

NORDIC CO-OPERATION

A Possible Model for British-Irish Relations

A Paper based on the Round Table held at the Finnish Institute
on 28 February, 1997

The Finnish Institute in London

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Nordic Co-operation: A Possible Model for British-Irish Relations

A paper based on the Round Table held at the Finnish Institute in London on 28 February 1997, by Simon Partridge and Tapani Lausti.

Introduction

The Round Table had its genesis in the successful launch of Professor Richard Kearney's pathbreaking book *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Philosophy, Culture* at the Finnish Institute in London in November 1996. A central motif of the book is the Siamese-twin-like nature of British and Irish nationalisms, a recognition that the British and Irish share many common characteristics as "mongrel islanders". This points to the overdue and concomitant need to transform the "national" rivalries, to go beyond the need for a stark Otherness. Kearney pointed to the Nordic Council as a model of peaceable transnational co-operation from which the Irish and the British might both draw some lessons and inspiration.

At the book launch Henrik Stenius, Director of the Finnish Institute, made a preliminary offer to provide a space in which the "Nordic analogy" might be pursued further. With the help of Simon Partridge - a freelance political consultant one of whose areas of speciality is British-Irish relations and who has collaborated with Kearney over a number of years - it was decided to put together a small informal Round Table (see Appendix I for participants) to pursue the analogy in some detail and to see whether it would yield up fruitful knowledge and transferable experience.

It was generally agreed among the participants of the day that the exercise had been a worthwhile one, the Nordic angle casting light on the complexities of Irish-British relations in a way in which both sides often find difficult alone. It also, perhaps more surprisingly, provided an opportunity for the Nordics to reflect on aspects of Nordicity which are often taken for granted but which are in any case going to have to be re-examined in the context of growing European Union integration.

To enable frank discussion among the participants it was agreed that the Round Table would be "off-the-record". At the end of the meeting it was agreed that a paper drawing out the main points of the day's discussion would be useful.

We set out some broad conclusions from the day at the end of the paper, but we should stress that these are the agreed views of only Richard Kearney, Henrik Stenius, Simon Partridge and Tapani Lausti (Information Officer of the Finnish Institute). They do not necessarily represent the views of the other participants. They were: Prof Antony Alcock (Department of European Studies, University of Ulster, Coleraine), Prof. Patrick Buckland (Director, Institute of Irish Studies, Liverpool University), Camilla Fenning (Deputy Head, Republic of Ireland Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Robin Wilson (Director, Democratic Dialogue, Belfast) Tony Worthington MP (Shadow Northern Ireland Secretary's Deputy),

Philip McDonagh (Political Counsellor, Irish Embassy in London), Colin Wrafter (Press and Information Officer, Irish Embassy in London), Prof Harald Baldersheim (Department of Political Science, University of Oslo), Dr Pertti Joenniemi (Centre for Peace and Conflict Research, Copenhagen) and Prof. Uffe Østergaard (Department of History, Aarhus University).

Setting the Context

Henrik Stenius opened the proceedings by drawing attention to certain important differences as between the Nordic and the British-Irish situations. The Nordics shared similar socio-religio-political value systems; hierarchical distinction within their societies was small. However, there was little "common public life" shared across the countries of *Norden* (literally 'the North'). By contrast he felt that there was a high level of such commonality in the British-Irish relationship, with much cultural interchange and shared personalities. In their internal differentiation and their complex of identities perhaps the British and Irish were more modern or post-modern.

Richard Kearney set the context for the meeting saying that it aimed to provide a neutral place in which we could "widen the frame" for examining the British-Irish conflict. It was worth remembering that according to a recent survey of social attitudes in Northern Ireland over 40% identified themselves neither as loyalist nor republican, while some 80% of the Republic's population were now opposed to coercing unionists into a United Ireland. There was a case for saying that the people were in advance of the political class in Ireland and Britain.

Uffe Østergaard then took the participants on a quick tour of the evolution of Nordic co-operation. He described the Nordic Council as a "collaboration between sovereign nation-states" (a description somewhat qualified in subsequent discussion) but which was in a process of transition due to developments in the European Union. Echoing Stenius he described *Norden* as a "family of nation-states" underpinned by a common experiences of Lutheran monarchism and a shared politics of social democracy. This was symbolised by the fact that all the members of the Nordic Council (with the exception of Greenland) had the "cross" as a central component on the national flag.

Via a series of projected maps we were transported back to the Europe of 1721 (see Appendix II) in which:

- the Danish crown was a multi-national Kingdom extending to northern Norway;
- a Swedish Empire encompassed Finland and the Baltic states; and
- Britain and Ireland were both part of an Anglo-Scots-Hanoverian Kingdom.

