

The Shape of the New Europe

Edited by

Ralf Rogowski and Charles Turner



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521601085

© Cambridge University Press 2006

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

The Shape of the new Europe / edited by Ralf Rogowski and Charles Turner.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-84128-3 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-60108-5 (pbk.)

1. European federation. 2. European Union. 3. Political culture—Europe.
4. Europe—Politics and government—1989- 5. National characteristics,
European. I. Rogowski, Ralf. II. Turner, Charles, 1962- III. Title.

JN15.S4513 2006

341.242'2—dc22

2006029770

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84128-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84128-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-60108-5 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-60108-8 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

9 A Postnational Council of Isles? The British–Irish Conflict Reconsidered

Richard Kearney

In the third millennium, postnationalism looks set to replace nationalism as the dominant political paradigm. The twentieth century witnessed the break-up of the great national empires – British, French, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian – as well as a number of devastating world wars resulting from the internecine 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 in the villages of Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo where Balkan ethnicities clashed in genocidal hatred before an international accord was secured. Widening the focus, the events of 11 September 2001 made it dramatically clear that wars of the twenty-first century cannot be confined to specific nation-states, or national empires, but traverse boundaries and borders with disturbing ease. Al-Queda is as postnationalist as the American Way of Life it targets.

In several writings over the last two decades, the German philosopher, Jürgen 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 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).¹ But Habermas is not naïve. He knows that such a postnational project faces many obstacles. One of the most challenging questions of these is, he notes, ‘whether the European Union can even begin to compensate for the lost

competences of the nation-state'.² And the related question of the European Union's (EU) 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'.³ If these questions cannot be answered in the affirmative then no meaningful 'Federal States of Europe' is possible. Or in Habermas's own words: 'If Europe is to be able to act on the basis of an integrated, multilevel policy, then European citizens, who are initially characterised as such only by their common passports, will have to learn to mutually recognise one another as members of a common political existence beyond national borders'.⁴

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 Belfast Agreement and Subsidiarity

If most of our global conflicts and crises today are largely postnational in character so too, I submit, are the possible solutions. In pursuing my argument, I will concentrate most of my remarks on the historic British-Irish Agreement of 1998, suggesting that it may serve as a litmus test for a new politics of international peace.

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 signalled 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 real peace, accepting that their adversarial offspring in Northern Ireland might at last be 'British or Irish or both'.⁵

Unitary sovereignty could never be enjoyed by two separate nation-states over the same province at the same time, especially if by sovereignty was meant 'absolutist' sovereignty, where this is understood

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. 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 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'.⁶ 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 Islands. 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 the environment and transport to the knowledge economy. Speaking at the launch of the BIC in Lancaster House in 1999, 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.⁷

And the veteran Scottish political theorist, Tom Nairn, hailed it as 'an imagined community disconcertingly different from anything in the political arsenal of the old British State'.⁸ 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.

The sea change signalled 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 emerging postnationalist scenario permits, for the first time in history, the citizens of Northern Ireland to 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 to the transnational union of Europe. As John Hewitt prophetically 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'.⁹

This scenario of extending circles of identity corresponds felicitously, in my view, with the political paradigm of 'subsidiarity' that has become part of the new European thinking, particularly since the Presidency of Jacques Delors in the 1980s and 1990s. The term 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 poets such as Hewitt and Heaney. Though originally 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 by European institutions and in the increasing provisions for regional, subnational decision-making. There is little doubt that the future success of a postnational European project will depend greatly on the degree to which the model of subsidiarity is positively adopted, both politically and culturally, throughout the expanded EU.

Colonisation and National Identity

But 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 Irish and British peoples 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, was the attempt to forge the notion of a British-English nation (*nacio* or *gens*) over and against that of a colonised Irish nation in the fourteenth century.¹⁰ The British-English 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 instigated segregation between coloniser and colonised, fomenting political divisions between two supposedly incompatible 'peoples'. Non-observance of the Statutes was called 'degeneracy' – that is, falling outside the Pale of the *gens*.

