

Speech to the Irish Association
Malachi O'Doherty, Commentator, Editor, Fortnight Magazine
Where now for Northern Nationalism ?

We are using words to mean things that they don't mean.

Nationalism in Northern Ireland, I am instructed to understand as encompassing the politics of Republicanism. There is a suggestion that it includes myself too. This is to stretch the word beyond what its definition can sustain.

In the normal usage of the word, Irish Nationalism is a determination that Ireland should be a unified autonomous nation. That is what the old Nationalist party made of it, not very different from what the Irish Republicans made of it.

John Hume for a time conceded his embarrassment with the term Nationalist and urged his party to think of itself as Post Nationalist - its aspiration to be part of Europe being as important as its association with Dublin, and conceding that it was pointless to care at this stage whether Dublin would ever be the seat of government for the whole island.

That anyone who lost sleep or took life over that question was missing the value of the day that was in it.

When we use the term Nationalist we are using lazy language, much as when we use the term Catholic to describe the same people.

We are doing this because we balk at the inelegance of our project, which is to describe people as ethnic blocks, ironing out the distinctions between them within those blocks. We are stereotyping people, making generalisations about them that fall apart when we speak to them as individuals. We are being sectarian.

It would be more proper to use a word like Taig, which acknowledges that the interest in these people is in their ethnic collectivity, rather than the diversity of their interests and opinions.

I acknowledge that I am a Taig. I am of those people who are summed up that way by those who hate them as suspect and even as targets.

I am of that family of people from which sectarian Nationalists and Republicans claim allegiance, who give offence to them if we move beyond the tribal expectations fostered by a few, in the way that a Donegal villager will be reviled if she wears a party dress to mass. Look at the cut of her. Who does she think she is.

See yon Malachi O'Doherty. He's forgotten where he comes from - who he came out from among.

When I addressed the Ulster Unionist Assembly party I was described by James Kelly in the Irish News as a token taig. I was seen as failing in my tribal responsibility to stick with my own people. It isn't just Prods who put taigs in their box.

Terminology like Nationalist and Catholic, applied to people who do not aspire to the creation of an island nation and who aren't mass attenders is another way of summing them up against themselves.

Still, we know what we are talking about, don't we?

A broad cultural or ethnographic description of the people of Northern Ireland would conclude that there are two tribes, the Prods and the Taigs, and that degrees of affinity to these tribes vary, some people being conspicuously and proudly identifiable with one or the other, very few being identifiable as belonging to neither.

It might find also that the ones who protest most loudly that they are of one tribe or the other live with the strongest secret doubt about that. Why would anyone attack another to assert Irishness, unless that Irishness was in doubt.

Let us look at the Taigs, and see if we can work out some of their defining features.

Historically they were Catholic and Nationalist. Those great historic ideologies, stretching back into the mists of the last century and marginally beyond, were held dearly by most of the parents and grandparents of those we call Taigs.

There are a few cultural interests almost unique to taigs, like Gaelic sports and the Irish Language. Neither of these are held dear by a majority of taigs, yet they are somehow considered more defining of taigness than those interests which are shared by a majority, like English television and soccer and playstation - for a majority of prods would share those interests with them.

When taigs want to let you know that they are taigs they start learning Irish.

Prods and Taigs differ in their regard for the state. Taigs say they feel more Irish than British.

We can see, for instance, that when Britain and America invaded Iraq, the Taigs of Northern Ireland were almost entirely opposed to this and the Prods generally in favour.

This is not as easy to explain as it superficially appears.

Some would say it comes down to a simple question of state allegiance, yet many British people opposed their government in this.

The Irish state was supportive of the war.

The American state, with which the Irish have a strong bond of affinity, was at war and the Taigs opposed it and attracted the vilification of former friends like Niall O'Dowd for their trouble.

Others say it is because The Prods have closer links with the British army tradition: yet there are strong historical links between the Taigs and the British army, such that, when the IRA revolution began, both the British and the IRA were able to use those links. Irish men who had been in the army, trained the IRA. Irishmen who were still in the army were used to infiltrate the IRA.

We are left with having to explore another part of the argument, that Taigs are culturally of a different mindset from Prods - they think differently and come to different conclusions about what is right and wrong. Which is not really surprising since they emerged from separate religious traditions.

They believe in the same father God, but they like different things about him and approach him more easily when he is in different moods.

If we are asking where the future of the Taigs lies, and I think that is what we are asking, then we will have to inquire into the shifts in religious faith, culture and party political allegiance.

Let's look first at their religion:

The Taig lineage is Roman Catholic, though it has long had an older strain of the indigenous fairy culture and a distinctively Irish way of being Catholic about it. It is strongly focused, traditionally, on the Virgin Mary.

