

Too Bad The North's Future Depends On Tony Blair's Bravery

Paul A. Fitzsimmons • 14 January 2005

In his article "Blair leading negotiating pack without any serious followers" (*Belfast Telegraph*, 18 December 2004), Northern Ireland political pundit Barry White well described—a week before the infamous £26.5 million bank heist in Belfast—some of the most fundamental deficiencies and failures of the region's "peace process":

Too bad, Tony, another devolution deal has gone the way of all the others, no matter how hard you tried. You got the DUP and Sinn Fein to come a long way together - though maybe they were saying "yes, yes, yes" without paying much attention to the small print, because they knew an agreement would never be reached.

[The Autumn 2004 talks achieved a] success of a kind, although the "ifs" and "buts" that were ignored in the Comprehensive Agreement proposals will need a lot more explanation before the public accepts them. Yet ***I don't meet anyone who believes that after more than seven years, you or Bertie Ahern are "tantalisingly close" to a solution.*** [Emphasis added.]

....

The fact is that ever since your arrival in 1997, we've been in a state of political turmoil. ...

By a process of constructive ambiguity, appeasement and hand-holding, you helped achieve the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Since then, in a political sense, it's been all downhill.

It's never admitted, in official quarters, but the institutions which were so carefully constructed, with so many checks and balances, have never worked well. ...

The pattern is that as crises occur - because the UUP leadership accepted undeliverable deals or because of IRA activity - the Assembly is suspended and more promises are made. When they aren't kept, there is another crisis, followed by talks and another crisis.

....

Now you've published your proposals, presenting them as near-agreements when we all know that nothing is agreed until everything is. And not only the SDLP are worried by what they read. Surely we should be trying to lessen community tensions, by playing down differences in the Assembly? The proposals do the opposite, by providing the potential for block votes and vetoes on almost every issue.

Assembly candidates must declare their "national" allegiance, before election and any party that refuses to vote for the whole executive, after it is named, forfeits its right to sit on it. That's going to be troublesome, for a start.

Mr. White then rhetorically asked what "the Blair legacy" will be regarding Northern Ireland, and he concluded, in so many words, a fair amount bad and not all that much good.

But, with all having been tried and having failed in this "process," the fact of the matter is that the key participants to this conflict—*preeminently including Tony Blair*—elect to sit

around indefinitely, pretending that the Good Friday Agreement is not cadaverous and deciding not to take a free swing at something different, radical, but *still* too daring to be discussed above a polite whisper.

A little more background, however, before a few less-than-polite whispers from me—my last, I hope and believe—on possible negotiated independence for Northern Ireland.

Since time immemorial, people have been fighting floods, famine, pestilence, disease, economic privation, and general social conflict. Our capacities in these battles, although very obviously not infinite, are considerable. Particularly in the field of government, almost all of western civilization has in recent centuries done reasonably well in putting together the basic structures of regional governance. Western Europe, with exceptional interludes such as the one Corporal Hitler instigated, has very broadly been part of this success story.

By contrast, however, governance in Ireland's northeast six counties was, throughout Northern Ireland's initial 1921-72 period of existence, that of grossly iniquitous and ultimately unsuccessful sectarian majoritarianism. Over the three decades since that period, orthodox effort after orthodox effort has failed to establish a workable democracy in a land where virtually everyone is the same color, where everyone speaks a common language, and where everyone who causes any trouble comes from a supposedly Christian culture of one variety or another.

Even in that largely homogeneous setting, the people just can't find an intra-U.K. devolution plan that works, they certainly cannot agree on any form of 32-county reunion, and their "leaders"—again including, preeminently, Mr. Blair—obdurately refuse to consider formally examining the untested middle ground of possible independence for Northern Ireland.

Quite frankly, this tale of woe is one of generation-to-generation incompetence, an incompetence almost universally prevalent among Britain's and Ireland's Northern Ireland "experts" in politics, in academics, and in the media.

The tenor of the foregoing notwithstanding, I have, in recent months, achieved a measure of success of a different sort through my gaining, in a Franciscan sense, the solace of accepting that, having gone at this project for a fair bit of time, I can do little or nothing more to achieve my goal of helping to facilitate a formal examination of this settlement possibility.

Unsurprisingly, no small concern of mine, particularly over the past several years, has been determining with an adequate degree of moral certitude when appropriately to desist from further efforts in a matter as important as seeking a solution to the Northern Ireland question. Throwing in this towel prematurely would itself assuredly be illaudable, and merely relying on the broadly held and lazy dogma of "impossibility" is obviously directly contrary to the notion of actively challenging that false dogma.

In this respect, I've had the good fortune of having had over the past couple of years a passing acquaintance with a Northern Ireland leader who not only won a Nobel Peace Prize for his mid-1990's efforts there but who also himself, as an academic *at least as late as 1988*, publicly advocated Northern Ireland's independence, then referring to that new political status—albeit quite erroneously—as an "inevitability."

In mid-October 2004, as a last-ditch effort on my own small independence project, I contacted by air courier the Rt. Hon. David Trimble, asking that he take up this point privately with Mr. Blair or, in the alternative, that he just recommend I pack in these wee

efforts entirely (see attached letter). In that I've become over the years used to snubs from others among the great and good on this topic (who have, though, been not quite great or good enough actually to resolve this infamous "Northern Ireland question" themselves), I take no large personal offense at Mr. Trimble's not having deigned to provide a response.

The silver lining here for me is a notable confluence of circumstances, namely

the GFA having failed conspicuously, to the point where Mr. Trimble's own political position has diminished very markedly as a direct result,

Mr. Trimble having himself publicly advocated Northern Ireland's independence and his having recently had the opportunity to try to press this point privately with Mr. Blair,

but Mr. Trimble's having chosen to leave unanswered my missive of October 2004, even in the face of that GFA failure and the absence of any democratic alternative thereto,

which together must mean that there is little or nothing more for me to do in this regard.

Some months ago, I'd relatedly note, Mr. Trimble accused the Democratic Unionist Party of letting the IRA "off the hook" by not pushing ahead adequately in late-2004 negotiations.

