

Contextualizing Secession

*Normative Studies in Comparative
Perspective*

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Britain and Ireland: Towards a Post-nationalist Archipelago

Richard Kearney

Nation-states are rather like teenagers: fine when full of questions but impossible when they get too sure of themselves. What we were witnessing on the Irish–British archipelago at the cusp of this millennium is little short of a revolution in our political understanding. With the ratification of a peace agreement on Northern Ireland in April 1998—the so-called Good Friday Agreement—both sovereign governments signed away their exclusivist sovereignty claims over Northern Ireland—and came of age. This signalled the possible end of the constitutional battle over the territory of Ulster: that contentious piece of land conjoining and separating the islands of Britain and Ireland for so long. The Siamese twins could now, one hoped, learn to live in real peace, accepting that their adversarial offspring in Northern Ireland may at last be ‘British or Irish or both’.¹

Since April 1998, the power-sharing agreement between the two Northern Irish communities has repeatedly been confronted with the threat of breaking down. The members of the four-party Ulster executive have accused each other of actions in breach of the peace agreement. It may happen that the British government and the political parties in Northern Ireland will be unable to maintain the momentum of the peace process and fail to keep the new institutions alive. Even in such a worst case event, the Good Friday Agreement has challenged traditional political wisdom and introduced new principles in the discussions on the future of Northern Ireland, whose relevance for a future peace order cannot be exaggerated.

¹ *The Good Friday Agreement*, Belfast, April 1998, paragraph 6. On the agreement see Clem McCartney (ed.), ‘Striking a Balance: The Northern Ireland Peace Process’ in *Accord: An International Review of Peace Initiatives*, 8 (1999), also on <http://www.c-r.org/accord8/>; Duncan Shipley-Dalton, ‘The Belfast Agreement’, *Fordham International Law Journal*, 22 (1999), 1320–44; Brendan O’Leary, ‘The Nature of the Agreement’, *ibid.* 1628–67; Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke, and Fiona Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? From War to Peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000); John McGarry, *Northern Ireland and the Divided World: The Northern Ireland Conflict and the Good Friday Agreement in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

According to classical political wisdom, unitary sovereignty could not be exercised by two separate nation-states over the same place at the same time. Especially if we were talking 'absolutist' sovereignty—which we were—and understood this to mean something like 'one and indivisible' (as defined by Hobbes, Bodin, and Rousseau)—which we did. The Agreement marked the termination of the age-old conflict between the rival ideologies of a United Kingdom and a United Ireland: a conflict made inevitable by the fact that two into one simply won't go.

The British and Irish nation-states have been compelled to redefine themselves. The 'hyphen' has been reinserted into their relations, epitomised in the new British–Irish Council (BIC). This council, which was established in the framework of the Good Friday Agreement and had its first meeting on 18 December 1999, allows direct cooperation between Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, the Channel Isles, the Isle of Man, and the governments of Ireland and Britain.² Its aim, as the April 1998 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'. The Irish government has endorsed the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the Constitution of the Republic (articles which made a claim on the territory of Northern Ireland); while the British government has rewritten the 1922 Government of Ireland Act which approved the partition of Ireland and held referenda to establish regional assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.³ The zero-sum game of exclusive 'national identities' is over.

The emerging post-nationalist scenario allows, for the first time in history, that citizens of Northern Ireland can owe 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 transnational union of Europe. As John Hewitt wrote foresightedly 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 How right he was.

² On the British–Irish Council see Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), 107–8. A report of the first meeting was published in the *Irish Times*, 18 Dec. 1999. See also Graham Walker, 'The Council of the Isles and the Scotland-Northern Ireland Relationship', *Scottish Affairs*, 27 (Spring 1999), 108–23.

