

RENARRATING IRISH POLITICS IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

In this chapter the models developed by Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas for appreciating the meaning and value of European integration are applied to the evolving British-Irish political constellation in the new European dispensation. The British-Irish political constellation in the new European dispensation fosters variable layers of compatible identification – regional, national and transnational – and provides the framework for the postnational hospitality envisaged by Habermas and Ricoeur.

Introduction

Ireland's entry to the European Community (EEC) in 1973 signaled a new era in the country's self-understanding and its understanding of its Siamese-twin, Great Britain. The Irish-British dialectic took a further turn in the signing of the Single European Act, when both nation-states agreed to a significant pooling of sovereignty with the other members of the community. These two moments of consent to the evolving process of European integration greatly helped to facilitate the ultimate reconciliation of Irish and British sovereignty claims in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a document approved by both National Parliaments allowing, for the first time in history, that citizens of Northern Ireland could be 'British or Irish or both'. The same Agreement, significantly, also made provision for a British-Irish Council which looked forward to greater cooperation between the two divided communities in a transnational context. On that dramatic day when John Hume and David Trimble shook hands across historically entrenched barricades and borders, six hundred years of mutual hostilities came to an end. Since the

notorious battles which pitched both island nations against each other were of European dimensions – Kinsale (Spanish), the Boyne (Dutch), the 1798 Uprising (French) – it was logical and fitting that the reconciliation of these ancient rivals should also be, ultimately, in a trans-national European context.

I have written elsewhere of the details and implications of Irish-British rapprochement in a New Europe where the boundaries of nation-states are loosened and amplified to allow for greater regional (sub-national) and greater federal (supra-national) responsibility (1988, 1998, 2007). In this essay I would like to cite the ideas of two contemporary European philosophers, Paul Ricoeur (1996) and Jürgen Habermas (2001), who have, in my view, suggested inspiring models for appreciating the meaning and value of European integration. Though they do not mention Ireland as such I believe that their reflections have a significant bearing on the Irish-British constellation. And, I submit, that what pertains to the question of Northern Ireland also pertains to similar border disputes and identity conflicts in other communities of Europe – Basques, Bretons, Catalans, Cypriots, Serbs, Macedonians and Albanian Kosovars.

Narrative hospitality and flexibility

In an essay entitled ‘Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe’, Paul Ricoeur (1996) outlines a hermeneutic model of *narrative hospitality*. This involves, he says, ‘taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other’ (1996: 7). In the context of a historically divided Europe, scarred by wars of religion, ethnicity and empire, this takes the form of an exchange between different people’s *histoires* (in the sense of both histories and stories). It calls for an art of transference and translation which allows us to welcome the story of the other, the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one. At the level of cultural and literary exchanges one might cite here (though Ricoeur does not) the way in which Irish writers of opposite sides used poetic imagination to empathize with the adversary – John Montague (Catholic nationalist) and John Hewitt (Protestant unionist) swapping stories of ‘Planter and Gael’, Frank McGuinness imagining the ‘sons of Ulster’ in the British-German battle of Verdun, or Brendan Kennelly getting into the mind of the national arch-enemy, Oliver Cromwell. At a political level, one thinks of how Irish Presidents, Mary Robin-

son and Mary McAleese, participated in war memorials and inter-denominational religious ceremonies which con-celebrated communion with what was traditionally considered the ‘other community’. And these post-nationalist gestures were reciprocated in kind from the British side.

Ricoeur shows how acts of narrative hospitality call in turn for an *ethic of narrative flexibility*. Memorials face the challenge of resisting the reification of an historical event into a fixed dogma by showing how each event may be told in different ways by different generations and by different narrators. Not that everything becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of trauma and suffering call out for justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap may thus lead to what Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) calls a ‘fusion of horizons’ where diverse horizons of consciousness may at last find some common ground; a reciprocal transfer between opposite minds. ‘The identity of a group, culture, people or nation, is not that of an immutable substance’, writes Ricoeur, ‘nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story’ (1996: 7). A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists an arrogant or rigid conception of cultural identity which prevents us from perceiving the radical implications of the principle of narrativity – namely, ‘the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past’ (1996: 7). The way in which numerous contentious events in Irish history – Battle of the Boyne, Battle of Wexford, Bloody Sunday, the Civil War – have been re-narrated by historians, writers, film makers and politicians to allow for a healthy rethinking of the origins and implications of these ‘foundational events’ is a case in point. Good examples of this are to be found in the New British History (and New Irish History) proposed by thinkers like Linda Colley, Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, IGA Poccock or Roy Foster, a more pluri-dimensional approach to historiography which widens the narrowly nationalist lens of British-Irish enmity to include regional and transnational horizons.

