



The Case For
A New Flag For
Northern Ireland

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The Problem

Flags have always been a contentious issue in Northern Ireland, since the country's inception in 1921. Here, I put forward the case for a flag that can end this situation, giving all the people in Northern Ireland something shared, something that both communities can be happy with and unite behind.

Northern Ireland may not be a nation state, but that does not preclude it from requiring its own flag. Firstly, Northern Ireland is legally a region that is distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom, in the same way that England, Scotland or Wales are. Even counties like Devon and Cornwall have their own flags and Northern Ireland should be no exception.

Secondly, Northern Ireland is often represented in international sport, be it international football, golf, or the commonwealth games. Using a flag that could be accepted and supported by both communities would aid the organisations involved in such events in attracting support from a wider range of individuals.

The most ardent of diehard republicans will simply say that no flag should exist for Northern Ireland because it is not a legitimate state – much like Sinn Fein's Bairbre de Brun did when the topic was discussed in a BBC Newsline interview. She stated that: *“To force me to say I am in favour of a flag for a piece of territory that people in my community don't identify with is itself problematic because what you're trying to do is to force me to a common view that is not common, or to pretend there is a common view when it is not common.”*

However that argument clashes with her party's support the Good Friday agreement, which the majority of both communities signed up to, specifically recognising Northern Ireland's existence unless and until a majority should vote against it. Added to this is a recent call from republican politicians for a policy of "equality or neutrality" on flags.

The arguments against a new flag can be summed up thusly: many Unionists and Loyalists do not wish to see Northern Ireland's links with Britain (and the Crown) undermined. Similarly, many nationalists and republicans do not recognise Northern Ireland at all, and therefore, see no reason for it to have any symbols.

It is my belief that despite the obstacles to which the above facts will give rise, it is important for Northern Ireland (and its flag) to gain the acceptance and support of a greater majority of the population. Simply creating a new flag doesn't have to undermine the link with Britain at all and should not be dismissed without entertaining what a new flag might look like. The Good Friday Agreement confirms Northern Ireland's right to self-determination. So long as Northern Ireland exists, it will need a flag. We can continue the status quo, which alienates many people from identifying with the flag and the country, or we can attempt to improve the situation – hopefully to the satisfaction of those who are happy with the current flag as well as those who aren't.

Current Flags

There are a range of flags flown throughout Northern Ireland. Some are legal, some less so. These include the British Union Flag, the Ulster Banner, the Irish Tricolour and more – and that's without getting into the illegal paramilitary flags.

Ulster Banner / Northern Ireland Flag

The Ulster Banner, or Ulster flag as it is sometimes known by unionists, while no longer official, is often currently used to represent Northern Ireland in international sporting events (although it was never the flag of the country of Northern Ireland but rather of it's government).



It was designed by the Unionist government in the 1950s based on the coat of arms granted to Northern Ireland decades previously, and some nationalists may see this alone as a reason why they don't identify with it. Others will point to the inclusion of the crown, or the fact that the flag is similar to England's, and apparently incorporates the Cross of St. George. As well as the above, its use (and some would say abuse) by unionists and loyalists, has ensured that the flag is seen by many as the preserve of Unionist communities.

To Unionists it is simply the flag of their country, to which they ascribe considerable pride, in a similar vein as the Scottish do to St Andrew's saltire. In a sense it is seen in a similar vein as nationalists see the tricolour: an expression of the distinctive identity of Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland flag is sometimes flown unofficially, in parades for example, with a Union Flag in the canton, thus demonstrating both the expression of identity and the allegiance to the UK. However, this has contributed to the nationalist sense that it is a Unionist flag.

There is likely to be resistance from Unionists to replacing the flag because many see no reason why something as simple as a country's flag should cause anyone offence. To unionists, replacing the Northern Ireland flag may be seen as undermining their tradition and in effect, officially deeming the Northern Ireland itself 'offensive'. It's therefore important that any new flag includes some traditional aspects lest it be seen as an ill-thought-out exercise in political correctness.

