

THE COUNCIL OF THE ISLES AND THE SCOTLAND-NORTHERN IRELAND RELATIONSHIP

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I

The British-Irish Council (BIC), colloquially known as 'The Council of the Isles', forms Strand Three of the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998, the result of the multi-party negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland (**The Agreement** 1998, pp. 14-16). The BIC will comprise representatives of the British and Irish governments, devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and representatives of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. The purpose of the Council, as laid down in the Agreement, will be 'to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships amongst peoples of these islands' (p. 14, para. 1), and 'to exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant Administrations' (p. 14, para. 5). In his speech to the Irish Parliament on 26 November 1998, British Prime Minister Tony Blair related the BIC to his hopes for the development of a common approach and a new era of co-operation between the UK and the Republic of Ireland (**Belfast Telegraph** 26 November 1998).

The inclusion of the BIC in the terms of the Agreement was fundamental to the Ulster Unionists' acceptance of the whole package. The Unionist leader, David Trimble, was quoted as saying in March 1998 that the creation of the British Isles-wide Council 'makes it possible for Unionists to contemplate an institutionalised relationship between Belfast and Dublin' (**Irish Times** 18 March 1998), and he and his party, along with other pro-Agreement Unionists, played on the possible significance of the BIC in their efforts to

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win the support of the Unionist community in Northern Ireland for the Agreement before the Referendum of 22 May. While it was the contentious issues of decommissioning and the release of paramilitary prisoners which claimed most media attention during the Referendum campaign, the position of pro-Agreement Unionists would have been far weaker without the innovative institutional acknowledgement of East-West links supplied by the BIC as a counter-balance to the North-South dimension of Strand Two. The drawback for these Unionists was the ultimate failure to have the North-South bodies made subordinate to the BIC, something apparently built in to an earlier draft by the British government which caused Nationalist alarm (**Irish Times** 12 January 1998). Instead the Agreement provided for the separate operation of the North-South and East-West bodies with the clear implication that a spirit of interdependence was to hold both, along with the Northern Ireland Assembly, together. However, it has been observed that the North-South dimension is bound more tightly to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and that the development of the BIC is not as clearly pre-determined as that of the North-South bodies (O'Leary 1999).

The idea of the Council of the Isles was credited to the Unionist Party at the time of the Agreement but it was hardly new. It probably owes more to the Dublin political thinker Richard Kearney who explored the concept in his 1997 book **Post Nationalist Ireland**, and who, along with Simon Partridge, has for some years urged that British-Irish relations should find an institutional model akin to that of the Nordic Council (Kearney and Partridge 1998; Constitution Unit 1998).¹ Kearney and Partridge and the cultural commentator and critic Edna Longley (Longley 1996) have all laid stress on such a structure as the BIC providing the suitably expansive context in which the cultural interactions which mark the archipelago can find expression free from political constrictions. In addition, such thinkers have approached the concept in a broadly 'post-Nationalist' spirit, encouraged by the notion of transcending traditional ideas of nation-states and of sovereignty and by the apparent emergence of a more regionally-focused Europe.

¹*The Constitution Unit report (Constitution Unit 1998) provides a valuable guide to the workings of the Nordic model and to what might be learned from it. It also points out (p. 3) the significant differences between the Nordic Council and the BIC, the most fundamental being that of the composition of the respective bodies: in the Nordic Council there are five sovereign states and three dependent territories; in the BIC there will be two sovereign states and six dependent territories. In the Nordic Council there is much nearer equivalence in size between the major partners.*

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Ulster Unionist enthusiasm for the Council of the Isles cannot be said to have embraced to any significant extent this type of radical thinking; strategic political calculations demand that the party still insists on Westminster sovereignty. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why the BIC has assumed such significance for Unionists. The Council embodies new East-West structures which for Unionists represent a departure from the trend in Britain during the Northern Ireland 'troubles' to regard 'all-Ireland' relations as the only ones to be developed and nurtured to the ends of peace and stability. The Council of the Isles proposal challenges the widespread assumption that the British role is simply to hold the line while the Irish - North and South - work out their differences. Underpinning this assumption is the notion of Irish unity - meaning a 32 county fully sovereign nation state - as 'natural' and 'inevitable' or 'the only solution in the long run', a notion which has led to the Northern Ireland conflict being viewed in a one-island context and which has encouraged the 'distancing' or the marginalisation of Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK (McBride 1996; Walker 1998).

