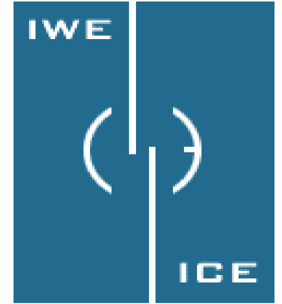

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Flying the Flag: Reflections on Nationhood

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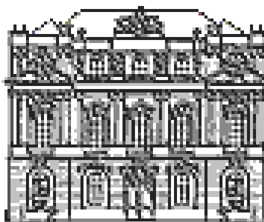

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Flying the Flag: Reflections on Nationhood[1]

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The reflections on nationhood offered in this paper are linked by images of movement, and were set off by thinking about flags. Their starting point is one of the striking images of recent politics: the sight of the Stars and Stripes flying everywhere in the United States as Americans responded with an upsurge of patriotism to the events of September 11 2001. Flags are traditionally symbols of continuity, of enduring nationhood and kinship with the glorious dead. Nationalists and analysts would agree that those links between past and present, that capacity to endure and persist across the generations, are at the heart of nationhood. But the flags flying in America in the autumn of 2001 bore witness also to another feature of nationhood - its dynamism. In fact they can be said to point to three different kinds of movement. Most obviously, they symbolised a movement toward solidarity, the mobilising for struggle of a nationhood that had never really been asleep, but that had been to some extent in reserve. At the same time they signalled movement in a different sense, as the nation turned to confront a new battle with a new enemy (a battle in which the old enemy, Russia, became a valued ally in the defence of civilisation). So they also illustrate the mobility of nationhood, and the way in which nations can reposition themselves in response to changing circumstances. But, thirdly, the flags were signs of a movement more profound than the mobilisation and reshuffling of nations. For they were raised in response to dramatic and totally unexpected events that signalled the challenge of a new kind of mobilisation, a mobilisation that had emerged from religion rather than nationhood. While the political implications of this can as yet only be guessed at, this

[1] This is a revised version of a paper first presented as a public lecture at the international workshop: *European Identities: Constructs and Conflicts, Vienna: 13-15 December 2001, organised by the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Diplomatic Academy.*

unexpected return of *cross*-national religious mobilisation is bound to affect the significance of nations and the configuration of national conflicts.

This is the context within which I shall try to offer reflections on some aspects of nationalism and national conflict. Stated baldly, their theme is that nationhood is dynamic, so that if we want to understand nations as political phenomena we need to think of them in terms of mobilisation. These bald statements raise vast and complex issues which I shall try to make manageable by connecting them to one specific European case of national conflict: the politics of Northern Ireland, another place, like the USA, where flags have a great deal of political significance. This is not to suggest that Northern Ireland is in any sense a typical case; indeed, the very fact that nationhood is dynamic should warn us not to expect national conflicts to conform to types.[2] But in its own way it illustrates the dynamics of national mobilisation, the mobility of nationhood, and even something of the impact of the events of September 11 2001.

Another reason for referring to this specific case is to make clear the point of view from which these reflections are offered. We may use abstract terminology when we speak and write about nations and nationalism, but we cannot help seeing general questions through the spectacles of particular national experiences: British experience, in this case. In some respects the United Kingdom has quite an encouraging record of peaceful accommodation, at any rate where Scottish and Welsh nationalism are concerned. But no one reflecting on national conflict in the light of British experience can avoid thinking about Northern Ireland, and about the long-running, violent struggle there between the majority community of Protestant Unionists (who are committed to

[2] For comparisons between recent developments in Northern Ireland and other cases of national or ethnic conflict and accommodation, see McGarry, 2001(a).

staying in the United Kingdom) and the large minority of Catholic Nationalists (who have historically been in favour of union with the Irish Republic).

