The Case for Negotiated Independence

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Negotiated independence is not the preferred option of either section of the Northern Irish community and is not currently favoured by the British or Irish Governments. However, it has been suggested as a solution to the province’s problems by several distinct groups and individuals, representing a wide range of political opinion. Among unionists, it has been advocated primarily by paramilitary groups, such as the Ulster Loyalist Central Co-ordinating Committee in 1976 and the New Ulster Political Research Group, a think-tank attached to the Ulster Defence Association, in 1979 (NUPRG 1979; Ulster Loyalist Central Co-ordinating Committee 1976). In 1987, a task force of the two main unionist parties argued that the concept of negotiated independence was becoming increasingly attractive among Protestants (Joint Unionist Task Force 1987: 5). Among nationalists within Northern Ireland, an influential section of the SDLP, the largest Catholic party, supported independence in the mid-1970s. They succeeded in having a motion passed at the party’s 1976 conference instructing the party’s executive to undertake an immediate study of the option (Arthur 1982: 125). In Britain, James Callaghan, the former British Prime Minister and person responsible for introducing British troops into Northern Ireland in 1969, publicly declared his support for independence in 1981 (The Times, 3 July 1981) a position subsequently supported in a Sunday Times editorial (16 August 1981). Finally, the concept has also attracted support from a number of politicians in the Republic of Ireland.2

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Despite the diverse nature of this support, the case for independence has not been presented in detail in the academic literature on Northern Ireland. This chapter seeks to fill this gap. More than this, however, it is our concern to set the parameters within which an independent northern state is a viable and sustainable option. Taking into account the political and economic risks associated with the creation and maintenance of an independent Northern Ireland, it is argued that the dangers can be sufficiently minimized and the foundations laid for a peaceful resolution only if the British and Irish governments are determined in their commitment to support this particular settlement. Ultimately, everything depends on the willingness of these governments to act in concert toward this end.

1. Allegiances, Attitudes, and Strategies

Negotiated independence is an intrinsically just solution in so far as it involves the requirement that the most favoured political arrangement of both nationalists and unionists must be withdrawn from consideration, because neither is acceptable to both communities. It requires each side to abandon that which the other objects to—the political link with Britain on the one hand, the so-called ‘Irish dimension’ on the other. It requires that both groups set aside their differences and forge a new identity for the new state of Northern Ireland on the basis of their common or shared interests. It rules out the unrealistic notion of a political victory for either side and involves concessions from both sides.

As an option for Northern Ireland, independence is usually dismissed without much consideration as unrealistic. This is partly due to a prevailing and often unquestioned orthodoxy that the basis for a common allegiance to a state of Northern Ireland does not exist among the province’s warring factions. According to the orthodox view, Northern Ireland’s Catholics identify with their co-religionists in the Republic of Ireland and seek unification with them; Northern Ireland’s Protestants identify with their co-religionists in the United Kingdom and wish to remain united with them; and the two groups are intensely divided from each other and have little in common. While there is clearly some truth in this, it is exaggerated, and in a way that undermines the case for independence.

Northern Ireland’s Protestants do not in fact strongly identify with the people on the British mainland, at least not with the English.
Their loyalty to Westminster has always been conditional in nature—useful in so far as it poses an obstacle to a united Ireland but to be jettisoned if it no longer fulfils that purpose (Miller 1978). Even those Protestants who want to be ‘integrated’ with Britain do so because they regard that arrangement as the most effective way of preventing rule from Dublin, not because they have any positive desire to be governed from London. Since the abolition of their Parliament by Westminster in 1972, many Protestants have objected to the colonial nature of their subordination to London. They resent being governed by English protoconsuls with different accents and values, some of whom have made it clear that they regard their stay in the province as a penance rather than an honour or even a duty. They were distressed when Harold Wilson mocked their self-reliance and ignored their sacrifice in two world wars by dismissing them as ‘spongers’ during the 1974 workers’ strike. They suspect that the ‘mainland’ British regard the level of political violence as ‘acceptable’ as long as it is contained in one part of the kingdom, i.e. Northern Ireland. But, most of all, they are profoundly afflicted by the fear of an imminent ‘sell-out’ by Westminster, an anxiety greatly increased by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985. Since that time, Protestant politicians routinely talk of Protestant ‘alienation’ from the British, a term that hitherto was only used to describe the plight of Catholics.5

While the IRA’s skilful propaganda has tended to obscure the fact, the aspiration of Northern Ireland’s Catholics for the reunification of Ireland is much weaker than is commonly thought outside the province. When offered a choice of options in a poll in January 1986, only 26 per cent of Catholics chose a united Ireland, unitary or federal in structure (Belfast Telegraph, 15 January 1986). A large minority of Catholics, possibly as many as 25 per cent, voted against a united Ireland in the 1973 Border Poll, despite being told by their leaders to boycott the poll (Compton 1981: 91). While it is true, of course, that the overwhelming majority of Catholics vote for nationalist parties, this does not mean that they agree with all the policies presented by these parties, or even with those policies deemed central to their respective platforms. Some Catholics vote for nationalist parties because those parties are at least partly concerned with improving the position of Catholics within Northern Ireland, and because they have no desire to vote for unionist parties.

A large proportion of Catholics fear a decline in their living standards in a united Ireland and they are unwilling to be caught in the middle of the civil war that would accompany any attempt to force Protestants into such a settlement.

Nor is it correct to claim that Northern Ireland’s Catholics and Protestants have nothing in common. Simply by living together and encountering similar experiences, including the ‘troubles’, both groups have come to share identities which are exclusive to the province and which distinguish them from people in the Republic and Great Britain. A 1968 survey of community identification in Northern Ireland revealed that 67 per cent of Protestants thought Ulstermen of the opposite religion were about the ‘same as themselves’, while only 29 per cent thought the same about Englishmen. Similarly, 81 per cent of Catholics regarded Ulster Protestants as about the ‘same as themselves’ but only 44 per cent thought this about southern Catholics (Rose 1971: 214). In an important study of a rural community in Northern Ireland Rosemary Harris, an anthropologist, found that, despite the social segregation, there was a ‘considerable area within which Catholics and Protestants shared a common culture’ (Harris 1972: 131; see also Murphy 1979). While Northern Ireland clearly has profound divisions, so have other societies, such as Malaysia, Singapore, India, and Tanzania, which have managed to maintain independence and stability.

