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A common feature of comparisons of Northern Ireland and South Africa prior to South Africa's transition and the Northern Ireland peace process was the siege mentality of the dominant communities in the two societies. The paper examines two attempts to analyse this in greater depth that were published before the major changes of the 1990s: Michael McDonald's *Children of Wrath* and Donald Akenson's *God's Peoples*. It reviews their arguments in the light of the current situation in both Northern Ireland and South Africa. Consideration is then given to how the discourse on the character of both communities changed in the course of the 1990s and to the comparisons that changing circumstances gave rise to, while a striking instance of the recent use of the older comparison of the Unionists and Afrikaner nationalists is noted and discussed. The paper concludes by asking whether the notion of a siege mentality still has any current applicability in these two cases.

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INTRODUCTION

At the outset it should be acknowledged that the comparison of the cases of Northern Ireland and South Africa often raises hackles. In particular, the analogy between sectarianism under Unionist rule and apartheid understandably annoys Unionists. Of course, for some others, that is precisely the attraction of the comparison. It is intended to wound. A case in point is the speech that Gerry Adams gave to a fund-raising dinner in New York in November 2008. At the time of this speech, there was still deadlock between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin over the holding of meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive. Because of disagreement over the agenda, there had been no meetings of the Executive for five months. This is what Gerry Adams said at the dinner in New York as quoted by the *Belfast Telegraph* on 14 November 2008: "Few human beings of my acquaintance are as petty and mean-spirited as those in the Afrikaner wing of unionism".

There was a strong reaction to Adams's remarks, particularly in the blogosphere where it prompted a large number of comments. But surprisingly the bloggers did not dwell on how dated Adams's comparison was, particularly in view of the very different use of the South African comparison that had been made during the course of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Admittedly, comparison of the intransigence of Northern Ireland's Unionists and Afrikaner nationalists had been commonplace before 1990 i.e. before the start of the South African transition and the subsequent Northern Ireland peace process. And insofar as the comparison implied that both Afrikaners in South Africa and Protestants in Northern Ireland would resist political compromise to the end, its validity had been undercut both by the South African transition and by the Northern Ireland peace process. Both communities had responded with pragmatism and flexibility to political challenges of the 1990s. If either of the two societies had proved resistant to change, then perhaps Adams's use of the comparison might have made sense. In particular, if South Africa had still been under apartheid, the argument could be made that the elements in Unionism most opposed to the peace process were like Afrikaners continuing to resist majority rule.

In the circumstances prevailing in 2008, Adams's comparison seems anachronistic at best. But the fact that the comparison still had the capacity to provoke anger can be taken as an indication that changed circumstances have not entirely eliminated its political resonance. Comparisons made for polemical purposes may be called political comparisons to distinguish them from analytical comparisons made by scholars for the purpose of theory-building. In practice, it can be difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the two forms of comparison, since the two tend to over-

lap and to influence each other. Thus, the notion that Protestants in Northern Ireland had a siege mentality similar to that of Afrikaners in apartheid South Africa has a place both in political polemics and in the academic literature comparing these cases. It is also worth saying that while this comparison tends to be seen nowadays as pejorative and insulting to the Protestant community in Northern Ireland, this was not always the case in the past.

In particular, some Unionists at the start of Northern Ireland's troubles positively embraced the comparison and saw similarities between international criticism of apartheid and what they perceived as hostility in the outside world towards the Unionist cause in Northern Ireland. Indeed, through the course of much of the troubles, there was a strong disposition on the part of both Unionists and nationalists to view the situation in South Africa through the prism of the conflict in Northern Ireland. There was especial sympathy among Unionists for the English-speaking White settlers of Southern Rhodesia. By coincidence, the first copy of the *Newsletter* that I read in January 1975 contained an editorial criticising the then South African Prime Minister, BJ Vorster, for not being sufficiently supportive of Ian Smith in his rebellion against British rule to avert majority rule. The South African government was fearful that the international community's actions against Smith would be extended to South Africa if no compromise could be found between Smith and African nationalists in Rhodesia. The *Newsletter* was disappointed by the South African government's evident preference for a deal over the principle of support for the settlers.