To marry outside the *nacio* or *gens* was to cease to be a proper English 'gentleman', and to forfeit the attendant virtues of gentility and gentrification. Commingling with the so-called Gaelic 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 colonising *gens* thus came to define itself over and against its *de-gens*, its alter-ego: namely the native 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 (871–99) which opened the way, it was actually in the laboratory of Ireland that the English nation first saw itself in the mirror and believed its image. In Ireland England originally earned its credentials and cried victory. If the Irish did not 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.¹¹ 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 their loves and hates, joined at the hip of Ulster and forever bound to a dialectic of conflict and reconciliation.¹²

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 colonisers, and the colonised, to differentiate themselves as two distinct *gens*. The criteria of differentiation were conventional rather than natural. They were, in other words, largely of a cultural and legal character – e.g. apparel, residency, name-forms, language, property rights – than of ethnic foundation.¹³ The *gens* actually 'looked' almost identical to the *de-gens*. But this absence of conspicuous 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's twelfth-century *History and Topography of Ireland*. Cambrensis himself

was, revealingly, 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 much influenced by the need to justify conquest and dispossession.¹⁴

But the prize for colonial stereotypes belongs to the British historian, Charles Kingsley, who many centuries after Gerald could still remark on a visit to Ireland: '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!'¹⁵

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 feminine victim or virgin – Roisin Dubh, Cathleen ni Houlihan, *Speirbhean*, etc. – and England as masculine master – fatherland, King and Country, etc. – served to aggravate the divide between the two peoples.¹⁶

But while ethnic propaganda worked historically, it was as nothing compared to the divisionary power of religion. Arguably, it was not until the seventeenth-century plantation of Ulster, after the Reformation, that the colonisation of Ireland ultimately succeeded. With the disenfranchising of Irish Catholics *en masse* in favour of Planter Protestants, subsequently backed up with the infamous Penal Laws, religion was deployed as a galvanising 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 Elisabethan ruthlessness had taken their toll, there were many Protestants and Catholics in the island of Ireland who preferred to die rather than to commingle. Even Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, with their valiant appeal to a single nation of 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter' in the 1790s, could not 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 and thereby to permit Irish Catholics, Protestants and Dissenters peaceably to co-habit for the first time

since the Reformation. It was only when the Irish and British communities inhabiting Ulster acknowledged that they could be 'British or Irish or both' that they could be united once again. Not as a unitary national identity, of course, as Tone had hoped, but as a multiple postnational one.

The End of Sovereignty

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 his landmark study *Domination and Conquest*,¹⁷ 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 and identities, which included, in part at least, the culture of the coloniser 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 in their ambiguous status as a 'middle nation' – neither fully English nor fully Irish – that they demonised the native Irish as their 'other' in order to more emphatically insist on their belonging to the former. And as the lady did protest too much she bolstered up her protests with accompanying statutes and racist rhetoric, determined to prove to herself and to others that she was right. This scapegoat campaign led to the exacerbation of existing conflicts. Thus the match between people and polity which 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 alter-native 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 union 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.¹⁸

The British nation thus emerged, like many other nations, as an 'imagined community' which invented itself in dialectical opposition to

its 'others' – and none more fundamentally than Ireland, its first, last and most intimate 'other', combining as it did three of the most significant 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 like Wales or Scotland); and (3) Ireland was a traditional ally of France, the main military rival to British imperial designs, and inspirational insurrectionary model, as was Ireland itself, for rebellious movements in India, Palestine and elsewhere. Thus Ireland came to serve as the untrustworthy 'poor relation' of the UK:

[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.¹⁹

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 and drama from Swift and Sheridan to Wilde, Yeats and Shaw) and so repellent (evidenced in the Fleet Street portrayals of the Irish as simian-like brutes).

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, and that its self-identity was 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 find an example 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 is my nation?' – thereby recalling not only that Ireland is a nation still in question (i.e. in quest of itself), 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 his identity is, 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?'²⁰ In short, Ireland takes its revenge on the king by deconstructing and multiplying the one and indivisible character of his sovereignty. The sovereign is shaken 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.

Ireland's advantage over England/Britain, then as now, was 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 *coiced*, 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 to lose in the first place. The Irish knew in their hearts and souls that the nation as such does not exist. This, of course, did not prevent icons and dogmas of exclusivist unitary nationality being elevated to the status of theological mystique by both loyalist and republican extremes.²¹

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 – including Ireland); (3) the entry of the UK, however hesitantly, into the European Community, which ended Britain's isolationist stance *vis-à-vis* its traditional alien-nations, Ireland and France; (4) the ineluctable impact of global technology and communications; (5) the devolution of power from over-centralised government in Westminster to the various regional assemblies of Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast; and finally, (6) the ultimate acknowledgment that Britain is now a multiethnic, multicultural, multiconfessional community which can no longer sustain the illusion of an eternally perduring sovereignty.