This brings us to Ricoeur’s third suggestion for a new ‘ethos’ for Europe – that of *narrative plurality*. Pluralism here does not mean any lack of respect for the singularity of the event narrated through the various acts of remembering. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of the uniqueness of each event, especially if it is foreign to us

in time, space or cultural provenance. ‘*Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honored by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise’ (2006: 8). And Ricoeur adds this critical point: ‘The ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other national cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations’ (2006: 9). This point applies as much to events of pain and trauma (like those commemorated in Irish Famine or First World War memorials for example) as to events of triumph and glory.

A fourth aspect of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic exchange of narratives is the *transfiguring of the past*. This involves a creative retrieval of the betrayed promises of the past, so that we may respond to our ‘debt to the dead’ and endeavor to give them a voice. The goal of historical narrativity is, therefore, to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in transformative ways, ethically and poetically. Ricoeur insists on this point: crucial to the act of reinterpreting transmitted traditions is the task of discerning past promises which have not been honored. For ‘the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted’ (2006: 8). In other words, the *unfulfilled future* of the past – or what Habermas calls the ‘unfinished project’ of European history – may well signal the richest part of a tradition. Ricoeur claims that the emancipation of ‘this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives’ (2006: 8). It is especially the *founding events* of a national community – traumatic or dramatic – which require to be reread in this critical manner in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies which the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied. This is why any genuine memorial involves a certain return to some seminal moment of suffering or hope, to the original events and textual responses to those events, which are all too often occluded by Official History. ‘The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept’, notes Ricoeur. And

generous rememorations can be ways of 'bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel' (2006: 9).

A fifth and final moment in Ricoeur's new ethos for Europe is *pardon*. If empathy and hospitality towards others and adversaries are crucial steps in the ethics of remembrance there is something *more* – something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of stories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something 'extra' involves pardon in so far as pardon means 'shattering the debt'. Here the order of justice and reciprocity can be supplemented, but not replaced, by that of 'charity and gift'. Such forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of 'working-through', mourning and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. It remembers our debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that reason. One thinks of Brandt kneeling at Warsaw, Havel's apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume's and Trimble's preparedness to speak with extreme Irish Republicans, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum's refusal to hate her hateful persecutions; all miraculous moments where an ethics of reciprocity is touched by a poetics of pardon. But I repeat: one does not replace the other – *both* justice *and* pardon are equally important in the act of remembering past trauma. 'To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum' (2006: 11).

It is not difficult to see how Ricoeur's European ethos of narrative exchange relates to the Irish-British context. What he is basically suggesting is that 'if the end of art is peace', as Seamus Heaney suggests, then politics will always need to be supplemented by culture. And culture here must be understood as both an ethics of historical judgment and a poetics of narrative fantasy. And the latter demands that we widen the frame of British-Irish hurt, inflamed by a long history of sovereignty neurosis, to include an exchange of narratives with the other communities of Europe to which we have always belonged and which we are now re-acknowledging as we move towards closer and deeper reintegration. For when we dare to visit the memorials dedicated to other peoples and

communities (not our own), we are suddenly all famine sufferers, we are all holocaust victims, we are all casualties of the tragic wars of the European continent.

Memory is not, alas, always on the side of the angels. Indeed sometimes we need to forget to remember or to remember to forget. In his book, *Memory History and Forgetting*, Ricoeur acknowledges the existence of several kinds of pathological memory – masked, blocked, fetishised, etc – and he sees it as a constant hermeneutic task to translate and transmute such disabling neuroses and traumas into more liberating forms of remembrance. If such emancipatory release sometimes comes in the guise of a gracious gift – as in Proust’s remembrance of times past – it frequently involves a laborious and painstaking ‘working through’ (Freud’s *Durcharbeitung*). Often memory enslaves and paralyses. Too much memory can indeed, as Brian Friel observed in his play of Irish-British perceptions, *Translations*, become a form of ‘madness’ – a recipe for sterile repetition and revenge, unless we learn to ‘translate’ the past in a wise way. The task is to revisit the wounds of history so that, through acknowledgment of truth and possible forgiveness, we can begin to give a future to our past. Amnesty is not based on amnesia any more than it is based on repetition compulsion or the triumphalist propaganda of Official History. True pardon means we remember forward rather than backward. For only in that way, Ricoeur concludes, can history be retrieved as a laboratory of still unexplored possibilities rather than a mausoleum of dead facts.