The most desirable way to proceed towards an independent Northern Ireland would be for the communal leaders in the province to take the first step. They could hold negotiations to establish if a consensus existed. If such a consensus emerged and looked stable, there would be tremendous pressure on the London and Dublin governments to welcome and assist the establishment of an independent state.

It must be conceded, however, that under the present circumstances there is no realistic possibility of such a spontaneous agreement emerging. Politicians in the province show no sign of being willing voluntarily to abandon their preferred alternatives. Even if they did, there are no guarantees that they would attract enough popular support. Independence as an option enjoys only a low level of support in the province, ranging from 3 per cent in October 1979 to 8 per cent in May 1987. This is partly because the idea has not been seriously discussed and also because the risks and dangers
attached to it are more immediately obvious than the benefits and 
advantages. If independence was widely debated and analysed as a 
genuine option by political leaders, lawyers, economists, the media, 
and the general public, many more would certainly favour it, though 
maybe not a majority of today’s electorate. Lack of majority consent 
in Northern Ireland seems so formidable an objection that it is often 
used to foreclose any further discussion of a range of options 
including independence.

If independence is to be realized, therefore, the first steps would 
have to be taken by the London and Dublin governments. They 
could justifiably decide, without risk of international opprobrium, 
that because the Anglo-Irish Agreement had not produced stability 
and showed no sign of doing so, the time had now come for the 
people of Northern Ireland to solve their own problems.

The outcome of this decision would depend on the way it was 
carrying out. In the present atmosphere of fear and distrust in the 
province, the immediate and complete abandonment of Northern 
Ireland to its own devices would carry with it a serious risk of civil 
war, the ‘malign scenario’ regularly predicted by Dr Conor Cruise 
O’Brien (O’Brien 1974). If the London and Dublin governments are 
to produce by their actions a stable and reasonably prosperous 
Northern Ireland, they would have to proceed in the following way. 
First, the British government would have to agree to withdraw from 
Northern Ireland at a fixed date in the future, allowing a sufficient 
transition period for it to develop support for the concept in 
Northern Ireland. During this transition period, Britain would invite 
all the important political organizations in the province to attend a 
conference to devise a constitution for the new state. The British 
government would have to inform the conference that it would 
withdraw at the end of the transitional period, whether or not an 
agreement was reached, leaving the northern Irish to fend for them-

selves. Secondly, the British government would have to proclaim its 
willfulness to continue its present policy of subsidizing the economy 
of Northern Ireland for a period of fifteen to twenty years. Without 
this subvention—£1.7 billion annually at the current rate—the 
present living standards in Northern Ireland could not be main-
tained; it would be more difficult to rebuild the economy; and the 
ensuing competition for scarce resources would put an intolerable 
strain on intercommunal relations. Thirdly, the Republic of Ireland 
would have to withdraw its constitutional claim to Northern Ireland 
and agree to sponsor, or at least refrain from vetoing, the new state’s 
application for membership of the European Community (EC). If the 
Republic continued to exercise irredentist claims over Northern 
Ireland, it would severely damage the prospects for internal 
accommodation. Northern nationalists would be encouraged to continue 
working towards, and fighting for, a united Ireland, while northern 
unionists would continue to regard them as fifth-columnists of a 
foreign power and oppose their involvement in government. Without 
access to the EC trading bloc the Northern Ireland economy 
would be in severe difficulties even if the British subvention con-
tinued. Finally, the two governments would have to facilitate 
internal accommodation by making their sponsorship of the new 
state conditional upon the Protestant majority agreeing to the 
establishment of a constitution acceptable to the Catholic minority. 
Apart from the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, the other 
members of the Community, any of whom could veto Northern 
Ireland’s application for membership, would probably also insist 
that the constitution be acceptable to both Catholics and Pro-
testants.  

Until now, both groups in Northern Ireland have enjoyed the 
advantages of Community membership and the large subvention 
from Britain, regardless of whether or not they were prepared to 
accommodate each other. For the first time, both benefits, without 
which Northern Ireland could hardly survive, would be used in a 
constructive fashion, to provide powerful, perhaps irresistible, 
incentives to compromise. If the two governments could agree to 
proceed in this way, it is likely that both sides in Northern Ireland 
would be able to achieve a settlement of their differences such as 
cannot be achieved otherwise.

For the first time, both communities would be faced with the 
prospect of sole responsibility for the future of the territory they 
share. Looking at them as they are now, frozen in attitudes which 
makes it impossible for them to contribute rationally to political 
progress, it may seem that independence would lead to disaster. But 
until now, neither community has had to face this responsibility. 
Both sides have been able to avoid compromise knowing that the 
British government would ensure that the violence would be 
contained within certain levels, and the economy would be sub-
sidized indefinitely no matter what damage the political impasse did 
to it. It was the probable therapeutic effects of this scenario that led
James Callaghan to declare his support for independence in 1981 (Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 2 July 1981, vol. 7, no. 133, cols. 1046–53). Such a strategy undoubtedly involves some risks but, as will be shown, these risks are not as great as the critics of independence allege.

