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Preface

Ever since the contested partition of Ireland in 1920, there have been regular demands for reunification. Sometimes these demands have been accompanied by threats of violence or sustained armed campaigns. This book does not *demand* Irish reunification, but it does *expect* it, with a high degree of probability, for reasons advanced in the first chapter. The ethos of the book is peaceful, and democratic – in keeping with the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement. Respect for the will and consent of majorities in both jurisdictions on the island is exhibited throughout.

Expectations of reunification have varied in intensity over the past century. The premise of this book is that reunification is more likely to occur within the next decade than at any juncture in the last hundred years. The year 2030 will mark a decisive tipping point, with the disappearance of a cultural Protestant majority in Northern Ireland among those entitled to vote across *all* age-cohorts – with the possible exception of those aged 85 or over.

Demography is not destiny, and this book is written without the results of the 2021 census in Northern Ireland, which will be published after it goes to press. But we do not need to wait for them; the brute demographic facts of the census of 2011 predict the future quite well. Nineteen years later, in 2030, the cohorts aged between 0 and 18 in 2011, assuming they are still living in Northern Ireland, will have joined the electorate as adults. They will decisively tip the balance against the historically dominant community, which will also have lost any advantage among the older age-cohorts that it had in 2011. The future of Northern Ireland will be in the hands of a non-Protestant majority.

This fact-to-be requires preparation, not premature exultation, and certainly not lazy deferral of its predictable consequences. Regrettably, some will persist in wishful thinking. Some will be saddened at the thought of this future fact; sadness, however, is not a political remedy. Others will be angered, but will want to think after their rage dissipates.

The need to prepare for the possibility of reunification affects all on this island, and it affects our diasporas. This book is a call for effective preparation, accurate information, and informed judgements. How will reunification happen – if it does? And how *should* it happen, so it can happen as well as possible?

Making Sense of a United Ireland was first drafted on a Fulbright scholarship in late 2021, between Delta and Omicron becoming the latest letters from the Greek alphabet to describe global threats to our public health. The manuscript was revised in early 2022 after close readings by numerous friends named in the Acknowledgements. The text was completed one hundred years after the establishment of the Irish Free State. The book accordingly may exhibit some of the collective pride widely felt in the recent accomplishments of independent Ireland. It will also be clear that I regard partition as an avoidable error, or series of errors, and that over the long run Northern Ireland, by any measure, has performed much less successfully than independent Ireland. Holding these opinions does not mean that I believe that Irish reunification is inevitable, or that it will necessarily be a success. It can be a success, but only if mistakes are avoided, and preparation to avoid them must begin now.

Plagues remind us of the fragility of all people, and that our most lethal enemies may not be humans. They also provide some of us with stilled moments to think about the future.

The book before you was written without certainty about the future, even though it seeks to avoid ambiguity. Fanatics and prophets, especially fanatical prophets, know the future with certainty. Usually, they are wrong. This book has been composed to reduce uncertainty: to address probabilities, possibilities, risks, and benefits, and to clarify what may happen, and what should happen. It aims to provide provisional and revisable answers to what the author judges to be the most looming questions obliged by our shared future.

A realistic portrait is offered of the possibilities of reunification, not a promise of a golden age. The focus is on feasible reunification. It is deeply important that reunification happens as smoothly as possible for *all* those affected – including those who vote against it. Long-term preparation is required now, not just the short-term improvisations for which Irish politicians are justly famous on both sides of the Atlantic.

Making Sense of a United Ireland addresses several audiences. It speaks to Southerners who are curious to know what may happen and what preparations are required – including those Southerners who don't like being called Southerners, for good geographic reasons – and to Southerners who thought that these questions were all settled. Addressed, with equal standing, are those British unionists and cultural Protestants in Northern Ireland who know or fear that they may shortly lose a referendum to preserve the Union that most of them, including their parents and grandparents, have sincerely believed has been in their best interests. My respect for their British identity is unequivocal, even as I discuss the possible dissolution of the Union of Great Britain, and that of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I do not expect them to change their identifications, and certainly not because of this book. Northern nationalists are addressed, as the most immediately interested community. This book should remind them that they need to think through questions of goals, strategy, and alliances, without illusions. The book speaks about, to, and of the 'others' – those who identify with neither nationalists nor unionists. The 'neithers' and the 'nors', the undecideds, and the current 'don't knows' will likely determine Irish futures in referendums, especially in the North. Lastly, this book hopes to reach the Irish diaspora, and those with benign interests in Irish futures in Scotland, Wales, and England, as well as in the European Union, North America, and further afield. It has fainter hopes of reaching the British diaspora from Ireland – including the Ulster Scots, or the Scots Irish.

This book will not calculate the level of anyone's pension in 2032 or 2042 if Ireland reunifies. It will not tell you what the cost will be, if any, of a visit to a doctor or to obtain prescription drugs, or the length of waiting lists for non-emergency treatment. It will not predict your after-tax disposable income, nor your child's degree or technical qualifications. Anyone who claims to know precise answers to these questions eight to ten years out would be pulling your leg, as they say in both jurisdictions on the island. The book should, however, help thinking about ways to address these questions. Broad information and the outlines of policy directions on these subject matters will need to be answered in any referendums. The book will show that there are good reasons to expect a united Ireland within the European Union to create increasing and

sustained prosperity, by contrast with the recent isolationist move of Ireland's eastern neighbour – a decision driven by a majority of English voters. The vote to leave the EU has reduced the comparative prosperity of Great Britain (or a rump UK) and will continue to do so.

It is impossible to write a relatively short book without assuming some background knowledge among readers. I have tried to be helpful, but without writing a parallel history of Ireland, North and South. Many of the judgements expressed here rely on materials explored in full in *A Treatise on Northern Ireland* (three volumes, 2020 paperback edition). *Making Sense of a United Ireland*, however, assumes you have not read these three volumes.