Any genealogy of Irish culture would do well to begin with the ancient *Book of Invasions*. For this earliest of Irish books serves as a reminder that the peoples of both Ireland and Britain are ‘mongrel islanders’ issuing from a countless series of Westward migrations from the continent of Europe. That is, after all, where the name *Hibernia* comes from: the most western point for immigrations and transplantations by numerous nations and tribes – fir bolg, tuatha de danann, milesians, Celts, Vikings, Danes, Normans, Anglo-Saxons. And this process of immigration and emigration between Ireland and the larger European community is still going on (the 2007 census of Polish and other Eastern Europeans living in Ireland speaks for itself). The dominant focus on the great 19th century Irish migrations in the direction of North America has often neglected the much older two-way migrations between Ireland and Europe. We remember, ritually, the celebrated Irish monks – Colum-

banus, Gallus, Columba, Eriugena – heading off to re-evangelize Europe after the Dark Ages, or the Flight of the Earls after Kinsale, or Tone and the United Irishmen in Revolutionary France, or the exiled Catholic Colleges of Salamanca, Paris, Prague and Rome. But we forget much of the more constant and mundane exchanges between this western Isle and the great continent to our East over the centuries. Our membership in Europe invites us to re-narrate the question of national identity in a trans-national setting. By leaving home – literally or imaginatively – we can return home in a new way. The shortest route from self to self is through the other. And it is a two-way street.

Identity and constitutional politics

In *The Postnational Constellation*, Jurgen Habermas argues that in the third millennium postnationalism looks set to replace nationalism as a dominant political paradigm. The Twentieth century witnessed the break-up of the great national empires – British, French, Austro-Hungarian– as well as a number of devastating world wars resulting from the interne-cine rivalries between nation states. The terminal death-rattles of nationalist belligerence (on the European scene at any rate) sounded on the streets of Belfast where republicans and loyalists fought their last battles before finally reaching peace in 1998, and on the streets of Sarajevo and Kosovo where Balkan ethnicities clashed in genocidal hatred before an International accord was secured, at least for now. Widening the focus, the events of September 11, 2001, made it dramatically clear that wars of the 21st century cannot be confined to specific nation-states, or national empires, but traverse boundaries and borders with disturbing ease. Al Qaida is as post-nationalist as the ‘American Way of Life’ it targets.

In several recent writings, the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, argues for what he calls a ‘postnational constellation’ as a response to the current political situation in Europe. Noting the erosion of the territorial sovereignty of nation-states, Habermas (2001) expresses the hope that this may open up a new space for 1) cultural hybridisation; 2) transnational mobility and emigration; 3) cosmopolitan solidarity, predicated on a neo-republican balance between private and civic liberties opposed to the neo-liberal disregard for social justice; and 4) constitutional patriotism (on a federal European scale inspired by principles of coordinated redistribution and egalitarian universalism).

But Habermas is not naïve. He knows that such a postnational project faces many obstacles. One of the most challenging questions, he notes, is ‘whether the European Union can even begin to compensate for the lost competencies of the nation-state’ (2001: 90). And the related question of the EU’s ability to act effectively, motivating citizens towards social solidarity, will depend in turn, he argues, on ‘whether political communities form a collective identity beyond national borders, and thus whether they can meet the legitimate conditions for a postnational democracy’ (2001: 90). If these questions cannot be answered in the affirmative then no meaningful ‘Federal States of Europe’ is possible. Or in Habermas’ own words: ‘If Europe is to be able to act on the basis of an integrated, multilevel policy, then European citizens, who are initially characterized as such only by their common passports, will have to learn to mutually recognize one another as members of a common political existence beyond national borders’ (2001: 90).¹

This calls for a radical rethinking of both 1) *identity politics* (the question of recognition and belonging); and 2) *constitutional politics* (the question of rights and justice). I fully agree with Habermas that the most promising context for such rethinking is that of a new postnational paradigm. Though I would insist that in the European context, at least, the idea of a postnational constellation is still very much a task, not a *fait accompli*.

