

Goodbye Team UK: Is Northern Ireland too awkward to be included formally?

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As Team GB is cheered into the record books at the Olympics, I have been puzzling over whatever happened to Northern Ireland.

The province, after all, is not part of Great Britain, which is composed of England, Scotland and Wales, but belongs to the UK – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

So if Northern Irish Olympians are competing as part of Team GB, shouldn't it have been called Team UK?



Irish brothers Peter and Richard Chambers, seen here with their families, helped Team GB Lightweight Men's rowing team take the silver medal

This is alluded to in today's [Times](#) (£), where Alice Thomson records initial worries by the British Olympic Association's director of marketing that the Olympic brand didn't include Northern Ireland. Apparently she decided 'The Great Britain and Northern Ireland Olympic Team' was too clumsy. But why not settle for Team UK instead?

It appears that Northern Irish Olympians have been given the choice to be in Team GB or Team Ireland — seven are competing for GB, and thirteen for Ireland. So as far as the Olympics are concerned, therefore, the United Kingdom appears to have been abolished.

The Northern Irish competitors are in real life neither British nor Irish; they are citizens of the UK. Yet for the purposes of the Olympics, they seem to have been stripped of their citizenship and left in geopolitical limbo over the Irish Sea.

The great triumph of the Northern Ireland Peace Process, or so we were told ad infinitum, was that it preserved Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and thus defended the integrity of the nation. But at the Olympics, there is no Team UK and thus no truly national team.

The British Olympic Association itself seems a little hazy about the difference. Its website tells us:

'The British Olympic Association (BOA) is the National Olympic Committee (NOC) for Great Britain and Northern Ireland.'

It says it is '*responsible for promoting the Olympic Movement throughout the UK*' but nevertheless goes on to talk about the Olympic participation of Great Britain. It would appear that Northern Ireland is just...well, just too damn awkward to include, too clumsy to be part of the brand. So if its competitors want to belong to Great Britain, fine; if they want to belong to Ireland, fine. Who cares?

As with sport, so with politics? Might this be an indication that the future lies not with the UK but with the Kingdom of Team GB?