

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION; THE ROLE OF THE IRISH DIASPORA

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We were fortunate in the Irish peace process, compared to some other conflicts, that no outside government was actively fomenting strife, and with the exception of some isolated incidents, such as a Libyan arms shipment to the IRA, outside influences were predominantly benign. We have already heard of the EU influence, positive as an inspiration how to transcend even very deep wounds of history, in the helpful way it softened the contours of contested sovereignty, and in the significant practical help it gave, and still gives to the work of reconciliation. However no history of the peace process can overlook the enormous contribution made to it by the Irish Diaspora in the United States, and the formal US involvement, which it leveraged. I will concentrate on this dimension, both for its intrinsic importance and because I had more than ten years personal engagement with it, as Consul-General in New York in the early eighties, as Ambassador in Washington from 1997 to 2002, and indeed at many points in between.

I believe that, like Tolstoy's famous comment about unhappy families, each political conflict is unique in its own way, and so also is the degree, which a Diaspora community can promote its resolution. The potential of the Irish Diaspora in the US was enhanced by a number of factors, few of which were unique to them, although perhaps the particular mix or combination was.

In the first place their number was impressive. In 2006 some 42 million Americans, about 12% of the population self-reported Irish ancestry. Of course this is a genealogical statistic, not an indicator of attitude or commitment, but obviously even a small fragment of that number could be a significant constituency, especially within an immensely powerful nation.

Secondly it was a community with a long record of political engagement, both in mainstream American politics and on Irish issues, in the latter respect going back almost two centuries. Ireland was an intensely political society, indeed a pioneer of some of the techniques of modern democracy, and Irish emigrants, who faced no language barrier, took to American politics with what some Americans felt was a lamentable gusto.

Ireland's unhappy history, and, later, nationalist resentment at partition was strongly motivational for some currents of Irish-American opinion, and memories of past injustices often became

consecrated in family memory. Indeed a persistent challenge for successive Irish Governments was to prevent such sentiments from translating into support for political violence.

It added greatly to the influence of the US dimension that British policy-makers, ever since the first great waves of post-Famine emigration, have been acutely sensitive to the damage Irish – Americans might inflict on Britain's most cherished international relationship, that with The US. Even without overt pressure, the mere fact of US interest could inspire British policy-makers to move from the default state of exasperated disengagement to a more proactive search for progress. . Indeed, Baroness Thatcher, questioned in her retirement why she, the doughty champion of British prerogative, had signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement which gave Dublin a formal role on Northern Ireland issues, is said to have replied 'the Americans made me do it'. Obviously there was no American diktat, but Mrs. Thatcher had probably grown exasperated at President Reagan's habit of enquiring amiably about Northern Ireland at their meetings, taking up time she no doubt felt he could have more usefully devoted to absorbing her guidance on the proper management of the world.

While each Diaspora has its own individual features, I believe it is true in most cases that there will scarcely ever be a spontaneous identity of views between the Diaspora and the home country. Cross- purposes are almost inevitable, and this is natural. The Irish Diaspora is composed mostly of American citizens and will view matters through that lens. That can bring a salutary and purposeful optimism to bear, but also on occasion overlook complications, which those at home know from their different experience, have to be accommodated rather than dismissed. The first task is therefore a process of respectful dialogue, to produce a platform all can endorse.

In the Irish case the touchstone in that regard was the rejection of political violence in favor of exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Some elements of the Diaspora, not the most numerous but among the most vociferous, reasoned that since it took violence to win Irish independence the same approach was needed to win Irish unity. They generally accepted that Irish Governments would not advocate violence, but resented greatly that we would not share in a broad front which included some who did, not realizing that advocating violence and condoning it are just different and narrowly separated degrees of the same unacceptable policy. Irish Governments unwaveringly maintained this stance, even boycotting, when I was Consul-General, the iconic New York St Patrick's Day parade when a prominent IRA fundraiser was nominated Grand Marshal, something that earned me the first death threats of my career.

Over time we refined our approach, not to soften in any way our message that political violence was totally unacceptable and also counterproductive, but to put it in a context Irish-Americans could relate to, stressing our shared concern to see progress, our common pride in Irish heritage and culture and concern to resolve immigration problems .Our diplomats had long been active on the issue at the Washington level, and had learned to harness the very useful political liturgy surrounding St Patrick's Day there to create a high-level focus on it. Now we began to engage more intensively at the retail or grass roots level also.

That grass-roots level was important for its own sake, but also as the sounding-box from which US policy-makers, incomparably more important as agents of influence, took their cue. Here it took people a little time to distinguish between politicians who merely ticked the populist boxes on Ireland, often outdoing everyone in fiery rhetoric, and those whose more sincere engagement and usually greater responsibilities required them to be judicious and circumspect.

It was our great good fortune that over the past two generations or so the higher reaches of US politics included an array of outstanding personalities who used their influence and insights to support the concerns of the Irish Government, closely aligned with John Hume and his colleagues, to find an accommodation which respected both unionist and nationalist identity. The late Speaker Tappan O'Neill and Senator Edward Kennedy would be very high on that roll of honour, but it included many others in both Houses, including Senator Mitchell, who honours us with his presence, and whose contribution to peace was so vital at many levels. Their efforts ensured the interest of successive US Presidents since Jimmy Carter, of which two, Presidents Reagan and Clinton, were particularly impact.

