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Title	Redefining southern nationalism : a political perspective ; an academic perspective
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Publication date	2001
Conference details	Revised text of two lectures presented as part of the seminar series "Redefining the union and the nation: new perspectives on political progress in Ireland", organised jointly by the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland and the Institute for British-Irish Studies. The lectures were presented in UCD on 3 April 2000.
Series	IBIS Working Papers; 1; Redefining the union and the nation: new perspectives on political progress in Ireland Lecture Series; 1
Publisher	University College Dublin. Institute for British-Irish Studies
Link to online version	http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/wp2001/01_cri1.pdf
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/2217

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REDEFINING SOUTHERN NATIONALISM

—A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Desmond O'Malley, TD

—AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Tom Garvin

IBIS working paper no. 1

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No. 1 in the lecture series "Redefining the union and the nation:
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of University Rectors in Ireland

Working Papers in British-Irish Studies
No. 1, 2001

**Institute for British-Irish Studies
University College Dublin**

Working Papers in British-Irish Studies
No. 1, 2001

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ISSN 1649-0304

ABSTRACTS

REDEFINING SOUTHERN NATIONALISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Southern Irish nationalism was traditionally aggressive and negative, and tended to view Northern Ireland as a colonial remnant; but economic protectionism and isolationism did little to stem the flow of emigrants out of the country. Evolution under the leadership of Sean Lemass from 1959 onwards led to a more outward-looking Ireland, but the more negative aspects of Irish nationalism began to appear again in the 1970s. The tension between two forms of republicanism should be resolved, the author argues, by an effort by liberal democrats to reclaim the term for themselves, redefining it as a belief in the primacy of the people through an exclusively democratic process.

REDEFINING SOUTHERN NATIONALISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The phenomenon of nationalism, the leading political ideology of the late twentieth century, is intellectually opportunist and intrinsically revisionist. In Ireland, political cultural change and the break-up of the alliance between nationalism and Catholic triumphalism was delayed by a number of factors, including British-Irish tensions, the great depression of 1929, isolationism during the second world war and misguided economic and educational policies after 1945. Ireland missed out on the economic boom of the post-war period, much of its energy diverted into the pursuit of linguistic revival. Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century has rapid cultural change been associated with a new, more pluralist, form of nationalism.

Publication information

This contains the revised text of two lectures presented as part of the seminar series "Redefining the union and the nation: new perspectives on political progress in Ireland", organised jointly by the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland and the Institute for British-Irish Studies. The lectures were presented in UCD on 3 April 2000.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Desmond O'Malley, TD, has been a Dáil deputy since 1968. He served as Minister for Justice and as Minister for Industry and Commerce in Fianna Fail governments, but was expelled from the party in 1985 for condemning party policy on family planning. He established a new party, the Progressive Democrats, in 1985, and was party leader until 1993.

Tom Garvin is Professor and Head of the Department of Politics at UCD. He has published extensively on Irish politics, and is author of *The evolution of Irish nationalist politics* (Gill and Macmillan, 1981), *Nationalist revolutionaries in Ireland 1858-1928* (Clarendon Press, 1987) and *1922: the birth of Irish democracy* (Gill and Macmillan, 1996).

REDEFINING SOUTHERN NATIONALISM— A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Desmond O'Malley

I

The story is told of an Englishman who sought guidance from an Irishman on the complexities of political attitudes on this island. “It is very simple”, came the answer. “In the north they love England but hate the English; in the south, they hate England but love the English”. The story may be apocryphal but it highlights the difficulty of defining nationalism, or unionism, or loyalism, or republicanism, or any of the other “isms” that inhabit the Irish body politic.

My task tonight is to seek to redefine southern nationalism; but before redefining it as it now is, it may be useful to define it first as it used to be.

II

For perhaps forty years after independence southern nationalism was essentially an aggressive and negative nationalism. It was almost as if the terms “Irish” and “anti-British” were synonymous or interchangeable. Effectively, we defined ourselves in terms of our historic conflict with Britain; and that conflict was seen to endure in the struggle to end partition. The Northern Ireland state was viewed as the last British outpost on the island of Ireland, a remnant of the old colonial structure. There was little attempt to understand Unionism or to engage with it. There was virtually no acceptance that the Northern majority had any right to determine their own constitutional position.

Economically, southern nationalism adhered to a doctrine of self-reliance. Protectionism was the order of the day. There was a sense of isolationism which allowed us to pursue an “economic war” with Britain even though the consequences for Ireland were horrendous. The Second World War highlighted some of the inconsistencies in anglophobic nationalism. We were not going to fight on behalf of the old enemy: we would remain neutral instead. Yet, it is widely recognised now that if we were neutral, we were neutral in favour of Britain.

There were inconsistencies also in the economic field. Yes, we had secured our political independence and freedom. But for hundreds of thousands of Irish people of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s freedom from England meant little more than the freedom to emigrate to England.