It is fatalistic. There are several aspects of Catholic theology that never quite grafted into the religious traditions of rural Ireland. Free will is one of them. Thou shalt not commit adultery always seemed to be a stronger law than Thou shalt not kill.

Two big things are happening within that religious tradition.

For those who still hold it dear it is changing.

And many others are letting go of it with little difficulty.

So there is change and there is secularisation, and they are not far off merging with each other.

If you were to take the Christian Brothers who taught me in 1963 and transferred them to the same school classroom in the year 2003, they would see no members of religious orders in the schools. They would hear the same prayers they knew but with lesser frequency. They would perceive that Irish Catholicism as they knew it had died away and been replaced by Protestantism.

Their shades might follow the boys home and see no family prayer, few of them going to mass even on a Sunday; some going on Saturday night so that they wouldn't have to get out of bed with a hangover the next morning. In the churches they would hear English language services bearing only a faint similarity to the Latin mass they had known, and these almost devoid of poetry.

The culture which those unhappy men had laboured so hard to instil in us, the fundamentalism of one true faith Catholicism is gone.

It was changed by the Second Vatican Council which gave the people a sense of freedom of conscience which they quoted against the church itself a couple of years later when it banned the pill.

The Catholic church has been through a reformation. The Catholics are Protestants now in the matters that count; they insist on freedom of conscience.

Catholicism is now outside the dispute between Taigs and their neighbours.

It was not always so.

The IRA was as Catholic as the UVF was Protestant. Theology was part of the difference between them, each committed to a True Faith, perceiving the other as merely ignorant and damned. The Taigs aren't saying that any more.

In 1970 I was at a Civil Rights rally in Casement Park which was drawn to a close at the request of the parish priest so that people could go to seven o'clock mass.

Today they would tell the priest to go and chase himself.

Yet the modern Catholic changes from day to day. The tradition is still remembered and engaged on occasions like weddings and particularly funerals. The Catholic who has discarded the faith - or lapsed, as the church prefers to say, assuming loss of faith always to

be an accident that can be mended - that Catholic may decide not to marry in church but is rarely in position yet to refuse to be buried with the sacrament.

My father died last year, and his four sons carried him on their shoulders the length of the street they played in as children. Everything about us had changed, yet that had not changed, that we were Catholic when it counted. Yet we are estranged from the very culture we observe, listening to a priest mouth words he hardly seems to give credence to himself, watching the next generation stand around the graveside bewildered, not even knowing the words or the motions expected of them.

Let's look at Taig Culture.

There are various items which are widely regarded as part of an indigenous Irish culture valued more by Taigs than by Prods; traditional Irish Music, the Irish Language, Gaelic Sports, St Patrick's Day.

We could extend this to include the poetry of Seamus Heaney, The Late Late on RTE. Yet none of these are majority interests among the Taigs. Country music is more popular in rural areas than traditional reels and jigs. Irish is dying out. A politically motivated revival of the language is under way, particularly in west Belfast, as it was in the prisons, and there are some small schools teaching through it. The vast majority of children still go to English language schools. Manchester United is more closely followed than Down GAA.

Where the Irish language and music are attracting new interest is where they are cross fertilising with other cultural strands. There is a new liberal cosmopolitan Irishness, a little bohemian, that you can identify in Culturlann or the novels of Pádraig Standún, a Catholic priest who has been able to write fairly passable descriptions of sexual intercourse and the naked female.

This radical chic Irishness seems to sit cosily beside the new Sinn Féin, but visualises Republicans more easily in aran sweaters than in balaclavas. If anything, Sinn Féin has softened to incorporate this strand.

There is another argument that says that the Taig culture is subtler, a more verbal and witty culture than that of the Prods. Taigs are better speakers and have a better sense of humour than Prods have. Therefore we see more Taig broadcasters and writers and more Prod engineers. Their culture values the man who speaks little and to the point. Ours is voluble and expressive.

Where most of us like this stereotype and can easily think of examples that seem to confirm it, it is as easy to find others that refute it. The gospel preachers are hardly stuck for words, are they?

And some of the great performers at the Presbyterian Assembly are among the funniest men in the country; it's just that Taigs don't get to see them in action.

Taigism is in crisis. Its religious and cultural foundations are weak and growing weaker. We are running out of things by which we might distinguish a Taig from a Prod, other than family name and tradition, and the political parties which they vote for.

Is there anything that defines a Taig other than not being a Prod?

Another curiosity about the Taigs is that some of them are taken to be more representative of what they ought to be than others. As Patrick Pearse looked to Connemara for the authentic Irish, Sinn Féin now attributes that standing to the people of west Belfast. Sinn Féin's touchstone of authenticity is the community.

Some Taigs are not real Taigs. They have betrayed their roots. They have gone soft and surrendered their commitment to the community. These Taigs are not to be trusted. They speak only for themselves.