However—especially in light of the possibilities which would have been afforded by a "key embellishment" to the logistical aspects of my independence proposals (as discussed in the attached 26 September 2004 letter to Jonathan Powell)—I think Tony Blair and very likely too Mr. Trimble have themselves let everyone off the hook by choosing *easy, unbrave, and unsuccessful political orthodoxy* over a difficult, low-probability-of-ultimate-success alternative ... an alternative which could, though, have been readily examined formally at very little actual cost, political or otherwise.

Burt Rutan—who knows more than most the meaning of the phrase "*per ardua ad astra*," via his historic X-Plane Prize success—has posited that truly important research takes place only in settings where half of those hearing of a radical proposal knee-jerkedly reject it as *impossible*.

That righteous concept is apparently utterly unfathomable to all but perhaps a very few in Britain (a land whose most noted living inventor, aiming a bit lower than the stars, devised a bagless vacuum cleaner). Unfortunately, in a genuinely historic sense, among that knowing few is almost certainly *not* the British politician Anthony Charles Lynton Blair.

I do and will yet look back with much fondness on the twenty-some years that I worked, from time to time, on this project, regretting mainly that Northern Irelanders will never have the chance to make their own personal and private decision at the polls on a worthy, ready-to-wear independence proposal. For as difficult as it may indeed be for many—especially in Britain, even on Downing Street—to comprehend, negative information is valuable, and trying yet ultimately failing to do something important *is* better than never having tried at all. A thin gruel of consolation for me personally, but, hell, it's something.

All the foregoing notwithstanding, force of long habit impels me to pen a final if pointless note to the man "in charge":

Mr. Blair:

As you would discern from my various scribblings, including this note, I tend to believe that few if any among your circle of advisors would ever be as forthright as I am on the subject of Northern Ireland.

Especially in light of necessarily limited time left for you in Downing Street, you've not many choices regarding your own Northern Ireland legacy (naturally, I'm assuming here *arguendo* that that legacy is of import to you).

In fact, beyond simply throwing up your hands and expressly consigning Northern Ireland to another generation or more of undemocratic direct rule, your options are really but two:

First, you could continue down the same GFA path that has already, effort after effort, year after year, failed repeatedly. (Most particularly in the wake of that wee bank caper last month in Belfast, a good many believe that, in this mode, nothing at all will be done before 2006 ... but, even thereafter, no one should hold his breath while awaiting a "tantalisingly close" political settlement brought forth by means of that Godot Friday Agreement.)

Second, you could attempt the radical approach of investigating possible negotiated independence, in the manner I described this past September to your Chief of Staff.

That first approach *will* result in the following scene taking place over and over during the next three decades or so in your own home: your holding out your hands, showing a small gap between opposed palms, and boring your guests to tears about how you were supposedly "that close" to a comprehensive Northern Ireland success. As recently suggested by Barry White, that same claim is even today rejected by more than a few.

The second approach would, more likely than not, lead as well to failure albeit—by distinct and morally important contrast—brave and honest failure. That result would come about either: (a) because, at the outset, one of the key Northern Ireland parties expressly betrayed itself as fascistic; (b) because, at the end of the day, no adequate proposal could in fact be fashioned via a first-and-last-ever formal independence investigation; or (c) because, ultimately at the polls, the people of Northern Ireland chose to reject a plan for their region's rebirth through fair and workable political independence.

Failure through this second approach would, however, *not* occur—as it has with the GFA—because of inherent, ineluctable, and irremediable "constitutional" deficiencies dodged and masked to the extent possible (*i.e.*, inadequately) by the powers that be.

Mr. Blair, I'll not soon forget how you claimed a couple years back of Britons: "[W]e're at our best when at our boldest."

Is, though, in all honesty, the boldest thing about Britain merely the fact of your having made that prideful assertion? Does your claim actually damn with faint praise, as Britain's boldness seems of a rather limp and tepid variety and as Britain's "best" is, as a result, pretty mediocre if not indeed poor? In this regard, the following is one Irishman's first draft of this part of Northern Ireland's history, presumably a description you'd not hope be adopted as the final version:

The peace process is based on a series of Orwellian lies that mean that no contract has value, no word of honour has any meaning, no undertaking is binding. In this diseased and wretched universe, men who murder are honoured; those who do not are abased. And from this despicable mess, lasting so-called democratic institutions cannot possibly be constructed.

Kevin Myers, *Sunday Telegraph*, 26 December 2004

Is really, in all truth and candor, the Good Friday Agreement the best and boldest that Britain can do for Northern Ireland?

Even at this late date in your Labour Government, you could still dispositively prove me wrong—not least in my making these rather rude characterizations—by your own bravely attempting a formal examination of possible negotiated independence. *You are the one and only person on the face of the planet who could make that attempt.*

If, though, you continue to reject that radical approach, *you will have to resign yourself* to a legacy of distinctly unbold failure in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Blair, there is no alternative.

Unhappily, I'm confident that the path of resignation is the one you will continue to follow because—I believe—***you are simply too British to do anything other than to choose orthodox, unimaginative, time-tested failure over a small chance for success through your undertaking a bold, open, untried course of action.*** (Cf. Brian Walker, "Depths of disillusion deepen after robbery": "*What Blair will not budge from is the close British-Irish relationship and the basic structure of the Agreement, now permanent features of life.*" *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 January 2005 (emphasis added).) Last year, I wrote in a related vein to a Northern Ireland pundit:

I'm sick of people in Britain and Ireland who—because of laziness or cowardice or otherwise—prefer the devil they know to the unfallen angel they don't know and won't try to seek out.

Maybe history will little mark and maybe only a few thousand people scattered around the globe will ever know, through the Internet's electronic ephemera, that you did have a clear opportunity to make a courageous new effort towards a genuine and honest settlement in that six-county region.

But you yourself will know.

Of course, the saddest part of all this is that many more than just you yourself will have to live—sometimes quite painfully—with the results, and the uncourageous inadequacies, of your own "leadership."

P.A.F.

The best of luck indeed to the people of Northern Ireland. It looks like, in Mr. Blair's care, they will very sorely need it.

Paul A. Fitzsimmons
14 January 2005

16 October 2004

BY AIR COURIER

The Rt. Hon. David Trimble
Leader
Ulster Unionist Party
Cunningham House
429 Holywood Road
Belfast BT4 2LN, Northern Ireland
UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Mr. Trimble:

Greetings once again.

