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**The Footballing Elephant in the Room? The Irish National
Football Teams and Northern Players who declare for the
Republic of Ireland**

Breen, P.

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Sean Huddleston – School of Education, University of the West of Scotland

Dr. Paul Breen – University of Westminster

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Title – The Footballing Elephant in the Room? The Irish National Football Teams and Northern Players who declare for the Republic of Ireland

Topic –

Northern Ireland has struggled to achieve momentum for “toleration, respect and recognition” that would help the society move towards meaningful embedding of the “appropriate normative expectations associated with equal citizenship” (McBride, 2015, p. 249). The society remains divided even two decades after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, as exemplified by the culture and practices that surround support for and endorsement of Ireland’s two ‘national’ football teams.

Before the 1980s there appeared to be a greater separation of politics and Association Football in Northern Ireland, with the cross community support for the 1982 World Cup team serving as an example of that. In the late 1980s and early 90s football became increasingly politicised, with loyalist identity becoming synonymous with support Northern Ireland, and an increasingly confident Catholic population finding greater affiliation with the Republic of Ireland (Hassan, 2002). The Good Friday Agreement of 1998, though aspiring to harmonise identities (O’Neill, 2003), has potentially served to reinforce the concept of two distinct communities defined by their political and religious affiliations.

On the surface level this appears to have created greater cultural and sporting divisions if analysing the situation through the pronouncements of public representatives on the Unionist side, and in so many young players of a Catholic background declaring adult allegiance to the Republic. However, at a deeper level, there appears to be a greater tolerance on the part of supporters with differing identities to recognise the achievements of the other side. Ultimately though, real harmony may only be attained when the symbols around football become less political and more neutral, in such areas as flags and anthems for example. There seems very little appetite for this though on any side, with each preferring to keep its own distinct identity rather than

diluting them down to something more acceptable to those at the other end of the political spectrum.

Introduction

National pride is closely allied to political symbols, and Northern Irish society serves as an exemplar of how sport and politics are inextricably linked in the popular imagination. Armstrong & Mitchell (2001:140) point to the role that those social activities such as sporting events play in reinforcing a sense of national pride. However, in a divided society even the most basic symbols can become contentious, and used as a vehicle for asserting ownership over the cultural terrain of a state. Northern Ireland is politically and demographically divided between the Christian denominations of Catholic and Protestant within a context where “religious ascription has typically been seen as coterminous with national identity” and Catholics see themselves as Irish rather than British (Nagle, 2012:3). This means that the majority of Northern Irish Catholics support the Republic of Ireland’s football team as a consequence of identifying with the notion of Ireland as a singular entity, which is more reflective of their long-held political aspiration of a united Irish state. As such, loyalty to the Northern Irish football team is seen as lukewarm at best.

However, this has not always been the case despite decades of conflict that arguably have their roots in the Anglo-Irish conflict of the early 1900s and the subsequent partition of Ireland into two states. It was only in the second half of the 20th century that the “social significance of sport in Northern Ireland” (Hassan, 2002:66) extended into the realm of political and cultural identification. Increasingly, ‘ownership’ of the national football team has become a crucial aspect of maintaining Protestant hegemony over a state that has seen considerable demographic change in the past half century. Yet, despite the increase in the Catholic population (Nolan, 2012; Hughes, 2013) Hassan (2002:69) has observed that “the popularity of soccer amongst Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland, far from questioning their sense of national identity, appears to provide many with an opportunity to express their support for the idea of Irish unification and engage in counter-hegemonic activity against the Northern Ireland State.”

That though hardly seems like a recipe for the agreed society envisioned in the 1998 Belfast Agreement’s, signed into British, Irish and European law on Good Friday, tenth April 1998, after two years of formal negotiations between representatives of unionism and nationalism. This agreement established “provisions for a new political and constitutional configuration in Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain”, and cemented “a strong equalisation policy” that had been in place since the late nineteen eighties. Nagle (2012, p.12) further describes the deal as recognizing both nationalists and unionists’ respective “self-determination claims, the need to share political power, as well as ‘parity of esteem’ for their cultural identities.” Parity of esteem though is a difficult construct to measure (O’Neill, 2003) and the Agreement itself has been deemed a failure in taking on board “overlapping, confused, or even contradictory identities” which “slice through the alleged fault lines of conflict” (Vaughan-Williams, 2006, p. 518). Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the binary landscape of supporting ‘the national football team’, which in itself is a loaded assertion since many Catholics also

see Gaelic football as their national game, rather than soccer.