The European dispensation

If most of our political conflicts and crises today are largely post-national in character so too, I submit, are the possible solutions. In pursuing my argument, let me return to the historic British-Irish Agreement of 1998, mentioned above, suggesting that it may serve as a litmus test for a new politics of peace at a pan-European level.

What we are witnessing on the Irish-British archipelago today is little short of a revolution in our political understanding of the nation-state, marking the coming of age of two historically engaged peoples. With the ratification of the Good Friday Agreement in the spring of 1998, the sovereign governments of the UK and the Irish Republic signed away their exclusivist sovereignty claims over Northern Ireland. This signaled

¹ See also Habermas’ development of this argument in ‘Why Europe Needs a Constitution’. Edgar Morin (2004) argues for a similarly postnational Europe, based on a federal/confederal model.

the end of the constitutional territorial battle over the province of Ulster – that contentious piece of land conjoining and separating the islands of Britain and Ireland for centuries. The Siamese twins could now begin to live in a practicable peace, accepting that their adversarial offspring in Northern Ireland might at last be ‘British or Irish or both’ (The Belfast Agreement, 2).

Unitary sovereignty could never be enjoyed by two separate nation-states over the same province at the same time. This is especially so if we were talking ‘absolutist’ sovereignty – and understood this to mean something like ‘one and indivisible’ (as defined by Hobbes, Bodin and Rousseau). The Agreement spelt the termination of the age-old conflict between a United Kingdom and a United Ireland: a conflict made inevitable by the fact that two into one won’t go.

The British and Irish nation-states are now compelled to redefine themselves in the new European dispensation. The ‘hyphen’ has been reinserted into their relations, epitomised in the new British-Irish Council of Isles (BIC) which had its first meeting on 18 December 1999, and whose aim, as the Belfast Agreement tells us, is ‘to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of the British and Irish islands’. Membership of the Council is drawn from the British and Irish governments, the devolved assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel. It acknowledges the fact that the citizens of both islands are inextricably intermingled thanks to centuries of internal migration, cultural borrowing and political exchange (positive and negative). And it purports to deal with a whole range of common interests running from trans-European policies of environment and transport to the knowledge economy (see, for example, the meeting held in Jersey on 15 June 2002). Speaking at the launch of the BIC in Lancaster House in 1999, then Prime Minister Tony Blair described its inaugural session as ‘an extraordinary and historical event that we have all the people of these islands finally coming together and saying we share certain things in common, that we can resolve our differences. The British and Irish people feel closer together now than at any time in their lifetime’.² And the veteran Scottish political theorist, Tom Nairn, hailed it as ‘an imagined community disconcertingly different from anything in the political arsenal of the

² Cited in Dworkin 2007.

old British State' (*New Left Review*, 2001).³ The fact that the BIC was able to secure the enthusiastic support of not only both sovereign governments but also of the two leaders of the traditionally opposed republican and unionist communities of Ulster – John Hume and David Trimble – was decisive. And it is significant that this sharing of sovereignty was actively and enthusiastically supported by the European community whose dual aspirations to great transnational and regional authority were being enacted in this historic gesture of cooperation.

The sea-change signaled by the establishment of the BIC was reflected in a radical paradigm shift in the constitutional relations between the two islands. The Irish government endorsed the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the Constitution of the Republic (a move ratified by the vast majority of the electorate); while the British government redrafted the 1922 Government of Ireland Act and held referenda to establish regional assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The zero-sum game of mutually exclusive 'national identities' was over. The utopian dream of a federal Europe of regions was taking a further step towards realization on its westernmost extremity.

The emerging post-nationalist scenario permits, for the first time in history, that citizens of Northern Ireland profess differing degrees of allegiance to an expanding range of identifications: from regional townland, parish or province to national constitution (British or Irish or both) and, larger still, to the trans-national union of Europe. As John Hewitt presciently wrote to his fellow Ulster poet, John Montague: 'I always maintained that our loyalties had an order: to Ulster, to Ireland, to the British archipelago, to Europe, and that anyone who skipped a step or missed a link falsified the total'⁴.

