

# **‘Beware the Irish bearing gifts.’ Dublin’s bribe to Ulster**

**‘The British may not want you, but we do.’**

In a trial of strength akin to China’s Belt & Road initiative, bribery laced with charm appears to be the latest tactic being deployed by parties south of the border to entice Northern Ireland back into the fold according to Professor John Foster, author, critic and Irish cultural historian.

If direct threats don’t work why not try something else?

But Unionists should beware. Funding from the Dublin government’s Shared Island Initiative (SII) goes far beyond investing in just arts and culture.

As Professor Foster explains,

*“Belfast and Cork city councils will share £77,000 initial funding for dockland development. Belfast City Council will apply for further money to build a new bridge across the River Lagan from Sailortown to the Titanic Quarter and the Sinn Féin-dominated Council’s application will be a shoo-in.”*

A further £38m has been earmarked for Ulster University whose Magee campus will be erased along with its Presbyterian historical association.

And this is just a taste of things to come.

*“The SII will allocate a billion euro (£865m) until 2030 and target health, education, the environment, transport, tourism, sport, culture and civic society to interconnect Northern Ireland and the Republic. Everything, one might say, that is – studiedly at this point – outside politics.”*

We shouldn't be fooled. As the author makes clear, the tactics may have changed but the objective is the same.

*"The Plan's play is an attempt at what American footballers would call an end-run around the unionists. And around London, though London apparently doesn't care. The Republic's business minister Neale Richmond champions the Plan to interconnect economically the island and in the same breath publicly "aspires" to a united Ireland.*

*Indeed, Paul Gosling [ex-advisor to the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party] thinks every member of every major party in the Republic thinks alike: yes to interconnection and to its chief end, unification."*

And if that involves bribery and brainwashing rather than bullets and bombs who's to complain?

The article can be read in full below with a link to the original beneath it.

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## **Ireland's Belt & Road Initiative**

**Written by Jack Foster**

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland has announced that the government of the Irish Republic will fund "all-island arts investment projects" to the tune of £6.4m. These will include turning the historic Bellaghy Bawn in Seamus Heaney's hometown at a cost of £4m into "a cross-border residential facility for writers to work and interact". As a literary critic and author of *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (1995) I am bound to find this news cheering.

## ***Infrastructure investment***

### ***Bridges, Solar Heating***

Funding from the Dublin government's Shared Island Initiative (SII) goes far beyond investing in "arts and cultural infrastructure", as the Arts Council has it. Belfast and Cork city councils will share £77,000 initial funding for dockland development.

Belfast City Council will apply for further money to build a new bridge across the River Lagan from Sailortown to the Titanic Quarter and the Sinn Féin-dominated Council's application will be a shoo-in. Belfast CC has already received £30,000 of initial funding to work jointly with Cork City Council on a rooftop solar heating project, the aims of which are impeccable: through renewable energy technology to help decarbonise the cities by reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

### ***Higher Education***

Dwarfing these investments is the £38m that will be provided to the University of Ulster to expand their Magee campus in Londonderry (Magee as a name will in the process apparently vanish along with its Presbyterian historical associations).

New buildings, an increase in enrolment of students from both sides of the border, a link-up between UU and the Atlantic Technical University in Letterkenny over the border are what this investment intends to accomplish.

### ***Railways***

From 2020-2022, over £165m was allocated from the SII fund while £451m is ringfenced for allocation in Northern Ireland

between 2020 and 2025. It is proposed to improve the Belfast-Dublin rail connection, reopen the Londonderry-Portadown line with an onward connection to Dublin, and improve the A5 Londonderry to Dublin road.

### ***Sports Stadium***

But other unforeseen opportunities can present themselves, such as the proposed £120m-£130m renovation of Casement Park, the west Belfast home stadium for Gaelic sports. The projected cost of the project has recently soared, but the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has intervened, offering to help defray costs of the rebuild with the UK government and the Gaelic Athletic Association. Euro 2028 will be jointly held by the UK and Ireland and matches will be played at Casement, though thereafter it will likely revert to Gaelic sports, played exclusively by Northern Irish “of a nationalist background”, as we say.

