

Fukuyama and the Irish Question

It is often said that people in Northern Ireland tend to have an unhealthy obsession with their own problems. When applied to academics it means that they have a habit of ransacking the work of thinkers who have nothing to say about Ireland at all in order to make a point about the political situation here. I will plead guilty to this offence by shamelessly taking some of the ideas from Francis Fukuyama's book The End of History and the Last Man. "Fukuyama and the Irish Question" I take to be a way of exploring the official hopes placed in the current Talks and the difficulties that would seem to lie in the way of any positive outcome to those Talks. The article outlines briefly those parts of Fukuyama which I think can throw some light on the Northern Ireland situation. It goes on to examine the formal thinking which informs the discourse of the two Governments and upon which an optimistic reading of the current situation is based. There follows an exploration of those resistant features of politics in Northern Ireland which create difficulties for that reading and which predispose one towards a pessimistic reading of the current situation. The article approaches the question in this way because, in the flux of events, manoeuvres and detail, it might provide some fixed point or points for understanding the complexity of issues at the heart of the problem.

Fukuyama

Francis Fukuyama astonished the world in 1989 by announcing The End of History? in an article in the American journal The National Interest and then went on to greater fame through the publication of a book in 1992, The End of History and the Last Man. Now the proposition which everyone remembers is Fukuyama's assertion that the defeat of communism means that there is no viable alternative to capitalist (liberal) democracy and, while there may be dramatic events in the world like the Gulf War and the Balkan conflict, mankind has reached the endpoint of its ideological evolution. However, the real interest of Fukuyama's book lies elsewhere. It lies in its discussion of the characteristics which together constitute the form taken by political modernity.

Very briefly - and simply - Fukuyama traces the triumph of liberal democracy to the successful reconciliation and synthesis of two competing visions of the social. The first, deriving from the liberalism of Hobbes and Locke, emphasises the centrality of self-interest and self-preservation and is dedicated to the arts of peace and trade in order to achieve the goal of material comfort. It seeks

to modernise society through the taming of passion by reason, creating an order in which the rights of persons would find satisfactory inscription in the orderly conduct of public affairs. The second, termed *thymos*, or spiritedness, is the desire for recognition, glory and respect. It involves the assertion of the self or of the group against other selves and groups. It is (potentially) the root of conflict for its basis is honour, not interest, and therefore is potentially beyond the scope of rational compromise which the liberal takes to be self-evidently good for everyone. Hence, the *thymotic* character is associated with fanaticism, the placing of principle before reason. Thymotic desire can take two distinct forms: *isothymia*, the desire for recognition of one's equality; and *megalothymia*, the desire for recognition of one's superiority. It is unnecessary to discuss precisely how Fukuyama believes capitalist democracy has successfully reconciled liberal rationalism and thymotic desire. I simply want to bank these ideas and turn now to consider the significance which the British and Irish governments have attached to the current Talks.

Stabilism

If one were seeking a term which would apply to the stated positions of the British and Irish governments it would not be unionism, nor would it be nationalism. The appropriate term would possibly be *stabilism*, ie that the objective is to achieve stability and that all else (to adopt the famous phrase of Peter Pulzer) is embellishment and detail. Conversations with government officials, British and Irish, lead one to the conclusion that, albeit with differing emphases and prejudices, responsibilities and requirements, both understand the Northern Ireland problem in Hobbesian terms. The question they seek to solve might be summed up thus: how can local politicians devise a rational and just compact amongst themselves and their communities in order to get out of a nasty and brutish state of nature and thus to secure the conditions of peace, putting behind them the fanaticism of historic disputes.

And the two governments, as well as those who subscribe to their endeavours, think that they have a privileged position in envisaging the contours of such a just settlement because, unlike local politicians and their respective electorates, neither government is fully implicated in the passions of Northern Ireland. For all the difficulties presented by the weight of historical bag and baggage - Britain's role in Ireland and the ideological character of the Republic's constitution - the mindset of bureaucratic rationalism creates a common ground upon which

officials from Dublin and London can stand together and resist the residual calls of British Unionism and Irish Nationalism. That, at least, appears to be the basis for equality of recognition and respect among civil servants and their ministers.

