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ISSN 1748-944X

# From Sands to Sanchez: The Making of a National Sports Stadium for Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines debates concerning the proposed construction of a 'national' stadium for Northern Ireland. In so doing, it considers both the philosophical issues that are central to these debates, not least in relation to Northern Ireland's contested claim

to nationhood, and also some of the technical and legal concerns raised by the project, specifically in terms of questions of ownership and use. In passing, the article also comments of the question of nationality and eligibility within the context of Northern Irish football. It is argued that whilst debates about the need for a new stadium have tended to focus to date on political and conceptual matters, it is likely that, in the foreseeable future, legal, financial and technical difficulties will predominate.

## KEYWORDS

Sport – Politics - Northern Ireland – Stadia - Nationality - National identity

## INTRODUCTION

In Northern Ireland, discussions about where to locate and how to fund any major public resource are always fraught, as indeed they are in any society. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, they are rendered even more problematic by spatial division. As Shirlow and Murtagh (2006, p. 13) have recently noted, 'within Belfast City Cemetery there is an underground wall that purposefully separates the Catholic and Protestant dead'. In addition, 'the disputes that have taken place at Carnmoney Cemetery [on Belfast's northern outskirts]...over demarcating the graves of Protestants and Catholics seem to confirm that even in death there is a desire to remain uncontaminated by the presence of the ethno-sectarian "other"'. This type of segregationist thinking also impacts upon the use of various leisure spaces, including leisure centres, and inevitably influences debates about the location of flagship buildings and amenities (Bairner, 2006; Bairner and Shirlow, 2003). An additional issue has been that of ownership, both real (specifically the relationship between private and public sectors) and symbolic (in terms of how far one or other of the two main traditions is able to successfully 'colonise' particular amenities) (Sugden and Bairner, 1993; Bairner and Shirlow, 2003). This article examines debates concerning the proposed construction of a 'national' stadium for Northern Ireland. In so doing, it considers both the philosophical issues that are central to these debates, not least in relation to Northern Ireland's contested claim to nationhood, and also some of the technical and legal concerns raised by the project, specifically in terms of questions of ownership and use. In passing, the article also comments of questions of nationality and national eligibility within the context of Northern Irish football as well as on the broader debate on the extent to which it is appropriate to describe Northern Ireland as a nation. 1

## NATIONAL STADIUM/NATIONAL STADIA - WHY?

In October 2001, a ministerial advisory panel (of which the author was a member) charged with considering the future of association football in Northern Ireland was set up by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the devolved power sharing Executive. Amongst its numerous findings and recommendations, the panel noted that 'Northern Ireland does not have a sports stadium that meets all the expected standards for hosting international football' (Armstrong et al, 2001, p. 73). As a consequence, the panel supported the idea of a large venue for football in Northern Ireland to cater for international games, major European club matches and major domestic games such as the Irish Cup Final. The panel expressed an awareness of 'previous discussions on the feasibility of establishing a national stadium'. Indeed, a National Stadium Working Group had been set up under the auspices of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland in 1999 but no further progress had been made. Thus, the panel argued that 'Government, in conjunction with the governing body (i. e. the Irish Football Association – IFA) should act quickly to end the uncertainty by making a firm commitment to establish a national stadium'. 2

Fundamental issues that would need to be explored included the question of which other sports, if any, 'would be accommodated in the stadium' (ibid.). And so the gauntlet was thrown down.