Making Sense of a United Ireland is informed by my discipline and specialism, but with an emphasis on accessible argument, and with some of the assumptions of a brand of power-sharing known as 'liberal consociational thought' – a style of thought that commends people's freedom to express their identifications politically, through self-determination rather than pre-determination by others. People's identities, to the extent that they matter, should be as freely chosen as possible.

In consociational thought, four principles are recommended for deeply divided places: parity, proportionality, autonomy, and veto rights. Parity implies equality in status and recognition, or full partnership. Proportionality suggests that a group's influence and benefits should be in accordance with its numbers. Autonomy requires that groups should be able to govern themselves on cultural matters of profound concern to them. Veto rights should exist, when necessary, to prevent tyrannous majorities maltreating minorities. These principles are in the Good Friday Agreement. These principles may not need to be so thoroughly applied in a reunified Ireland as they have been in Northern Ireland, yet they may need to be preserved if Northern Ireland remains in existence *within* a united Ireland.

Making Sense of a United Ireland is also informed by democratic republican thought developed on both sides of the Atlantic since its revival in Renaissance Italy. Republics of equal adult citizens are capable of significant self-government, free of domination by patriarchs, churches, capitalists, civil servants, and great powers. Hard-won pluralist conclusions are here too. There is not one best way of life. There are deep as

well as shallow differences in cultures and mentalities, but these deep differences can be managed, even if they cannot be transcended or peacefully eliminated.

The book is written in the conviction that I have some standing to address reunification, because I am a Southerner by birth who became a Northerner by residence. In my adult life I have worked mostly in Great Britain and the USA, the two powers with Irish diasporas that have most affected both parts of Ireland. I have both left and never left Ireland. I am a professor of political science best known in my profession for working on power-sharing in deeply divided places. In 2009–11, I was the second person to be the senior advisor on power-sharing in the Standby Team of the Mediation Support Unit of the Department of Political Affairs of the United Nations. My predecessor was my school friend and regular co-author, Belfast-born John McGarry, who is now a Canadian citizen. My professional work on divided places partly stems from my autobiography – I grew up amid three civil wars, in Nigeria, Sudan, and Northern Ireland. I do not claim that arguments on Ireland's reunification are reducible to personal projection or experience, and I do not claim privileged insights, but unlike many Southerners and Northerners I am both, and perhaps that may help me to be read with some sympathy across the island.

Outline of the book

There are eight parts to this book:

- Why we are here
- Lessons from elsewhere
- How reunification may happen
- Models and process
- The government of a united Ireland
- The economics of reunification
- Securing Ireland
- Accommodating diversity

Part One sketches the scene in both parts of Ireland in 2021–22, paying most attention to the North. It explains the revived interest in reunification, why that question will form the political canopy of the rest of the decade, and why ‘reunification’ is the right word – even if it is not the only word to describe what may be expected. The conjunction of long-run demographic and electoral change and the ramifications of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union are emphasized in accounting for the renewed likelihood of reunification.

Part Two asks what we can learn from the failure to reunify Cyprus by referendums in 2004, and from the comparative success of German reunification. The failures and successes of our European neighbours are instructive. We also have lessons to learn from our own pasts. We may make new errors, but we can at least avoid repeating some old ones. Lastly, we can learn from past referendums, including the UK’s referendum of 2016. The key lesson is not that there should never be any referendums, but that referendums should have clearly defined outcomes, with credibly clear consequences.

Part Three looks at how reunification may happen – through the referendum process pledged in the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement. It highlights three important but neglected accomplishments of Irish diplomats in the drafting of that agreement, which will have significance in regulating the referendums to come. It sets out what needs to be done by way of preparation, planning, deliberating with mini-forums and citizens’ assemblies, and polling – all with as much of an all-party consensus in the South as possible. A Ministry of National Reunification is recommended, as is the formation of a Sovereign Reunification Fund.

Part Four is the most technical part of the book, but it is presented as plainly as possible. What territorial models of Irish reunification are available, and when should these be chosen? Should voters in the Northern referendum know exactly what territorial model of a unified Ireland will emerge if they vote for it? Alternatively, should they vote on principle, for a process – a constitutional convention – that would reshape the island in a fresh start? Each of these key choices has costs and benefits. Much hinges on the answers to these questions, to which my friend,

Mayo-born John Garry,^{*} and I – along with others – have devoted some of our recent attention, and some of our results from deliberative forums are reported in this book. I argue that the two most feasible models of a united Ireland are: (i) one in which Northern Ireland persists as a devolved government inside a united Ireland; and (ii) an integrated Ireland, in which Northern Ireland would no longer exist politically. It is possible to imagine that one model might precede the other, with a transition from one to the other. This part of the book also explains why certain models of our collective future are currently precluded by the Good Friday Agreement, or the Constitution of Ireland, or UK constitutional statutes, and sometimes all three. Bluntly, I argue that, barring radical changes, an independent Northern Ireland, a Confederation of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and repartition are politically impossible, or unwise. I also explain why the sharing of sovereignty over Northern Ireland by the UK and Ireland is increasingly improbable, even if the idea once had merits. Lastly, I explain why federalizing Ireland is increasingly improbable, rather than undesirable. No party with a significant mandate advocates federalization, and there are reasons why Southerners will not wish to risk the stability of the state they have built – they will want to recognize the state they have built in a united Ireland.

Part Five examines the government of a united Ireland. What changes, if any, will be required to the Irish presidency, the Government (the cabinet), the two chambers of the Oireachtas (the parliament), and the courts? Will there be a need to reconstruct local government – and if so, how? What institutions of the Belfast Agreement will persist in a reunified Ireland? Lastly, I will argue that the whole island should consider adopting some of the electoral arrangements developed in Northern Ireland – uniform electoral districts with the single transferable vote, and the d’Hondt method of filling cabinet portfolios. Unification should not be a one-way street: the South can and should learn from the North.

