Still as divided as ever? Northern Ireland, football and identity twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement

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The signing of the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was widely welcomed by those that interpreted it as offering Northern Ireland the prospect of a fresh start, free from inter-ethnic violence that had blighted the country for almost eighty years. Soon it began to be seen by some observers as the genesis too of a 'Northern Irish' identity, as the community at large came to reconcile themselves to their common lives in Northern Ireland. Sport was also viewed as offering the prospect of adding weight to this sense of a shared journey and governing bodies of sport unquestionably played their parts in supporting a settled political environment where division had previously existed. This article examines the still contested concept of a 'Northern Irish' identity and critically reviews its real currency in a divided society, even if sport, specifically association football, offers renewed hope for something better in the time ahead.

Introduction

Since the signing of an all-Party peace accord in Northern Ireland in 1998, the concept of a settled political context there has taken hold and, with this, the perceived emergence of a 'Northern Irish' identity i.e. an allegiance to Northern Ireland in regard to citizens' identities has become apparent.[1] The Belfast-Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was, unquestionably, ambitious in its aims as it sought to overcome centuries of political and cultural division in Northern Ireland, which were shaped by ethnicity, religion, social and geographical separation.

During the twenty year period since the signing of the Agreement, governing bodies of sport have been engaged in positive outreach work throughout Northern Ireland, principally involving those that would not have, up until that point at least, engaged with their activities; however, it's unclear whether this work has had any meaningful impact in advancing cross-community relations towards desirable, peace-affirming outcomes. Indeed, in the main there is a lack of robust research in this regard and largely none to sustain a credible argument supporting this outcome over the longer-term.[2]

Nevertheless, sport can act as a proxy setting in which wider issues may be discussed and symbolic gestures made. This, in turn can create a 'feel-good' factor, suggesting change is possible in other realms. At times the mere presence of erstwhile opponents or those thought atypical of association with a given sport can make an impact as, very often, sport is

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regarded as a proxy for separate identities in Northern Ireland.[3] Later in this article a case study of the Irish Football Association's (IFA's) Football for All (FFA) initiative and the emergence of the so-called Green and White Army (GAWA), a genial description of Northern Ireland's enthusiastic band of football supporters, will be presented. The emergence of the GAWA has, to a large degree, transformed the image of Northern Ireland football internationally from one that was, perhaps too readily, associated with sectarianism and division to a much more engaging and welcoming environment for all, even if some from the nationalist community in Northern Ireland remain reluctant to fully associate with the team to this day.

What is undeniable is the speed at which the FFA initiative created positive change to the public face of the Northern Ireland football team and affirmed the seminal leadership around the issue offered by the game's national governing body in the country. In the early years of the new millennium it would not be unreasonable to describe the atmosphere at the home venue for Northern Ireland games, Windsor Park in Belfast, as 'toxic' certainly in respect of its approach to welcoming members of the minority nationalist community. But by adopting a programme of direct action – including changing the aesthetics of the stadium and the organisation of its fans - the IFA signalled its intent to deal with the issue of sectarianism head on. In conclusion the article considers what the future will look like for the young people of Northern Ireland, particularly those with a strong interest in association football and, specifically, those from a nationalist background.

The second coming by W.B. Yeats (1919)

Sadly some 20 years after the signing of the GFA, Northern Ireland appears more divided than ever. At the time of writing the country is without a devolved (from Westminster) Assembly on account of a series of disputes between the two main parties in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein, the latter commanding the support of large sections of the country's minority Catholic population. It has led to others, representing a number of smaller political parties there, to conclude that the 'peace process', as it is commonly referred to, remains doomed. Former leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) Alastair McDonnell even went as far as to claim that 'politics has failed' in Northern Ireland. For some observers the course of events has echoes of the poem *'The Second Coming'* by the Irish writer William Butler Yeats, penned in the wake of the first World War, in which Yeats laments the fact that the 'centre cannot hold'.[4]