Almost all the panel members agreed that a new stadium was needed for practical reasons. If international football is to continue to be played in Northern Ireland, a better facility is required in order to meet increasingly stringent international rules concerning health and safety. A majority of panel members also saw the need for a new stadium in terms of the wider context of Northern Ireland society. It has long been an acknowledged fact that few northern nationalist are willing to watch the 'national' football team preferring instead to support the Republic of Ireland (Fulton, 2005). There are numerous reasons for this, amongst them the unionist sentiments of most (perhaps all) of those who have governed the game in the north of Ireland, the close identification of Northern Ireland games with Ulster loyalist songs and rhetoric, the playing of the UK national anthem ('God Save the Queen') before matches, the relatively poor performances of the team in recent years when compared with those of the Republic and the fact that the very term 'Northern Ireland' is anathema, reflecting as it does the unacceptable partition of the island of Ireland. In addition, it was evident to some panel members that any hope of attracting nationalists to Northern Ireland games is currently dampened by the negative image of Windsor Park, where the Northern Ireland team currently plays its home matches, based on its location and its direct association with an Irish League club, Linfield FC, which over the years has been seen as epitomising Ulster unionism at play (Bairner and Shirlow, 1998). Furthermore, some of those panel members who felt that there is little chance that nationalists are likely to support Northern Ireland even if a new stadium is built nevertheless argued that the fact that Windsor Park is Linfield's stadium has tended to put off Protestant supporters of other Irish league clubs, most notably Glentoran, who play their home games in the east of the city. There is one additional factor that is probably worthy of mention – namely the value placed in both the UK and Ireland on the idea of the national stadium. 3

Whilst not exclusive to the United Kingdom, the idea of national stadia remains relatively peculiar to the British (and arguably, the Irish). The obsession with national stadia is highlighted in the ongoing redevelopment of Wembley Stadium in London as the venue for England's international football games. While this work has been taking place, international games have been staged at numerous well-appointed venues throughout the country; yet the desire to get matches back to Wembley has persisted. The fact that plans to incorporate an athletics track into designs for the new Wembley were rejected makes something of a mockery of the idea that this is a truly national stadium, built as it is primarily for a single sport. A similar situation exists in Scotland where what might normally be described as the national stadium, Hampden, is also set aside for football with the considerably larger Murrayfield acting as the home of the Scottish rugby union team. In Wales, the situation is slightly different. Whereas in the past rugby internationals were played at Cardiff Arms Park and football internationals took place at various grounds – in Wrexham, Cardiff and Swansea - the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff is now home to both the national football and rugby teams, although it is worth noting that in 2006 the national football team also played at Swansea City's new stadium. Finally, taking the Republic of Ireland as part of the British Isles for this specific purpose, Lansdowne Road has been the only home of the Ireland rugby team since the 1950s with Irish Free State (latterly Irish Republic) football games being played at Dalymount Park in Dublin. More recently, Lansdowne Road became the venue for football as well as rugby games. However, with that stadium's planned reconstruction and following an amendment to the rules of the GAA, Croke Park in Dublin, traditionally the venue for the most important Gaelic football and hurling matches, will now host these games for the foreseeable future. 4

In many European countries, notably Italy, Germany and Spain, the idea of the national stadium seems virtually unknown as it is, of course, in the United States. It is true that when particular countries play host to the Olympic Games, the main stadium constructed for that purpose assumes a kind of national importance. But international football matches take place in various cities in Italy, Spain and Germany and even in smaller countries such as Sweden, where fixtures are shared between the two main cities of Gothenburg and Stockholm, and Poland, where important matches are often staged in the relatively forbidding post-industrial town of Katowice. It is almost certain that should the United Kingdom ever have a single international football team as opposed to the four which are currently allowed to operate, despite the fact that they do not represent nation states, matches would need to be rotated as they are in other countries. For the time being, however, the belief that a nation should have a national stadium appears to be strongly held in the UK. 5

In the case of Northern Ireland, it would be impossible at present to stage international football matches anywhere other than Windsor Park. Other Irish League grounds are too small and generally have even less adequate facilities than Linfield's. In addition, apart from Belfast, the only other major city in Northern Ireland is Derry/Londonderry where the main professional football club plays not in the north's Irish League but in the Republic's League of Ireland and at a ground which is located in a staunchly republican area and is therefore as off putting to Protestants as Windsor Park is to Catholics. In sum, there are specific reasons why the idea of a single national football stadium makes sense in Northern Ireland. More thought-provoking however is the idea of having a single multi-use stadium or else more than one national stadium, options that are clearly related to the concept of national sports and initially to the very idea of Northern Ireland as a nation. 6

