

SCOTLAND, IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND: TIME FOR LATERAL THINKING

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One area which deserves treatment now that Scotland has achieved home rule is its relationship with the two Irelands. This is something of a taboo subject in that Scotland has been kept hiding behind the skirts of England for years and has had no chance of contributing to the debate on constitutional change for Northern Ireland. What interest there is tends to come from the diehard supporters of the two main tendencies in Northern Ireland.

For the foreseeable future Scotland and Northern Ireland are likely to remain constituent parts of the United Kingdom, each with its own representative body, and it is time that they were talking to each other in a constructive way. While the focus in the early months of the Scottish parliament will be on the developing relationship with Westminster, it is also important that the new administration engages with the leaders of the Northern Ireland assembly. Complementary to this is a need to build a relationship with the Republic of Ireland, and here we come up against the issue of whether initiatives of this kind come within the terms of reference of the Scottish parliament. Probably not, but this has been overtaken by a more recent event, the Easter Agreement, which should facilitate new sets of relationships among the various countries of these Isles once the provisions under Strand Three are implemented. For the first time it will be legitimate for Scotland to deal directly with both Northern Ireland and Ireland without recourse to London. Although Ireland has had a special relationship with the UK since independence it has had no cause to deal separately with Scotland, until now.

We should perhaps be working on what Mary Robinson declared when she was President of Ireland:

There are no two countries in Western Europe which are as close; not only in a shared past but also in what we have in common today. It is

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timely that we renew these links between modern Ireland and the modern Scotland.
(Ross 1997)

LONDON AND DUBLIN RULE

So reviving the links with both Irelands will be made easier with the advent of the 'Council of the Isles' (in Strand Three of the Easter Agreement). This spells the end for the convention that dealings between London and Dublin account for the totality of 'east/west' relations. Consideration has to be given to encouraging the involvement of communities like Wales, the Isle of Man and Scotland in matters of common interest to the Isles. In particular, Scotland's past role as a bystander in the 'peace process' has to be questioned. In close proximity to Northern Ireland (only 13 miles away at one point), Scotland could however only spectate as the various governments and parties manoeuvred in their quest for an accommodation. To most Scots the 'peace process' was something got up by London and Dublin, and, because of the inherent remoteness of these cities from each other as well as their cultural and ideological distance from Northern Ireland, the feeling persists that what has emerged may be short-lived. The terminology used confirmed the narrowness of that approach; Irish and UK ministers always referred to the 'Anglo-Irish' Agreement or Document or Declaration. The combined effect of this 'Anglo-Irish' mind set and the consistently top-down approach to Northern Irish affairs has been to inhibit discussion and to shut out parties with a legitimate interest in the process and its outcomes.

NOT OUR PROBLEM

There are of course other reasons why Scotland is not already a player, and why the Scottish political establishment shies away from an involvement in their neighbour's affairs. Fear of a resurgence of sectarian conflict in the west of Scotland is the main one; ignorance of Ireland, north and south, is another. Over the 30 years, travel and tourism declined and to all intents and purposes Northern Ireland became a no-go area. Even less is known about the Republic of Ireland; in government circles official links between an independent state like Ireland and a constituent part of the UK have been ruled out, and, with Northern Ireland (literally) coming between the two, informal contacts have been slow to develop.

SCOTS IRISH AND ULSTER SCOTS

The inability of Scotland to play any part in contemporary moves is remarkable. Throughout the recent 'cease fires' an army of visitors descended upon Belfast, many from the world's trouble spots, offering advice on resolving the problem. Sometimes it seemed that the only voice missing was that of Northern Ireland's neighbour. Yet Scotland has better credentials than most, having been involved in Northern Irish affairs for over 4000 years, from when people of the Neolithic age exported flints and tools from East Antrim. The invaders who gave Scotland its name hailed from Scotia, in the north east of Hibernia, and subsequent centuries have seen comings and goings in each direction, from the Plantation in Ulster of the 17th century, to the migrations of the 19th and 20th centuries to the West of Scotland. In 1991, long after the era of mass migration, there were still some 35,000 residents of what was Strathclyde Region born in Ireland (north and south). (General Register Office 1993)