This scenario of extending circles of identity corresponds felicitously, in my view, with the political paradigm of 'subsidiarity' which has become part of the new European thinking, particularly since the visionary Presidency of Jacques Delors in the 1980s and 1990s. The term 'subsidiarity' refers to the principle and practice of never taking a decision at a higher level that can be taken at a lower level. So the ever ascending and descending levels of political responsibility could be said to chime well with the cultural model of mobile, overlapping identities outlined by the Ulster poets, Hewitt and Heaney. Though originally

³ See also by Nairn: *After Britain* (2000) and *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977).

⁴ <http://library.ulster.ac.uk/craigne/hewitt/work.htm> (accessed 20/02/2010).

deriving from Catholic social philosophy, the concept of subsidiarity has, of course, assumed its own special significance (beyond all denominational or confessional partisanship) in both the aspirational and actual exercise of power in the European parliament and by extension, in the increasing provisions for regional, subnational decision-making. There is little doubt that the future success of a post-national European project will depend greatly on the degree to which the model of subsidiarity is positively adopted, both politically and culturally, throughout the expanded community. For the larger the European Union becomes – as it moves eastwards and southwards – the more urgent the need to devolve and share sovereignty and power.

Postnational sovereignty

The British-Irish ‘Council of Isles’ is now a reality. This third spoke of the 1998 Agreement’s wheel – alongside the internal Northern Ireland Assembly and the North-South cross-border bodies – harbors enormous promise. What the trans-national model effectively recognizes is that citizens of Britain and Ireland are inextricably bound up with each other – mongrel islanders from East to West sharing an increasingly common civic and economic space in a European context. In addition to the obvious contemporary overlapping of our sports and popular cultures, we are becoming more mindful of how much of our respective histories are shared: from the old Celtic, Viking and Norman settlements to our contemporary belonging to the European community. For millennia the Irish Sea served as a waterway connecting our two islands, only rarely as a *cordon sanitaire* keeping us apart. And this is becoming true again in our own time with over 40,000 trips being made daily across the Irish Sea, in both directions. It is not entirely surprising then that over eight million citizens of the United Kingdom today claim Irish origin, with over four million of these having an Irish parent. Indeed a recent survey shows that only 6% of British people consider Irish people living in Britain to be foreigners. And we don’t need reminding that almost a quarter of the inhabitants of the island of Ireland claim to be at least part British. Finally, at a symbolic level, few can fail to have been moved by the recent unprecedented image of the President of the Irish Republic, Mary MacAleese, standing beside the Queen of England on the battlefield of Flanders commemorating their respective dead – Irish and British.

In light of this reawakening to our common memories and experiences, it was not surprising to find Tony Blair receiving a standing ovation from both houses of the Parliament of the Irish Republic on 26 November 1998, in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. Such a visitation had not occurred for over a century, and the ghost of Gladstone was not entirely absent from the proceedings. Blair acknowledged openly on this occasion that Britain was at last leaving its 'post-colonial malaise' behind it and promised that a newly confident Republic and a more decentralised UK would have more common tasks in the scenario of European convergence than any other two member states. East-West reciprocity was back on track for the first time since the divisive Statutes of Kilkenny. The Irish-British rapprochement may be seen as both a confirmation and prefiguration of postnational Europe.

Though rarely acknowledged at the official or constitutional level, a *practical* form of joint-sovereignty has been endorsed by the Irish and British peoples. The pluralisation of national identity, epitomised by the provision of the BIC, entails a radical redefinition of the hallowed notion of sovereignty. In essence, it signals the *detritorialisation* of national sovereignty – namely, the attribution of sovereignty to peoples rather than land. (A fact which finds symbolic correlation in the Agreement's extension of national 'belonging' to embrace the Irish diaspora now numbering over 70 million world wide). Of course, this detritorialising process is not confined to the British and Irish experience. It applies also to the significant diasporas of other European nations from their native lands to adopted countries abroad – one thinks of how the Italians and the Poles, for example, settled in North America while retaining substantial identity-links with their homeland. And in a curious, if somewhat different sense, it is timely to recall here how the attribution of sovereignty to peoples rather than land became a basic tenet of law under the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II, both as a way of taking account of the territorial division of Germany and the devolution of power to sub-national regions or *Länder*. Contrary to what many continue to believe, 'land' is chronologically and historically a much older criterion for sovereignty than ethnic or civic (that is, national or constitutional) identity. The detritorializing and pooling of sovereignty in the new European project is therefore a wager which carries substantial stakes. If the wager fails, the consequences could be dramatic and, I would submit,

dangerous. The fatal realignment of sovereignty with ethnic purity in the recent history of the Balkans surely serves as a powerful reminder.

