

Existing British-Irish Links

by Simon Partridge

The complexity of the relationship between the peoples of these two islands...almost defies analysis. But one thing is clear to all but the most closed of minds: the many Irish inheritances from British rule have had the effect of maintaining a sense of familiarity - even comfort - with British ways of doing things...The extent of direct human and family ties is probably unprecedented between two independent states, principally due to large scale emigration from Ireland to Britain.

From Ireland's British Question, an essay by Garret FitzGerald, former Taoiseach, and Paul Gillespie, deputy editor of The Irish Times, in Prospect, October 1996, p.25

As the above quotation demonstrates, there is a growing recognition by informed Irish and British commentators that it is the salience of the East-West dimension - unavoidable for historical, economic, social, cultural and familial reasons - which has so far been neglected. As background to our discussions it might be helpful to set out the extent of existing relationships which are often obscured in both the discourse of high politics and populist rhetoric between the Irish and the British.

To put some detail on the density of these inter-island relationships. In *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, a collection of essays edited by Prof Richard Kearney, he noted that out of the estimated world-wide Irish diaspora of 70 million, some 13 million were resident in the UK. Of course, defining those of Irish descent is not easy, but this order of magnitude was confirmed by the empirical research conducted by Prof James O'Connell at the University of Bradford in 1994 (partly funded by the Rowntree Foundation) through an independent ICM poll which tested the attitudes of the British towards "Ireland and the Irish in Britain". The survey found that a quarter of Britons have an Irish relative, while as many as 60% of British people have Irish friends, acquaintances or fellow workers. This evidence confirms that there are several million people of Irish descent or origin living in Britain - a figure estimated at some 8 million by FitzGerald and Gillespie in contrast to the Republic's population of 3.6 million.

Furthermore, the social evidence from the survey revealed, for the most part, very positive attitudes towards the Irish in Britain. Only 6% considered those who came to Britain from Ireland "foreigners". The great majority of the British say that they have more in common with the Irish than Americans or Continentals. While the survey excluded the Irish-born, it included their British-born adult children and grandchildren. Significantly, only 14% of those felt they had strong Irish dimension to their identity, while 45% felt there was no Irish dimension, and only little more than half identified themselves as Catholic. This points to a very substantial and rapid integration of those of Irish extraction into wider British society, confirming large elements of overlap and commonality in the two cultures.

We are, therefore, faced with an enormous paradox. The peoples of these islands, in the great majority of cases, seem to negotiate what differences they have in a tolerant and mature way - though this is evidently less true within Northern Ireland. At a

political level, it cannot be said that this tolerance and maturity is matched in the relations between the Irish and British states - who recently could hardly agree on what title the President of the Republic should have while visiting Britain!

Despite this political disharmony there are in fact more political and institutional links between the two polities than is often realised, certainly by the general public in both countries. Those involved in the nitty gritty of politics are well aware that there is daily contact between officials as regards European issues and on issues effecting Northern Ireland or relationships between the North and South. In addition to these frequent meetings of personnel there are more formal structures through which meetings take place.

The one with the broadest remit, though least known, is the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council which was established in November 1981 by Thatcher and FitzGerald as a result of the Anglo-Irish Joint Studies Report (HMSO, Cmnd 8414). Its objective was "to provide the overall framework for intergovernmental consultation, at Head of Government, Ministerial and official levels, on all matters of common interest and concern, with particular reference to the achievement of peace, reconciliation and stability and the improvement of relations between the two countries and their peoples". The Report also recommended the establishment of a parliamentary tier as "the natural and desirable complement" to the Intergovernmental Council; an Advisory Committee on "economic, social and cultural co-operation, with a wide membership reflecting vocational interests"; and an Anglo-Irish Encounter organisation "with the major function of organising high-level conferences on the Koenigswinter model" (the conferences are annual Anglo-German gatherings of politicians and academics to discuss matters of mutual interest).

The Intergovernmental Council was established almost immediately after the publication of the report. However, the Council appears to have been downgraded after November 1984 when at its meeting Thatcher is reported to have made negative remarks about the New Ireland Forum report. It has since been completely overshadowed by the Anglo-Irish Conference (see below). The Encounter organisation came into being in 1983 and has continued to organise a regular series of conferences, round tables, seminars and youth conferences, albeit in a low-key way. The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body finally came into existence in February 1990 and provides for 25 parliamentarians (plus 20 associates) from each jurisdiction to meet twice a year. The Body has four standing committees: Political and Security; European and International Affairs; Economic and Social Affairs; and Culture, Education and Environment. The Body is low-profile but has built useful contacts between the parliamentarians in each jurisdiction. Unfortunately it is boycotted by the Unionists who (mistakenly) see it as a part of the hated Anglo-Irish Agreement (see below). The Advisory Committee on economic, social and cultural co-operation never seems to have materialised.

In many ways the work of the Joint Studies Report was overtaken by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985 which was the outcome of some 18 months secretive negotiations between the two governments, and then registered with the UN as an

international treaty. This established the standing Anglo-Irish Conference which gave the Irish government a role in representing the interests of the Irish Catholic community in Northern Ireland, while at the same time the principle of consent was recognised as regards any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. It should be noted that legally the Conference is "established within the framework of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council set up in November 1981" (Article 2(a) - our emphasis) and theoretically subordinate to it. The Irish government's role was limited to relevant matters which were not or would not be devolved to a Northern Ireland assembly, with the intention of encouraging Unionists to move towards power-sharing thereby diminishing the influence of the Republic in the affairs of Northern Ireland. However, the Conference was bitterly contested by the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland having been perceived, not without cause, as an imposition from above without consultation (a fact which led Mary Robinson, now President, to resign from the Irish Labour Party in protest) which diluted the Union, symbolised by the small joint Anglo-Irish secretariat of the Conference near Belfast. But despite the continuing objections of the Unionists the Conference persists and can be said to be the main institutional innovation which has appeared as a result of the last 27 years of conflict.

In this brief survey of Irish-British links we have observed the irony that the one major innovation is deeply resented by the Unionists, though its existence has certainly bolstered the standing of the constitutional nationalists of the predominantly Catholic SDLP, which was seriously under threat from Sinn Fein in the mid-80s. By contrast the area where there is an increasingly acknowledged resource of mutual interests and experience - the cross-islands, East-West links (Strand 3 of the talks) - has so far been neglected, though it is interesting to note Mo Mowlam's recent pronouncement that the "Wesminster-Dublin strand is equally important" as cross-border links (*The Independent*, 17 February). If we could find some way of drawing more adequately on the common experiences and growing trust between Irish and British peoples and politicians (1), perhaps these positive examples of interaction would feedback into Northern Ireland itself and help to expose the increasing anachronism of the conflict. Hopefully, our deliberations, drawing on the Scandinavian experience and particularly the intergovernmental Nordic Council, will strengthen this prospect.

Note

1. A number of political innovators have already made suggestions in this direction. See:-
Towards a Council of Islands of Britain and Ireland - proposal to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Richard Kearney and Robin Wilson, December 1994
Beyond Nationalism in These Islands - the need for a Britannic and Local Frameworks, pamphlet by Simon Partridge, March 1996
Postnationalist Ireland: politics, culture, philosophy, Richard Kearney, Routledge, November 1996
Relationships Between the Two Islands: Past, Present and Future, Sir David Goodall (former government chief adviser on Irish matters and instrumental in the Joint Studies Report and now co-chair of Encounter) - cites the Scandinavian example, "Is it really out of the question for the peoples who occupy "these islands" to aim at something similar?", November 1996, p.10