The timing of the Northern Ireland Agreement has enabled the Blair government to tie Northern Ireland into its wider constitutional reform project, and to raise the possibility that the BIC could play a significant role both in the management of constitutional change and in the forging of a new set of relationships within these islands, perhaps too a new sense of collective identity. As Blair put it in his speech to the Oireachtas, Northern Ireland now draws Britain and Ireland together whereas it had driven them apart in the past (**Belfast Telegraph** 26 November 1998). Knitting Northern Ireland into the constitutional re-structuring of the UK as a whole has upset some traditional assumptions about the Irish question in British politics, notwithstanding the continuing stress on developing all-Ireland relations and institutions as well. Instead of one centre of government from which Northern Ireland was apt to be viewed as the most distant periphery, there will soon be several 'centres', including that of Northern Ireland itself, with the potential for substantial co-operation and interaction. Much of course will depend on how successful the respective devolution schemes turn out to be, and how the de-centralisation process develops in respect of the position of England (Bradbury and Mawson 1997; Constitution Unit 1998).

At the very least the constitutional reforms taking place, and in particular the BIC, offer the opportunity for such as Scotland and Northern Ireland, with their close historical and cultural links, to fashion a new working relationship independently of London (Linklater 1998; **Scotland on Sunday** 28 June 1998; Ramsay 1998), and this paper will discuss the kind of possibilities - and possible points of contention - which the new arrangements might bring.

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Little of a detailed or definite nature about the role of the Council of the Isles has yet emerged; in keeping with so much of the Blair government's constitutional programme its development looks set to be piecemeal and in accordance with no clear overall vision or plan (Keating and Elcock 1998). The situation in this particular, as well as generally, is eminently fluid. Thus discussion of the future role of the BIC will be necessarily speculative for the most part. Before that, some more comment will be offered on the way the Scottish and Northern Irish questions have been pulled together in recent years.

II

The inclusion of Strand Three in the Agreement dealing with East-West links was in part a reflection of the way Ulster Unionists had imposed themselves on the debate about UK constitutional change as it developed during the late 1980s and 1990s. In practical terms this amounted to 'muscling in' on the issues which the revived demand for a Scottish Parliament gave rise to. The Scottish demand was increasingly looked upon as a likely catalyst to wider constitutional changes, and the Scottish Constitutional Convention which deliberated from 1989 to 1995 was a source of inspiration to those who sought radical democratic renewal in the UK as a whole. While hardly natural constitutional radicals, the Ulster Unionists, led by the cautious figure of James Molyneaux, nonetheless took every opportunity to highlight Northern Ireland's claim to be part of any constitutional re-structuring, and any inconsistency in the government's handling of the constitutional position of the different parts of the UK. Molyneaux duly made contact with the Scottish Constitutional Convention, and on the eve of the 1992 General Election leading Ulster Unionists demanded that any future devolutionary concession to Scotland be granted also to Northern Ireland (Walker 1998; Lynch 1996). The Unionists were alive to the implications of any single constitutional change for the rest of the UK - they gave consideration also to the effects on Northern Ireland of Scottish independence - and saw that there were salient points to make in relation to what might be called 'the nature of Britain/UK' question. They positioned themselves accordingly and made much of those issues in Parliament.

Thus, in the 1992-97 Parliament, Unionists regularly put the government on the spot regarding the inconsistency in their approach to the Scottish and Northern Irish cases. They drew attention, for example, to the value the government appeared to place on Scotland's place in the union in contrast to that of Northern Ireland (**Hansard** 9 March 1993). In 1993 the Ulster