There are several reasons why Protestant leaders faced with resolute action of this sort by the two governments would want to draw up a constitution acceptable to the Catholic minority. They would be aware that an independent Northern Ireland, denied both the British subvention and access to the EC trading bloc, would be in an unenviable situation. The already stagnant economy, which is heavily dependent on trade, would be put in extremely serious difficulties. Living standards would decline drastically overnight. There would probably be a massive outpouring of the most mobile and well-qualified sections of the population, causing further decline. A constitutional settlement that was unacceptable to the large Catholic minority would help the cause of the IRA and seriously jeopardize the stability of the new regime, posing another tremendous obstacle to any hope of economic recovery. Faced with an economic catastrophe of such magnitude, it is inconceivable that the Protestant leadership in Northern Ireland would resist an internal accommodation with Catholics. This is why they have consistently refused to consider a unilateral declaration of independence, for such an action would produce these same unwelcome consequences. Even if Britain was not prepared to isolate an intransigent Protestant government completely because of the suffering that this would cause, more limited sanctions, perhaps selectively aimed at sectors of the economy in which Protestants dominate, would probably be enough to induce a more conciliatory spirit among their leaders. In addition, Protestant leaders would be aware, or could be made aware, that the government of the Irish Republic, with its larger population and well-equipped armed forces would ‘not stand idly by’ and permit a repetition of Stormont-type behaviour towards Catholics. The fact that the British sovereign power would have left the province would free a Dublin government to take whatever action it considered appropriate. It should be remembered that the Republic’s Government considered intervening in 1969 to prevent Protestant maltreatment of the minority (Kelly 1971).

Apart from these powerful arguments against intransigence, there are at least two positive incentives to compromise that could be employed. First, by offering to recognize the legitimacy of the new state (i.e. withdrawing its constitutional claim in return for an internal settlement in Northern Ireland) Dublin would have gone a considerable way towards reducing the ‘siege mentality’ among Protestants that has caused them to refuse to compromise in the past. This siege mentality helps to explain why Protestants excluded Catholics from government in Belfast between 1921 and 1972, and why they discriminated against them in terms of jobs and houses in the hope that they would be forced to emigrate. Secondly, a constitution acceptable to all sections of the community in an independent Northern Ireland would be needed to provide the unity of purpose essential for the reconstruction of the Northern Ireland economy after independence.

It should not be surprising that those Protestants who have seriously considered the option of an independent Northern Ireland have made it perfectly clear that the success of such a state would depend on majority tolerance towards the minority. For example, the UDA document Beyond the Religious Divide (NUPRG 1979), which advocated independence, was described by Bernard Crick as ‘a genuine attempt to shift religious antipathy into constitutional argument and inter-community self-government’ (quoted in O’Malley 1983: 320). While the UDA plan did not provide for mandatory power-sharing in government, provisions in the constitution it proposed, including one stipulating that the election of the pivotal position of Speaker needed a two-thirds majority in the legislature, ensured that the system could not function without the co-operation of both sections of the community. The proposed constitution also provided for a Bill of Rights which could only be mitigated during a period of ‘public emergency’, and which would require for validation a two-thirds majority of the legislature (NUPRG 1979). Clearly, not all Protestant leaders would be willing to accommodate Catholics in an independent state but it is likely that a substantial majority would. On this score a prolonged transition period might help to facilitate the emergence of a new group of Protestant politicians to replace those rendered immobile by their past rhetoric of intransigence.

It should be noted that current demographic changes may soon make power-sharing between Catholics and Protestants necessary even if it is not constitutionally entrenched. The proportion of
Catholics in the population of Northern Ireland has been rising strongly in recent decades. Demographers have argued that it will increase from its present level of between 38 and 42 per cent to somewhere between 44 and 51 per cent before stabilizing in the early decades of the next century (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, app. 7). If elections in an independent Northern Ireland continue to utilize the present system of proportional representation and if non-sectarian parties continue to achieve around 10 per cent of the poll, both reasonable assumptions, neither of the two main factions will be able to govern by itself. As the two populations come closer in size to each other, a multiple balance of power will be created in the province and coalitions of some sort will become necessary. Political scientists regard the presence of such a balance of power to be a very important factor underlying the existence of power-sharing governments in other divided societies (Lijphart 1977: 55–61). The ability of the Unionist Party to win a majority by itself between 1921 and 1972 goes some way towards explaining why its leaders were not prepared to share power with Catholics during that period.\(^1\)

The emergence of a multiple balance of power in an independent Northern Ireland may well be facilitated by the growth of new, non-sectarian parties. The unionists have been able to maintain their dominant position in elections, as one party before 1969 and as a varying number of closely allied parties since then, because of the threat to the border. Despite their monolithic appearance, they are in fact divided by denomination, class, region, and differences of interest between agriculture and industry. On several occasions between 1921 and 1969, especially when the threat of Irish unity seemed weakest, this natural clash of interests threatened to emerge, giving rise to class-based politics and parties that could appeal to both sections of the community. The unionists, and their nationalist counterparts, were always saved by the re-emergence of the border as the dominant issue. In an independent Northern Ireland, with its frontiers guaranteed by both London and Dublin, the basis for sectarian politics would be greatly weakened.

Some nationalists have claimed that even if a constitution for an independent Northern Ireland could be agreed to by both communities, such a state would be in constant danger of an undemocratic Protestant takeover.\(^2\) These fears, however, are greatly exaggerated. Protestant leaders would be aware that such action would be completely unacceptable to London and Dublin, both of whom would continue to have an obvious interest in the stability of a Northern Ireland state. If, in spite of this, such a coup did take place, the Protestant junta that had taken power could be brought to its knees by either the British or Irish governments. If Britain chose to, it could destroy such a government without military action and at no cost to itself, by simply cutting off financial aid and imposing a trade boycott. This would make the new state completely unviable and would force all but the completely irrational to come to terms. An undemocratic Protestant takeover would also invite intervention from the militarily stronger Republic, especially if the coup resulted in harsh treatment for the minority.

The main danger to political accommodation between Catholics and Protestants in an independent Northern Ireland would be continuing paramilitary violence. If this could not be contained, it would polarize the two communities, strengthen the hands of militants, and undermine the position of moderates. Given the violent traditions of both communities, it would be foolish to ignore this danger but it would also be wrong to overestimate the risks. The claim that independence would be followed by continuing or even increased violence rests on the assumption that present paramilitary attitudes would remain unchanged in an independent Northern Ireland. But there are good reasons why this would not be the case. The removal of the British presence resulting from independence would achieve the Provisional IRA's goal of 'Brits out' and would remove a fundamental part of its raison d'etre. Irish republican extremists, whose support expanded greatly when British troops arrived in the province in 1969, and who are guaranteed sufficient recruits and a sympathetic population while those troops remain, would find it considerably more difficult to keep fighting if both parts of Ireland became republics, both governed by Irish people. Moreover, those who chose to continue fighting for a united Ireland would have to do so without the legitimacy that Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's Constitution presently lends to their cause. Their position would also be weakened to the extent that Catholics were treated equally with Protestants in the new state. The British government could further undermine support for the militant nationalist cause by making it perfectly clear that the large British subvention would no longer be forthcoming in a united Ireland. Nationalist intellectuals readily admit that a united Ireland would be unviable without this, but wishfully assume that British subsidies would
continue to be made available to them (see, for example, Rowthorn and Wayne 1988, and Chapter 2 above).