Apparently, speaking only for yourself is a form of self indulgence in a Taig.

Which brings us to politics.

There are real Taigs and there are weak Taigs. The real Taigs set the standard for the weak Taigs, calling them home to their loyalties and their tradition, reminding them that they are nothing if they do not stand together and that out there, away from the community, among the Prods, they are indulged but not loved.

Two political parties represent the Taigs, one of them representing the real Taigs and the other the half hearted Taigs, the sell out merchants, the ones who prefer Olive Oil from Sainsburys to Cookeen from Curleys.

Now this is a broad distinction which many of those who contribute to it would not recognise. Sinn Féin does not admit to being a sectarian organisation concerned only with the promotion of the interests of the real Taigs, and the SDLP does not admit to being less Irish than Sinn Féin.

Indications that they think this way are that Sinn Fein dismisses the SDLP as the Stoop Down Low Party, which sells out its responsibility to defend the Taigs for political advantage, and that the SDLP in reply has greened itself a little, offering in recent years an Irish language translation of its own title and with some of its bilingual members using Irish in the assembly before a body of people who mostly don't understand what is being said to them.

Both parties contribute to the Good Friday Agreement which requires that every issue of mutual concern to Prods and Taigs should be voted on by proportionate numbers of each, and thereby that political advantage is gained by defining your party as Prod or Taig and is lost by refusing to do this.

Both parties promote the Agreement's endorsement of community rights, a principle which is creating a headache for the Human Rights Commission because it can't find a way of protecting individual rights while enshrining Taig and Prod Rights. What happens then to the right of a Taig not to be held accountable as a Taig?

Do I have rights as a Taig that I would not have as an individual?

Can anyone think of one?

Would Taig Rights go along with Taig responsibilities? Would we have to oblige every Taig to celebrate St Patrick's Day in order to earn taig rights?

Sinn Fein as the more Taig of the Taig parties appears to be currently in the ascendant. There is something anomalous about this. The party is rising in the esteem of the electorate while promoting issues which the electorate appears to have very little interest in; the Irish language, Irish unity, the equality agenda - whatever that is. It represents Taigs as a disadvantaged ethnic and national group which needs constitutional and statutory endorsement of its national rights, yet appears short on issues on which Taigs are seriously disadvantaged as Taigs.

One suspects that the rise of Sinn Fein is predicated on its ability to annoy Unionists rather than to represent Taig rights.

That is what you would expect in a society in which the main defining feature of a Taig is that he or she is not a Prod and after which all efforts to pin a meaning on the term begin to crumble.

The SDLP which is less interested in annoying unionists and asserting Taig rights loses votes for much the same reason that the Alliance party does, it's not engaging in the main stand-off. The one big thing that Taigs are presumed to want, politically, is Irish Unity, yet most have voted for a political compromise which defers that until a majority in Northern Ireland consents to it.

Sinn Fein and the IRA argue that the Agreement is an extension of their struggle for a United Ireland and will take them to it.

There are two conceivable ways in which this might happen:

One, they may make government so smooth and productive that they win the support of all Taigs and a Few Prods too - that is, more than half the population of Northern Ireland.

Two, they may abort this project in such a way as to make it evident that no political compromise can make Northern Ireland a tenable entity. In that event they may suppose that the unthinkable of Irish Unity without majority consent becomes the only surviving option. Both would be difficult projects. If devolution works well that will make the case for retaining it, not for changing it.

If Sinn Fein continues to undermine it, and to succeed in evading responsibility for undermining it, then it is more likely that we will revert to direct rule on a more formal basis with a desultory contribution from a disillusioned Dublin rather than forward towards Irish unity.

And what of the SDLP?

The SDLP has been eclipsed in the sectarian stand-off between Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists. That suits Sinn Fein well.

It has one great weapon at its disposal, an ability to turn its back on Sinn Fein and make power sharing with Unionists work without them.

It will never use that weapon, because it would be reviled by Sinn Fein for betraying the people, for not being real Taigs. Where they might have been able to exclude Sinn Fein while commanding a larger mandate than theirs from Taigs, it is inconceivable that they could do it with a smaller share of the Taig vote.

So we are probably going into a period of protracted stagnation in which neither Taigs nor Prods will make significant political gains.

After a while the IRA will be faced with the decision of whether to end its ceasefire or abandon the theology which says that violence arises as a force of nature from Taig disenfranchisement.

They may foresee that embarrassment and seek to avert it by settling terms with Unionism, if they can find Unionists willing to settle terms with them.

Otherwise they may sing to the world their plaintive wail about being an oppressed people and the lesson may slowly sink in that sectarianism, the division of spoils between people on the basis of whether they are Prod or Taig, arose from a failure of political imagination, and perhaps in time those who are sick of that way of thinking might contrive the beginnings of an alternative.

Don't bet on it though.