Flying Two Flags - for Equality

Part of the Good Friday Agreement made provision for the principle of parity of esteem. Republicans have called for both flags to be flown at government buildings, in the name of this parity. It is the belief of many that this is a flawed interpretation of the principle.



Democratic Dialogue's research [2] explains that the dual flag proposal cannot be accepted by unionists because as well as a symbol of identification, a flag is a symbol of sovereignty – this is particularly true of the Union Flag on public buildings. Therefore, an Irish flag flying, particularly over government buildings, would in effect symbolise joint sovereignty. This is something which unionists, en masse, have never accepted, and which not only isn't included in the Belfast Agreement, it in fact runs contrary to what unionists see as a core aspect of the agreement.

In short, Unionists see the UK's Union Flag as a symbol of their membership of the United Kingdom. Nationalists see it as a symbol of oppression and occupation.

In turn, nationalists see the Irish tricolour as an expression of their cultural identity with other Irish people. Unionists see the same tricolour as a symbol of rebellion, intimidation and the claim of a foreign nation to their homeland.

The 'Gaelic' or Provincial Ulster Flag

This flag was used to represent the old Irish province of Ulster, and is still used by Gaelic sporting organisations as well as many sports that are organised on an all-island basis, many of which use the "Four Provinces" flag rather than a national flag because they are effectively representing two jurisdictions.



The flag is based on the arms of John de Courcy (a red cross on a gold field) who was a Norman coloniser. In the centre it is defaced with the Red Hand of Ulster (or of the O'Neills) on a white shield. It was this flag that formed the basis of the 1953 Ulster Banner (now commonly used as Northern Ireland's flag).

The problem with this flag is that thanks to its use in Gaelic sports and by Republican groups it has become politicised to the extent that only one-side now identifies with it. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that supporters of the 'Ulster' rugby team, supposedly a provincial Ulster body, are much more comfortable with the Ulster Banner than the provincial flag.

Ulster Independence flag

It's perhaps worth mentioning the Ulster Independence flag, with the red cross of St Patrick on a blue field (as in the cross of St Andrew). In the centre of this is the Red Hand of Ulster in a gold 6-pointed star, to include the colours (gold and red) from the de Courcy arms as seen the provincial flag.



Like the Ulster Banner, this flag is largely associated (somewhat ironically given it's nature) with Unionists or Loyalists. The predominance of the red and blue may also be off-putting to nationalists due to their traditional association of red, white and blue with the Union Flag.

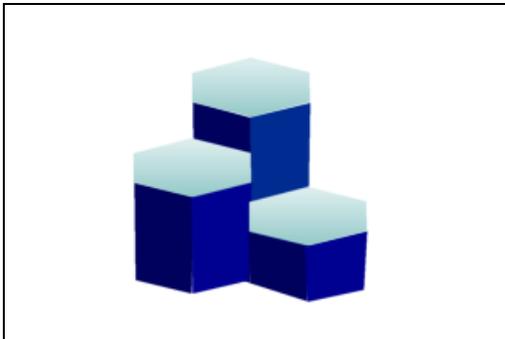
A New Flag for Northern Ireland

Having looked at the flags above, it seems clear that existing flags have largely been either claimed or denounced as belonging to one side or the other and are therefore difficult to consider 'neutral'. As the option of flying the flags of both the UK and Republic of Ireland states is a near non-starter, it's clear that a new flag is needed.

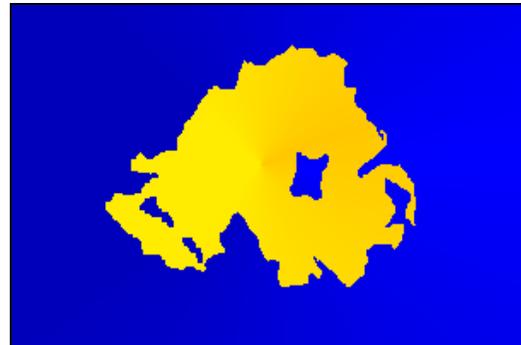
Any new flag should reflect both communities and traditions equally, therefore they should either reflect both or neither (focusing instead on something related to Northern Ireland, but related neither to the Unionist or British nor the Nationalist or Irish community/traditions).