Part Six addresses the economics of reunification. Ireland is much

^{*} John McGarry and John Garry are two different but equally likeable people.

better prepared for economic reunification than Germany was in 1990. The Republic is now more prosperous than West Germany was then, and Northern Ireland is more prosperous than was East Germany, and there are net gains to be made from reunification. I suggest that the costs of reunification have been significantly exaggerated, and the benefits understated, and I spell out the implications. This part also addresses the first efforts to model the consequences of Irish reunification, while warning that far greater research and capacity needs to be developed on this subject.

Part Seven is devoted to ‘securing’ a united Ireland. What has been done and what will need to be done to achieve a legitimate, representative, and effective policing service – or services – in a reunified Ireland? What needs to be done in the decade ahead for Ireland to have defence forces worthy of the name, capable of performing UN, EU, and internal security functions? What needs to be done to end paramilitarism, and to make any loyalist insurrection against Irish reunification unviable?

Part Eight focuses on the critical question of the accommodation of greater diversity – avoiding any coercive assimilation, preventing any regression in the improved rights-cultures in both jurisdictions, and managing fresh challenges to the organization of education, languages, and the coexistence of rival symbols of identity. It pays special attention to what rights, protections, and securities British people in Ireland and cultural Protestants may want – and should have – in a reunified Ireland.

In the conclusion, I address whether Ireland should reunify.

I do not expect anyone to agree with every last suggestion made here. I have, however, made every effort to be factually correct – and will happily accept evidence-based corrections. Above all, I hope to encourage the current and future Governments of Ireland over the next decade to do what is suggested here – prepare properly for the momentous possibility of reunification.

Brendan O’Leary, Cushendall, Galway, and Philadelphia, April 2022

PART ONE

Why We Are Here

I. Six into twenty-six won't go – or will it?

6 into 26 won't go!

I saw that painted on a Belfast gable wall when I was a boy. Being a competitive little lad, I thought the graffiti author didn't understand fractions. After all, six goes into twenty-six 'four and a third times'. Of course, the statement was not about division, where it may have been correct according to certain schoolteachers, but about partition. The six counties of Northern Ireland could not, would not, and should not fit into the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland. Monarchist, Protestant, English-speaking people could not live in the Republican, Catholic, and Gaelic nation-state. The statement was a slogan – a word derived from the Irish for 'war cry'. It proclaimed an 'impossibility'.

Irish reunification was long deemed impossible. For many it still is, especially because of the long conflict – or war, or 'troubles' – between 1966 and 2005, or 1968 and 1998. The dates and names are contested.¹ Yet reunification is now certainly possible, indeed highly probable, though not inevitable – at least, not yet. But even those who want it to happen are not prepared – at least not adequately prepared, even if they may think otherwise.² That includes Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Irish Labour Party, the Greens, People Before Profit, and others.

The Government of Ireland Act of 1920, the instrument of partition enacted by the Westminster Parliament, was the most enduring gerrymander of the last century.* With some truculence, Ulster unionists accepted a six-county Northern Ireland, rather than one consisting of all nine counties of Ulster. Their local leaders had made a strategic

* To gerrymander is to draw boundaries deliberately to advantage one's own side, and to disadvantage the other. The expression derives from the early American republic. Governor Elbridge Gerry redrew constituency boundaries in Massachusetts in 1812. One looked like a salamander, so 'Gerry's salamander' became 'gerrymander'.

decision. In the words of James Craig, Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, they would secure those counties they could control, and thereby create 'a new and impregnable Pale', behind which loyalists could withdraw and regroup to maintain the Union with Great Britain.³ That control has now been lost, however. The ramparts of the new Pale are long gone. Unionist control went in 1972 when the London government shut down the Northern Ireland Parliament, which the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) had dominated for fifty years. The ramparts were the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the armed police force, and the B Specials, its armed reserve. The former was mostly Protestant; the latter, originally recruited from the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), entirely Protestant.

The most famous Ulster unionist slogan is 'No surrender', still cried at the annual August and December parades of the Apprentice Boys over Derry's walls – or Londonderry's.⁴ The 'boys' are nowadays mostly somewhat-matured men. The slogan means no surrender either to Irish Catholics or to illegitimate British power. There have, however, been several unionist surrenders – as well as British betrayals. Ulster unionists parted with their Southern counterparts, who wanted all of Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom, or in the British Empire, or in the British Commonwealth. Southern unionists would have settled for 'dominion status' for the entire island in 1917–18 – so that they would have been part of a larger minority, rather than the small one they became.⁵ They feared an Irish republic, but they did not want partition. Ulster unionists preferred to leave Southern unionists behind rather than bolster them in a sovereign united Ireland. As retreating generals do, they cut their losses.

Ulster unionists had made a solemn covenant on 'Ulster Day' in September 1912. In it, they pledged loyalty to their brothers and sisters throughout Ulster. The covenant was signed by more than 235,000 men, with a matching declaration signed by nearly the same number of women. The three counties of Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan, however, had large Catholic and nationalist majorities. A nine-county Ulster would have meant, according to the census of 1911, a Protestant-to-Catholic ratio of 57 to 43 rather than the 66-to-34 ratio of what became Northern Ireland. The UUP leadership's 'inner circle' effectively surrendered the

unionists of Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan to what became the Irish Free State.⁶ They might have had all of Ulster, and kept to their covenant, but then their demographic and electoral majority would have been highly unstable, and quickly reversible.