## SPORT AND THE NATION – WHAT NATION?

It is difficult, but by no means impossible, to see in what sense Northern Ireland can be described as a nation. 7  
Just under half the population would refer to themselves as Irish without hesitation or qualification. Indeed their elected representatives tend not to use the phrase 'Northern Ireland', opting instead for 'the north of Ireland'. Many republicans go even further and talk about 'the six counties' (sometimes 'the occupied six counties'). Life is arguably even more complicated for Ulster unionists. Academic supporters of the unionist position have been keen to set to one side the very idea of nationalism or have referred to the nationalism of unionists as 'civic' – linked to a particular set of political institutions rather than to more primordial criteria – thereby emphasising British nationality (i.e. being a member of the United Kingdom state) as opposed to Irish national identity (i.e. feeling a sense of belonging to the Irish nation) (Aughey, 1989).

Terminological problems remain though with some unionists happily describing themselves as Irish, many 8  
referring to their Britishness and others making reference to Ulster as if that could be granted quasi-national status. The consistent political defence of the union of Britain and Northern Ireland appears to confirm an unquestioned British identity that complements an official British nationality. On the other hand it has been argued, for different reasons, that Ulster unionism and national identity are uneasy bedfellows. In his attempt to establish the theoretical principles of a 'civic unionism', Aughey (1989, p. 202) argues that 'the idea of the Union is properly one which transcends such outdated concepts as nationalism'. Writing from a very different political perspective, Tom Nairn supports the contention that there is a disjuncture between Ulster unionism and nationalism but suggests that, in relation to 'normal' politics, this is a weakness rather than a strength. According to Nairn (1981, p. 236), 'trapped in this extraordinary way between past and future, Ulster Protestantism was unable to formulate the normal political response of threatened societies: nationalism'. Neither account is wholly accurate. In fact, Ulster Protestants have consistently played around with notions of nationalism and national identity. In the past, Irishness and Britishness were conjoined – the yoking of opposites or antisyzygy (Smith, 1919; Morgan, 1980) – just as Scottishness and Britishness co-existed in another part of the United Kingdom. With a changing political context, however, this particular version of the Celtic antisyzygy became increasingly difficult to sustain. As Coulter (1999, p. 22) reveals:

The nationalist enterprise insisted that 'Irishness' and 'Britishness' represented ways of being in the world that 9  
were essentially incompatible. As the demand for national autonomy gathered pace, unionists came increasingly to accept this particular reading. Throughout the (twentieth) century the unionist community has gradually demoted feelings of 'Irishness' in favour of a sense of Britishness.

In broad terms, Coulter is correct in his claim that Britishness has tended to replace Irishness as the national 10  
identity of the Ulster Protestant population. It is important to recognise, however, that Britishness is itself a contested concept within this context. Thus, according to Todd (1987, p. 1), 'together, the Ulster loyalist and Ulster British traditions constitute the two main strands in Unionism'. The former is defined by a primary imagined community of Northern Irish Protestants and a secondary, conditional loyalty to the British state. Ulster British ideology, on the other hand, is defined by a primary loyalty to the imagined community of Greater Britain and a secondary, regional patriotism for Northern Ireland. Social class, together with varying degrees and forms of religiosity, also impact on the construction of these alternative modes of seeing the union. What they share, however, is a rejection of Irishness as a way of 'being in the world' to use Coulter's phrase. It remains to be considered, however, how far, and in what ways, Northern Ireland's contested nationhood impacts on the organisation of sport.

## THE ORGANISATION OF SPORT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Given Northern Ireland's troubled history since its creation as a devolved administrative region of the United 11  
Kingdom in 1921 and the ongoing contestation of its constitutional status, it is perhaps not surprising that the organisation of sport is relatively complex. At the governmental level, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCal) is responsible for sport and leisure as well as the arts and creativity, museums, libraries, visitor amenities, inland waterways, inland fisheries, the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland, language diversity and the Northern Ireland Events company. Since the temporary suspension of Northern Ireland's power sharing Executive at midnight on 14 October 2002, all government departments, including DCal, whilst remaining in place, have passed into the control of the Secretary of State and his Northern Ireland Office ministers, of whom Angela Smith is the current (April '07) Under Secretary of State at DCal <http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/home/> .