As for the loyalist paramilitaries, some of these have been among the chief promoters of an independent Northern Ireland acceptable to both communities. They would not want to jeopardize its prospects for success by attacking the minority population. Many loyalists appreciate that, with Britain gone, their only chance of survival in the whole island of Ireland, where they are outnumbered 4 to 1, would be to act responsibly towards the minority population. In an all-Ireland military confrontation provoked by Protestant violence against Catholics, the Protestants could not win. It is their present insecurity resulting both from their fear of a British sell-out and the Republic’s constitutional claim that has provoked Protestant paramilitary violence against Catholics in the past. In an independent Northern Ireland, loyalists would be in control of their own relationship with the Irish Republic and would no longer have to worry about deals conducted over their heads or behind their backs, such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement. This new state of affairs would provide a sounder base for a friendly relationship between North and South than is possible under present circumstances.

It could be argued that a British unilateral severance of the Union would provoke a loyalist armed rebellion, such as occurred in 1912 with the organization of the UVF. But a rebellion against whom or what? Loyalists organized in 1912 because they were faced with the imminent prospect of government from Dublin. In the 1990s, faced with the departure of the British and an end to the Republic’s constitutional claim over Northern Ireland, any extreme loyalist group inclined towards armed rebellion would have no one and nothing to rebel against. The British would have gone, leaving the northern Irish in complete control of their own territory.

Those Protestants (or Catholics) who could not, under any circumstances, reconcile themselves to forgoing the Union, could be given financial aid to move to Britain. It would have to be made clear—to give the state a chance to succeed and to prevent a mass exodus of skilled labour to Britain—that these grants would continue to be available for a significant period. All Northern Ireland citizens should, of course, continue to have the full rights of British citizens, as the people in the Republic have currently. As Callaghan pointed out, the British ‘guarantee’ could be switched from the territory of Northern Ireland to the people themselves (The Times, 3 July 1981).

Independence, unlike any other option, would present both sets of paramilitaries with a quid pro quo, with both being able to claim a sort of victory. The IRA could claim that while they had not achieved a united Ireland, they had rid the island of the British. The loyalists could claim that they had effectively prevented a united Ireland. This would provide the essential framework for an accommodation between the two groups that could not possibly occur if one side is clearly seen to be the winner and the other side the loser. Hopefully, the leaders of the paramilitary factions could be persuaded to participate in the negotiations leading up to the establishment of the new state.

The prospect of political negotiation among paramilitaries has been increased by recent political developments in the major paramilitary factions. The leaders of these organizations have made serious efforts to promote reconciliation and to confront the problem of sectarianism in Northern Ireland (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: app. 5). The UDA’s document Common Sense (Ulster Political Research Group 1987) is the most enlightened and moderate document to have emerged from the unionist side since the troubles began. On the Republican side too, leaders of Sinn Féin have become increasingly vocal in their condemnation of sectarianism, a development which, while uneven, represents a reassertion of the traditional non-sectarian values of the republican movement dating back to the eighteenth century when it was led by Protestants (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 7). Such developments indicate a potential for realism and compromise among the paramilitaries on both sides and casts doubt on the inevitability of a sectarian blood-bath in an independent Northern Ireland. It is probable that some members of the paramilitary factions would continue to fight but it is not clear that they would constitute serious threats to the new state. If violence did continue on a significant scale, it may be necessary to import neutral security forces either from EC countries (excluding Great Britain) or from the United Nations to aid the indigenous security forces.

The risk of continuing or increased violence in an independent Northern Ireland has also to be balanced against the dangers involved in accepting the only other options available. There will almost certainly be a full-scale civil war if any attempt is made to force one million Protestants into a united Ireland. On the other hand, the death-toll will continue to mount if the British remain in Northern Ireland.
2. ECONOMIC VIABILITY

One of the most serious objections that has been made to the concept of an independent Northern Ireland is that it would not be economically viable. While every economist who has dealt with the subject agrees that the province would need continuing external aid, some add that it is highly unlikely that such aid would be forthcoming, at least not for the extensive period that would be required to rebuild the Northern Ireland economy. David Blake, the economics editor of The Times, wrote that it would be ‘unlikely’ that Britain would be willing to go on paying large sums to a country with which it had severed links (The Times, 3 July 1981). The Belfast Telegraph (4 and 9 September 1986) responded strongly to suggestions by UUP deputy leader Harold McCusker’s claim that independence might be a viable option by dismissing as ‘mere wishful thinking’ any notion that long-term British financial support would follow a grant of independence. In an article on independence published in 1982, Paul Arthur also speculated that such aid would not be forthcoming, noting that Britain had not displayed such generosity towards other dependent territories (Arthur 1982: 131).

If British aid was not forthcoming for a prolonged period, an independent Northern Ireland would face severe difficulties. The British subvention—the gap between government spending in Northern Ireland and the amount raised in the province in taxes and levies—is currently £1.7 billion per annum and is likely to increase. The 1984 New Ireland Forum Report estimated that it represented 29 per cent of the province’s GDP, and that if the subvention had not existed in 1982–83 taxes would have had to rise by 69 per cent in order to maintain the level of services and expenditure (The Times, 15 November 1985). Such an increase in taxes is out of the question. It would only jeopardize further the province’s faltering industrial base and result in a sizeable emigration of the most mobile and wealth-producing sections of the population, the middle class and skilled labour. The decline in the economic stability of the state would put a severe strain on political stability. The ability of the British government to curb extremist tendencies in an independent Northern Ireland would be reduced without the economic clout it would possess if it continued to pay the subsidies.

