Union and Unity:
Redefinitions of ‘Ireland’
as a European nation

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April 2001
Redefinitions of Ireland as a European Nation

This is a time of great questioning for all of us in Ireland, North and South. We ask ourselves more searchingly than ever before “what is Ireland?”, “what is it to be Irish?”, and “what is to be the future of our island?”

Questions of national identity – the constitution, meaning and destiny of the ‘nation’ – continue to abound within European states today. The answers to these questions change over time, nationalism being a process or practice rather than a ‘given’ (Brubaker 1996:7; Hall 1990:222). This paper contends that the European Union has become integrally involved in the definition of national identity in the arena of the official discourse of its member-states. Hence, ‘Europe’ has become more than a context for the fulfilment of national interests and is actually conceived as a dynamic of nationalism itself, for it has changed the way in which the constitution, meaning and destiny of nationhood are delineated. Such a process has had particular implications for the Republic of Ireland, where the definition of the ‘nation’ has been integrally associated with a colonial legacy and political conflict. The political and conceptual implications of European union have been frequently interpreted in Irish official nationalist discourse with reference to Ireland’s relationship with Britain and Northern Ireland. This paper examines the resulting inter-relation of nationalist and European discourses, with specific focus on continuity and change in the ideal-typical depiction of the meaning of Irish national identity. In defining Ireland as a European nation, members of the Irish governing élite have been able to present ‘sharing of sovereignty’ as the fulfilment of Irish independence and constitutional change as the preservation of Irish nationhood.

‘The Nation’ in Discourse

Nationalism, as Periwal (1995:229) notes, is essentially political in its “construction and contestation of concepts of identity”, and the ‘nation’ itself is consequently a political as much as a cultural or territorial entity. National identity as the
representation of this ‘imagined community’ is, although deliberately imbued with cultural or ethnic features, also intensely political, in that different aspects of identity are emphasised by the political élite in response to a particular context (Anderson 1991; Billig 1995:83, 106; Brass 1991:50). Hence, although the logic of nationalism is that ‘the nation’ should have its own state, the definition of this ‘nation’ can vary widely according to international context, historical period and location. Fundamental changes in nationalist discourse can thus occur within a State, and official nationalism in Ireland changed its definition of the Irish ‘nation’ throughout the twentieth century. Nationalist discourse of Ireland as a nation-state has always been elaborated in the light of its own incompleteness, as seen in the ‘national policy’ of the re-unification of the 26 county Irish State and the six counties of Northern Ireland.4 Yet, while partition remains, the conceptualisation of the Irish nation with regards to Northern Ireland and Great Britain has changed substantially in the past eighty years. In order to trace the progress of this conceptual change, this paper considers the nationalist discourse (specifically that concerned with representing and defining the ‘nation’) of members of the political élite in Ireland.

Members of the political élite may be distinguished from other actors in the discursive order by their credibility - necessary for the general acceptance of their discourse - and their accountability (Burton and Carlen 1979:8). The forms of nationalist discourse analysed include statements (written or spoken) of high profile members of the political élite and government publications on the subject of EEC membership. This paper particularly focuses on the speeches and statements of four of the most influential members of the Irish political élite who made a substantial contribution to Irish political discourse in a period that together covers the forty years since Ireland’s application to the EEC. They were selected because of their prominence in debates over Ireland’s position in Europe as well as their positions as Government Ministers and Taoisigh: Jack Lynch (1966-73, 1977-79), Charles Haughey (1979-81, 1982, 1987-92), Garret FitzGerald (1981-82,1982-87), and Bertie

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4 Members of the Irish Government continually reiterate the policy of the re-unification of Ireland embodied in the Irish Constitution. For example, at the height of tensions within Northern Ireland in 1969, the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, stated that: “it is, and has been, [the Government’s] policy to seek the re-unification of the country by peaceful means” (Lynch 1971:8).
Ahern (1997-present). Jack Lynch continued to lead Ireland in the progressive economic path instigated by his predecessor, Seán Lemass, but as well as leading Ireland into the EEC, his first term as Taoiseach was marked by the rising violence in Northern Ireland and the imposition of direct rule by Britain in 1972. The subsequent tension that arose in British-Irish relations continued throughout a period of political instability and economic underdevelopment until the late 1980s. FitzGerald and Haughey dominated the Irish political scene at this time, appearing as implacable opposites; nonetheless, their approach to European union was notably similar. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 was built upon in 1993 with the Downing Street Declaration (Reynolds and Major) and the Framework Document of 1995 (Bruton and Major). Together, these efforts build an improved relationship between Britain and Ireland that contributed to the Agreement signed by Ahern in 1998.

The Good Friday Agreement was signed and endorsed by referendum in 1998, leading to the most substantial changes to the Irish Constitution regarding the position of Northern Ireland since its enrolment in 1937. Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of Ireland stated that “the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland” and claimed the Irish nation’s “jurisdiction over the whole territory”. Moreover, it was considered (according to judgements of the Irish Supreme Court in 1975 and 1990) a “constitutional imperative” that the politicians of the Irish State work towards the reunification of Ireland, albeit by peaceful means (Article 29) (Goodman 2000:140). Under the terms of the Agreement, Articles 2, 3 and 29 were altered in such a way as to attempt to remove what some residents in Northern Ireland considered to be a threatening claim from the Republic. Article 2 now defines the members of the Irish nation as all the citizens of Ireland and all those born on the island who, as their “entitlement and birthright”, choose to be so. Article 3 reiterates that reunification of Ireland is the “firm will of the Irish nation”, but clearly states that this would occur by the “democratically expressed” consent of the majority of people in “both jurisdictions of the island”. Such modifications, involving official recognition of the legitimacy of Northern Ireland, represented significant movement in terms of Irish official nationalism, to which the speeches and statements of Ahern contributed. Official nationalist discourse in contemporary Ireland reflects both
change and continuity since the leadership of Lynch, Haughey and FitzGerald, whose positions on the subject of Irish membership of the EEC were complemented by government publications on the subject. These texts were presented to give a concise and particular impression of European union and its implications to an audience that subsequently endorsed related changes to the Constitution of Ireland. The portrayal of European integration in such sources, therefore, reflects the popular as well as the official conceptualisation of the Irish nation and its place in the world.