The result was that the American dimension advanced the cause of peace in Ireland on several different levels:

- The active interest by so many influential Americans motivated all concerned, including successive British Governments, to give the problem the priority it deserved, but had often lacked in the past.
- Those who contemplated abandoning violence worried that this might again lead to a policy of neglect, or that the formidable resources of British statecraft might again marginalize nationalist interests. Active US involvement amounted to a tacit guarantee that a manifestation of bad faith from any quarter would draw censure from very powerful quarters.

- By a happy coincidence both unionist and nationalist traditions in Ireland take a justified pride in the contribution made by their kinsfolk to the building of the United States, and the American relationship had therefore positive connotations for both sides. This was skillfully built on by American Presidents and other leaders to bring the sides together informally on American ground, reinforcing the contacts and confidence needed to offset the polarization of Northern Ireland politics. Those moving from violence found a degree of political mentoring from US civil society in that transition more acceptable than it might have been from elsewhere.
- The close friendship which the US Government maintained with the British and Irish Governments on many different levels enabled them to act as candid friend to both, mostly in low-key private ways, but occasionally with public “tough love”, as when Gerry Adams was granted his first US visa, a decision which caused hurt at the time, although President Clinton’s decision would now be generally accepted as a wise one.
- A bonus, so to speak, was the quality of the American talents which Ireland was able to draw on, well exemplified in Senator Mitchell’s extraordinarily skilful and dedicated contribution. President Clinton was once described to me by an awe-struck official as being his own desk-officer on Ireland, which was true both in terms of his extraordinary grasp of detail and the generous dedication of his time. Ambassador Kennedy-Smith reflected his commitment on the ground in Ireland with great political acumen and energy and there were many other distinguished Americans who lent their talents to pursuing and consolidating peace, leaving Ireland forever in their debt.
- Finally, there was the US financial contribution to the Ireland Funds, in cooperation with the EU which while not massive by US budgetary standards, helped orient the communities towards cooperation in ways other funds might not have achieved, thus promoting the attitudinal change which is always the final frontier of peace-making, once institutions have been reformed.

I have concentrated on the role of the Diaspora in the peace process, since the resolution of the conflict was the enabling condition for so much else, including economic development. Attracting inward investment is a major plank in the development strategies of both parts of the island, and the presence of people of Irish heritage in the upper echelons of important corporations is a significant potential resource for both. Naturally such business leaders will not make investment

decisions based on their sentiments towards Ireland – indeed it would probably be legally actionable if they did – but they can create access to make a sales pitch, almost equally valuable if the product is good enough. They can also provide invaluable advice to the Governments, especially in the rapidly changing world of the information-age industries.

Tourism is another area where the Diaspora are an obvious opportunity, indeed are a captive market in genealogical tourism, since if your ancestors come from Donegal, that is the only place to sample the world they lived in, visits which a successful tourism industry should be able to build on for further business.

A further area of great relevance is the cultural field, and not only in the sense that the Diaspora is receptive to Irish cultural products. Diaspora networks begin as family and interpersonal networks. These become weakened and disappear with the passage of time. The residual common ground, which then remains between Diaspora and home country, is essentially cultural, using that word in its widest sense, so culture becomes the factor, which maintains interest, as well as being the springboard for new interactions. This has been reflected in the work of Irish promotional bodies such as Culture Ireland in recent years.

The great tide of nineteenth-century emigration, reinforced by periodic surges in the twentieth, meant that the spontaneous and informal links between Ireland and the US were sufficient to ensure that links with that Diaspora remained vital and active. There is now a growing awareness that such links will in future need to be reinforced with new structures. The Internet, with its ability to organize widely dispersed groups, for example people around the globe with links to a particular locality, has not yet been used to anything like its full scope.

The new awareness of the importance of the Diaspora was reflected on the symbolic level in an amendment to the Irish Constitution in 1999, affirming the nation's special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad. A committee on the Constitution currently being organized will consider a possible role for the Irish abroad in elections to the Irish legislature.

On the practical level, one recent initiative with I believe particular potential is the development of a "Global Network", involving some 300 top business leaders around the globe with Irish links or affinity. For the last three years this group has met in a kind of "Davis" format in Ireland, with the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and panoply of other Irish decision-makers. It has among other initiatives led to a round-table on investment in Ireland held in New York last February, hosted by President Clinton. Even more intensive activities are planned for next year, to add to its

current work, such as facilitating seed-capital and mentoring for Irish start-ups, and the placement of Irish graduates.

I hope I have made clear that the generous interest in Ireland of the Irish-American community, and the US involvement it inspired was a major resource in our search for peace, as it can be in other respects also. I have not the time, or indeed the scholarship, to draw parallels with other Diaspora communities in the US, but I hope the Irish experience may prompt reflections by some in the audience better qualified to do so. It suggests at any rate that a partnership with a Diaspora community in resolving conflict is at a minimum always worth exploring.

Finally for connoisseurs of history and its karma, it is pleasant to think that values such as democracy, pluralism and respect for diversity which Irish people like to think they helped establish in the United States were reflected back at the end of the twentieth century to help resolve a problem on our island which we had failed to resolve by our unaided efforts.

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