There is profound disagreement between the parties and among observers about the nature and causes of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the issues at stake and the key historical events (McGarry and O`Leary 1995). Even the assumption made here that it is a *national* conflict that is in question would itself be denied from some standpoints. But no one could claim that Northern Ireland in the twentieth century was a harmonious community. Consider only the level of violence of the past 40 years: nearly 3,000 people killed, in a small area with a population of only one and a half million (O`Leary and McGarry 1996). When the "Troubles" broke out in the 1960s they brought to an end forty years of uneasy peace following the partition of the island in the 1920s. Partition had been an attempt on the part of the United Kingdom`s government to come to terms with two starkly opposed demands: on the one hand an increasingly militant demand for self-determination made by the (mostly Catholic) Irish Nationalist majority of the island`s population, and on the other the equally clear and militant refusal of the (mostly Protestant) Unionists to leave British rule and find themselves a minority in a Catholic Irish state. Partition allowed three quarters of the island to become virtually independent, while the predominantly Unionist north-eastern corner remained within the United Kingdom with its own provincial parliament and administration. Within that administration a Protestant and Unionist majority held power for fifty years while a large minority of Catholic Irish Nationalists were excluded from power and privilege. In the 1960s, agitation by the minority led to intercommunal violence, the appearance of paramilitary forces on both sides, intervention by the British army and, in 1972, the resumption by the United Kingdom of direct responsibility for running the affairs of the province. In the decades that followed, successive British governments made repeated attempts

simultaneously to defeat terrorism and to construct a new political settlement for the province, without success in either case. In the 1990s, however, tortuous negotiations with the political representatives of the Unionist and Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland, including the terrorists` political wings, led eventually, and against all expectations, to what seemed to promise a genuine resolution of the conflict. This was the Agreement, signed in Belfast on Good Friday 1998, to establish new power-sharing institutions that would associate Unionists and Nationalists, Protestants and Catholics, British and Irish, in joint responsibility for the affairs of the province, and confirm a shift from violent conflict to democratic politics.[3] Implementing that Agreement has so far proved to be as difficult as negotiating it in the first place. Despite the Agreement, and despite official cease-fires on the part of the major paramilitary organisations on both sides, the two national communities remain separate and mutually hostile, lined up beneath their rival flags.

In Northern Ireland, as in the United States, flags continue to be potent symbols of national mobilisation. Union Jacks and Irish tricolours fly from the lamp posts in Protestant and Catholic streets in parts of Belfast, and are painted on walls and pavements to confirm rival claims to territory. And apart from the flags themselves, it often seems that in the context of that long-running conflict, anything at all can become a battle-standard. Apparently trivial matters can trigger partisan fury. Place-names, for example, are politically sensitive: speaking of `Derry` rather than `Londonderry` can tell listeners which side the speaker is on. (O`Leary and McGarry 1996: 5-6) Dates also have huge political resonance as anniversaries of victory or of martyrdom. And in 2001 (three years after the Good Friday Agreement and the supposed settlement of the

[3] The text of the Agreement can be found in Cox *et al*., 2000: 301-325

conflict) repeated riots were set off by the apparently innocent activity of taking five-year-old girls to school along the most direct route, because this was seen on both sides as an invasion of enemy territory. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there has been very considerable movement in the political relations between the two communities, in that a Peace Process has been in motion for the past decade, making dramatic progress, sliding back into crisis and then staggering on again. (Cox *et al.*, 2000)

The high point of the Peace Process was reached on Good Friday 1998. On that deeply symbolic date, the Belfast Agreement was accepted by representatives of the two rival communities inside Northern Ireland, plus the British government and the government of the Irish Republic. That Agreement provided for the British government to devolve power to new institutions in the province, institutions elaborately designed to include representatives of both communities. At the time, it seemed nothing short of a miracle that these arrangements could be accepted in Northern Ireland, and endorsed in popular referendums held simultaneously in the province itself and in the Irish Republic in May 1998. However, the Agreement was reached only by evading the most difficult issues, to do with security and terrorist weapons. Despite a unilateral cease-fire by the Irish Republican Army, Unionist politicians had long refused to share power with representatives of still-armed terrorists, and demanded that weapons should be given up (or at any rate securely `decommissioned`) as the price of inclusion in new political institutions. After repeated crises over this issue, the opposing standpoints had apparently been reconciled in a haze of creative ambiguity at the time of the Agreement in 1998. That ambiguous consensus rapidly vanished, and had to be painfully recreated by a series of further negotiations before the power-sharing executive authorised by the Agreement could be set up at the end of 1999 - only to be suspended by the British government after two months work. The issues that caused this debacle were the

