REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM

—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE
Alban Maginness, MLA

—AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE
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ABSTRACTS

REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM—
A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The idea of "northern" nationalism is a questionable one, since the nationalist tradition within Northern Ireland sees itself in an island-wide context. From its origins in the civil rights movement, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) has grown to become the predominant voice of nationalism within Northern Ireland. In many respects, the Good Friday agreement represented the culmination of the SDLP's efforts, representing a fair and imaginative attempt to redefine relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between the two islands. It also reflects a strong European dimension, with the European Community serving both as ally and model. There are several indications that the future for the agreement is bright, with deepening European integration, economic development and vigorous efforts to combat sectarianism playing a major role; but none of these factors can be taken for granted, and the prospect of a difficult path ahead must not be discounted.

REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM—
AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, the academic study of northern nationalism has been largely neglected, partly because—unlike unionism—it is seen as unexceptional. Dating organisationally from the constitutional nationalist movement of the early decades of the twentieth century and reorganised as the SDLP after the civil rights movement of 1968-69, its ideology has evolved from single-issue anti-partitionism to a much more subtle blend of policy positions that is difficult to categorise. In terms of other kinds of nationalist movements, it may be seen as combining elements of liberal nationalism, regionalism and civic republicanism—an ideology entirely compatible with the Good Friday agreement of 1998. This new formulation offers a fresh perspective on relations within the British Isles, but especially within Europe and within a new Ireland, though its capacity to protect the SDLP against the electoral challenge from Sinn Féin is as yet unclear.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alban Maginness, MLA, has been a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly since 1998. He was elected to Belfast City Council in 1985, and served as Lord Mayor in 1997-98. He was chairman of the SDLP, 1985-91, a member of the SDLP delegation at the Brooke and Mayhew talks (1991), of the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation (1994-95) and of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue (1996).

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REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM—
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Alban Maginness

I

If the SDLP, and John Hume in particular, have any historical legacy, it is in redefining Irish nationalism. I deliberately do not say Northern nationalism, as I believe the SDLP has radically changed the thinking of the mainstream political parties in the South, as well as the broad mass of constitutional nationalist thinking in the North and in the South. Not only do I make that wider claim, but I also further claim that the SDLP has radically redefined the thinking of physical force nationalism / republicanism as well.

II

The SDLP was an outworking of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. The civil rights movement was a non-violent reaction to the grave social and economic injustice and inequalities visited upon the Catholic community since partition. It arose out of a sense of frustration within the Catholic community at their plight at the hands of a seemingly all-powerful and monolithic Unionist Party hegemony. Equally frustrating was the ineffectual political opposition of the moribund so called Nationalist Party which was certainly not a party and probably not very nationalist either. Sporadic republican violent campaigns had been equally ineffectual and were at that time a discredited form of opposition.

The very success of the civil rights movement in undermining unionist rule was a lesson in itself and without the civil rights agitation Stormont would surely have continued to survive. The key to its success was the fact that the agitation was on the basis of accepting the fact that Northern Ireland existed and that the campaign was about the internal rights of Catholic citizens within Northern Ireland. The National Question was therefore not at issue and to reintroduce that Question, as the Provisional campaign certainly went on to do, was to undermine and through abhorrent and counter productive paramilitary violence, ultimately subverted the civil rights movement. Physical force republicanism, while paying lip service to the civil rights campaign, saw it simply as a way of creating political unrest through which they could reintroduce the National Question. They saw a successful civil rights movement as being antipathetic to their tradition aim of a united Ireland on a territorial basis.

The reality was that the prevailing political outlook within the Catholic community was a gross sense of injustice, a desire for equality and a rising tide of political and economic expectation among a well-educated young Catholic community. National-

ism was a secondary consideration, a long term aspiration, and the prevailing traditional view that a united Ireland would ultimately solve all problems was also beginning to become a discredited notion, if only because people were not prepared to wait for some notional united Ireland to come at some indeterminate date in the future.

From the very beginning, although the SDLP was an anti-partitionist party, its emphasis was on eradicating injustice and creating equality within Northern Ireland. Its constitution redefined anti-partitionism on the basis of unity of the Irish people not the unity of Irish territory. From the very beginning the consent principle became the founding principle upon which in SDLP eyes, constitutional change could take place in the future. Its objective was "to promote cooperation, friendship and understanding between North and South with the view to the eventual reunification of Ireland through the consent of the majority of the people in the North and in the South."