Thus society in Northern Ireland remains divided along religious, ethnic, social, educational, aspirational and many other lines, and this despite more than two decades having passed since the GFA was confirmed. Moreover, something of a dependency culture still pervades amongst the country's political elite, meaning much of the investment that occurs in Northern Ireland emerges from public sources and, commensurately, there is little by way of wealth creation taking place in the country, as the level of foreign direct investment (FDI), for instance, continues to prove negligible. Instead, regrettably, the political picture in Northern Ireland reminds one of the often cited riposte of the economist Ken Galbraith, 'Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof.' There is a level of intransigence within Northern Ireland politics at present that makes the prospect of a settled, to say nothing of a prosperous, future far from certain. That said, by now there is an almost complete end to violence and armed groupings in the country and there is a growing and positive relationship between both parts of Ireland – Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - with a greater sense of co-operation taking hold and a coherence around a number of common causes, not least of which is the imminent prospect of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union (in Spring 2019), a process often simply referred to as 'Brexit'.

There is, however, a growing ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland, and this is reflected in many aspects of life, with second and third generation immigrants also beginning to exercise their influence across civic society.[5] In addition there is a growing diversity of sporting leadership in the country e.g. Angela Platt as CEO of the Northern Cricket Union(NCU), alongside a rising profile for a number of sports that were previously on the margins of a much smaller number of pre-eminent sporting codes, e.g. cricket and field hockey. In general participation in sport, leisure and the arts remains high in Northern Ireland with 88% of adults engaged in some way with these mediums on a regular basis.[6] Moreover, sporting infrastructure in the country is improving and, in some codes, a professional approach is proving sustainable, e.g. rugby union, where previously this would not have been possible.

2011 UK census – some important trends

Thus, there has been a prevailing view that Northern Ireland has been becoming steadily more 'Northern Irish'. This may be a response to a series of public surveys, including censuses, which would appear to substantiate this belief. However, although an increase in

Northern Irish identity is evident since 1989, this is mainly due to attitudes amongst the majority Protestant community in Northern Ireland as Catholics, some of whom accentuate their Irish national identity ahead of all other markers, remain comparatively lukewarm. Indeed young Catholics are *much* less likely to consider themselves Northern Irish, whilst the opposite is broadly true for Protestants. Social psychological theory on cross-community identities suggests that a new inclusive 'we' is created when traditional identities become less salient but the fact remains – and this is particularly striking amongst the young – that these 'traditional identities' would appear stronger than ever in Northern Ireland. For example, when asked 'How many of your friends would you say are of the same religion as you?', between 2008 and 2012 the proportion of 18-24 year old Catholics who said that at least half of their friends were the same religion as them increased from 66% to 80%. For young Protestants in Northern Ireland the figure rose from 61% to 74%. Regrettably the picture that emerges is one of a generation of young people living out largely separate lives.[7]

This stark reality does, undoubtedly, require some context. Prior to 2009 there appeared to be the beginning of a steady decline in the number of young people who had only close relationships with people like them. The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey*, for example, drawn annually, indicated that from 2007 to 2009 this figure had dropped from 69% to 61% and all the signs were that this trend was set to continue. However, since 2009 the opposite has been true and, by 2012, this figure had grown to the levels outlined above.[8] It would appear that the UK-wide economic downturn of 2008-09 had the effect of leading to high levels of youth unemployment, including in Northern Ireland, an outcome that can prove to be socially isolating and lead those impacted to conclude that their prospects appear bleak. Other factors are also, unquestionably, at play. After the GFA it is easier for Unionists to consider themselves Northern Irish without denying their Britishness. At the same time the further in time society in Northern Ireland moves from the period of paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland it would appear easier for Catholics to refer to themselves as Irish without appearing to support violence. All of which merely affirms the view that it does seem somewhat optimistic to assert that the 'peace process' has somehow organically created an inclusive 'Northern Irish' identity, which will overtake the traditional binary versions that exist there, anytime soon. However, inter-group contact is decreasing fast among the young people of Northern Ireland and, regardless of political opinion, this must be considered a failure of the political process.

One noticeable aspect of the rise in confidence amongst the young Catholic community in Northern Ireland has been the proliferation of Gaelic Athletic Association

(GAA) jerseys that has emerged in public spaces, including in large urban settings, such as Belfast. Here, young people from the Catholic community apparently see no difficulty in public displays of their Irish identity when, only a small number of years ago, efforts to conceal these same identities, for fear of causing offense, would have been commonplace.[9]

How are attitudes formed?