The old Tory vision of Great Britain as a timeless Anglo-Saxon Empire presided over by indomitable 'little Englanders' is at an end. Influential publications such as the Parekh Report *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*²² demonstrate that new modes of postnational politics are now a necessity.

The Dawn of Postnationalism

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 – harbours enormous promise. What the transnational model effectively recognises 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 our sports and popular cultures, we are becoming more mindful of how much of our respective histories are shared: from the Celtic, Viking and Norman settlements to our more recent entry to the EU. 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 almost 30,000 trips being made daily across the Irish Sea, in both directions. It is not entirely surprising then that over eight million citizens of the UK 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 one-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 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.

In view 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 on the political agenda for the first time since the divisive Statutes of Kilkenny.

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 notion of sovereignty. In essence, it signals the deterritorialisation of national sovereignty – namely, the attribution of sovereignty to peoples rather than land.²³ 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 term sovereignty (from the Latin *superanus*) originally referred to the supreme power of a divine ruler, before it was 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 democracies recognise the existence of several different peoples within a single state. And many peoples mean 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 to 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. The deterritorialising and pooling of sovereignty in the new European project is an example of this.

There are, however, precedents. 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 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.²⁴

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 demilitarised zones. Could we not do likewise under the aegis of a new transnational BIC, declaring Northern Ireland a third demilitarised zone?²⁵

The Blair government's readiness to acknowledge the inevitable long-term dissolution of Britain qua absolute centralised state was a singular achievement. But it is not a decision taken in a vacuum. There were precedents for sovereignty-sharing in Britain's recent experience, including the British government'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 and the European Court of Justice. 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 neighbour, the Irish Republic. Moreover, the EU principle of subsidiarity as well as the local democracy principle promoted in the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government, already signalled an alternative to the clash of British-Irish nationalisms that had paralysed Ulster for decades.

Nor should one forget that the forging of Britain into a multi-national state was predicated, at its best, on a civic rather than ethnic notion of citizenship. We need only recall how dramatically the borders of the British nation had shifted and altered in history (e.g. in 1536, 1707, 1800 and 1921) to envisage how they might 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 disguise does not detract from its salutary constitutional principle of civic (rather than ethnic) belonging.

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, as we have been suggesting, 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 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 – 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'²⁶ – is no longer tenable.

The fact is there are no pristine nations around which definitive state boundaries – demarcating exclusivist sovereignty status – can be fixed. The Belfast Agreement recognised 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 BIC promises a network of interconnecting regional assemblies guaranteeing respect 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, postnationalist reality. Might the BIC not, as Simon Partridge suggests, even serve as an inspiration to other parts of Europe and the globe still embroiled in the devastations of ethnic nationalism?²⁷

What the Belfast Agreement allows, in short, is that the irrepressible need for identity and allegiance be gradually channelled 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 both locally empowered provinces and larger international associations.

The new dispensation fosters variable layers of compatible identification – regional, national and transnational – allowing anyone in Northern Ireland who so wishes to declare allegiance to the Ulster region, the Irish and/or British nation, the EU, and the cosmopolitan order of world citizenry.

Citizens of these islands are offered the possibility of thinking of themselves as mongrel islanders rather than as eternal inhabitants 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 in alternative versions. The 'postnational constellation' envisaged by political visionaries as diverse as John Hume and Jürgen Habermas, need no longer be considered a utopian dream.

Notes

- 1 Habermas 2001.
- 2 Ibid, p. 90.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid, p. 99. See also Habermas in this volume; Morin 1984; Morin 1994.
- 5 See The Belfast Agreement, Part 2, para vi.
- 6 Ibid, Strand 3, para. 1.
- 7 Cited in Dworkin 2005.
- 8 Nairn 2001, p. 60; see also Nairn 1977; Nairn 2000.
- 9 John Hewitt, Letter to John Montague, 1964, extracts available in University of Ulster Libraries John Hewitt Collection. Available at: <http://library.ulster.ac.uk/craigne/hewitt/work.htm#letter>
- 10 Davies 1990.
- 11 This move conveniently masked the fact that the 'natives', no less than the colonial settlers, were a mongrelised ethnic mix of successive invasions by Vikings, Anglo-Normans, Scots, Celts, Milesians, etc.
- 12 McCana 1978. 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, that some form of centralised 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).
- 13 Indeed it is well accepted that the inhabitants of our respective islands share a virtually homogenous gene pool due to the commonly shared experience of successive invasions and migrations, pre-Celtic, Celtic, Viking,

Anglo-Norman, etc. One of the earliest known volumes of Irish letters was tellingly named the *Book Of Invasions*.