By contrast, among nationalists, there tended to be strong support for the anti-apartheid cause, coupled with the assumption that someone who had such sympathies would be inclined to have a nationalist, even Republican, perspective on events in Northern Ireland, as I found out from personal experience. As a traveller on the ferry between Heysham and Belfast in November 1974, I had encountered a measure of suspicion from fellow passengers seated at the same table when I identified myself as a South African. When I reassured them that I had no sympathy for apartheid, I discovered that this led to the assumption that I could safely be regaled with stories about the activities of "the boys", by which I eventually concluded they meant Provisional Irish Republican Army volunteers. Others have recounted similar anecdotes. Thus, in his contribution to a book on the comparison of the cases of South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland, *The Elusive Search for Peace*, Bernard Crick recorded that "I first heard the phrase 'laager mentality' in Ulster long before I heard it in South Africa" (Crick, 1990: 265). The laager referred to the Boer practice in the 18th and 19th Century of making a circle from their ox-wagons to provide a rudimentary defensive position. In the course of the 20th century it became a metaphor for the siege mentality of Afrikaner nationalism in the face of international criticism of apartheid. An example is William Vatcher's 1965 study of the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, which was entitled *White Laager* (Vatcher, 1965).

The relative modernity of the metaphor is worth underlining. Earlier in the 20th Century, comparison of the cases of South Africa and Ireland tended to have a completely different point of departure and to be based on the assumption of political sympathy between Afrikaner nationalism and Irish nationalism as enemies of British imperialism. Famously, two brigades of Irish volunteers had fought on the Boer side

in the Anglo-Boer war at the start of the 20ᵗʰ Century. While these volunteers were greatly outnumbered in practice by the Irish soldiers in the British army fighting the Boers, it was the former who were celebrated. Even as late as 1960, the memory of the alliance of the two nationalisms proved sufficiently strong to affect the plans of the Conservative government when it sought to enlist the aid of the government of Northern Ireland in promoting the British Commonwealth. The London government had wanted an exhibition in Belfast promoting the British Commonwealth to be opened by the South African High Commissioner. The Unionist government objected, citing the political connections between Afrikaner and Irish nationalists. Admittedly, one of the ministers, Brian Faulkner, struck a more contemporary note by putting forward a different objection, which was that such an arrangement might encourage comparison between apartheid and Northern Ireland's sectarian divisions.

Faulkner understood that the basis for comparison of the two cases was changing. And this was to be reflected during the course of the troubles not merely in polemical comparisons of the two cases but in scholarly ones as well. In the next section of the paper I intend to examine two particularly influential studies from this period. Though it will be apparent that their assumptions have been overtaken by events, my purpose is not to deride their analysis. Rather my purpose is to examine their arguments to try to gain an understanding of why their expectations about what might be possible proved so wide of the mark. But I also want to pose the question as to whether aspects of their analysis still do contain a measure of validity, though without endorsing Adams's crude stereotype of the two communities in the process.

The first of the studies is Michael McDonald's *The Children of Wrath*, which was published in 1986. The nub of his argument is stated in the conclusion to Chapter 6, entitled "Unrequited Loyalty":

> Thus as compromising privileges divides settlers, and as dividing settlers is unacceptable politically, intransigents hold the veto among both Protestants and Afrikaners. 'Realists'—whether Smuts and Botha in the 1910s, Hertzog in the 1930s, O'Neill in the 1960s, or Faulkner in the 1970s—may propose compromise in pursuit of stability, but are all ultimately overwhelmed by right-wing appeals to settler unity in defending their privileges from betrayal. Thus, settlers repudiate the very reforms designed to stabilize their position. Privilege counts for more than security: hence their wrath (McDonald, 1986: 148).