The situation is thus a complicated one, and raises the question of whether or not it is possible to accommodate diversity within the support base, and to have this reflected in the broader symbols associated with the Northern Irish football team. To date, that appears not to have been achieved to any substantive extent and a scenario exists where, twenty years after The 1998 Belfast Agreement, sporting allegiances may be just as polarised as in those now-passed decades of conflict. It remains to be seen though if that could change, and whether or not there is scope for arrangements in which supporters, if not players, can strongly identify with teams from both parts of Ireland. For this to happen, a number of measures might have to be put in place regarding such issues as anthems and symbols, but even then as Roberts (2017) has pointed out, most Catholics would still probably identify more strongly with the Republic of Ireland regardless of any cosmetic changes.

However, an interesting challenge to this position comes in the existence of Catholic players such as Paddy McCourt and Niall McGinn. They have chosen to wear the colours of Northern Ireland, even in an era when they could self-select for the Republic as others such as the infamous James McClean have done. This suggests that there may be hope for making the background environment of Northern Irish football more reflective of a broader society that has long since ceased to be “a cold house for Catholics” (Trimble, 1998). For that to succeed though, Roberts (2017:461) argues that it “take more than words” and cites the aforementioned Niall McGinn as saying that in some scenarios such as the playing of the ‘national’ anthem, for Catholic boys it’s a case of “just put your head down and try to get through it” (ibid: 452); which seems a contradiction to the foundations of the 1998 Agreement.

Historical Context

Much of Irish football’s present day divisions have resulted from the “divorce” (Breen, 2014) of the island’s two football associations in 1921, following the partition of Ireland into two states. Historically in Ireland, Association Football, had been the preserve of the Protestant north east, even if two of the most recognisable clubs, Belfast Celtic and Cliftonville, Ireland’s oldest club, generally attracted a largely Catholic following (Roberts, 2017). Even in the aftermath of the split into two associations and right up to this day, the northern version retained a sense of righteousness in being true heirs to the title of the Irish Football Association, with the Football Association of Ireland being the ones who broke away.

The Republic of Ireland football team’s identity thus came to be based on a statist version of nationalism according to Cronin (1999:124) in that it was formed around the boundaries of a political state, i.e. the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland and that the FAI “built its identity around the nation state, and not, as with the GAA, a mythical ideal of the nation.” Such a perspective mirrored the insular nature of southern Irish politics in the decades after partition; a situation changed gradually by entry into the European Union and a thaw in relations with Britain. However, by the late 1980s and early 90s, the situation had changed radically, as noted in The Irish Times (June 30, 1990) where they state that “the Irish soccer team, with its

extraordinary collection of polyglot Irish pedigrees, has given us a new pride in our multi-cultural Irishness, and put one more nail in the coffin of the old, exclusive ... GAA-supporting, Fianna Fail-voting definition of 'real' Irish-ness." Despite such changes though, the situation within, and even presence of the North, has always complicated whatever process Irish identity has undergone ever since partition.

Up until the 1990s, the Northern Irish soccer team had been the more successful of the two entities upon the island. They achieved qualification and some degree of respectability in three World Cup competitions, as well as producing arguably the finest British footballer of his generation in terms of raw talent; George Best. Allied to this, when Northern Ireland played in the Spanish World Cup of 1982, they had a reasonable Catholic following, even though this was less than one year after the 1981 Hunger Strikes, and the peak of the political conflict (Breen, 2014). Yet by the early 90s football in the north became increasingly politicised as Ulster Loyalist identity became synonymous with support for Northern Ireland, an increasingly confident Catholic population found greater affiliation with the Republic of Ireland (Hassan, 2002). Further to this, the fact of the teams facing one another in qualification for major tournaments twice in the 1990s exacerbated the sense of polarisation, and created what was to be deemed "a bubbling cauldron of sectarian bile" (Roberts, 2017:382) in which Northern Irish manager Billy Bingham was seen to play a key role and singled out for criticism in the southern media and parliament.