This approach understands the task of statecraft in Northern Ireland to be the transcendence of two mutually frustrating dogmas of denial. Stated simply these two dogmas are: no first step *because* it is a step towards Irish unity - the Unionist position - and no first step *unless* it is a step towards Irish unity - the Nationalist/Republican position. Ideally, the task would be to devise a formula which is capable of making the politics of dogmatic denial irrelevant. There would be no longer be any need for negativity because everyone could be a winner. The formula might allow everyone to subscribe to the outlines of a settlement, permitting them to engage constructively for the mutual benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. In Fukuyama's terminology: institutional structures may be devised which can secure the liberal-rational goal of peace and stability by overcoming the destructive consequences of *megalathymia* - the desire to prove one's superiority - and transforming it into a positive *isothymia*, an acknowledgement of the equality of traditions. The current buzzword for this is "parity of esteem".

Some of the central political ideas informing this approach are easily identified. The key idea of British and Irish policy has been that of balance, into which balance are set the principles of consent and self-determination.

* Balance

The claim of the British and Irish Governments is that the object of policy is to create a "balanced accommodation" of the contending parties in Northern Ireland. Essentially that is a claim to political virtue and rationality. This balance normally has been understood to mean the fashioning of an agreement which satisfies two mutually exclusive positions. It has been common, in other words, to propose that the Nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland ought to be balanced against the Unionist commitment to remain fully part of the United Kingdom. In the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 this balance was restated in terms of the principles of consent and self-determination.

* Consent and Self-Determination

On the one hand, the Declaration seemed to concede the principle of *popular sovereignty* to the Irish "people". On the other hand, the Declaration seemed to concede the principle of *constitutional*

sovereignty to the "greater number" in Northern Ireland. This balance was designed to accommodate the Unionist idea of the constitutional people and the Nationalist idea of the sovereign people. The Unionist idea of the constitutional people is a people defined by the status and durability of its institutional life. It fixes Northern Ireland's statehood as part of the United Kingdom, a statehood which can only be changed on the basis of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. The Nationalist idea of the sovereign people asserts that the unit of self-determination for the governance of Ireland, "north and south", must be the "Irish people as a whole". This idea of the people transcends Northern Ireland's current statehood in an all-island framework.

In the Declaration the British Government confirmed again - as it had done both in 1973 () and in 1985 (Anglo-Irish Agreement)- the status of the constitutional people, a status which could only be changed on the basis of consent, freely given. However, it also made clear that it would legislate for any agreement between the Irish people *as a whole*, to whom it conceded a right to self-determination, modified by the need for consent within the North. The Irish Government remained equivocal on this matter - as it had done both in 1973 and 1985. The historic character of the Irish state has been defined not only by the gap between, but also by the claim to remove the gap between, the nationalist *ideal* of popular sovereignty (the 32 counties) and its own *reality* of constitutional sovereignty (the 26 counties). However, the Irish Government too appeared to accept that the British concession of the metaphysics or theology of self-determination for the Irish people as a whole (north and south) meant that it, as the representative of the nationalist ideal conceding the legitimacy of Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom (on the basis of consent). Once these symbolic difficulties had been addressed, the way was open to outline the possible substance of a settlement, which outline was proposed in the Frameworks Document of 1995.

This rationalist vision has helped to inform the optimistic way in which the Talks are discussed. It has been an article of liberal faith that what Locke called "the way of the beasts" - naked power and force - could be overcome through openness and discussion alone. In Churchillian language, jaw, jaw is always better than war, war. This has issued in two optimistic perspectives about the current Talks process, based on the rationality of such grand political compromise.

First, there exists an idealist expectation (idealist in the sense that it gives priority to the exchange of ideas) that talks should be about persuading one's opponent by debate and discussion of the justice of one's case. It is thought that, in a free and open debate across the table, parties will be persuaded by the logic or coherence of arguments and agree to move to a plane of understanding where old antagonisms and bitterness will be resolved (or transcended). This understanding of talking as collective political therapy has a distinguished pedigree, especially in the world of community relations, and assumes a rational common good ultimately capable of being perceived by all participants. It's about building trust and mutual understanding, an adult political version of what is now prominent in local schools: EMU, education for mutual understanding.

Second, there is the realist view (realist in the sense that it gives priority to the assessment of respective positions of power) that talks are about reckoning the impossibility of winning and should be about building alliances to attain one's interests, conceding on some points to gain advantage on others. It is hoped that through such hard bargaining, mutual respect - if not affection - will be built up between the parties and that a balance of compromises can be arrived at to the mutual satisfaction of all sides. The parties at the Talks might not like the compromises they have to accept but they issue in an outcome they are prepared to live with. Ultimately, however, both understandings share a common faith, a common faith in the power of reason and argument to overcome what is understood as violent fanaticism.