The argument has force, even if the detail may reasonably be criticised. In particular, Hertzog's political demise owed nothing to any attempt on his part to embark on reform. Further, political divisions in South Africa prior to the Second World War were not primarily over the issue of the accommodation of the African majority, such was the relative political weakness of the country's subordinate communities in this period. But his essential points were correct, that the outside world tended to regard the case for reform in South Africa and Northern Ireland as both morally compelling and also in the interests of the dominant communities, while within the two societies, reform was viewed as at best of uncertain value as a means of quelling revolt by the subordinate communities and as at worst a slippery slope to majority rule in one case or a united Ireland in the other.

McDonald extended the argument to include Israel in his contribution to the 1990 volume, *The Elusive Search for Peace*, from which I have already quoted. McDonald described his purpose as being to explain

> why intransigence, polarisation, and violence often prevail over political compromise in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Israel, and why, in spite of the obvious and manifest differences between the situations and their conflicts, none of the three societies has reached, or even *approached*, a political settlement among its diverse communities (McDonald, 1990: 33).

But McDonald takes care to avoid the trap of ruling out any possibility of political change in the three societies:

> The thesis is not that political change is impossible in Northern Ireland, South Africa or Israel; it is, instead, that the costs to the dominant community of accepting the legitimacy of the political aspirations of the weaker community are higher than is often supposed, that the costs flow from the centrality of political power to both the socio-economic interests and the collective self-identities of substantial sections of Northern Irish Protestants, white South Africans and Israeli Jews, and that the nature of these interests and identities reduces the prospects for voluntary and consensual political changes in all three societies (*ibid.*).

The second of the studies is Donald Akenson's *God's Peoples*, published in 1992 and a comparison of the dominant communities in South Africa, Israel and Ulster. The book opens with a powerful comparison of the mindsets of the three communities:

> Any careful reader of the bible realizes that, often, stones speak louder than words. I had read a good deal about Ulster, and about South Africa, and about Israel, and I had faith in the fundamental accuracy, if read judiciously, of the historical record of each country. At a distant intellectual level I realized that these three cultures—the Afrikaner, the Ulster-Scot, and the Israeli—had many things in common. But it was a flat, two-dimensional recognition.

> Then I visited the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria, South Africa. It is an extraordinary structure, not only a monument to a culture's past but also a map of a collective mind. The monument is a national museum for the Afrikaners, but it could just as well serve as a defensive outpost. Its walls are as thick as were some parts of the Maginot Line, and it has sally ports and ambushments that would do credit to a medieval fortress. Each salient protects another. What struck me was that I had encountered the mind that built this structure before, and in far distant countries. Although built in different eras and using sharply different technologies, the bawns of the Ulster-Scots, fortified farmhouses designed to protect against the indigenous Catholics, and the military-agricultural encampments of Israeli 'pioneers' on the West Bank of the Jordan, hunkered down amid the Palestinian Arab population, came from the same cast of mind: the creation of an interlocking defensive structure that asserted at once its own existence and the ability of those inside the structure to defend themselves against the alien and hostile outside world (Akenson, 1992: 3-4).

A difference between Akenson's and McDonald's accounts is that the former emphasises the role of ideology in explaining the resistance of these societies to ap-

peals for liberal reform, while the latter places greater emphasis on structure. Like McDonald, Akenson is also insistent that his analysis should not be interpreted as ruling out any possibility of political change, only that change would be unlikely to follow along the integrationist lines urged by liberals from outside the three societies.

Indeed, in his contribution to *The Elusive Search for Peace*, which I have already touched on, Bernard Crick is far more adamant than either McDonald or Akenson in underscoring the intractability of the three conflicts:

> I call the three problems 'insoluble' for two formal reasons: (i) that no internal solution likely to guarantee peace can possibly satisfy the announced principles of the main disputants; and (ii) that any external imposed solution or enforced adjudication is likely to strengthen the desperation and self-righteousness of the threatened group (Crick, 1990: 265).