usual ones: on one side, refusal by the IRA to give up its weapons (on the grounds that undefeated armies do not surrender their arms, and that `the silence of the guns` is enough); on the other, refusal by Unionists to share power with representatives of armed paramilitaries, particularly at a time when convicted terrorists were being released early from prison. (McInnes, 2000; Page, 2000) Further crises, negotiations and temporary solutions have followed. Since Good Friday 1998, that is, there have been some encouraging periods when the new power-sharing institutions have actually worked, but also long stretches when they were suspended or on the point of collapse. Before September 11 2001 they were closer to collapse than at any time in the previous couple of years. Ironically, one side effect of the catastrophe was to make peace in Northern Ireland a little more likely, as we shall see later. As always, though, the future remains uncertain.

A serious exploration of the intensely complicated details of the Northern Irish situation is outside the scope of this paper. But it may nevertheless be helpful to take Northern Ireland as a context in which to think about the *dynamics* of nationalism: on the one hand the dynamics of mobilisation for conflict; on the other the dynamics of mobility and change.

National mobilisation in Northern Ireland is constant and highly visible. Its most frequently televised manifestations take two complementary forms, one of them organised, regular and orderly, the other informal and sporadic. One familiar image is of some Unionist march, one of the many annual marches that commemorate victory of Protestant over Catholic forces three hundred years ago: a procession marching to a band playing ancient songs of triumph, the marching men wearing bowler hats and dark suits with Orange sashes, carrying Union flags and banners that portray King William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne. (Edwards, 1999) That is

one familiar image of mobilisation. The other familiar image is of mobs in the streets, usually hurling abuse and other things at police who are trying to keep the road open. It may be a Catholic mob trying to prevent an Orange march going through a Catholic street, or it may be a Protestant mob trying to stop little Catholic girls being taken to a Catholic school by way of a Protestant street. Both mobs and marches remind us of something that is obvious enough, though it is sometimes overlooked: that nations as political phenomena are dynamic. They exist in and through collective action - most of that action, of course, rather less dramatic than in Belfast.

Romantic nationalists used to suppose that nations as collective entities were permanent parts of God`s creation. They were simply there, whether individuals liked it or not. (Mazzini, 1907) Contemporary thinking about nations seems to have gone to the opposite extreme, focusing on individuals and their personal beliefs, attitudes and choices. (e.g. Tamir, 1993) One reason for drawing attention to flags, either on the streets of Belfast or on the flagpoles of the USA, is that it shifts our attention away from that introspective view of nationhood to aspects that have more political significance. For the question to which flying the flag is the answer, is not so much "Who am I?" as "Who is on our side, and what are we collectively prepared to do?" That is of course also a matter of identity, and especially of how other people see us. But the focus is less on individual identification than on collective mobilisation. Politically, that matters for two reasons. In the first place, mobilisation creates power; secondly, it is a matter of events rather than of entities, and is therefore contingent and patchy. Rogers Brubaker has argued, indeed, that we should think of a nation not as something that exists, but rather as something that `*happens*`. (Brubaker 1996: 18) Let us reflect a little on these two connected points, power and contingency.