This liberal-rationalist approach is based on three interlocking assumptions which, if acted upon by all participants, will lead to a win/win situation:

- 1 that a distinction can be made between symbol and substance;
- 2 that politicians are capable of recognising the distinction between symbol and substance;
- 3 that a deal can be cut on the basis of politicians accepting the value of substantial advantages even if they have to swallow a certain amount of distasteful symbolism.

In short: Unionists will have to swallow the symbolism of cross-borderism in order to secure the substance of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom; Nationalists will have to swallow the symbolism of Northern Ireland's Britishness in order to secure the substance of parity of esteem for their own tradition.

This certainly would be an "end of history" of sorts, an end of history in the sense of changing the pattern of mutual denial in Northern Ireland and ushering in a pattern of mutual recognition. Those who hold to this position reckon that it is the sort of outcome which the majority of people in Northern Ireland wish to see.

Unchanging Constancy?

In principle then, the process we are going through may be read positively, in Fukuyama's own words, as "a supremely rational act, in which the community as a whole deliberates on the nature of the constitution and set of laws that will govern its public life." But as Fukuyama also goes on to say "one is frequently struck by the weakness of both reason and politics to achieve their ends; and for human beings to lose control of their lives, not just on a personal but on a political level".(p212) And if by "losing control" we understand locally the inability of politics to make the required distinctions between symbol and substance, then experience would oblige us to believe that this time around the result will be no different for a solution based on the best will of rationalistic purpose.

For instance, Seamus Mallon, deputy leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, has said that the current Talks are about "Sunningdale for slow learners". Mallon did not intend this in a negative way (he was actually suggesting that, after 25 years of wasted lives and treasure, politicians would now have to confront the rational and unavoidable character of what was proposed in 1973 and was destroyed in 1974. Nonetheless, there is an eerie memory here of what Brian Faulkner once called "necessary nonsense". That phrase was Faulkner's way of trying to convince a sceptical Unionist electorate that the functions accorded to a Council of Ireland, as provided for in the Sunningdale agreement, were necessary symbolic concessions to Irish nationalism in order to secure two substantial gains: political stability and the securing of Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom. These symbolic concessions could mean the end of Northern Ireland's historic sense of instability and insecurity.

The problem for Faulkner and his colleagues on the ill-fated Executive of 1974 was that their electorate had very different "ends" in view. Indeed, without too much exaggeration it is possible to understand Northern Ireland politics in terms of a distinct "ism" (distinct, at any rate, within these islands), that of "endism". Put very simply, the single ideological coin of politics

involves a nationalist sense of destiny, the end point of which is Irish unity and a unionist sense of the apocalypse, also the end point of which is Irish unity. Politics in this form is rarely concerned (if ever) about mutual recognition and stable accommodation. It is mainly about winning and losing in a struggle between friends and enemies, a struggle in which it is virtually impossible to tell the difference between symbolic issues and issues of substance, be those issues marches, anthems, flags or emblems, such as a Remembrance Day poppy. It is, in sum, the politics of communal assertion.

Thus unfolds a pessimistic understanding of what the Talks are about and this understanding seems to correspond with what has actually been taking place over the last months and year. Talks, in this view, are *indeed* about winning and losing, about victory and surrender, about mastery and humiliation. That, it is believed, is the true nature of the political. Real enemies have nothing to discuss. They can only manoeuvre. It is a world of conspiracy theories and manipulative stratagems, to such an extent that the possibilities for compromise or constructive opportunities - such as they may appear to those on the outside - are lost through politicians and officials being either too clever by half or too paranoid for their own good. This is *thymos* or spiritedness with a vengeance and informs already the respective positions of the parties. From a large menu of calculations, only two key ones need to be abstracted.

First, a key assumption of Republican strategy is that it is simply impossible for Unionists ever to concede equality of recognition (*isothymia*) because to do so would mean the collapse of the whole fabric of the state (founded on Protestant *megalo-thymia*). Talks, then, are not about reaching agreement with Unionists (that is by definition impossible and, despite fine phrases, rarely enters the mind of Sinn Fein) but about proving that Unionists represent the obstacle to "reason" and should be dealt with accordingly. And "accordingly" means that the two governments, but especially the British government, should accept responsibility "to move the process further" and confront the Unionist "veto". In sum, construct a strategy conducive to nationalist purpose over the heads of Unionist representatives.

Equally, a key Unionist assumption is that the Irish state, never mind Republicans, cannot accept fully the democratic legitimacy of Northern Ireland by satisfactory amendment (they would prefer scrapping) of Articles 2 and 3 of its 1937 Constitution (*isothymia*) and that there remains a powerful irridentist streak in southern

Irish nationalism which sustains the objectives of the IRA (*megalothymia*). For them, the obstacle to reason is nationalist expectation which should be confronted head on by the British government.