A MISSING DIMENSION

The 'Anglo-Irish' perspective overlooks the reality that many of the key relationships between Northern Ireland and mainland UK are with Scotland rather than England. In a broadcast on Radio Scotland in 1996, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party claimed that the Province's human, social, geographic and economic ties are closer to Scotland than to any other part of Britain, and hinted that he would favour forging stronger links with Scotland than with England if Scotland became independent. Similarly in 1998, the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party hailed the history of Scotland over the past 25 years 'as an inspiration to those ... struggling to create new institutions in the North of Ireland and on the island of Ireland', and 'in terms of the maturity and depth of the political debate over Scotland's future the rest of us have a lot to learn'. (**The Herald**, 1998)

So we have both of the major constitutional parties in Northern Ireland and an Irish President declaring an affinity and an admiration for their neighbour. How can this goodwill be built upon?

The links between Scotland and unionist Northern Ireland are well known, but less publicised is the network of relationships between Scotland and 'national' Ireland (notably those with the Ulster counties in the Republic, and especially the connections between Glasgow and Donegal). These two dimensions give credence to Scotland's fitness for the task, in that its sympathies can hardly be construed as one-sided. Moreover there are

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particular reasons why Scotland should now be drawn into supporting the implementation of the Easter accord. These are:

- ◀ Scotland's relative neutrality, having been little involved in events related to Northern Ireland over the past 30 years;
- ◀ The new political status of Scotland. A Scottish parliament will provide both a focus of national identity and a body to which others can relate;
- ◀ Many of the highest offices of state in the UK are now occupied by MPs from Scottish constituencies, including, for the first time, a strong Scottish Labour presence in the Northern Ireland Office.

A SCOTS/IRISH ENTENTE?

Visualising a role for Scotland is enhanced by the prospect of a 'Council of the Isles'. The hope is that this British-Irish Council will moderate the 'Anglo' monopoly on inter-island affairs and promote new alignments of countries willing and able to assist in difficult areas, such as in the re-creation of a normal society in Northern Ireland. Already rehearsed is the difficulty that centralised states like the UK tend not to tolerate 'regions' having dealings with each other or with foreign bodies. Such an instance occurred in 1966 when the then Secretary of State for Scotland wanted to send a first day cover of Robert Burns stamps to the US President. He was prevented from doing so by Foreign Office protocol.

There are matters that could be more usefully addressed in a new forum comprising Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland than under the aegis of London and Dublin. Among concerns which straddle the three jurisdictions are those relating to pollution control, transportation and energy-sharing. Viewed as peripheral in a centralised UK, such issues could be tackled by this new grouping which in fact would represent a sizable constituency of some ten million people.

However even in the new political climate serious questions remain about Scotland's prospects as a player furth of Edinburgh - for example:

- ◀ Would the government of Ireland treat with Scotland if sovereignty continues to reside in London?
- ◀ Would the UK government be willing to delegate any significant authority to a new grouping?

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- ◀ What would the attitude of the parties in Northern Ireland be to a role for Scotland?
- ◀ Would anyone in Scotland be interested in getting into a situation they've managed to stay out of until now?

CONCLUSIONS

When all's said and done, anyone with anything to say about conflict resolution from around the world has already been to Belfast. Parallels have been drawn with South Africa, the Middle East, Cyprus, the former Yugoslavia, etc, and the United States played a major role in the 'process' which led to the Easter Agreement. By comparison, Scotland's claim has gone by default; a near neighbour knowing those very problems of nationality and sectarianism at first hand, but lacking the political identity and power to make an impact. One can only speculate at the possible effect of a Scots presence in the talks on the relative size of the unionist 'yes' and 'no' votes in the referendum.

Fortunately the process now in train of 'unpacking' the UK allows for a scenario where relationships between all the countries on the North Atlantic seaboard are validated. Above all, the Easter Agreement provides the opportunity for the kind of involvement that Scotland requires. and which is missing from the Scottish devolution bill.

Under para 10, p.14 of the Agreement 'it will be open to two or more members' (of the British Irish Council) 'to develop bilateral or multilateral arrangements between them. Such arrangements could include ... mechanisms to enable consultation, cooperation and joint decision-making on matters of mutual interest'. (Northern Ireland Office 1998). This option for multilateral cooperation under Strand Three should be taken up by Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland once the parliament and assembly are up and running.

Whatever else emerges in the on-going process of 'unpacking' the UK, Scotland has to be in the vanguard on matters concerning these islands and not on the sidelines.

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