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Unionist MP John Taylor called for 'all party talks' on the future government and administration of Scotland (**Hansard** 5 May 1993), and the then fresh face of Unionism, David Trimble, pointed out to the Scottish Secretary Ian Lang that there was a revealing contrast between himself, who did not want party talks but had a policy, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who wanted talks but had no policy (**Hansard** 9 June 1993). Later that year Taylor called on Lang to assure the House that if a referendum were held in Scotland over any proposed constitutional change an identical one would be held 'elsewhere in the United Kingdom' (**Hansard** 8 December 1993). Although politically somewhat at odds with the Unionists, the Labour opposition were also not averse to making political capital out of the government's inconsistencies, and of the government's failure to address the many anomalies and conundrums inherent in questions of UK constitutional affairs. These centred on contrasting application of principles towards the Scottish and Northern Irish cases.² The government's attempts to depict Northern Ireland as 'exceptional' in the UK context only served to highlight the extent to which there were many 'exceptions' and much diversity lying beneath the surface of the unitary state. Somewhat belatedly it came to be widely appreciated that 'the West Lothian question' had had a fifty-year life as the 'West Belfast question' during Northern Ireland's experience of devolution, and that this devolutionary history still had much of relevance for the rest of the UK, especially in the circumstances of the 1980s and 90s.

Taylor, Trimble and fellow Unionist MP William Ross all tabled questions on Scottish matters, mostly with an Ulster connection real or implied, and special attention was given to Scottish-Ulster links in the policy areas of transport, tourism, education and dealings with the European Union. All of these were to be cited as areas of possible exploration and co-operation through the BIC in the terms of the Belfast Agreement. In 1995 Trimble asked Lang to list 'the joint programmes' between the Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices, to which the reply came that there were no joint programmes as such but various cases of 'close working relationships' between the two departments (**Hansard** 22 March 1995). In raising the question Trimble may have wished to float the idea of more formal Scottish-Ulster administrative harmony. Finally, the Monklands Affair, raising as it did the question of religious sectarianism on the part of the local Lanarkshire council, allowed

²See points made by John McAlion, Scottish Labour MP, in the House of Commons (**Hansard**, vol. 234, c. 307, 8 December 1993). See also Heald, Geaughan and Robb (1998) regarding the Major government, the block grant and devolution for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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Trimble to signal that 'Orange and Green' tensions did not just have political ramifications in Northern Ireland, and that the Scottish and Ulster political cultures had much in common. Indeed, he called in 1994 for the creation in Scotland of 'a moderate, right-of-centre, pro-union alternative to Labour, which the present Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties cannot provide' (**Hansard** 14 June 1994).

It was notable that the Ulster Unionists, under the leadership of David Trimble, responded positively to the election of the Blair government in May 1997 and its constitutional reform agenda. In the House of Commons Trimble said that 'the government's commitment to decentralisation and openness creates opportunities for us' (**Hansard** 16 May 1997). The Unionists had a history of largely pro-Conservative sympathies to live down and they were anxious to show that they were amenable to 'New Labour's' plans for 'New Britain'. Trimble stressed that if arguments for devolution in Scotland were made on the basis of Scotland's separate legal system and social differences, then such arguments applied with equal force in Northern Ireland. He pledged that his party would be in the thick of the debate, and that they would support devolution based on 'sensible co-operation' between the centre and the regions. On the other hand he was against breaking the fiscal unity of the UK, and thus against proposals to give the Scottish Parliament additional taxation powers, and he was at pains to impress upon the Labour Prime Minister that references to 'our country' and 'our nation' should be truly inclusive, and should not censor out 'the British people of Ulster' (**Hansard** 10 May 1997).

This was an important marker to lay down, and it seems no coincidence that the new Labour government has included Northern Ireland in its reform plans, and has produced a wider and more imaginative framework for agreement in the Province than its predecessors. Trimble was to be found endorsing the idea of a Council of the Isles in the autumn of 1997 (**Irish Times** 6 December 1997) and it appears that he was able to wed his desire for a strong East-West dimension to the Labour government's more regionally-conscious, if vague, vision of a new British future (**Parliamentary Brief** 1998). Moreover, the strength of the argument in favour of some institutional expression of the myriad examples of East-West links embracing all of Ireland, North and South, was such as to disarm traditionalist Irish Nationalist opposition. It appears that these Nationalists felt that the inclusion of the Council of the Isles would be the price they would have to pay for the North-South bodies, whose range of powers and functions were confidently expected to be far greater. Nationalists seemed to believe that the BIC would soon assume the role of a mere talking-shop.