Underscoring Crick's pessimism about the possibility of change in any of the three societies was that he coupled the obduracy of the dominant communities with the radical demands being made by the subordinate communities:

> One odd feature in common of the three actual regimes is that none of them are pure autocracies but that each has some kind of working parliamentary institutions, indeed a vigorous and by no means superficial political life within the dominant community. Nonetheless, in each case the existing institutions do not appear to furnish a mutually acceptable framework for the resolution of conflicts; rather the discontented see the existing institutions as part of the problem (Crick, 1990: 265).

Somewhat ironically, these conclusions were put forward at a conference in September 1989, just as the dam was about to break in all these cases and in a country, West Germany, on the eve of its own profound transformation. By the time of the publication of *The Elusive Search for Peace*, President de Klerk had removed the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) and released Mandela from prison. The Oslo peace process followed in the case of Israel in 1993, while the Joint Declaration by the British and Irish governments in December 1993 held out the promise of an Irish peace process that paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 confirmed.

It would be unfair to the participants in the 1989 conference to leave the impression that none of the participants anticipated the possibility of change. At the time, what appeared to require explanation was why these societies had been so resistant to change during the course of the 1980s. But an effort was also made to look forward and not simply backwards. Notable in this context was a debate between Sammy Smooha and Meron Benvenisti on the prospects for a peace process in the Middle East. Smooha not merely argued that the prospects for the two-state solution coming to fruition were good, but that of the three cases, Israel-Palestine was best placed to achieve a political settlement. He argued that the racial inequality was too great in South Africa to be easily bridged while he suggested that too little was at stake for the sides in Northern Ireland to settle their differences. Further, he contended that the negotiation of a separation presented fewer difficulties that that of a new political dispensation. Benvenisti was altogether more pessimistic about the

likelihood of progress. While Smooha's predictions have been confounded by the course of events, he was at least right in recognising that there would be change.

The greatest surprise was South Africa's negotiated revolution of the first half of the 1990s. Ironically, the process bore out what the most intransigent elements among Afrikaner nationalists had always argued; that concessions would prove to be the thin end of the wedge and, by empowering the opposition, would ultimately lead to majority rule. President de Klerk had calculated that the ANC had been weakened by the coming down of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe that had followed. He had assumed that the ANC's links with the South African Communist Party would damage the organisation because of the general discrediting of communism as an ideology. In fact, the international context worked to the advantage of the ANC as it made Western governments largely indifferent to the role of Communists within the ANC. Further, De Klerk had counted on Western support for the entrenchment of group rights in the new dispensation. This was not forthcoming. Western governments feared that the establishment of an effective White veto on political change could undermine the legitimacy of a new dispensation, especially when coupled with the continuance of inequality in the economic sphere. What is more, the National Party government tended to be blamed by Western governments for the violence of the transition and that further undermined the National Party's negotiating position.

Yet in some respects South Africa has changed less than might have been expected after more than 12 years under a majority rule constitution and effective single-party domination of the political system since Mandela became the first President of a non-racial South Africa in May 1994. If one looks at figures for income distribution, the change in the relative per capita incomes of the country's four racial groups—Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Africans in South African parlance—has been remarkably small (MacFarlane, 2008: 240). Indeed, it is arguable that in economic terms South Africa has become more unequal as a society since the end of apartheid rather than less, though one should add that this is in tune with what has been happening elsewhere in the world. That is, the rich have become richer, much richer, practically everywhere. Conceivably, the economic downturn may reduce this a little but it is unlikely to reverse it altogether.

South Africa's first democratic elections of 1994 were commonly referred to as a racial census. A crude indication of that was that if you added up the votes of the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), they came close to the share of Africans in the electorate as a whole, while adding up the votes for the National Party, the Democratic Party and the Freedom Front approximated to the share of Whites, Coloureds and Indians in the electorate. After the divisions in the ANC over the issue of Thabo Mbeki's leadership, his ouster as ANC President and then his recall as President of the country, there was a lot of debate about the prospect for fundamental political realignment in the South African elections of April 2009.