These years though were characterised by some of the most vicious and pointless murders of the decades-old political conflict, including a bomb attack on a Shankill Road fish shop, and the "World Cup massacre" (Duggan, 2014) in which six civilians were murdered in a remote bar whilst watching the Republic of Ireland's match against Italy in the first round of FIFA's 1994 competition. This was also the era of instigating "a lengthy, and often precarious, peace process" (Brown & MacGinty, 2003:85) which culminated in the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Though aspiring to harmonise identities (O'Neill, 2003), actually served to reinforce the concept of two distinct communities defined by their political and religious affiliations. The 1998 Agreement also allowed for dual citizenship and gave Catholics in Northern Ireland who felt alienated by sectarianism and other issues surrounding the Northern Irish team to switch their allegiance (Hassan et al, 2009:743). That though has created a situation where a trickle at the start appears to have become a flood of young Catholic players.

Reasons for this are varied though, and not simply to do with antagonism towards the Northern Irish state. Hassan et al(2009) have observed that there is 'no single explanation can be offered as to why talented young soccer players from Northern Ireland's Catholic community are choosing to play for Republic of Ireland teams' with a number of interlocking issues at play regarding these players and their choices. Cronin (1999:124) highlights some of these issues and reasons as being the nature of the communities in which players reside, family allegiances and ties, political beliefs and affiliations, personal/national identities, sporting pragmatism (i.e. perceived increased chances of playing in better teams and better chances of playing in international tournaments). The perception of the IFA held by some nationalists in Northern Ireland (which has rarely been favourable) is also a factor in

some of these players' decisions to declare for the Republic of Ireland (Hassan et al, 2009:741; Roberts, 2017:465-491).

The New Century and Persisting Issues

This division in allegiances, and the factors underpinning them, appeared to reach a tipping at the start of the 21st Century. The treatment of Northern Ireland team captain Neil Lennon, particularly after he joined Celtic from Leicester City, confirmed to some in the Catholic community that anti-Catholic bigotry was rife and flourishing at Northern matches. Simon Kuper (2007) explains that when Lennon joined Celtic, some Northern Irish Protestants were unforgiving. To them, wearing the green-and-white hoops was a greater crime than being Catholic. During Northern Ireland vs. Norway in Belfast's Windsor Park in March 2001, Lennon was abused by a section of his own crowd. They sang traditional anti-Catholic songs, and chanted, "We've Got a Provo on *Our*¹ Team" (Roberts, 2017:408).

Such antagonism was directed towards Lennon because of what Clancy (2010:86) describes as Glasgow Celtic's "Irish origins and strong contemporary Irish links" and the fact that this Scottish football club continues "to be a badge of Irish identity for many thousands of people." The sectarian abuse of Celtic footballers by hard-core loyalist elements within the crowd, and not just Neil Lennon, but Anton Rogan and Allen McKnight (Roberts, 2017:421) alienated Catholic supporters from going to matches and allowed the perception of Northern Ireland games as anti-Catholic events to grow. These incidents also resonated with other examples in Europe e.g. the problems faced by Bixente Lizarazu as a member of the French World Cup squad who was born a Basque but who chose to play for France. Lizarazu was subsequently put under 24 hour police protection after Basque paramilitary group ETA sent threatening letters to his parents home (Observer, 4/3/2001).

For the Northern Ireland international side, the division that had gripped the country for so many decades was now being translated into support for the team. The Northern Ireland support, from the 1980s through to the 21st Century, reflected an overt Protestant, unionist character that proved to be a difficult place for Catholic supporters to attend (Sugden & Bairner, 1993:78). On a positive note though, this situation strengthened the hand of some progressive figures working in football in Northern Ireland to tackle anti-Catholic bigotry and sectarianism; even if Lennon himself appeared to believe that not enough was done at the time, in practical terms, to ease the situation (Roberts, 2017:409-412).