³ On Scotland, see Alice Brown et al., *Politics and Society in Scotland*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998); Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism* (London, Routledge, 1998); Jonathan Hearn, *Claiming Scotland* (Edinburgh, Polygon, 2000); Michael Keating, 'Britain—The United Kingdom?', in Don MacIver (ed.), *The Politics of Multinational States* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1999); Andrew Marr, *The Battle for Scotland* (London, Penguin, 1992); and Lindsay Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

⁴ See R. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland* (London and New York, Routledge, 1997), 105–6.

THE ORIGINS OF THE BRITISH–IRISH CONFLICT

How did the game of exclusive nationalities first originate? Like most stories of national genesis, the Irish and British one began with a mirror-stage. The peoples of our two islands first identified themselves as separate and unique by differentiating themselves from one another. One of the earliest chapters in this process, noted by the Welsh historian, R. R. Davies,⁵ was the attempt to forge the notion of an English (proto-British) nation—*nacio* or *gens* in Latin—over and against that of a colonized Irish nation in the fourteenth century. The English–British settlers of the time felt so fearful of mingling with the natives, thereby becoming 'more Irish than the Irish themselves', that they invented the infamous Statutes of Kilkenny. These Statutes, passed into law in 1366, instigated segregation between colonizer and colonized, fomenting political divisions between two supposedly incompatible 'peoples'. Non-observance of the Statutes was called 'degeneracy'—that is, the falling outside the Pale of the *gens*. To marry outside the *nacio* or *gens* was to cease to be a proper English 'gentlemen', thereby forfeiting the attendant virtues of gentility and gentrification. Commingling with the so-called natives was, as the old phrase went, 'going beyond the Pale' (literally, exiting from the frontier-walls of the city of settlers, Dublin). To transgress this limit was to betray the tribe. The colonizing *gens* thus came to define itself over and against its *de-gens*, its alter-ego: namely the indigenous Irish. Thus, even though it was the venerable Bede who initially invoked the idea of an English *gens*, and while it was Alfred's expansion of Wessex (871–899) which opened the way, it was actually in the laboratory of Ireland that the English nation first saw itself in the glass and believed its image. In Ireland England originally earned its credentials and cried victory. If the Irish didn't exist, the English would have had to invent them.

By virtue of this mimetic logic, the Irish in turn began redefining themselves as an equally pure and distinct *nacio*. In response to the colonial campaign of segregation, King Donald O'Neill of Ulster wrote to the Pope in 1317 declaring himself heir of the 'whole of Ireland' and affirming an unbroken historical continuity of the Irish people (*gens*) through their laws, speech, and long memory of tribulations suffered at the hands of the colonial invaders. (This move conveniently masked the fact that the 'natives', no less than the colonial settlers, were a mongrelized ethnic mix of successive invasions, Viking, Anglo-Norman, Scots, Celts, Milesians, etc.) Ever since this act of reciprocal invention and definition in the fourteenth century, the Irish and English–British nations have evolved like twins, inseparable in

⁵ R. R. Davies, *The Peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100–1400*, vol. i, in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (London, Royal Historical Society, 1994).

their loves and hates, joined at the hip of Ulster and forever bound to a dialectic of conflict and reconciliation.

It is of course true that the Irish nation had some primitive sense of itself before this reaction to the fourteenth-century plantation. It has been argued, by Proinsias McCana for example,⁶ that some form of unitary government began to emerge as early as the ninth century in response to the Viking invasions, and again in the twelfth century in response to the Anglo-Norman invasion. But these intermittent efforts at all-island structures of self-rule were largely a matter of self-defence rather than any self-conscious assertion of enduring national identity. After all, the term 'scotus' could as easily refer to an inhabitant of Ireland as of Britain up the eleventh century (e.g. John Scotus Eriugena from the former, Duns Scotus from the latter). In short, the first *successful* attempt to identify the Irish and British as two radically separate peoples really only took hold after the fourteenth century invasionary settlement made it in the interests of the colonizers, and the colonized, to differentiate themselves as two distinct *gens*.