The British coalition government of 1918–22, made up of Conservative Unionists and Liberal Imperialists, and led by David Lloyd George, organized Ulster's 'downsizing'. The Ulster unionist elite were effectively allowed to pick their preferred Northern Ireland: six counties, four with cultural Protestant and Unionist majorities – Antrim, Down, Armagh, and Londonderry – and two without – Fermanagh and Tyrone. Unofficially, unionists would call these six counties 'Ulster'. Officially, UK Governments refused requests to rename Northern Ireland as Ulster, but they had no objections to the naming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, or later to the Ulster Defence Regiment, or to 'the Ulster Banner'.⁷

Unionist-dominated Ulster is now over. A referendum in the North on Irish unity is likely at the end of this decade, to be followed by one in the South – if the rules of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 are followed. That is because Northern Ireland's tectonic plates have shifted.⁸ Its cultural Catholic population – those who are Catholic or come from a predominantly Catholic family formation – now outnumber cultural Protestants. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, such Catholics have mostly voted for nationalist parties with platforms that favour an autonomous or independent and united Ireland. Today, the largest of these parties are Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).⁹ Not everyone who votes Sinn Féin or SDLP will vote for Irish reunification, if and when the Northern referendum happens. Like everyone with a vote, they will want to know what is on offer, and what the benefits and costs are – both for themselves and their families and for their peoples. But cultural Catholics will have a choice, and their votes will matter – with increasingly decisive importance over the rest of this decade. By 2030, as I shall try to show, the decision will be theirs to make. The Alliance Party and the Greens, the most significant of the current parties in the Northern Assembly that refuse to register as either nationalists or unionists, and who identify as 'others', also have significant cultural Catholic members

and voters; perhaps a majority have that background. Many of these voters will strongly feel the appeal of Irish reunification in a referendum, as will a distinct minority of liberal Protestants who identify with Alliance or the Greens.

The shifting of the demographic tectonic plates

Look at Figure 1.1 in the colour plate section, which contains a series of figures. The lines on the graph show the percentages of the local population of the six counties who identify as Catholic, Protestant and other Christian, other religions, or as ‘no religion’, or ‘not stated’, or ‘none’ over the 150 years since the first regular census. The black bar across the middle marks the 50 per cent line. It is easy to see that the proportion of Catholics in the six counties fell before partition in 1920 – partly because Catholics out-migrated from a hostile Belfast region.¹⁰ It is also easy to see that the proportion of Protestants peaked around World War Two. By 2011, however, Catholics were poised to surpass Protestants in raw numbers, and as this book goes to press almost certainly did so in the past decade. Today, a century after Northern Ireland’s invention, its founders’ descendants can no longer hold it on the strength of their own numbers.

This change has not occurred because Catholics quickly managed to ‘breed’ at the rate popes are said to recommend, while Protestants did not. Catholics had a higher average birth rate than Protestants, but that did not matter before 1971–81. Under the domination of the Ulster Unionist Party in the old Stormont parliament between 1920 and 1972, life was significantly more unpleasant, on average, for Catholics than it was for Protestants. And deliberately so. As David Trimble put it, when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize at Oslo with John Hume in December 1998, ‘Ulster Unionists, fearful of being isolated on the island, built a solid house, but it was a cold house for Catholics.’ Catholics emigrated from this cold house far more than Protestants, proportionally and absolutely. Trimble continued: ‘Northern nationalists, although they had a roof over their heads, seemed to us as if they meant to burn the house down.’¹¹ Whether these fears of combustion were justified, and

whether they remain so, is the subject of unresolved controversy. What did end eventually was disproportional Catholic out-migration.

The demographic ratios of the two major groupings changed slowly after 1972, partly because comparative rates of migration changed. Educational reforms by the post-war Labour government in London created a graduate class of Catholics by the 1960s that would spearhead the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. Political reforms made a difference, eventually, after the imposition of direct rule by Great Britain in 1972. So did the MacBride campaign, begun among the Irish diaspora in the United States under the auspices of the former Irish foreign minister, Seán MacBride, which begat the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act of 1989, enacted by Margaret Thatcher's government, to replace the failed act of the same name of 1976.¹² The draft bill was effectively redrafted by Belfast-born legal scholar Professor Christopher McCrudden, then lead advisor on law to Kevin McNamara MP, the British Labour Party's frontbench spokesman on Northern Ireland. The Fair Employment Act proved to be remarkably effective legislation.¹³ Among other accomplishments, it made cultural Catholics more likely to stay in Northern Ireland.

Did unionists lose their demographic majority for reasons beyond those of a partly reformed and therefore better Northern Ireland, higher Catholic birth rates, and eventually lower Catholic migration? Other factors have also been suggested. Protestants have been more likely to leave to take university degrees in Great Britain – and not return – especially when university tuition was free. It is a plausible story, but it is difficult to estimate the flows, and their endurance. What is clear is that Northern universities have cultural Catholic pluralities or majorities in their student bodies.¹⁴ Another suggestion is that unionists left disproportionately because of the war officially launched by the Provisional IRA in 1971. That explanation is also difficult to evaluate, and faces a decisive objection: more Catholics died than Protestants in the conflict, proportionally and absolutely, and more violence and injuries took place in Catholic-majority districts of Northern Ireland.¹⁵ So, if violence induced emigration, then, at the margin, Catholics should have been more likely to leave than Protestants. Many Catholics did leave because of violence – by the B Specials, the RUC, the Ulster Defence

Regiment, the British Army, and loyalist militia, as well as violence by republicans on their front doorsteps.

Whatever one's opinions on these contested matters, the two most powerful demographic consequences of the conflict, euphemistically known as 'the troubles', are agreed: the brain drain from all communities; and the reinforcement of voluntary segregation, sometimes because of intimidation.¹⁶ People with skills and higher-education qualifications were more likely to leave, and people who stayed became even more likely to live with their own. Mixed areas became unmixed. Sometimes they were forcibly unmixed. Some remixing is now taking place after twenty-five years of peace.

Figure 1.2 in the plate section returns us to the demographic future. It contrasts the bottom and top of the demographic age-cohorts in Northern Ireland in 2011. Among nearly 125,000 young children aged 4 or under, 50 per cent were Catholic compared to 35 per cent who were Protestant – with a significant number, 14 per cent, of 'none' stated. By contrast, among the elderly who were aged over 85 in 2011, 69 per cent were Protestant and 30 per cent were Catholic.

Figure 1.3 presents a simple visualization of the cumulative advantage cultural Catholics had over cultural Protestants in raw numbers in the 2011 census. As shown, the Catholic cumulative advantage peaks in the cohorts below the age of 40 in 2011, and it declines thereafter, disappearing among the cohorts aged 70 and above.