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It remains to be seen if such expectations are borne out, but in the meantime, in the wake of the Agreement, there have been interventions to suggest that some parties would wish it to become a much more meaningful body. These views will be examined in the next section. It bears repeating at this juncture, however, that the Unionists, in view of their parliamentary efforts over the last decade or so, have clearly prioritised East-West relations and have talked them up to some effect especially in relation to the Northern Ireland-Scotland relationship. It seems unlikely that they would meekly permit the BIC to lapse into a condition of relative insignificance in the broad scheme of things agreed last Easter Friday.

III

Government ministers have stressed the flexibility which is built into the new constitutional arrangements for Northern Ireland (**The Herald** 15 October 1998), and it does seem to be the case that the BIC could take shape according to the will and the vision of those who invest in it. The Cabinet Office document outlining the 'modus operandi' of the BIC stated that there is 'no theoretical limit to the matters which could be put forward for discussion' (**Irish News** 8 September 1998; Constitution Unit 1998, Appendix B), although the terms of the Belfast Agreement specifically mention examples such as transport links, environmental issues, cultural issues, education, and approaches to EU issues. It is less clear whether the Council is expected to be a forum in which policy is decided in these areas, or whether it may function as a means to the end of co-ordinating policies between different parties involved. Certainly, the clause in the Agreement providing for two or more members to develop bilateral or multi-lateral arrangements between them goes beyond 'consultation' into the possibility of 'joint decision-making' on matters of mutual interest (**The Agreement**, p. 14, para. 10). The Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, has indeed expressed the hope that Scotland and Northern Ireland might exploit this opportunity together, and Mowlam clearly believes that the successful operation of devolutionary arrangements in Scotland and Wales will help the situation in Northern Ireland (**The Herald** 15 October 1998). The Scottish Liberal Democrat leader, Jim Wallace, naturally welcomed a body which is in keeping with his party's federal vision, and looked forward to it developing teeth and exercising real influence (Interview 8 June 1998). From the point of view of the possible enhancement of Scottish autonomy through the BIC, the Scottish National Party has also made positive noises (**The Herald** 25 May 1998; Salmond 1998; Interview with Alex Bell, 16 September 1998).

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The recent analysis by the Constitution Unit of the potential role of the BIC has highlighted the fact that the new body will be embarking on an already trodden path of inter-governmental activity. The BIC will be joining the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body which has deliberated since 1990, a new British-Irish Inter-Governmental Council to replace the earlier variant established with the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, and the recently announced Joint Ministerial Committee on Devolution. The Cabinet Office document on the BIC published in September (Constitution Unit 1998, Appendix B) signalled that the elected institutions of the BIC members might build on the work of the first body and develop inter-parliamentary links, and there would thus appear to be scope for the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly, as well as the other elected bodies, to build a close relationship.

In the case of the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly there is the common factor arising from their legislative capacities, and although they have different legal systems they are likely to face the same predicament of framing legislation in the context of the central government's remaining remit, and the framework set by the European Convention of Human Rights. Notwithstanding the apparently clear definition in the Scotland and Northern Ireland Bills of legislative competencies reserved at Westminster (Mitchell 1998), there will still be many ambiguities and grey areas regarding the legislative licence of the new bodies (Aitken 1998a). It now appears that the Joint Ministerial Committee on Devolution will be the appropriate forum in which energies are directed at preventing the operation of devolution in Scotland and Northern Ireland from being mired in complex legal squabbles (**Hansard** 31 July 1998). Nevertheless, if Scotland and Northern Ireland were to accept the invitation in the Belfast Agreement to develop bilateral arrangements of whatever kind to the point of shaping a common policy, then there may be legal implications which the BIC as a body would have to consider.

Scotland and Northern Ireland are also compellingly brought together over the contentious issue of public expenditure in the UK regions. The prospect of a review of the 'Barnett formula' by which the block grants for both places are calculated and under the terms of which Northern Ireland and Scotland, in that order, have received most in public expenditure per head in the UK, quite evidently provides both with much cause for concern. It would seem, on the face of it, that it would be in the mutual interest of Scotland and Northern Ireland to ensure that any revision of the Barnett formula does not result in public spending failing to match the needs of both places. This in turn means that any new assessment of needs be carried out in a co-operative

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fashion between the central and regional governments, as suggested recently in the Scottish case by Graham Leicester of the Constitution Unit (Leicester 1996). It was speculated before the announcement about the Joint Ministerial Committee on Devolution (Bew 1998) that the BIC could be the forum in which Scotland and Northern Ireland combine to support each other's claims and try to pre-empt any 'English backlash' which threatens to make itself felt on this question, but it is the firm view of the Constitution Unit (Constitution Unit 1998, p.18) that such issues would not be allowed to be raised in the BIC, and that the body will almost certainly not play a 'pivotal' role in the devolution context. Again, the Joint Ministerial Committee on Devolution now appears to be the forum in which such issues will be discussed and worked out.