Nations understood as cultural identities may be elusive, but nations as concentrations of power make their presence felt in politics.(Canovan, 1996: 72-4) As Hannah Arendt observed, power arises out of `action in concert`: it is created by individuals when they act together in the public realm. (Arendt 1972, 151) Individuals can be mobilised for many different reasons and behind many different banners; national flags are only one of the possibilities. But the political muscle generated by national mobilisation has been demonstrated over and over again, notably in the history of Ireland`s relations with Great Britain. (Kee 1972) For that power to be generated, it was necessary for individual people to come together to act, and the individuals concerned could in all cases have behaved differently. The sheer contingency of nationhood is too easily forgotten. It is a feature of national mobilisation that those involved always think in terms of a history of mobilisation, and rally to inherited symbols. But we should not allow this insistence on continuity to divert attention from the uncertainty and unpredictability of collective action, Politically speaking, that is to say, rather than thinking of nations as entities with a uniform, continuous existence (or, alternatively, as collections of separate individuals who identify themselves in a particular way) we need to think in terms of *mobilised* individuals, acting together in ways that generate collective power.

To see more of the implications of thinking about nations in this way, it is helpful to draw on two very different images of mobilisation. One of them is military: the image of the nation as an *army*, an organised collectivity marching to war behind the flag. The other is sociological: the nation as a *social movement*, fluid, unstructured, evanescent. Up to a point, one might say that the two images correspond respectively to state-nations on the one hand, and to nations without states on the other, but there is considerably more overlap than that distinction might suggest. Neither image is quite right: each of them misses too many important things about nationhood,

which is a complex phenomenon that holds together many different aspects of human experience. (Canovan, 1996: 69) But each of these two images of mobilisation at least draws our attention to aspects of nationhood that are relevant to national conflict and accommodation.

The image of the nation as an army, and of the flag as battle-standard, is a useful reminder that nationhood in its origins and its most powerful forms is bound up with confrontation and antagonism, with collective defence and shared fears. The link between warfare and the formation of nationhood is well-known, as is the calling up of reserves of nationhood in times of war. Those of us who live in pacified communities may enjoy the luxury of seeing nationhood as a matter of personal identity or cultural expression, but in the situations where nations are politically crucial, what is at issue is collective security. The frequent association between nationalism and violence is often attributed to the divisiveness of national identification; reversing the causation, however, it is characteristically in situations of perceived insecurity that national mobilisation occurs. Rival mobilisations then exacerbate and prolong the insecurity and confrontation in a vicious circle. In Northern Ireland, as in many comparable situations, both sides have had compelling reasons to feel threatened and to understand their violence as a matter of self-defence. (McGarry and O`Leary, 1995: 244)[4] It is ironic but not surprising that the Peace Process, with its accompanying reduction in threats to physical security, has also reduced the cohesion of the Unionist community. Having dominated the province for half a century because of their ability to present a united front against Irish nationalism, the Unionists are much weakened by their divisions over whether to accept and work with the Good Friday Agreement or to reject it out of hand. (Aughey, 2000)

[4] This is not of course to suggest that communal self-defence is the only reason for violence, particularly that committed by organised paramilitary groups. Such groups often develop a vested interest in terrorism and crime.

Although thinking of a mobilised nation as an army can be a useful reminder of the importance of conflict and security, it can also be somewhat misleading, suggesting a level of organisation and unity that is rarely present. If nations really were armies, indeed, the conflicts between them might be easier to resolve. If they were organisations with hierarchy and discipline, then cease-fires and peace-treaties would have more purchase. In practice, despite the presence of organised paramilitary groups, national conflict in Northern Ireland (as elsewhere) is much less formal and harder to predict or control. At the time of writing, although formal cease-fires continue, violent clashes persist at the grassroots, usually to do with what are seen as invasions of territory.