A Community Relations Resource Centre report entitled, 'Too Young to Notice? – The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3 – 6 year olds in Northern Ireland', concluded that the key opinion formers in the lives of young people were family, their local community, and the school they attended. The research confirmed that by ages 5-6 differences in terms of the young people's preferences for particular combinations of colours and football shirts had emerged, whilst some 90% of 6 year olds demonstrated the greatest awareness of the cultural/political significance of parades, flags and Irish dancing. In general a tendency to identify with a particular community in Northern Ireland grew from 13% for children aged 5 to 34% for those aged 6 – a near three-fold increase in 12 months.[10]

Northern Irish identity

In an overarching sense, those identifying themselves as 'Northern Irish' tend to have more tolerant attitudes to the people of other religions.[11] It is also associated with attending integrated education and, again, having contact with religious outgroups. It has also been shown that the further one lives from an area that historically suffered high levels of conflict related violence the more likely one is to consider oneself Northern Irish.[12] However, recent research shows that each group does not have the same level of potential inclusion to Northern Irishness. It has been demonstrated that people consider Northern Irishness to be more closely associated with Britishness (and Protestants) than Irishness (and Catholics) and that the typical Northern Irish-identifier is generally perceived to be a Protestant. It seems likely that the historical and continuing higher average status of Protestants in Northern Ireland may mean they have a greater ability to define what this identity actually means.[13]

The results of local and general elections, specifically the percentages of votes shared, in Northern Ireland since the 1998 GFA offer, perhaps, the most insightful assessment of all, of the contrasting aspirations of the country's divided people. At the time of the signing of the GFA, the chief protagonists, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), commanded almost 47% of the popular vote in Northern Ireland and reflected a prevailing sense of moderate, civic allegiance to the very existence of the country. By 2017 this combined vote

had fallen to 29% and, by then, Sinn Fein and the DUP had not only eclipsed their somewhat more benign opponents but had actually seen their percentage of the vote grow, so that almost 6 people in every 10 in Northern Ireland now vote for either one of these parties, who, of course, retain diametrically opposed positions on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland. The most recent UK General Election results in Northern Ireland are equally revealing in that they lead to a virtual redrawing of the political border separating Northern Ireland from its neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. In this regard there is a straightforward 'east-west' split in that all the seats that exist along the border with Ireland are now held by Sinn Fein, who would wish to see a United Ireland, whilst all the seats – of which there are only 18 in total – in the east are retained by members of the DUP, who, in contrast, wish to see the Union with Great Britain strengthened still further.

But, by far, the most revealing aspect of the 2011 Northern Ireland census was the stated religion for each age grouping in the country. Because of the close alignment of religion to ethnicity and ultimately political allegiances, the fact that the number of 16 year olds who declare themselves to be Catholic outnumbers their Protestant counterparts, and that this merely reflects a trend present for every year thereafter, may well suggest the future of Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, is considerably less certain. In simple terms, if, over a period of some 20 or so years, the majority of people living in Northern Ireland describe themselves as being Catholic and the majority of these people also wish to see greater moves towards a United Ireland then it would seem the likelihood of this actually happening is increased.[14]

Sport and identity in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, a deeply divided post-conflict society, sport has struggled to be a force for unity. Association football is popular among both unionists and nationalists but, as stated earlier in this article, the Northern Ireland international team has, certainly up until very recent years, been associated with the Protestant community and, at times, displays of sectarian aggression. Catholics still tend to support the Republic of Ireland team but even this profile has shifted somewhat to the 'right', meaning the level of support displayed in this way has waned and only the most committed northern nationalists continue to follow the Republic of Ireland team by regularly attending its games. Rugby has traditionally been the preserve of a middle class, and commands a broadly pro-British, certainly constitutionally supportive, demographic following. The governing body of Gaelic sports, the Gaelic Athletic Association

(GAA), was founded as an explicitly Irish nationalist organisation. It has been overwhelmingly Catholic in composition and, as a consequence, traditionally has drawn an ambivalent response from Northern unionists.[15]

Sport as an aid to greater harmony: GAA and IFA

Nevertheless, sport appears to have the capacity to overcome these erstwhile divisions – in three ways. The first is through in-group socialisation – empowering marginalised groups and fostering cultures of peace and tolerance. The second is through building social cohesion across identity divides, bringing people from different backgrounds together in a shared enterprise. The third is through its symbolic power. Sport can foster inclusive identities and embed a political transition in the popular consciousness through unified teams, colours and emblems.