It quickly became apparent that the British-Irish conflict had been paralleled by much conflict in the Scandinavian peninsula. There had been war between the Danes and the Swedes which in the mid-17th century had led to Swedish expansion into both Norway and Denmark. Given

this turbulent history it would be wrong to imagine *Norden* as some "post-nationalist haven". Partly through the accidents and luck of its geo-politics the area had been isolated from major conflicts, in a way that Britain and Ireland had not. In 1809 Finland was ceded to Russia by treaty. In 1905 Norway dissolved the union with Sweden and in 1917 Finland established its independence from Russia and 1918 Iceland became self-governing - the latter two aided by the World War.

1918 also saw the establishment of the "Norden Association" - a citizens' movement which sought to promote co-operation among the Nordic peoples. After World War II there was a feeling that this sense of co-operation should be put on a more formal footing and this led to the founding of the Nordic Council in 1952, bringing together the Parliaments of the Nordic countries. In 1971, in response to a failed effort at economic union, a Council of Ministers was added with its own budget.

Østergaard considered that the Association and Council had considerable achievements to their credit: it had helped to resolve the territorial dispute over the Åland islands (Swedish speaking but have remained a demilitarised autonomous region within the Finnish state) between Sweden and Finland, it had helped to share out the oil resources, it had mediated in the conflict between Denmark and Norway over Greenland, and it had smoothed the path of considerable migration between the countries. In short, it had intervened effectively at both the level of high and low politics. However, it was an association of independent nation-states (for which the EU now posed questions) and in this sense it remained different from the multi-national history of the British Islands.

Off-the-record Discussion

In the ensuing discussion the similarities and differences between *Norden* and British-Irish relations became illuminated by the participants' own experiences and observations. The discussion revealed a genuine interest in each others' politico-geographical reality.

Early on in the discussion the participants were told about research into the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body at Liverpool University which had revealed an "indifference" by the British to such a collaborative venture. Perhaps this was fuelled by guilt about Northern Ireland leading it to be seen as a problem to be "managed". There was no great enthusiasm for institutionalising the British-Irish relationship nor extending the scope of the Body. From the Irish side, the Body had an important symbolic function by showing the "equality" of the two islands. Irish parliamentarians could now enter Westminster with respect and on equal terms, but there were no long-term ambitions. Ireland didn't "loom large" in the British consciousness and something analogous to a Nordic Council might well help to raise the profile.

This view was contested by an opinion according to which non-institutional relations are quite good under the present arrangements. Another view saw the equalisation of the relationship being achieved via the European Union connection. In this context a complaint was heard about the invisibility of constructive British-Irish contacts. Extreme views tend to be paraded,

not good things. A major problem on these islands compared to the Nordic countries is that there are not the kind of citizens' associations which preceded the Nordic Council. High-level British-Irish contacts don't seem to be able to bring this sense of co-operation into mainstream politics.

Outside the British-Irish Association, which was described as "rather elitist", there is surprisingly little serious popular contact between the islands. Hugh Kearney's book *The British Isles: a history of four nations* had been a most important corrective in showing the constant interaction among the peoples of the islands. Indeed, while there might have been increased contact at the level of high politics, over the last few years the communities in Ulster have become even more estranged. It was the "extremes" which were often paraded in the popular media. The overall symbolic effect of this should not be ignored.

In response it was asked what common geographical image or language we could find to describe British-Irish commonality. It needed a paradigm shift. Why was sovereignty no longer an issue in *Norden*?

It was pointed out that it was important to recognise that Nordic co-operation was in many ways "citizen-driven". It might be an agreement among sovereign political entities but it rested on a popular base. It had led to "functional co-operation" among distinct national polities rather than the formation of a unified nation-state as had happened in Italy or Germany in the 19th century. And this was despite "people in the foreign ministry not wanting to know". The agreement of high politics actually rested on a substantial "popular network". Indeed, the importance of "Nordic enthusiasts" was stressed. There had been and is huge co-operation in civil society, for example in the professions and voluntary associations. The development of law and constitutions in each country had often used the "comparative approach" leading to the copying of each other's laws. This gave reality to the "family of nations" - war had really become impossible.

This picture of mutual co-operation prompted a reflection that the English/British still tended to perceive of the southern Irish as "barbaric by birth" and the northern Irish as "barbaric by choice". What did "parity of esteem" mean in a Nordic context?

