

The Good Friday Agreement: our common ground must hold

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Fintan O'Toole wrote about the Good Friday Agreement in [the Guardian yesterday](#). I happen to think Fintan is probably the best journalist writing in the English language right now, so I strongly recommend a read of what he has to say. But I most especially wanted to consider this paragraph that he wrote:

The genius of the agreement was that it took an unanswerable question and changed it. The unanswerable question was: what are you prepared to die for? A United Kingdom or a United Ireland? They were mutually exclusive concepts. The new question was not what are you prepared to die for, but what are you willing to live with.

I think this astonishingly insightful. But extrapolate it just a little and you will see why those who now think the Good Friday Agreement has overstated importance are so wrong.

Implicit in Fintan's exquisitely crafted paragraph is the idea that we can simultaneously be many things. Think of us as a Venn diagram if you like. Many interlocking identities overlap to make us the person we are. Frequently these identities might be in conflict. The paradox of living successfully is that we can embrace those differences. More than that, the tension they create adds poignancy to life. It is in their reconciliation as we negotiate our identity with others that much of life's pleasure is to be found.

Now contrast that with the Brexit view. This says we have single identities. We are British, and not European. Or English and not British. We are isolationist and not partners. We are alone and not together. We control and do not cooperate. These are forlorn worldviews. It is as if no part of our Venn diagrams can, let alone do, overlap.

To return to Fintan's suggestion; we need to be clear that this divisive perspective on identity is one that we do, after all, reject. We have to. That's simply because it does not reflect who we are. I am, for example simultaneously East Anglian, English, British, Irish, European and just one of seven billion or more on this planet. There is no paradox in saying so. Each is true. Just as I can accept fluidity in gender and sexual orientation so do I in my locational identity with all that also implies.

Simultaneously that means I accept that my neighbour has a different mix of identity, and places different weight on each from me. But to paraphrase Fintan, that demands that I ask 'what can I live with?' There will, I accept be boundaries. No society I know of is totally tolerant. Nor, I think, is that necessary. Societal norms do exist. They need to be respected. But Fintan's point is key: they are not absolutes. They are instead points of negotiation in the vast majority of cases. And my point is that we gain from that negotiation.

Brexit takes us back to fixed identities that most of us cannot identify and do not want demanded of us. It creates conflict where none should exist by imposing a demand where none is required and only harm can result.

To ask what we can live with is so much more useful. And we know it can be done. All of us can see the flaws in those we know and love. We co-exist with them in most cases despite those flaws, precisely because the capacity to negotiate tolerable solutions is innate in us humans.

So too should it be in our politics. The Good Friday Agreement recognised that. Brexit does not. One then stands head and shoulders over the other and must hold sway. Our common ground is what we must still value, come what may.