The other key institution with respect to sports development issues in Northern Ireland is the Sports Council for 12  
Northern Ireland (SCNI). As the lead facilitator for the development of sport, the SCNI is concerned both with excellence and grass roots participation. Eighty five governing bodies are linked to the SCNI. It is worth noting however that out of these, whilst 33 Northern Ireland governing bodies are affiliated to a UK governing body, 39 are affiliated to Irish governing bodies i.e. to governing bodies located in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, 13 Northern Ireland governing bodies are affiliated directly to an international federation [http://www.sportni.net/links/ni\\_gov\\_body.htm](http://www.sportni.net/links/ni_gov_body.htm). All of this conspires to make the SCNI's position very different

from that of other national sports councils within the UK which deal only with organisations that are affiliated either to British or international governing bodies but not to national bodies located in a separate political jurisdiction. In this respect, it is also significant that the sports that involve Irish affiliation include rugby union, swimming, cricket, hockey, golf, boxing and tennis as well as Gaelic games. British affiliates include athletics but also a number of minority activities such as aeromodelling, orienteering and Scottish country dancing.

All of this raises questions about the role of the SCNI in relation to the distribution of funding provided through funding sources such as the UK National Lottery. 13

The SCNI also has close links to the Northern Ireland Commonwealth Games Association, the existence of which facilitates genuine Northern Irish participation at a global sporting event. Apart from the various activities that constitute the Commonwealth Games programme, association football provides Northern Ireland with its most high profile opportunities to compete at an international level with its own 'national' team(s) along with domestic league and cup competitions and a 'national' governing body – the Irish Football Association (IFA). Its counterpart in the Republic of Ireland is the Football Association of Ireland. 14

At least at the level of international football in Northern Ireland, a generic Ulster loyalist perspective has tended to prevail. Although much has been done by the IFA in recent years to reduce the sectarianism associated with Northern Ireland international football matches, the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of home fans on such occasions come from the Protestant/unionist tradition. That Northern Ireland has its own international side is, of course, hugely important to them. It provides evidence of the existence of Northern Ireland as a separate place in a way that is facilitated by few other sports. Not surprisingly, therefore, home games are imbued with nationalist symbolism and rhetoric as they are elsewhere. Northern Ireland may not be a real nation. But it is certainly celebrated on such occasions as if it is. 15

Rugby union, on the other hand, is administered on an all-Ireland basis by the Irish Rugby Football Union although competitive matches are played between the four provinces – Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster. The latter nominally refers to the nine counties of the historic province but in practice the team is made up largely of players from the six counties that constitute Northern Ireland and could therefore be construed by some as being Northern Ireland's 'national' rugby team. The rejection of Irishness in all its manifestation is by no means universal within Ulster unionism. Indeed, a sense of being Irish, amongst Irish international rugby players (Bairner, 2005a), is able to co-exist with both of the traditions that Todd identifies although to a much greater extent, ironically perhaps, with the Ulster British tradition. 16

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), formed in 1884 with the aim of preserving traditional Irish games and pastimes and in so doing contesting what was deemed to be evidence of British cultural imperialism in the world of sport, is in many ways far less problematic with regard to national identity. Organised on an all-Ireland basis, albeit with councils presiding over activities in each of the four provinces, the Association promotes inter-provincial matches (with Ulster meaning the nine counties in this instance) although it would be fair to say these are of secondary importance to county and club competitions. Although these contests are the highly competitive, they also manage to convey a noticeable impression of people celebrating a shared understanding of Irishness. 17