However, the outreach efforts of the IFA also saw initiatives with regards to refugees in Northern Ireland, when, in 2003, the 'World United' football team was established by the IFA with the intention of giving 'immigrants the chance to meet other people from similar backgrounds, to get a foothold in Northern Ireland and to tackle racism in the process' (Belfast Telegraph, 10/1/2015). With the popularity of this initiative,

¹ '*Our*' in italics for emphasis within this paper & not used in original text.

Hassan & McCue (2013:421) noted that “by 2004 Northern Ireland was witnessing levels of inward migration it had never previously countenanced [and]...in considerable numbers availing of often comparatively higher wages and a better standard of living. Together with asylum seekers and refugees, predominantly from North Africa, these new arrivals formed the nucleus of early World United sides.”

Diversity then was becoming an increasing feature of football in Northern Ireland, and further developments were to come with the appointment of a Catholic manager Michael O'Neill who has complimented the IFA on doing “a great deal of work in making the games at Windsor Park inclusive” and that “*we*² want a team on the pitch which is inclusive of everyone” (Independent, 10.10.2015). He also went on to dispel cynicism about his appointment with the insinuation that he may have been given the job as a consequence of being a Catholic. His retort to that was simply that “I'm not here to say Mass, I'm here to pick a team.” (Belfast Telegraph, 13.11.2015). Despite this change at the helm and many changes on the ground, there is still a long way to go in terms of realising Michael O'Neill's ambition of seeing every young Catholic born in Northern Ireland being passionate about playing for their country (Roberts, 2017:466-468).

The James MacLean Factor?

Conversely, it is important to demonstrate examples that have had a negative impact on the possibility of Catholic/nationalist players declaring and playing for Northern Ireland. Four years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement Neil Lennon, from a strongly Catholic and nationalist background, captained the Northern Irish team whilst playing for Glasgow Celtic football club in Scotland. However, he was forced to retire from international football at only thirty one years of age due to death threats made against him prior to a friendly match against Cyprus. Almost a decade later, former Derry City players and then Northern Ireland internationals Paddy McCourt and Niall McGinn were sent bullets in the post (*and, as in the case of Neil Lennon, both were also Celtic players at the time*). Niall McGinn would later compound matters to an extent when he, possibly naively, announced that he had been a lifelong Republic of Ireland fan. These remarks proved especially ill-judged due to their timing following a match in which he had been part of a Northern Ireland team beaten 5-0 by the Republic in a competition featuring all the ‘nations’ of Britain and Ireland (Belfast Telegraph, 27.05.2011). These remarks caused a social media furore amongst Northern Ireland supporters and would later prompt a public apology from the player even though as a Catholic born in Donaghmore he was probably voicing opinions shared by the majority of his community, but still not officially tolerated in the official narrative of the State.

Prominent football writers have highlighted other cultural factors that may have had a negative impact. Conall Cahill, for example, stated that “as long as 'God Save The Queen' is played before Northern Ireland games, Irish Catholics born north of the border will stay away from Windsor Park and will choose to play for and support the

² ‘We’ in italics for emphasis within this paper & not used in original text.

Republic of Ireland instead of Northern Ireland...young people in the north are as secular as their southern counterparts) in supporting the Northern Ireland football team, the playing of 'God Save The Queen' penetrates your consciousness and reminds you otherwise" (balls.ie). Paul McVeigh, former Norwich City and NI international has also raised the question of Paul McVeigh, former Norwich City and NI international has also pointed to this fact: "what justifies the national anthem of England [God save the Queen] being played for Northern Ireland's football team?" and goes on to suggest that long as the authorities continue with this anthem, the Northern Irish football team "will not have an identity of its own" and players from a nationalist background "will continue to turn to the Republic" (ibid).