In their ability to mobilise *without* becoming organisations, nations are perhaps more like social movements than like armies. (della Porte and Diani 1999: 16) Nations are of course better than social movements at persisting through time, above all because they are also like extended families, recruited by birth and adoption. This makes it easy for the memory and symbols of previous mobilisations to be handed down from one generation to another, and inherited as *our* struggle, *our* flag. But the virtue of comparing them to social movements is that it reminds us of their contingency and fluidity. Like social movements (and unlike states) nations have no firm boundaries or lists of members. In periods of intense mobilisation, they grow and expand as crowds rally to the flag. But they can also have long periods of relative demobilisation in which potential adherents drift to other identities or none. Nations also take different forms at different times. Where, as in Northern Ireland, it seems that two national communities are locked immovably in a wearisomely static confrontation, the appearance of immobility is often

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Furthermore, experience in Northern Ireland has shown that where a minority nationalism is dealing with a democratic government, paramilitary violence can play an effective role as part of a political strategy.

deceptive. What is actually happening is a ferment of continual mobilisation, continually renewed on both sides in response to well-grounded fears

Because nationhood depends on contingent mobilisation, it happens unevenly across space and through time. There is no standard model of the nation to which all must conform, and any particular national formation varies and changes, creating difficulties for attempts to classify nations as `ethnic` or `civic` and so on. Reflecting on national conflict in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, Michael Ignatieff has offered one of the more appealing attempts at classification of nations, suggesting that they come in two sorts, `hungry` and `sated`. (Ignatieff 1994, 189) What he calls `hungry nations` are violently nationalistic because they are caught in situations of confrontation, insecurity and mutual vengeance. `Sated` nations have finished their predatory phase and settled down in peaceful enjoyment of their political institutions. This is a vivid and persuasive point, but it can be misleading if it gives the impression that the movement is all in one direction, and that `sated` nations can be counted on not to work up an appetite.

Nationalists usually like to claim that their particular nation has always been the same. But because nationhood is dynamic, mobility and change are to be expected as nations mobilise and demobilise in response to changes in their environment. After September 11 2001, for example, Americans became insecure and hungry for revenge, and therefore rallied to the flag. Nations also change direction and form, and it sometimes happens that these changes are favourable to the resolution of national conflicts. The most striking fact about the notoriously immobile politics of Northern Ireland, is that a Peace Process did occur during the 1990s and did lead to the Good Friday Agreement. Despite the many subsequent difficulties in implementing this Agreement, what is remarkable (in view of the dismal history of the province) is that it was ever

negotiated, signed and ratified. Many complex conditions made this possible. (Cox *et al*, 2000) For example, by the end of the 1980s stalemate in the military struggle between the United Kingdom and the terrorists of the Irish Republican Army made both realise that a military solution was not possible. Meanwhile the IRA`s political wing, Sinn Fein, was becoming increasingly confident that its aim of a united Ireland could in the long run be achieved by constitutional means, because demographic change was swelling the Catholic population of Northern Ireland and eroding the Unionist majority. Despite the reluctance of the Unionists to contemplate power-sharing, their leaders were pushed in that direction by the same demographic prospect, but especially by pressure from the British government.

For our present purposes, what is interesting is the role in this story of changes in nationhood on the part of key players. And there is an important and ironic point to note here. What happened was not a matter of transformation or demobilisation of the two national communities of Northern Ireland itself. As the elaborately consociational arrangements in the Agreement acknowledge, the two remain separate, at best mutually suspicious, at worst actively hostile. But important changes happened *outside* the province, in the nationhood of the two nations to which Protestants and Catholics had looked for their support. In Britain, a long-term reorientation and demobilisation of British nationhood gathered pace in the early 1990s, leaving the Protestant Unionists friendless.(Cochrane, 1994) A much more rapid recent transformation of Irish nationhood distanced the Irish Republic from the Catholic Nationalists in the North.(Crotty and Schmitt, 1998) These helpful transformations of British and Irish nationalism deserve a little more attention here.