The complex nature of the relationship between sport, nationality and national identity in Northern Ireland became very apparent when, in 2006, football's international governing body, *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) decided that international players should hold 'the passport of the national association they are seeking to represent in order to allow the match commissioner to verify their eligibility' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/internationals/5016872.stm>). According to FIFA, the fact that a player held an Irish Republic passport (which had previously been accepted practice) did not 'demonstrate conclusively that he or she is eligible to play for Northern Ireland'. This policy shift was criticised by the government of the Irish Republic and also by the main nationalist parties in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party. The IFA's chief executive, Howard Wells, described FIFA's stance as 'unfortunate' ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/5093924.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/5093924.stm)). 18

In large part, this issue arose because of the unique position held by England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales within the context of international football - that is as football nations without corresponding states. It was rendered more problematic in this specific case by long-standing debates about the status of Northern Ireland together with the more recent provisions of the Good Friday Agreement which recognise that all people born in Northern Ireland can opt for British or Irish citizenship (Neuheiser and Wolff, 2002). 19

As a direct consequence of pressure from various different quarters, a compromise has now been reached. Northern Ireland players are now permitted to hold either a British or an Irish passport although, in addition, they are obliged to sign 'a declaration of eligibility'. Conversely, a player who holds only a British passport is deemed ineligible to play for the Republic of Ireland. 20

In the case of Olympic sports, it has traditionally been possible for sports people from Northern Ireland to represent either the Irish Republic or the United Kingdom in keeping with the fact that citizens born in Northern Ireland are entitled to hold either a British or Irish passport or both. More recently however, there has been a tendency on the part of a number of sports – such as boxing and hockey - to affiliate to the Irish Olympic Committee, primarily for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, a development which reflects the national affiliation of various governing bodies associated with the SCNI. 21

If Irish political history raises major questions about Northern Ireland's status as a nation, sport offers few, if any, answers. As a result, we are faced with some rather obvious problems when we come to consider the idea of a 'national' sports stadium for Northern Ireland, not least because the original pressure to build a new venue related principally to the need for a new football stadium to be home to what is in reality Northern Ireland's only major 'national' sports team. It should be noted though that not all national football teams in the world play at national stadia. So even if we judge Northern Ireland to be a nation at least in terms of football, this is not in itself enough to make the case for a national stadium. Instead, we are forced back to the concept of national sports. 22

### NATIONAL SPORT – WHICH ONE?

Given that Hampden and Wembley would probably be regarded as the national stadia of Scotland and England respectively, despite the fact that they only host football games, it might be reasonable to assume that football is the national sport of each country. In the case of Wales, the sharing of the Millennium Stadium between football and rugby union informs us that the relationship between national identity and the concept of national sport may be more complex. In Ireland, the picture is even more confusing with Windsor Park, Lansdowne Road and Croke Park all being described as national stadia in recent years and with national sports being a particularly contested concept. 23

In Ireland, whilst hurling may well be the sport of choice in the eyes of *Bord Fáilte* (the Irish Tourist Board) or the advertising executives responsible for selling a variety of Irish products, including stout and whiskey, the sport's popularity varies considerably from one county, and even one parish, to another. Gaelic football is more uniform in terms of the support that it receives throughout the thirty-two counties. Yet there are isolated pockets where it loses out to hurling. Furthermore, the right of any Gaelic game to be assigned 'national status' is considerably weakened not only because some Irish nationalists opt for other sports, such as rugby union and soccer, but also because the overwhelming majority of the Protestant community in the north of Ireland have resolutely set their faces against the whole Gaelic games movement. It might seem easy to dismiss this difficulty by simply taking these people at their word and accepting that since they do not consider themselves to be truly Irish, their sporting preferences need have no impact on what does or does not constitute an Irish national sport. But this would be to ignore the basic precepts of Irish republican ideology that has consistently sought to embrace not only Catholics but Protestants and Dissenters as well. 24