Ireland as the Island

In the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the Irish Free State, ‘Irishness’ continued to be referred to in official discourse along the same inclusive lines as it had been by the majority of the nationalist élite prior to independence, i.e. on an all-island basis, regardless of ‘cultural’ background. A controversial product of compromise, the 1921 Constitution of the Irish Free State stated that “the National life and unity of Ireland” awaited restoration (Preamble) and made provision for the consensual integration of Northern Ireland into the Free State (Article 83). The belief that partition (imposed by the 1920 Government of Ireland Act) was temporary was reflected in contemporary official discourse:

5 Following a Supreme Court ruling in favour of Patricia McKenna, an MEP for the Green Party, the Irish Government have, since the referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, had to publish information on the EEC/EU that was objective, rather than written to encourage a ‘yes’ vote in referendums.

6 Surveys in Ireland since 1973 have shown a consistently high level of popular support for membership of the European Union, and this has been reflected in referendum results. The 1972 referendum to permit membership of the EEC (3rd Constitutional Amendment) was passed with 83% in favour. 70% of the electorate supported the Single European Act in the 1987 referendum (10th Amendment). Ratification of the Treaty of European Union (11th Amendment) was permitted by a referendum vote of 69% in 1992. The Treaty of Amsterdam (18th Amendment) was ratified following a vote of 62% in favour that occurred on the same day as the referendum to alter the Constitution in line with the Good Friday Agreement (19th Amendment), for which 95% voted affirmatively (Coakley 1999:372).

7 At a period in which socio-biological notions of nationality were commonly accepted, it is interesting to note that the those in favour of self-government tended to emphasise the unity of the Irish nation whilst allowing for what they saw as its ethno-cultural diversity. Such a viewpoint is elaborated by Home Rule advocate, Mrs J. R. Green:

But it is not on purity of race that Ireland, any more than other countries, would rely. Difference in blood was recognised, but it was not held a bar to patriotism. Ireland was the common country to which all races who entered it were bound by every human interest. It had a unity of its own, which as ‘The Pale’ shrank and the sense of country deepened, laid hold of the minds of the later as of the earlier inhabitants. (Green 1912:223)
And of course, as a nation Ireland has no land frontier at all…The present frontier is thus clearly seen as a political contrivance which cannot endure, for it ignores historical, territorial and economic realities.\(^8\)

However, after the 1925 Boundary Agreement, which failed to deliver the anticipated re-unification or even re-partition, the political élite considered that Irish national identity needed to be defined in more specific terms than residence on the island of Ireland. Northern Ireland may have been considered to be an ‘artificial’ entity by the political élite of the Irish State, yet the majority of the population of the six counties did not associate the territory on which they lived with a need for government outside the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. Nationalist discourse in Ireland thus began to construct a definition of national identity that legitimised the Irish State in terms that went beyond the territorial separation of Ireland and Great Britain. Irish nationhood had to be represented as so clearly distinct from British statehood that the political implications (i.e. the right to self-determination) were indisputable.

The Post-Colonial Quest for Integrity

Irish nationalist discourse sought to depict the State or, after 1948, Republic of Ireland as representing the essence of Irish nationhood as it had been before subsumed under British rule. This process of utilising cultural myths to support a political claim was not new to Ireland; indeed, at the turn of the century, Ireland “already possessed the entire series of symbols which were to be found in all European nation-states” (Alter 1987:10-17). The quest for self-government during the Home Rule debates had seen nationalist movements of all shades in Ireland utilise ‘national culture’ in the construction of a political quest.\(^9\) Yet, it was not until the rise

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\(^8\) W. T. Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council, 1923 (Quoted in O’Halloran 1987:158)

\(^9\) The fact that both constitutional and republican nationalist movements pursued a policy of nation-building in terms of raising cultural awareness in Ireland during the last quarter of the nineteenth century highlights the inadequacy of a typology that posits ‘cultural’ versus ‘political’ forms of nationalism. The Irish Parliamentary Party was involved in the promotion of an Irish flag, national festivals and a national anthem (“God save Ireland”). The Home Rule movement also gained from the revival of the Ancient Order of Hibernians at a ground level. At a different level, members of the Irish revolutionary élite, such as Patrick Pearse, emphasised “the spiritual and intellectual” elements of independence and, after 1893, influenced the Gaelic League’s combining of the ideologies of spiritual nationalism and political insurrection (Hennessey 1998:19, 29).
Redefinitions of Ireland as a European Nation: Katy Hayward

to power of Fianna Fáil, whose roots lay in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 (the foundation stone of the Free State), that nationalist discourse of cultural exclusivity of the Irish nation came to be utilised in political practice. De Valera, as leader of Fianna Fáil and President of the Executive Council of the Free State from 1932, began to make alterations to the Constitution of the Free State in line with the nationalist priority of drawing a distinction between Ireland and its former colonial oppressor. ‘Britishness’ was considered to be an illegitimate political or cultural affiliation in Ireland, and the national identity of Ireland was defined in terms that were distinctly non-British: rural, Gaelic and Roman Catholic.