Barring migratory transformations that none of us have noticed, we know broadly what the demographic picture in 2030 will be. By that date, most of those in the cohorts aged 70+ in 2011 will have died, while those aged 0–19 in 2011 will have joined the eligible electorate, producing a net advantage for cultural Catholics over cultural Protestants across *all* cohorts of voting age, with the possible exception of the over-85s.

The shifting of electoral alignments

The net demographic dominance of cultural Ulster Protestants across *all* adult age-cohorts will therefore be gone in 2030 – give or take a year

or two. Unionists' electoral majority has already gone, earlier than some anticipated. Politically there are three minorities in the North – defined as groups which have less than 50 per cent of the vote – namely, unionists, nationalists, and 'others'. Whether there will be a future overall cultural Catholic electoral majority is unclear. It takes time for higher numbers of Catholic children who do not emigrate to show up as higher numbers of voters on electoral registers – eighteen years, in the case of those who were babies in 2011. The rising numbers of 'nones' who do not state their religion – or do not have one – may mean that a formal Catholic electoral majority will never exist. Yet we know from multiple sources, including the census, that high numbers of the 'nones' come from predominantly Catholic backgrounds, as well as from predominantly Protestant backgrounds, so it is reasonable to infer that a de facto cultural Catholic electoral majority will materialize in 2030.

The loss of the unionist electoral majority has partly occurred because significant numbers of liberal Protestants support the Alliance Party. That party used to be unionist with a lower-case 'u', but now it is formally neutral on whether the Union or a united Ireland should prevail. Alliance thereby keeps both cultural Catholics and cultural Protestants among its members and voters. We therefore cannot count Alliance voters as unionist or nationalist without further evidence. How they vote, and how other 'others' vote – notably the supporters of the Greens and the micro-socialist parties, and the children of new immigrants – may be decisive in a future referendum in the North.

Visible evidence of electoral change, partly flowing from demographic change, may be confirmed by looking at the outcome of Westminster elections in Northern Ireland since 1997. Figures 1.4 to 1.7 in the plate section demonstrate the change. Figure 1.4 shows that, in the year before the Good Friday Agreement, unionist parties won thirteen of Northern Ireland's eighteen seats in the Westminster Parliament, including three of the four seats in Belfast. By the 2001 elections, however, the west and south, and the entirety of Northern Ireland's border with independent Ireland, had greened. As Figure 1.5 shows, Sinn Féin won Fermanagh & South Tyrone and West Tyrone, and northern nationalists now held seven of the eighteen seats. Unionists were down to eleven.

The 2010 Westminster elections registered another decisive shift: the near-balancing of the blocs. Figure 1.6 shows that Alliance briefly held a seat in East Belfast after scandals immersed Peter Robinson, the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Belfast had a non-unionist majority of MPs for the first time. The major nationalist and unionist parties won eight seats each. An independent unionist won North Down, and the Ulster Unionist Party, which had founded Northern Ireland, was eliminated from Westminster. Unionists were down to nine seats.

In the 2019 Westminster elections, the results of which are displayed in Figure 1.7, the final blow to unionist pre-eminence was delivered. Nationalists won nine of the eighteen seats, while Alliance took North Down, creating the first-ever non-unionist majority delegation from Northern Ireland at Westminster. Unionists were down to eight seats; the DUP's Westminster parliamentary leader Nigel Dodds lost to John Finucane of Sinn Féin in North Belfast.

Westminster elections take place under the rule of winner-takes-all in single-member districts, so these visual representations of the winning parties are more striking than any visual representations of Northern Ireland Assembly elections would be. In the latter, proportional representation produces multiple winners in each constituency, so change would be less easy to present. But these visualizations exhibit the picture expected by the opening demographic analysis: a less unionist and a less Protestant-dominated electoral scene has been the big-picture story for more than two decades.

Polling evidence consistent with demographic and electoral shifts

The Conservative peer Lord Ashcroft, a unionist and Brexiteer, runs a reputable polling organization. I have selected his most recent poll in Northern Ireland, taken before this book went to press, because it is based on a large sample and cannot be accused of having been conducted with an Irish nationalist or a pro-European agenda. Between 15 and 18 November 2021, Ashcroft's organization ran an online poll of over 3,300 eligible voters in Northern Ireland, weighted to be representative of all adults. The results were striking.¹⁷

Excluding ‘don’t knows’, the margin in favour of maintaining the Union with Great Britain was 54 per cent, compared to the 46 per cent who favoured a united Ireland. A clear majority affirmed that leaving the EU was not the right decision for Northern Ireland (63 per cent), including one in five of 2017 DUP voters. A full 13 per cent of the poll affirmed they now favoured a united Ireland, after Brexit, having previously favoured staying in the UK (including high proportions of SDLP and Alliance voters), while 9 per cent were now less sure that Northern Ireland should be part of the UK. Two-thirds of respondents thought Brexit had made Irish unification more likely in the foreseeable future – including 49 per cent who thought it was much more likely. More than two-thirds (69 per cent) of current voters in Northern Ireland said there should be a referendum on Irish unification at some point in the future: 85 per cent of those aged 18–24 agreed it should occur, with 72 per cent thinking it should be held within the next ten years.

Any referendum on reunification in 2030 may be decided by the currently undecided. They are, after all, one in ten in Ashcroft’s poll. Alliance voters support a united Ireland by 35 per cent to 25 per cent, but the largest portion of them, 40 per cent, ‘don’t know’. This data is especially interesting. If Alliance, the largest party among the ‘others’, expands its vote share, especially at the expense of the SDLP, it will be read by many commentators as a fall in support for nationalism – and as making the Union safer. But that would be a premature judgement. The limited evidence suggests Alliance voters are more pro-reunification than they are pro-Union, but that the largest portion of them is undecided – swayable in a referendum. Differently put, the combined Sinn Féin and SDLP vote does not measure the ceiling of support for Irish reunification.

