From tribal to identity politics

April 2011

Kevin Bean and Chris Gilligan will be in conversation with the Salon audience, with a focus on recent developments in Northern Ireland.

Whether it was the **Peace Process** or the rise and fall of the **Celtic Tiger**, Ireland as a whole has been a focus of interest over the last twenty years. In Northern Ireland, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement was supposed to end the old tribal politics and usher in a new era. But instead of transformation, has the Peace Process simply created new forms of conflict framed around issues of identity?

Identity politics are usually associated with the New Social Movements of the Left which emerged in the late 1960s – such as radical feminism, sexual politics and black power. However, in Northern Ireland it is associated with Irish Nationalism and Ulster Unionism. Orange Order parades are defended by Unionists on the grounds that they are celebrations of their cultural identity. Irish Nationalists defend murals which depict IRA hunger-strikers as an expression of their cultural heritage. In this view being Irish or British provides a sense of belonging to a community, and the cultural articulations of Irishness or Britishness are expressions of the authenticity of those communities.

This way of understanding the antagonism between Nationalism and Unionism is relatively new. In the past the conflict was understood in political rather than psycho-cultural terms, primarily as a conflict over national self-determination. The rise of identity politics has masked the retreat from the political struggles of the past. It also provides a positive gloss to the divide in Northern Ireland, by presenting the divide as an expression of the cultural diversity of the two communities.

Likewise, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ in the South was believed to have swept away the traditional nationalist project and replaced it with a modernized and secular state. However, the collapse of this economic miracle since 2007 alongside the decline of the authority of the Catholic Church, political and financial scandals linked to the elite and the collapse of the once dominant Fianna Fáil party in February’s election, have called into question the viability of the state and its forms of identity politics. On both sides of the border, politics is in crisis and pose similar questions in very different environments about the future of politics and society on the island.

Although this discussion will have a focus on developments in Northern Ireland, some of the themes are prevalent beyond there and widespread in politics across Britain, so are important to address for the democratic process here too.

Listen again (not miked so variable quality)...

Speakers' introductions - click on the Play button: {mp3}identity-politics-introductions{/mp3}

Audience and speakers initial interchange - click on the Play button:
{mp3}identity-politics-intial-discussion{/mp3}

Audience and speakers final interchange - click on the Play button:
{mp3}identity-politics-final-discussion{/mp3}

Final speakers' comments - click on the Play button:
{mp3}identity-politics-speaker-summation{/mp3}

Some background readings

'Conflict in Northern Ireland: A Background Essay' by John Darby, Conflict Archive on the INternet

Towards a Shared Future by Duncan Morrow, Community Relations Council 28 May 2004

The Irish Question and the concept 'identity' in the 1980s by Chris Gilligan, Nations and Nationalism 2007

Ireland's Bono boomers , John Kelly, Prospect (subscription required) 24 May 2008

From insurgency to identity , by Kevin Rooney, spiked review of books July 2008

Extremist Outbidding in Ethnic Party Systems is Not Inevitable by Paul Mitchell, Geoffrey Evans and Brendan O'Leary

Enough is Enough , by Fintan O'Toole, Faber & Faber 2010

Unionists remain British by conviction , Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland press article April 2010

How the Celtic Tiger lost its roar , by John Morray Brown, Prospect (subscription required) 15 December 2010

Everything & nothing has changed , Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times 12 March 2011