A distinction was drawn between "Nordic differences" which were nonetheless compatible and a sense of "Otherness" which would be antagonistic. Large-scale conflict in what had once been a "war system" was now unthinkable. That was a profound achievement. It was stressed that various Nordic fora for "talking" were as important as any "instrumentality" in fostering a sense of Nordic community or commonality. The aftermath of World War II had provided an impetus to "institutionalise" Nordic links when faced with the rebuilding of Germany and Europe. Certain areas of co-operation - for example harmonisation of laws - demanded governmental as well as citizen co-operation.

On British-Irish relations value was seen in placing emphasis on the "totality of these islands" rather than North-South links because it could reduce tensions in the North-South dimension or within the inter-party talks in Northern Ireland. The issue of North-South co-operation was

always liable to be seen as the slippery slope of being trapped into a United Ireland. It should also be recognised that the UK itself was evolving: there might well be a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly, that might help the evolution of more nuanced relationships between the different parts of these islands. Too often the relationship was thought of only in England-Ireland terms. For instance education in Northern Ireland could be better compared with that in Scotland than England. However, there was a worry that in the event of a Labour victory in the forthcoming election there would be an end to bi-partisanship. That would make matters more difficult. What would the Unionists do then? We also had to be aware of the impact of Europe. Could the UK and Republic of Ireland, in their common interest, co-operate alongside each other?

One view was that the Unionists might turn in one of two directions: either towards a nationalist anti-European party or towards a regional party in Europe.

A warning was raised against the dangers of "institutionitis" – it was highly significant that the Nordic concept arose and had had currency before it was given institutional shape. The political geography of these islands was complicated and any symbolic expression would need to be able to encompass this diversity. It was claimed that the "totality of these islands" still fitted the bill because it reflects daily reality on the ground. It had stuck because rather like a nick-name in the collective unconscious it rang true.

The Nordic co-operation analogy was deemed a "good idea whose time has come". As often, timing is all. The recent book *Britain's European Question: The issues for Ireland* had identified a "British crisis of identity". It was difficult to envisage much closer British-Irish co-operation until this crisis was resolved, probably by new arrangements internal to the British state. There were still problems as regards the Irish diaspora in Britain - this emigration still evoked responses of guilt and shame. However, there was a growing recognition of the need to recast the Irish relation to Britain in the context of the new politics of "interdependence". It was possible to look forwards to a rearranged Britain in a rearranged Europe - one with a more variable geometry. It was quite possible to see the discussion we were having today feeding into Strand 3 of the peace talks dealing with East-West relationships (this will deal with the totality of relations between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom - often called East-West relations).

It was pointed out that being Nordic meant being part of something bigger without losing anything cultural, social or civic. It meant "almost feeling at home" - a sense of positive co-operation. There were now some 300,000 Finnish speakers in Sweden, part of a wave of immigrants who went in the late '60s to get away from the economic depression. Furthermore, Stockholm had always had a strong Finnish component.

A distinction was drawn between a civilised "civic nationalism" and a narrow exclusive "ethnic nationalism". The former focused on a common sense of citizenship while the latter emphasised tribal similarity, the bonding of the *Volk*. Indeed, there was now a million emigrants in Sweden. It was suggested that we had to go beyond this bi-polarity of "citizenship-ethnicity" and see that issues of social welfare and justice were also part of the sense of what it was to belong.

At this point another important factor in Nordic co-operation was introduced, that of urban cross-border co-operation driven by cities and municipalities. There were ten established Nordic institutions along these lines which had existed long before the EU, while co-operation among districts could be numbered in 100s. Such "low-level" co-operation might be less threatening than the prospect of over-arching institutions. It might also be worth considering the Commonwealth as another possible example of transnational co-operation.

It was pointed out, however, that many people in the Republic of Ireland considered the Commonwealth to be a "post-imperial hangover" but rejoining it as part of an overall settlement might be acceptable. The benefits of "positive nationalism" were pointed to, instancing Norway's generous overseas aid. The intrinsic problems created by the asymmetry of size and resources between the islands of Britain and Ireland were highlighted - the Nordic countries were more evenly balanced. But the ideas we were discussing could fit comfortably within the talks, particularly Strand 3. The attitude towards the "Siamese twins" (see "Ghosts of 'the other' still haunts banquet", *Irish Times*, 22 February 1997, Appendix V) is changing and a new relationship is possible, but it needs working through in a series of relationships starting from: those internal to Northern Ireland; North-South co-operation; these islands; and all in the European context. There was creative thinking going on. This observation raised doubts, but it was pointed out that President Mary Robinson has recently made 30 visits to Britain.