In other words, what both Unionist and Nationalist seek is what they also believe the other side is incapable of giving.

The powerful instinct which tells people that communal solidarity is ultimately essential (mobilising friends to challenge the enemy) if their culture is to be honoured accorded full respect has been traditionally more than a countervailing force to rationalist models of institutional accommodation or exhortations to respect the diversity of cultural and political beliefs. The business of definitive compromise, of the sort prescribed by bureaucratic rationalists, has been interpreted consistently by political leaders as a threat to friends and to their own positions without ever satisfying the ambitions of the enemy. And in this political leaders generally reflect the deepest concerns of their respective electorates. Much of what happens in the political life of Northern Ireland may be gauged by that practical rule of thumb. It suggests the following reading of the practical political difficulties lying in the way of an accommodation, an accommodation based on alternative views of what accommodation really means.

First, the proposition has been advanced that the Talks are about encouraging Northern Nationalists to settle down within a Northern Ireland still within the United Kingdom. Unionists will have to pay a price for this stability and the maximum price is set out in the Frameworks Document. This has been the consistent view of the Republic's Department of Foreign Affairs. The problem here is twofold: first, the minimum nationalist demand - cross-border bodies with executive powers deriving their mandate and original functions from London and Dublin - is something which, even if Unionist negotiators were prepared to concede it (and there is no evidence to date that they will concede it), it is extremely doubtful if such an arrangement could ever be sold to Unionist voters (or at least that is what Unionist negotiators sincerely believe); second, even if it were possible to get agreement on that basis, it seems highly unlikely that Republicans would accept a settlement which not only secured the Union but also returned to Unionists a measure of control over policy in Northern Ireland.

Another proposition has been advanced, namely that the Talks are about devising dynamic structures which would be transitional in

nature, allowing for, or even promoting, movement towards an all-Ireland settlement. This appears to have been the key to ensure IRA support for the process. The problem here is equally twofold: first, there seems no possibility whatever that Unionists would participate in a scheme so transparently designed to ensure the undoing of their position; second, making the principle of unity a priority over the principle of consent, which such a proposition seems to entail, would destroy the last vestiges of confidence which Loyalist paramilitaries had in the process.

If these thymotic judgements are well-founded why is it not the case that, apart from the departure of Paisley's Democratic Unionists and Bob McCartney's UK Unionists, the Talks have not collapsed? Apart from considerations of image (not wanting to be left holding the parcel of threatening the breakout of reasonableness in Northern Ireland, this pessimistic reading would suggest the following reason. There has been no breakdown in the Talks as yet is because no one has had to sign up for anything in particular. The negotiations so far have been abstract, not detailed. Once specific commitments have to be agreed then each major participant has its own particular community to fear. First, David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party is acutely aware of the threat of losing support to McCartney and Paisley. Second, the SDLP is acutely conscious of being outflanked by Sinn Fein. Third, Sinn Fein and the Loyalists know very well the dangers of isolation within their own organisations and within their own communities.

In other - Fukuyamian - words, the possibilities of the Talks "losing control" strike one more forcibly than the possibilities of the "supremely rational political act" of reconciliation.

Conclusion

What conclusion can we come to? It might be instructive to consider the final paragraph of Fukuyama's book where his self-confidence in the benign course of historical development becomes equivocal. Since we have heard frequently over the last few years about trains leaving the Talks station his view seems particularly apt. He employs the analogy of a wagon train to suggest the course of historical progress, progress towards a common destination. However, in the final analysis we cannot know, argues Fukuyama,

provided a majority of the wagons eventually reach the same town, whether their occupants, having looked around a bit at their

new surroundings, will not find them inadequate and set their eyes on a new and more distant journey. (p.339)

In Northern Ireland we have been brought this far by the rationalist possibilities of government policy and we are in the process of determining whether the proposed destination is adequate or not. At this moment, if the different understandings outlined here hold any water at all, the balance of prognostications does not look so good. The German political theorist, Hermann Heller, once wrote in the dying days of Weimar that the value of liberal democracy (a la Fukuyama) lay in the:

belief in the existence of a common ground for discussion and in fair play for the opponent, with whom one wants to reach agreement under conditions that exclude naked force.

The tragic circumstance of Northern Ireland lies in the fact that we are still not certain whether such common ground exists, whether we are all agreed on the meaning of fair play or, indeed, whether we can ever envisage reaching agreement under any conditions which satisfy the honour of the contending parties.

It would be a very brave person who would propose that we have reached the end of our own particular and violent phase of Irish history.

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