Because Northern Ireland is a part of the United Kingdom at present, it is automatically entitled to British government support. Outside the UK, this automatic entitlement would cease and would have to be specifically negotiated (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 120). The danger of losing the subvention is often used by academics and politicians to discredit serious discussion of any option that does not include continued membership of the UK. However, we would argue that it is highly unlikely that Britain would grant independence to Northern Ireland without also agreeing to continue the subsidies. An economically unstable Northern Ireland on Britain’s western flank would not be in that country’s strategic interests. Furthermore, Britain could realistically expect to save money from negotiated independence even while continuing to underwrite the Northern Ireland economy. The repatriation of British troops would immediately cut Britain’s costs by around £200 million per annum with virtually no negative effect on the local economy (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 157). Other sources, such as the USA and EC, would probably be willing to share the burden of aid as the price of a durable peace in an area of some strategic importance. At the end of the 1970s, funds from the EC provided a net addition of nearly 10 per cent to the Irish Republic’s budget resources after allowing for that government’s financial contribution to the Community. The EC also provides substantial aid to many countries outside its boundaries. Fine Gael’s argument that special Community aid would be made available for a transition to a united Ireland clearly also applies to negotiated independence:

It can scarcely be doubted that, in the event of a political solution being found to the Northern Ireland problem, which is by far the biggest single source of unrest and violence within the frontiers of the present community, that institution would be willing to contribute financially to the transitional arrangements towards such a settlement. (Fine Gael 1979, para. 105)

In the long term, the savings to Britain would be much greater. If it stays in Northern Ireland, it will have to continue paying the subsidy indefinitely. If it withdraws, it could expect to abandon payment after a certain, albeit fairly prolonged, period. As economist John Simpson has pointed out, given a stable independent state, the hope must be that Northern Ireland’s dependence on British subsidies would be gradually reduced in the future (NUPRG 1979: 44).

The new state would derive certain economic benefits from independence. It would no longer be susceptible to the deflationary measures which Westminster takes periodically to reduce consump-
tion in the booming south-east of England. It would also have control over economic levers which it does not have presently and which it could use to its advantage. One of the disadvantages to Northern Ireland of its membership of the UK is that it has not been able to pursue an independent exchange-rate policy of its own. A devaluation of the Northern Ireland currency would make it more competitive within the EC and a more desirable location for investment. The state would have some independent borrowing capacity and, freed from the constraints of Whitehall taxation policy, which at present inhibits it from pursuing economic policies that might revitalize its economy, it would be able to provide the same type of tax and investment incentives which have enabled the Republic to build up its manufacturing sector so successfully in recent decades. An independent Northern Ireland would also have greater wage and salary flexibility than it has at present and could, if it so chose, set its wages more in line with what it could afford rather than by reference to Britain, a much wealthier country (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 138). This would make Northern Ireland more competitive and cut unemployment, though it would also mean a lower standard of living for some, at least in the short to medium term.

If the new state gains full representation in the institutions of the EC, it would be in a position to protect its interests there in a way it cannot at present. Northern Ireland, like the Republic, has a large agricultural sector but is represented at the highest levels in the Community by British spokesmen whose job it is to defend the interests of a country with an overwhelming majority of food-consumers. France, West Germany, Denmark, Italy, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Spain, and Portugal all have major farming communities. Northern Ireland as an independent member of the EC would increase their political salience. An independent Northern Ireland within the EC could also expect to take 8 or 9 seats in the European Parliament rather than the 3 it currently has as a part of the UK. It would thus benefit from the convention in the Community (a characteristic of many other international organizations) whereby small countries are given disproportionate influence, a convention which works to its disadvantage while it remains part of a large state.

The argument that Northern Ireland is too small for independence need not be taken seriously. Much smaller countries, like Malta, Iceland, and Luxemburg have prospered. The Republic of Ireland, with a population of only three million, managed to flourish despite being born in less than propitious circumstances (Arthur 1982: 717). And a political unit’s size is of much less importance today in a world of large trading blocs than it was in 1921. Northern Ireland’s small size would only pose serious problems if it was denied access to the EC.

Since the present violence is the chief cause of the economic malaise in the province (Rowthorn 1987: 132), it follows that a peaceful settlement, brought about by negotiated independence, would help to provide the basis for increased investment and an economic recovery in the province. Between 1966 and 1971, multinationals set up 51 new manufacturing units in the province and created 11,600 new jobs. By contrast, between 1972 and 1976, largely due to the ‘troubles’, they established a mere 15 units and created only 900 jobs (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 84–5). With a stable peace, Northern Ireland would start to draw in a significant amount of investment, which in turn would stimulate home-grown firms by providing a demand for locally produced goods and services. It would also give a major boost to the tourist industry and would encourage many of those creative and skilled people who, under present circumstances, want to leave the province to remain (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 12).

A peaceful settlement would also allow Northern Ireland to take advantage of its attractiveness as a location for multinational investment. It possesses an educated professional class, a large supply of skilled workers, relatively low wages, and inexpensive land. It covers a small territory and its communications are good, certainly much better than those in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, the province has good leisure facilities and beautiful scenery, which make it a very congenial place for incoming executives to live, an important factor in multinational decisions on where to locate firms. The province also has a much better record of industrial relations than the British mainland. While Northern Ireland suffers the disadvantage of being located on the fringe of Europe, in this respect it is no different from the Republic, which continues to attract considerable foreign investment (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 121).

3. BRITAIN AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

At the moment neither the British nor Irish Governments seem
inclined to take the resolute steps required to establish a stable independent Northern Ireland. But such steps are not as inconceivable as the critics of independence suggest, and they may be discussed more seriously as the futility of the alternatives becomes increasingly apparent. Moreover, promoting such a solution to the crisis in Northern Ireland may be in the interests of both London and Dublin.

