alternative formulations of religion and politics**

The third session was chaired by Dr Kenneth Milne, historiographer of the Church of Ireland, with Dr Geraldine Smyth, Irish School of Ecumenics, as discussant.

The first paper, by Gladys Ganiel, UCD, began by noting that historically the politics of dissent have been associated with Presbyterian participation in the United Irish movement. She examined the reasons why the United Irish and Labour movements failed to transcend sectarianism, and concluded with an analysis of the potential of the peace movement to do so.

The second paper, by Rev Terence McCaughey, Trinity College Dublin, noted that Irish Christianity, like much of Christianity in the Northwest, has been losing adherents at an alarming rate and is seeking popularity and “relevance”. Religion in various forms first promoted the idea of the one-ness of humankind, and he argued for the peculiar obligation of the faith communities to discuss the full implications of this.

**The future of religion and politics in Ireland**

The last session was chaired by John Coakley, Director of the Institute for British-Irish Studies, UCD, with Stephen Mennell, UCD, as discussant.

A paper by Bernadette Hayes, Queen’s University Belfast, and Ian McAllister, Australian National University, began by noting that the Northern Ireland conflict has traditionally been characterised as a sectarian conflict between two monolithic religious communities. Using the 2001 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, they challenged this conventional wisdom, identifying a small but significant group of religiously unattached people who are more open to endorsing a political accommodation between the two opposing constitutional positions.

Finally, Alice Feldman, UCD, explored the challenges posed by the ethnic diversification of contemporary Irish society for conventional issues of religion, community and politics. She discussed the nature of religious identity and its relationship with ethnicity within broader cultural and political fields, and their implications for the “new” (multicultural) Ireland.

**LECTURE SERIES**

A further lecture in the series organised in association with Cooperation Ireland took place on 12 December 2002, and focused on the Irish government and the peace process. It was chaired by Jennifer Todd, UCD, and the speakers were Albert Reynolds, former Taoiseach, and Kevin Rafter, RTÉ.

Kevin Rafter provided an introduction to the topic by exploring the role Albert Reynolds played as Taoiseach during the peace process. He identified a number of factors that had been helpful, including Mr Reynolds’s commitment to resolving the issue, his role in obtaining a US visa for Gerry Adams, and the fruitful consequences of his contacts with the republican movement. He also drew attention to the central role of Fr Alex Reid as an intermediary linking the Dublin government with the republican leadership.

Albert Reynolds reflected on his time in office. On coming into office, he had seen several factors that were conducive to progress, including a growing willingness in the republican movement to try a new strategy, the Hume-Adams talks, and a positive relationship with John Major and Bill Clinton.

Mr Reynolds was convinced that a ceasefire was a prerequisite to talks, and he helped to persuade the republican movement of the value of this by means of confidence building measures, including an end to the broadcasting ban on Sinn Féin and the issue of prisoners. These resulted ultimately in
the IRA ceasefire on August 31 and the loyalist paramilitary ceasefire six weeks later.

The former taoiseach underlined his belief in the peace process and in the agreement, stressing the strong democratic mandate it had received in the referenda, but he pointed out that its advantages had not been sold vigorously in all quarters. He looked forward with some optimism to the agreement’s successful implementation.

**IBIS NEWS**

**New working papers**

The IBIS pre-publication working paper series is based on work in progress. Individual papers are available free of charge from IBIS (though a small charge applies to orders of several copies). All but the last of these are based on the proceedings of the conference “Renovation or Revolution? New territorial politics in Ireland and the United Kingdom.” organised by the Institute in April 2002. The most recent additions are:

23. John Osmond, Nation building: implementing devolution in the United Kingdom—the Welsh experience

This paper explores the Welsh experience of devolution through contrasting it with the Scottish experience. It discusses the role of a number of key characters and agencies in redefining the nature of the National Assembly. The author also tracks the development of a new civic culture in Wales, and concludes by examining the broader impact of the Welsh experience of devolution on territorial politics within the British Isles, and Welsh engagement with a network of European regions.

24. David McCrone, Marking the card: The Scottish Parliament at 1000 days

This paper assesses the achievements and prospects of the Scottish parliament halfway through its first term. The paper reviews the outcomes of the parliament in the context of people’s expectations, and argues, using recent surveys, that while home rule has become the prevailing consensus in contemporary Scotland, people are by no means averse to a parliament with extended powers and responsibilities.

25. Arthur Aughey, Territory and politics in Ireland and Great Britain after devolution

Simon Partridge, Implications of devolution for England

Arthur Aughey’s paper focuses primarily on the experience of devolution in the United Kingdom, pointing to the political need to achieve a sense of cohesion, in order to secure the existence of a British identity. Simon Partridge outlines devolutionary moves within England itself, concluding that a quasi federal England could fit quite well into a broadened British-Irish Council.

26. Jennifer Todd, The changing structure of conflict in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement

This paper argues that until the early twenty-first century the Northern Ireland conflict retained an unstable triangular form, where the British state was inextricably imbricated in a communal conflict. By its very structures and modes of statecraft it reproduced the conflict which, by its policies, it attempted to ameliorate and manage. The Good Friday agreement changed all that. It did not resolve the conflict, although it began to create the conditions whereby this might be possible. In effect, the conflict moved from an unstable triangular to a stable symmetrical form of conflict management. Although the provisions of the agreement appeared to mark radical change, aspects of the older form of conflict management returned in its implementation, suggesting that the triangular structure of conflict is not yet gone. Rather than a move towards stable binationalism, we may be seeing an uneven move towards an unstable multi-variable form of conflict, where the communities compete for alliances and resources in a context of a multiplicity of power centres. In this respect globalisation and the changes in forms of territorial management in the archipelago may be less conducive to stability in Northern Ireland than was initially hoped.

27. Brigid Laffan, Ireland, Britain, Northern Ireland and the European dimension

This paper analyses the European dimension of British-Irish relations and the EU’s role in altering the environment within which relations between these islands are played out. The paper examines relations between the two states in the context of EU membership and proceeds to an analysis of the evolution of an EU role under four headings: the EU as an arena, EU policies and reports, the EU as a model and the EU in Northern Ireland. The paper then assesses the EU dimension of the Good Friday Agreement in all three strands and finishes with a brief analysis of the longer-term contribution of the EU.

28. Claire Mitchell, Is religion in Northern Ireland politically significant?

Reducing religion to theological fundamentalism has stifled the debate about its political significance in Northern Ireland. This paper develops an integrated theoretical conception of religion as the key to illuminating the multi-dimensional role it plays in social relationships. Based on analysis of interviews conducted in 2000, it finds four main ways in which religion is socially and politically significant in Northern Ireland—as a communal marker, as a community-builder, as ideology and as theology. These roles differ amongst believers and non-believers, churchgoers and non-churchgoers and amongst Catholics and Protestants. Through exploration of religion as a fluid dimension of personal and group identity, the paper concludes that religion does not simply mark out the communal boundary, but often gives it meaning as well.
IBIS WEB SITE

The Institute’s web site contains an extensive links page, which continues to be a significant resource for anyone working in the field of British-Irish political and constitutional research. Links fall into six main categories:

- Official information
- Political activism
- Education
- Irish political documents
- Guide to periodicals
- Miscellaneous

The current and back issues of the IBIS Newsletter are also available on the website.

Consult the site at: www.ucd.ie/~ibis.

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