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Government Interventionism in Ireland, Part 2

by Scott McPherson

In 1881, the Young Ireland Society was formed. The Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League followed soon after. The Gaelic League began selling Irish-language textbooks and by 1906 had 900 branches boasting 100,000 members in urban areas around the country. The same Arthur Griffith who would found Sinn Fein in 1905 had in 1900 created an organization called Cumann na nGaedheal (“Irish Council”), which hoped to advance Irish nationalism through, among other things, “the study and teaching of Irish history, literature, language, music and art,” “the discountenancing of anything tending towards the Anglicisation of Ireland,” and, perhaps most important, “the physical and intellectual training of the young.”

Ulster Protestants saw the writing on the wall. Under an Irish government, all power would be vested in a centralized socialistic government while an alien culture controlled their economy, sport, literature, religion, language, and, worst of all, education — the “intellectual training” of their young — with an eye towards the eradication of “anything tending towards the Anglicisation of Ireland.” As Feeney writes in *Sinn Fein: A Hundred Turbulent Years*, “Unionists were staring at a gigantic Gaelic, Catholic, republican juggernaut.... Certainly there seemed to be no role for them in the sort of Ireland” envisaged by nationalists.

The desire to use a strong government to enforce this cultural revolution remains unchanged to this day. Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein since 1983, wrote in *Free Ireland* (1986) that nationalists had to lead a “reconquest of Ireland by the Irish people, which means the expulsion of imperialism in all its forms, political, economic, military, social and cultural.”

It means the establishment of a real Irish republic and the organisation of the economy so that all its resources are under Irish control and organised to bring maximum benefit to our people in a ... state in which *Irish culture and national identity* are strong and confident.... My understanding of socialism is that it is a definite form of society in which the main means of production, distribution and exchange are socially owned and controlled and in which production is based on human need rather than private profit. Socialism is based on the most thorough-going democratisation of the economic system,

side by side with the most thorough-going democratisation in politics and *public affairs*. [Emphasis added.]

It may have been purely coincidental, but Adams placed his chapter “Republicanism and Socialism,” from which the preceding quotations were taken, back to back with the chapter entitled “Culture.” “The struggle against cultural colonialism must be a key part of the reconquest of Ireland, of the making of a new Irish humanity,” he wrote.

My own conviction is that the restoration of our culture must be a crucial part of our political struggle and that the restoration of the Irish language must be a central part of the cultural struggle.

The 1798 United Irishman’s rebellion had been initiated with the intention of forming a

brotherhood of affection, a communion of rites and union of power *among Irishmen of every religious persuasion, and thereby to obtain a complete reform of the legislature founded on principles of political and religious liberty*. [Emphasis added.]

Somehow, between the euphoria of 18th-century liberal thinking and the constitutional crisis of 1914, the wish for Irish separation from Great Britain had mutated from a liberal quest for self-determination into a tool of socialist authoritarians bent on using an Irish state to impose an economic, social, and cultural regime on all of its inhabitants. At the least, that was the very real fear of several hundred thousand Ulster Protestants who were not at all interested in having everything Irish forced down their throats.

Then, as now, the Irish separatist movement pointed to America’s own fight for independence from Great Britain to gain sympathy for their cause around the world and particularly in the United States. They hoped to claim an affinity with the revolutionaries of 1776 to bolster support for an Irish revolution in the early 1900s. To their detriment, they failed to see that a yearning to be free of English rule is where any similarities between the two movements ended.

The American experiment

During 1775–1787, Americans were experimenting with the idea of government as a tool for protecting individual rights, not a means for controlling the economy or promoting a particular language, culture, religion, or form of education. As a matter of fact, Americans created a central government that was largely restricted from interfering in any of those areas — precisely to avoid the kind of conflict that has raged in Ireland. The extent to which the U.S. government

has been held within those constitutional bounds explains how America's many cultures have generally co-existed quite peacefully, by comparison, for most of its history.

The trouble is, Irish separatism at that time fell victim to the trends of the age. Government interventionism, of one form or another, was the dominant creed in the early 20th century, and Ireland's intellectuals, like so many others around the world, succumbed to the belief in salvation through government control. Unfortunately, it is precisely the craving for government control that made their hopes for self-determination so unappealing to a significant minority of their population, the very people whose cooperation they required to make a peaceful departure from British control.

It was around this same time that an early libertarian commentator would accurately capture the spirit of the times and prescribe the appropriate antidote. In 1927, Ludwig von Mises's *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition* addressed the very problems that were only exacerbated by Irish nationalists' interventionist tendencies. "One can assume that the desire for peace is today universal," he wrote. "But the peoples of the world are not at all clear as to what conditions would have to be fulfilled in order to secure peace." Nowhere was this truer than in early 20th-century Ireland.