On 26 September 2004, I sent an extremely forthright letter to Jonathan Powell, copying the office of Mr. Ahern (“Senior”) as well as Dr. Reiss here in D.C. That letter, appended hereto (as “Attachment A”), did little or nothing to disguise my exasperation at the fact that a half-dozen years of Good Friday Agreement failure have apparently not been enough to get the English thinking in any new ways regarding the Northern Ireland question. I told Mr. Powell therein that, in an effort to burn whatever bridges might exist in the wake of my small efforts, I’d publish that letter and be done with the whole mess if I did not hear back from him substantively by October 15. Naturally—as I noted at the letter’s end—I expected to receive no such reply, and indeed none has arrived (though the post did bring an unexceptional and uninformative acknowledgement of receipt, stating merely that Mr. Powell had referred my letter to the Northern Ireland Office, thereby proving that the buck does not stop in his office¹).

¹ Cf. the following general comments, by American businessman F. Leon Wilson on not stopping the buck, which have repeated manifestations in recent Northern Ireland history:

How Not to Solve a Problem

1. Profess not to have an answer. This releases you from having an answer.
2. Say “we must not move too swiftly.” This avoids the necessity of getting started.
3. For every proposal, setup an opposing proposal, and conclude that the middle ground (no action/motion) represents the wisest course of action/motion.
4. When in a tight place, say anything that the group cannot understand.
5. Say that the problem cannot be separated from other problems. Therefore, no problem can be solved until all other problems have been solved.
6. Ask what is meant by the question. When it is clarified, ask for definitions of each word. When definitions are given, ask about the structure of the sentence(s). When it is clarified, hopefully people will lose interest and/or there will be no time left for the answer.
7. Retreat into analogies and discuss them until everyone has forgotten the original question or problem.
8. Explain and clarify over and over again what you have already said.
9. Say anything, document nothing.
10. Conclude that you have all clarified your thinking on the problem even though no definite conclusions have been reached.
11. Point out that this is an age-old problem in which many of the greatest thinkers have struggled with these same issues and problems (implying that it does us credit even to have thought of it).
12. Be thankful for the problem. It has stimulated our best thinking and has therefore contributed to our growth. It/we should get a medal.
13. Carry the problem into other fields and show that it exists everywhere, hence it has no immediate resolution.

(footnote continued ...)

Since I wrote that 26 September letter, however, several things have occurred to me regarding terminating these efforts.

First, it seems to me highly likely that you yourself could readily receive a one-on-one (unbugged) with Mr. Blair. Were that the case, you could—at least in theory—elect to take that opportunity to put privately to Mr. Blair (and maybe even convince him) that now really is the time to take a hard look at this paradigm shift. As I've argued *ad nauseam*, the chances of failure for possible negotiated independence would surely be greater than not, but people in Ireland and Britain would be no worse off after such a failure than they are right now. It seems abundantly clear to me that, if the effort is not made at this point, it never will be made; not least from events over the past month, it also seems reasonably clear (as, indeed, it did to me in 1984-85) that decades more of socio-political stalemate will, in that setting, follow.

Second, it seems to me at least possible you might examine this situation and actually elect to make that private yet perhaps very important pitch to Mr. Blair. Your doing so—(a) on a point regarding which you earlier took an affirmative public position (*e.g.*, your 1988 comment: “When we come to agree on the inevitability of some form of independence, we can shape our political offensive.”) and (b) in circumstances where, more than three decades on since the fall of the first and only stable albeit hugely undemocratic local government in Northern Ireland, all the orthodox devolutionary approaches have been tried and have failed—could, I think, be a brave and Christian (and maybe even “patriotic”) act, under these challenging conditions. God knows, any pitch from you would mean a helluva lot more than any of mine ever has or ever would.

Third, instead of my acquiescing in and merely noting for the record that this untried middle-ground idea is now going completely, permanently, and unceremoniously down the toilet because of the inaction of some all-but-anonymous British bureaucrats (particularly including one man recently described, by you, as “the prime minister’s gofer”), it seems to me that an ultimate public rejection of this idea would instead far better come from you yourself, as a person who lives in Northern Ireland, who has long been a political leader there, who has had *at very least* substantial earlier interest in the topic of independence, and who, not least, has gained enough world attention on the subject of Northern Ireland to have garnered a corresponding Nobel Peace Prize.

As further background to my overall argument, I've appended (as “Attachment B”) a 21 July 2004 letter to one of your fellow UUP members, Alex Kane. That letter, replying rather pointedly as well to a note from him that same morning, put a very plain request to him:

Alex—after all this haranguing by me—please have yourself a cup of tea, then take another pass through this lengthy message, and finally, after adequate contemplative meditation, write me a note saying that you've decided now boldly to step up to the plate on this cross-community heresy or, in the alternative, a note just telling me frankly to bugger off, so that I can be accordingly guided. Given the lateness of the hour on this project, a lukewarm, put-it-on-the-long-finger response will be worthless and silence worse still.

That request was, however, rejected, in that I received only a “lukewarm, put-it-on-the-long-finger response” from him. Of course, I'm hopeful that—as someone who, unlike Mr. Kane, has and has long had an actual leadership position and role in your society—you would take on more forthrightly a similar invitation which I hereby respectfully convey.

Thus is above what *will be* my last grasp at a last straw regarding this independence heresy ... something an American football fan, regardless of religious belief or denomination, would term a “Hail Mary” shot.

(... footnote continued)

14. *Look slightly embarrassed when the problem is brought up. Hint that it is in bad taste or too elementary for mature consideration. Or too sophisticated for preliminary consideration, or that any discussion of the problem is likely to be misunderstood by outsiders (or the “uninformed”).*
15. *Say that we must wait until some (or other) experts can be consulted.*
16. *Intentionally or unintentionally find a face-saving formula so odd or unusual (“Pickwicking”), that the overall effect of the words or ideas has no meaning. However, everyone will accept the formula because she or he can read into it their own (individual) interpretation. (This is the highest art of a good administrator.)*
17. *Talk about looking to God and prayer for the answers, but never mention or act on the fact that “God helps those who help themselves.”*
18. *Appoint a committee to study the problem or issues.*

If this last straw fails to keep—or get—afloat the possibility of negotiated independence (and I'm loathe to project the probabilities thereof here), I intend, *inter alia*, to invite our mutual friend here in town to a very private wake for it at a local watering hole, where I would both buy his fill and lead that bittersweet celebration of its passing.