That Ireland, which we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads…

In the narrative of the ideal ‘Ireland’ of the mid-twentieth century, British national identity was the ‘other’ and, in an attempt to reverse the logic of colonialism, it was conceived as more political fabrication than cultural entity. In contrast, the Irish nation was viewed as ancient, spiritual and essential, now seeking to overcome the legacy of colonialism and recapture its pre-colonial genius. Gaelic identity represented not simply a linguistic ability or an assumed ethno-racial past but a history of national civilisation and international renown. This publication by the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1944 epitomises the image of Ireland’s Gaelic past applied to the contemporary capacity for ‘national recovery’:

The task which lies before this generation in Ireland is literally colossal. Political freedom, the undoing of the outrage of Partition…Gaelic Ireland saved Europe for Civilisation and Christianity before the Middle Ages. Our duty now, and our only hope for a national future, lies in making Ireland once again, not only free but Gaelic, not only Gaelic but a missionary example of practical Christianity… (Anelius 1944:xviii)

Closely intertwined with the ‘Gaelic identity’ of Ireland was its ‘spiritual’ self-conception. Article 44 of the 1937 Constitution (until its amendment in 1972) recognised the “special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as

the guardian of the Faith professed by the majority of the citizens” of Ireland. The same Article also recognised the main Protestant and other religious denominations existing in Ireland, in acknowledgement of the fact that “the Irish Constitution was intended for a people one quarter of whom were non-Catholics” (Barrington 1959:12). In other words, the Constitution of 1937 was written to affirm the identity of the 26 county nation with the ideal of a 32 county nation. The logic of this official nationalism was that the reunification of Ireland relied on the development of a strong sense of Irish national identity and distinctiveness, a process that had to begin in the 26 counties.

The Rediscovery of Irish ‘Europeanness’

The ideal of Irishness as a spiritual and cultural essence with political implications facilitated, in ideological terms at least, not only distinction from Britain but membership of a wider international community. Even following disappointment regarding the response of the League of Nations to Irish petition for self-determination and strain arising from Ireland’s neutrality during the Second World War, relations with ‘Europe’ were generally positively conceived among Irish nationalists. British domination was portrayed as inhibiting a long-standing and friendly relationship between Ireland and Europe, as De Valera implied in a statement to the League of Nations in September 1935:

One of the oldest of the European nations, it is with feelings of intense joy that, after several centuries of attempted assimilation by a neighbouring people, we find ourselves restored again as a separate recognised member of the European family to which we belong.11

Ireland’s links with Europe predating colonial history implied not only a formerly respected international reputation for Ireland but also that Europe was a family of nations to which Ireland naturally belonged and had every right, and even duty, to be involved in. In this way, when the question of accession to the European Communities arose, official discourse was able to present membership as a form of

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Redefinitions of Ireland as a European Nation: Katy Hayward

continuity between the idealised Gaelic Christian Ireland of the past and the restored Irish nation envisaged for the future.

One of the main objections to membership of the EEC among Irish nationalists at the time of Ireland’s first application in 1961 arose from the perception that the European Community represented a threat to the integrity and spirituality of Irish national culture. These objections were met in two ways by pro-European official nationalist discourse. Firstly, appeal was made to the ‘memory’ of the time of Ireland’s active involvement in Europe through its Christian missionaries and educators. These myths not only referred back to an un-disputable glorious past, they suggested that Ireland’s activities at that time had contributed to the shape of contemporary Europe – an image that had compelling implications for contemporary relations with Europe. It was argued that European identity was based on Christian principles and that European union would involve the practice of these principles, as expounded Haughey in one of his earliest speeches on the subject of the Common Market:

…we will be helping to build and strengthen a new Europe which will be a sanctuary for those spiritual values so highly regarded by us. The new Europe is one to which we will be proud to belong, a union founded on beliefs to which we enthusiastically subscribe.

Discourse such as this helped to counteract the force of socialist opposition to EEC membership, especially that which came from ideological rather than economic

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12 For example, this extract was taken from a letter to the Irish Times, 11 February 1962, signed by seven members of the intellectual and political élite (two of the signatories would later become pro-EEC government ministers and one went on to establish the most high profile Eurosceptic movement in Ireland) (Source: Desmond 2001):

…such cultural distinctiveness as we possess is likely to disappear when the forces of commercialised materialism are given free play. What likelihood can there be of preserving the Irish language or building a national culture in such circumstances?

13 “[Ireland] has long been part of the mainstream of European culture and has indeed contributed more than its share to the literature and the general cultural enrichment of mankind.” (An Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, St. Patrick’s Day Message, 1981. See Haughey 1986:Doc.115).

14 Speech at University College Galway, 14 December 1962 (Haughey 1986:Doc.7)
interpretations, such as Marxist commentators, religious leaders or rural community groups.  

Secondly, the ‘new Europe’ envisaged by the Irish élite was portrayed as a cultural project as much as an economic one. The unification of Europe was seen, in contrast to the union of Britain and Ireland, as one of “cultural enrichment” and a mutual appreciation of cultural heritage by the nations involved. An important point to note is that whilst the union of Europe relied, according at least to official Irish discourse, on populations of EEC member-states being made “more aware” of their European identity, this European identity was itself ‘discovered’ through the flourishing of national cultures. The “European spirit” as it was described in élite discourse contrasted with the spirit of imperialism, as it might be conceived, in that it was “based on the recognition rather than the oppression of individual national identity and culture”. European identity, rather like European citizenship currently is, would be possessed, and arguably experienced, according to membership of a European nation-state. It was not at any point envisaged that the European member-states would become more alike as a result of their co-operation; on the contrary, the EEC was lauded for “enhanc[ing]” the “separate and distinctive qualities” of its members. In the case of Ireland, the “alien” context of Europe would serve to unify and clarify Irish national identity, it was argued, as those on the island of Ireland become more conscious of their common Irishness in their distinctiveness in relation to other Europeans. FitzGerald frequently outlined this argument with Northern Ireland in

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15 For example, the Farming Independent of 1972 carried a story on ‘The Conversion of Father Brady’, national chairman of Muintir na Tire, to a pro-EEC position, as he explained, “My visit to Brussels showed me that the EEC is not the materialistic businessman’s arrangement I had imagined. Many people there have a very definite social conscience.” (Source: Desmond 2001).