Games such as rugby union and soccer have some claim on the right to be called 'national' in the Irish context. Despite their British origins, they are played throughout the island. Moreover, although rugby tends to be played by Protestants and not Catholics in Northern Ireland, both football codes enjoy considerable support from the two main traditions on the island as a whole. They offer Irish sportsmen and women the opportunity to represent the nation at international level. Indeed, rugby, unlike soccer, allows northern unionists the chance to acknowledge their sporting Irishness whilst retaining a political allegiance to the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Bairner, 2005a). It should be noted, however, that regardless of any claims that either sport may have to be recognized as 'national' (and the claim of soccer in this regard is clearly weakened as a result of the existence of two distinct organisations and 'national' teams), neither has escaped the influence of globalization. The two Irish 'national' soccer teams have both fielded players whose ethnic 'right' to belong has been relatively weak. The same thing has happened in rugby union. 25

Gaelic games have been less affected by the movement of people that is commonly linked to globalization except in the sense that Irish migrants have taken their traditional activities to other parts of the world, most notably Britain and North America. This is not to deny that changes taking place beyond the shores of Ireland have had an impact on the GAA. Nevertheless, the factors that have been most influential are best understood in terms of modernization and consumer capitalism as opposed to the more specific category of globalization. Gaelic games have been relatively unscathed by the latter. As a result, the GAA offers rich insights into the processes whereby the nation has been able to resist the global in sport as in much else (Bairner, 2005b). 26

All of this presents problems for those who share the responsibility of planning and constructing a 'national' stadium for Northern Ireland. Defining the 'national' sport or sports is clearly a challenge which is rendered even more daunting precisely because of the ambiguity surrounding Northern Ireland's claim to be a nation. Even if one were to accept, however, that association football, Gaelic games and rugby union can all be seen as 'national' sports, depending upon which criteria are applied, and that Northern Ireland is eligible to have a 'national' stadium, the question of where to locate that stadium remains. In particular, policy makers are faced 27

with the thorny problem of finding neutral space in a spatially segregated society.

### NATIONAL STADIUM FOR NORTHERN IRELAND – WHERE AND HOW?

At the time of writing, the British government has decided that the most appropriate location for a new 42,500-seater stadium is the site of the former Maze Prison (Long Kesh as it was known to generations of loyalists and republican prisoners who were housed there from the 1970s until 2000) (Hassan, 2006). To date, all of the relevant parties have agreed to support the initiative in principle. However, the choice of location has caused controversy for a variety of reasons, all of which shed further light on the intimate relationship between sport and politics in Northern Ireland. The government's decision has been prompted in no small measure by the fact that it already owns the land, thereby alleviating the fear of excessive costs which could be associated with building the new stadium closer to Belfast city centre. However, selecting a site which is ten miles outside the city is clearly at odds with strategies aimed at linking sport and leisure to urban regeneration and civic boosterism. It would also depend on major developments in the transport infrastructure and arguably a review of both the Regional Development Strategy and the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs, 2006). 28

An additional complication arises from the fact that the former prison itself has such a significant place in the history of the troubles, not least as the site of the republican hunger strike in 1981 which led to the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine other prisoners. It is against this backdrop that Hassan (2006) appears to believe that the entire project is particularly problematic for northern nationalists. 'Put simply', he writes, 'some northern nationalists are indisposed to support the new "national" stadium for Northern Ireland because of the involvement of the IFA' (p. 341). More generally, he rightly notes that the very idea that the project is referred to as a 'national' stadium for Northern Ireland is contentious. His suggestion, however, that it is the responsibility of nationalists to support the project as part of a more general commitment to the Good Friday Agreement ignores the extent to which nationalists, arguably rather more than unionists, have already supported the peace process and the fact that the spirit of the Agreement appears to militate against integration, thus allowing people to make their own sectarian choices about how they live their lives (Bairner, 2004a). In addition, when Hassan (2006, p. 341) writes of northern nationalists that 'whereas their continued reluctance to move forward, to be progressive and embrace a new beginning might well be based on genuine cases of injustice, it is questionable whether such disinclination remains as valid at the beginning of the twenty-first century', he is in danger of ignoring unionist unwillingness to support any new order and, more specifically, the trenchant criticisms of the stadium project itself from predominantly Protestant/unionist supporters of the Northern Ireland football team. Indeed, it is their critique which raises the more fundamental issues about ownership and the economic benefits, if any, that might accrue from the construction of the stadium. 29