More than a quarter of voters (27 per cent) affirmed that they had changed their mind over whether Northern Ireland should stay in the UK at some juncture, including 16 per cent who had changed their minds more than once. We might label them the ‘wobblers’ – those with swaying preferences. Therefore the Northern referendum may be decided, according to Ashcroft’s poll, by the undecided, Alliance ‘don’t knows’, the wavering wobblers, and especially by women, who reported

themselves six times likelier to be undecided compared to men (18 per cent compared to 3 per cent).

Protestants (86 per cent) were more likely than Catholics (64 per cent) to respond that they had never changed their mind about Northern Ireland's position in the UK, but as we have seen, Protestants are the declining demographic grouping. A less Protestant, more undecided, and partially fluid electorate will decide in the decade ahead. For now, however, the currently youngest electoral cohort wants change by a dramatic margin. Those aged 18–24 said they would vote for Irish unification as opposed to the status quo, by a supermajority margin of 71 per cent to 24 per cent. By comparison, among those aged 65 or over, the ratio is 25 per cent to 55 per cent. Expectations have also clearly shifted: 51 per cent responded that a referendum in ten years' time would produce a majority for joining the Republic, whereas 34 per cent disagreed.

Many in Ashcroft's focus groups sensibly affirmed that they would want to be sure of 'the package' before they voted. As one UUP voter put it: 'At the moment I don't think [my generation would] be interested in a united Ireland unless there were more benefits than negatives, regardless of religion.' Fears, however, persist among some Protestants. Another UUP voter said that 'if there was a united Ireland, there would be no Orange Parade, no 12th of July. They would shut Protestant schools. We'd be told to get off the land, they're taking it over. They would make life hell.' In Ashcroft's focus groups, many on all sides felt there was a growing number, particularly among younger voters, who would see a referendum according to 'practicalities' rather than religion, nationality, or tradition – or, as one participant put it, 'some will vote green or orange, but a lot of people will vote with their heads'.¹⁸

All parties, whether nationalist, unionist, or 'other', do not mobilize all their potential voters in normal elections to Westminster, Stormont, or to local governments in the North. The Northern nationalist vote has sat at around 40 per cent for nearly two decades. It is not fully clear why. Some cultural Catholics likely shifted to voting Alliance, because the SDLP was not viewed as sufficiently socially liberal. Sinn Féin's expansion is definitely hindered by its historic support for the IRA's 'long war'. It must be emphasized that though all elections provide clues

as to how a referendum may go in the North, they offer no certainty. The Northern nationalist vote is a proxy, though perhaps an unreliable one, for how voters will decide in a referendum. That is because a much higher turnout can be expected in a referendum than in normal elections. The turnout in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 was 85 per cent. Turnout will be high in a future Northern referendum, not only because the decision is momentous but because it is likely to be a close result.

Northern nationalists boycotted the first and only previous referendum held on Irish unity in the North, in 1973.¹⁹ Another such boycott could occur if the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland calls a referendum when it is not justified. Conversely, unionists or loyalists could boycott a referendum, especially if they think they are certain to lose. The following questions therefore need further thought: when the appropriate time to hold a referendum might be; how to avoid a boycott among those who expect to lose; and what power-sharing 'securities' might be offered so that losing will not devastate the losers.

Whatever your thoughts on these matters, this chapter has demonstrated that it is plausible that a referendum in the North might be called around 2030, and that it is probable that it can be won by non-unionists.

2. The comeback of reunification after 2016

A united Ireland seems a simple concept to understand. The six counties and the twenty-six counties would become a single political unit, under one common sovereign government – six plus twenty-six equals thirty-two – after the agreement of the people of Ireland, North and South, in two referendums. The border created in 1920 would cease to be. The wound of partition would be over. Perhaps that is exactly what will happen, but as we shall see, there is another possibility – namely that Northern Ireland will persist within a united Ireland.

A word to the wise on reunification

‘Reunification’ is the right word, rather than ‘unification’, because the two units were created through the British partition of 1920. Some historians – not only unionist or ‘revisionist’ historians – argue that any future unification would not be reunification. They maintain that Ireland was never previously united – except under the Crown of England, later that of Great Britain, and later still that of Great Britain and Ireland. Relax; deep historical engagement over how unified Ireland was before Strongbow invaded – or was invited in by his collaborators in Leinster – will not be necessary. The short answer is that before the first English colonization started, Ireland was culturally but not politically unified – though state-building projects had begun.¹

Nor need time be spent here evaluating the precise status of the Kingdom of Ireland before the Union with Great Britain was brought about in 1800 – indeed *bought* about.² The Kingdom of Ireland was territorially unified – albeit annexed to the Crown of England since Henry VIII’s decree. And it was administered as a unified jurisdiction, with its own partly autonomous parliament.

‘Reunification’ is the correct legal, political, and historical word

because of a different and often forgotten point. Under the provisions of ‘the Treaty’, or the ‘Articles of Agreement for a Treaty’, signed in 1921 and ratified in 1922, Great Britain recognized the Irish Free State as a dominion – as a state, domestically sovereign, with the foreign policy powers of Canada. And it recognized it whole, as one unified entity. The Treaty, however, gave the Northern Ireland Parliament the right to opt out, or to secede, from the Irish Free State after Westminster’s ratification of the Constitution of the Irish Free State was complete.³ So, in British law, and in international law – not just in Irish nationalist doctrine – two referendums, North and South, favouring a united sovereign Ireland would reverse partition, and would reunify Ireland. Nevertheless, if you prefer the expression ‘unification’, a ‘united Ireland’, or simply ‘Irish unity’, use these phrases instead.