But this was not merely theorising on the part of the SDLP, as it informed its basic thinking and consequent political action. The party also received popular approval in successive elections from the Catholic community, which is important in terms of reshaping the political consciousness of that community. This basic outlook orientated the party towards thinking creatively about alternative, non-traditional methods of addressing the problem of a divided community in Northern Ireland and by extension the problem of a divided people in Ireland. Out of this arose the guiding principle of partnership, which has been central to the political thinking of the party through the past three decades. This principle has shaped and informed the political thinking and policies of the party.

III

This, in my view, has culminated in the Good Friday agreement, which I believe is the ultimate achievement of the SDLP. The agreement is a roll call of SDLP demands and proposals. Its very structures shadow and reflect the analysis of the party for many years. Its insistence that all the pertinent relationships be addressed together, in an interlocking fashion, so that the complexity of the problem can be fully explored and addressed was SDLP dogma. The three strands around which the pre-agreement talks centred—the Catholic-Protestant or nationalist-unionist relationship within Northern Ireland, the North-South relationship, and the British-Irish relationship—were all part of SDLP thinking. The basic institutions of the agreement reflect the political need to tackle these relationships: the Northern Ireland Assembly and power sharing Executive; the North/South implementation bodies and the North/South Ministerial Council, and the British-Irish Council.

We now have the opportunity and challenge of the present. We have constructed the Good Friday agreement, which seeks to repair and heal the fractured relationships between nationalists and unionists in Ireland both within the North and between North and South, and quite as important, between Ireland and Britain. This latter relationship will be addressed within the British-Irish Council, which in my

view, despite being largely deliberative, has a significant role to play in the building of a new, warm and dynamic relationship between our two islands. We share many things in common: a common history, a common geography, a common weather and even the English language, which is the best export that the British gave to the Irish.

The agreement has as its centrepiece a formal political recognition by all the participating parties and the governments that any constitutional change in the status of Northern Ireland will be by the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. This recognition has been endorsed by the political representatives of physical force republicans.

There would have been no successful European Union without the dynamic core relationship between Germany and France begun by Adenauer and de Gaulle and refined by Mitterand and Kohl. That relationship is at the heart of Europe, and has contributed enormously to peace in post War Europe.

We can also construct a similar relationship that can repair the damage of history and heal the wounds that have festered for too long between our two neighbouring islands—a relationship based on friendship instead of hostility, a relationship based on trust instead of fear, a relationship based on partnership not rivalry, and a relationship based on equality not on superiority. This is a new multidimensional relationship centred on people, not territory, or the outmoded concept of sovereignty, rooted in the nineteenth century, that has blighted political thinking in twentieth century.

We now should realise that we live in a world in which sovereignty is pooled among and sometimes between nations. Sovereignty is shared within the European Union, within NATO, within the context of the International Convention on Human Rights, within other international agreements, including provisions to prosecute War Crimes extra-territorially.

Parallel with those developments is the rapidly increasing interdependence and inter-relationship amongst the world economies. It is therefore within that wider context that one should see the development of institutions within the Good Friday agreement.

As a consequence, Northern Ireland does not remain wholly within the control of Britain, nor does she entirely escape the control of Britain, but rather develops a new and imaginative relationship simultaneously with both Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

The ultimate aim of the agreement is to achieve one overall goal—the reconciliation of the people of Ireland and the people of Ireland and Britain. It is people based, not land based. It does not seek to join territory, or reinforce territory, but to create a partnership within Northern Ireland between nationalists and unionists in which trust can be built through working together and to create a partnership between the people of North and South, also through working together. In that way trust can be built

on many fronts and will allow a genuine and sustained reconciliation to take place. What the people will determine in future will be entirely up to themselves in a free and democratic manner. Their choice probably will not conform to any of our traditional models.

IV

Our task now is to implement the agreement fully and faithfully and in a spirit of reconciliation. To simply create a system of mere coexistence, a cold unfriendly peace, would be wasteful. One recognises, given the depth of our recent and previous history, that no instant remedy will wipe away the damage done over the centuries. The healing process must begin—and begin now. Old prejudices and hatreds will then progressively dissolve. What is required is the Mandela factor a real and vibrant spirit of reconciliation. I fear, though, that there is no one at present big enough or imaginative enough to act as a Mandela in Northern Ireland.

Wherefore the agreement, now? There are a number of very positive factors that I believe will assist and strengthen the agreement. These are as follows.

1. The Human Rights Act 1999: this will radically affect our jurisprudence, building a rights-based legal culture and thus putting to rest the security type legal culture that we have endured for so long

2. The dynamism of the southern economy and its spill-over effect on Northern Ireland

3. The European Union and its development as a larger political and economic union

4. The prospect that Britain will join the Euro currency zone

5. The regeneration of the economy of Northern Ireland

6. The maintenance of peace following the end of large-scale paramilitary violence

7. The creation of a new policing service that will attract widespread cross community support

8. The development of non-sectarian cross community politics on a limited range of issues

9. The existence of statutory Assembly committees alongside the political executive and individual ministers.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledge that a number of negative factors are at work, some of them running counter to the positive scenarios outlined above.