Naturally, I look forward to your response. Should none arrive by 24 November, I shall have further reason to give thanks the next day by dispositively assuming that none will follow, and I shall thereby be guided accordingly.

In any event, thank you for your kind attention here.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Fitzsimmons

PAF:

attachments

ATTACHMENT A

September 26, 2004

BY TELECOPY

Mr. Jonathan Powell
Chief of Staff
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA, England
UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Mr. Powell:

Your Government's responses to date to the failure of the Good Friday Agreement, at Leeds Castle and thereafter, have been predictable though nonetheless, of course, disappointing. *Unarguable here is that, after more than a half-dozen years of trying rather intensively, you-all have markedly failed to resolve the Northern Ireland question.*

Regardless of why your Government yet—apparently—elects to reject my unorthodox and highly challenging proposals on formally investigating possible independence (although, as you may have concluded, I believe that rejection could have a lot to do with plain old-fashioned guts), I am well beyond ready to conclude this long and unavailing middle-ground effort, which I began two decades ago quite uninvitedly. Frankly, I think that I'm probably sicker of you-all than you-all are of me, though I'd accept that that contest might be tight.

Therefore, in an effort to burn whatever bridges may exist in this respect, I'll publish this letter and its attachments under the title "Too Bad The North's Future Depends On Tony Blair's Bravery" unless—with, obviously, the odds largely against—I've somehow substantially misread your Government's position and you choose to inform me, *on or before October 15*, of my error.

Though any additional effort here on this score may be worth damned little or nothing, I'll nevertheless arrogate to myself this last opportunity to make what will be a comparatively brief argument, against the background of something written on 24 September by one of those bright BBC-Northern Ireland reporters:

If, as seems likely, none of the parties budge, then Tony Blair may have to play his best hand. He has been robbed of a deal in time for his annual party conference. However, legislation could be pushed through providing for some changes to the Stormont rules, changes which the government believes the parties will tolerate if not embrace. Then the suspension of the assembly could be lifted in a take-it-or-leave-it challenge. If the politicians refuse to pick up the gauntlet that would lead to fresh elections. Given their recent strength at the ballot box, the DUP may regard that as an empty threat.

Is Mr. Blair's "best hand" here really "push[ing]" legislation through Westminster providing "for some changes to the Stormont rules"? That approach *will* result in rejection, and likely cross-community rejection, thereof within the recalled Assembly. Resultant new elections in Northern Ireland under the GFA *will* entail a still firmer establishment both of the now-dominant parties and of the current impasse. That situation *will* lead, in turn, to the sort of generations-long, inadequate, and unhappy joint authority which—via our mutual friend Matthew Rycroft—I implored your Government a half-decade ago to avoid falling directly into, through uninspired governmental inertia or otherwise. (*Cf.* a *Sunday Life* (Belfast) report today that your Government "will now mothball the Assembly, following the failure by local parties to reach agreement on IRA decommissioning and ministerial accountability.")

Instead of languidly permitting yourselves to succumb to another exceedingly predictable pattern of *orthodox* failure, Mr. Blair could instead now courageously say, along lines earlier suggested, something like the following:

Negotiated independence is not our preferred approach for a potential settlement. Our preferred approach remains a fair and workable solution within the context of the Good Friday Agreement.

Moreover, we believe rather firmly that, in any event, an independence plan would, more likely than not, fail to be implemented, for one reason or another.

These considerations notwithstanding, we have decided to put this GFA scheme completely on ice for the time being and to try to undertake formally what may—as we are fully well aware—turn out to be an entirely unsuccessful attempt towards a radical middle-ground settlement through negotiated independence.

In the emphasized text below is an important and perhaps key embellishment to that radical tack:

Our first formal step in this direction—a constitutional convention presided over by knowledgeable experts—is, however, conditional in two respects.

First, if the IRA does not expressly state, in response to this announcement, that it will fully respect and abide by plebiscite approval of independence, at a 70-percent-or-higher level, through its fully disarming and standing down immediately after such a vote, we shall abandon this inquiry.

Second, if the IRA makes that commitment but if any of the four largest political parties in Northern Ireland thereafter announces formally that it will boycott such a constitutional convention, we shall likewise proceed no further concerning this settlement possibility.

Thus, the IRA and any of those four political parties will have the power to block consideration of this new approach, which approach could in any event be implemented only after 70-percent-or-higher approval at the polls. Restated a bit, if any of those groups sees fit to deny the people of Northern Ireland any chance to settle on this supermajority basis, that group can unilaterally—and, I think history will record, fascistically—do so.

If, on the other hand, these groups respectively conclude, appropriately, that they are comfortable with leaving any ultimate decision on this matter to the voters—realizing that a mere 30-percent-plus-one of the electorate would have, at the end of the day, the power to veto any ultimate independence proposal—then we will initiate this constitutional convention, *with none of those groups having made any advance commitment of support*, and we shall do so notwithstanding our realistic view that the odds are decidedly against any ultimate settlement along these lines.

For the record, I would not suggest this “embellishment” were I not reasonably confident that indeed none of those five groups would, under such circumstances, play the part of fascist in this wee Northern Ireland melodrama.

Instead, my largest and continuing doubts involve—again quite frankly—what role your Government will itself now choose to play: that of phlegmatic functionaries who are content to follow in well-worn paths of failure or that of genuine leaders and statesmen who, *per ardua ad astra*, really are at their best when at their boldest.

As, *inter alia*, an eternal pessimist, I must and do expect to receive nothing substantive in response hereto, but I’d nonetheless reiterate my thanks for your personal courtesies some years back.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Fitzsimmons

PAF:
attachments

cc (w/attachments):

Mr. Dermot McCarthy, Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach (by telecopy)
Mitchell B. Reiss, Ph.D., U.S. Department of State (by telecopy)

September 10, 2004

BY TELECOPY

Mitchell B. Reiss, Ph.D.
Director, Office of Policy Planning
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Re: Northern Ireland

Dear Dr. Reiss:

Following the less-than-uplifting reports from Sedgefield today, and having heard yesterday that you will be attending next week's Leeds Castle talks, I thought I'd send on to you, via an enclosure hereto, what may be my final love note, of September 6, to our friend Jonathan Powell.