Most present-day British people find the strident anti-Catholic Protestantism of Northern Irish Unionists such as the Reverend Ian Paisley incomprehensible and distasteful. Very few recognise that it is authentically British: it is indeed a living relic of the national and religious mobilisation that brought the British nation into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and sustained it throughout its imperial conquests. (Colley, 1992) But in the twentieth century British nationhood underwent a slow but profound change. Religion lost its relevance early in the century; then the imperial destiny, too, was discarded. One could perhaps argue, controversially, that the Empire was replaced in British national consciousness by close alliance with the United States, preserving the sense of being part of a dominant Anglo-Saxondom and easing the painful transition from imperial power to middle-sized nation. That `special relationship`, demonstrated once again after September 11 2001, has made it hard for Britain to fit into the European Union. Europeanness is not yet part of British national identity, although co-membership of the EU with the Republic of Ireland probably helped (alongside American mediation) to ease co-operation between the two states, (Meehan, 2000).

One key feature of the process of national redefinition just described was that Ireland - which had been the site of England`s first imperialist expansion - gradually lost its place within British conceptions of nationhood. The separation of the Catholic South was accepted early in the twentieth century. By 1993, the process of disengagement had gone so far that a British Prime Minister - a Prime Minister, moreover, who belonged to the Conservative and Unionist Party - could officially declare that the government of the United Kingdom had `no selfish strategic or economic interest` in Northern Ireland, and would not oppose its secession to join the Irish Republic if a majority of the population in Northern Ireland so wished. (McGarry and O`Leary, 1995: 409) In effect, the British government - with the overwhelming support of the mainland

population - was expressing a wish to be rid of a large chunk of Britain`s historic territory, including its embarrassingly loyal Protestant inhabitants. This statement was made by Prime Minister John Major in a `Joint Declaration for Peace` issued in conjunction with the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic. Instead of being able to count on British support in their opposition to the Nationalists, the Unionists were left stranded.

Irish nationhood inside the Republic proved to be even more mobile, undergoing a remarkable transformation in the last two decades of the twentieth century. For most of the twentieth century, opposition to British rule in Northern Ireland was crucial to the Irish sense of nationhood. During the long and bitter struggle that had defined the nation, the Irish had been mobilised specifically *against* Britain, and *for* a united, Catholic Republic of the whole island of Ireland. But towards the end of the twentieth century, under the influence of a new prosperity brought by EU membership, all this changed. The Irish nation became less embattled, lost its reverence for the Church, and ceased to be greatly interested in the North. (Crotty and Schmitt, 1998) The Peace Process in Northern Ireland was made possible, in other words, partly because of changes in nationhood that took place outside the Province. Both of the two states that had sponsored the rival communities inside the province were transformed from participants into (relatively) impartial observers, able to co-operate in constructing a peace settlement without risking a nationalist backlash among their own core populations.

These transformations on the part of the sponsoring nations illustrate the potential mobility and fluidity of nationhood, and have led many to expect similar changes on the part of Protestants and Catholics inside the Province itself. Some, indeed, have come to believe that because nations can change, they can also be deliberately re-engineered. One commentator on Northern Irish politics

has claimed rashly that `nations...are of our own making and can be *remade* according to other images.` (Kearney 1997: 69) Confidence in the possibility of deliberately remaking nations lies behind some of the criticisms that have been directed at the Good Friday Agreement - criticisms not on the part of hard-line Unionists or Irish Republicans but of commentators who believe that the division between the two communities can and should be overcome. From that perspective, consociational arrangements that share power between Unionists and Nationalists simply entrench and perpetuate hostility. Rupert Taylor has argued, for example, that such arrangements are too pessimistic, failing to pay attention to `the dynamic nature of human action` and how `the status quo can be transformed through the living activities of action, speech and thought`. (Taylor, 2001: 40) Encouraged by the example of the end of apartheid in South Africa, he suggests that a new, inclusive, civic community could be built up from the grassroots in Northern Ireland.