Yet the yearning for unity partly rests on the idea that there is merit in *reunifying*. The urge recognizes that the peoples on the island, divided by colonial and religious legacies, have much in common, and may have much to gain, jointly, from reorganizing themselves under new auspices. Especially among Northern nationalists, the conviction is widespread that reunification will fully rejuvenate their fellowship within the Irish nation, with which they have a shared ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. Unionists will often argue that they would prefer the reunification of the United Kingdom – through the return of Ireland to the Union. I have heard that response many times, but those same unionists have never gone on to say that Northern Ireland should become part of a restored all-island Kingdom of Ireland. After all, if they want to restore the unity of the UK, then they should favour the reversal of partition.

Reunification should be advanced because it is a good idea, not because it is inevitable or ‘natural’, though those claims are made – and will continue. It is true that, of the twenty largest islands in the world, there are just three divided by a sovereign border: New Guinea, Borneo, and Ireland. But geographic determinism does not, and should not, drive Irish reunification. The memory of a shared – albeit often divided – past and the prospect of a better joint future are what drives it, and should drive it.

Affirmative referendum results in favour of a united Ireland, in the

North and the South respectively, would restore a politically unified and distinct island-wide polity. Not under the Crown, however. Any role for the Crown and the British royal family would be confined to the Commonwealth, and that in turn would be subject to two provisos: *if* a united Ireland re-joins the Commonwealth, and *if* the British monarch remains its head.* A sovereign, democratic, and secular republic is the widely understood meaning of reuniting Ireland – certainly under Ireland’s existing laws. In this expanded republic, there would be no religiously defined citizenship, or religiously defined head of state, and no established religion – unlike the UK, where the monarch cannot be a Catholic and the Church of England remains established.

The entire territory of Ireland (including its immediately adjacent small islands), as well as its territorial waters, would be united under the sovereign authority of its people. No sovereign border would cross the island, or its seas. Ireland would be one self-governing jurisdiction, fully free to organize its own internal jurisdictions – which could include keeping Northern Ireland as a devolved unit of government. The United Kingdom of Great Britain would be Ireland’s neighbour, unless Scotland secedes from Great Britain. In that case, a united Ireland would have two neighbours, Scotland and England (incorporating Wales), and Great Britain would displace Ireland as one of the three top-twenty largest islands in the world that are divided into more than one state.

Last, but not least, a reunited Ireland would be *doubly* reunited. The South and North would be reunited as one Ireland: reunification one. But something novel would also happen – Northern Ireland would reunify fully within the European Union, this time as part of a different member-state: reunification two.

The Good Friday Agreement: mixed outcomes

It is now almost a quarter of a century since 10 April 1998, the morning the text of the Good Friday Agreement was agreed in multi-party and intergovernmental negotiations. The Agreement was finalized in

* See Chapter 24, pp. 268 ff.

Belfast, but negotiations had taken place in Dublin and London, and informally in Washington, DC. Though made in all these places, the UK Government and unionists called it the ‘Belfast Agreement’ because that is where the text took final form. I recall the moment vividly. Expected to be delivered on Thursday 9 April, deadlines were extended, and I continued broadcasting throughout the night and the following morning on the BBC World Service, well informed by contacts or friends in most parties and in both the British and Irish governments. As dawn broke over Belfast, it was easy to predict that the Agreement would be called the ‘Good Friday Agreement’.

A light snow blew over the face of the UUP leader David Trimble as he began a defensive justification of the Agreement outside the Stormont parliament building. Though he should have been proud and happy, he was all to the contrary. His party delegation had split. Jeffrey Donaldson had walked out over the arrangements on prisoner releases, and doubts over whether the decommissioning of weapons would be required before republicans could participate in the new executive.

Earlier in the year, Ian Paisley Jr had told me, off-air, that he expected an agreement to be reached, which the DUP would oppose. He said that his father’s party would focus on planning to defeat any agreement that would follow, not by winning an overall ‘No’ vote in the pledged referendum but by winning a majority of ‘No’ voters among Protestants. The DUP, he told me, would demand major revisions to the forthcoming agreement, not its complete destruction. Its goal would be to displace the UUP as the leading party of unionism. I recall that interaction not to show that Paisley Jr, like his father, has significant political realism and skill beneath the characteristic public bluster. Rather, the story warns us that any political agreement, including a future agreement on reunification, will be challenged by its prospective losers, who will seek to reshape whatever has been agreed – or to destroy it. The Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was targeted by the DUP for renegotiation even before it was signed, and it has remained the constant object of attempted renegotiation, rather like the more recently negotiated Protocol, which is intended to stabilize the GFA.

The political settlement of 1998 created new power-sharing institutions, in the three strands within which they were negotiated – namely,

across the North, North–South, and East–West.⁴ The peace process ended substantive armed conflict. It brought eventual demilitarization of the border and troop withdrawal by the British Army; eventual decommissioning of paramilitary weapons by the IRA, and by some loyalists; the release of paramilitary prisoners on licence; eventual reform of policing and the administration of justice; eventual substantive disbanding of the IRA; and an array of pledges on rights, safeguards, reconciliation, and the treatment of the victims of conflict. That last sentence is littered with ‘eventual’ to recall the slow and distrust-laden pace of implementation, and the last clause emphasizes *pledges* rather than *delivered outcomes*.

Simply put, neither the political settlement nor the peace process has been completely successful, or fully implemented. Jointly, however, they have delivered a radical improvement in public life, with mostly peaceful politics, albeit with a negative rather than a positive peace.⁵ Excessive ingratitude or cynicism about the GFA is inappropriate, but uncritical admiration is not sustainable.

Seventeen years later, Northern Ireland had a peaceful Assembly election in 2016 with a low turnout. Sinn Féin and the DUP were returned as the leading parties of nationalism and unionism respectively. The political temperature was calm and unexcited. Political momentum on shared commitments was stalled, but it was hard to argue that ‘the system’ was in complete crisis. Within a year, however, the Assembly would be dissolved, after Martin McGuinness resigned from the deputy first ministership – precipitating a fresh election in March 2017 in which, on a much higher turnout, the DUP was nearly beaten by Sinn Féin in the competition for first place, in votes and seats, and unionists lost their political majority.