Some Suggestions

The Alliance party is one group who have already proposed a new Northern Ireland flag [6] and have explained examples to encourage debate. I have included my impression of 2 such examples below. Please note these are only impressions based on descriptions given in a television interview. They carry absolutely no official weight at all.



3 columns of stone representing the Giant's Causeway



2-dimensional yellow representation of Northern Ireland on a blue background

As well as these two designs, David Ford MLA suggested an individual flax flower.

I don't believe any of these suggestions are appropriate. The Giant's Causeway Flag is too geographically confined to north Antrim and may seem much less relevant in Fermanagh or south Down, for example. The yellow Northern Ireland outline on a blue background is very complicated. It's generally accepted that flags should be kept simple. The flax flower is symbolic of the linen industry which has for a long time been declining - hardly a favourable impression of a new Northern Ireland!

Government Proposal?

As of 23rd February 2006, Wikipedia [3 & 4] carries an image it claims is a representation of a flag being considered by the government in the 1990s based on a combination of the

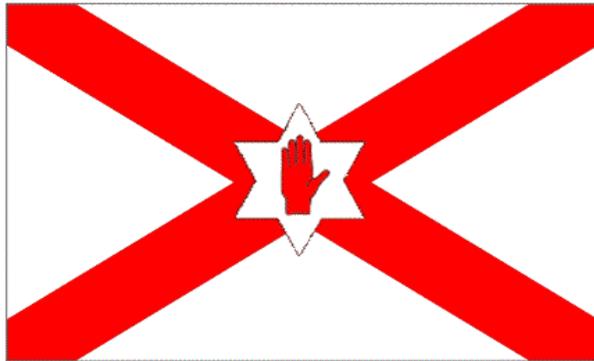


provincial flag and the Ulster Banner. The Wikipedia article claims, however, that this flag met with responses considerably less than enthusiastic about the suggestion.

It should be noted that Wikipedia is not always considered a reliable source of information. Due to its nature and the fact that anyone with internet access can edit it, mistakes and corrections are common. However, regardless of the flag's origins, it's worth including as an example. While the idea of retaining the historical symbols of Ulster is admirable, the merits of retaining a form of St George's cross are questionable.

The Solution

While some suggest a new flag would need to forget the past and look to the future, I prefer the idea that a new flag should find aspects of our past that we share. Getting into visions of the unknown future often results in vague concepts that are hard to symbolise and perhaps harder to identify with. To that end, I propose the following relatively simple design for Northern Ireland's new flag:



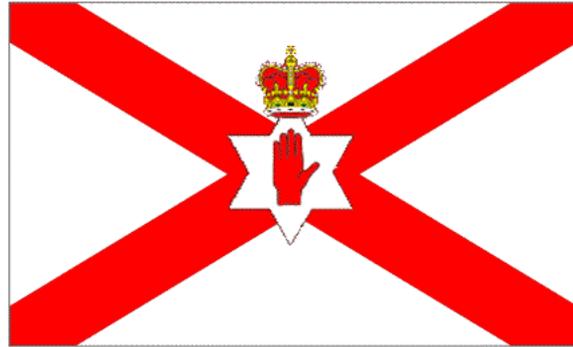
Rather than use the red perpendicular cross, associated with St George, the flag bares the red saltire or cross of St Patrick. Saint Patrick is a man, and a symbol, both communities can identify with. He is the patron saint of the whole island, who came here at a time before any notion of an Irish state, Protestants or Catholics, nationalists or unionists ever existed on the island.

While disagreement exists over the origins of the St Patrick's cross it seems that it predates both the Irish Tricolour (1848) and the British Union Flag (1801 in its present form). The cross now known as the St Patrick's cross seems to have a history in Ireland at least as far back as 1612, as the standard of the Fitzgeralds/the House of Kildare, possibly dating as far back as 1467 or further. There are also several records containing mention of a similar flag in relation to Ireland dated in the 17th century.