1. The fragmentation of loyalism and of constitutional unionism, resulting in a community where strong and authoritative leadership is lacking

2. Constant political tension, whether produced by accident or design; though less damaging than paramilitary violence, this can lead to a state of constant crisis, and possibly to the rejection in practice of the consent principle by Sinn Fein

3. The possibility that Britain will *not* join the Euro currency zone

4. The failure of the regeneration of the Northern Ireland economy

5. A deterioration of the southern economy

6. A failure to create an acceptable policing service in Northern Ireland.

Hopefully, in the near future, a truly post-nationalist European Ireland will emerge to play its part in the world. For the present, implementing the Good Friday agreement is our mandated duty and our most onerous and demanding challenge.

REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM:
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INTRODUCTION: ACADEMIC RESEARCH
ON NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland has been the subject of very little intellectual analysis. If one compares recent writings on unionism, a burgeoning academic field where the character of unionism and distinctions within it are argued out in sophisticated and comparative manner, northern nationalism has had very little attention.

There are exceptions, particularly in the detailed analyses of nationalist attitudes and preferences as given in surveys and opinion polls. These works have rightly pointed to the paradoxes associated with northern nationalism.

- First, not all northern nationalist voters want a united Ireland (only two thirds of SDLP supporters in a recent 1998 survey favoured a united Ireland and this figure is consistent with the trend over time).

- Second, northern nationalist opinion is fluctuating, conditional, varying with the situation and perceived opportunities. Most nationalists favour a united Ireland as a long term aspiration; the numbers reduce (to about two thirds) when it is posed as a realistic middle- or short-term option, and reduce further (down to a quarter) when it is posed as an immediate possibility. However this also varies with the political situation: in an important *Fortnight* poll carried out in 1988, a quarter of Catholics polled reported fluctuation in their political views and sympathies after Gibraltar killings, the Stalker and Sampson reports and the Enniskillen bombing.

- Third, strong Irish nationalist identifiers who also want a united Ireland have steadily increased in numbers over the last decade.

But there is little or no explanation of the significance of this rich data. Academic writing has fallen short in the theorisation of the constitution of a nationalist/Catholic community in Northern Ireland and of its political options. In effect we have here a group thrust into existence (as northern Catholics and northern nationalists) by partition, against their will in a situation not of their choosing, whose interests begin to be articulated only as new options are opened and a level of self-determination becomes possible, and whose views are therefore fluid, open-ended, changeable, and hard to catch in surveys. But rather than seeking to develop the implications of this—and there are plenty of comparative examples to explore—the academic literature is silent.

Why is so little academic attention paid to northern nationalism? I can suggest four reasons for this, at least three of them bad ones.

- The first (bad) reason is that northern nationalists, and John Hume in particular, are very articulate. They don't need commentators. This is a bad reason because it ignores the ambiguities and slippages in northern nationalist discourse which have given rise to radically conflicting interpretations both among the public (peacemaker versus devious nationalist) and among intellectuals.

- The second (bad) reason is commonly expressed here in the Republic. It is said that northern nationalism is now so close to southern nationalism that we don't need an analysis of it. This is a bad reason both in its conflation of northern and southern nationalism (as we will see, they are quite distinct in ideological structure) and in its complacency: precisely because the nationalisms are close we in the South need the distantiation that intellectual typologies can give.

- The third reason, this time not all bad, is pragmatic. The dramatic success story of the new constitutional nationalism in the North, from the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985 to the Good Friday agreement of 1998, has made intellectual commentary seem superfluous. It was the perceived defeat of unionism in the Anglo-Irish agreement which prompted the emergence of a new generation of unionist intellectuals: the perceived success of nationalism has prompted intellectuals on the other side to work on other pressing issues. Indeed the SDLP's impatience with what they call "theology", i.e. absolute clarity on issues of sovereignty, the national question etc, has also encouraged other intellectual priorities. But, now that the Good Friday agreement is achieved, it may be that this reason has lost its force. I will argue that now, for nationalists in Northern Ireland, the successful ideology promulgated by John Hume no longer gives the necessary direction or guidance about the choices that are generated in the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. Maybe now theology becomes practically necessary.