As my time on this wee project may indeed be drawing to a close, I've lately been allowing myself added measures of forthrightness. For example, to a leading Northern pundit I've been corresponding with over the past couple of years, I recently wrote the following:

If it's not already clear, please allow me to state at this point that, for as sick as some people may be of hearing from me about all this, I too am sick of this fight, important as the "Northern Ireland question" is. I'm sick of stating obvious truths and so often getting in response blinkered, erroneous, yet nonetheless hallowed dogmatisms. I'm sick of the fact that many have given me words of encouragement but seldom more than *private* words, because they won't raise their heads above the parapets for fear of what others will think about some basic socio-political verities (David Vance being, to date, the most notable exception to that rule). I'm sick of people in Britain and Ireland who—because of laziness or cowardice or otherwise—prefer the devil they know to the unfallen angel they don't know and won't try to seek out. I'm sick of those who think that evading difficult questions is an honorable or morally acceptable practice.

Continuing in that rather frank vein, my bet is that you're a pretty damned smart guy who is certainly interested in trying to advance the ball vis-à-vis the Northern Ireland conflict *but* who is by no stretch of anyone's imagination any sort of expert on the situation. To whatever extent you've earlier been advised by purported experts that "GFA *über alles*" is the way forward—hasn't everyone, or almost everyone, after all been saying for years and years that "there is no alternative" to the GFA?—perhaps Mr. Blair's repeated signals of late, including earlier today, that he's just about to chuck that peculiar institution are causing you now to reevaluate that advice.

Yet further in this same vein, if you yourself aspire to be more than a mere functionary in your current position, you might well give some rather strenuous thought to the notion that maybe now really is the time for Britain and Ireland to open their minds to the possibility of a genuine paradigm shift here. Your stating—or, if applicable, reiterating—within the course of discussions next week that the U.S. would stand shoulder-to-shoulder with London and Dublin in this brave investigation might make a difference of historic measure. Those governments may need (and even appreciate) a bit of cover—and a bit of back-stiffening—in this regard.

Continuing in this blunt vein beyond any arguable boundary of good manners, if you elect to reject the suggestions made in the previous paragraph, you will come to conclude that you have added nothing of value to this situation and, far worse, that you yourself have helped squander the small yet nevertheless best chance Northern Ireland has to move dramatically forward. An additional generation or two may wind up paying the price for multinational timorousness here.

Though you rejected, *sub silentio*, my earlier invitation to meet, I hope you would nonetheless feel free to contact me hereafter as you see fit.

Dominus vobiscum.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Fitzsimmons

PAF:
Enclosure

September 6, 2004

BY TELECOPY

Mr. Jonathan Powell
Chief of Staff
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA, England
UNITED KINGDOM

Dear Mr. Powell:

As the BBC reports rather unsurprisingly today that “Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams has said that the Good Friday Agreement stands in ‘considerable difficulty’ ahead of talks aimed at restoring devolution” and as the article “**The North’s Future Depends On Tony Blair’s Bravery**” may not have otherwise crossed your desk, please find a copy of that article transmitted herewith.

Also on the topic of possible negotiated independence, and in advance of this week’s Sedgefield discussions, please permit me to reiterate a point raised in my wee “Open Letter” to the Provos published in *The Blanket* this past June (with emphases from the original):

One of the related thoughts behind looking formally into possible independence may itself be regarded as revolutionary although, frankly, it ought not to be: it is better (a) to take the time to study and test an honest, workable, and somewhat painful—but *mutually* painful—settlement proposal which surely might be rejected at the polls than either (b) to waste time trying to con an electorate desperate for real peace into sanctioning a half-baked, all-things-to-all-men “solution” which will in fact not work or (c) to waste more time supinely accepting the abject failure of democracy, objectively manifested through the direct rule of Northern Ireland. Distilled a bit: a workable and *possibly* acceptable settlement proposal would be vastly superior to an acceptable but unworkable scheme or to an undemocratic period of craven political lassitude.

Virtually everyone’s job is, of course, exactly the same: to try to make the boss look good. All the very best of luck to you in your own such efforts, particularly if Mr. Blair wisely elects to stick to his own guns, as described in the first two paragraphs of the enclosed.

Sincerely,

Paul A. Fitzsimmons

PAF:ms
enclosure

cc (w/enclosure): Mr. Dermot McCarthy, Secretary General (by telecopy)

The North's Future Depends On Tony Blair's Bravery

Paul A. Fitzsimmons • 20 August 2004

On the twenty-fifth of June, British Prime Minister Tony Blair signaled the imminent demise of Northern Ireland's well-intended but ill-conceived Good Friday Agreement by stating that, through scheduled "intensive talks" meetings in September, he wanted to achieve "a concluded agreement that allows everybody to move forward together or alternatively we are going to have to search for a different way forward."

Asked whether such a failure would really mark the end, Mr. Blair answered: "I think what we're saying is 'Yes' in terms of our ability to take this process forward."

However, the September meetings will fail. Indeed, Henry McDonald of the *Observer* aptly challenged in mid-July "not just the judgment but also the sanity of the newspaper editors and pundits who are peddling th[e] illusion" that the GFA's structures might be revived at those meetings. (Cf. some similar thoughts in a *Sluggie O'Toole* posting appended hereto.)

Another generation of troubled rule from London, probably with some marginal input from Dublin, looks to be the likely outcome, but Northern Ireland could yet have a small chance at a genuine and democratic—albeit radical—political settlement.

After a failure of these September talks, and for the first and last time ever, Northern Ireland could receive—through brave and generous leadership by Mr. Blair—an opportunity to examine formally a "ready-to-wear" independence proposal.

"Generous" is easy to describe in this respect: all know that political independence would require Great Britain's substantial, long-term economic aid.