Part of this critique is clearly political. According to the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs (2006, p. 25), 'although the SIB (Strategic Investment Board) assured us that the site would be a neutral space, it is hard to believe that the site will not be honoured as a place of martyrdom turning into a ghoulish tourist attraction. This is unlikely to endear the site to an average sports fan who is not interested in such controversial and divisive symbolism'. In truth, there are few sports fans in Northern Ireland who are wholly apolitical and what is likely to please one faction is almost certain to anger another. Calls for the preservation of at least one of the prison's so-called H-Blocks have been partly answered in the preliminary plans for the new stadium. These propose that, in addition to restaurants, offices, a multi-screen cinema and a hotel, the surrounding site should also include an International Conflict Transformation Centre with one of the old H-Blocks, H6 where arguably the seeds of the hunger strike were sown (O'Hearn, 2006), being preserved along with the prison hospital where the hunger strikers died [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4663512.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4663512.stm). 30

In terms of sport *per se*, other problems emerge however, regardless of what site is finally chosen. In the first instance, the idea of a new stadium was based on the premise that Windsor Park, for reasons already discussed, is inadequate for association football's needs. Subsequent attempts to include other major team sports inevitably run the risk of being seen as public relations exercises linked to a community relations agenda. Do Gaelic games and rugby union genuinely need a new stadium? How often would they use it? Indeed, how often would it be used even for football matches? The question of 'ownership' is also significant. At present, the SIB proposes that the stadium operator should retain the majority of associated profit. The Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs has objected, arguing that 'with an effective monopoly due to its rural location, any concession operator at the Maze will definitely generate significant income. The IFA must have a cut of this in any proposal' (Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs, 2006, p. 21). They argue that because the GAA and the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) would retain alternative venues, the issue of financial return is less important to them. According to the Amalgamation, whilst this may not be an issue during the course of the first operating contact, it could be come significant thereafter. 'In such a scenario', they argue, 'the stadium operator will be obliged to recoup the lost revenue from the other sports through increased rental charges to the IFA' and 'with no stadium to return to, the IFA would find itself in a very weak negotiating position' (p. 21). In the short term moreover, it is highly unlikely 31

that either the GAA or the IRFU would be happy with a situation in which fans of their respective sports were generating income exclusively for another governing body.

To summarise some of the more conceptual issues raised by this proposal, reference has been made throughout this section to plans for a new *national* stadium. The idea that there should be a national stadium for Northern Ireland therefore inevitably leads back to the question of whether or not Northern Ireland can be legitimately described as a nation. In terms of football, the answer is quite probably yes, thereby making the case for a 'national' *football* stadium. It is certainly a sporting country within the context of association football with the IFA being recognised as a national governing body by FIFA. As for rugby and Gaelic games, however, the sporting nation is clearly Ireland. Thus, given that it is proposed that both rugby and Gaelic games should also be played at the Maze, other considerations come into play, not least because both the GAA and the IRFU are happy to embrace their Irishness, as opposed to their northern Irishness, albeit interpreted rather differently. 32

Viewed from a purely sporting perspective, according to some criteria football is the national sport of both parts of Ireland and of the island as a whole. Yet the united Irish rugby team is undeniably inclusive in relation to religio-cultural identity although not in terms of social class or within the narrow confines of the north of Ireland whilst Gaelic games are certainly presented as national or, as some might prefer, nationalistic. With Croke Park already available for major Gaelic games and Lansdowne Road being redeveloped by the IRFU, it becomes easier to argue within the context of national sports that Northern Ireland does not need a national stadium for those particular activities. 33