The criteria of discrimination were conventional rather than natural. They were, in other words, largely of a cultural and legal character—e.g. apparel, name-forms, language, decorum, property rights—than of ethnic foundation. (Indeed it is well accepted that the inhabitants of our respective islands share a virtually homogeneous gene pool due to their common experience of successive invasions and migrations, pre-Celtic, Celtic, Viking, Anglo-Norman etc. The first book of Irish letters is, after all, called the *Book of Invasions*!) The *gens* actually 'looked' almost identical to the *de-gens*. But this absence of racial distinguishing marks made it all the *more* necessary to compensate at the level of contrived legislation and statute. Where nature could not segregate, law would.

But law in itself was not enough. The border of the Pale separating *gens* from *de-gens* remained constantly shifting, porous and indeterminable, requiring repeated recourse to propaganda. The stereotyping usually took the form of prejudice and snobbery ('the natives are not *gentlemen*'), drawing great ammunition from Giraldus Cambrensis' twelfth-century *History and Topography of Ireland*. Cambrensis himself was, tellingly, a secretary to Prince John on one of his invasionary expeditions to Ireland and his depiction of the natives as 'a wild and inhospitable people who live like beasts' well served its colonial purposes. As the Irish historian, Art Cosgrove, would later observe: 'The picture drawn by Gerald was unflattering; the Irish were economically backward, politically fragmented, wild, untrustworthy and semi-pagan, and guilty of sexual immorality. Doubtless the picture was

⁶ Proinsias MacCana, 'Notes on The Early Irish Concept of Unity', in *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977–1981)* (Dublin, Blackwater Press, 1982), 205–9.

much influenced by the need to justify conquest and dispossession.⁷ But the prize for colonial stereotypes must surely go to the British historian, Charles Kingsley, who could still remark on a visit to Ireland in the nineteenth century: 'to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins are as white as ours!'⁸

The Irish, of course, responded with their own version of self-conscious national pride, their spalpeen poets and bards spinning tales of the virginal motherland being raped and plundered by the invading *Sasannach*. And this widening gender opposition between Ireland as female virgin (Roisin Dubh, Cathleen ni Houliahn, *Speirbhean*, etc.) and England as male master (fatherland, King and Country, etc.) served to aggravate the divide between the two peoples.

But while literary propaganda worked, it was as nothing compared to the divisive power of *religion*. Arguably, it was not really until the seventeenth-century plantation of Ulster, after the Reformation, that the colonization of Ireland ultimately succeeded—and with a vengeance. The disenfranchising of Irish Catholics *en masse* in favour of Planter Protestants, subsequently backed up with the infamous Penal Laws, was evidence of how fatally religion could be deployed as a galvanizing force of apartheid. Where neither nature, nor ultimately even law or propaganda, could succeed in separating the peoples of these islands—*faith* in the one true church would! After Cromwellian zeal and Elizabethan ruthlessness had taken their toll, there were many Protestants and Catholics in the island of Ireland who preferred to die rather than to commingle. And not even Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, with their valiant appeal to a single nation of 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter' in the 1790s, could put the hibernian Humpty Dumpty back together again. Sectarianism was here to stay.

It would take another two hundred years after the failed Rebellion of 1798 for Britain and Ireland mutually to renounce their separatist claims to Northern Ireland thereby permitting Irish Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters peaceably to cohabit for the first time since the Reformation. It was only when the two communities inhabiting Ulster acknowledged that they could be 'British or Irish or both' that they could be united once again. Not, to be sure, as a unitary national identity as Wolfe Tone hoped, but as a multiple post-national one.

UNITIES OF PEOPLE AND POLITY

The story of the genesis and evolution of the Irish and British nations might thus be said to run broadly in parallel. As R. R. Davies again points out in

⁷ Art Cosgrove, 'Seeing Ireland First', in *Books Ireland*, Kilkenny, 71 (1983), 35–6, at 35.