At the time the DUP was entrapped in a corruption scandal mostly of its own making. ‘Ash for Cash’ was the memorable name given to the renewable heating initiative approved by First Minister Arlene Foster in her previous ministerial portfolio.⁶ But while the Ash for Cash scandal was the immediate precipitant of the breakdown in cooperation between Martin McGuinness and Arlene Foster, it was the European question which disrupted the sustained cooperation between their parties that had formally commenced in 2007. That may

not have been inevitable, but the DUP made fateful choices in and after 2016.

The European question

The outcome of the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the European Union was largely driven by English voters,⁷ but it overtly and vividly revived the question of Irish reunification. The project of reunification had never gone away, however. Reunification was provided for in the text of the Good Friday Agreement, which could not have been made, let alone ratified, without these provisions. Yet much of the focus of political life in Northern Ireland between 1999 and 2015 had been on establishing and stabilizing the new Northern institutions, and on implementing agreements arising from commitments given – or failing to implement them.⁸

The claim that but for ‘Brexit’ the issue of reunification would have remained dormant is not credible. Recall the demographic and electoral data in the previous chapter. Reunification would have incrementally suggested itself in this decade under all scenarios. Both Sinn Féin and the SDLP still proudly affirmed reunification as their goal, even if their attention was elsewhere during the eighteen years focused on the implementation of the GFA. Moreover, how the DUP had played its political hand in 2006–15 had begun to irritate nationalist patience with the status quo, while also frustrating the ‘others’.

Quite simply, the UK referendum on EU membership brought reunification loudly back onto the political agenda because the result threatened to destabilize the GFA, and because, for nationalists, reunification became a solution to a new problem – Brexit – not just the old ones (partition, and the perceived and actual resistance of the DUP to egalitarian power-sharing). Reunification would mean re-joining the EU, not just reunifying the island.

The new world opened up by the UK’s referendum result was appreciated in the Dublin government, which had been better prepared for Brexit than Whitehall and Westminster. An early prudent step into the future was taken by Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny in late April 2017,

just before negotiations between the UK and the EU began. At his initiative, the European Council of heads of states and governments formally agreed in their minutes that, in the event of Irish reunification, Northern Ireland would automatically return fully to the European Union.⁹

In the June 2016 referendum, the UK as a whole voted to leave by 52 per cent to 48 per cent, but Northern Ireland voted to remain by a more significant margin: 56 per cent to 44 per cent. The local result strongly suggested that the remain/leave division within Northern Ireland significantly coincided with the nationalist/unionist or cultural Catholic/cultural Protestant division, but not completely. Every Westminster constituency in Northern Ireland which had previously had a nationalist majority backed remain by over 8,000 votes. Remain's lowest margin of victory within safe majority-nationalist seats was in Fermanagh & South Tyrone (59 to 41 per cent). Remain won both swing seats in Belfast – comfortably in Belfast South, but by a whisker in Belfast North. All Westminster constituencies on the border voted to remain, as did urban voters in Belfast as a whole and in Derry. Strikingly, two of the then nine safest unionist constituencies voted remain: North Down and East Londonderry. The first has the lowest share of Catholics, the second may slowly be becoming a marginal seat. The leave side prevailed in two of the safe unionist constituencies by just over 500 votes. Differently put, nationalists were more solidly in favour of remain than unionists were in favour of leave.

This referendum result was replicated in both the European Parliament election of May 2019 and the Westminster election of December 2019. The combined vote in the latter election of the largest remain parties – Sinn Féin, Alliance, the SDLP, and the Greens – constituted 55 per cent. Remain MPs are currently a majority of Northern Ireland's Westminster delegation: ten out of eighteen. Nationalists, however, continue to punch underweight at Westminster. As long as MPs must take an oath of allegiance to the Crown to take their seats it seems unlikely that Sinn Féin will fully participate in that body, though that party has been burning many of its sacred cows since 1986.

The Alliance winner in North Down in 2019 was Stephen Farry, a cultural Catholic in a constituency with few Catholics – evidence of

hostility to Brexit among unionists who are prosperous and educated professionals. Less noticed, in Lagan Valley the vote share of the incumbent MP, Jeffrey Donaldson, fell by 16.4 percentage points. Surging into second place behind him was the Alliance Party's Sorcha Eastwood, improving her party's previous performance by 17.7 percentage points. She too is a cultural Catholic. These contests demonstrated a significant swing to the pro-European Alliance among cultural Protestant voters. One question ahead is whether socially liberal Protestant remainers and socially liberal cultural Catholic remainers, who currently back parties designated as 'others' (notably Alliance and the Greens), will move jointly to favour Irish reunification within the European Union. If they do move in that direction, the pressure to hold a referendum on reunification will materialize sooner than many commentators currently expect.

In the UK's 2016 referendum, the Democratic Unionist Party, then the largest unionist party, endorsed Brexit. No other major party in the North did. The DUP's MPs at Westminster nevertheless eventually, and deliberately, chose to support a 'hard Brexit': a total withdrawal from the EU's institutions – its parliament, its court, its commission, and its ministerial councils – *and* its treaties and policies, especially the customs union and single market. A hard Brexit would automatically mean a new customs and regulatory border between the UK and the European Union. The DUP claimed it did not want a hard land border recreated on the island of Ireland, but then deliberately acted to promote that goal by refusing all 'soft exits' that would have kept the UK aligned with the EU in ways that would have avoided the need for regulatory or customs borders. Along with the Brexiteers in England, the DUP suggested that novel technologies – falsely claimed to be in active operation elsewhere – would resolve any teething problems. These 'alternative arrangements' were correctly diagnosed as 'unicorns' and dismissed by the Government of Ireland, and the European Union, and eventually by the UK Government. Special arrangements would, however, be required for Northern Ireland if restoring a hard border on the island were to be avoided.

The DUP had an opportunity to promote a softer UK exit from the EU, including full UK alignment with EU customs and regulatory policies, which would have avoided the need for any hardening of the