Even though the new grouping that split off from the ANC, Congress of the People (COPE) received a respectable 7.4 per cent share of the national vote, this fell far short of what would have been required to change the character of South African

politics. The outcome was a reflection of a highly polarised election that had centred on the fitness of the ANC President, Jacob Zuma, to lead the country. The ANC vote fell by just under 4 per cent compared to 2004, but the party's dominance was underlined by the fact that it remained only a few seats short of a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. The Democratic Alliance increased its share of the vote to 16.7 per cent, though this was still well short of the share of the vote that the National Party had achieved under De Klerk in 1994. In ethnic terms the ANC made gains among rural Zulus, with the IFP falling below 5 per cent, while in the Western Cape, Coloured voters deserted the ANC for the Democratic Alliance.

If we turn to the case of Northern Ireland, the process of change since 1990 has scarcely been less remarkable but an obvious difference is the extent to which change has been driven by external forces i.e. basically, co-operation between the British and Irish governments. Contrary to commonsense assumptions that a peace process would diminish support for the radical parties, the reverse has happened. In the light of this polarisation, it may seem remarkable that the process has survived at all and, in fact, it should be acknowledged that there have been times when the whole process has hung by a thread. Even now it remains premature to speak of the normalisation of the settlement. Last year (2008) the Northern Ireland Executive, which was supposed to meet on a roughly weekly basis, did not meet at all for a period of five months because of deadlock over the agenda for meetings.

Perhaps it will be possible to make the claim that the settlement has fully taken root if the devolution of policing and justice powers finally happens in the near future. However, there remain some reasons for concern. They include the following: the actions of dissident Republicans; the challenge of Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) to the DUP; and the prospect of a change of government in London in 2010, especially in the light of the links that the Conservatives have recently forged with the Ulster Unionists. I'll expand on each of these points in turn. In March 2009 two soldiers and a police officer died in attacks mounted by two different dissident Republican paramilitary groups. The attacks deeply shocked the public. At the same time, they attracted world-wide publicity. Some of this coverage raised doubts about the durability of the settlement and in doing so gave unintentional credibility to the claims of the dissident organisations. But more positively, the strong stance taken by the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, in describing the dissidents as traitors had the contrary effect of enhancing Unionist and especially Loyalist confidence in Sinn Féin's commitment to the settlement. That helped to pave the way for long overdue decommissioning of weapons by the main Loyalist paramilitaries in June 2009.

The TUV first emerged as a challenge to the DUP in a council by-election in February 2008. It accelerated Paisley's retirement as First Minister. It also prompted the DUP to adopt a more combative approach to its dealings with Sinn Féin in the governance of Northern Ireland. However, the new tactics failed to marginalise the TUV candidate in the European Parliament elections of June 2009. The TUV candidate, Jim Allister, who had the advantage of having won election to the European Parliament in 2004 as the DUP candidate, secured a substantial vote, almost entirely at the DUP's expense. It was evident that the DUP was shaken by the outcome of the

European Parliament elections, but it remains unclear what its response will be to the challenge that the TUV now presents to its position as the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the nomination of the First Minister of Northern Ireland that goes with that status. It is possible that the party will conclude that its combative tactics have backfired and that a stronger commitment to the institutions under the St Andrews Agreement is required. Alternatively, it may conclude that an even tougher posture towards Sinn Féin is called for. A test of the direction the party takes will be its attitude towards the devolution of policing and justice powers and whether this is achieved in 2009.

The political consequences of further delay would be likely to be magnified by the fact that a British general election is due to take place in 2010. It is widely expected that the present Labour government will be defeated and that the Conservatives under David Cameron will form the next British government. This possibility gives added significance to the alliance that the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) has forged with the British Conservatives, reflected in the fact that the outgoing UUP MEP, Jim Nicolson, stood for and secured re-election under the label of Ulster Conservatives and Unionists—New Force (UCUNF). What is disturbing about this alliance is its potential for compromising the conflict management role of the next British government through the Conservatives' relationship with one of the parties in Northern Ireland.