Political developments beyond the sporting sphere can directly impact the potential of sport in this regard. The aforementioned peace process catalysed a number of evolutions towards inclusivity in the sporting realm. The GAA repealed a number of controversial bans it had retained, such as that on the security forces' (police and British army) membership (Rule 21) and has engaged in outreach work among the Protestant community, particularly in schools.

The Irish Football Association (IFA) has made strenuous efforts to create a more welcoming environment for all traditions, principally through its 'Football for All' (FFA) campaign, and has refurbished its main stadium, Windsor Park, so that it has cast off much of the iconography associated with a narrow sense of British identity and is, by now, a broadly welcoming environment for all. Rugby too has cultivated a more diverse following but remains the preserve of the (aspirational) upwardly mobile and so has a much closer association with the politics of social class than perhaps any of the other two mentioned codes.

Brexit and its impact on sport and community relations

As indicated earlier, by far the most pressing concern for all those who live in Ireland at the time of writing this article, including Northern Ireland, is the as yet unclear outcomes associated with the decision of the UK electorate in 2016 to remove the country from the European Union. This is of particular concern to community and sporting bodies, and indeed many others who operate in what is referred to as the 'third' sector, because European Union

Peace funding has totalled £2.2 billion in Northern Ireland since the signing of the GFA in 1998. Moreover, Interregional funding (a package of cross-border funding), designed to stimulate co-operation between European regions, has amounted to a further £1billion worth of financial support. The full extent of the potential loss of this investment into Northern Ireland, notwithstanding a commitment by the UK government to replace this level of funding, if only for a limited period, is not, as yet, fully understood.

Whilst there is an overall lack of rigorous research concerning the impact of cross-community funding for sports projects, presenting opportunities for people of different backgrounds to meet, offers the prospect of enhanced understanding and connections. Moreover, with a lack of clarity on the potential membership of the European Common Market, and with it the existence of so-called 'frictionless' borders, it is also entirely possible that Brexit may impact upon cross-border sporting bodies and travel, including for professional athletes, in Ireland. Finally, as much of sport in Northern Ireland is community-based, it is also possible with uncertainty around the future employment prospects for citizens of Northern Ireland, the avowed separation of the UK from the other 27 EU member states may also result in the further depopulation of the rural West and an 'easterly drift' of those living there.

Even the most recent research drawn in Northern Ireland on civil society's allegiances to sport confirm trends and opinions that have already been well-established**.** Work by Mitchell, Somerville and Hargie, for example, found that sports' support and participation continue to follow traditional cleavages established from the mid-part of the twentieth century and, in some cases, earlier.[16] For instance, 31 per cent of Catholics reported watching 'a lot' of Gaelic Games on television, compared to only 1 per cent of Protestants. Moreover, some people are still reluctant to visit venues associated with the 'other side' in Northern Ireland, whilst some sports colours and even equipment are still regarded as political markers. The survey found that half as many Protestants as Catholics were willing to attend the main GAA ground in West Belfast, Casement Park, as a means of illustrating this point.[17]

At the same time, sport remains affected by Northern Ireland's controversial politics of symbolism. The playing of the British national anthem at international soccer matches and the Irish national anthem at some GAA matches has long contributed to a so-called 'chill factor' for those who do not identify with those allegiances. On this issue, opinion was closely divided, with slightly more (42 per cent) disagreeing with the statement that 'anthems should not be part of sport in Northern Ireland', than agreeing (36 per cent).