- The fourth (bad) reason for ignoring the intellectual content of northern nationalism has to do with the cultural limitations of the South (where it is easy to get impatient with it) and of Britain (where it is easy to get bored by it). In neither state is the northern nationalist political agenda *their* agenda, nor northern nationalist priorities their priorities. In the South, the closeness yet separation in respect of northern nationalists, the commonality yet difference has led to mutual disappointment and hurt as each learns more about the other and finds their immediate expectations confounded. It should be said, though, that this is a very bad reason for not studying northern nationalism. Precisely such cultural tensions and distantiations are open to intellectual analysis which can throw new light not just on northern nationalism but on aspects of the mainstream Irish-British agenda.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT:
TRADITIONAL (CLASSIC) NATIONALISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

If political scientists and sociologists have been slow to study northern nationalists, historians have begun the task of giving the history of the constitution of the northern Catholic and nationalist community.

It is, first, a story of diversity: Eamonn Phoenix has shown the diversity by locality—Catholics in the border counties were not distinct from their southern neighbours, although the strength of Sinn Féin, and within this of pro- and anti- Treaty factions, varied from region to region. Catholics in Belfast were politically distinct, both in the continuing strength of Joe Devlin's Redmondite organisation, and, more profoundly, in their reaction to their situation as a minority in a British provincial industrial city. Even within the Catholic church, as Mary Harris demonstrates, the whole range of nationalist political attitudes (from old Irish Parliamentary Party to anti-Treaty Sinn Féin) existed in the hierarchy itself in the decades surrounding partition. This diverse population, with little in common other than being the Irish Catholics left over in Northern Ireland after the 1921 settlement, was thrust into community organisation—initially largely church centred—and community identity and ideology.

The nationalist party that emerged by the late 1920s, closely linked to parish organisation, accepted the Irish nationalist ideology of the pre-partition period. This classic nationalism took as its premise the primary existence of the Irish nation and its right to self-determination and sovereign statehood. This nation was sundered and mutilated (as Cahir Healy put it) by partition which produced an unnatural state—the tearing of a branch off the parent tree (in TJ Campbell's words). The primary objective was the reunification of Ireland as an independent state. To this, northern nationalists added a righteous anger not just at partition but at the multiple injustices suffered by northern Catholics under unionist rule, from discrimination in work and housing allocation, to intimidation and murder, to cultural humiliation and slights. This prioritising of principles of justice was what came to distinguish northern from southern nationalism after 1920. A united Ireland was desired as much as a remedy for injustice as on traditional nationalist grounds, with the injustice of the northern state and the national injustice of partition dovetailing in nationalist rhetoric. The principles of nationalism and justice were not clearly distinguished, nor were the potential tensions between them acknowledged. These did not need to be acknowledged, for there was little prospect of reform of the state, so that criticising injustice was criticising the unionist state. In addition, the content of nationalism was left ambivalent—political nationalism was transmuted into cultural nationalism (a contentment with being Irish) as uniting Ireland faded as a real possibility, only to re-emerge periodically in surges of voting support for republican candidates.

Republican ideology was different from nationalist ideology in that it never forgot the aim of political separatism. But in other respects, the ideologies were formally similar. Republicans, as one 1950s activist put it, were extreme, militant nationalists. Republicans in this period (1920-1960) differed from nationalists socially—in mores, family connections, social networks, existential attitudes—but not ideologi-

cally. All of this was to change in the decades following the civil rights movement of 1968-69.

REDEFINING NORTHERN NATIONALISM

Among its many radical effects, the civil rights movement provoked a major ideological crisis in northern nationalism. For the first time since the foundation of the state, the choice between justice and nationalism was starkly posed; the community mobilised for justice (not unity) and in so doing helped bring down the Stormont regime. As an unintended consequence, however, the civil rights movement and the conflict that surrounded it reinvigorated nationalist feeling.

That nationalist feeling required a different ideological form. In the 1970s, real opportunities were opening for northern nationalists to influence policy making, first in Faulkner's cabinet, next under direct rule and in the Sunningdale power-sharing executive. The situation was fluid and demanded a new pragmatism and realistic interim goals. The SDLP, formed in August 1970, initially as an alliance of ex civil rights politicians, began to work out such an approach—power sharing, Irish dimension, unity by consent. But it was also a situation where the realities of communal power were brutally apparent. When Catholics mobilised, Stormont was eventually brought down four years later; when Protestants mobilised, Sunningdale was brought down in 14 days. The questions which had disabled nationalism from the time of partition were posed and reposed: cooperation with or antagonism towards unionists and the British? A strong nationalism (which would provoke unionists and bring no immediate gains) or a moderate reformism (which was likely to be equally ineffective)?