This alienation has also been evident in the women's game with Catherine Drain, a former Northern Ireland ladies international soccer player from the nationalist tradition who declared for the Republic of Ireland in February 1999, stating in an interview that: "I'm not ashamed to say it – you do feel more pride walking out in the Republic [of Ireland] jersey" (Hassan 2002, p.74). This is a feeling shared by former Derry City player, and current Republic of Ireland international James MacLean who stated that 'You don't really feel at home. I think any Catholic would be lying if they said they did feel at home, seeing all those flags (Union Jacks) and hearing the songs and chants. For me, personally, I didn't feel part of it. I gave a piece - an article - not that long back and I was just describing how, as a Catholic in the squad, you don't feel part of the squad" (Daily Mail, 11.05.2012).

MacLean probably best exemplifies an apparent political motivation in a young Irish nationalist footballer's decision to opt for the Republic, having provided very explicit indications of his allegiance and publicly expressing his Irishness in ways that are intimately bound up with the city of Derry where he grew up. MacLean's identity is overtly Nationalist and his decision to declare for the Republic of Ireland was a logical extension of what he felt was his national identity. MacLean himself eloquated this in an interview with the Irish Independent newspaper when he stated that "Northern Ireland is not my country. Unless you're from where I'm from, Creggan [*traditional nationalist section of the city of Derry*] - which was a big part of The Troubles when I was growing up - unless you're from there, you don't really understand" (Hogan, 2015). Furthermore, playing for the the Irish national team had always been a personal sporting ambition for MacLean as in a further statement that "playing in the Aviva Stadium in Dublin in front of thousands of people and wearing that green jersey means so much to me and my team-mates", and that he feels "very proud and very fortunate to have been given an opportunity to wear that jersey. I do everything in my power to give 100 per cent when wearing it" (Irish Examiner, 25.10.2016).

As a result of such a public expression of pride in his national identity, James MacLean has stood out in terms of being a new *bête noir* for Unionism and Football. Some might argue that he has become the incarnation of an Irish national pride that is still treated with scorn across different classes and elements of mainstream British society. The treatment of MacLean (with echoes of historic treatment meted to former internationalist Neil Lennon), and subsequent pronouncements by public representatives on the Unionist side, have arguably become new barriers to

Catholic/Nationalist acceptance of Northern Ireland football team. Hassan (2002) provides important context behind players from Derry i.e. MacLean, deciding to represent the Republic and the importance of geographical as well as historical factors. He sees a near tangible sense of rejection amongst Derry City FC fans of their location within Northern Ireland, propagated by their geographical and economic isolation in the State. The border separating Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland is to be found within four miles of the city centre, yet is now virtually unrecognizable following the relaxation of border controls between countries in the European Union. As a result the bond between Derry and certain parts of the Republic of Ireland, especially County Donegal, is very real. Exaggerated by their team's involvement in representative sport in the Republic of Ireland, nationalists in Derry now have to rely less on some mythical construction of Irish unity than might previously have been the case – rather their association with parts of southern Ireland is both natural and inherently logical (ibid, p.78).

In a similar manner, Shane Duffy (like other footballers Darren Gibson and James McLean, also born in Derry), initially capped by the north at various under-age levels, has expressed very similar sentiments in suggesting it was a logical outcome of his own loyalties “it is a dream to play for the Republic of Ireland ... Everyone in my family is Irish and so am I. We are just living in Northern Ireland. I have always wanted to play for the Republic. I grew up supporting Ireland and so did everybody around me” (Donegal Democrat, 25-02-2010). In recent times, more senior football players born in Derry City and the wider county have decided to represent the Republic of Ireland rather than Northern Ireland. James MacLean, Shane Duffy, Darren Gibson, Eunan O’Kane are all senior players in the Ireland squad who hail from the same county and have represented the Republic of Ireland. This then gives rise to the conclusion that McLean (and others like him) were acting correctly in accordance with their consciences when deciding to declare for the Republic of Ireland. In similar cases, the Unionist/Loyalist reaction to these players’ decisions are similar to how the French feel when they display the same sense of dismay when their ‘home-grown players’ - young men born in France but of Maghrebin or sub-Saharan family origin – decide to declare and play for the African countries of their parents (salutsunderland.com, 2012).

