DESMOND GREAVES SCHOOL 2026

CLOSING COMMENTS AFTER LAST SESSION – 13 SEPT 2026

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

The Good Friday Agreement was the most important Anglo-Irish accord since the Treaty of 1921. For nationalists and republicans, the really crucial part of the agreement was the potential path that it opened up towards a peaceful reunification of Ireland.

As the *Sunday Times* Insight Team observed in the late 1960s, Northern Ireland itself was the first and biggest gerrymander. It remains so to this day. In other words, Northern Ireland was and still is an illegitimate political entity. However, for some, the decision to accept that Irish unity could come about by means of a majority vote for same in the North was not an endorsement of what has been called the *principle* of consent, but appreciation that the *method* of consent could actually produce the desired result in the radically changed circumstances which had come about. These entail a fundamental demographic shift in the north, an altered geo-political situation following collapse of the USSR affecting the North's strategic significance, the evident wish by the peoples of Britain to end the Union, and a consequential willingness that has arisen in the British establishment to disengage in certain circumstances.

The Good Friday Agreement says that when it becomes apparent that a majority vote for Irish unity in the North is likely, a border poll should be called by the Secretary of State. The immediate question which republicans have to answer is by what means *they* think such apparency should be determined. Does that refer to an opinion survey, electoral data, or simply a vote in the northern assembly, or a combination of measurements. The second question is, if it is apparent that a pro-unity vote is not likely now, how is its likelihood to be brought about.

There has been a tendency on the part of some to merely rely upon natal Catholics eventually outnumbering natal Protestants in considering a border poll. That is to say, those born to Catholic parents with their associated nationalism, retaining that political stance in adulthood whatever about persisting in religious belief. However, that is an assumption that may turn

out to be not entirely sound. Research has suggested that natal Catholics, including those who vote SDLP or Sinn Féin in northern elections, cannot *all* be relied upon to necessarily vote pro-unity in a poll. Various factors could come into play at the time of a poll regarding a section of the so-called 'Catholic' middle class, particularly economic ones, such as who will continue to pay for pensions etc - as happened in the Scottish referendum. Moreover, civil rights are no longer a major issue as they have been largely achieved within the North. If that is the case, outreach to natal Protestants in order to get some of them to consider a pro-unity position could be all the more important.

One has also to take into account the fact that there are increasingly significant numbers of non-religious voters, often being the offspring of non-religious parents, and also immigrant voters. Their pro- or anti-unity position is difficult to assess. And there is the matter of how Alliance Party voters will jump. All that is where attitude surveys become especially germane in the course of pressing for a poll.

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A signal feature in the activities of nationalists and republicans since the Good Friday Agreement has been inadequate attention to public opinion in Britain, and especially among labour voters, regarding Irish unity.

There was a time when there was substantial campaigning in Britain towards this end with resolutions of support for Irish unity being sought from trades councils and the like. But that seems to have notably diminished.

Moreover, in Dublin and Belfast, one now hears a lot about reconciliation with unionists, but virtually nothing about the responsibility of Britain to take a positive position on the substantive issue of Irish unity and apart from just setting a poll date. The British establishment has been allowed to internalise the question of Irish unity as though it were a neutral bystander, which is political nonsense. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to give that State its formal name, by definition consists of two partners and requires both to agree on continuing the relationship.

Of late, much of the nationalist and republican position is characterised by calling for a date in respect of a border poll, and understandably so. However, it should be remembered that when one does press for a poll, if it turns out to be negative for nationalists, according to the

Good Friday Agreement, another cannot be held in less than seven years thereafter. In fact, not sufficient regard is being given to the crucial dimensions which I have referred to in regard to achieving a positive result. In other words, one needs to be able to adduce evidence that a poll could succeed in producing a pro-unity vote in order that a date may be *effectively* pressed for. In a nutshell: the object is not only to have a border poll, but to win it.

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Even at this early stage, one has also to think not just of Irish unity but also of what kind of Ireland one wants. Pearse once said that he dreamed of an Ireland Free, Gaelic and Christian. Today the aim might be more realistically seen as Free, Bilingual and Pluralist. Free in the sense of a sovereign all-Ireland State; Bilingual, in that while English will continue to be the main language for most people, Irish has been thriving recently and must continue to be promoted; and Pluralist in that, while Protestantism and Catholicism will endure, Ireland is now predominantly secular - the so-called 'North' is no longer in the grip of Calvinism and the so-called 'South' has largely deCatholicised.

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The structure of the new Ireland will also be important. The options appear to be a unitary Republic of Ireland or a Confederation of Northern Ireland and the existing Irish Republic. (Although Northern Ireland was a gerrymander, it may have to be pragmatically accepted now as a unit in a confederation. To paraphrase Oscar, the rectification of an historic wrong is often not pure and rarely simple.)

From a nationalist point of view, in the immediate future, a confederation might be the safest option. That is because, making hasty provisions for a unitary State might open up the way for anti-Gaelic and pro-British elements to over-influence the character of the new polity. And, be sure, a task then will not only be to persist in outreach towards unionists, but to be wary of *inreach* by the British establishment in order to tie a united Ireland as closely as possible to the remaining UK. The ultimate objective is not just Irish unity, but also genuine Irish freedom and the preservation of a distinctive Irish culture and identity.

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Finally, another want in the pro-Irish unity camp up to now has been the absence of some reasonable outline of what a united Ireland would entail. It is not expected that everything would be put on the table to start with, but a blank sheet is no answer either. And there is no point in just calling for a Green Paper if one does not put forward some substantial ideas oneself as to what it might embody.

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