

Determining the Future

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'Forget Irish freedom, we're all Europeans now!' So goes the claim that the republican struggle is long past its sell-by-date. Of course, the people who make this claim have always been virulently anti-republican; but, now some academics are promoting the theory that national self-determination is no longer relevant to the new world order. They point to processes such as globalisation and internationalisation which have created a more interconnected world. In Europe, this theory is being further advanced with the embryonic single market which, in economic terms, is making national frontiers appear obsolete. The expanding European Union increasingly classifies territory in terms of regions rather than nation states, and on occasions, bypasses national governments. As republicans striving to achieve national self-determination for Ireland as a whole, it is important that we analyse and debate the relevance of this objective in light of these changing international relations.

Republicans have traditionally held to the analysis of James Connolly who spelled out in detail the benefits of national self-determination for Ireland and linked it to a socialist model of international relations. He contended that, 'the most perfect world is that in which the separate existence of nations is held most sacred.' (*Workers' Republic*, 12 Feb. 1916)

He believed that a national democracy was the essential basis from which all other freedoms in a nation could be developed: 'the first requisite for the free development of the national powers needed for our class.' (*Workers' Republic*, 8 April 1916)

In other words, governmental structures in Ireland would be more representative and more accountable to Irish people than similar structures governing Ireland from Britain or elsewhere. They would act as, 'the natural depository of popular power' (*L'Irlande Libre*, Paris 1897). For this reason, the establishment of national self-determination in Ireland was an important component in the overall struggle for social justice. But is this view of the world still relevant to the needs and aspirations of the Irish people as we approach the twenty first century?

In theory, it is still a widely-held view. Self-determination is universally accepted to mean a nation's right to political freedom: to determine its own social, economic, and cultural development without external impediment and without partial or total disruption of the national unity or territorial integrity. This right is underlined in the principles of international law.

Article 1 of the *United Nations' Covenants of 1966* states: 'All peoples have the right to national self-determination. By virtue of that right they determine their economic, social and cultural development.'

Resolution of the United Nations' Organisations on 12th December 1970, states:

All people have the right to self-determination and independence, subjection of the peoples to foreign domination constitutes a grave obstacle to the maintenance of international peace and security and to the development to the peaceful relations between peoples.

In the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples*, Algeria, July 4th, 1976, it is stated: 'Every nation has the fundamental and inalienable right to self-determination. It defines its political status in all freedom without external foreign interference.'

Based on these internationally agreed principles, Sinn Féin has consistently asserted that the Irish people as a whole have the right to national self-determination and that the exercise of this right is a matter of agreement among the people of Ireland. This right to nationhood, independence, and sovereignty has been asserted by Irish people in every generation since 1798. Ireland has also been universally regarded as a single unit, one people and one nation throughout history, before and after partition. British jurisdiction in the northern six counties is clearly in violation of international principles. Therefore the British Government should not be allowed to dictate how we exercise our right to self-determination.

When it comes to the actual exercising of this fundamental principle of self-determination, it is important to recognise that a variety of options are available, and that full independence may not be feasible, practicable, or the preferred option of the people living within each nation. Other options include various levels of autonomy within a multi-national state and a federation of states within a union. An example of such a federation exists in Belgium, made up of French speaking Wallonia and Flemish speaking Flanders. Independence, however, is not a major issue with either the Flemish people, who have been involved in a long struggle for parity of esteem, nor with the Walloons, who have benefited with the greater economic dominance since the formation of the Belgian State in 1830. Whatever option is exercised, it is crucially important that the people of each nation have the free and democratic right to choose how best they can determine their political, social, cultural, and economic development. A nation must be able to do this without repression, domination, partition, or any artificial obstacles being placed in the way, such as the unionist veto in Ireland, or the Spanish Constitution which lays a claim of sovereignty over Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque Country.

Some unionists in Ireland have made the analogy with the Basque Country and claim that Articles 2 and 3 of the 1937 *Irish Constitution* are likewise undemocratic with claims to sovereignty over the whole island of Ireland. This point immediately calls into question the definition of a nation. Each nation is

defined as a distinct and homogeneous people who belong to a particular geographic locality and have deep historical roots in the area. Nationalism, which is a territorial ideology, links historically and culturally-defined communities to political statehood, either as a reality or as an aspiration regardless of class or other social divisions. A nation must have at least some of the important elements such as a distinct language, religion, ethnicity, social customs, sporting traditions, and other forms of cultural identity.

The Basque Country, like Ireland, historically has always had a separate and distinct identity, with a unique language that bears no resemblance to any other European tongue. The six north-eastern counties of Ireland on the other hand, have no historically separate identity of their own, and have always been regarded as an integral part of the Irish nation making any comparison with the Basque Country a flawed analysis. These northern counties were partitioned from the rest of Ireland by an Act of the British Parliament in 1920. This Act, a mere lottery based on a sectarian head count, did not receive a single Irish vote either north or south. It was only during the twentieth century following partition, when unionists adopted the features of a British identity in order to sustain an elitist power at Stormont.

However, with the growing prominence of the theory that we are now living in a post-nationalist world, could it be argued that the case for national independence is becoming redundant? It is important to recognise that the status of a nation needs to be defined, not in any pre-dated idealistic fashion, but with reference to the global realities of the twenty-first century. Humanity has moved on from the basic needs of food and shelter that could be provided within a single geographical locality, to the essential requirements of modern times such as cars, oil, gas, electricity, high-tech engineering, computers, fax machines, and so on, which require trade through international cooperation. Territorial boundaries are becoming more diluted with the accelerating pace of global integration in political, economic, and social terms.