Case study of the Green and White Army: building a new Northern Ireland identity

The 2016 European football championships launched both the Northern Ireland football team and their supporters, commonly referred to as the Green and White Army (GAWA), on to the global stage. Just as Michael O'Neill and the players were gaining respect on the pitch, so too were their fans off it as they traversed Europe in support of their team. Their sportsmanship was recognised by the award of both the Medal of the City of Paris and the UEFA 'outstanding contribution' award. Beyond sport the positive influence of the GAWA generated both economic (increased sponsorship and improved destination marketing of NI) and social impact (improved image) for the country.

These achievements were a far cry from the negative image portrayed of Northern Ireland and, in particular, Northern Ireland fans during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This period saw regular displays of sectarian aggression, violence and division across society, manifested at Northern Ireland football matches through the singing of sectarian songs (e.g. 'The Billy Boys' 'The Sash My Father Wore') and booing of certain players (e.g. Anton Rogan and Neil Lennon), simply because they played for Glasgow Celtic (a Scottish team with foundations in Catholic tradition).

This outpouring of sectarianism had not always been the case. Bertie Peacock and Charlie Tully had represented both Northern Ireland and Glasgow Celtic in the 1950s and been well received by spectators. However, as the conflict across Northern Ireland intensified so too attitudes in the stands at Windsor Park hardened. The 'Troubles' (spanning a period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s) instigated entrenched affiliations to either an Irish or British identity, with little or no outlet for those that remained in the 'centre'.[18] Some saw the Northern Ireland team as a vehicle to express their British or indeed Loyalist identity through the explicit use of British emblems, anthems and flags, to the exclusion of those who did not associate with these. On the other hand, nationalists and republicans promoted an, at times, anti-British agenda by offering support to the Republic of Ireland football team, seeing the NI team and its fans as a further representation of an unwelcomed British identity.

To many the atmosphere at Northern Ireland games had become – to use a descriptor deployed earlier - 'toxic', filled with sectarian, political and religious tribalism, with Union flags used to mark territory and affiliation. This reputation spread through the published media, resulting in many traditional Northern Ireland supporters becoming disenfranchised and, as a consequence, attendances at home matches began to drop significantly.[19]

At this time Northern Ireland fans became increasingly aware of the wider societal perception of them as 'sectarian bigots', and in response, along with the support of the IFA, created The *Football for All* (*FFA*) campaign. The initiative was formed with the objective of challenging sectarianism on the terraces at Windsor Park and providing a '*fun, safe and inclusive culture*'[20] within which to watch international football matches. The fans were determined to reclaim *their* team in the belief that *'if we walk away they have won and this is our team*'[21]

Several fans and IFA staff date the emergence of the GAWA to June 6, 2001 and an away match in Teplice against the Czech Republic. Although Northern Ireland lost the match 3-1, the several hundred fans in attendance were determined to sing a new catalogue of non-political songs (e.g. Johnny Cash's 'Sweet Caroline, 'GAWA', 'We're not Brazil we're Northern Ireland'). As one respondent outlined to Bell:

> It (FFA) started because some fans were just fed up with being, em, constantly castigated, particularly in the media, as mindless, bigoted, sectarian thugs. Em, that seemed to have just become the norm in society, that's how you were perceived as a Northern Ireland fan. And some people just got really fed up with that and said, 'Look that's actually not reality and we want to address that.' [21]

This wasn't without challenge however; the Amalgamation of Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs (AONISC) voted in favour of supporting the FFA campaign, despite losing two of their twelve member clubs as a result. Further confrontations were to follow with the lowest point coming in 2002 when Neil Lennon received a death threat from a Loyalist paramilitary group hours before kick-off of the Northern Ireland game against Cyprus. This threat, which following the announcement that he was to captain the team, led to him withdrawing from the game and ultimately retiring from international football. These incidents coincided with a period of change as both communities in Northern Ireland struggled with the transition to a post-conflict society.

In this environment the GAWA initiated a 'bottom up' movement, adopting fan driven ideas as a means to challenge and remove perceived bigotry and sectarianism. In practical terms, fans from the AONISC who were previously spread throughout the stadium, came together creating a mass of supporters strategically positioned throughout the stadium with drums and loud speakers. This form of self-policing created a mechanism to overwhelm any sectarian singing, replacing it with new socially acceptable songs created and shared through a GAWA online community. The use of drums was significant, as previously these instruments were banned from the stadium due to their connection with loyalist marching

bands; however, their reintroduction in support of the FFA message built trust with supporters, based on the symbolic link to their heritage.