16 “The promoters of European unity…aimed also at co-operation at the cultural level so that the peoples of Europe would better appreciate their common cultural heritage and make a greater contribution to the cultural enrichment of Europe and of mankind as a whole.” (Haughey, Address to the opening of the Annual Assembly of the Irish Folk School Movement, 15 September 1967. See Haughey 1986:Doc.29).


18 Quotations from ‘Ireland’s Place Among the Nations of Europe: An Historic Opportunity’, a speech given by Haughey on 7 May 1972 (Haughey 1986:Doc.52).
mind. He noted the failure “of the attempt to impose a neo-Gaelic (or pseudo-Gaelic?) culture on the Irish people” due to the “different national traditions – Ulster-Scots, Anglo-Irish and Gaelic” within Ireland and suggested that “by joining Europe and facing Europe together we might create that sense of unity at home” that official Irish nationalism had previously been absent (1963, my italics).

The European Antidote to the ‘Parochialism of the ¾ Nation’\textsuperscript{19}

Involvement in European cooperation was thus envisaged as not only corresponding with the national identity of Ireland but also offering a means by which it could be revived. At the time of Ireland’s first application for EEC membership, there was a sense that Ireland’s national identity was under threat from two main areas: the underdevelopment of the Irish economy and the substantially self-imposed distance between Ireland and international relations. Firstly, continued Irish dependence on trade with Britain appeared at one level to make a mockery of Irish national sovereignty.\textsuperscript{20} Economic development as an equal partner in the EEC would be significant for Irish national identity not least because it would mean a definitive stepping-out from the “economic, geographic and historical” shadow that had been cast by Britain over Ireland.\textsuperscript{21} Secondly, it was suggested that Partition had inhibited the development of an independent Irish foreign policy, despite the fact that the interests of Ireland and Britain diverged so notably (FitzGerald 1973:60). An emphasis was made in pro-EEC literature on the worldwide rewards of European cooperation in acknowledgement of the counter-productive effects that relative international isolation had had on Irish national identity.\textsuperscript{22} In an article in the Irish Times (January 1963) on the subject of the Common Market, Dr. Garrett FitzGerald

\textsuperscript{19} Phrase coined by Boyce (1991:367).

\textsuperscript{20} Within eight years of EEC membership, Irish exports to the UK had decreased by 12% to 43% and exports to the other ten member states had risen by 11% to 32% (Gillespie 1996:177).

\textsuperscript{21} Quotation from ‘Ireland’s Place Among the Nations of Europe: An Historic Opportunity’, a speech given by Haughey on 7 May 1972 (Haughey 1986:Doc.52).

\textsuperscript{22} “Inside the new Europe I think we could feel a great deal more secure in this troubled world because this new united Europe would be a potential influence in world affairs in the promotion of international peace in our time.” (Haughey, speech in Dáil Éireann on Ireland’s second application to the EEC, 26 July 1967. See Haughey 1986: Doc.28).
expounded the view that membership of the EEC would, to use Milward’s (1992) phrase, ‘rescue’ Irish nationhood:

[Irish national] culture has already lost much of its vitality whereas more competition with other cultures could strengthen our way of life by showing us its great merits by comparison with the emptiness and superficiality of much that exists elsewhere...the more we can reorient ourselves towards Continental influences the more chance we have of resisting Anglo-Americanism. But we must not think only of ensuring the survival of our way of life – we should be thinking of contributing to the rest of the world, and this we can do too by joining Europe and bringing to it our sense of moral values.

Implicit in FitzGerald’s argument is the assumption that Irish national culture, in its genuineness and depth, shares a common bond with Europe that, in the face of increasing ‘Anglo-American’ influence, needs to be acted upon in order to fulfil the obligation of nation-statehood of an active international role.

The economic and political strength of the European Economic Community, both in its external and internal affairs, posed a challenge to Irish sovereignty that was interpreted by the governing Irish élite as essentially positive. For Ireland’s national policies and defensive self-conception had, until the period of Lemass’ leadership in the 1960s, substantially circumscribed its foreign policy. In Ireland’s application to the EEC, official discourse often stressed the inadequacy of Irish national sovereignty as it stood, as the Department of Foreign Affairs publication prior to the referendum on membership, *Into Europe* (1972:13), stated:

We are a small country with little capacity, at present, to influence events abroad that affect our interests...This seriously restricts our freedom of action and is a very real limitation on our national sovereignty.

Such emphases on the weakness of Irish sovereignty conflicted sharply with the ideals of independence that had been envisaged fifty years previously. Now arguments for Ireland’s redemption from positions of deficiency and dependency were pushing for integration into another supranational organisation. The governing élite argued that Ireland’s national sovereignty would be fulfilled rather than
weakened by the change, not only because national culture would not be threatened, but also because Ireland would be actively involved in deciding the shape of European union itself. Confidence in Irish national identity should, it was suggested, be reflected in a positive vision of what Ireland could contribute to European integration.

‘Is this the kind of Ireland you want?’