III

The evolution of southern nationalism was slow, but I think it is fair to say that that evolution began when Sean Lemass became Taoiseach in 1959. Lemass was a veteran of the War of Independence—indeed, he took part in the 1916 rising. But he wanted to face the future rather than be imprisoned by the past. Crucially, he recognised that, in the Irish context, real economic nationalism and independence would require policies which were outward-looking, not introspective. Ably assisted by brilliant civil servants such as Kenneth Whitaker and John Leydon he initiated the internationalisation of the Irish economy which provided the foundation for the economic prosperity which we in this country enjoy today.

It was Lemass too who finally began to thaw out our frigid relations with Unionism. Today, meetings between Bertie Ahern and David Trimble are so commonplace that they hardly make the news anymore. Things were very different back in the mid-1960s and the meetings which took place between Lemass and his Northern counterpart, Terence O'Neill, were groundbreaking events by any standards.

WT Cosgrave and Eamon de Valera were the dominant political figures of the earlier independent Ireland. Between them, they headed the government of this country for a total of thirty-five years. Lemass held the position of Taoiseach for just six; but I think the Ireland of 2000 is much more the Ireland of Lemass than it is the Ireland of Cosgrave or of de Valera. Lemass sowed the seeds for a new kind of southern nationalism, a positive nationalism that was more extrovert, more confident, less threatening and more vibrant than anything that had gone before.

The process of change was slow, however, and within a few years of Sean Lemass's retirement as Taoiseach the old, negative aspects of Irish nationalism were on view again.

IV

For 30 years the Provisional IRA would wage a cruel and dirty war in pursuit of an atavistic "Brits Out" strategy. For 30 years they would so besmirch the name of nationalism that many Irish people no longer felt comfortable calling themselves nationalists. It is ironic that the ultimate effect of the Provos' long war has been to undermine totally the political philosophy upon which their campaign was based.

It is now accepted—even by the Provos themselves—that the principle of consent applies. It is now accepted that the people of Northern Ireland have the right to determine their own future. Articles 2 and 3 are gone. And it is now accepted that normal, friendly relations should prevail between Ireland and Britain as neighbouring states and as fellow members of the European Union. A lot of what we were told were "core values" is gone.

Southern nationalism has matured. It is now virtually unrecognisable from the political creed that dominated in the first four decades after independence. It has, in fact, redefined itself.

The pace of change in Ireland just now is quite extraordinary. Instead of labour surpluses we now have labour shortages. Instead of emigration we now have immigration. Instead of national poverty we have national prosperity. Essentially, we are making the transition from being one of the developed world's poorer economies to being one of the developed world's wealthier economies. That transition has proven difficult in other countries and it could prove difficult here too.

Prosperity, by its nature, produces diversity. There is a drab sameness about poverty. Immigrants arrive with new religions, new cultures and new languages. Former emigrants return with new ideas and new attitudes. Foreign influences become more pervasive through improved access to the media, to overseas contacts and through foreign travel.

The problem is that certain strains of nationalism find it very difficult to cope with diversity: one only has to look at what happened under the Nazis in Europe in the 1930s for proof of this. So how are we in Ireland going to cope with diversity? What political model will we evolve to cope with our rapidly changing situation? What new forms will nationalism take on in the South of Ireland?

According to some media commentators Sinn Fein may offer one such model. In government north and south their political model could come to dominate in both parts of this island, or so we are told. Sinn Fein is certainly nationalist on political matters. But it is decidedly socialist on economic matters. It seems to me that the party could be described as embracing what might be called national socialism. They hate those who disagree with them. On reflection I don't think the Sinn Fein model is what either part of this country needs in the years ahead.

V

History shows that the political model best capable of accommodating diversity and promoting prosperity is that of the liberal democratic republic. If Irish nationalism is to redefine itself it could do so by reclaiming for civil society the ownership of the word "republican".

To me a republican is someone who believes in the primacy of the people through an exclusively democratic process. To me a republican is someone who believes in promoting opportunity for all and privilege for none. To me a republican is someone who respects the rights of others freely to hold and peacefully to express opposing views. To me a republican is someone who believes in the guiding principle of tolerance as the basis of civilised living in society. Defined in those terms I am proud to call myself a republican.

I got myself into a lot of trouble back in the mid-1980s for saying that I stood by the Republic. Fifteen years on, I still do.

REDEFINING SOUTHERN NATIONALISM— AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Tom Garvin

I

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 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.

II

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 “priests 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.

III

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 became studiously and monistically

Catholic, despite a genuine streak of liberalism and tolerance toward minorities that was never quite snuffed out by fundamentalists. Each, absurdly, rebuked the other for not living up to English liberal orthodoxies.

Second, the great depression of 1929-39 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 of 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 was 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 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.

IV

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 spancelled 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 a 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 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.

V

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 interests 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.

VI

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 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.

