



**THE IRISH ASSOCIATION**  
for cultural, economic and social relations

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Seminar**

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Nationalism is the leading political ideology of the late twentieth century, and has outstripped its main competitors (such as communism, fascism, nazism and racism) as the most common organising principle of large numbers of ordinary people across the world. The Irish are not peculiar in their adherence to nationalism; in fact they are possibly more aware of their nationalism than the English, an extremely nationalist people.

One of the reasons for nationalism's political success is that it offers a simple principle of collective solidarity, collective self-protectiveness or whatever one might like to call it, to communities in a world that is commonly less than friendly and sometimes bullying, menacing or even genocidal. Nationalism is intellectually opportunistic, and redefines itself constantly and commonly does so without ever admitting that is what it is up to. As 1066 and all that put it a generation ago, the Irish question was always and automatically problematic in British politics because, whenever the English thought they had figured out an answer, the Irish changed the question. The Irish, of course, were simply demanding a redress of monstrous historical grievances on what amounted to the instalment system, and were not fully aware that each assurance that they gave the English that this recent demand for reform would "settle Ireland" was really just such an instalment: freedom by the drip method, perhaps.

I have suggested that the phenomenon of nationalism is intellectually opportunist and therefore "revisionist", and I believe that we Irish, North and South, afford no exception to this generalisation; both nationalists and unionists on the island of Ireland have been forced repeatedly to revise their self-definitions because of political and historical circumstance.

As most of us, certainly the older cohort of Irish people in the Republic and even in Northern Ireland, are aware, the political culture in the twenty-six counties has been undergoing a profound change over the past generation. I would personally date this change back to the "Mother and child" scheme of 1951, when, as most of us know, a welfare and health scheme which was perceived to be contrary to Catholic principles, contrary to the monetary interests of the medical profession and sympathetic to a series of principles then labelled "communist", "British", or, worse than either, "secularist", was struck down by the Catholic Hierarchy.

Despite the fact that the substance of the proposals was enacted two years later by Eamon de Valera, the Catholic church in Ireland never recovered from this denunciation. George Bernard Shaw had prophesied long before Irish independence that a native Irish government would immediately dismantle the extraordinary apparatus of political, cultural and social power that the Catholic church had



amassed in the nineteenth century. He was wrong, but not completely wrong; it took two generations for the decay of Catholic power to become evident, and for the first 40 years after independence, an alliance which I have elsewhere termed the alliance of "priest and patriots", an alliance of Irish nationalism and Catholic triumphalism, dominated the politics of independent Ireland. Fenians, often anti-clerical, found themselves, politically speaking, in bed with nationalist and anti-Protestant clerics.

I would argue that the inevitable split between "priests and patriots" after 1922 was delayed until the 1950s by several factors: first, by the continuing and unresolved political, economic and cultural tensions between Ireland and Britain after 1922, partly due to "dependency", whether cultural, economic or political, and partly due to partition; second, by the coming of the great depression in 1929, which froze political thinking and behaviour in a 1920s mode and ensured the survival in office of an increasingly gerontocratic political elite right through to the 1960s; third, by the isolation of most of the island during the neutrality period of the second world war, which aggravated the cultural and psychological effects of the depression; and, fourth, by misguided government policies concerning economics, education and foreign affairs during the period 1945-60.

I would like to deal briefly with each of these propositions in turn.

First, British-Irish tensions, The Anglo-Irish treaty reflected within itself this set of problems; it resulted in the 1922 constitution of the Irish Free State, which the German scholar, Hans Kohn, in a classic book published in German in 1928 and in English in 1932, described as a republican and democratic document pretending to be a monarchic document. All sovereignty was derived from the Irish people, but the King was in the document essentially as the agent of the Irish people; it took 30 years to get rid of poor old George V and his heirs and successors.