⁸ Cited in 'Introduction', Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind* (Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 1984), 7.

his landmark study *The Peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100–1400*,⁹ what the English, and later the ‘British’, had great difficulty accepting was that after the Viking and Norman invasions, the various parts of these islands were already countries of ‘multiple’ peoples, which included, in part at least, the culture of the colonizer who was so desperately struggling to retain (even if it meant reinventing) his own sense of pure, uncontaminated identity. The settlers in Ireland were so insecure and unsure of their own ambiguous status as a ‘middle nation’—neither fully English nor fully Irish—that they demonized the native Irish as their ‘other’ in order to more emphatically insist on their belonging to the former. The planters bolstered up this separatist propaganda with legal statutes and racist rhetoric, determined to prove to themselves and others that they were right. This scapegoating campaign led to the exacerbation of existing conflicts.

The match between people and polity that was achieved in England (and to a lesser extent Scotland) was not replicated in Ireland. But while the peoples of England (including the Normans) were by the fifteenth century welded into an integrative unit by virtue of such strategies of alien-nation—namely, establishing oneself as a single nation over against an alternative one—the island of Ireland remained a victim of such divisions. What would continue, however, to haunt the contrived national unity of Englishness—and of Britishness after the unions with Wales and Scotland—was the ghost of their alien and alienated double: Ireland. The very *difference* from Irishness became part and parcel of English–British identity. Their Hibernian Other was uncannily mirrored in themselves, the familiar spectre hidden in strangeness, the original double they had forgotten to remember, the threatened *revenant* of their own repressed political unconscious.

Linda Colley provides further evidence for this mirror-imaging of Irish and British nationalism in the last two centuries. In *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1797–1837*,¹⁰ she also argues that the peoples that made up the British nation were brought together as a national unit by confrontation with the ‘other’. In keeping with the theses of the new British history advocated by Benedict Anderson, Hugh Kearney, Tom Nairn, and J. G. A. Pocock,¹¹ Colley suggests that British national identity is contingent and relational (like most others) and is best understood as an *interaction* between several different histories and peoples. Without necessarily endorsing the Four Nations

model of Britain, Colley contends that most inhabitants of the ‘British Isles’ laid claim to a double, triple or multiple identity—even after the consolidation of British national identity after 1700. So that it would not be unusual, for example, to find someone identifying him/herself as a citizen of Edinburgh, a Lowlander, a Scot, and a Briton. It was over and against this pluralist practice of identification, on the ground, that the artificial nation of Great Britain managed to forge itself, not only by its Tudor conquests and successive unifications with Wales in 1536, Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1800, but also by its homogenizing Industrial Revolution and a series of massive external wars between 1689 and 1815. Due to these latter especially, Britain managed to expand its empire overseas and to unify its citizens back home, replicating on a world stage what England had first tried out in Ireland in the fourteenth century. It galvanized itself into national unity by pitting itself against external enemies.

The strategic benefits of British imperialism were not just commercial and political, therefore, but psychic as well. And the biggest advantage of the ‘overseas’ African and Asian colonies was that, unlike Britain’s traditional enemies closer to home (the Irish and the French), these ‘others’ actually *looked* entirely different. But as the empire began to fracture and fragment in the first part of the twentieth century, the British resorted to *religion* once again to cement the sense of real national identity. For some, what united the British above all else in their times of trouble and decline, was their ‘common Protestantism’. Hence the emblematic importance of the famous representation of St Paul’s during the Blitz—the parish church of the besieged empire *par excellence*—‘emerging defiantly and unscathed from the fire and devastation surrounding it... a Protestant citadel, encircled by enemies, but safe under the watchful eye of a strictly English-speaking deity’.¹² The British nation thus emerged, like many another nation, as an ‘imagined community’ that invented itself in dialectical opposition to its ‘others’—and none more fundamentally than Ireland, its first, last and most intimate ‘other’. For Ireland was unique in combining the three most salient characteristics of alien-nation: (1) Ireland was majority *Catholic* (non-Protestant); (2) it was a *colony* (overseas if only a little over—but sufficiently so to be treated like a subordinate rather than an equal neighbour, *pace* Wales or Scotland); and (3) Ireland was a traditional ally of *France*, the main military rival to British imperial designs, and inspirational insurrectionary model, along with Ireland, for rebellious movements in India, Palestine, and

⁹ Davies, *The Peoples of Britain and Ireland 1100–1400*.