For Britain, giving independence to Northern Ireland would be no more than a logical extension of its present policy of keeping the province apart from the rest of the United Kingdom. Since 1920 the British government has striven to maintain clear distinctions between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It gave the unionists their own Parliament against their will and played no role in Northern Irish politics until forced to do so by the events of the late 1960s. The main British political parties, fearful that the Irish problem would destabilize mainland politics, have refused to organize in the province, and show no sign of doing so in the future. Unionist demands that Northern Ireland be governed by the same procedures that apply elsewhere in the United Kingdom have been consistently refused. Northern Ireland is clearly not 'as British as Finchley', as Prime Minister Thatcher declared during the hunger strikes in 1981. It is inconceivable that London would allow a foreign government a direct say in the running of Finchley or any other part of Britain. Yet Dublin has been given such a role in Northern Ireland under the Hillsborough agreement. This accord indicates that Britain no longer even bothers to conceal its lack of enthusiasm for keeping Northern Ireland in the UK. The continuing Protestant reaction to the Agreement and the prospect of having to subsidize the province indefinitely further tempers what enthusiasm remains.

Negotiated independence for Northern Ireland has several attractions for the British. It would extricate them with honour from an area which has been a drain on their resources and a source of tremendous embarrassment both domestically and internationally. It would be more palatable to the Tory elements of the British establishment than the alternative of coercing the northern Irish Protestants into an all-Ireland Republic. It would also be very popular with the British electorate. Opinion polls in England, Scotland, and Wales have shown consistently that granting independence to Northern Ireland is far more popular than keeping it in the UK or allowing it to become part of a united Ireland. A *New Society* poll in 1981 found that 37 per cent of respondents in Great Britain favoured independence for Northern Ireland, compared to 24 per cent who thought the province should remain part of the UK and 21 per cent who favoured a united Ireland (*New Society*, 24 September 1981). In 1986 a Gallup poll indicated similar results, 35 per cent favouring independence, 26 per cent the UK option, and 24 per cent a united Ireland (*Irish Times*, 29 May 1986).10

British capital has no interest in Westminster maintaining political control over Northern Ireland (O’Leary 1987b: 10–11). If the province were admitted to the EC British companies would still be able to trade, invest, or locate there. Nor need the strategic interests which Britain has in Northern Ireland (and which help to explain why it has stayed in the province) be adversely affected by independence.17 London could insist that Northern Ireland join NATO as a condition for continuing its economic subsidies to the province.18 As far as the British are concerned, an independent Northern Ireland in NATO would be preferable to allowing Northern Ireland to be united with an Irish state which has long professed its neutrality.19 This would go some way towards overcoming the main objections of Enoch Powell and others to an independent Northern Ireland.

The attractiveness of withdrawal to the British is such that the policy seems to have been given serious consideration by some policy-makers in the mid-1970s. First, the White Paper of July 1974 setting out the British government’s future course after the collapse of the Sunningdale agreement was the first in a series of such documents which did not reiterate the pledge that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK as long as a majority there wanted it (*The Northern Ireland Constitution* (1974), Cmdn. 5675 (London)). Second, according to Merlyn Rees, the Northern Ireland Secretary from 1974–6, a Cabinet subcommittee under Prime Minister Wilson considered withdrawal at a series of meetings in the 1974–5 period (Bew and Patterson 1985: 76, 106; Langdon 1983). Third, during 1974 republican and loyalist paramilitaries met at several conferences where they seemed to be moving towards agreement on an independent Northern Ireland. These conferences were funded indirectly, via the Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission, by the British government. Fourth, the Provisional IRA claims it received a promise of British withdrawal at the time of the truce in February 1975. Many of its policy documents of this period
declared a British withdrawal to be imminent (Bew and Patterson 1985: 80–1). Fifth, in 1975, Sir Frank Cooper, then Permanent Under-Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, told a group of local editors that he expected British withdrawal in about five years. Finally, as we have seen, James Callaghan, the second most important person in the Labour Government during this period, later publicly declared his support for independence (Whyte 1981: 430). It is surely conceivable that a future British government, or indeed the present one, led as it is by a Prime Minister who does not fear radical initiatives, could not only consider withdrawal leading to independence, but carry through such a policy.

From the British perspective, the main problem with this course of action is the risk of destabilizing the province, further undermining the already weak economy, and perhaps even precipitating a bloody civil war. The likelihood of that occurring would be greatly reduced if the government of the Republic of Ireland also recognized the independent state of Northern Ireland. Some may claim that there is no possibility that this would ever occur; and they are probably correct that there is little incentive, in present circumstances, for Dublin to embark on such a politically risky course. However, there are situations in which such action by the Republic’s government may be forthcoming. It would not be necessary for London and Dublin to arrive at the conclusion that negotiated independence is the best and fairest solution to the crisis in Northern Ireland independently of each other and simultaneously. It may be sufficient for the British government to make explicit their firm commitment to independence for Northern Ireland and their unwillingness to enact measures to force the Protestants into a united Ireland after they withdraw. Advocates of a united Ireland admit that active promotion by the British of a united Ireland—e.g. the continuation of the subvention, the disarming of the UDR, trade embargoes to force recalcitrant Protestants into submission—is necessary to facilitate the emergence of a united Ireland, rather than produce a costly, perhaps prolonged, civil war, with uncertain results (see e.g. Chapter 2 above). If the British were to make it clear that their support for such measures would not be forthcoming, the Republic would be faced with the choice either of (1) using its influence to ensure a stable Northern Ireland; or (2) refusing to give its support to the independent state, thereby taking the risk that Northern Ireland would disintegrate into civil war, and be eventually partitioned. In these circumstances, it would surely be in their interests to support the independence option and work to ensure that the new state embodies institutions and principles that benefit the Catholic community.