Nonetheless, ambiguities remain with reference to the provision in the Belfast Agreement for bilateral and multi-lateral action in the context of the BIC: if Scotland and Northern Ireland were to develop common policies in certain areas there may be financial implications which, as in the case of the legal dimension, will involve the BIC in questions of devolutionary practice. Such is the open-ended nature of the government's proposals for the BIC at present, and the uncertainty surrounding the future operation of the devolved Assemblies, that the potential for overlap clearly exists between the different bodies, and it may in practice be no easy task to define respective areas of competence and relevance (Constitution Unit 1998, pp.17-19).

In general, politicians of all parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland (and Wales) will have to adapt to the new responsibilities which their respective devolution arrangements bring, and to face up to some hard choices regarding legislative and executive priorities. As Gerry Hassan has recently put it: 'A Scottish political class - in a way similar to Northern Ireland under Direct Rule - has grown up without responsibility for running things, setting priorities and making tough choices' (Hassan 1998). Both Scotland and Northern Ireland, perhaps through co-operation in the context provided by the Council of the Isles, might share the harsh realities of devolution and help each other to adapt to a changed set of political circumstances.

IV

Since the idea of the Council of the Isles was mooted in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process, there have been suggestions on its role in relation to economic matters in particular. Some observers have seen potential in the new structures for co-operative economic initiatives. Again,

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the Scottish-Ulster relationship has been highlighted. For example, Esmond Birnie, the Ulster Unionist Assembly member and economist, has urged that part of the agenda for the BIC should be the promotion of a Belfast-Glasgow economic corridor, claiming such a venture could provide a much-needed boost to trade and jobs on both sides of the North Channel, and pointing out that the Dumfries and Galloway region of Scotland is currently one of the most economically disadvantaged of the Scottish regions. Birnie also emphasises the importance of better transport links between Scotland and Northern Ireland in connection with increased economic performance and activity (Birnie 1998). In October 1998 the Lord Mayor of Belfast, David Alderdice, said that Northern Ireland and Scotland, far from competing for business, should work together to the mutual good of economic development and the tapping of tourist potential (**The Herald** 22 October 1998). However, Unionist enthusiasm for such possible joint ventures has to be set against the desire on the part of the Nationalists in Northern Ireland and the Irish government to give priority to the development of the island of Ireland as one economic unit, a goal for which they will be likely to fight in the context of the BIC as well as any other.

The question of competition for inward investment and new economic opportunities is potentially problematic in view of the Scottish Parliament's differential taxation powers and possible future use of them. As is the current fear of certain English regions that there will be the temptation on the part of the Scottish Parliament to use these powers to gain advantage in the competition for investment (Keating 1998). This could be another matter to be addressed in the BIC where the co-ordination of investment and planning strategies across the UK - and indeed the Republic of Ireland - might come to be viewed as a 'common sense' priority.

The same may apply to matters concerning the European Union. Again, there appears to be the potential for tension and division between different parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland over applications for funding and assistance. Given the regional dimension to European policy-making, this is an issue which could cut across national identities and could result in regional alliances. Again, the Ulster-South-West Scotland example may be germane. However, the different bodies (Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish and Welsh Assemblies) may succeed in using their new status to achieve greater clout with regard to Europe, and if so there will have to be a consultative process between these governments and central government involving respective sets of civil servants (Leicester 1996; Mitchell 1998; Interview with Jim Wallace, 8 June 1998). In such circumstances, if there is a reluctance to multiply the consultative bodies in existence, there may be

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use made of the BIC structures. Certainly, it seems certain that the relationship of the different nations and regions to the European Union will be a staple feature of the BIC's deliberations for the foreseeable future.

