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Split allegiances, soccer and sectarianism: Is the FAI creating soccer sectarianism in Northern Ireland?

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The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has a long history of scouting young players from Britain who are eligible to play for the national team of the Republic of Ireland due to the fact their parents or grandparents were/are Irish. In many ways these efforts have been understandable as a small country sought to supplement its own pool of talent. In most instances the English Football Association, who the players could have alternatively declared for, have had no reaction; in the majority of cases these players were unlikely to be included in the English team due to greater competition. However where the FAI has targeted players who could alternatively be playing for Northern Ireland and are eligible to play for the Republic due to special arrangements, the reaction has been very different. Some of this is due to the fact that as a small region Northern Ireland's Ireland Football Association (IFA) cannot afford to lose players to the Republic.

However the FAI's effort to recruit these players is far more complex than this. The England born players who declare for the Republic of Ireland do so due to bloodline rules, they have Irish born grandparents or parents. The Northern Ireland born players who declare for the Republic of Ireland are able to do so even if they have no bloodline to the Republic due to the fact that they are entitled to an Irish passport under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. This rule has caused controversy with the Irish Football Association, appealing to both FIFA and the Court of Arbitration for Sport. However both bodies have upheld this rule. This leaves soccer and the issue of international soccer on the island of Ireland in a difficult position.

The players who declare for the Republic are almost entirely from the nationalist community. This drains the Northern Ireland team of talent from this community. This paper explores how this pattern is leading to a soccer team for Northern Ireland that is unrepresentative of the nationalist community and sectarian in nature. The difficulties facing the Northern Ireland football team are in many ways representative of the problems facing the region politically. There is a tension between a need to respect the distinct identities of the two main communities in Northern Ireland and the need to build a shared future. This paper looks at proposed solutions to the problems facing the Northern Ireland football team and how they feed into the larger political conflict surrounding identity.

Three options have been put forward by different groups as possible ways forward for international soccer on the Island of Ireland:

1. That Northern Ireland players can declare for the Republic or Northern Ireland due to their eligibility for both Irish and British passports – the status quo.
2. That Northern Ireland born players play for Northern Ireland unless they are eligible to play for the Republic due to blood ties as players from other countries would need to be.
3. That an all Ireland soccer team be formed.

The first of these options is the status quo and is informed by the consociational Good Friday Agreement. At the heart of such consociational agreements is the assumption that different culturally distinct communities are most prone to achieve political and economic integration if the dominant lines of social and cultural division between them remain unchallenged. As [Theiler](#) argues consociationalism is driven by a 'good social fences make good political neighbours' postulate (Theiler, 2007).

Under this peace accord those born in Northern Ireland are entitled to identify themselves as either British or Irish and thus are entitled to carry either passport. This entitlement has been interpreted by FIFA as also meaning that players from Northern Ireland can therefore declare for Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. However even this rule was not clear. A dispute arose in 2006 as to whether players had to carry a British passport to play for Northern Ireland, as Northern Ireland

doesn't issue its own passports (The Sunday Times (London), April 23, 2006). This was seen as an obstacle for Nationalists who may want to play for the Northern Ireland team but would rather carry an Irish passport. A row had hung over the Irish Football Association for several months after FIFA banned young players from travelling with Northern Ireland junior teams because it did not deem them eligible without a valid British passport. FIFA then backed down and SDLP MLA Pat Ramsey said it "has finally seen sense". Families and young people with an Irish background will be reassured by this announcement that there will be no exclusion or non-participation because of one's Irishness,' he said (Belfast News Letter (Northern Ireland), June 20, 2006).

Another issue with the status quo GFA inspired rules is that many young Northern Ireland players play for Northern Ireland at junior level but then go on to play for the Republic at a senior level (The Sunday Times (London), February 5, 2012). This raises the questions as to what role identity plays in determining what team players declare for. Are national identities developing as individuals mature with age? Or alternatively as the IFA was insinuated players are making the most of training and player development in Northern Ireland and then when this investment by the IFA in their talent has made them a favourable target to the FAI they are switching to this team as it's more successful. If the latter is true players are cynically exploiting rules put in place to recognise NI's special situation. The IFA has called for arrangements to be put in place where they are compensated for their investment in junior players who then move to the Republic's team.

Finally and most importantly one must ask what effect the status quo is having. The GFA's consociational nature is based on the premise of respecting individual's rights to have separate identities and an assumption that such a respect makes such identities less controversial. However opponents of consociationalism claim that the "consociational project" furthers the very divisions it is supposed to be ameliorating. They have long argued such separation feeds mistrust and sectarianism and makes developing a shared future difficult. The Agreement, it is argued, rejects the "one community" approach to politics offered by Northern Ireland's existing political centre (Evans & Tonge, 2003: 48). This conceptualisation of the conflict in Northern Ireland is "presumptive, inscriptive and far from progressive" (Taylor, 2006: 223).

The sectarianism that has been present in NI football including death threats I will discussed momentarily may support this position. Those who engage in this argument may advocate the next solution to the NI football issue.

However consociationalism is not the only theory that has been applied to the Northern Ireland case. There was a tension within British policymaking between the consociational and "integrationist" approaches in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement. In particular, when the Agreement stalled the British promoted a much more ideologically 'integrationist' outlook in public policy agendas. This can be seen during the crisis that hit the GFA institutions from 2000 to 2005 when the British government pushed an 'integrationist' agenda (Hughes, 2011:7). The second option for soccer in Northern Ireland follows this integrationist logic. By treating Northern Ireland like any other country this approach would result in players from both communities in Northern Ireland being obliged to play together on the Northern Ireland team. Those who advocate for this way forward argue that nationalist players without familial links to the Republic should represent their national team with their unionist counterparts rather than playing for a team to which they have less connection. This would help establish a Northern Ireland team which both communities can support. A shared soccer team is part of building a shared identity and a shared future.