The belief that membership of the EEC represented the fulfilment of Irish national sovereignty reflected the perception that Ireland as a nation-state remained inhibited by the post-colonial context. Any change in the sovereign independence of Ireland was inextricably linked to relations between Britain and Ireland and, therefore, to the position of Northern Ireland. In period from Ireland’s first application to the EEC and the referendum on EEC membership in 1972, events occurred in British-Irish relations and Northern Ireland that would bring the issue of partition and the Irish Government’s responsibility towards the North to the forefront of political debate in the Irish State. This was reflected in the arguments against accession to the EEC, which focused on the implications for North-South relations more intently than ten years previously. The nationalist elements of opposition to EEC membership restated the arguments for Irish sovereignty as they had been conceived prior to independence and attempted to draw a line of continuity between the logic of separation from

23 In a Government Report on Irish Accession to the European Communities (1972:60) it was stated that limitation on national sovereignty and the right of freedom of action was necessary because of the interconnection of Ireland’s vital interest with those of other countries.

24 “As a member of the expanded Communities, Ireland would be playing her part in their political development.” (Report on Membership of the European Communities, April 1970:8).

25 Such was the point made by Haughey in a speech entitled ‘New Tensions of Change’ at a Cairde Fáil function, 10 December 1970 (Haughey 1986: Doc.45):
To be patriotic today is to believe in one’s own country, in its capacity to handle its affairs in an enlightened way and to create an acceptable and attractive way of life for its people. It is also, in our case, to have confidence in our ability to make an original and worthwhile contribution to the new European Community.

26 Heading of a Fianna Fáil advertisement, 1972, in which Ireland was pictured in white on one side of the poster, with a gap in the place of Northern Ireland, which is pictured on the other side of the poster alongside Britain, in black, under the label ‘EEC’. (Source: Desmond 2001)
Britain and that of separation from Europe. In contrast, members of the political élite in favour of EEC membership, including the two largest political parties, argued that Northern Ireland would become more alienated from Ireland in practical and ideological terms if Ireland stayed out of the EEC. This position was elaborated from a different set of assumptions to that of their critics, asserting that if Ireland became more separated from Britain it would become more separated from Northern Ireland. The fact that Britain and, therefore, Northern Ireland were to be in the EEC would mean, it was argued, that the internal Irish border would effectively become an international border if Ireland did not also join. Under the subheading ‘Staying out – Greater Divisions’, a pamphlet issued but the Department of Foreign Affairs on the subject of Ireland North and South in the EEC (1972:3), this hypothesis was summarised:

If our people vote in the Referendum in favour of joining, then the whole of Ireland – North and South – will be inside the EEC. If not then part of Ireland will be inside the EEC and part outside.

The contention that membership of the EEC was necessary because of Britain’s membership was nonetheless combined with frequent assertions of the distinction of Northern Ireland from Britain and, in contrast, the affinity between the North and the South. It was stated, moreover, that the context of the EEC would produce a situation where Northern Ireland would become more distinct from Britain and closer to the rest of Ireland. FitzGerald (1973:105), then Minister for Foreign Affairs, assessed the practical impact of European integration on this triangle of relations in the following terms:

Within a vast European Community the two parts of Ireland, sharing common interests in relation to such matters as agricultural and regional policy, must tend to draw together – and the fact that on some of these major issues the North and the Republic will have a common interest, divergent from that of highly-developed Britain, cannot be without significance in these conditions.

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27 In an event designed to associate the independence movements of the past with those of the present, the Common Market Defence Campaign organised a mass rally outside the General Post Office in Dublin, the focal point of the Easter Rising, on 22 January 1972. It was entitled Keep Ireland Out of EEC and involved a ‘renewal of allegiance to the 1916 Proclamation’. (Source: Desmond 2001)
The vision of economic cooperation between North and South in the European context was complemented by the assumption that the island of Ireland acting as one unit is preferable to division. However, official discourse at this particular time reflected a significant change in the conceptualisation of Irish national identity. In a move away from the association of Irishness with particular cultural traditions, ‘Irish’ became a phrase to include all people and traditions on the island. As with all definitions of national identity, this inclusive (some would say oppressive) stance had political implications; in this case, the common Irishness of all on the island was used to support arguments against British interference in what was described by the Taoiseach as “an Irish quarrel”. The perception that partition was less a reflection of the stubborn British identity of some in the North and more a result of a lack of understanding among the wide varieties of Irishness went hand in hand with the placing of the problem in a European context. Finding a means of accommodating this diversity was also seen as possible in the European economic, political and cultural framework - one that was inspired by the ideal of “peaceful union”.

Turning to the possible effects of EEC membership, although it would be quite wrong to look to this as a panacea for the Irish problem, which will always remain one to be settled by Irishmen in Ireland, such influence as membership of the Community will have is likely to be uniformly directed towards easing that path to a united Ireland. (FitzGerald 1973:104)

The motivating ideal of European integration was portrayed in Irish official discourse as the achievement of peace and prosperity through cooperation in a previously

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28 In an address over Radio Telefís Éireann on 11 July 1970, the eve of what looked set to be contentious parades in the North, the Taoiseach made a statement “to the Irish people, North and South, Protestant, Presbyterian, Catholic – and simply Irish”, noting that “all Irish traditions are intertwined”. Such an assertion noted simultaneously the plurality of Irish identity and the essential commonality of all on the island. However, the impact of this language is somewhat tempered by the internal contradictions and terminological confusions of the address. For example, in “speak[ing] to the British Government and people”, the Taoiseach continues to ask, “Why should we, the Celts and the English, go on misunderstanding each other? There is no imperial role for you in Ireland.” (Lynch 1971:22-23, my italics).


