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Seanad Public Consultation Committee on Constitutional Future of the Island of Ireland

Sport, Culture, and Identity

Dr Katie Liston and Professor Joseph Maguire



Key Premises

- Sport is one of the most powerful transfer mechanisms for culture. This is because it is constituted by people for people. The meanings given to sport, and to its material, physical and emotional experiences, can and do change over time.
- Because sport reflects diverse passions, aspirations, and identities, rarely is it possible to have ‘normal’ sport within ‘abnormal’ societies. Any dialogue about the future of this island must therefore include all the related complexities and challenges.
- Sport functions as both social glue and toxin. South Africa, the United States, Cyprus, Israel, and the Western Balkan and Basque regions, are cases in point.
- When managed judiciously, and in tandem with other initiatives, sport can enable diverse individual and group traditions and identities to be understood, expressed, and promoted. The role of cultural intermediaries will be especially important in this.

The Utility of Sport: Past and Present

There have been many historical and contemporary examples of the utility of sport to political leaders, civic groups, and others. From an Irish-British perspective, these include Irish government support for the *Aonach Tailteann* Games in the 1920s and the role of sport in building the new nation, interventions by Northern Irish government and civic leaders over the course of its existence to ensure six-county jurisdiction of sports such as athletics and cycling, and the recent statements by the NI Assembly, Gymnastics Ireland, and Minister of State for Sport (Chambers) about the dual eligibility of male gymnasts for the Commonwealth Games enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement.

At its core, the social fabric of sport acts as a **constitutive force for identities**. This includes the names of stadia, emblems, flags and other insignia, songs, anthems and symbolic silences, and protests. On the island of Ireland, there is a distinctive conglomeration of jurisdictional rights and identities owing to our colonial and Imperial history. Some examples are listed in the table below.

32 county sports (Year of Formation)	6 / 26 county (+ others) (Year of Formation)
Gaelic Games (1884); Ladies Gaelic Football Association (1974) Camogie Association (1904)	Athletics NI (1925/30); Athletics Ireland (2000/1937)
Rugby (1879); Boxing (1911); Swimming (1893); Hockey (1893)	Irish Football Association (1880); Football Association of Ireland (1921)
Cricket (1884) Olympic Federation (1920)	Netball (1955); Bowling (1927)

Historically, there was a role for sport in augmenting national cohesiveness, reputation, and status. Diverse views on sport, identity and representation had different bearings on the development of sport and on relationships with Great Britain and the world. This was reflected, for instance, in Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera’s lobbying of a British Foreign Office representative about team designation in advance of the 1948 London Olympics. 50 years later, NI First Minister, David Trimble, and eight other unionist MPs, backed a parliamentary early motion in support of the NI Cycling Federation. And as recently as last year, David Campbell, chair of the Loyalist Communities Council, wrote that it was not acceptable for NI competitors to compete under a **foreign flag** ‘that they may well consider obnoxious and alien to their own nationality’.

Even in politics, few complexities rival the world of Irish sport

In working relations today between north and south can be felt the impact of past disagreements over jurisdiction, representation, and identity. Many in the south still struggle to comprehend the NI question while those in the north cannot be expected to deal with post-conflict tensions on their own. While there is a movement towards greater inclusivity in sport, north and south, sport remains an important signifier there of the defended link to the UK.

Studies of life in NI also reveal the intensity of feeling there. Some sports, such as soccer/football, are regarded as the ideological preserve of those whose identities remain strongly wedded to Britain and Ulster (six county). Others, like Gaelic games, though governed on a 32-county basis, are not necessarily culturally neutral. Yet more seek to grapple with the implications of dual eligibility in the 1998 Agreement, like athletics: governed on a 6/26 county basis owing to the political boundary rule in World Athletics but with an all-island team in the Olympic Games and an NI team, only in the Commonwealth Games. Of note, however, Ireland did enter its only **all-island team** in the **first Commonwealth/British Empire Games** of 1930, winning a silver medal (see opening images).

Imagined Communities and Sport

Footballers from NI have expressed a variety of views to us and to others concerning sportive identity codes: from ‘leave my flag alone’ and ‘if you don’t like it, you can play for another country’ to ‘time for an agreed NI anthem’ and ‘what about a separate football flag like rugby has done?’. None have yet suggested one all-island football association. Dual eligibility remains a bone of contention between the two football associations and for many NI football supporters too.

*‘Time for an agreed NI anthem’
... ‘Leave my flag alone’*

The creation of an official all-island football team would be a clear **acid test** of how strong and deeply entrenched is this imagined community. Moving in this direction, discussions about governance, funding, assets, and official roles would be required that would also impact on the club game (north and south and at amateur and professional levels).

The same point applies to the Unionist/English Amateur Athletics Association conspired political boundary rule of 1934 in international athletics, whose current status means that in World Athletics-sanctioned events, the Irish team represents a 26-county organisation in terms of its jurisdiction, even though it includes athletes like Ciara Mageean, from NI, and who represented the ‘wee country’ in the recent Commonwealth Games, winning silver. Some 18 days later, in the European Championships she again won a silver medal, this time for a 26-county body under the title Ireland, proudly displaying the Irish Tricolour in her lap of honour. A more inclusive model is reflected in Olympic sports where the Olympic Federation of Ireland has all-island jurisdiction and teams represent the 32 counties.