This nuance and contextualisation has been largely absent from unionist and loyalist examination. Members of the Democratic Unionist Party, on the conservative right wing of Britain’s political spectrum, have been at the forefront of MacLean’s declaration for the Republic and other controversial gestures such as refusing to wear the poppy on his jersey during remembrance weekends. Gregory Campbell - the DUP MP for East Derry - in 2013, recommended that Maclean should be sacked in response to the footballer tweeting about his love for the Republican song 'Broad Black Brimmer' (balls.ie). The DUP have been joined by other official Unionist voices of opposition to MacLean’s viewpoints and politically motivated decisions. Billy Hutchison, leader of the Loyalist Progressive Unionist Party, stated in the Belfast Telegraph that “it was disgraceful that a Premiership player “earning £40,000 or £50,000 a week” for an English team then refused to wear a poppy”.ⁱ Herein, aside from lack of tolerance for Irish nationalism, there is a perception that the only legitimate British identity is one that is accepting of militarism. Added to this,

MacLean has also become a target for the ire of Northern Ireland fans. When Northern Ireland made it three goals to nothing during their game against Greece on (8/10/2015), Windsor Park reverberated to a chorus of "Are You Watching, James McLean?" (Independent, 10.10.2015).

As already mentioned, Northern Ireland is in an unenviable position of being a post conflict society struggling to deal with the legacy of its past while also experiencing difficulties within the traumatic growing pains associated with being a new, multi-cultural society. McVeigh & Ralston (2007) have observed acutely that 'Instead of the promised post-GFA future 'free from racist and sectarian harassment' and grounded in human rights and equality, we find a state formation responsible for – and incapable of dealing with – frightening levels of racism and sectarianism. In terms of both racism and sectarianism, the Northern Ireland state, despite all its post-GFA gloss, remains part of the problem, not part of the solution' (McVeigh.R & Rolston.B, From Good Friday to Good Relations: sectarianism, racism Relations: sectarianism, racism and the Northern Ireland state, Race and Class, April 2007, vol. 48 no. 4, P.22). Political leadership, within all these different societal aspects, therefore must improve if Northern Irish society is to lessen its divisions of whatever variety.

The Deluge Continues? Catholic Players from the North and the South

There have also been fears within the IFA that there has been a 'player drain' to the Republic that has been gathering increasing speed in recent times. The IFA has argued that the current situation puts it at a clear disadvantage against all other 206 associations. The Northern Ireland association has been at loggerheads in recent years with the Republic's Football Association of Ireland (FAI) over the issue. The IFA had hoped that the option of the CAS facilitated by governing body FIFA although the FAI had continually expressed confidence that the body would not change the current position. FIFA rules include a clause allowing players to change nationality once before they play a senior competitive match if they were born "on the territory of the relevant association". The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 provided Northern Irish people to claim either British or Irish nationality but again, as reflected in attitudes surrounding the 'national' football teams, there remains a lack of hegemonic tolerance for nationalists' birthright to identify as being exclusively Irish.

On the sporting side, Hassan, McCullough, and Moreland (2009) have noted that the "decision of young Catholics from Northern Ireland to turn their backs on the chance to represent the country of their birth at senior international level is a worrying trend for those governing the game there. Their decisions are essentially the product of socio-political issues where the views of significant others, including the player's perception of his role as a community representative, holds considerable sway" (pp.752-753)ⁱⁱ. Indeed, as observed with by the likes of James MacLean, Fulton (2005) has also observed that the decision to declare for the Republic of Ireland is now another aspect of overt nationalism in the North: "...this affiliation with the Republic of Ireland team also demonstrates a rejection of Northern Ireland as their support 'introduces a sense of aspirational nationalism, an allegiance to a 32 county independent Republic ... (and thereby) imposes a more complicated relationship between soccer and Irish sporting nationalism' ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, so many young players of a Catholic background continue to declare adult allegiance to the Republic in the era since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (1998). For Smith (1991, p. 16)) national identities “fulfil more intimate, internal functions for individuals in communities”; they are ‘called upon to provide a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions... members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging.” Tonge and Gomez (2015, p. 19) have noted that “Northern Ireland may have become more secure as a political entity” but in terms of its national identity any shared sense of Northern Irishness “has failed to flourish on a cross-community basis.” They go on to say that “both communities do not look across to each other to redefine nationality, which is instead shaped by intra-communal debates over how best to express Britishness or Irishness.” Consequently, the possibility of growth in loyalty and connection with some Catholic players in the North, and a Northern Irish identity has stymied attempts to create a ‘cross-community’ Northern Ireland team to a certain degree.