However there are a number of difficulties with this approach. Many nationalist players may still be eligible to play for the Republic through blood ties and will do so due to the fact that the Republic's

team is more successful and the sectarian problems in football in Northern Ireland. The issue of making the Northern Ireland team more successful and thus more attractive to those who could opt to play in the Republic or elsewhere is a question probably better answered by soccer experts than those involved in conflict resolution.

The Irish Football Association has made an effort to counter sectarianism. Their "Football for All" initiative has sought to do exactly what it says on the tin. It aims to make football in Northern Ireland welcoming to women, the disabled as well as free from racism and sectarianism. This includes a ten point plan that calls on clubs in Northern Ireland to:

- Issue a statement saying the club will not tolerate racism or sectarianism, spelling out the action it will take against those engaged in racist or sectarian chanting.
- Make public address announcements condemning racist and sectarian chanting at matches.
- Make it a condition for season-ticket holders that they do not take part in racist or sectarian abuse.
- Take action to prevent the sale of racist and sectarian literature inside and around the ground.
- Take disciplinary action against players who engage in racial or sectarian abuse.
- Contact other clubs to make sure they understand the club's policy on racism and sectarianism.
- Encourage a common strategy between stewards and police for dealing with racist and sectarian abuse.
- Remove all racist and sectarian graffiti from the ground as a matter of urgency.
- Adopt an equal opportunities' policy in relation to employment and service provision.
- Work with all other groups and agencies, such as the players union, supporters, schools, voluntary organisations, youth clubs, sponsors, local authorities, local businesses and police, to develop pro-active programmes and make progress to raise awareness of campaigning to eliminate racial or sectarian abuse and discrimination.

Practically the initiative aimed to change the experience of supporting the Northern Ireland team. For example inappropriate, abusive and sectarian songs, such as the Billy Boys, have been replaced by fun filled anthems, such as 'We're Not Brazil we're Northern Ireland' (IFA, 2012).

In 2006 delegates from UEFA and the EU awarded the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters Clubs with the prestigious Brussels International Supporters Award, for their efforts to stamp out sectarianism, superb charity work and commitment to the promotion of good relations.

However it is worth noting that it is not all good news in relation to fighting sectarianism in soccer in Northern Ireland. Most notably the team's Catholic captain, Neil Lennon, was forced to pull out of the squad's friendly match with Cyprus in 2002 after receiving death threats. The Celtic midfielder's family in Lurgan received threats following his transfer from Leicester City in 2001, but Lennon continued to play for his country. There were unconfirmed reports that the death threats purported to be from the paramilitary Loyalist Volunteer Force, which in May 2002 had reportedly planned to kill Lennon as a one-off terror "spectacular". Lennon became a target for abuse from certain sections of Northern Ireland supporters after his move to Celtic and was booed by some members of the

crowd in Belfast. Death threats appeared on the walls of loyalist areas, including in his home town of Lurgan, Co Armagh (The Guardian (London), August 22, 2002).

Football in Northern Ireland seems to be stuck in a vicious circle. Sectarianism is fed by a lack of nationalist players in the team and in turn it discourages players from declaring for Northern Ireland and thus changing this situation. While offering nationalist players without blood ties to the Republic no option other than to play for Northern Ireland may increase nationalist involvement as long as sectarianism persists this seems unlikely.

An option put forward to break this circle (and to improve soccer standards) is to have an all-Ireland soccer team much the same way as there is currently an all-Ireland rugby team. However unionists strongly oppose this option (The Irish Times, June 26, 2002). They point to the fact that the symbols associated with the Irish rugby team are not sensitive to the identities of Northern Ireland unionists. However two things are worth noting. Firstly while Northern unionist players are a minority on the rugby team there appears to be a complete lack of sectarian attitudes from fans or others towards these players. Furthermore the IRFU has made an effort to make the team more inclusive by adding the playing of Ireland's Call to the playing of the national anthem before international games. This small step shows an important willingness on the part of the IRFU to accept different Irish identities and perhaps indicates that an all Ireland soccer team could be possible if those involved were prepared to have a broad concept of the Ireland they were representing. This of course also offers a lesson to those who argue for a united Ireland – this can only ever be possible if it is an Ireland that includes and respects the identity of all.

While it may be argued that if an All Ireland team could have an inclusive identity so could a Northern Ireland team with players from both communities however it is possible that the sectarian divisions are diluted by the larger arena. Furthermore an issue that the case of Northern Ireland's international soccer raises is that soccer appears to be more prone to sectarianism than other sports such as rugby. This is an interesting question for those interested in the interplay between sport and conflict resolution.

To conclude the status quo and both alternatives have difficulties associated with them. Allowing Northern Ireland players to choose to play for the Republic has left the Northern Ireland team bereft of nationalist players and support and thus allowed sectarianism to survive. However forcing Northern Ireland players to play for Northern Ireland doesn't sit with the GFA which has done much to ameliorate the conflict. A potential all-Ireland team faces a difficult challenge of appealing to those with a unionist identity. Furthermore sitting with all these complex political and identity issues is the fact that sportsmen may also be operating on a pragmatic basis and therefore the Republic of Ireland's soccer success plays an important part in this puzzle, something worth bearing in mind as the team heads to its first European championship in over 25 years this summer.

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