Northern Ireland and the Free State were to be linked by a Council of Ireland, sitting in Armagh. It was hoped that it might be, or sceptically or even cynically declared to be, a vehicle by which both parts of Ireland could reconcile their differences in some kind of confederal all-Ireland polity. As we know, this was very certainly not to be, and two of the causes of this political failure and copperfastening of partition were orange intransigence in the North and republican intransigence in the South. The civil war in the South and the death of Collins was exactly what orange supremacists in the North yearned for and got. Green and orange bullies between them conspired, in effect, to defy the will of the Irish people. Northern Ireland became a Protestant state for a Protestant people, despite genuine concessions toward the Catholic minority, and the Free State came studiously and monastically Catholic despite a genuine streak of liberalism and tolerance toward minorities that was never quite



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snuffed out by fundamentalists. Each, absurdly, rebuked the other for not living up to English liberal orthodoxies.

Second, the great depression of 1929-1939 had huge political consequences all over the planet, as we all know. In the United States and Sweden, leftist and welfarist governments were swept into power, mainly in reaction to the perceived failures of capitalism and acceptance of the claims by various ideologues of the time that government intervention in the form of state enterprise and tariff control would bring about a new era. In the US, they merely got Franklyn Delano Roosevelt, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Blue Eagle and a general attempt to use state resources to assuage the consequences of what was often described as unbridled capitalism; in Sweden they got a generation of statist but popular social democracy, following emotionally on the Adalen incident, where strikers were machine-gunned by the military; in Ireland we got Eamon de Valera's mixture of cultural apartheid, statism and protectionism, in part fuelled by emotionalism following on the conflicts of 1916, 1919-21 and 1922-23; in Germany, of course, they got Hitler, fuelled by the great collective disaster of the first world war, much dwarfing the misfortunes of the United States, Sweden or Ireland. Incidentally, Hitler was elected by a minority vote of 33.3% in 1932, mainly due to the cowardice of the Catholic opposition and the historicist idiocy of the Stalinist Communists of the period.

Third, in Ireland, the second world war, neutrality, isolation and stagnation had a consequence in reinforcing to an abnormal extent, the cultural and intellectual conservatism of the depression period. Mancur Olson, the American economist and political scientist, in a famous argument, has argued that, in essence, defeat is good for you economically speaking. Nearly 20 years ago, in 1982, he pointed out that the real victors of the post-1945 peace had been the defeated Axis powers: western Germany, Austria, Japan and Italy. To these defeated powers could be joined defeated France, Finland and Spain, defeated in a sense by itself in its Civil War of 1936-1939. Ireland and Portugal slumbered on, the argument went, because older elites with older ideas stayed in power. Ireland has held back by perhaps 15 years after 1945, Portugal by 30. Interestingly, the argument is a mixture of political determinism and idealism: younger and outsider elites tended to be more flexible, adventurous and creative.

Fourth, Irish economic and educational policies after 1945 remained misguided and even perverse for far too long a time. Children were taught Irish, commonly being taught the grammar of a foreign language in that language. Science and nature study were abolished to make room for "double Irish" in the 1920s by the Cosgrave government. In the 1930s the pressure to use the educational system primarily for





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linguistic transformation intensified. The idea that children should be taught how to earn their living and given an education that was applied as well as one that was literary and linguistic was ignored as far as the key emergent middle-class groups were concerned; the reaction against exaggerated academicism, itself exaggerated and intellectually destructive, is still with us. Higher education remained the prerogative of a privileged few right into the 1960s.

Olson's arguments amount to an appealing thesis and seem to fit the Irish facts. Irish nationalism was indeed extraordinarily backward-looking in the years after 1945, years that were at once dull, uneventful and absolutely crucial in Ireland and pretty well nowhere else; Ireland slept while the rest of the world was turned upside down. Ageing men remained in power and, unlike most other European countries, no generational shift occurred in the aftermath of the world war. An attempt at such a shift did happen in the shape of younger people in Clann na Poblachta, but it failed. Ironically, the emergence of the Clann enabled a mainly conservative Fine Gael led government to come into power in 1948, and essentially spenceled Sean Lemass and his drive for modernisation for 10 years. The ultimately inevitable shift had to wait until the 1960s.