¹⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1797–1837* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn. (New York, Verso, 1991); Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neonationalism*, 2nd edn. (London, New Left Books and Verso, 1981); J. G. A. Pocock, *Limits and Divisions of British History* (Strathclyde, University of Strathclyde, 1979).

¹² Linda Colley, ‘Britishness and Otherness’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31:4 (Oct. 1992), 309–29, at 72. Of course, the Protestant motif in the World War II should not be taken too far, since Germany was predominantly a Protestant country and allies such as Poland and France were Catholic.

elsewhere. Thus Ireland came to serve as the untrustworthy 'poor relation' of the United Kingdom:

(Ireland's) population was more Catholic than Protestant. It was the ideal jumping-off point for a French invasion, and both its Protestant and its Catholic dissidents traditionally looked to France for aid. And although Irishmen were always an important component of the British armed forces, and individual Scots-Irishmen like Macartney and Anglo-Irishmen like the Wellesley clan played leading imperial roles as diplomats, generals and pro-consuls, Ireland's relationship with the empire was always a deeply ambiguous one. How could it not be, when London so persistently treated the country in a way that it never treated Scotland and Wales, as a colony rather than as an integral part of a truly united Kingdom? Ireland was in many respects the laboratory of the British empire. Much of the legal and land reform which the British sought to implement in India, for example, was based on experiments first implemented in Ireland.¹³

It is of course the very *ambiguity* of Ireland's insider-outsider relation with Britain that made it at once so fascinating for the British (witnessed in their passion for Irish literature from Swift and Sheridan to Wilde, Yeats, and Shaw) and so repellent (evidenced in the popular portrayals of the Irish as brainless simians in the British Fleet Street media). This paradox of attraction and recoil is typical of what Edward Said calls 'orientalism': Ireland serving as Britain's Orient in its own backyard. It also approximates to what Freud describes as the 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*)—the return of the familiar as unfamiliar, of friend as stranger. Ireland served, one might say, as Britain's unconscious reminding it that it was ultimately and irrevocably a stranger to itself: that its self-identity was in fact constructed upon the screening of its forgotten other—in both senses of 'screen': to conceal and to project.

The nature of this unsettling rapport was evident not only in the mirror-plays of Irish dramatists like Shaw and Wilde, but also in the works of English dramatists who reflected on the neighbouring island. Already in Shakespeare we witness traces of this. In *Henry V*, for example, we find Captain MacMorris, the first true-blue Irishman to appear in English letters, posing the conundrum: 'What ish my nation?'—thereby recalling not only that Ireland is a nation still in question, but that England is too. And we find an even more explicit example in *Richard II*, when the King visits Ireland only to regain the British mainland disoriented and dismayed. Having set out secure in his sovereignty, he returns wondering what exactly *is* his identity, and by implication, his legitimacy as monarch: 'I had forgot myself, am I not king?' he puzzles. 'Is not the king's name twenty thousand names? (III, ii). In short, Ireland takes its revenge on the king by deconstructing and multiplying the one and indivisible character of his sovereignty. Richard is shaken

¹³ Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness', *Journal of British Studies*, 31:4 (Oct. 1992), 309–29, at 72. Of course, the Protestant motif in the World War II should not be taken too far, since Germany was predominantly a Protestant country and allies such as Poland and France were Catholic, 76.

from his slumber by his sojourn in the Irish colony, discovering that the very notion of a united national kingdom is nominal rather than real, imaginary rather than actual.