The answer, brilliantly conceptualised by John Hume, was to change the question and Europeanise the problem. Hume's strategy and ideology crystallised after the fall of Sunningdale. He changed the battlefield, from Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom to the European Union, the island of Ireland and the US connection. He changed the question, from nationalism or reform, by formulating principles of legitimacy which demanded nationalism and reform. This became the dominant ideology of the SDLP and served as an ideological mode of distinction from the still classic nationalism typical of republicanism in the 1970s and 1980s and much of the 1990s.

The structure of Hume's ideology is two-levelled. The first principles are general contemporary principles of legitimacy, brought from EU and US principles, bypassing the British political tradition. At the second level, in application of these principles to the Northern Irish and Irish context, nationalist assumptions re-enter.

At the level of first principle, Hume decisively rejected the classic nationalist model of a world of nation states and with it the classic nationalist view that nation and state should coincide. This was irrelevant in an age of European integration and international linkages. Instead he emphasised the multiple and interconnected loci in which interaction takes place. He prioritised the principle of agreement: a legitimate

political order must be founded on agreement on the mode of government, and self-determination is precisely the process of reaching such agreement. Agreement is reached through dialogue, which in turn requires institutions which ensure equality and protection of basic rights. Rights are understood in a broad sense, to include communal and cultural rights, while oppositional notions of identity and culture are rejected: diversity is to be accommodated, and difference is seen as a source of strength, not weakness.

In applying these principles to the conflict in Northern Ireland, Hume brings back nationalist assumptions. The core—although not the exclusive—identity for one community and tradition in Northern Ireland is an Irish national identity. This national identity requires institutional recognition and respect: this requires a movement beyond Northern Ireland to a strong Irish dimension and role for the Irish state in Northern Ireland. The British state in the past contributed to the conflict by giving in to Protestant resistance to reform: it must now stand up to this resistance. At the same time, the island of Ireland is prioritised as a locus of democratic agreement which will become possible where basic rights are assured and the traditions engage in dialogue from an equal standpoint. Such agreement on the island as a whole, ratified by simultaneous referenda in both parts of Ireland: this is what Irish self-determination means today. Irish nationalism will be satisfied by this and it is a matter for further generations—once political antagonisms are overcome—to decide for themselves where future political boundaries are to lie. This is a form of nationalism which recognises the equal rights of other nationalisms, which is framed within an overarching liberal-pluralist set of principles, and which—once its minimum conditions are met—sees future change as evolutionary, gradualist and consensual.

Hume's central ideological achievement was to distinguish the two levels of ideology in his political discourse and rhetoric. Hume's nationalism exists only at the second level, and it is a matter of judgement and emphasis—emphasis on the political salience of some (national) aspects of identity over others (regional, local), and of some spatial units (the island of Ireland) over others. The emphasis can shift in the light of dialogue with unionists, of changing attitudes in the population, of emerging political possibilities. It can encompass the variety of views within the SDLP, from regionalists content with a reformed Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, to strong nationalists. And through its first principles, it can bypass the critiques of nationalism posed within unionism and until the recent period at least, within British political culture.

This ideology has been immensely flexible and successful politically. It has cohered closely with developments in southern nationalism: the prioritising of agreement on the island, the principle of consent, the retention of national interest in Northern Ireland while rejecting territorial claim over it, the attempt to attain a level of Irish state influence and all-Ireland integration much less than full state sovereignty and independence. There are also practical parallels: for example the question of the origin of the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4—whether in Hume's suggestion or in Garret FitzGerald's—can be debated but not decided. There are, however, differences.

Southern nationalism, even in its Fine Gael form, is not two-levelled. Its nationalism is taken for granted; it is made coherent with other nationalisms, opened to world and contemporary trends, but with these provisos it is upfront. Unlike northern nationalists, the Irish state is not arguing from a position where its right to nationalism is itself challenged. The effect is a quite different structure of ideology North and South, even if it dovetails on policies and practical judgements.

COMPARATIVE CATEGORISATION: THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

How is this ideology to be categorised in comparative terms? Let me take five possible categorisations:

- Classic nationalism: This is a principle of political legitimacy which holds that nation and state should coincide and that the nation should determine its form of rule.

- Liberal nationalism: Nations have rights, but these rights can be satisfied by a level of political autonomy and institutionalisation of national culture which falls short of state sovereignty. In the case of conflicting national rights in one territory, they must be so satisfied.

- Pluralism: This is a principle which upholds communal and cultural rights and freedoms. It holds that—as a prerequisite of political equality within a state—each relevant group should have the right to some institutionalisation of its culture in the public sphere.

- Regionalism: This involves a principle of political autonomy for regions—including autonomy in some international relations—coexisting with continued state sovereignty. It is sometimes subsumed under the principle of subsidiarity, which involves multiple levels of governance with each set of issues being assigned to the lowest possible level consistent with effective governance.