It is perhaps not surprising that analogies would be made between the European and the Irish situation, with images of peace after conflict, the transcendence of borders, and unity in place of division. Indeed, Cunningham (1997:17) interprets John Hume’s oft-repeated vision of a “borderless island” in the context of European integration as “either over-optimistic and naïve or…deliberately framed to promote de facto nationalism”. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the meaning of this ‘nationalism’ is continually being altered - a process in which ‘Europe’ is more than inspiration or context. At the time of Ireland’s accession to the EEC, much official discourse, with the situation of Northern Ireland in mind, heralded the creation of a ‘new Ireland’. This ‘new Ireland’ was, admittedly, rather like the old Ireland in that it was conceived as 32 counties in size; nevertheless, this nation would be more than Gaelic in tradition and non-British in culture, it would be European. As elaborated earlier, Europeanness, according to the Irish political élite at this time, represented the fulfilment of a distinct, unified, yet heterogeneous national identity. Membership of the European Community implied the relieving of the need to make ‘the state’ intrinsically tied to one particular form of cultural tradition. For the ideal of European union represented the belief that people of different cultural affinities could cooperate for their mutual benefit and be drawn closer as a result. Hence, just as European identity itself was overarching yet inclusive, so Irish identity, it was believed, could be the same.

31 “They, in fact, saw themselves as laying the foundations of an ever-closer union among the Europeans and as helping to strengthen the safeguards of peace and liberty…It was felt that do so would be a step towards making Europeans more aware of their European identity and of their responsibilities towards the rest of the world.” (Into Europe, Department of Foreign Affairs, 1972:11)

32 “…it should be clear that a united Ireland will not be an Ireland in which the present State in the ‘South’ takes over the ‘North’ and assimilates it into its existing structures. There should be negotiation, but it should be about a new Ireland.” (Lynch 1972:1).

33 This interpretation was elaborated by the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, in his Presidential Address to the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis, 20 February 1971 (Lynch 1971:48, my italics):
We on our part are prepared to seek, with our Northern brethren, a true meaning for Irish nationalism. It is, in our view, a wide and embracing concept – not the exclusive property of any single set of beliefs or attitudes. It is one which would attract and retain the respect and allegiance of all Irishmen. It is founded in the belief, expressed throughout our history, that we Irish are a distinct nation; that none of us, irrespective of ancient origin or later migration, remains uninfluenced by the environment of the land in which we live.
We are free to create our own united society.
Disillusion and Re-vision

The EEC is still a great political concept. It still has the incalculable capacity to achieve economic and social progress. Its leaders today, however, are not measuring up to their responsibilities. They are failing the people of Europe…

The vision of a “Community ideal and spirit” was to be dulled by the reality of European cooperation in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. Nationalist discourse at this time reflects frustration at the lack of progress in European integration, and the fact that “Europe” at this time appeared “far more a group of national member States” than at the time of Irish accession. The economic and regional development that was needed in contemporary Europe was portrayed in Irish nationalist discourse as being possible only with the restoration of “a central political ideal to the Community” and the “deflect[ion of] national energies away from partisan self-interests towards unified Community purposes”. These arguments and frustration at the progress of European cooperation contributed to the rising perception that Ireland’s “position in the EEC [was] being steadily eroded”. Disillusion with the European ideal was linked to growing disillusion with Ireland’s role in the EEC, as Haughey voiced in a Dáil debate on the Dooge Report in June 1985:

We must get out of our head once and for all the idea that we are somehow specially favoured by the EEC or by our partners. The stark truth is that we are not. We are and remain one of the less favoured regions of the EEC and we should have no illusions about it.

However, it is important to place these expressions of aspiration to European unification and frustration with its progress in context. The Irish élite believed that progress in European matters, from which Ireland had a lot to gain and little to lose,

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35 Quotations from Haughey, Comment on the outcome of the European Council Meeting in Athens, Dáil Éireann, 7 December 1983 (Haughey 1986: Doc.179).
was being stalled by protracted negotiations on the British contribution to the European budget. In this way, the Irish political élite felt that Ireland was still being constrained in terms of its national development by British policy, even in the arena of the EEC. This led to attempts to confirm the distinction between Ireland and Britain, through reassertions of both Ireland’s commitment and enthusiasm for European integration and its national independence.

‘Our national independence is not for sale’

The Downing Street Talks, held in May 1980 between the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, reflected a desire on the part of both governments to develop closer political cooperation. Although the “new framework for solution” envisaged by the two Governments was to “take full account of all that has changed in the relations between the two islands and in Western Europe since Northern Ireland was first established”, it became clear that the definitive element in agreement on Northern Ireland was not the European context but British-Irish relations within it. Irish neutrality during the Falklands War, disagreement over the treatment of the Hunger Strikers in Northern Ireland, and the failure of James

39 The Irish Government portrayed renewed focus on the question of European defence - over which it was particularly sensitive, due to its policy of neutrality - as a result of Britain’s blocking of other areas for European cooperation. For example, the Genscher-Colombo Plan that was produced after the collapse of the London European Council in November 1981 proposed negotiations over security policy among European states. Haughey was just one of the Irish élite who condemned this move as “a serious reversal of thinking and approach entirely detrimental to our interests” and predicted that “both the Community and Ireland will be losers if the pace is forced in this manner”. (Statement in Dáil Éireann, 2 Dec 1981. See Haughey 1986: Doc.132).


41 The communiqué issued following the Downing Street Talks stated that both Haughey and Thatcher agreed that “any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland”. Added to this, the Taoiseach reaffirmed “the wish of the Irish Government to secure the unity of Ireland by agreement and peace” (Quoted in Haughey 1986: Doc.100). It is interesting to note that one of the strongest criticisms made by Haughey of the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed five years later by FitzGerald was not what it included (i.e. recognition of the need for majority consent within Ireland) but rather what it didn’t include, namely an “affirmation… by the Irish Govt of its wish to ensure the unity of Ireland by agreement and in peace” (Haughey 1986: Doc.222). Such a comment highlights the importance of language/rhetoric in official nationalism.