Where Ireland had the advantage over England/Britain, then as now, is that it never achieved indivisible sovereignty as a unitary nation—and so never could mistake the illusion for a reality. For the Irish, from ancient legend to the present day, the idea of sovereignty was linked to the notion of a 'fifth province': a place of mind rather than of territory, a symbol rather than a *fait accompli* (the Irish for province is *coicead*, meaning a fifth, but there are only four provinces in Ireland). Or to put it another way: when it came to sovereignty, Ireland had less to lose than Britain because it never had it (all-Ireland political sovereignty) to lose in the first place. Ireland was never legally established as a single, united nation-state. The Irish knew in their hearts and souls that 'the nation' as some absolute and indivisible entity did not exist. (Which did not, of course, prevent it being often elevated to the status of theological mystique.)

The crisis of British sovereignty reached its peak in recent times. This was brought on by a variety of factors: (1) the final fracturing of the empire (with the Falklands, Gibraltar, and Hong Kong controversies); (2) the end of the Protestant hegemony (with the mass immigration of non-Protestants from the ex-colonies—Asian, African, Caribbean, and Irish); (3) the entry of the United Kingdom, however hesitantly, into the European Union, which ended Britain's isolationist stance vis-à-vis its traditional alienations, Ireland and France; (4) the ineluctable impact of global technology and communications (proving Nicholas Negroponte's point about the tremendous changes brought about by the digital age and globalization, leading to the creation of smaller entities on the European continent while much of this continent was uniting economically¹⁴); and finally (5) the devolution of power from over-centralized government in Westminster to regional assemblies in Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast—and most probably, in time, to different English regions as well.¹⁵ Britain is now a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-confessional community which can no longer sustain the illusion of an eternally perduring sovereignty.

To be sure, Thatcherism represented one last desperate exercise in 'denial' fantasy, finding its perfect foil in the IRA. Terrorist bombings of London and Birmingham momentarily served to rally the British people against the alien Irish in their midst: people who looked and spoke like them but were secretly dedicated to their destruction. But even the IRA at their most menacing—and however associated with similar anti-British 'monsters' like

¹⁴ Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York, Knopf, 1995).

¹⁵ See the March 1999 MORI poll, conducted by the *Economist*, showing 50 per cent versus 27 per cent of the English in favour of more devolved power to English regions.

Galtieri, Gadafy, and Sadam Hussein—could not save Britain from itself. Thatcher's last stand to revive Tory nationalism was just that, a *last* stand. It could not prevent the dissolution of absolute unitary power, ultimately leading to the formation of regional parliaments in Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast. The break-up of Britain was as inevitable as it was overdue. So much so that the enormous outpouring of grief at Princess Diana's demise was not just mourning for a particular person but for the passing of an imperial nation.

If Ireland was present at the origin of the British *nacio*, as I have suggested, then it is equally present today—in the guise of the Ulster crisis and resolution—precipitating its end. Ireland is the deconstructive seed at the heart of the British body politic: the cracked mirror reflecting Royal Britannia's primal image of its split-self; John Bull's other island sending shock waves back to the mainland; the island behind the island returning to haunt its inventor.

NOTIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY

The British–Irish 'Council of the Isles' is becoming a reality. This third spoke of the Agreement's wheel—alongside the internal Northern Ireland Assembly and the North–South cross-border bodies—harbours enormous promise. What the transnational 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 addition to the obvious contemporary overlapping of the sports and popular cultures of the two islands, the citizens of Ireland and Britain are becoming ever more mindful that much of their respective histories were shared during centuries when the Irish sea served as a waterway connecting the two countries rather than a *cordon sanitaire* keeping them apart. And this is becoming true again in our own time, with over 25,000 trips being made daily across the Irish sea, in both directions. It is not entirely surprising then that over eight million citizens in Britain today claim Irish origin, with over four million of these having an Irish parent. Indeed a recent survey shows that only 6 per cent of British people consider Irish people living in Britain to be foreigners. And we do not 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—poppies and shamrocks no longer considered symbols of irreconcilable identity.