- Civic republicanism: The constitution by agreement of a new political order defines equality of rights and citizenship and access to the public sphere within that order; it constitutes a civic nationality defined politically rather than ethnically. Once this new political order is constituted, ethnic-national identities become a private cultural rather than public political matter, and are properly irrelevant to political decisions and organisation.

How should the new northern nationalism be categorised? It is certainly not classic nationalism. There no assumption that state and nation should coincide, indeed this premise is denied. National self-determination is redefined and based on agreement. Nor, despite some commonality of premises, is it pluralism, which does not prioritise ethno-national over other groups. Moreover, pluralism takes effect within given state boundaries, rather than between states. In the new nationalism, unlike pluralism, there is a clear territorial dimension whereby the institutionalisation of Irish identity is assumed to require linkages with the southern state.

On the other hand, it shares many characteristics with liberal nationalism. It argues for institutionalisation of national culture and a level of political autonomy for the nation that falls short of independent statehood, while according equal rights to other nations. It prioritises the rights of the nation as a prerequisite for state legitimacy and nationalist consent. Many within the SDLP are such liberal nationalists. They wish to lessen the significance and substance of British sovereignty in order to increase the linkages with the Irish state, and ease an future transition to Irish sovereignty (in the event of majority wish). In this sense the Good Friday agreement is taken as initiating a process of change rather than a final settlement.

Equally, however, it can be interpreted as a regionalism, emphasising the autonomy and multiple linkages of Northern Ireland, and deprioritising the issue of state sovereignty, which, on Hume's account, is becoming decreasingly important in this European and global age. On this account, Northern Ireland can and should retain and expand its linkages with the South, without thus endangering either its own autonomy (expressed through the new Assembly) or lessening its linkages within Great Britain, the British Isles and Europe. Some within the SDLP are regionalists who wish to add a level of political autonomy and linkages to existing British sovereignty. These new levels may develop and expand, but British sovereignty remains unchanged, if in practice inapplicable to the new levels of politics.

It could, on the other hand, be a form of republicanism. Hume has consistently pointed out that once the principle of self-determination by agreement is satisfied by simultaneous referenda in both parts of the island, a legitimate political entity is constituted and the old nationalist territorial claim no longer holds. At this stage the "healing process", "shedding sweat rather than blood", begins. Has this stage been reached with the ratification of the Good Friday agreement in referenda in both parts of Ireland? Has it constituted a new sort of republican political entity (with agreed linkages to Britain and Ireland) within which equality of citizenship prevails, which can become the focus of a civic nationalism? There are those in the SDLP who believe so, seeing the Good Friday agreement as having replaced British sovereignty with the sovereignty of the people of Ireland, by agreement of its two parts. This is consistent with continuing British rule, with a devolved assembly and North-South and East-West linkages: ultimate authority, however, rests with the agreement of the people of Ireland. As distinct from liberal nationalists, these republicans deem inappropriate further nationalist assertion within the institutions of the Good Friday agreement: rather the issue is to work the institutions as so agreed, without extraneous nationalist aims.

The answer may be, of course, that the new northern nationalism has combined liberal nationalism, regionalism and republicanism all at once, without distinction or concern for possible tensions between them, just as the old northern nationalism combined classic nationalism and a concern for justice. In the earlier case, the interim goals were the same and no immediate contradictions arose. Similarly, in the recent period, regionalism and liberal nationalism converged, because greater regional autonomy for Northern Ireland within the EU also promised to strengthen the liberal nationalist agenda, loosening the strength of Northern Ireland's integration

into Britain and allowing a greater balance between Irish and British linkages. Liberal nationalists and regionalists as well as republicans could emphasise the need for agreement, knowing well that agreement would be possible only with quite radical changes from the status quo and greater North-South linkages. The immediate goals of regionalists, liberal nationalists and civic republicans in a Northern Irish context therefore converged: they included changing the public culture to allow greater linkages with the South and a real level of political equality within Northern Ireland, in the light of which nationalists and unionists alike could consent to a political settlement. The prioritisation of aims might vary—some prioritised the Northern Ireland Assembly and with it a level of political autonomy for Northern Ireland, some the North-South linkages, some multiple linkages both North South and East West and European, and some agreement in a situation of political and cultural equality—but the Good Friday agreement promised to go some of the way to each of the goals. The new nationalism could, therefore, remain at once liberal nationalist, regionalist and civic republican, without needing to make clear distinctions between these aims and goals. Priorities, direction and long term future strategy might differ, but for the present there were real rhetorical and political benefits of keeping all options open—it maximised both external allies and internal support.