In parallel a ‘sea of green’ campaign was initiated to reduce the red, white and blue, perhaps too readily deployed throughout the stadium and typically aligned with displays of overt loyalism. Instead, fans were encouraged to wear green (the Northern Ireland Team playing colour) to games, with merchandise adopted to promote the ‘sea of green’ message. The significance of the move towards green and white for most fans lay in the reconnection between self and ascribed definitions of themselves.[22] In essence the fans altered the ‘structure’ of Northern Irish fandom by changing the authoritative and allocative resources and ‘rules’ associated with supporting the team, which led to the creation of the transformed ‘social system’ otherwise referred to as the GAWA.[19] The impact was seen in the change within the contextual aspects of a football match, which are in theory more important than the physical surroundings,[23] arguably the environmental conditions at a football match set the context as space does not exist as an ontological fact but is (re)created as a social product.[24]

In the early days the change was only evident to those who attended Northern Ireland games; subsequently the campaign reached out to reconnect and engage directly with supporters, community groups and internal IFA staff, holding workshops to promote and communicate the FFA message. Those mainly Protestant supporters who had been forced away from games by the manner in which they had become too readily politicised, began to return and bring their families to games, creating a more diverse atmosphere and image. Further outreach work and the distribution of free tickets to school and community groups representing both the Protestant and Catholic communities further facilitated engagement with non-traditional supporters. In doing so the GAWA movement created a positive brand image at home and abroad, which connected with the hard to reach (or more appropriately labelled ‘hard to hear’), something Government had tried to initiate in communities across NI but with limited success.

Government

Fans and the IFA established the FFA and GAWA to overcome sectarian elements and transform the narrative around football fans in Northern Ireland. As the FFA campaign spread, political representatives saw the potential power of football and the GAWA within wider society. Symbolic acts followed with the then Sports Minister Caral Ni Chuilin becoming the first member of Sinn Fein to attend a match at Windsor Park in 2011 in an

official capacity. A change at policy level saw an increased focus on the wider social responsibilities of sport, the Sport Northern Ireland Corporate Plan (2015-2020) identifying the promotion of equality and the tackling of both poverty and social exclusion as key priorities.[25] The rationale built on the growing use of sport as part of a social policy agenda in the UK[26] alongside the widespread public belief in the peace-building capacity of sport across Northern Ireland.[27] Consequently, public funding was provided to establish partnerships between the three largest sports Governing Bodies in Northern Ireland: the IFA, Ulster Council of the GAA and Ulster Rugby. Subsequent programmes targeted engagement with schools and communities from across the political divide with the aim of breaking down myths and building cross community understanding and respect. As part of this policy all three sports received substantial funding to renovate their sporting stadiums. In the case of the IFA this was used to transform Windsor Park, a ground with limited spectator facilities, so bad that it required a fire engine on site on match days on foot of health and safety concerns, into a modern stadium offering improved spectator and corporate facilities. This modern stadium provided a platform for neutrality for international Football matches, albeit still located in a mainly Protestant area of south Belfast. Speaking at the opening of the renamed National Football Stadium at Windsor Park in 2017 then Deputy First Minister Martin McGuiness noted:

> The Executive's investment of nearly £30million will reap massive social, economic and cultural benefits'. The IFA work goes beyond the gates of Windsor Park and ripples out into wider society building friendships and the community. The financial support we have provided towards this stadium is an investment in a more inclusive, shared society.[28]

Although initially welcomed by many, the public investment was seen by others as an attempt to influence the direction of travel in favour of Government objectives, potentially to the determent of addressing specific unresolved issues within football in the country. Here critics pointed to the sharing of funding across the political divide at the expense of effective practice.