Finally, there is the problem of the choice of location for the new national stadium. Because the Maze Prison was both symbolically and factually at the heart of so much of the conflict in Northern Ireland, its selection as a sporting venue could be interpreted as a testimony to a new spirit of reconciliation. On the other hand, fears have already been expressed that as has happened with so much of the material culture and of the significant places of Northern Ireland, it will prove to be either a contested space or one that comes to be owned symbolically by a single community. The idea of having the stadium play host to rugby and Gaelic games as well as to football is clearly intended to ensure that the latter does not happen. However, because the GAA and the IRFU already have *national* stadia, it is likely that the new stadium will inevitably mean more to unionists than to nationalists and arguably more to working class unionists than to middle class ones. The solution may seem obvious – an all-Ireland football team with games played in both Dublin and Belfast, thereby replicating a pattern familiar in many European countries. But as an IRA prisoner in the Maze once said to the author – 'there's more chance of a United Ireland than of a united Ireland football team' (Bairner, 2004b). Leaving aside these philosophical and political issues that the proposed new stadium will potentially bring with it, it also important to recognise in conclusion the importance of the very real practical difficulties which may well unfold. 34

### CONCLUSION: WHO PAYS? WHO WINS?

Regardless of whether or not one considers Northern Ireland to be a nation with association football as its national sport, legal and financial issues cannot be ignored. The criticisms voiced by the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs point in the direction of two fundamental compound questions. Who pays for the stadium (and why)? Who will actually own (and profit from ) the stadium? If the major investor is to be the British government, unionists are likely to ask why the British tax-payer is being asked to contribute to a facility that will be used by an avowedly nationalist organisation such as the GAA or even by the Ulster Branch of the IRFU, affiliated as it is to a 'foreign', governing body. Spokespeople for both will of course point out that supporters of Gaelic games and rugby in Northern Ireland themselves pay taxes to the UK government. Furthermore, they are likely to note that the main catalyst for this investment of public capital is the fact that the IFA's current arrangements for hosting major football games have been deemed to be inadequate. As a result, it is football rather than Gaelic games and rugby that is the ultimate beneficiary. However, this in turn leads to questions of ownership. 35

As the Amalgamation has pointed out, both the GAA and the Ulster Branch of the IRFU will retain their alternative facilities and will not be expected to use the new stadium for all of their major matches. Football on the other hand will have no other option but to use the stadium for all important fixtures. This might appear to present an irrefutable case for allowing the IFA to be the owners and/or major tenants of the 'national' stadium. Given that scenario, however, the question of financial advantage emerges. Would the GAA and the rugby authorities be placed in a position of having to sub-let from the IFA just as the promoters of concerts held at the stadium might be expected to do? If this is the case, however, why would those bodies not simply revert to playing all of their major games at their existing stadia? One is also left to speculate as to who would profit from sales at catering outlets within the stadium. It is doubtful that 42, 000 fans of Gaelic football would be content in the knowledge that the profits from their outlay of food and drink would be destined for the coffers of the IFA. 36

To date, much of the debate about the proposed stadium, has focussed on what for many might be regarded as the big issues. Why are national stadia needed? Is it necessary for a national stadium to play host to more than 37

one putative national sport?

Is Northern Ireland a nation? Given its proposed location, what is the role for the new development in relation to the collective memories of the two major communities? All of these are weighty matters that are eminently worthy of discussion. The very idea that at some point in the relatively near future, the Northern Ireland football team, currently managed by Lawrie Sanchez, will be playing close to the site where Bobby Sands died is difficult to believe. But strange things have happened in Northern Ireland in recent times. Indeed, it is likely that very soon the big ideological themes relating to the new stadium will be replaced by more mundane, but arguably no less contentious, legal and financial issues. For now though, it is simply a matter of watching this space, both literally and metaphorically. 38

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Bairner, Alan, "From Sands to Sanchez: The Making of a National Sports Stadium for Northern Ireland", [Entertainment and Sports Law Journal](#), ISSN 1748-944X, July 2007, <<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/eslj/issues/volume5/number1/bairner/>>