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**Cultural Identity and
Political Transformation**

Andrew Finlay

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Acknowledgments

The idea for a conference on the theme of identity was first suggest by Terry Stewart, then President of the Association. The Conference Organising Committee included Mary Humphreys, Stephen McWhite, Catriona Stewart, Penny Gundry and Andrew Finlay. Thanks to the members of the Committee, to each of the contributors and to Paul McErlean and Dr Jean Whyte for chairing the sessions. Special thanks to Penny for organising the hotel and taking care of all the administrative details.

Introduction

Andrew Finlay

'What it means to be Irish' has been one of the most insistent questions in public life over the last thirty years. It arises from the theory, shared widely among politicians, policy makers and academics, that Ireland's problems - the Troubles in the North and the exigencies of European accession and economic growth in the South - are caused by underlying conflicts and confusions of cultural identity. Rather than foster further reflection on the stale question of Irish identity, the purpose of the conference was to interrogate the theory which has prompted the question so insistently. Such interrogation was considered timely, not just because the conference coincided with the Nice campaigns, but because the policies that the belief has inspired are faltering. It seems that the top-down multiculturalism that underpins both the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and official responses to the arrival of immigrants attracted by the Republic's new-found wealth may, paradoxically, itself be contributing to the growing intolerance that is evident on the streets of Belfast and Dublin.

As an international agreement, the GFA is frequently praised for the ground-breaking openness of its definition of belonging and citizenship. The GFA recognises that it is the 'birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose' (1998: 2). The recognition that identity is a matter of choice is full of promise, but this promise is undermined by the use of the word 'birthright', and the only choice that matters is to be British or Irish, unionist or nationalist: in the Assembly set-up under the agreement the votes of those members who refuse this choice - liberals, socialists, feminists - do not count. In this manner, the GFA appears to institutionalise sectarianism. Another consequence of the Agreement has been to further embed a notion of Irish citizenship and belonging in terms of a concept of origins or birthright, the inadequacy of which has subsequently been exposed by the plight of immigrants



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

who face the possibility of deportation despite having parented a child who was born Irish.

The conference opened with a keynote address from Senator Martin Mansergh and the discussion continued with contributions from Dr Andrew Finlay, Trinity College Dublin; Dr Murna Crozier, Northern Ireland Department of Culture; Professor Mairead Nic Craith, University of Ulster; Dr Louis de Paor, NUI Galway; Piaras Mac Einri, University College Cork; Professor Michael Cronin, Dublin City University. Victor Price, writer and broadcaster, was the after-dinner speaker.

No consensus was reached on the Good Friday Agreement, the Nice Treaty or the shape of the emerging multicultural order in Ireland, but the differing approaches taken by the speakers made the debate all the more interesting, and it was enlivened by interventions from among the one hundred or so people who attended the conference.

An international publisher has expressed interest in publishing the conference papers in book form; in the meantime, we hope that the following summaries of the conference papers provide a flavour of the conference and whet your appetite for the forthcoming book.

Key-note Speech

Senator Martin Mansergh*

Senator Mansergh developed a subtle defence of Irish government policy in respect to both the Good Friday Agreement and Europe. The Agreement encapsulates all that is best in Anglo-Irish agreements over the last 80 years. He noted that Northern Irish politics today are characterised by a Kulturkampf, but Northern Irish politics were always tribal and it is a virtue of the Good Friday Agreement that it recognised this reality and creates a context in which respect for different cultural identities and traditions may yet emerge. The problems with the Agreement do not stem from its institutionalisation of identity, but from a lack of trust between the parties. He alluded to anxieties that the Good Friday Agreement or further European integration might compromise or dilute Irish identity, but argued that these anxieties are unfounded: the Agreement does not imply a return to the British sphere of influence and Irish support for further European integration will bolster Ireland in relation to its larger neighbour and make Irish identity even more confident.



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Session One - Views from the North

Maurna Crozier*

Maurna Crozier considered some international and intercultural concepts which may underpin contemporary political transformations, but which are inevitably mediated by issues cultural identity at local level. She referred to some global exchanges, and, in the light of contemporary conflicts, considered the international movements which are addressing the aspiration of shared values, human rights and equality.

With reference to experience in Northern Ireland, she outlined the rationale for the approaches which have been taken to address the issues of cultural diversity. On the one hand there is legislation based on international codes of human rights and equality. But such legislation focuses on the individual and fails to address either collective rights or collective responsibility (citizenship). We are all members of social and cultural groups. Cultural identity is a basic characteristic of human society, and, while not all conflicts have cultural roots, many do, and policy makers must deal with this reality by promoting intercultural understanding. Dr Crozier concluded by relating cultural initiatives in Northern Ireland to the wider debate about the imperatives of intercultural communication in the contemporary world.