Unionists, however, saw this as a deeply problematic conflation of aims. They might possibly accept the regionalist version of North South linkages, but not the liberal nationalist version. They might possibly be open to being wooed by the civic republican version of a new Northern Ireland, but not by a liberal nationalist vision of increasing integration with the South until all-Irish integration was at least as strong as that between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Once again, they thought, non-nationalist language was being used to cover up nationalist aims. And, as always, this new nationalism was hard to pin down.

THE CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE OF THEOLOGY FOR NORTHERN IRISH, NORTH-SOUTH AND EAST-WEST RELATIONS

The new political context after the Good Friday agreement is no longer so favourable to this dovetailing of distinct political projects. Just as the civil rights movement forced a choice between nationalism and justice, and later a radical redefinition of nationalism, the Good Friday agreement may force a choice between liberal nationalism, regionalism and civic republicanism and still more redefinitions of northern nationalism. I focus on three aspects of the new political context in order to make my argument.

The ambiguities of the Good Friday agreement

The Good Friday agreement is in many respects the fulfilment of the new nationalism. It also echoes its ambiguities. I will briefly indicate this by looking at the position on sovereignty.

The Good Friday agreement has been hailed by David Trimble and others as a confirmation and strengthening of British sovereignty in Northern Ireland, condi-

tional only on the wish of a majority there. Yet if this is the case formally, substantively it promises to lessen the significance of British sovereignty, disaggregating the functions of the state and dividing them between British, Northern Irish, North-South and British-Irish institutions. Moreover its reaffirmation of British sovereignty coexists in tension with its rooting of ultimate political authority in the people of Ireland, by agreement between its two parts, and its inclusion of all aspects of the Good Friday agreement in an international agreement between the British and Irish states.

The text of the agreement is ambiguous on precisely these points. The ambiguities about sovereignty in the Good Friday agreement lay at the root of the controversy which surrounded Peter Mandelson's dissolution of the Assembly in February 2000 against Irish government and northern nationalist advice. The very crisis over the dissolution of the institutions at that time forced nationalists to choose between these positions: on the liberal nationalist and civic republican views, Mandelson was in breach of the agreement; on a regionalist reading, one could make the argument that he was simply exercising British sovereignty when the lower level of decision making was proving ineffective. Nationalists in the SDLP clearly opted against the regionalist reading.

The future implementation of the agreement holds out further tests for new nationalists. For example, civic republicans and liberal nationalists are distinguished by their attitudes to the new system: is it to be worked whole-heartedly, without attempt to increase the significance of Irish linkages, much less to work for a nationalist majority in Northern Ireland? That is the civic republican attitude. Or is it a stepping stone, one which will inevitably develop further and which legitimately can and should be worked to increase the importance of all-Ireland linkages? That is the liberal nationalist attitude. Each SDLP member is implicitly making his or her decisions on this as the implementation process proceeds.

The dynamics of the new British context

The British context, with assemblies not just in Northern Ireland but also in Scotland and Wales, makes the issue of regionalism versus liberal nationalism all the more pressing. Note that John Hume himself skipped over the British political context, using European and American models and images in fashioning the new nationalist discourse. It is not clear that this is any longer possible.

Today, the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and the British-Irish Council give the prospect of a regionalism all around within the United Kingdom, albeit with Irish linkages. From this perspective, we have a new constitutional settlement in Britain, with a level of regional political autonomy for (many of) its constituent parts. In many respects it is analogous to the Spanish case. But in Spain there are tensions between regionalisms and nationalisms in the different autonomous provinces. Andalucian regionalists, for example, may look for as great political autonomy as Catalonia, but without ambitions of separatism or traditions of nationalism. Catalonian nationalists, in contrast, may use regionalist rhetoric and deny any desire for separatism, while retaining a clear nationalist identity and seeing the Spanish state

as the principal enemy and opposition to further Catalan prosperity; some foresee a federalist future, others see continuing growth of autonomy albeit without a breach of all linkages with the Spanish centre. Basque nationalists, again in contrast, are clearly separatists, using Europeanist regionalist rhetoric only to increase its leverage for separation from Spain. Which of these models is Northern Ireland, or northern nationalists within Northern Ireland, to follow? An Andalucian style regionalism? A Catalan style gradualism where nationalism has accepted for the moment a regionalist mould? A Basque nationalism?

Moreover, there is the possibility of a dynamic of regionalisation within the United Kingdom, where increasing powers for any one of the assemblies produces increasing demands from the others. One might envisage Northern Ireland increasingly becoming a core part of this new United Kingdom dynamic, rather than a place apart within the old British territorial system. How will northern nationalists feel about this? It is perhaps this prospect that will definitively separate the regionalists in the SDLP from the liberal nationalists, as the latter press for something other and something more than regional autonomy. Of course the closer the Irish state moves to an integrated British Isles area, the more this choice will again be blurred.