Fears were expressed that a new institution of co-operation would bring further bureaucracy. The "totality of relationships" was recognised but it was felt that these could be pursued in a less Hegelian way, on several fronts rather than as a whole. In response to expressed fears of more bureaucracy, it was pointed out that the Nordic Council itself only had a very small secretariat (some 100 people) in Copenhagen, while the role of expensive ambassadors had been reduced to a low-key, honorary level (mostly dealing with commercial matters) in the Nordic countries.

A further view was offered on the "pre-(national) political" nature of the Nordic project. The strongly individualistic nature of Nordic citizens had been a factor in pushing the "myth of similarity" beyond nation-state boundaries. This diffused "nationality" did not then present such a challenge to individuality. A major difference between Nordic co-operation and the European Union project was that it was not based around security. Even EMU was being presented as a way to tie the so-called aggressive Germans into Europe. This argument cut no ice with Nordics.

The question raised at the outset as to whether the uniqueness of the Nordic did not render its export very difficult was reiterated, though it was recognised that UK/Ireland was in many ways "one arena". As a response it was said that wholesale import was not necessary, but there was no reason in principle why the British and Irish should not learn from the largely successful experience of Nordic co-operation, perhaps in particular that it had been grounded in civil society.

There was a general feeling that with general elections approaching in both the UK and the Republic the immediate future looked unpredictable. However, it might be worth reconvening a meeting later this year or early in 1998. The major points of the discussion could be brought together and they could be fed into the third strand of the talks. There was a possibility that some of the day's work might be carried forward in Northern Ireland through the policy think-tank Democratic Dialogue. And a Scandinavian acknowledged that the day's discussion had thrown as much light on assumptions about Nordicity as it had done about their relevance to increasing British-Irish harmony – a testimony to the comparative approach to such issues.

Professor Kearney closed the day by thanking all the participants for a stimulating debate and the Finnish Institute for providing a much-needed space for the *imaginaire sociale*, without which there can be no sense of "feeling at home".

Conclusions

Kearney, Stenius, Partridge and Lausti set out their main conclusions of the day below – conclusions which we hope to find further opportunity to look at more deeply, probably in the context of Strand 3 of the Irish-British talks process.

1. The history and the geopolitics of *Norden* and Britain and Ireland have some close resemblances, namely both have been "zones of conflict" over long periods. The British-Irish conflict is by no means as "exceptional" as is commonly perceived.
2. *Norden* is more religiously and politically similar than Britain and Ireland, sharing a common Lutheran background (the Protestant/Catholic cleavage is absent) and a predominant social democratic politics. However, there is more cultural, linguistic and institutional commonality between the British and the Irish than among the Scandinavians.
3. *Norden* is now expressed at an inter-governmental level through the mechanism of the Nordic Parliamentary Council and the Council of Ministers, but it has its roots in the "Norden Association" – a civil society movement which sought to promote co-operation among the Nordic peoples. It should be stressed that the Nordic connection is an important dimension in the civil society as well as within the state bureaucracies. All professional, trade union and voluntary associations have their Nordic connections (annual meetings) which are important fora of co-operation and self-reflection. Also the Nordic linkage between different sections of the state administration takes for granted the Nordic reference groups. There is a constant exchange of detailed information while national policies are being harmonised. In this sense, the Nordic framework is a cost-effective and pragmatic form of co-operation.

4. The Nordic states have in the 20th century managed peacefully to resolve serious disputes between themselves: the secession of Norway from the Swedish-Norwegian Union in 1905, and the resolution of conflict over the Aland Islands between Sweden and Finland in 1921. This contrasts to the unresolved territorial claims over Northern Ireland between the British and Irish states.
5. The Nordic Council, focusing as it does on the functional-practical, is singularly unbureaucratic in its *modus operandi*. It is not a large organisation.
6. The Nordic Council has managed to bring together political units as large as Sweden (pop. 8.6m) and as small as the Faroe Islands (pop. 47,000). It therefore offers an encouraging precedent for coping with the asymmetry between the Republic of Ireland (pop. 3.6m) and the UK (pop. 58m).
7. Noting the dense links between Britain and Ireland (now documented in a growing British-Irish literature) and drawing on the Nordic precedent, it seems reasonable to suggest that in time these multiple "civic links" will lead to rapprochement at a more political level - a hope which is confirmed to some extent in Appendices V-VIII.
8. The Nordic Council and its associated bodies, despite a day of hard-headed intellectual interrogation, retain a capacity for emulation and inspiration in the realm of resolving inter-ethnic and inter-state conflict in these islands.

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