Prior (Secretary of State for Northern Ireland) to consult the Irish Government on the establishment of a devolved Assembly in 1982 all contributed to tension in this area. The New Ireland Forum was established in May 1983 as a point of consultation between the constitutional nationalist parties in Ireland, North and South. The Report issued at the conclusion of the Forum, a year later, included three possible solutions to the conflict in Northern Ireland: a unitary Irish State, confederation of the States of Ireland and Northern Ireland States, or joint authority of the Irish and British Governments in Northern Ireland. All three proposals were unambiguously rejected by the British Prime Minister in what came to be known as the ‘out, out, out’ speech at the Anglo-Irish Summit in May 1984. The Irish Government subsequently found its freedom of action and policy towards Northern Ireland as constrained as ever by that of Britain. The fact that tensions between Britain and Ireland were reflected in Ireland’s approach to the EEC reflects the close links between the Irish conceptualisation of national identity and European union. For until progress could be made in European political cooperation, following agreement between the larger member-states, Irish national identity was reasserted in terms of differentiation from Britain.\footnote{The reversion to rhetoric emphasising the ancient integrity of Irish nationhood is exemplified in a speech given by Haughey in March 1985, to the First Annual Dinner of the Friends of Fianna Fáil in America, New York (Haughey 1986: Doc.202):}

Ireland is an ancient nation whose roots and culture go way back into the mists of time beyond the boundaries of recorded history, a nation that embraces all the people of Ireland and whose national territory comprises the whole island of Ireland. She is an ancient nation struggling to establish herself in the modern world, to reaffirm the integrity of her nationhood…

\footnote{Quotations from Why the Single European Act (1987:2) and Ireland’s Freedom of Action (1987:1).}

Breakthrough came in 1985 with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which dealt with the question of Northern Ireland largely as a problem to be solved by intergovernmental rather than internal arrangements. This was closely followed by the Single European Act, ratified by referendum in the Republic in June 1987. The SEA was represented as “an important step towards the kind of community that the EEC was always intended to be”, and conceived in terms of “a sharing of sovereignty” that increased “our control over Ireland’s destiny”.\footnote{By 1988 and the}
15th Anniversary of Irish accession to the European Community, the sense of progress in European integration contributed to renewed confidence in Irish national identity and independence, not least because of related improvements in British-Irish cooperation. Statements such as those made by the Tánaiste, Brian Lenihan and Commissioner Peter Sutherland at this time highlight the interconnection of these elements. The contrast between depictions of Irish national identity in the early and late 1980s reiterate this paper’s assertion that advancement in European integration was viewed as progress for Irish national independence. In 1988, despite earlier criticism and disillusion among the Irish political élite, Sutherland (1988:5) echoed the general perception when, in an indirect comparison with Ireland’s relationship with Britain, he concluded, “Ireland’s trust in Europe has not been misplaced”.

‘The Western Isles of Europe at the Millennium’

Wishing to develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union.

Given the geographical and historical proximity of Britain and Ireland, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most significant changes to Irish nationalism in the European context has come through its influence on British-Irish relations. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked the new configuration of the political dynamics within what are now generally referred to as ‘the Isles’. The three-stranded approach of the peace process was encapsulated in institutional and constitutional terms in the Agreement with the establishment of (i) the Northern Ireland devolved Assembly, (ii)

45 “Membership has boosted national morale. It has also helped to diminish the anglo-centricity of Irish attitudes and given Ireland a role in Europe and the world which would otherwise have been beyond our reach.” (Lenihan 1988:2)

“The struggle for independence and the closeness of our ties with our nearest neighbour caused us for many centuries to pay less attention to our European links than was the case in earlier links. Yet…entry into the European Community was a logical step. Firstly, it was the ultimate expression of our hard-won independence.” (Sutherland 1988:4)


47 Extract from the Preamble to the Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland, (Good Friday Agreement), April 1998.
the North-South Ministerial Council and other cross-border bodies, and (iii) the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and British-Irish Council. Discussion of the extent to which the ideas of these institutions was influenced by models of cooperation between European states (such as the Nordic Council) and the European Union itself is beyond the scope of this paper, yet the significance of the common membership of the EU is frequently lauded in British and Irish official discourse on the subject. For example, in a speech entitled ‘Ireland’s Experience of EU Membership’, Ahern acknowledged the connections between European membership and progress in the Northern Ireland peace process:

EU membership has also been very important in the development of our approach to our relationship with Britain and to the problem of Northern Ireland. It has helped to develop new perspectives, inspired by the example of reconciliation which is at the basis of the European project. It has enabled Britain and Ireland to see each other in a more rounded way, drawing on our joint experience as EU partners. Many factors made the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998 possible, but shared EU membership was one of them.48

Common membership of the European Union worked at a number of levels to increase the plausibility of a bilateral approach to the conflict in Northern Ireland and reconfigure the relationship between identity and territory that was at the core of British-Irish relations (Ruane and Todd 1996:281; Laffan 1999:4)

One of the most significant consequences of the new relationship between Britain and Ireland over Northern Ireland in the European context is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of British identity for some on the island of Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement states that it is the “birthright of the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose” (Article 1.iv). This self-ascription of national identity is added to the right of the residents of Northern Ireland to hold both British and/or Irish citizenship and marks recognition of the importance of national identity in addition to citizenship and cultural identity, which is itself enshrined in the Agreement in the form of language rights for Ulster-Scots and Gaelic. National identity is, therefore, seen as an overarching identity rather than ethno-culturally, territorially or politically confined.

This modification is reflected in the (19th) Amendment to the Irish Constitution, Article 2 of which now conceptualises the Irish nation as simultaneously yet not exclusively ancestral, cultural, political and territorial:

It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation. That is also the entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.