According to Mises,

The first requirement [for peace] is private property. When private property must be respected [and] private ownership of the means of production prevails everywhere, an important motive for [conflict] has already been excluded.

This was completely contrary to the views of Ireland's socialists, who wanted to expropriate the private property of Protestant industrialists in their class war, or, at the very least, indirectly commandeer a large percentage of their earnings by curtailing their ability to trade in world markets.

"However," Mises continues,

this is far from being enough to guarantee peace. So that the exercise of the right of self-determination may not be reduced to a farce, political institutions must be such as to render the transference of sovereignty over a territory from one government to another a matter of the least possible significance, *involving no advantage or disadvantage to anyone.*" [Emphasis added.]

In order for peace to reign in an Ireland of two divided cultures, the minority had to believe firmly that Walter Long's fears of "the loss of individual liberty, the absolute insecurity of property" were unfounded. The economic designs of Arthur Griffith and James Connolly

would have done nothing to advance such a belief. “Every interference on the part of the government in economic life can become a means of persecuting [minorities],” Mises warned.

Education, religion, and the state

Education and culture likewise had to be removed from the political sphere to ensure stability and peace. “The right of self-determination works to the advantage only of those who comprise the majority,” Mises advises. If Catholics and Protestants are to live peacefully side by side, neither must have the ability to impose a foreign culture on the other. The best means of having that ability, of course, would be government control of the educational system. “Whoever controls the schools has the power to injure other nationalities and to benefit his own,” Mises wrote. Consequently, the state, the government, the laws must not in any way concern themselves with schooling or education. Public funds must not be used for such purposes. The rearing and instruction of youth must be left entirely to parents and to private associations and institutions.

No self-respecting socialist, however, would ever consider for a moment separating education from the machinations of the state.

Religion, too, would have to be removed from the prerogatives of political planners. It has been suggested that the religious differences of the Catholic and Protestant populations of Ireland would always be an insurmountable barrier to any measure of peaceful coexistence. Here again the example of the United States contradicts such a view. In the United States, religions of every kind are practiced with no organized sectarian conflict. This is so exactly because the First Amendment forbids government from favoring one religion over another.

Admittedly, even under a government strictly confined in its powers to preserving the life, liberty, and property of the individual citizens under its care, tensions would continue to exist between conflicting nationalities. But as Mises concludes, such tensions “become quite intolerable in an interventionist or socialist state.”

If the administrative authorities have the right to intervene everywhere according to their free discretion, if the latitude granted to judges and officials in reaching their decisions is so wide as to leave room also for the operation of political prejudices, then a member of a national minority finds himself delivered over to arbitrary judgment and oppression on the part of the public functionaries belonging to the ruling majority.

In a description that applies fittingly to later developments in Ireland, Mises predicts that in such a state “hatred ... must become ever fiercer and continue to ignite new ... rebellions.” Just as in so many other nations, the principles of a libertarian society would have best provided the necessary conditions for peaceful coexistence between members of the two ethnic, religious, and national groups in Ireland.

To be sure, the Protestant leadership certainly played its own part in Ireland's political troubles. Nationalist political and labor leaders were brutally suppressed and imprisoned, Irish lands were unfairly confiscated, and pogroms were initiated against Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast, giving socialists the ammunition they needed to paint words like "capitalism" and "liberty" as synonymous with oppressive, discriminatory government. The seeds of pressure-group warfare were sown. Catholics wrongly — but understandably — drew the conclusion that in order to be politically free, they would need government's reins, driving them into the ranks of the socialists.

Political liberty and economic liberty

It could be argued that no conciliatory measures would have brought the Protestant minority in Ulster around to the idea of a united Ireland. This is probably correct — in the short term. Had Irish nationalists espoused a philosophy of true political freedom — free markets, individual rights and private property, and limited government — rather than one of government interventionism, statism, and political control, there is every reason to believe that the majority of unionists would at least have been less suspicious of their Catholic neighbors and more prepared to see the Home Rule Act as no threat to their British values. That would have gone a long way towards tempering hotheads in the nationalist community and maybe even preventing the turmoil and violence that would mark Irish politics for decades thereafter. As it was, republicans would not seriously consider the possibility of decentralized government in Ireland until the 1970s.

It is interesting to note that the British government itself throughout the 20th century would become more and more enamored of economic interventionism and the socialistic welfare state. If Irish nationalists had from the start embraced libertarianism instead of socialism, forging a link with the Protestant community on the basis of shared affection for the principles of a free society, the two groups could well have fashioned a political alliance against greater centralization of power in London in later years. In time, Ireland might have become united in the minds of its entire people against British socialists, resolved to oppose any encroachment on the liberties of Irish citizens — Catholic and Protestant alike.

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