- 14 Cosgrove 1993, Introduction.
- 15 Watson 1994, p. 17.
- 16 One of the most effective remedies for such a history of opposed national narratives is, I believe, what Paul Ricoeur (1996, pp. 3–14) calls an 'exchange of memories': a critical and creative traversal of one's adversary's stories and histories which might provoke, in turn, a new understanding between two rival nations, at a cultural, psychological and political level. For a more detailed analysis of the conflict between opposed gender stereotypes of national identity, see my 'Myths of Motherland', in Kearney (1997, pp. 108–21).
- 17 Davies 1990.
- 18 Colley 1992a. Colley also argues that the peoples that made up the British nation were brought together as a national identity by confrontation with the 'other'. In keeping with the theses of the new British history advocated by Hugh Kearney, Benedict Anderson, J. G. A. Pocock and Tom Nairn, 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. 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 consolidation and successive annexations of Wales in 1536, Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1800, but by a series of external wars between 1689 and 1815 and also, of course, by its Industrial Revolution. In this manner, Britain managed to expand its empire overseas and to unify its citizens back home by replicating on a world stage what England had first tried out in Ireland in the fourteenth century. It galvanised itself into national unity by pitting itself against an externalised alien enemy. 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 national identity. 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 photo 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' (Colley 1992b, p. 72).
- 19 Colley 1992b, p. 76.

- 20 *Richard II*, Act III, Scene ii.
- 21 Kearney 1997, pp. 99–108.
- 22 Parekh *et al.* 2000.
- 23 A fact which finds symbolic correlation in the Agreement's extension of national 'belonging' to embrace the Irish diaspora now numbering over 70 million worldwide.
- 24 'Sovereignty' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. XI, p. 57.
- 25 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 labelled '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 the British and Irish governmental initiative made moderate unionism realise the tribal march was over and that the UK was no longer united. By contrast, John Hume's 'new republicanism' – a vision of shared sovereignty between the different peoples of Ireland – had little difficulty with the new 'postnationalist' scenario. Indeed Hume had called himself a 'postnationalist' for many years without many taking heed. And, curiously, one might even argue that Michael Collins was himself something of a postnationalist 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).
- 26 Bossuet 1990, p. 12.
- 27 Partridge 2000.

References

- Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne, 1990, *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2005. 32 vols. London: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- Colley, Linda, 1992a, 'Britishness and Otherness', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, 309–29.
- 1992b, *Britons: Forging the Nation. 1707–1837*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 1999, 'Britishness in the 21st Century', Downing St Millennium Lectures, 8 December 1999. Available at: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk>
- Cosgrove, Art (ed.), 1993, *A New History of Ireland: Medieval Ireland, 1169–1534. New History of Ireland Vol. II*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Davies, R. R., 1990, *Domination and Conquest. The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100–1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Dworkin, Dennis, 2005, 'Intellectual Adventures in the Isles', in Begoqa Aretxaga, Dennis Dworkin and Joseba Gabilondo (eds.) *Empire and Terror. Nationalism/Postnationalism in the New Millennium*. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen, [1998] 2001, *The Postnational Constellation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kearney, Richard, 1997, *Postnationalist Ireland*. London: Routledge.
- McCan, Proinsias, 1978, 'Notes on the Early Irish Concept of Unity', *The Crane Bag Journal*, Vol. 2(1–2), 57–71.
- Morin, Edgar, 1984, *Penser L'Europe*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1994, *La Complexité Humaine*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Nairn, Tom, 1977, *The Break-up of Britain*. London: NLB.
- 2000, *After Britain*. London: Granta.
- 2001, 'Farewell Britannia', *New Left Review* 7, January–February, 55–74.
- Parekh, Bhikhu, *et al.*, 2000, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. London: Profile.
- Partridge, Simon, 2000, 'The British-Irish Council. The Trans-islands Symbolic and Political Possibilities'. *Looking into England Papers*. London: British Council. Available at: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/studies/england/partridge.htm>
- Ricoeur, Paul, 1996, 'Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe', in Richard Kearney (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur. The Hermeneutics of Action*. London: SAGE, pp. 3–14.
- Watson, George J., 1994, *Irish Identity and the Irish Literary Revival*. Second edn. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press.