What this represents is arguably a reflection of the conception of European identity as was originally laid out in Irish official discourse at the point of Ireland’s application for EEC membership. European identity was conceived to be a historical and geographical reality, representing the forum in which smaller identities could flourish in their diversity for the benefit of all.

‘Europe has been good for Ireland and Ireland has been good for Europe’

The European Union is a totally new form of political institution. It is based on the identification of common interests and the cherishing of cultural and national identities.

Contemporary Irish national identity is described in terms that resonate with the ideal and motivations of European union: “pluralist”, “inclusive”, “tolerant”, “progressive”, “accommodating” and “peaceful”. One effect that membership of the European Union has had on Irish national identity that is seen to be particularly significant is the development of Irish “self-confidence”. This is associated in official discourse with broadening “cultural and psychological” horizons, being “more open and generous” in defining the Irish nation, cooperating and interacting with other countries, and “carv[ing] out a presence in Europe”. This confident and independent national identity in Ireland is compared, directly and indirectly, with the post-colonial

49 Quotation from Ahern (May 1998:1).

50 Ahern, Address to the EU Heads of Mission, Dublin, April 1998.


position of Ireland. It also contributes to Ireland’s approach to the enlargement of the European Union, in which the Irish experience of European membership is seen as a possible model for applicant states. At the root of this approach is the acknowledgement that Ireland joined the European Economic Community to overcome underdevelopment “that had not been cured by political independence”.^{53} Hence, the success of Ireland as a European member-state is seen as integrally related to the perception that Ireland is a “successful nation” (Ahern, March 2000:6). The narrative of Ireland’s development as a nation in Europe as an example for applicant countries highlights the importance of the economic benefits gained through membership without overstating the extent to which they have determined Ireland’s self-conception or commitment to European integration. Indeed, despite speculation that Irish commitment to Europe will dissipate as it becomes a net contributor to the EU for the first time, few of those calling for renewed debate on Irish membership of the EU express criticism of enlargement plans that have led to reduced EU funding for Ireland. Instead, dissent from the positive representation of European integration has been voiced regarding the protection of independent Irish identity and European enlargement is thus generally welcomed as increasing diversity within the European Union (see Harney 2000; De Valera 2001). An interesting element of these comments, however, is that they tend to diverge in emphasis rather than in content from the main body of Irish official discourse regarding European integration. This highlights the fact that official conceptualisation of the Irish nation in the European Union has encompassed traditional symbolic elements of nationalist discourse whilst facilitating a shift in its application.

Nationalism’s persistence in the contemporary world is substantially related to its ability to portray dynamic change as a form of continuity. This process has been seen in the most overtly political elements of official nationalism in contemporary Ireland. An example of this is the application and interpretation of the term ‘self-determination’, which has been a prominent feature of nationalist discourse in Ireland since before the establishment of the Irish State. Until recently, the claim for self-

determination was specifically made in terms of the granting of self-government to the 32 county Irish ‘nation’ as a whole. In contrast, the 1998 Agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland not only as a political entity but also as a ‘people’ and states that the “two parts” of Ireland “can exercise their right of self-determination” (Article 1.ii). Self-determination has thus become conceived as a commendable democratic principle rather than a revolutionary claim for unification in Ireland. This is not to say that self-determination is now divorced from the idea of ‘the nation’ but rather that it is seen to facilitate the achievement of democratic political structures for all rather than political structures designed to represent ‘the nation’. The way in which these apparent contradictions are smoothed is exemplified in the Lothian European Lecture given by Ahern in 1998:

…we regard the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, as endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South in concurrent referendums, as a valid expression of national self-determination.

In speaking to an audience in Scotland, where self-determination is sought in the form of separation from Britain by a minority of nationalists, Ahern portrays national self-determination as fulfilled through the means (i.e. the voting) rather than the ends (such as a united Irish nation-state). Hence, although the Constitution of Ireland still explicitly states the desire of the Irish people and Government for the unification of Ireland, the Agreement clarified that the ‘completion’ of the Irish nation-state can only occur with the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland.54

‘Identities and aspirations are enduring but they are not immutable’55

The contemporary conceptualisation of Ireland as a European nation represents both continuity and change in official Irish nationalism in the twentieth century. The question of “what is Ireland” has moved from being defined territorially, to culturally, and now politically. ‘Ireland’ today is conceived as a 26 county nation-state with

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54 For example, the Preamble of the Irish Constitution states that the Constitution is enacted so that “the unity of our country [may be] restored”; and the revised Article 3 anticipates unification with the phrase, “until then…”.

55 Quotation from Cowen (2000:8).
nationals and citizens all around the world. This relates to the perception of what it is to be Irish, which now encompasses cultural diversity and transcend state boundaries through the choice of individuals. The perceived future of Ireland is, perhaps, the element of national identity that has changed the least, although it is possible to contend that the vision of a 32 county nation-state is, more than ever, merely a nationalist ideal to compensate for a national reality. What is significant, however, is the fact that all three matters – the constitution, meaning and destiny of Ireland – have become integrally linked to ‘Europe’. From economic to enlargement policies, Ireland’s self-conception is of “an important player in a big pond – for symbolic reasons as much as real ones”.56 As a defining process, Irish official nationalism has been extremely sensitive to the symbolic implications of Ireland’s decisions and position within European integration. The successful merging of the identity of Ireland as a nation-state and as a member-state has been a key facilitator of Irish achievement in Europe. The ability of Irish official discourse to present changes to the conceptualisation of the Irish nation as the fulfilment of Irish identity is an example of the versatility of ‘Europe’ as a context and dynamic of contemporary nationalism.

56 Quotation from a government official, Sunday Times 18 February 2001:15.
Redefinitions of Ireland as a European Nation: Katy Hayward

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