Competition with Sinn Fein

Electoral and ideological competition between the SDLP and Sinn Féin began in earnest in the 1980s at the same time as the social distinction between republicans and nationalists which existed in the Stormont period, began to dissolve. From the mid 1980s, the SDLP looked as if it was winning the competition: the effect of the Anglo-Irish agreement was to show the effectiveness and viability of the new nationalism. Since the peace process of the 1990s, things have changed. The Sinn Fein vote has been steadily increasing since the peace process began in 1994. Moreover, Sinn Fein has refashioned its own republicanism, borrowing large parts of SDLP discourse, including its flexibility and pragmatism, although offering a more radical egalitarianism, and a sharper nationalist focus. In electoral terms, this has been effective. The demand on the SDLP, therefore, is to refashion its profile so as to win—or not to lose—in the new context. This too forces choices on the SDLP.

The SDLP could opt for a clearer regionalist profile, a clearer liberal nationalist profile or a clearer civic republican profile. There are costs and benefits to each strategy. The first, the regionalist strategy, will pay off only if the electorate are becoming less nationalist; but there is no evidence of this, indeed the contrary appears to be the case. Moreover there is no immediate motivation for such a strategy as the electoral competition (since the collapse of the Alliance Party) comes from the nationalist rather than the regionalist side of the spectrum. They could emphasise the civic republican aspect of the agreement as SDLP politicians did quite eloquently after the agreement—I am thinking here of Seamus Mallon. This provides a clear and for many an attractive profile, but is effective only if the agreement is wholeheartedly implemented and worked in this light by unionists, and the British, as well as nationalists. The evidence to date—and I am thinking of the delays in forming

the executive, the dissolution of the Assembly in February 2000, and the issue of police reform—is that it is not so being worked. This cuts the feet from under this strategy. Or they could emphasise the liberal nationalist profile, while emphasising that—unlike Sinn Féin—they provide safe hands. In the long term, this could risk losing voters to a regenerated regionalist party, perhaps a redefined Alliance Party. In the short term it may turn out to be the most effective strategy.

To sum up this section of the paper, there is good reason to believe that current political pressures are going to force a further redefinition of SDLP nationalism. This could lead to a clearer regionalist focus, or to a stronger liberal nationalist emphasis. For the reasons outlined above, I am inclined to think the latter is the more likely outcome. This will certainly not ease relations with unionism, but it may clarify unionism's options, perhaps, although this is surely a utopian suggestion, letting unionist liberals take over the regionalist mantle.

CONCLUSION

Northern nationalism has certainly been redefined, but that redefinition took place in the 1970s, not the 1990s, although in many respects it laid the foundations for the political progress and settlement of the 1990s. I have argued, however, that the very achievements of the 1990s pose new problems and may provoke a further redefinition of northern nationalism. This will involve a choice between the perspectives—regionalist, republican or liberal nationalist—that up to the present were combined in nationalist discourse. That choice will take place with an eye at once to changing attitudes in the nationalist electorate and to the strategies of the other parties and governments in the post-Good Friday political context. In short, the story of northern nationalism is an evolving one, and its likely evolution is closely tied to the development and prospects of the new institutions which have been set up with the Good Friday agreement, the evolution of governmental policy and the dynamics of British Isles and European level changes.

Let me end on a note of caution, in particular on the relevance of Europe to developments in northern nationalism. I pointed out the importance of Europe for John Hume's refashioning of northern nationalism. If European integration is de-emphasised, as in some recent comments here in the Republic, it changes the context for northern nationalists. Will these developments—the de-emphasis on Europe, increasing British Isles linkages and regionalism within British sovereignty—lead to northern nationalism becoming a new form of British regionalism? And if so, what of republicans? Or will a perceived collapse into a British Isles context provoke in northern nationalists a renewed nationalism and separatism which will lead rather than follow the South? Each option is dangerous in an Irish context. It is not at all clear to me that the distinctive mixture of reform-orientation, liberal nationalism and open-mindedness about constitutional issues which has characterised northern nationalism at its best is possible in a primarily British Isles context. It needs the EU as a counterbalance and alternative model to the very power of British political culture: without it, the danger is of schism between British provincial regionalism and a stronger, but also more traditional, Irish nationalism. Perhaps it is

here, in working out a new form of liberal nationalism in a European as well as Brit-ish-Irish context, that a new redefinition of northern nationalism will lie.