### ***Longer-term investment***

Although the UK’s £10bn annual subvention to Northern Ireland will remain the essential guarantee of Northern Ireland’s existence, the SII will allocate a billion euro (£865m) until 2030 and target health, education, the environment, transport, tourism, sport, culture and civic society to interconnect Northern Ireland and the Republic. Everything, one might say, that is – studiously at this point – outside politics.

Should everyone in Northern Ireland, unionists and nationalists alike, be grateful for these versatile injections of Irish euro into Northern Ireland? Strictly from an economic point of view, certainly. And assuredly, too, if the Plan is *solely* to advance reconciliation and friendship between enemies and cooperation between two warring populations, no strings to be spun.

Moreover, since one of the Southern government's most important ostensible aims is to strengthen the Ulster economy, might these projects not help to make Northern Ireland work, something I and others have called upon nationalists to do and that Sinn Féin has never sincerely done? Indeed, so there is much on the credit side.

### ***Political overreach?***

But the call has previously been for nationalists *inside* Northern Ireland to make this part of the United Kingdom work; making it work from and by the Republic is a different breed of cat. And the overreach of the ten-year government Plan outlined by then Taoiseach Michéal Martin in October 2020 turns the green light deep amber.

Some of the various sectors of society are to be joined up with their Southern counterparts to their mutual benefit. But some are assumed to have deficiencies that need taken care of. In an August 21 article in the *Belfast Telegraph*, the author of *A New Ireland: A Ten Year Plan* (2020) and ex-advisor to the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party, Paul Gosling, explains and promotes the Plan.

### ***Encroachment into UK affairs***

He tells us that the Irish government is very concerned that too many NI students are leaving for university in Great Britain, that NHS waiting lists are too long, and there aren't enough childcare places in NI and that the Republic aims to fix all this. Reading this, I needed to comb my hackles flat. For these are internal matters for the UK and the UK alone. NI students (most of them "of a unionist background") when they go to a mainland university are going to another part of their own country and it is no business of the Republic's. The Republic does not have an NHS. And as far as Northern

childcare is concerned: whoa – “Leave them kids alone!”

The British government is apparently looking the other way from all of this and seems to be the South’s sleeping partner. It is important to remember that when in this context we say “cross-border” (a phrase like “across the sectarian divide” that stirs warm feelings in script-writers), we allude to connections between two independent nations, the UK and Republic of Ireland but that in practice lessen the sovereignty only of the UK, never that of the Republic.

Is the UK government fixing to help remedy the serious problems of the Republic – the gang warfare, the housing and rental messes, the inferior health delivery service, the domination to this day of primary education by the Roman Catholic church? Would the Southern government contemplate such a thing, even in the name of a united Ireland?

### ***No mandate under Good Friday Agreement***

We are told that the Good Friday Agreement mandates all of this. What an Agreement for all seasons it is! No wonder Martin hails its “genius”. But under “Economic, Social and Cultural Issues” in the GFA, it is the British government alone that will promote economic growth and strengthen “the physical infrastructure of the region”. There is no mention of the government of the Republic doing this or helping to do this.

To imagine that the “broad policies for sustained economic growth” can be broad enough to involve the Republic by implication or stealth is to give the unionist imprimatur to the Agreement a whole new interpretation.

This appeal to the GFA is to use it like Birnam Wood that by nature cannot come to Dunsinane but for Macbeth’s enemies is movable by ruse when they lop off branches and advance behind

them to the objective, thus fulfilling the witches' supernatural prophecy.

The Republic'schutzpah is astounding, reflected in Gosling's condescension when he confides that the trick is to get all this done "without unnecessarily annoying unionists" who are the only flies in the ointment of this wonderful scenario. "Tribal politics get in the way", Gosling scolds – not highly justified constitutional suspicion, which is what it is, but just crude unionist atavism standing in the way of all this warm progressiveness.

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### ***Longer-term objective***

Martin calls the Plan "game-changing". So, what's the game?

Well, Martin recently chastised the Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris for finding unhelpful Varadkar's prediction that he will see a united Ireland in his lifetime. Varadkar was echoing what his Fine Gael colleague Simon Coveney, a thorn in Brexiting Britain's side, said a few years ago. Says Martin: "Since the New Ireland Forum, we in the Republic have always articulated our aspiration to a united Ireland".

None of these politicians recognises their predictions (not mere, innocuous sounding "aspirations") as significant micro-aggressions or would admit that the Plan and the predictions are soulmates. The predictions are attempts at self-fulfilling

prophecy.