"Brave" requires a bit more explanation: all also know that the odds would be against success here. Opinion polls consistently show that, *as a first-choice preference*, only about 10 percent in Northern Ireland favor this unorthodox approach. The most encouraging polling data merely indicate that about half of the Protestants and about half of the Catholics in the North would at least "tolerate" independence as a new way forward.

It needs to be observed and appreciated, however, that all such responses have been collected in a vacuum, without any actual independence proposal for respondents to read, study, digest, and render a final decision upon. Thus, an actual plebiscite on a ready-to-wear independence proposal might ultimately yield 20, 50, or 80 percent in favor. Frankly, anyone who claims he knows for sure which of those numbers it would in fact be is either lying or fooling himself.

Aware of those daunting facts and figures, Tony Blair—if *actually determined to leave no stone unturned in trying to resolve this persistent strife and in trying to achieve democracy in Northern Ireland*—could now see whether the odds against this venture can be beaten. As suggested eighteen months ago in *The Blanket*:

If the GFA irremediably fails, Mr. Blair will himself need to take charge regarding this radical approach—somewhat encouragingly, he recently maintained of Britain that “we’re at our best when at our boldest”—or else the British government will unboldly consign and condemn Northern Ireland to at least one more generation of unhappy direct rule.

Specifically, Mr. Blair could take steps to establish for certain whether a fair and workable independence plan might be fashioned so that at least 70 percent of the voters would decide to check “Yes”—in the privacy of their voting booths—in order to vault themselves, and their children, into a brighter future. (He would, however, adopt this position already understanding—care of some discreet nods—that most or all of the main political parties in Northern Ireland would accede, grudgingly, to taking part in formally examining this independence possibility.)

This 70-percent plebiscite figure would not just seek to establish large support for independence but would also ensure that the North’s Catholics—something above 40 percent of the population—could, themselves alone, veto any proffered plan.

A *sine qua non* to looking into this possibility formally would be, however, the IRA’s announcing, in response to such a call, that it would fully respect and abide by voter approval at that 70-percent-or-higher level. (Cf. “An Open Letter To The Leadership Of The Irish Republican Army” (*The Blanket*, 13 June 2004), to which, unsurprisingly, no negative response was received from the IRA.) Given the rather slim chances for success in any event, this effort simply could not get well underway with a Republican sword of inscrutability dangling overhead.

If the IRA made its own brave and appropriate commitment in this regard, Ireland might possibly find, within about a year’s time, a genuine and democratic peace via—for the foreseeable future—*two* free, fair, and workable republics on that island.

Quite to the contrary, however, the IRA might respond to such a call from Mr. Blair by telling Northern Nationalist and Republican voters—through its words, its deeds, or its silence—“We do not trust and will not trust you or your decisions, and we have therefore summarily decided to keep you from having any choice regarding the possibility of a settlement along these lines.”

For more than two decades, I have bet that, whatever else it might be, the IRA is not a group of fascists. The world could learn whether that bet and much more have been won or lost *if* Tony Blair courageously elects to make a historic move in this new direction.

Washington, D.C. lawyer Paul A. Fitzsimmons wrote *Independence for Northern Ireland: Why and How* (1993) (pfitzsim@wrightrobinson.com).

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<http://www.sluggeroole.com/home/archives/004310.asp> (11 August 2004)

Alex[Kane] *et al.*:

First off, apologies to those who have written, in *Sluggor* and via email, for my tardy responses.

No one in this thread responded directly to my comment of 26 July at 1:03PM:

It seems, then, that either (a) Republican militants will have to stand down while in the dark on how issues like "accountability of ministers, the way the assembly votes," etc. will ultimately be resolved or (b) an omnibus resolution of all these issues will first be needed ('nothing is agreed until everything is agreed').

The difficulty there is figuring out which of those options is less likely: (a) Republicans saying "Alright, the IRA's now gone for good; NIO, please let us know as soon as possible whether the GFA will still include things like d'Hondt, etc." or (b) the parties actually together working out all the changes to and deviations from the sacred GFA scrolls, thereby making possible a complete and final standing-down of the IRA (whose members would, of course, then be putting their faith into the notion that that new omnibus agreement would actually hold when later push came to later shove).

However, the "a"-side of that issue is addressed, at least inferentially, within the following from yesterday's *Irish News*:

IRA 'stand down' before talks would be 'tactically naive' move (*Irish News*)

Republicans believe it would be tactically naive, if not stupid, to signal before political negotiations start in September that the IRA is ready to 'stand down' with a final order to dump arms.

'Nonsense' and 'rubbish' are the words used in republican circles to describe claims that the IRA is about to be wound up. The emphasis is as usual on political negotiation and 'context'.

If it is not already apparent, I think that, as between "a" and "b," each is less likely than the other (a new paradox for Northern Ireland).

Alex, you have suggested here, by contrast, that all (or, at least, enough) will be resolved in September because of the pressures upon and impulses within the DUP:

[(A) The DUP] doesn't want the UUP to be back in the driving seat and [(B)] it doesn't want to leave NI's fate in the hands of two governments pissed off by the fact that the efforts of the last ten years have turned to dust.

Of course, I agree with this statement, as literally written: the DUP must want neither "A" nor "B."

However, your "A" looks in any event to be a virtual impossibility for the foreseeable future (absent something like a Westminster "constitutional mercies" tweak to the GFA granting UUP MLAs two-for-one voting privileges). Thus, the observation seems an irrelevance.

As to your "B," the mind does not flinch imagining that September could boil down to a choice for the DUP of (i) "leav[ing] NI's fate in the hands of two governments pissed off by the fact that the efforts of the last ten years have turned to dust" or (ii) its being leveraged into a some "agreement" (cf. the UUP, circa Good Friday 1998).

In this regard, Alex, I did read your comment: "I could be wrong in my analysis--it is the risk that all commentators and columnists run."

Frankly, though, if you would indeed argue publicly that the DUP would choose "B(ii)" over "B(i)," I would think that either (a) you're simply not being forthcoming with your readers or (b) you might consider another line of work.

If, however, you do accept that the DUP would not choose "B(ii)" over "B(i)," then it seems your commentary conveys with little more than a rather self-evident conclusion that the DUP would go along with a resolution which it found acceptable. As I've asked others (like Mark Simpson, who a month ago ended one of his think-pieces with the insight that "[t]he conflicting signals make it impossible to make a proper assessment of the chances of a deal"), is voicing such thoughts really what you get paid the big bucks for? As I've mentioned before, you could indeed do much better.