The late 1940s were the years of the Marshall Plan and the beginning of the greatest 30-year economic boom in human history, and Ireland missed out on the first 15 years of it because of pre-war or even pre-1914 political and economic ideas. In 1949, the secretary of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, the distinguished historian Leon O Broin, denounced the offer through US aid of 100,000 phone lines on the grounds that it would only encourage suburban housewives to gossip. That the telephone and its derivatives were essentially a convenience rather than a necessity was still being asserted by civil servants as late as 1958. Nationalism prompted persistence with high tariff walls, and an insistence on the Irish language revival programme, right into the 1960s. In 1948 an ambitious road-building programme was cancelled in favour of a massive programme of social housing. The emergent transatlantic airline was closed down at the beginning of the great post-war boom in air travel.

The idea that the educational system might be a mechanism by which young people might learn a way of earning their living was unfashionable or even denounced as antinational and barbarous. It took a mixture of academics, civil servants and politicians, including Kenneth Whitaker, Patrick Lynch, John Sheehan, Terry Rafferty, Sean O'Connor, Patrick Hillery and Donough O'Malley to break through this particular cultural and political log-jam in the mid-1960s. In so doing they had to defy the rules of the game and by-pass powerful interest groups: the Catholic church, the



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teachers' unions and the quiet apathy or even active resistance of the ensconced and rather small middle class of the time. The rest is history, and we are now living in the world created, possibly unknowingly, by the policy makers of a generation ago.

This all does come back to defining nationalism in independent Ireland. A paradigm of nationalist ideology which proposed that Ireland could be free, Irish-speaking, frugal, quasi-rural and somehow more virtuous than anywhere else came to be seen as betraying the real interest of the Irish people. It was replaced by an equally nationalist paradigm, which was entrepreneurial, open to the outside world, agnostic on cultural matters and eventually on religious matters as well. Irish nationalists in power had to make their mistakes and acquire a certain hard-earned wisdom in the same expensive way.

With some exaggeration, it could be argued that the generation of the 1970s (those born after about 1970) is the generation about to take over and is the generation of Donough O'Malley as putative father. The grandfather is, of course, Sean Lemass, who recognised the bankruptcy of the de Valeran statist system, a system which he himself had done so much to construct, and later to deconstruct in the sad but hard-eyed awareness that it no longer worked. A similar pilgrimage to Canossa was to be made a generation later by Charles Haughey and Ray MacSharry in 1987. In the latter case, it was the etatist ideas of Lemass and Garret FitzGerald which were being jettisoned against a background of economic crisis in some ways rather similar to the far greater crisis of the 1950s.

Today's Irish nationalism, because of this rather strange series of evolutions, has gone beyond the "priests and patriots" alliance of 50 or 100 years ago, but this is not to say that that nationalism no longer exists. My own belief is that the extraordinary changes of the last quarter century are such that the ordinary people are miles ahead of the intellectuals, the journalists, the academics, the economists and even, dare I say it, the politicians who are supposed to manage cultural changes of this kind. The deep realism of Lemass, O'Malley, Whitaker and others in the 1950s and the often forgotten William Cosgrave and his colleagues in the 1920s won out over the fantasies of the various Sinn Feins which this country, North and South, has had to endure since 1905.

Generational change, the impact of the outside world particularly in the shape of the European experiment and the radically different collective experiences which the peoples of Ireland have had in both parts of this island have forced an increasing acceptance of each other's differences on all of us. The older monist definition of Irishness has had to be modified or even dropped, and it is clear that a rapprochement with the peoples of Britain is also going on; the new Institute for



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British and Irish Studies at University College Dublin's Department of Politics is only one small symptom of a wide cultural and ideological sea-change in our collective self-understanding. We are not simply an Island people, but are peoples of this island; we are all also peoples of the Islands, and we are European peoples who are learning to celebrate our diversity and also our underlying deep cultural kinship with one another.