The flag retains the centre piece of the current Northern Ireland flag, the red hand on the 6 pointed star. The red hand has been a symbol of Ulster (the province from which Northern Ireland was formed) for centuries and is one of few symbols used by both communities, appearing both on the Ulster Banner and badges of GAA clubs (as well as on the arms of County Tyrone, Antrim and Londonderry). The 6 pointed star reflects the 6 counties of Northern Ireland: Fermanagh, Antrim, Tyrone, Londonderry (Derry), Armagh and Down.

The Crown & A “State” Flag

In an effort to reconcile the nationalist unease at the presence of a crown on the flag, and the unionist unease that removing said crown might be seen as weakening the constitutional link with the UK, I also propose a second version of the flag to be used on state occasions, such as formal visits from the British government and Royal Family



(alongside the Union Flag and applicable

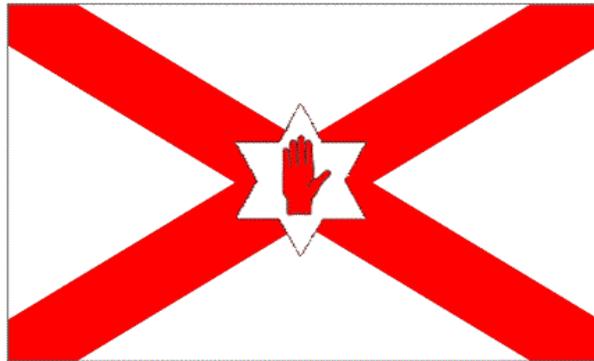
Royal Standard). There is also potential to also fly it alongside the Union Flag on state occasions such as the Queen’s Birthday etc specified in the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, where the current policy is to fly the Union Flag alone. The exact uses for a state flag like this however could be formalised once agreement is reached on the design itself.

Such a move would not be totally unprecedented. Many European countries, eg Germany, Austria, Belgium, have state flags where their simple design has a logo/crest emblazoned in the centre. Usage of the state flags varies from country to country and I believe that this is a suitable and appropriate compromise for Northern Ireland (as long as it remains constitutionally part of the United Kingdom. Future discussions could allude to the crown being replaced by the harp should Northern Ireland become a region of the Irish state, but that is beyond the context of this discussion).

My suggestion is that this flag should be the reserve of the state, and only used within the context of UK government. It would be difficult to foresee a flag including the crown being flown with respect to the Northern Ireland government.

Summary

There is no quick fix to the problems faced in uniting the divided community in Northern Ireland and no amount of toying with the symbols will achieve overnight what politicians have been trying to achieve for years. However, shared symbols have an important role to play in promoting a sense of common heritage. Handled in the right way a new flag could be one of many small steps needed. If the two sides of the community in Northern Ireland are ever to unite under a single banner, they'll have to agree on that banner in the first place.



Appendix A: Further Reading and References

- [1] Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Flags of the World Database
<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/gb-ulste.html> , 23rd February 2006
- [2] Flagging Concern: the controversy over flags and emblems, 2000, Democratic Dialogue
<http://www.democraticdialogue.org/working/flags.htm> , 23rd February 2006
- [3] Flag of Northern Ireland, Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Northern_Ireland, 23rd February 2006
- [4] Northern Ireland flags issue, Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Ireland_flags_issue , 23rd February 2006
- [5] Tension over flag flying, 2000, BBC News
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/773579.stm, 23rd February 2006
- [6] Alliance proposals for new Northern Ireland flag, ????, BBC News
http://news.bbc.co.uk/media/video/38673000/rm/_38673479_newflag_vi.ram, 26th March 2005
- [7] Cross of St Patrick, Kerr, D , Ulster Nation
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- [8] Transforming Conflict: Flags and Emblems, Brian, D and Gillespie, G, March 2005, Queen's University Institute of Irish Studies