As these attempts at inclusiveness face broader hurdles, sport in itself remains a small element of a bigger social construct.[29] Therefore it follows that, so long as division remains manifest in Northern Ireland society,[30] any attempt to build inclusion will require social changes far beyond the power and reach of sporting organisations. Much work is required to build greater integration in education, housing and social life, as well as addressing territorial markers and facilitating wider acceptance of differing political identities. [16]

More than 20 years after the GFA there still remains no agreement on flags, emblems and cultural traditions in Northern Ireland, politicians having consistently failed to find a resolution within the numerous political agreements that have been proposed (e.g. GFA,[31] 'St Andrews',[32] 'Stormont House',[33] 'Fresh Start',[34]). As sport and, in particular, football continues to be adopted as part of a Government agenda, the game faces the risk of being deployed as all things to all people - a pawn in an ideological battle with both sides seeking political advantage.

The 2018 Irish Cup final held at the National Football Stadium at Windsor Park between Cliftonville (associated with a Catholic/ Nationalist tradition) and Coleraine (associated, in part, with a Protestant/ Unionist tradition) offers reason for concern. Following the decision by Cliftonville players to bow their heads as a protest to the playing of the British National Anthem (God Save the Queen), politicians on both sides of the community issued contrasting criticism. North Belfast Sinn Féin MLA Gerry Kelly described the actions of the Cliftonville players as constituting a 'dignified protest'. 'It would seem the IFA have made the decision that a "politically neutral environment" at Windsor Park is not for them. Today the message from the IFA to Irish Nationalists is very negative.'[35] While Nelson McCausland, a former DUP MLA from North Belfast, noted it was 'demeaning' and 'disrespectful' that the Cliftonville team bowed their heads during the National Anthem.[36] As such, for as long as politicians continue to use issues such as flags and anthems to reaffirm their political position, while at the same time remaining unable or unwilling to find compromise on matters of identity, the ability of sport to act as a vehicle for inclusion will be limited.

Identity

Football in Northern Ireland is one of the few sports divided along partitionist lines, with the six northern counties on the island making up Northern Ireland, governed by the IFA, and the 26 southern counties of Ireland making up the Republic of Ireland, governed by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). As a result, there is a politicised relationship between identity and football,[37] with sporting colours, emblems and venues continuing to be perceived as political-religious markers·[16] The ambiguity of a Northern Ireland identity is made more complicated by the existence of two communities (Protestant and Catholic) rather than one, with society generating a low level of collective identification.[38] Those with affiliation to an Irish Identity see the existing symbols of Britishness (e.g. Anthem and flags) as being

exclusionary of their culture. While those who hold a British identity attribute calls for the removal of these identifiers as further evidence of the dilution of their Britishness.

Both communities habitually promote commemorations and traditions from the past to assert feelings of preservation and heritage, rather than compromise as part of a forward looking and inclusive society.[39] In deeply divided societies separate communities are effectively self-perpetuating entities as they retain suspicion of proposals for change which seek to establish common ground with the 'other'. Under these conditions, the success of programmes designed to underpin forms of 'bridging' social capital is undermined along social, economic and religious lines.[40] As a result 'New national identities are extremely rare. The Northern Irish identity faces uncertainty and myths surrounding the absence of a clear culture, flag, passport, anthem, language, shared history, currency, traditions of state, or any of the other usual paraphernalia of national belonging.'[41]

The divisive impact of this was evident across two high profile and comparatively recent incidents in Northern Irish sport. Firstly, when Paddy Barnes won boxing gold at the 2014 Commonwealth Games, he was heard to say '*that's not my anthem*' during the medal ceremony as the selected National Anthem for Northern Ireland at those Games (the Scots-Irish ballad 'Danny Boy') was played. More recently still, Rory McIllroy was drawn into the debate surrounding sport and identity, when asked for his views on who he might compete for at the Rio 2016 Olympics and the symbolism of his selection. He noted 'I don't know the words to either of them (anthems); I don't feel a connection to either flag; I don't want it to be about flags; I've tried to stay away from that.'