As a result of these cross-community failings, the Northern Ireland association has been at loggerheads over the issue of player recruitment and eligibility in recent years with the Republic's Football Association of Ireland (FAI). These concerns largely centre on fears within the IFA that there has been a ‘player drain’ to the Republic, a concern that even saw the IFA try “the option of the CAS although the FAI had continually expressed confidence that the body would not change the current position. FIFA rules include a clause allowing players to change nationality once before they play a senior competitive match if they were born “on the territory of the relevant association” (BBC, 30.07.2010). There have been some notable high-profile commentators who have come out in support of the IFA on this issue. Former Northern Ireland footballer and assistant manager Gerry Armstrong, who later moved into a media career, has been consistent in his opposition to players from the North declaring for the Republic, particular those players that he believes have not been allowed to make a decision at an appropriate juncture. He has stated that “I think it is a problem because at 15 or 16, kids should be allowed to get on with their football and enjoy their football without another added pressure from a political point of view” (BBC, 10.10.2011).

Armstrong has even gone as far as accusing the FAI of poaching players from Northern Ireland being “poached” by the Republic of Ireland and that some players have eventually ‘returned’ to play for Northern Ireland after declaring for the Republic and having expectations et al falling through, although to date no evidence has been provided for such claims (BBC, 10.10.2011). Nevertheless, the reactions of Northern Ireland supporters to this perceived poaching of players by the Republic saw their fans launch a boycott of a friendly match in Dublin in 2011 between the island's two national sides (Storey, 2016). Others have questioned Armstrong's version of events however. Prominent Irish football writers, such as Cathal Dervan, have stated that they have not witnessed Football Association of Ireland (FAI) coaches at the side of matches in border areas such as Derry. He goes on to argue that “the bottom line is if a person is good enough to get into the Republic of Ireland team, [the then coach]

Giovanni Trapattoni will play him. It doesn't matter if he was born in Glasgow, Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymena or wherever. The Irish Football Association (IFA) have to accept this. This is legal, there is nothing illegal here in what the FAI are doing. The IFA have got to accept they are not bigger than the Good Friday Agreement" (BBC, 10.10.2011).

This sense of not accepting the conditions or subtext of the 1998 Agreement goes to the heart of what is partially to blame for the existing situation over how national identities are treated within Northern Ireland, and how each side has totally different expectations of what the future holds. Since the Agreement itself is shrouded in such necessary ambiguity (Ruane & Todd, 2001; Breen, 2017), neither side needs to meet the other in the middle because conditions have been created where the two societies can exist in parallel. The contention only arises when they need to share space such as cross-community sporting events or public expressions of culture such as festivals and marches. Even a couple of decades after the signing of the 1998 Agreement, there still remains a challenge in creating the type of "third space" advocated by Rhapp & Rhomberg, 2012). In the latter case they appear to advocate a platform that entails a dilution of both cultures for which there seems no appetite on either side since they each feel considerable devotion to their own flags, emblems, cultural activities, and even sporting affiliations (Hassan, 2002). Despite this, other cross-community sports have managed to strike a compromise with rugby and boxing being amongst the most successful in creating conditions for the expression of personal and national identities that incorporate diverse expressions of identity. Boxing, as a sport of individuals, has created conditions where every fighter, nationalist or unionist, represents Ireland in the Olympic Games and Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games, thus formally recognising the society's shared British and Irish identities by effectively fighting under the flags of each state at different times (Cronin, 1997). Rugby Union, as a team game more comparable to Association Football, has managed the same in other ways.