V

Thinking about the Council of the Isles also involves consideration of questions concerning culture and identity. Those intellectual figures discussed above who have done much to refine the concept have been motivated to a large extent by the goals of cultural pluralism and the co-existence of different identities and allegiances (Kearney 1997). They have been dismayed by the tendency in the Northern Ireland conflict for both sides to engage in a 'zero sum' approach to cultural and political matters, and to hanker after the 'victory' of their respective nation-state, either that of the UK or the Irish Republic. The idea of the Council of the Isles is thus of its intellectual time, as acknowledgement is increasingly made of the rights of individuals to hold and express different - perhaps multiple - identities. The 'umbrella' quality of the BIC seems designed to reflect both the social and cultural interactions within these islands and also the layered sense of identity held by many people. The spirit in which it has been argued for and presented politically has been that of an opening-up of cultural channels often politically closed, at least in the context of Northern Ireland. It represents a shift away from the tendency towards 'oneness' and cultural homogeneity in traditional nationalisms, and a repudiation, on a theoretical level at least, of outdated assertions of sovereignty.

Nonetheless, competing agendas may turn the BIC into a site of cultural and identity struggles. There is, for example, the question of the BIC helping to renew and strengthen the idea of British identity, an apparent objective of the Blair government. Here the hope seems to be that the forging of new relationships within the context of the BIC will help smooth the constitutional transitional process and help ensure the success of decentralisation in terms of governance and administration, while at the same time re-vitalising a collective British identity. This is a 'new Unionism', a positive project which some pro-government commentators believe can engage particularly those Unionists in Scotland and Northern Ireland who have been put on the defensive by respective Nationalist pressures. The 'new Unionism' of the constitutional re-structuring project is viewed as an antidote to the 'defeatism' which characterised the Unionist position in the unreformed context (Hassan 1998). Again, intellectually, there is much force in the argument that this kind of Unionism, based on a reforming vision and freed

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from shibboleths about Westminster sovereignty, is in keeping with the pluralist spirit of the times. Moreover, if it turns out to be a vision which does engage the energies of those who wish to renew a broad-based and expansive form of British identity or promote federal ideas, then the BIC would seem the ideal forum in which to make such efforts.

However, others will be likely to want to pursue very different goals through the Council of the Isles. It is, for instance, notable that the Scottish National Party has endorsed the concept warmly, although this is not so surprising given the party's support, independently of the Irish peace process, for a Nordic-Council-type body bringing together Scotland, Wales, England and Ireland (North and South) as equal (national) partners (Kerevan 1998). For the SNP the Council is attractive on account of the opportunity it might afford for Scotland to act independently. The SNP view of European trends is that they are running in favour of the cultivation of strong national identities, and that independent nation-states are best placed to inter-relate with others (Interview with Alex Bell, 10 September 1998). Clearly, the SNP view the Council of the Isles as a forum in which the separate 'Celtic' national identities can be enhanced; Britishness, on the other hand, is regarded as being in inexorable decline as a form of identity.

In conjunction with a desire to see British identity fade, the SNP has also signalled its hope that the Council of the Isles will renew close ties between Scotland and Ireland. While sensitive to the Northern Ireland situation, there is little doubt that Scottish Nationalists are now looking much more purposefully than before at the question of links with the Irish Republic. In Ballina, Co Mayo, in August 1998 the SNP leader Alex Salmond spoke enthusiastically of re-establishing links between Scotland and Ireland which had been 'dislocated by the affairs of the United Kingdom,' and pointed to the Council of the Isles as a structure 'which can allow us to communicate directly, work together on shared interests and influence each other by example'. Salmond listed four priority areas for such exchanges: education, culture and the media, transport and Europe, and even held out the possibility of a shared television channel on one of the digital multiplexes (**Irish Times** 22 August 1998; Salmond 1998).

Significantly, the Irish government had just taken a decision to establish a Consulate General in both Edinburgh and Cardiff, their responsibilities being to develop links with Scotland and Wales, work with Scottish and Welsh representation on the BIC, and report to Dublin on developments in Scottish and Welsh politics after devolution (**The Herald** 1 August 1998). As one influential commentator noted, the move in relation to Scotland at least

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seemed to be an acknowledgement of the nationalistic temper of contemporary Scotland (Millar 1998). Commenting on the Irish move, **The Herald** newspaper called for a clearer definition of the role of the BIC, and endorsed the notion of a renewal of the 'Celtic connection' between Scotland and Ireland. It even observed that some historic links with the North of Ireland, such as Orange extremism, 'we might wish to skirt over' (**The Herald** 15 October 1998).

