

# A modest proposal for Irish renewal

**Communal divisions in Northern Ireland, responsible for twenty-five years of violence, might be partly bridged by an imaginative scheme for a new campus in Belfast. But why not go further?**

**Belfast.** What is the obligation of universities to the social environment in which they find themselves? The most common answer is that the education of the young is a sufficient justification. Where would a society be if it could not easily acquire the skills to keep industry and the social infrastructure alive and capable of innovation? On that view, it is simply a by-product of higher education that the same young people may have the intellectual breadth to change from within the societies to which they belong. The creation of new knowledge is something else again, a tribute to international scholarship. That, in normal circumstances, is the case for the modern university.

But what if the circumstances are abnormal? Last weekend, Sinn Fein, the Republican Party, was meeting in a muddy tent on the outskirts of Dublin to decide (among other things) what response to make to a declaration on the future of Ireland by the British and Irish governments. In the event, Sinn Fein said nothing that will carry weight in London or Dublin. The violence will go on.

Not that Belfast seems a violent place. The murder rate is less in the whole of Northern Ireland than in, say Washington, DC, and by a substantial factor. A quarter of a century of the present troubles notwithstanding, most people seem remarkably cheerful. There are (British) Army patrols on the streets and policemen at the entrances to most public buildings, but the city itself looks exceedingly well; bombed buildings are quickly rebuilt, while the new public housing on the sectarian frontier is a credit to the British government (and the British taxpayer, who has paid for it). And Belfast, with its sea lochs and suburban mountain-scapes, is as spectacular a piece of topography as ever.

But it is tiny. The provincial capital, with 300,000 people, houses a fifth of the population of Northern Ireland, which itself accounts for 30 per cent of the 5 million or so in the whole of Ireland. If the nationalists were to win their united Ireland, there would be fewer of them than there are Swiss. What arrangements would they make for higher education? And how should the existing universities order their affairs to accommodate the uncertainties ahead?

Ireland's universities are the island's history in bricks and mortar. Trinity College, Dublin, was an Anglican foundation in 1595, from which Presbyterians as well as Roman Catholics were excluded. Queen's University Belfast is the surviving eponymous

relic of the Queen's University of Ireland, created in the mid-nineteenth century (in partnership with the still-extant universities at Cork and Galway in the republic). The National University of Ireland began life in Dublin (in 1851) as the Catholic University of Ireland (now University College Dublin), but has now absorbed Cork and Galway. The most recent creation is the University of Ulster, formed in 1984 by the merger of the previous New University of Ulster (formed in the mid-1960s at Coleraine and Londonderry) and the Ulster Polytechnic (sited in Belfast).

At least by British standards, most of these institutions are substantial. Queen's College Belfast and University College Dublin have about 10,000 students of all kinds, while the University of Ulster has quickly grown to the same number. Ireland in total has about 50,000 students at any time, a third of them in Northern Ireland. Queen's Belfast has by far the best record on research, earning some £8 million from research grants two years ago.

Most of these institutions are partly imprisoned by their origins. Early in the present troubles, Queen's Belfast, under vice-chancellors such as Sir Arthur Vick, took it as its social role to be an island of calm in a sea of turmoil; research aimed at understanding what was happening on the streets was discouraged. Much has now changed, but Queen's is still somewhat timorous, perhaps overconscious of its Protestant traditions. In different ways, most other Irish universities exude the same defensiveness.

The exception is the University of Ulster, which has quickly won a reputation for being go-ahead, some say for bravado. It boasts of the best facilities for computer networking in the United Kingdom as well as of a joint programme with the United Nations University on "conflict resolution and ethnicity". More than 1,000 of its students are from south of the border.

Last September, the university startled even its own members with an audacious plan: to build a new campus for more than 4,000 students on a derelict industrial site spanning what is called the peace line at Springfield in West Belfast. Over many years, the British government has been unsuccessful in persuading industry to build factories there. The scheme, which is chiefly meant to meet the growing demand for higher education, is also political. One of the questions for the feasibility study now under way is whether a campus so sited would attract students from both the union-

ist and the nationalist communities.

The scheme has been welcomed as a "visionary initiative" by Sir Patrick Mayhew, the British government's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Even the politicians have been cheerful about the project, the nationalists perhaps the more so. The government also seems to be taking the project seriously. Academics elsewhere are less sanguine, fearing that the cost may diminish their budgets. But these are early days. There are hopes that in the end, some part of the £100 million or so the development might cost could come from Brussels, not London.

What are the chances that the project will help bridge Northern Ireland's conflict? In the end, local politicians and not academics will decide that. But it is not irrelevant that the communal conflict has not obliterated the sense that Ireland is one island. Both parts of it compete internationally as one in horse-riding and rugby football (in which respect Ulstermen last weekend were still savouring "our victory" over England). Dublin still has a "Royal Irish Academy" and the flux of students between the two is substantial. Students trickling South are supported financially by their local authorities, students moving North have their fees paid by the British government. Cross-border research projects are increasingly common, usually on the initiative of individuals.

The University of Ulster's Springfield campus, if it comes off, would dramatically bolster that sense that the communal conflict is at some level an irrelevance. But why not go even one step further? Ireland's 5 million people now have two university systems, one run from Belfast and one from Dublin. Why not put them all together, under a single funding council to which both governments would contribute? The benefits would be both to prove that higher education is above politics and to demonstrate that its institutions can, by their existence, help solve political problems. No institution would be required to abandon its traditions. All would profit from being players in a bigger pool.

Already, it seems, the heads of all the Irish universities have held two meetings, piquantly this year at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. It would make more sense if they were meeting every month or so, in Ireland, to talk about their common problems. The British and Irish governments are looking for projects on which to work. Here is one.

**John Maddox**