Comparison with Ireland Rugby Team

The controversy over Northern players declaring for the Republic of Ireland football team compares interestingly with the Irish Rugby team and Protestant/Unionist players that have played for this team. Indeed, in comparison with the football teams situation, there is very little (if any) serious debate about Protestant/Unionist players playing for an All-Ireland sports team (thus ignoring partition) and the creation of a Northern Ireland rugby team. There has also been an established coterie of important northern protestant players in Ireland team thus possibly stymieing any debate about separate Ireland rugby teams (and reflection of national identity).

It may be useful to register the success of the Ulster rugby team in that this team, playing home games in Belfast and reflecting a long established Protestant support, allows Northern Protestants to successfully juxtapose a British or Northern Irish identity beside supporting or even playing for an All Ireland Rugby team. Trevor Ringland, a former Ireland rugby internationalist and former Ulster Unionist Party representative acknowledged this relationship recently when he stated that "Northern Ireland is actually as 'British as Finchley' but also "as Irish as Cork" although our

[Northern/Protestant/Unionist] Irishness is distinct from that of the Republic of Ireland” (Belfast Newsletter, 20.10.2017).

It should also be noted that the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) has been arguably more successful in neutralising symbols and aspects that may appear alienating to Protestant players. The IRFU created its own flag after partition and also created a new anthem to be played for before games after renditions of Amhrán na bhFiann (Tuck, 2003, p.502). Within this set of circumstances, players – Catholic/Protestant and Northern/Southern – have been consistently able to give specific explanations of a “we–I balance” experience while representing “their” Ireland (ibid, p.511). Therefore, these teams have found a better means of reflecting the various layers of complexity that shape individuals’ and communities’ sense of national identity. The ability of Rugby to allow players and supporters the room to compartmentalise and balance what are often seen as competing identities is the difference between the island’s two football teams and one rugby team.

Conclusion

Some commentators have been brutal in their judgement on the IFA on this issue. Brendan Crossan, sports commentator for the Irish News, directly accused the IFA of refusing to acknowledge the complexities and realities of the situation facing them regarding player eligibility: “...stamping your feet in frustration hasn’t got the IFA anywhere. To use a football analogy, it’s like playing long ball tactics and being frustrated by the outcome. Put simply, the IFA need better tactics. They should be asking themselves why so many young Catholic players don’t want to play for the north. Indeed, the IFA would be better served if they carried out in-depth surveys/interviews with all the so-called ‘defectors’ to find out where they, as an association, are going wrong. Moreover, blaming the FAI for ‘poaching’ northern-born players is not a fair analysis of the situation (Irish News, 17.03.2017).

Journalist and commentator Andrew Quinn, writing in the Derry Journal, also spelt out the predicament that Gerry Armstrong, and essentially the IFA and its supporters face: ‘Gerry Armstrong is entitled to his opinion and it’s a valid one but let’s not shy away from the facts; the Northern Ireland football team needs a total facelift. If the IFA want to make declaring for Northern Ireland an attractive option for nationalists across the North then they must address the tough issues’ (Derry Journal, 25.11.2011). Criticism of a similar level and kind can be directed at Unionist Politicians and Unionist-minded (ex and present) footballers, commentators et al. Refusal to recognise the belief of these players to follow their conscience and declare for their country has been typified by an obtuse attitude that ignores legitimate positions and concerns. Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and ironically as the 2011 census found that 20% as Northern Irish (5% less than those who viewed themselves as Irish – Guardian, 12.05.2017), it is significant that the Irish football association has refused to acknowledge or even attempt to cater for those fans and players who do not view themselves as Unionist. While the desire to remove sectarianism from the stands has been largely successful, the willingness to create a Northern Ireland team that can be represented by all people in the community appears to be far off.

ⁱ Belfast Telegraph January 4 2016

ⁱⁱ David Hassan, Shane McCullough & Elizabeth Moreland (2009) North or South? Darron Gibson and the issue of player eligibility within Irish soccer, *Soccer & Society*, 10:6, 740-753, DOI: 10.1080/14660970903239933, pp.752-753

ⁱⁱⁱ Fulton, Gareth. 'Northern Catholic Fans of the Republic of Ireland Soccer Team'. In *Sport and the Irish. Histories, Identities, Issues*, ed. Alan Bairner. Dublin: UCD Press, 2005., p.125

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