In light of this reawakening to our crossed memories and experiences, it was not surprising to find Tony Blair receiving a standing ovation from Dail Eireann, the Parliament of the Irish Republic, on 26 November 1998, in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement. 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 decentralized United Kingdom 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.

Though no one is shouting about it, a *practical* form of joint-sovereignty has now been endorsed by the Irish and British peoples. The pluralization of national identity epitomized by the BIC entails, I believe, a radical rethinking of our hallowed notions of sovereignty. In essence, it means the *detritorialization* 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, which now numbers over 70 million world-wide.)

The term sovereignty (from the Latin *superanus*) originally referred to the supreme power of a divine ruler, before being delegated to divinely elected 'representatives' in this world—kings, pontiffs, emperors, tsars, monarchs—and, finally, to the 'people' in most modern states. A problem arose, however, in that many modern democracies recognize the existence of several *different* peoples within a single state. And many peoples means many centres of sovereignty. Yet the traditional concept of sovereignty, as already noted, was always *unitary*, that is, 'one and indivisible'. Whence the dilemma: how divide the indivisible? This is why, today, sovereignty has become one of the most controversial concepts in 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 already 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 states—in the interests of greater entente, social justice, economic exchange, and information technology—qualified the very principle of absolute sovereignty. 'The peoples of the world have recognised 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 their 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.¹⁶

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)¹⁷ for a transcending 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 the relevance 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 regions¹⁸ succeeded in sorting out territorial conflicts, declaring the Åland and Spitsbergen islands as Europe's two first demilitarized zones.¹⁹ Could we not do likewise under the aegis of a new transnational British–Irish Council, declaring Northern Ireland a third demilitarized zone?

To date, such sovereignty sharing had been largely 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 Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin in the North) which was usually labelled 'nationalist', even though the most uncompromising nationalists in the vexed history of Northern Ireland have often 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. 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, former leader of the moderate Northern Irish nationalist party, the SDLP and Nobel prize winner, had declared himself a 'post-nationalist' for many years without many taking heed. And, curiously, one might even argue that Michael Collins, one of the leaders of the original Sinn Féin

¹⁶ 'Sovereignty' in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edn. (Chicago, Auckland, and London, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998), xi. 57

¹⁷ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*.

¹⁸ The Nordic countries are Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, with the self-governing Faroe Islands and Greenland, and Finland with the self-governing Åland Islands. Informal cooperation had been established at government level in the 1920s and 1930s and on the parliamentary level, through the Nordic Council, in 1953. See http://www.lysator.liu.se/nordic/mirror2/NIAS_1.html

¹⁹ On the Nordic Council as a model for the British–Irish relations see Simon Partridge, 'Nordic-style institutions recommended for Irish–British islands', in *Eagle Street: Newsletter of the Finnish Institute in London*, January 1998 and various other papers published in the same newsletter. This publication is available on the internet site <http://finnish-institute.org.uk/>

movement for Irish independence, was himself something of a post-nationalist when he wrote in 1921 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'.²⁰

That the Blair government seemed prepared to grasp the sovereignty nettle and acknowledge the inevitable long-term dissemination of Britain, qua absolute centralized state, is to its credit. But it was not a decision taken in a vacuum. There were precedents for sovereignty-sharing in Britain's recent experience, including Westminster's consent to a limitation and dilution of sovereign power in its subscription to the European Convention on Human Rights, the Single European Act, the European Common Defence and Security Policy, and the European Court of Justice. If Britain has been able to pool sovereignty in these ways with the other nation-states of the EU, surely it is only logical to do so with its closest neighbour, the Irish Republic! Moreover, the EU principles of subsidiarity and local democracy, promoted in the European Charter of Local Self-Government,²¹ offer a real alternative to the clash of British–Irish nationalisms that paralysed Ulster for decades.²²