This globalisation process can be clearly illustrated by the significant expansion of telecommunications and international mass consumerism during the past three decades. Fashion trends in clothing, pop music, videos, fast food chains, indoor shopping centres, and so on, create images that are promoted by the advertising industry and these reflect a drive by transnational corporations to achieve ever greater marketing of diversity. National identities are being sidetracked as a new Western culture sweeps the globe.

Sovereignty, a nation's capacity to control its economic and political development, is gradually being reshaped by globalisation. National governments are limited in their ability to formulate policies on behalf of their citizens due to the constraints of the inter-connected global economy. Transnational coalitions of bureaucrats are exercising greater control over national economies than elected politicians in many countries. Military power to enforce state demands has also been weakened or made irrelevant by the shift to multilateral

diplomacy under the UN umbrella. In addition, many political, social, economic, environmental, and other issues often must be addressed through international cooperation nowadays hence the pre-eminence of international structures such as the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), and so on.

However, while we must recognise that world conditions are changing rapidly due to globalisation, and the relevancy of the nation state is being challenged, it would be wrong to argue that self-determination is becoming an out-dated concept. The maintenance of international peace, for example, is largely dependent on the order and security provided by nation states. When the right to national self-determination is denied to a people, whether through the partial or complete occupation and domination of one nation over another, or through some form of outside interference, the maintenance of international peace is seriously undermined. In the Balkans, as in the north east of Ireland, an undercurrent of friction existed below the surface for decades due to certain conditions created by injustice before armed conflict erupted. Other European-based conflicts have occurred over the political status of the Basque Country, Kurdistan, and most recently (January 1995) in Chechnya. Yet, in a developed Europe approaching the twenty-first century, armed struggle should not be required or left as the only effective method for each nation to bring its case for self-determination to the fore.

Moreover, the idea that increasing international trade cooperation will diminish sovereignty completely is misleading. States have always operated under constraints of all kinds, none has ever been free to act completely independently from external pressures. In addition, international economic decisions are in the main implemented through the structures of the nation state. The post-nationalist theory is also challenged by the sweeping changes in Eastern Europe during the past five years. Many nations grasped their right to self-determination following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the break up of the former Yugoslavia, and the separation of the Czech Republic from Slovakia. In part, this desire for nation statehood is driven by the realisation that only nation states can negotiate in a global economy to protect and advance their people's interests. Many are now seeking to form alliances with the EU or a new economic realignment of Eastern European states, both of which strategies require as a prerequisite the status of nation statehood. Therefore, for many people in Eastern Europe, national self-determination is essential for economic progress as much as for social and cultural development.

Even within the constraints of the global economy, national self-determination enables a government to decide on what basis international relationships should be formed, the terms of cooperation, and to bargain for what they determine to be in the best interests of the nation. This is essential as each nation, in accordance with its climate and geographic location, will have traditional, locally-based industries which are the backbone of national econo-

mies. The fishing industry, for example, is significant for countries along the Atlantic Coast, the same with the production of wine in France and timber in Scandinavia. These industries need to be nurtured and protected, and this requires the correct management of international trade by government.

National governments are also essentially responsible for policing, the administration of justice, education, and health. Providing that self-determination is properly exercised, the national government is the main institution to which the people will generally give their allegiance. This is important for several reasons. Confidence and public accountability is vital for the functioning of a police service and the maintenance of civil law and order. Education should be tailored to suit the particularities of local employment, and especially to accommodate national languages which are among the most important symbols of nationhood. In countries like Ireland, where the first language is in minority status due to a history of suppression, positive discrimination is required to the education system and national media to ensure its survival and recovery. As these public services require the greatest public expenditure, they can only be properly supported by government through the control of the national budget and public spending, although this should occur in a context of decentralised and fully accountable local-government structures.

Another argument, used to undermine nationalism generally, is the growing rise of semi-fascist parties and movements in France, Austria, Belgium, and Germany, already attracting several million voters. There has also been a huge increase in the number of attacks on Arab, African, Turkish, and Kurd immigrants in these countries. Nationalism is categorised in two very different ways: 'progressive' in nations suffering a legacy of colonialism (such as Ireland and many Third World countries); and 'xenophobic/racist' (opposed to an 'enemy' within) in countries with an imperial past. Those who are opposed to our progressive type of nationalism often, for political reasons, make the false analogy of linking it with images of racist parties such as the National Front. The two aspects are clearly distinct; although, in the most extreme circumstances, nationalism can evolve into racism by trying to ground national supremacy on pseudo-biological criteria.

It is therefore important we acknowledge that people living within each nation must be recognised in inclusive terms, not exclusively. In the modern world, no nation exists where all its members are gathered within its geographic territory. Irish people, for example, are scattered to every corner of the globe. Likewise Indian, Chinese, and Italian people have settled in this country. The rights of all citizens, both indigenous and immigrant, and all minorities, such as travellers, must be accommodated without oppression or discrimination. This can be best achieved within a progressive society in which the right to national self-determination has been properly exercised.

However, the most important aspect of the nation today, and in every generation since the Middle Ages, is the focus it provides for personal and

communal identity. As republicans, we only have to examine the commitment and sacrifice of the many thousands of men and women from a wide range of backgrounds who have taken part in the struggle for national liberation in Ireland. In broader terms, almost every citizen can have some sense of national identification through sporting affiliation, language, music, and so on, especially among immigrants overseas. The potency and symbolism of nationalism was clearly evident during the 1994 soccer World Cup, particularly among the Irish, Swiss, and Swedish peoples.

As our struggle progresses ever closer to the achievement of Irish national self-determination, we can be assured the status of the nation will remain of the utmost relevance. Politically, it provides the most effective and democratic framework for addressing the contemporary problems of our society and its future needs. Culturally and psychologically, it remains of critical significance in structuring the political and social organisation of people. Far from being secondary or obsolete, the nation, nationalism, and the idea of the national interests will remain central elements in contemporary European and world politics.