

# History lessons can help us shape a better future

**The world that created the Covenant is long gone. But a century on, what enduring truths remain, asks Arthur Aughey**

Popular commemorations like the Covenant provoke two opposite states of mind: on the one hand, a sense of distance (things are different) and on the other, a sense of connection (things are familiar).

How can we understand this? We may find people wrong in what they thought, G K Chesterton once wrote, but we cannot find them wrong in what they thought they thought. The object is not to expose errors but to understand perspectives, in their time and ours. In short, how can we render unto history what belongs to history and unto the present what is relevant to us? To put that otherwise, how do we distinguish what is living from what is dead?

The first thing that is dead is a way of historical thinking. The history we find in the Covenant is a narrative of the ever onwards and upwards of liberal progress. This was Lord Macauley's vision of political and cultural improvement which put the Siege of Derry

at its centre. There is an irony here, of course. That history assumed the 'genius' of British constitutionalism was its ability to reform in order to avoid radical disruption. The Irish Home Rule crisis brought this notion into deep contention. For all that the Covenant assumes a liberal heritage it stands condemned by liberal historians as the source of all subsequent rancour and bloodshed in Ireland. That liberal opinion should harbour resentment towards Ulster unionists is understandable if only because their actions illustrated the limits of British liberal assumptions. The second, and related, death is the notion of Providence. The idea of progress was part of a larger self-understanding where, to paraphrase Seamus Heaney, faith and destiny rhymed. Only the very naive believed that God had put Belfast Lough where He did to make Ulster the centre of world shipbuilding. Yet such providential naivety was one aspect of the belief that the Union was divinely favoured.

The third is the identification of the Covenant with the UK's imperial mission. That mission was rooted in moral seriousness and also in the faith that free trade promised a world beneficial for everyone. This heart-warming vision of imperialistic righteousness may have been an unreliable guide to what was actually done in the name of free trade and civilising mission. Providentially, it was assumed that God helped those who helped themselves. The fourth passing is the Covenant's pride in Ulster's economic success, hubris which Gladstone had detected a

generation earlier. Ulster was not a dismal backwater. It could claim to with some justice be at the heart of the British Empire. Not only did its ships, ropes, engines help pump the commercial lifeblood of that Empire; its intellectual life contributed as much to its character as the playing fields of Eton. That world is dead and gone, even though images of it remain on the banners of some Orange lodges. But is it possible today to find anything living in the Covenant? I suggest the answer is yes. Read imaginatively, it can speak to the debate about the future of the UK and to Northern Ireland's place within it.

The Covenant was a very Irish document. Perhaps surprisingly, given the prominence identity is supposed to play in Northern Ireland politics, the word British was not used at all. The Covenant was also concise – 189 words - and yet it conveyed the complex relationship which was - and remains - the Union. It begins with a statement of what political scientists call the instrumental value of the Union: its importance for the material well-being of all citizens. If this looks like a contract with a mobile phone company, that is not all it says. This instrumentalism is balanced, secondly, by a statement of non-instrumental belonging in the UK: the 'cherished position of equal citizenship'. These are set, thirdly, in the context of political allegiance: loyalty to the Crown where material entitlement and political obligation meet. This links, fourthly, to an appeal to values held in common: civil and religious freedom. We have difficulty putting it so

precisely today. Gordon Brown tried and the British citizenship test tries its best. Finally, the Covenant points to what economists call the equalisation of risk – expressed there as the unity of the Empire but proclaimed today as welfare solidarity across all parts of the UK. All of these matters are live issues as the UK adjusts to devolution and engages with the prospect of Scottish independence.

Perhaps what is living in the Covenant today is a concept useful for those who wish to maintain the UK. That concept is the paradoxical one of elective affinity. Why is that concept a living one? It does not presume that everyone and everywhere are the same. It proposes that different nationalities elect to stay in constitutional relation with one another and that this relationship constitutes an affinity giving meaning to the term British. This does seem attuned to today's concerns. Or to put that in language, familiar now in Northern Ireland but of relevance elsewhere, especially in Scotland: multi-national affinities are sustained on the basis of consent.

What about Northern Ireland? Some would say this is taking historical imagination too far. A century ago, was not the real paradox of the Covenant a loyal statement of sedition? Did it not deny nationalist elective affinities? The answer is yes in both cases and the result was partition, an outcome never envisaged in 1912. However, times do change. A Cadogan Group pamphlet published in 1992 (to which I contributed) argued that the people

of Northern Ireland might soon be 'in the happy position of deeming themselves to be Irish, or British, or both, as the mood takes them, while remaining, constitutionally, citizens of the UK'. Twenty years on, the elective affinities of nationalists within the island of Ireland have been recognized in the Belfast Agreement. Perhaps this opens up the possibility of equally new and unforeseen elective affinities between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland itself.

Read more: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/ulster-covenant-history-lessons-can-help-us-shape-a-better-future-16216632.html#ixzz27gAGv2oS>