The term sovereignty (from the Latin *superanus*) referred, in its original European context, to the supreme power of a divine ruler, before being delegated to divinely elected ‘representatives’ in this world – kings, pontiffs, emperors, monarchs – and, finally, to the ‘people’ in most modern states. A problem arose, however, in that many modern European democracies recognize the existence of several *different* peoples within a single state. And many peoples mean many centers of sovereignty. Yet the traditional concept of sovereignty, as already noted, was always *unitary*, that is, ‘one and indivisible’ (Rousseau’s *Social Contract*). Whence the dilemma: how divide the indivisible? This is why, today, sovereignty has become one of the most controversial concepts in European political theory and international law, intimately related to issues of state government, national independence and minority rights.

Inherited notions of absolutist sovereignty are being challenged from both within nation-states *and* by developments in international legislation. With the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, followed by the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Charter of the UN, significant restrictions on the actions of nation-states were laid down. A system of international checks and balances was introduced limiting the right of sovereign states to act as they pleased in all matters. Moreover, the increasing *interdependence* of European states – accompanied by a sharing of sovereignties in the interests of greater peace, social justice, economic exchange and information technology – qualified the very principle of absolute sovereignty. ‘The people of the world have recognized that there can be no peace without law, and that there can be no law without some limitations on sovereignty. They have started, therefore, to pool sovereignties to the extent needed to maintain peace; and sovereignty is being increasingly exercised on behalf of the peoples of the world not only by national governments but also by organisations of the world community’ (Sovereignty, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 11, 57).

If this pertains to the ‘peoples of the world’ generally, how much more does it pertain to the peoples of the islands of Britain and Ireland? This is why I argued in *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997) for a surpassing of the existing nation-states in the direction of both an Irish-British Council and a federal Europe of regions. The nation-state has become too large and too small as a model of government; too large for the growing needs

of regional participatory democracy; too small for the increasing drift towards transnational exchange and power-sharing. Hence my invocation of the Nordic Council as a model for resolving our sovereignty disputes – in particular the way in which these five nation-states and three autonomous regions succeeded in sorting out territorial conflicts, declaring the Åland and Spitsbergen islands as Europe's two first demilitarized zones. Could we not do likewise under the aegis of a new trans-national British-Irish Council, declaring Northern Ireland a third demilitarized zone?⁵

That the Blair government was prepared to grasp the sovereignty nettle and acknowledge the inevitable long-term dissemination of Britain, qua absolute centralized state, was to its credit. But it is not a decision taken in a vacuum. There were, of course, precedents for sovereignty-sharing in Britain's recent experience, including Westminster's consent to a limitation and dilution of sovereign national power in its subscription to the European Convention on Human Rights, the Single European Act, the European Common Defence policy. If Britain had been able to pool sovereignty in these ways with the other nation-states of the EU, surely it was only logical to do so with its closest neighbor, the Irish Republic. Moreover, the EU principles of subsidiarity and local democ-