ATB,

Paul

Posted by: [Paul A. Fitzsimmons](#) at August 11, 2004 09:13 PM

ATTACHMENT B

-----Original Message-----

From: Paul Fitzsimmons [SMTP:pfitzsim@wrightrobinson.com]
Sent: 21 July 2004 19:04
To: Alex.Kane
Subject: As my solicited last to you

Alex:

I've pasted my response below and attached it hereto in a Word file whose superior formatting renders it much more readable.

Paul

21 July 2004

Dear Alex:

Thank you for your note of this morning.

Per your invitation to “[c]onvince [you] otherwise” on independence, my attempt has to be on bases vastly different from what you’ve suggested.

Is independence a “unionist” solution? It’s often been referred to as such, though I’m with you on this one: I don’t so regard it. What I do strongly feel is that it could be a quantum leap to a middle ground which might ultimately be tolerable or even acceptable to genuine Unionists. David Vance’s “Independence Day” article—in *The Blanket*, no less—is extremely substantial support for that proposition.

Would Republicans “regard independence as a British exit”? Well, basically, yes, I think they would do so. *But that exit would occur only with and through a formal ratification of Ireland’s internal border and within the context of a constitutional situation where written in stone would be how and when, if ever, that border would change.* That point would manifestly be a key aspect of negotiations on proposed constitutional provisions.

Let me digress a bit from what is most important in this overall analysis. In the course of your note to me, you wrote that you also “have huge difficulties with how an independent NI would survive, either politically or economically.” Those concerns—which I’ve now heard in various iterations 4,637 times—are perfectly valid, but they do *not* go to the question of whether to investigate independence. Instead, particularly in this post-GFA environment, they go only to the question of whether any given independence proposal should be approved or rejected.

Whether to investigate independence turns most particularly on what *is* important *above all else* here (a point you and I have already touched on in a *Slugger* thread). In a recent exchange with a very famous Republican, I responded:

“[T]he German phrase was a bit offensive”? My apologies, but of course I occasionally use that obviously pejorative phrase “*über alles*”—in my dealings with all colors and stripes in Ireland—to make what I think is a key point: what is truly important here “*above all else*”? (And, frankly, do those “*above all else*” desires comport or conflict with genuine principles which should be overriding?)

....

You say: “I see no solution while the Island remains partitioned, that is a logical conclusion although I am an emotional Republican as well, I weep at Mise Eire.” That comment reminded me of a portion of an article I sent you a couple of days ago:

As noted above[in that article], Mr. Irvine also tells us:

I cannot see [major socio-political improvement] happening while those Six Counties remain either attached by their poisonous umbilical cord to Britain; or free to float in their own space.

Responding seriously to that statement, which I have heard in various forms many times, is difficult to do without sounding insulting, but here goes: maybe an important problem here lies in Mr. Irvine's vision. Perhaps independence could work but perhaps Mr. Irvine, in light of his current predilections and prejudices, is literally unable to see that potential. As but one indication of his possible error in this respect, Mr. Irvine refers to my argument as involving "UDI," i.e., "unilateral declaration of independence"; in fact, I have advocated not any UDI but, instead, independence resulting from negotiation with London and Dublin and implemented only with supermajority support.

[P]lease don't just weep for your Eire, indeed our Eire. Instead, please consider now bravely saying something democratic, and indeed noble, that many others in your community may be afraid to say themselves: that you don't support six-counties independence, that you don't think such independence would work, that you don't think that it would be broadly acceptable, *BUT* that you yourself would accede—perhaps grudgingly—to that result if an independence plebiscite received at least 70 percent support in favor.

Please let me move on at this point to two things that really are central to this analysis: Christianity and democracy.

As I don't know you personally, I don't know whether you are a Christian, but let me assume for the sake of argument here that you are, as are many other Unionists. I would never waste my breath by suggesting to you or anyone else in Northern Ireland: "As a Christian, you should surrender yourself politically to the other side in order to resolve this conflict." However, I sure as hell hope and trust that already pellucidly clear is that independence would mean "surrender"—to Dublin or London—would be required from or by *neither* side. Quite obviously, this is the main compromise at the heart of this independence proposal. Since no surrender to "the other side" would be involved in any respect, two questions present themselves. Would, in this context, the other types of sacrifices involved in this independence approach be such that Christian principles would urge them to be accepted in order to try to remedy the main socio-political problems that have long scourged your region? Should not now, based on Christian inclinations and principles, the logistics of possible independence at least be formally investigated in this "all else *has* failed" socio-political situation?

However, even if you somehow feel that Christian principles themselves would not impel such an investigation, how about an investigation based merely on plain democratic principles? This aspect of the analysis, particularly from the Unionist perspective, I find essentially stunning. In my recent "Open Letter" to the Provos, I've proposed that a minimum 70% approval level be set on an independence plebiscite. Unionists—following, of course, the gerrymandering of Ireland in the 1920's—have often rallied around the "self-evident" truth and wisdom of simple majoritarianism in government. Against this backdrop, just how on God's green earth could a Unionist or Unionism as a whole—with well over 50% of the vote in your six counties—possibly conclude that a 70%-minimum approval level for an independence proposal could be anything other than a "democratic" result? Why in hell would any principled Unionist object, on any *democratic* basis, to a fair fight at the polls concerning a proposal which, if approved, could only produce a by-definition democratic result?

I've got what might be bad news for you personally, so brace yourself: you yourself are really important to the future of Northern Ireland. What you say and do could actually make a difference in the course of Northern Ireland's history, as suggested in a 17 July *Sluggie* posting—which, perhaps due to Mick's new software, hasn't yet made it onto the recent "Utopian" thread—quoted in part here (and appended in full to this letter):

[A]s noted in this instant 8 July 2004 “The danger of utopian dreaming...” thread, you suggested (through a *Newsletter* article published earlier this month) that “wait[ing] another few decades” for significant improvement in your society might be necessary. In precisely that light, I asked you:

[C]an it really be “better” (i) to decide to forego whatever small chance for success independence has and to accede supinely, for decades on end, to socio-political failure and conflict than (ii) to take a brave shot at that untested possibility, to find out for sure through trying (as was done with Sunningdales Mark I and II) whether success is anywhere near possible, and at least to fail after trying valiantly?