Mairead Nic Craith*

Mairead Nic Craith traced the development of thinking about cultural identity and the notion of parity of esteem between cultures in successive Anglo-Irish agreements. She discussed the discomfiture of both unionists and nationalists with the new dispensation inaugurated by the GFA. In some important respects, the responses of unionists and nationalists to the new dispensation are almost a mirror images of each other. Unionists who were more used to thinking of themselves as a political community defined by an individualistic notion of citizenship are uncomfortable with the GFA's emphasis on cultural identity. In a similar way to Dr Crozier, Prof. Nic Craith suggested that nationalists who were used to thinking of themselves in collective terms as a cultural group bound together by a sense of grievance are uncomfortable in a situation where communal solidarity is diminishing and where there is a growing emphasis on citizenship. In conclusion Prof. Nic Craith reached towards a notion of cultural citizenship, which, she thought, may help to resolve some of the dilemmas alluded to by herself and by Dr Crozier.

Andrew Finlay

Several authors have noted a general tendency in the late modern world for identities to be constructed, and wars commemorated, around the memory of trauma



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

and loss rather than heroics and triumph: what one author, commenting on the role of Gallipoli in constructions of Australian national identity, refers to as a 'memory boom'. Dr Finlay examined some of the ways in which the memory of trauma and loss are figured in Irish cultural politics and policy. The 'memory boom' provides a context in which the feelings of those who were bereaved or injured in the Troubles can be heard. This is in contrast with the stoicism and silence which characterised the aftermath of other, earlier conflicts in Ireland and elsewhere. Facilitating the public articulation of one's grief or suffering can be beneficial in the aftermath of conflict, but Dr Finlay made a distinction between specifying one's grief or victimhood and the attempt to mould individual suffering into a collective identity. Examining several recent examples of the latter phenomena in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Finlay worried that the price of admission to the emerging multicultural order in Ireland and elsewhere seems increasingly dependent on the ability to elaborate cultural victimization, real or imagined.

Session Two - Views from the South

Louis de Paor:

In most instances of human interaction, the use of one language rather than another can appear more or less unproblematic. A shared language can facilitate integration by reinforcing the coherence of a group or community whose diversity in other respects can be elided or suspended, temporarily or indefinitely, through the agreed use of a single language. If it cannot finally reconcile or entirely resolve more pronounced differences within and between communities, an agreed language can at least provide a vehicle for the negotiation of such difference. Where cultural identity and political allegiance are contested, however, and the use of one language is privileged over another, the situation becomes much more fraught.

Dr. de Paor considered a number of instances of cultural alienation provoked or confirmed by a difference of language and the extreme response of individuals and groups who consider their very existence to be threatened by such diversity. Examples were drawn from both Australia and Ireland, from historical and contemporary experience, to illustrate the extent to which both minorities and majorities are capable of violent response to the challenge of cultural difference, a response predicated on their own perceived vulnerability. The implication of language in the processes of power and exclusion were discussed as well as the possibility of a more generous approach that would validate the collective identity of



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

established communities without compromising the rights of those who share a different set of cultural values and practices.

Piaras Mac Einri

No part of Ireland today is avowedly monocultural. Northern Ireland has adopted its own form of biculturalism through the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The Republic has experienced significant levels of inward migration, both workers and asylum-seekers, since the mid-1990s. Although both jurisdictions are beginning to use the rhetoric of interculturalism, parity of esteem and respect for diversity, much remains to be done.

Dr Mac Einri dealt with the Republic and with the various partnership-based initiatives which have been implemented in recent years with the express intention of addressing issues of social exclusion, notably the various collective national agreements and, more specifically, with the Community Development Support Programme (CDSP). He argued that these arrangements may have given many a place at the table, with benefits for some, but that not all voices were equal. In the case of ethnic minorities and new communities, these remain largely invisible and/or under-represented.

He further argued that a more radical concept of interculturalism and a real redistribution of power will be required if a genuinely inclusive society is to be built and if conflict between minorities, whether indigenous or newly arrived, is to be avoided. A number of recommendations were proposed.

Michael Cronin

Prof. Cronin began by situating debates on identity in Ireland in a wider international context, namely the shift from ideology to identity as the central issue for debate in the post Cold War world. The shift from jingoism to xenophobia as a principal characteristic of developed societies was examined in the light of the changing nature of nationalism. As Ireland has moved from a country of emigration to a country of immigration the essay asks what the political challenges are for the country in dealing with others and otherness. In this context, two developments were traced that impact on the ability of Irish civil society to cope with changes in population and society. The first relates to the influence of post-industrial economic practices on the elaboration of personal and communal identity and the second is the emergence of a notion of citizenship which is based solely on material self interest. To strengthen the transformative possibilities of civil society in Ireland Prof. Cronin argued that much more attention needed to be devoted to the construction of a meaningful knowledge society in post-industrial Ireland and in particular that much



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

remains to be done by way of the construction of a vibrant public sphere. In conclusion, he pointed to another dimension to contemporary Irish identity formation that has been consistently neglected, that is, the effects of the exponential growth in the science and technology sector which not only calls into question what it might mean to be Irish or British but what indeed it means to be human.