⁵ Prior to the Belfast Agreement of 1998 such sovereignty sharing was mainly opposed by British nationalism which went by the name of Unionism. It was, ironically, the Irish republican tradition (comprising all democratic parties in the Irish Republic, as well as the SDLP and Sinn Féin in the North) which was usually labeled 'nationalist', even though the most uncompromising nationalists in the vexed history of Northern Ireland have been the Unionists. It was the latter, after all, who clung to an anachronistic notion of undiluted British sovereignty, refusing any compromise with their Irish neighbours; until Tony Blair blew the whistle and moderate unionism realized the tribal march was over. The final showdown probably came when the Unionists faced off against Her Majesty's Army in Drumcree, prepared to do combat with the very Crown to which they swore unconditional loyalty. At that fateful moment it must have dawned on even the most fervid loyalist that the United Kingdom was no longer united. By contrast, John Hume's 'new republicanism' – a vision of shared sovereignty between the different peoples of this island – had little difficulty with the new 'post-nationalist' scenario. Indeed Hume had called himself a 'post-nationalist' for many years without many taking heed. And, curiously, one might even argue that Michael Collins was himself something of a post-nationalist when he wrote that as a 'free and equal country' Ireland would be willing to 'cooperate in a free association on all matters which would be naturally the common concern of two nations, living so closely together' as part of a 'real league of nations of the World' (*Manchester Guardian*, December 1921). A sentiment echoed by Linda Colley in her Downing Street address on the status of Britishness in the wake of the Belfast Agreement, where she concluded that 'these islands may actually move closer together in the next century' ('Britishness in the 21st Century', *10 Downing Street Magazine*, London, 1999).

racy, promoted in the European Charter of Self-Government, already signaled a real alternative to the clash of British-Irish nationalisms that had bedeviled Ulster for decades.

The implications of the Good Friday Agreement are especially relevant here: the conflict of sovereignty claims exercised over the same territory by two independent governments – issuing in decades of violence – is now superseded by a postnational paradigm of intergovernmental power. The dual identities of British-Irish relations have long belied the feasibility of ‘unitary’ forms of government and shown the necessity of separating the notion of *nation* (identity) from that of *state* (sovereignty) and even, to some extent, from that of *land* (territory). Such a separation is, I submit, a precondition for allowing the co-existence of different communities in the same society; and, by extension, amplifying the models of identity to include more pluralist forms of association – namely, a British-Irish Council, a European network of Regions, and the Irish and British diasporas in global context. In sum, it is becoming abundantly clear that Bossuet’s famous seventeenth century definition of the nation as a perfect match of people and place – where citizens ‘lived and died in the land of their birth’ – is no longer tenable.

Conclusion

The fact is there are no pristine nations around which definitive state boundaries – demarcating exclusivist sovereignty status – can be fixed. (Germany’s attempts to do this from Bismark to Hitler led to successive and disastrous wars). The Belfast Agreement recognized the historic futility of both British and Irish constitutional claims on Northern Ireland as a natural and necessary part of their respective ‘national territories’. Instead, the Council of Isles (BIC) and the EU’s Regional Charter call for a network of interconnecting regional assemblies guaranteeing parity of esteem for cultural and political diversity and an effective co-management of such practical common concerns as transport, environment, social equity and e-commerce. We are being challenged to abandon our mutually reinforcing myths of mastery (largely British) and martyrdom (largely Irish) and to face our more mundane post-imperial, post-nationalist reality in a new European constellation. Might the BIC not, as Simon Partridge suggests, even serve as an inspiration to other parts of Europe, like the Balkans and Cyprus, still embroiled in the devastations of ethnic and religious nationalism?

What the vision of a postnational Europe allows, in short, is that the irrepressible need for identity and allegiance be gradually channeled away from the fetish of the nation-state, where history has shown its tenure to be insecure and belligerent, to more appropriate levels of regional and federal expression. In the Irish-British context, this means that citizens of these islands may come to express their identity less in terms of rival sovereign nation-states and more in terms of: a) locally empowered provinces (Ulster, Scotland, Wales, North and South England, the Republic, etc); and b) larger trans-national associations (the BIC, EU, European Court etc). The new European dispensation, I repeat, fosters variable layers of compatible identification – regional, national and transnational – allowing anyone in Northern Ireland, to cite our chosen example, to declare allegiance to a) the Ulster region, b) the Irish and/or British nation, and c) European community.

Citizens of these islands might, I suggest, do better to think of themselves as mobile mongrel citizens of Europe than as eternal dwellers of two pure, god-given nation-states. There is no such thing as primordial nationality. If the nation is indeed a hybrid construct, an ‘imagined community’, then it can be re-imagined again in alternative versions. The task is to embrace this process of hybridisation from which we derive and to which we are committed willy-nilly. In the face of nationalist resurgences in certain parts of Europe today, fired by rhetorics of purity and purification, we do well to remember that we are all interdependent, ethnically and culturally mixed up. If we can acknowledge this, the postnational hospitality envisaged by political philosophers like Jurgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur need no longer be considered a utopian dream but a practical necessity.

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