While the recognition and sponsorship of an independent Northern Ireland would pose significant problems for the leaders of the Republic, given the tradition of irredentism which exists there, these could be overcome with political will. In any case, contrary to what Anthony Coughlan would have us believe (Chapter 2), the extent of the devotion to Irish unification in the Republic is exaggerated. The commitment to unification is, in fact, extremely shallow and coexists alongside an unwillingness to make the financial sacrifices or the constitutional changes that would almost certainly be required to make it a serious option.29 As the southern Irish have become more used to partition and more involved in their own considerable problems, and as travel and the media have brought them closer to the reality of the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland, the aspiration to unity has weakened. A 1983 survey shows that support for reunification tended to decrease in the more ‘modernized’ parts of southern society. Younger age groups and those living in the growing urban areas of the country, especially Dublin, are less attached than older people and those living outside the urban areas to the notion of one indivisible nation (Cox 1985: 38). As this demographic trend continues, support for unity will be further weakened. In these circumstances (providing there were reasonable expectations that the position of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland would be safeguarded), a declaration of support for an independent Northern Ireland by the Republic’s government would be unlikely to provoke intolerable controversy amongst the southern electorate.

The changing nature of the Republic’s political elite also offers grounds for optimism among those who favour independence. The revolutionary leaders of the post-1916 era—those who could never accept partition in principle though they were willing to reinforce it in practice by their everyday actions—have been replaced by a generation with different concerns and priorities. While there are notable exceptions, including the present Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, the Republic’s leaders lack the value system of their predecessors and, as Garvin notes, are ‘more concerned with parochial bread and butter issues, the product of competitive
electoral democracy in a rather parochial society rather than the product of the militant and romantic movements in the revolutionary period' (Garvin 1988: 99). Even Fianna Fáil leaders, with a long tradition of unyielding reunificationist rhetoric, have shown themselves in practice to be more concerned with the internal stability of the Republic than with Northern Ireland. Like their counterparts in other southern parties, they have no desire to threaten the peace and homogeneity of what has hitherto been one of the best-integrated societies in Europe.

While for a long time Conor Cruise O'Brien was the only leader in the Republic who publicly accepted that reunification was not a realistic option, recognition of this fact among the Republic's élite is becoming more frequent (Cox 1985: 41; O'Malley 1983, ch. 2). Indeed, the unionists are quite wrong to interpret the Anglo-Irish Agreement as the first step in the Republic's plan to achieve a united Ireland. On the contrary, it is a treaty which is primarily designed to hasten a settlement within Northern Ireland (Garvin 1988: 100). The fact that the Agreement has failed to do this, and has illustrated to the southern élite the extent of Protestant resistance to a united Ireland, may make it more likely that Dublin will consider alternative ways to reach an internal settlement.

An independent Northern Ireland, which has certain attractions for Britain, also has advantages for the Republic. Many nationalists would rejoice because the British presence on the island had been removed at no cost to them in terms of money, lives, or changes in civil law. While Dublin's express withdrawal of the constitutional claim to Northern Ireland (Articles 2 and 3) might incite considerable opposition in the Republic while the British remain in Northern Ireland, it would provoke much less opposition if seen as part of a quid pro quo for British withdrawal. Article 2, which was partly designed to repudiate Britain's colonial presence in a part of Ireland, would be much more difficult to justify if all of Ireland was governed by the Irish. Article 3, with its unrealistic and provocative claim that the Dublin government is entitled to rule Northern Ireland, would, as Senator Whitaker points out in Beyond the Religious Divide, 'be an embarrassing anachronism' which the Republic 'would be in haste to bury and forget' (New Ulster Political Research Group 1979: 48).

It would also be possible for a Dublin government committed to recognizing an independent Northern Ireland to claim that this did not rule out the possibility of a united Ireland at some time in the future. Dublin's recognition would remove pressure from the unionists and would, in fact, make unity more likely in the long term than would be the case if the Republic was to continue its present policy. While constitutional nationalists claim that their policy is based on 'unity by consent', it is in fact based on a degree of coercion. The consistent nationalist strategy, dating from the 1921 treaty negotiations and seen again at Sunningdale and Hillsborough, has been to force the British to pressure the unionists to accept closer relations with the Republic. However, this strategy of appealing over the heads of the unionist leaders has resulted in a deepening of their mistrust of nationalists and the stiffening of their resistance to any form of co-operation with them. As it is unlikely that the British can be persuaded to take the measures necessary to force the Protestants into a united Ireland (never mind the type of state this would produce), the present nationalist strategy can be seen as an obstacle to unity. By recognizing that unity could only come about through 'freely given consent', nationalists would be going some way towards dissolving the fear and mistrust among Protestants which presently reinforces partition.

In this transformed atmosphere, a consensus for unity could emerge at some later time. Some long-term developments in the Republic are making it a more attractive partner for Northern Ireland in the future than it is at present. It is becoming more prosperous and is closing the gap in living standards which exists between it and the United Kingdom. It is becoming more secular, albeit at a slow pace, as it continues to be integrated with the European mainstream. A number of politicians in the Republic are already aware that the less said about unity, the greater the prospects for attaining it. 21

4. CONCLUSION

There are risks involved in giving independence to Northern Ireland. It is possible that the reaction of the northern Irish to such a settlement might not follow the rational course outlined here. If the two groups could not live together and independence resulted in a full-scale civil war, the only option remaining would be to partition the province, as happened in 1974 in Cyprus. Either Britain or the Republic, preferably both, would intervene to perform the same role that the Turkish government executed in that situation.

The risks, however, should not be exaggerated. If the British and
Irish governments could agree to establish the process outlined above, the dangers traditionally associated with independence would be minimized and the prospects for peace and prosperity would be considerably enhanced. In the circumstances created by this process, it is virtually certain that the Protestant majority would be willing to negotiate and abide by a constitution acceptable to the Catholic minority. Unlike any other constitutional arrangement, including the present one, independence would satisfy crucial goals of both the Protestant and Catholic paramilitary factions and would have a reasonable chance of winning their support or at least their acquiescence. There would be no serious risk to the living standards of the Northern Irish. On the contrary, the settlement would help to provide a basis for rebuilding an economy which has been severely weakened by two decades of violence. Given the more certain dangers involved in following the only alternatives, i.e. continuing the British presence in Northern Ireland or creating a united Ireland, negotiated independence deserves serious consideration.