In this respect, one should not forget either that the forging of Britain into a multinational state constitution was predicated, at its best, on a *civic* rather than *ethnic* notion of citizenship. We need only recall how radically the borders of the British nation have shifted and altered in history (e.g. in 1536, 1707, 1800, and 1921) to envisage how they may shift and alter yet again—perhaps this time so radically as to remove all borders from these islands. The fact that British nationalism was often little more than English nationalism in drag does not take from its salutary constitutional principle of civic (rather than ethnic) belonging.

POST-NATIONALISM: THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

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—has been superseded by a post-nationalist paradigm of intergovernmental power. The dual identities of Northern Ireland, which long belied the feasibility of

²⁰ *The Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 1921.

²¹ <http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Treaties/html/122.htm>

²² On the contradictory effects of the Europeanization of Irish and British policies on the Northern Ireland peace process see Elizabeth Meehan, "Britain's Irish Question: Britain's European Question?" *British–Irish Relations in the Context of European Union and The Belfast Agreement*, *Review of International Studies*, 26:1 (2000), 83–97.

'unitary' government, show 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 coexistence of different communities in the same society; and, by extension, amplifying the models of identity to include more pluralist forms of association—a British–Irish Council, a European network of Regions, and the Irish and British diasporas. 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 wholly tenable.

There are no pristine nations around which definitive state boundaries—demarcating exclusivist sovereignty status—can be fixed. (Germany's attempts to do this from Bismarck to Hitler led to successive and disastrous wars.) The new Agreement recognizes the historic futility of both British and Irish constitutional claims on Northern Ireland as natural 'national territories'. Instead, the Council of the Isles promises a network of interconnecting assemblies guaranteeing parity of esteem for cultural and political diversity and an effective co-management of practical common concerns such as transport, environment, social equity, and e-commerce. We are, in effect, being challenged to abandon our mutually reinforcing myths of mastery (largely British) and martyrdom (largely Irish), going back to the fourteenth century, and to face our more mundane post-imperial, post-nationalist reality. Might the BIC not, as Simon Partridge suggests,²³ even serve as an inspiration to other parts of Europe and the globe still enmired in the devastations of ethnic nationalism? Discussions on the search for federal alternatives to secessionism in the Balkans and in the Caucasus show that it may.²⁴

What the 1998 Agreement indicated, in short, is that our ineradicable need for identity and allegiance may gradually be channelled away from an exclusive focus on the nation-state, where history has demonstrated its tenure to be insecure and belligerent, to supplementary 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 nation-states and more in terms of *both* locally empowered provinces (Ulster, Scotland, Wales, North and South England, the Republic, etc.) *and* larger international associations (the BIC and EU). The new dispensation, I repeat, fosters variable layers of compatible identification—regional,

national, and transnational—allowing anyone in Northern Ireland to declare allegiance to the Ulster region, the Irish and/or British nation, the European community, and in the widest sense, the cosmopolitan order of world citizenry.

Citizens of these islands might, I suggest, do better to think of themselves as mobile mongrel islanders 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 reimagined again in alternative versions. The task is to embrace this process of hybridization from which we derive and to which we are committed willy-nilly. In the face of resurgent nationalisms in these islands and elsewhere, fired by the rhetoric of purity and purification, we would do well to remember that we are all mongrelized, interdependent, and marvellously mixed up.

²³ Simon Partridge, 'Reimagining these Islands: The Need for a Britannic Framework' (London, European Regionalist Discussion Paper, 1995), 5.

²⁴ On the relevance of the BIC for regional integration in the Caucasus see Bruno Coppieters, 'A Regional Security System for the Caucasus', *Caucasian Regional Studies*, 5:1 & 2 (2000), <http://poli.vub.ac.be/>