

Bordering on the Sectarian

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We are all familiar with the adage, regurgitated by establishment politicians, that the only border that exists in Ireland is the one in people's minds. This is to ignore the reality of military repression, social deprivation, and economic underdevelopment, all of which can be linked, at least in part, to the artificial partition of Ireland.

Almost one million Irish people live straddling Britain's border – 20% of the island's population. Partition has imposed many social failures on the whole country, but this 20% of the population has had to suffer many extra burdens.

When border roads were closed by the British, they didn't just shut one county off from another, they split communities; communities that didn't know the boundaries of counties. Not only were communities split, but in many cases families. No longer were people free to associate with friends, neighbours, or family members. They were isolated from their local churches, schools, and even their own property. Because of road closures, many journeys that would have been considered local in the past now amounted to a detour of many miles, and in some cases, became impractical. These border roads are now being reopened, in large part due to the constant and courageous campaigning of local people, but it will take many years to undo the social and economic damage caused by Britain's version of the Berlin Wall.

In the southern border area, there has been a drastic economic decline. Businesses are losing out to their counterparts on the northern side of the border because of the existence of a different economic framework there, and obviously this has a knock-on effect on the rest of the community. A major problem, brought on by the economic decline, is the depopulation of the areas. This is not due to a simple demographic shift, but to unemployment and the consequent high levels of emigration. And as usual, the emigrants are young and educated. Not a new problem for Ireland.

It seems that border counties in the 26 counties have been forgotten about or ignored by successive governments. There hasn't been any real investment in these areas, nor has there been any proper structures set up to help these counties cope with their special needs. In between elections, the attitude of the past governments seems to be 'out of sight, out of mind.'

The six-county border areas have many of their neighbours' problems. With all the hype that surrounds any major new investments in these areas, it is very easy to believe that the local communities are benefiting from it. Yet, behind each British government minister and local clientelist MP patting each other on the back for a job well done, there is an even happier multinational. These

investments, which aren't and never were meant to be rock solid, can be terminated at any time by these 'good weather' foreign companies. They take full advantage of grants, tax benefits, and cheap local labour, then shift their capital investment elsewhere to reap extra benefits and new profits.

Nationally, the partition of our country has been a living nightmare. The basic right of National Self-determination has been denied to the Irish people; not just over the last 70 years, but since the British first came here. With partition, the British made sure that they still have a foothold in Ireland and can do whatever they please with the six north-easterly counties, no matter what the Irish people say.

The main ploy utilized by the British is sectarianism and indeed partition represents the institutionalisation of this ploy. They have always sought to divide our people, and they have succeeded in driving a wedge between one fifth of the population in the north east and the remainder south of the border. In addition, it has kept the people of the six counties divided by discriminatory social and economic structures and a repressive state apparatus. All of this has led directly to 25 years of war in the recent past.

A visitor to the six counties may be forgiven for thinking that there wasn't such a thing as nationalism or Irishness. The discrimination practised by those who hold the reins of power has ensured that nationalists are kept out of official sight. Nationalist flag or emblems are not displayed, have been banned in the past, and are still removed by the Crown forces. The nationalist culture has been swept under the carpet and hidden out of sight for fear it taints any visitor's view of this part of 'Britain.'

But sectarianism isn't just practised by one section of the Irish people or by one part of our divided country. Sectarianism in the six counties tends to start at the top and works its way down, right to the bottom. However, sectarianism in the twenty-six counties merely tends to be more subtle. It would seem to a visitor that everyone is a Catholic, or at the very least a Christian. Prayers in Leinster House before parliamentary sittings, the Angelus at six on the TV, and laws which would appear to come from Rome. It doesn't matter what way you turn in society, there always seems to be someone with a dog collar pulling the strings. Not very inviting for any self-respecting Orangeman, or republican, for that matter.

Economically, partition seems to be a total disaster. Not only are the six counties at the bottom of the scale in the British economy, but the twenty-six counties seems to be lower still. It is estimated that Britain pumps over 3 billion pounds into the six counties statelet each year, making it one of the most economically unviable areas in Europe. The twenty-six county government pays one million punts per day to bolster Britain's artificial border, which is a huge sum to take from such a small country's coffers. Both sums of money are paid by people who don't agree with partition, i.e., the British people and the Irish people. It is ironic that, after so many years of partition, the British and

Irish governments are only now beginning to discuss the fact that it would make economic sense to promote Ireland as a single unit.

Apart from the obvious military presence, these are only a few of the difficulties encountered as a direct result of partition. As barriers are breaking down, we may be able to benefit from any new changes, but whilst the main cause of our problems, British occupation, remains we will always be a divided people.