Notes

1. This paper has benefited from utilizing the key arguments presented by those individuals and organizations who have advocated independence for Northern Ireland since 1976. Their publications include Murphy (1984); NUPRG (1979); and O’Connor (1984). Rowthorn and Wayne (1988) has also been very useful. While Rowthorn and Wayne state the case for a united Ireland, they also present arguments which are as suited, or more suited, to the case for an independent Northern Ireland.

2. Those from the Republic of Ireland who have supported the concept of an independent Northern Ireland include Euro MP Neil Blaney, Senator T. K. Whitaker, and Senator Trevor West. Whitaker’s advocacy of this option can be found in NUPRG (1979: 45–8). For West’s views, see West (1973). In addition to Derula Murphy (Murphy 1984), the Irish writer Desmond Fennell has also supported an independent Northern Ireland. See Fennell (1975a,b).

3. This is a central justificatory argument for the institutions and principles advocated by the well-known moral philosopher John Rawls. See Rawls (1983).

4. This suspicion is fuelled by the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which prevents suspected terrorists from entering the British mainland while allowing them to move about freely in Northern Ireland.

5. It was probably this alienation which accounted for the increased support for negotiated independence among Protestants which was discovered by the unionist task force in early 1987. See Joint Unionist Task Force (1987).

6. As Moxon-Browne has pointed out (Moxon-Browne 1977), it has become a well-established tenet of Community philosophy that potential members should observe standards of democracy far in advance of mere majority rule. The Community has suspended benefits to countries during lapses from these standards, e.g. the Colonels’ Greece. In the same vein, the Spanish government was made clearly aware of the democratic reforms that were required before its bid for membership could be considered.

7. For a discussion of the disastrous economic consequences of a unilateral declaration of independence, see Gibson (1986).

8. Rowthorn and Wayne (1988: 138–9) advocate the use of a range of similar measures by the British government to force a Protestant government in Belfast that had unilaterally declared independence into a united Ireland. However, as Protestants are much less opposed to internal accommodation with Catholics in Northern Ireland than they are to a united Ireland, such measures have a much greater chance of promoting the former than the latter.

9. Various other Protestant groups which support independence have also recognized the need for power-sharing with Catholics in an independent Northern Ireland. For example, see statements by the Ulster Independence Movement (Ulster Independence Movement 1976); the Ulster Independence Party in Fortnight, 12 May 1978; and the Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party in Ulster, Jan. 1984.

10. While the UDA’s document Common Sense (Ulster Political Research Group 1987)—reviewed in ch. 6—called for Cabinet-level power-sharing and a Bill of Rights to be entrenched in a Northern Ireland constitution within a United Kingdom framework, the organization has since stated that an independent Northern Ireland should have a similar constitution (Ulster, Sept., 1988, p. 2).

11. Claire Palley uses demographic changes to support her arguments for a united Ireland (Palley 1985; see also ch. 3 of this volume). Palley claims that Protestants would be acting prudently if they started negotiating for a federal Ireland now as they will be voted into a unitary state as soon as Catholics become a majority. However, this line of reasoning is dubious on three counts. First, while the size of the Catholic population is increasing, it is by no means certain that they will ever become a majority. Second, even if Catholics did gain a majority, it is not clear that they would vote for a united Ireland in sufficient numbers, as many, if not most, of them do not support this option at present. Third, and most importantly, even if a Catholic majority did vote for unification, this
would merely replace a United Kingdom which has a large dissentient Catholic minority with a united Ireland which had a large dissentient Protestant minority. On a related point, Rowthorn and Wayne’s view (1988: 212) that Catholics may well become a majority of the population in Northern Ireland casts doubt upon their earlier argument (1988: 138) that Catholics would not voluntarily accept independence because it ‘would leave them permanently reliant on the goodwill of the Protestant majority’.

12. See Garret FitzGerald’s attack on the concept of an independent Northern Ireland from this perspective (Belfast Telegraph, 10 Aug. 1979).

13. By the end of 1988, 2,724 people had died in the ‘troubles’ (see App. 3). British Army generals acknowledge that the Republican campaign of violence will continue as long as there is a British presence in Ireland (see Brigadier James Clover’s comments in O’Malley 1983: 263), and the new Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Peter Brooke, has admitted publicly what British politicians have privately said for a long time: the British security forces cannot defeat the IRA militarily.

14. Rowthorn and Wayne (1988: 157–8) use these arguments to back up their claim that British subventions will be forthcoming to a united Ireland. The arguments, however, are at least as plausible in the context of a negotiated independence for Northern Ireland.

15. In this same document (NUPRG 1979), Senator T.K. Whitaker, former Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland and the person responsible for the Republic’s economic planning from 1958, expressed his conviction that the British subvention would be continued to an independent Northern Ireland and that the state would be viable (NUPRG 1979: 48). He regarded the continuation of the subvention as contingent on both sections of the community agreeing to a constitution for the new state.

16. While nationalist propagandists (Rowthorn and Wayne 1988: 191) are correct to point out that a majority of the British electorate want to withdraw from Northern Ireland, this does not translate into majority support in Britain for a united Ireland.

17. Nationalists, of course, often claim that an independent Northern Ireland would be a threat to Britain’s security. See e.g. Garret FitzGerald’s comments to this effect, Belfast Telegraph, 10 Aug. 1979.

18. Rose (1976b: 157) has pointed out that Britain could, if it thought it necessary, sign a military treaty with the new state, giving Britain the right to intervene if unfriendly forces involved themselves in Northern Ireland. However, such a derogation from sovereignty might pose an obstacle to gaining internal support for independence, especially from Catholics.

19. Ireland refused to end its neutrality even when Britain promised significant steps towards a unified Ireland in 1940 (Bowman 1982: 229–36; see also ch. 1, sect. 4).

20. In one survey 51% of respondents said they would not be prepared to pay heavier taxes to run a united Ireland (Cox 1985: 35). See also ch. 5, Sect. 1 of this volume. In a 1986 referendum a majority of the Republic’s electorate voted to retain a constitutional ban on divorce despite warnings by some politicians that this would weaken the prospects for unity.

21. There are potential benefits which would accrue to nationalists if they refrained from putting pressure on unionists (Whyte 1981: 427–8).