The Plan's play is an attempt at what American footballers would call an end-run around the unionists. And around London, though London apparently doesn't care. The Republic's business minister Neale Richmond champions the Plan to interconnect economically the island and in the same breath publicly "aspires" to a united Ireland. Indeed, Gosling thinks every member of every major party in the Republic thinks alike: yes to interconnection and to its chief end, unification.

Gosling himself, on the strange assumption that the Republic's economy is stronger than the UK's, encourages the Republic to strengthen the northern economy in order to make the inevitable unification a fusion of something more like equals.

### ***Belt & Road Initiative***

Since its most important initial component is infrastructure, the ten-year Plan is obviously Ireland's Belt & Road Initiative. Via investment and trade, China's BRI aims to interconnect countries and regions in pursuit of a Chinese-led globalism. The Shared Island Initiative appears to be its island-sized scale-model.

The SII will invest while all-island trade will develop in the wake of the Windsor Framework which impairs the Union and will subtract a growing portion of NI-GB trade from the NI economy. The ulterior motive of the BRI is, of course, Chinese political influence around the globe to counter that of the United States. Just as (in miniature) the Republic surely hopes with its Plan to counter GB influence in NI.

Moreover, I'm quite sure all members of the Dáil, being nationalists, regard the island at present as one country, two systems which only some of their great-grandparents reluctantly agreed to in 1921. When the CPP succeeded the UK



in Hong Kong governance, they quickly set about fashioning one country, one system to which they had always aspired. Just as they scheme to get Taiwan back, in the teeth of 74 years of separate development. Or 101 years in the cases of Northern Ireland and the Republic. The irredentist memory is a long one.

When I read of the Plan, I was taken back to 1994 when Canada lifted its ban on Gerry Adams' coming into the country. The Vancouver Board of Trade hosted a Q & A with Adams and a local panel and I was invited. An expatriate Fianna Fáil stalwart, who travelled often to Dublin, narrated to me in Vancouver during the Q & A the likely sequence of events as he claimed constitutional nationalists in the Republic saw them.

### ***Softly, softly catchee monkey***

First, we unify tourism, he said, then agriculture, energy, transport and telecommunications – the soft economic targets and infrastructures. Then we go for the sturdier structures and agencies, consent and cross-borderism in the same breath. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin grow intimate, Fine Gael and Labour recede.

The British don't want you, but we do, he said (a sentiment that is ghoulish to unionist ears). We'll keep 70 seats warm for you in the Dáil. The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland will be the first unionist party through its portals. I told him it was fantasy and he chuckled at my naivety.

It was not to be the Sinn Féin/IRA way but the Fianna Fáil way and the Shinners would finally come on board. Was his take prescient? If the Plan were to proceed and expand, a border poll may not even be necessary to achieve a weird ensnaring unification. This would rob Sinn Féin of the vengeful poll result they dream of as a party historically wedded to rout and rupture, a Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael end-run of an equally

weird kind.

### ***Wake-up call for Northern Ireland?***

China's Belt & Road Initiative has left deep footprints across the world, according to one *Foreign Policy* observer. But she says it is a shadow of its former self, what with protests, suspicion, fractures and intensifying scrutiny in the target nations and its own economic difficulties. Even with success, the time would probably come, I suspect, when economic benefit to those nations would collide with their awakened cultural self-esteem and then their political objection, though the latter might come too late.

In Northern Ireland, Casement Park is named for Roger Casement. In nationalist hagiography he is a hero martyr, less for his human rights advocacy than for his help in organising the Easter Rising in the cause of Irish independence and who paid the ultimate price.

To others he is Sir Roger, the British diplomat who plotted violence against his own country with the help of Germany and was hanged in 1916 for treason. UK taxpayers will foot the vast majority of the bill for the stadium's rebuilding, but I have not heard it suggested that in turn the renovated ground be renamed in the name of reconciliation with those Northern Ireland football supporters who would otherwise find Casement Park a very cold house.

China won't, it seems, entirely abandon a project to extend its political investment and influence beyond its own borders. Nor will the Irish Republic readily abandon its own miniature counterpart. But events, dear boy, as Harold Macmillan told his interviewer, might not prove cooperative.

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The original article can be found [here](#)

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