Alex, you’ve accurately informed this group that your “criticisms of the [Good Friday] Agreement have been quoted in the Dail, House of Commons and the Assembly.” (<http://www.sluggerotoole.com/home/archives/001989.asp>).

Maybe--before the GFA does a final “crash and burn” in September--people in the Dail, the House of Commons, and beyond would yet do well to hear a thoughtful response from you on that italicized question. Frankly, answering that question honestly *and* aloud would take more balls than brains, as the morally correct answer is obvious and as the GFA political culture seems to have rendered truth (and perhaps honor as well) virtually anathema.

Time is running very short, in more ways than one, so onward here with still more truths still more pointed than polite discourse would typically permit.

If, entirely contrary to my current estimations, your Unionism is more important to you than are the fundamentals of Christianity and the principles of democracy, I sure as hell wouldn’t presume to pronounce on the prospects for your own soul, but Northern Ireland herself may thereby be damned. Relatedly, these are the first two paragraphs of a note I wrote on Sunday to Henry McDonald, a journalist with the guts to challenge “not just the judgment but also the sanity of the newspaper editors and pundits who are peddling th[e] illusion” that the Assembly/Executive might be revived in the autumn:

Your “A bridge too far” today was, of course, dead-on correct. The one qualifying point I’d raise is this: you write “there is little or no chance of the restoration of power at Stormont prior to Tony Blair going to the country in the spring/summer of 2005,” but the implication is that the chances might somehow be better thereafter. Yet Unionists’ broadly not wanting “Martin McGuinness in charge of their children’s education any more” won’t have changed substantially after the next British general election. It’ll therefore all be back to the same thereafter.

The subheadline to your story--“*The tragedy is there may never be a point at which the parties meet*”--is exactly the reason I decided, two decades ago, to write on possible negotiated independence (articles attached, including my most recent, an “Open Letter” to the Provos). For whatever the general British “evolution rather than revolution, atrophy rather than surgery” philosophy might be worth in other contexts, it is grossly and gravely inadequate in this one. Events over these past couple of decades tend rather strongly to reinforce my conclusion that Northern Ireland does instead need a “paradigm shift” for any chance at a genuine settlement. Otherwise, indeed, “there may never be a point at which the parties meet.”

If it’s not already clear, please allow me to state at this point that, for as sick as some people may be of hearing from me about all this, I too am sick of this fight, important as the “Northern Ireland question” is. I’m sick of stating obvious truths and so often getting in response blinkered, erroneous, yet nonetheless hallowed dogmatisms. I’m sick of the fact that many have given me words of encouragement but seldom more than *private* words, because they won’t raise their heads above the parapets for fear of what others will think about some basic socio-political verities (David Vance being, to date, the most notable exception to that rule). I’m sick of people in Britain and Ireland who—because of laziness or cowardice or otherwise—prefer the devil they know to the unfallen angel they don’t know and won’t try to seek out. I’m sick of those who think that evading difficult questions is an honorable or morally acceptable practice. Last November, I wrote similarly:

On a train back to D.C. in February 1994—following a large National Committee on American Foreign Policy gathering in New York, famously attended by Gerry Adams—another person who had also attended chanced to sit next to me. He was, I learned, a lay member of a major U.S.-based Catholic group tangentially involved in the Northern Ireland question, and, in the ensuing conversation, he mentioned his group’s frequent frustration at being unable to get straight answers to straight questions posed to various Northern Catholics.

During the past decade, I've often shared that feeling, though by no means exclusively because of dealings with members of that one Northern group. Those years have taught me well that—notwithstanding stereotypes to the contrary—many Northern Protestants are no less able to dodge, weave, cover their ears, and close their eyes when they feel it suits them to do so. Exceptions in each camp of the North's intelligentsia have, in my experience, been well outnumbered by those who illauidably follow that general rule.

Yet, the costs of such evasions may be high, including not least their leading astray politicians who often look to those bright lights and big thinkers for direction on difficult Northern Ireland issues.

Alex—after all this haranguing by me—please have yourself a cup of tea, then take another pass through this lengthy message, and finally, after adequate contemplative meditation, write me a note saying that you've decided now boldly to step up to the plate on this cross-community heresy or, in the alternative, a note just telling me frankly to bugger off, so that I can be accordingly guided. Given the lateness of the hour on this project, a lukewarm, put-it-on-the-long-finger response will be worthless and silence worse still. Also in my email on Sunday to Henry McDonald was the following:

I yet believe the people in Northern Ireland deserve the chance--however small it might be--to examine, study, and render their verdict upon an honest and genuine settlement proposal. It *might* be that 80 percent or more in Northern Ireland (the ones never videoed rioting) have enough of a "live and let live" attitude that they could drag the rest into a stable, workable future.

But if Downing Street is intent on going from a conspicuous GFA failure straight into officially long-term direct/joint rule--after I've been telling them (Simon McDonald, here in D.C.; Matthew Rycroft, here in D.C. and now in No. 10; and Jonathan Powell, via correspondence) for years and years that they would indeed land in *exactly* this position--it seems obvious to me that I need finally to end these efforts. Not as self-puffery but as simple fact, I certainly believe that chances for any sort of "paradigm shift" in Northern Ireland will be drastically reduced, if not completely eliminated, after I wrap things up.

In sum, were you yourself to take the difficult step of publicly placing democratic and Christian principles above your own Unionism by, as I suggested to the "famous Republican" referenced above,

now bravely saying something democratic, and indeed noble, that many others in your community may be afraid to say themselves: that you don't support six-counties independence, that you don't think such independence would work, that you don't think that it would be broadly acceptable, *BUT* that you yourself would accede—perhaps grudgingly—to that result if an independence plebiscite received at least 70 percent support in favor,

your statement surely would be heard in the House of Commons, in the Dáil, and beyond.

I hope very much that your decision on this final petition to you will be one that you'll have a right to be proud of for the rest of your days and indeed thereafter.

Thanks again. I look forward to your response.

Best regards,

Paul