All of this puts the potential of the Council of the Isles in a different cultural and political light to that favoured by the Ulster Unionists, for whom the idea was meant to have most appeal in the first instance. There is relatively little attention given, in the Scottish media and artistic circles at any rate, to the Ulster-Scots cultural heritage which has been politically galvanised in Northern Ireland by Unionists in response to the identification of Irish Nationalism with Gaelic cultural pursuits. There does seem the prospect of a 'Celtic bias' permeating the deliberations of the BIC on cultural and educational matters, although those promoting Ulster-Scottish cultural ties may have more success in engaging Scottish energies by launching educational initiatives to make the intellectual flowering of the eighteenth century in both places around figures such as Francis Hutcheson much better known and appreciated. On the evidence of recent political wranglings over language issues, it is doubtful if Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Ulster-Scots will all be able to prosper together in terms of funding and educational initiatives (**The Herald** 23 April 1998).

Thus, in spite of government spokespersons like Mo Mowlam playing down the ideological dimension to the BIC and promoting it in terms of 'common sense' and practicalities, competing Unionist and Nationalist agendas are likely to be brought to it. This is certainly not in the 'post Nationalist' and 'post Unionist' spirit of the concept as expounded by intellectual figures like Kearney, but it will take time for traditional notions of identity, allegiance and sovereignty to soften, and cultural matters will carry the potential for political friction. Such friction will be more likely if devolutionary arrangements, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland, are constantly assailed by Nationalist pressures, and if the political cultures in both places continue to be characterised by constitutional uncertainty and dominated by the issue of devolution as a terminus or as a staging post to Scottish independence and Irish unity. It will be interesting to see if the cultural complexities of these islands - the inter-weaving of British and Irish cultural strands - are properly acknowledged and accepted as the framework in which to conduct new relationships, or whether more narrowly focused cultural agendas will prevail.

VI

The new constitutional arrangements, and the BIC in particular, have led more Scottish political figures and commentators to consider how Scotland might relate in the future to both parts of Ireland. There is a growing awareness that Scotland is in a good position to contribute constructively to the Northern Ireland debate after years of virtual silence, that the Scottish voice may represent a beneficial broadening of the 'Anglo-Irish' structures and a balancing force, notwithstanding the potential friction over cultural agendas discussed in the previous section (Walker 1998; Ramsay 1998). There is still caution, a reluctance to encourage speculation about politics in a Home Rule Scotland shaping up more like those of Northern Ireland³, and a fear of sectarianism acquiring a higher profile over issues like education in the context of devolution. Nevertheless, the presence of West of Scotland Labour figures Adam Ingram and John McFall in the Northern Ireland Office, and the intervention in debates on the new Northern Ireland legislation by Norman Godman, are perhaps indications that political interactions are increasing and that Scots have a positive input to make and important lessons to learn.⁴ There seems to be a growing perception that the construction of a new politics in both places which is inclusive, infused with civic values and free from majoritarian assumptions (Porter 1996; Aitken 1998b) will require dialogue and co-operation such as may be appropriate for a body like the Council of the Isles.

Debate over the possibilities of Scottish devolution in the 1970s was an acrimonious and insular affair. This time round perspectives seem broader and more open-ended, and the parallel developments in the Northern Ireland peace process have impinged significantly. There may be continuing uncertainty about the role of the BIC and its relationship to a plethora of other bodies, and it may have to deal with fresh rehearsals of ancient hatreds and cultural antagonisms, but there does appear to be a discernible wish to make it a meaningful institution. There is an adventurous quality to it which

³See the exchange in the House of Commons (*Hansard*, vol. 298, c. 1056-7, 24 July 1997) between Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar and Ulster Unionist MP William Ross regarding the character of Scottish politics under devolution.

⁴There is some contrast between Scottish engagement with current developments in the Northern Ireland peace process, and the lack of a substantial contribution at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. See the comments of Scottish Labour MP Hugh Brown regarding the desirability of a Scottish voice (*Hansard* 26 November 1985).

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has captured a sufficient number of imaginations to improve its chances of proving successful (Dudley Edwards 1998).

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