Summaries marked with an asterisk () were drafted or edited somewhat by Andrew Finlay, based on his notes from the conference.

Contributors

Professor Michael Cronin is Dean of the Joint Faculty of Humanities, Dublin City University. He is author of *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Identities* (Cork University Press, 1996) and *Across the Lines: Travel, Language and Translation* (Cork University Press, 2000). He is co-editor of *Tourism in Ireland: A Critical Analysis* (Cork University Press, 1993), *Nouvelles d'Irlande* (Quebec, L'Instant Meme, 1997), *Unity in Diversity: Current Trends in Translation Studies* (St. Jerome 1998) and *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London, Pluto, 2002). He was co-editor of *Graph: Irish Cultural Review* from 1986 to 1999.

Dr Maurna Crozier is the Director of the Cultural Diversity programme of the Community Relations Council, currently on loan to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a policy adviser on cultural diversity. She is on the board of the Arts Council of NI, the NI Museums Council, the Linen Hall Library, Resource and the British Council Intercultural Advisory Committee.

Dr Louis de Paor is Director of the Centre for Irish Studies at National University of Ireland, Galway. He has published articles on a broad range of writing in Irish from the court poetry of medieval Ireland to the work of contemporary poets such as Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill and Michael Davitt. His books include a study of narrative technique in the short fiction of Mairtin O Cadhain and an anthology of twentieth century poetry in Irish co-edited with Sean O Tuama. He is currently working on a study of the writings of Flann O'Brien.

Andrew Finlay is from North Belfast. He trained in anthropology at University College London and now teaches sociology at Trinity College Dublin. Living in Dublin has re-kindled his interest in Irish politics, and he has written several pieces questioning the idiom of identity in Irish studies. These include: Andrew Finlay, (2001) 'Reflexivity, the Dilemmas of Identification and an Ethnographic Encounter in Northern Ireland', in



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Smyth, M. and Robinson G., *Researching Violent Societies: Ethical and Methodological Issues*, Tokyo and London: United Nations University Press and Pluto Press. Andrew Finlay, (Dec 2001) 'Defeatism and Northern Protestant "Identity"', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1, 2, 3-20. Andrew Finlay and Natalie McDonnell (2003), 'Partitionism, Pluralism and a Proposed Orange Parade in Dublin', *Irish Studies Review*, 11, 1.

Dr Piaras Mac Einri is Director of the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, established in 1997 at NUI Cork. He has taught and published widely on migration and related issues. In his spare time he works with NASC, the Irish Immigrant Support Centre in Cork. His previous career with the Department of Foreign Affairs included postings in Brussels, Beirut and Paris. His published works include: Mac Einri, P. (with Lambkin, B.K.) (forthcoming) 'Whose Diaspora? Whose Migration? Some current issues in Irish migration studies', in Roe, M.D. & Lewis, C.A. (eds.) *Irish Journal of Psychology, Special Issue Psychosocial Dimensions of the Irish Diaspora*. Mac Einri, P. (2001) 'Immigration Policy in Ireland' in Farrell, F. and Watt, P. (eds) *Responding to Racism in Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas. Mac Einri, P. (2000) 'Emigration: An Enduring Tradition.' In Jones, A. (ed.). *The Scattering: Images of Emigrants from an Irish County*, Dublin: A.& A. Farmar.

Senator Martin Mansergh is a former advisor to successive Taoisigh.

Prof. Mairead Nic Craith is an anthropologist at the Academy for Irish Cultural Heritages, University of Ulster (Magee). She has previously been attached to the universities of Liverpool, Dublin and Cork. Author and editor of several books, her research interests include culture and identity politics, European influences on Irish culture and the impact of European integration on linguistic and cultural diversity. Prof. Nic Craith has written extensively on aspects of culture and identity in Northern Ireland. Her most recent publication *Plural Identities, Singular Narratives: the Case of Northern Ireland* (2002) examines cultural plurality and hybridity in the region and proposes the re-conceptualisation of cultures in Northern Ireland.

Victor Price is from Co. Down, a writer, broadcaster (BBC World Service) and translator. His novels include "The Death Of Achilles", "The Other Kingdom" and "Caliban's Wooing." He has also written poetry "Two Parts Water" and translated from German three plays of Brecht. More recently Victor Price became involved in drama writing "Love Among The Tulips," which was performed at the Edinburgh Festival fringe in 2001.