Both arguments, Taylor`s and Kearney`s, are right to stress the dynamism of nationhood, but both commit the same fallacy, arguing in effect that because unpredictable change is possible, therefore change in a given direction can be anticipated and contrived. Opposing Taylor`s view, John McGarry argues that deliberate attempts at civic inclusiveness tend to be seen by one side or the other as veiled threats to their own community. By providing security, consociational arrangements that seem to freeze communal divisions offer the best hope of movement and integration in the long term. (McGarry, 2001(b)) So far, attempts to demobilise and redefine the national consciousness of Protestants and Catholics inside Northern Ireland have been unsuccessful, as can be seen from the continuing salience of the rival flags. Nevertheless, there are signs of mobility, though of an ambiguous kind. An incident to do with the flying of flags illustrates both this movement and its ambiguities.

During the attempts to implement the Good Friday Agreement, one of many contentious issues has concerned official policy on flags. Should the British Union Jack fly alone over government buildings, as it had during the long dominance of the Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland? Or should it be joined by the tricolour of the Irish Republic, as some Catholic Nationalists demand? This debate is a trial of strength between the two factions, but it also highlights an important disagreement about what the emblems signify. What *is* a national flag? Is it the symbol of territorial sovereignty, demanding exclusive political allegiance? If it is, flying two rival flags side by side can be seen as absurd and treacherous, a sign (as many Protestant Unionists see it) that their territory is being annexed by stealth to the Irish Republic. But should the flag be seen instead simply as an emblem of one cultural tradition among others, part of the rich tapestry of a modern multicultural society? (Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000) If so, there is nothing strange about having different flags flying side by side, to reflect the different strands within the society.

When some Catholic Nationalists in Northern Ireland say that flying both flags is simply a matter of showing respect for the two cultural traditions, their claim fits comfortably into a familiar narrative about the dynamics of nationhood and the place of national identity within a globalised, post-national world - a narrative that has many supporters within the European Union. This is a complex and controversial topic, but if one may be permitted a caricature for the sake of brevity, that story of progress from old-fashioned nationalism to a new and benign version would perhaps go something like this:

Once upon a time, we lived in a world of sovereign nation-states. Nations were exclusive, homogeneous, apparently unchanging. States jealously guarded their territory, and demanded

unqualified allegiance from their citizens, because they expected to have to fight wars against other nation-states. In that world, a national flag was a military standard. Its whole essence was to be confrontational. But now we live in a different world, a post-national era of globalisation. States are no longer sovereign or geared to war; territorial boundaries have lost much of their significance; populations are fluid and mixed. Within such a world, loyalties are multiple and personal, and national flags can be little more than lapel badges, expressions of personal identity and cultural tradition.

Within the Northern Irish Peace Process, the official language of negotiation has been strongly influenced by post-national discourse of this kind. All those concerned know, of course, that the new language of accommodation and `respect for both traditions` can itself be used to score traditional nationalist points. When Sinn Fein demands that the Irish flag be flown alongside the Union Jack, supposedly out of respect for both traditions, everyone known that this is a coded move in a game, a game played for the traditional stakes of sovereign control over territory. But supporters of accommodation hope that this sort of ambiguity can itself be constructive. If the leaders of the two communities can be induced to translate their territorial claims into the language of accommodation, even at the cost of a good deal of hypocrisy, then this may at least be a step on the way to genuine reconciliation. The hope of peace-makers in Northern Ireland and elsewhere have been bolstered by the belief that history was on their side, and that old-style territorial nationalism was inexorably giving way to less lethal forms of identity politics.

Although the narrative just caricatured is a story about movement and change, the movement is usually assumed to be all in one direction, away from the more powerful and intractable forms of national mobilisation toward peace and harmony. Before September 11 2001 that optimistic

narrative did have considerable plausibility in some parts of the Western world. (Alcock, 2001; cf. Halliday, 2000) Against that background, then, what are we to make of the flag-waving from which this paper began - the defiant flying of the Stars and Stripes in the USA? One response would see it as proof that there is plenty of life left in the old politics of the nation-state, geared, as always, to national mobilisation for war. From the opposite point of view, some would argue that the American response to the terrorist attacks is fundamentally anachronistic; that it is an understandable but atavistic regression to a lost world of nation-states, and that even to talk of a "war" against "terrorism" - a war waged by the American people against an enemy that is mobile and has no territorial borders - shows how inappropriate the US response actually is.