Outside of sport, the so-called 'loyalist flag protests' in 2012 saw many young people become embroiled in street protests and acts of civil disobedience and disorder throughout Northern Ireland.[42] These arose after Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the Union Flag over Council Buildings to designated days throughout the year. Outraged at what it considered to be further evidence of the diminution of the Protestant and Loyalist culture in Northern Ireland, Loyalist groupings staged a number of demonstrations throughout the country, which, in some instances, involved young children of school age and gave vent to a growing sense of a ethnic community disenfranchised from the supposed post-conflict, 'new' Northern Ireland.[43] The violence that ensued was further evidence of the strong views held in society in Northern Ireland attached to symbols and identity. These social tensions again saw isolated incidents of sectarianism return to the stands at international football matches. In particular, a Loyalist threat to a Women's European Championship qualifier between

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 2018 resulted in the cancellation of the normal pre-match anthems and flag ceremony.

These issues of symbolism and identity have a direct impact not only on the fans but also on the field of play, with many attributing blame for the flux of players born in Northern Ireland declaring for the Republic of Ireland (As is their right under the terms of the GFA). The continued ambivalence towards the anthem and flag perpetuates the perception, on the part of nationalist players, that the game in Northern Ireland is a Unionist domain.[44] It is therefore not surprising that some commentators still 'retain negative views of the sport'.[27] Politics and religion aside, if anthems and flags distract one player from the Northern Ireland team, minutes before kick-off, there are marginal gains in performance to be made from addressing these matters.

Since the signing of the GFA, not everyone feels Irish or British. It is possible to be a hybrid of the two. Instead of constantly pitting nationalities against each other, being Northern Irish can demonstrate the benefits to a mixed heritage. 'Whilst everyone has the right to identify as either British or Irish so too can they be Northern Irish'. [40] It is possible to have a superordinate identity (Northern Irish), one which can overarch smaller subcategories. In this instance identity comes from positive contact between group members.[45] When people from different groups have contact under conditions of equal status, working cooperatively towards common goals while there are social norms that are accepting of this contact, it makes less practical sense to talk about difference and a new overarching identity is created so that both members feel a part of the same group. [41] Broadly this enables the use of each identity interchangeably as part of a society that moves away from defining everyone dependant on who and what they are.

As has been outlined previously within this article, the change created by the FFA and GAWA has gone some way to promote an inclusive identity shared by football supporters. In doing so the feel-good factor generated has played a small part around influencing the desire of those from Northern Ireland (whether Protestant or Catholic) to play for the country's football team.[46] However, as long as the debate remains unresolved, those who wish to create political or sporting advantage will have an opportunity to use these issues to the detriment of an inclusive sporting Northern Irish identity.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland is a country where sport and politics regularly intertwine, with numerous high profile examples of where sport has been used as a symbol either to promote unity or create division. In this context, sport remains critical instrument to a still divided civil society, which reproduces separation, while legacies of the conflict continue to limit its potential integrative capacity. Under these restrictions, the GAWA and FFA have taken 'small and incremental steps towards greater inclusivity', generating a 'feel good' factor around a Northern Irish identity. Proud of their identity, protecting it and building it through engagement with other groups, Northern Ireland supporters have been described as 'active and 'knowledgeable' agents who deployed the *FFA* campaign to (re)create their football fan culture, a narrative that resonates with various aspects of the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens'. [19]

What the last 20 years in Northern Ireland has shown is the real possibility for otherwise conflicting identities to co-exist, with progress made towards inclusive identities. As a new generation of supporters evolve, born after the Troubles in Northern Ireland, oblivious to the origins of the FFA campaign, the quote by George Santayana in 1863 becomes more prevalent. 'Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.'[47] Yet within this new era, a window of opportunity may exist to discuss a strategic direction and widespread of sport for social outcomes. Here sporting projects have the potential to inform debate through a bottom-up perspective,[48] by initiating a wide-ranging audit of opinions from supporters, to provide insight and garner the building blocks created by the GAWA towards a sustainable and common identity. However, this comes with risks beyond sport. Requiring a neutral respected figurehead providing the impetus and space to begin the conversation. If football is to be used as a mechanism to build an often quoted 'new' Northern Ireland identity, governing political parties in Northern Ireland must first address the 'Wicked Issues' which limit the expression of identity. In this instance, Government must take the lead at a policy and strategic level to clearly define its 'desired outcomes' in the sporting realm,[49] providing top down support to the bottom up movement, as illustrated, in the sport of association football, by the GAWA.

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