Initial Steps towards a Shared Future

A constructive shared dialogue is required, underpinned by an inclusive, consultative process that can command the support of those connected to sport as well as the wider public - akin to an **all-island sportive assembly**.

There are three areas in which future sportive and civic relations will be forged

This dialogue must start as soon as possible and certainly prior to any future border poll. If this does not happen, then any changes to national symbols such as flags, emblems and anthems resulting from constitutional change would likely prove challenging and even divisive. There are three potential areas of public policy significance that arise: structural, symbolic, and socio-cultural.

1. Structural: How we organise our sporting lives

There are already models or templates that might steer future sporting structures. Some work on a cross-border basis, acting to minimise the effects of the border in many instances. But developing best practice on a shared structural future will make demands, not only of existing all-island organisations as diverse as rugby, boxing, and swimming, but also of those who might take on a new form. Sports representatives who can think beyond the status quo will be crucial in this dialogue. Future state funding for sports structures, whether in merged, devolved and/or federalised forms, could be tied to requirements for reform and engagement, exemplified in balanced diverse board membership.

People live six days a week in the current environment. On the seventh, it is unreasonable to expect that sport can be immune from this.



Shamrock Rovers
(All Ireland) XI
1973

Dual state funding for sport in NI, via Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland, will also be subject to review. In addition, joint north-south structural initiatives in health, exercise, and well-being, as well as integrated government departments could highlight the extent to which challenges perceived to be unique or distinctive to one group/community are, in fact, common to many. The establishment of an **all-island sportive assembly** with an independent chair and expert representation would be a productive first step in this regard and would be a constituted forum of stakeholders from playground to podium in the four provinces.

2. Symbolic: How our identities are made and renewed

Sport matters. For better and sometimes worse, sport is a morality play in which both participant and spectator identities are made and expressed in a mutual quest for exciting significance. At the symbolic level, the **rituals of sport**, its anthems, emblems, flags, and uniforms, and its crowd cultures, move people emotionally, socially, and, at times, politically. As such, its symbolic significance must form part of the debates on the future of sport in Ireland. It is inescapable to how people on the island view themselves, view others, and nation groupings.

Difficult though these may be questions of **place and space** must also form part of discussions regarding the symbolic side of sport. Questions about anthems, emblems and flags are part of the cultural DNA of Irish sport as are the location of sporting events and clubs across the island. Hence, discussion of where and when major sporting events could and should be located, and under what flag(s) – Belfast and Dublin, of course, but also Cork, Limerick and/or Galway too – must be part of this new thinking. The **symbolism of unity** – for example, one team, one

league, one FIFA representative in the sport of football – will also have to be addressed across communities and not only in the senior executive boardrooms or parliaments.

The role of existing major stadia and their place in both national and provincial life would also need to be rethought. Planning the optimum use of these facilities – Windsor and (redeveloped) Casement Parks, the Aviva and Croke Park stadia – as multi-sport venues would no doubt be subject to intense deliberation given the existing emotional economy of the ‘Big Three’ mass spectator sports. Likewise, transforming governance structures towards integration in parallel with political change will be a challenge.

3. Socio-cultural: How we live and experience sport together

If, in a border poll, people voted for reunification, then UK funding for sport in NI would have to be reviewed (together with other exchequer transfers and public subsidies from Westminster). **Equity in funding** to all four provinces will have to be achieved ensuring, we would hope, an uplift in spending on sport, exercise, and well-being. Having benefited from EU Peace Funding through ‘Sport Uniting Communities’ for example, sport in NI could offer leadership to others on the challenges that are common to *all*. Because of the traumatic intergenerational effects of the Troubles on all communities, but especially the working classes, NI has specific needs in this sphere which will have to be addressed. Funding may continue to flow from the USA and the EU, but fellow citizens in the South may also have to **own and share the legacy** of the past.

Interim, joint (cross-border) structural initiatives along the spectrum of health, exercise, and well-being, and integrating educational, health and sporting initiatives across Ireland could be a useful steppingstone.

Under certain conditions, playing together can be, a signpost for Ireland's future

Likewise, in developing children’s play, games and physical education structures, future generations should have the opportunity to cherish their heritage but also to create new legacies and sporting memories and heroes – but only by playing *together*. In inter/intra community relations within and between provinces, sport can provide a space and place in which a greater shared sense of belonging might unfold. **Liberty and equality** will be necessary ingredients but so too will **fraternity**.

The social initiatives across Ulster and NI that celebrate a common heritage in music, art and language, such as those led by Linda Irvine, Brian Vallely and others, are also beginning to find expression in sport in general. Whereas in the mid twentieth-century rugby was seen as the preserve of northern Protestants and not representative of ‘the nation’, the recent series victory in New Zealand and reaching world number one is a source of pride, north and south. The President of Ireland, Irish Taoiseach and Unionist leaders heralded the achievement. In a nod to our complex past, one of the star players is Josh Van de Flier, born in Wicklow, of *Dutch* ancestry, whose grandparents moved to Ireland. Playing together, can be, under certain conditions, a signpost for the future – but only if public policy recognises that sport is a touchstone for community relations and the identity of the nation as a whole.