Let me now try to sum up. First of all, with the benefit of hindsight it is clear that the flexibility of the political leaders of different communities in both South Africa and Northern Ireland was underestimated by scholars and analysts in the 1980s. But those who expected the divisions themselves to disappear in any new political dispensation were also mistaken. Secondly, of the two cases, South African has gone through the more profound change. Superficially, electoral polarisation in the two cases may appear similar. However, there is some substance to the argument that has been advanced by Bob Mattes among others in the South African case that South Africans vote along racial lines but not for racial reasons. Thus, if South Africans are asked why they vote for particular political parties, race rarely features in their answers. In particular, the ANC attracts votes as champions of the poor and that is a large part of Jacob Zuma's appeal. And the poor happen to be overwhelmingly black Africans, just as wealthier people fearful of redistribution and populism tend to come from the country's racial minorities and to vote for the Democratic Alliance. The 2009 elections, which before the voting had prompted speculation of the possibility of far-reaching political change, in fact produced an even closer correlation between poverty and ANC support than previous elections, with the poorest provinces voting overwhelmingly for the ANC. At the same time, it should be underlined that while the South African parties disagree over the direction the country should take in terms of policies, there is remarkably little challenge to the overall political framework.

The same cannot be stated about Northern Ireland as yet. But, of course, South African and Northern Ireland are in a far better place politically speaking than the third of the cases they were commonly compared with in the 1980s, Israel-Palestine. The sad history of Israel-Palestine since the dashing of the hopes that the Oslo peace

process raised in 1993 underscores that there was nothing inevitable about the course that the two more successful cases have taken. This is not to discount the role that structural features of the situations have played in their outcomes, though it should be acknowledged that it is far easier to do this now from the perspective of 2009 than to anticipate how the differences among the cases would play out in the 1980s. Further, in all three cases, chance events, including assassinations and the impact of spoiler violence, have affected the outcomes in ways that no structural analysis of the cases could ever have anticipated.

This paper opened by referring to Gerry Adams's jibe of November 2008 comparing Afrikaner and Unionist intransigence. What surprisingly was not picked up on in the multitude of comments his remarks provoked was that in the 1990s nationalists in Northern Ireland had invoked a very different analogy. A statement by John Hume was very widely quoted that what Northern Ireland needed was a Unionist De Klerk (Hume, 1996: 95-6). The analogy irritated the UUP leader, David Trimble, on the grounds that it confused who the minority was in Northern Ireland. He contended that a call for a nationalist De Klerk would have been more appropriate. Regardless of this objection, the prevalence of the analogy underlined the importance of political leadership to the prospects for change. Despite his subsequent repudiation by the Unionist electorate, Trimble is likely to have as honoured a place in the narrative of the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland as does De Klerk in the story of the demise of apartheid in South Africa. This is by reason of the roles both men played at a crucial juncture in the two societies and in spite of their evident miscalculation of the consequences of their actions, as well as many other failings.

However, Adams's comments show that though Trimble and De Klerk clearly confounded the stereotype of intransigence that had become attached to Northern Ireland's Unionists and to Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa, vestiges of the old associations remain sufficiently powerful that use of the older analogy is capable of generating emotion and not merely ridicule. Further, it is not merely political partisans who have not come to terms with the unexpected capacity for political pragmatism demonstrated by Unionists and Afrikaner nationalists during the 1990s. Scholars have yet to put forward either structural or ideological explanations of this change as powerful as the arguments advanced by writers such as McDonald and Akenson to account for these communities' earlier resistance to incremental reform. The absence of such explanations in the case of South Africa is underscored by the continuing application of the metaphor of a miracle to the country's transition. In Northern Ireland it is to be found in lingering doubts about the durability of the new dispensation that have still to be overcome despite the length of the peace process and its substantive achievements.

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