Those who take the latter view are often post-nationalist in the sense of looking to a future of constructive international co-operation; but it is possible to adopt a similar diagnosis while drawing less encouraging conclusions; a shift from nationalist to internationalist mobilisation is not necessarily good news. For if it is the case, as this paper has argued, that it is mobilisation that constitutes nations as political phenomena, then the relevance of that kind of analysis extends beyond patriotic fervour in the USA or rival solidarities in Northern Ireland. The events of September 11 2001 remind us that national flags are by no means the only standards to which people will rally. During the past decade, nationalism has as it happens been a particularly prominent form of mobilisation, and students of politics have therefore become preoccupied with national conflicts and how to resolve them. But there is nothing necessary or unchangeable about this situation. Other flags have rallied fervent support in the past, and will do so again. Looking back only a little way, we remember that the politics of the twentieth century was dominated by *ideological* mobilisation to such an extent that many political thinkers forgot about the significance of nationhood altogether. (Canovan, 1996) On a longer time-scale, many of the most

powerful mobilisations have been religious, sometimes reinforcing nationhood but often dividing it.

There have in recent years been a few students of nationalism - John Hutchinson, for instance (Hutchinson 1994, Ch. 3) - who have drawn attention to this point. On the whole, however, Western social scientists in general seem to have been misled by the tacit assumption that the modern world has left religion behind. Instead, nationalism has been seen as a kind of modern surrogate for religious fervour. Even in Northern Ireland, where the national conflict grew out of religious enmity, `Protestant` and `Catholic` have with considerable plausibility been seen as badges of ethnicity and politics rather than of faith. It is instructive to recall a claim made confidently by Anthony Smith in 1991, after the fall of Communism and the end of the Cold War:

> `Nationalism... provides the sole vision and rationale of political solidarity today, one that commands popular assent and elicits popular enthusiasm. All other visions, all other rationales, appear wan and shadowy by comparison. They offer no sense of election, no unique history, no special destiny` (Smith 1991: 176)

At the time, that analysis seemed eminently plausible; since September 11 2001 it sounds oddly blinkered. It seems that we have all the time been living in a different world, one in which *religious* mobilisation can be a powerful force cutting across national loyalties. Like the ideological crusades of the twentieth century, this will undoubtedly have an impact on national conflicts, perhaps even in Europe, and certainly elsewhere. In this altered geo-political environment, it may be that some national conflicts will actually become easier to resolve. The crisis seems to have indirectly benefited the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. The attacks on the

USA led Americans, including Irish-Americans who had been sympathetic to the Irish Republican Army`s `armed struggle` against British rule in Northern Ireland, to see terrorism in a different light. Under American pressure, the IRA has taken the long-delayed step of going beyond its temporary cease-fire and actually putting some weapons beyond use - a partial move, but one that may in time make the Unionists less insecure, and therefore more able to compromise.(*The Economist*, 2001, September 22: 30; October 27: 35-6) In view of past disappointments, it would be unwise to be too optimistic, but the changed dynamics of international politics have certainly had a positive effect in this case.

By contrast, some other national conflicts have already been exacerbated. In particular, the national conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has become entangled with international Islamic militancy and the USA`s world-wide `war on terrorism`. Not only is nationhood dynamic in itself, in other words, but it is also profoundly affected by dynamic developments elsewhere. To conclude: the reflections offered in this paper on the dynamics of nationhood could perhaps be summed up by saying (what is obvious enough, but sometimes forgotten) that whatever their social, moral and legal dimensions, nationhood and national conflict are above all *political* phenomena, with all the mobility and contingency that implies. Rogers Brubaker has said that ours is `a world in which nationness may suddenly, and powerfully, "happen".` (Brubaker 1996: 21) We have reason to know that other kinds of mobilisation can also `happen`, and that they can change the world overnight.

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