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BEYOND RUGBY AND CRICKET: Which Sovereignty to Small Nations?

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Last year Ireland held a historic general election that put an end to voting trends that had characterised the previous century and Wales held a historic referendum that would create a national assembly. The Scottish National Party won a surprise majority and the First Minister of Scotland has announced its intention to organise a referendum on independence that would put an end to the United Kingdom if successful.

Over the last few weeks the Six Nations have been competing in the world's most famous rugby tournament. Two of the six nations playing rugby, France and Italy, are nation-states. The other four nations are not. England, Scotland and Wales together form Great Britain, which is one part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (formerly the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland), but they play as separate nations in international sports, and Great Britain is not a nation-state either. Ireland plays international rugby as a single united nation (the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland together), but it is not playing as a unified and single nation-state in the international system. The United Kingdom as a nation-state includes Great Britain and

Northern Ireland. The 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland as a nation-state do not include the 6 counties of Northern Ireland.

All of these events have to do with the sovereignty of small nations and their plight in a global economy.

Sports and the quest for sovereignty

Sport has always played an important symbolic role in the definition of Irish, Scots and Welsh nationalism. At the end of the 19th century Irish nationalists created associations to

promote the use of the Irish language (Gaelic) and the de-anglicisation of Ireland. They also advocated a return to traditional Irish sports (hurling, Gaelic football) and a boycott of English sports (soccer, rugby and cricket). As a result, the most popular sporting events in the Republic of Ireland today are Gaelic sports, in which all 32 counties of both parts of the island compete, but the best Irish soccer players compete in the English or the Scottish premier leagues. The boycott of English sports belonged to the same philosophy that led to the creation

In an economy where markets and corporations are multinational or supranational, the sovereignty of a small nation-state has become a very weak defence; the only protection available to individual nation-states might be a supranational organisation.

Small nations used to be subject to economic control by large nations that can themselves no longer resist international market forces: what should be the nature of a small nation-state now?

Nationalist policies are rooted in a process that has been superseded by regionalization processes that tend toward the (re-)creation of supranational entities.

Today national political power and supranational economic power have become separated and the existing political structures can no longer control the economic forces, resulting in a tendency toward supranational technocracy.

Although sovereign debt and global financial problems have hemmed in the freedom and independence of Ireland, the people still cherish their national sovereignty but have lost any illusion about what the independence of a small nation-state might mean

at the beginning of the 20th century of the first political party to be called *Sinn Féin* ("We Ourselves"). *Sinn Féin* proposed a non-violent path toward national independence based upon boycotting all English institutions in favour of native ones. It proposed that the Irish people ignore the existence of the United Kingdom and act as if Ireland were already an independent state and thereby become self-sufficient as a nation. This policy included setting up cooperative movements in the countryside to avoid the need to rely on British capital and setting up parallel but unofficial courts to deal with civil suits.

A more radical approach led to armed struggle, with a failed rising in 1916 and a more successful guerrilla war of independence in 1918-1921 that created the basis for the current 26 county Republic of Ireland. The failure to achieve full independence for all 32 counties provoked a Civil War that still has implications for Irish politics. The radical republicans lost the Civil War but went on to become the major political force under Eamon De Valera as *Fianna Fáil* ("Soldiers of Destiny"), a party which became the "natural majority" until last year's general election. The forces that "won" the

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Civil War, led by Michael Collins, eventually became *Fine Gael* ("Tribe of the Gaels"), but did not become the major political force until recently. The founders of what is now the Labour party also fought for Irish independence, but only now have enough power to decisively influence Irish politics. The results of the general election almost destroyed *Fianna Fáil* as a political force. The party that now calls itself *Sinn Féin* --and gained its current status during the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland as the political wing of the group then calling itself the IRA-- has made an important advance and has begun to take over from *Fianna Fáil* the defence of constitutional Irish republicanism. *Sinn Féin* is the only political party with representation in the parliaments of both Irelands.

The Welsh nationalist party, *Plaid Cymru* ("Party of Wales"), although a minority party, has gained ground and is represented in Wales, in Westminster and in the European Parliament. It advocates an independent Wales as a member of the European Union. Prior to last year's referendum the Welsh people had been reluctant to opt for a devolved national assembly. The Welsh voted to create a national Assembly with autonomous control over 20 areas of legislation that affect only Wales, while the UK government maintains total control over everything else. This is a timid advance, supported by more than 60% of the voters (with a turnout of some 30%), resulting in an 18% of the total electorate. The Scot-

tish Assembly has both more power and more support, and the Scottish Nationalist Party's surprise majority victory in the most recent Scottish elections has been accompanied by increased support for an independent Scotland, despite the overt opposition of the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, both of which are pan-UK political parties that prefer to maintain the Union. (An unexpected side effect of growing Welsh and Scottish nationalism has been a movement in favour of creating a national assembly for England, separate from the UK Parliament at Westminster, a budding of English nationalism.) Despite seeing the difficulties now being faced by an independent Ireland, the Scottish Nationalist Party still plans to go ahead with a referendum on self-determination, but there is an underlying concern about the danger of the "*Parti Québécois* syndrome".

Despite majority support for the *Québécois* political party that advocates independence for Québec, enough support to justify the celebration of various independence referendums, the people of Québec have never finally voted in favour of independence (nor did the people of Australia finally vote to become a Republic instead of a Dominion

when they had a chance, despite great popular support for the idea). The economic success that the Republic of Ireland enjoyed during the period it was known as the "Celtic Tiger" also inspired more support for the independence of Scotland because the standard UK argument against Scottish independence claimed that a small nation-state would not

be viable in an open and global economy. Ireland seemed to have shown the way (although it did so within the supra-national framework of the EU, not as a small and isolated nation-state like Iceland). When the Irish economic bubble burst and the Republic had to be rescued by the EU and the IMF, the traditional UK argument against independence took on more weight, and there are doubts in Scotland as to whether to vote for complete independence or for an increase in the amount of sovereignty that has been devolved to Scotland by the UK.

A success story that fell short

For 50 years after independence Ireland was unable to break its economic interdependence on the UK or to build important infrastructures or to modernise the economy. Emigration was a major social ill, covertly promoted in order to obtain remittances from emigrants, as well as their return as tourists prone to spend generously "at home". The Irish government continues to cultivate the Irish Diaspora today, consciously modelling its policy toward the Irish overseas on Israel's careful cultivation of Jewish support around the world.

After joining the European Union in 1973 Ireland began to diversify its economic interdependence toward the rest of

Europe, broke away from the British pound sterling and eventually became part of the Eurozone. By the late '90's the "Celtic Tiger" had begun to roar and Ireland joined Finland as the EU member state with the highest standard of living, with an average GDP growth rate of 6% from 1995-2007. Among the factors that brought about Irish economic growth were tax incentives (although the corporate tax in Ireland is neither the lowest in the EU nor significantly lower than the British or even the French corporate tax), the fact that Ireland was English-speaking but not Eurosceptic, the quality of Irish higher education and research, Ireland's lack of colonialist "baggage", the high quality of Irish subcontractors of high technological production, and the fact that a very large number of multinational corporations that have established themselves in Ireland are run by members of the Irish Diaspora.

More than 80 years after independence, the Irish finally become prosperous (although most of the 80 years previous had been a prolonged period of severe economic difficulties). A decade later everything has changed. The roar became a whimper. The rescue of the Irish economy and the people's livelihoods now depends upon rules established by supranational entities: the "Troika" composed of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund that now dictates Ireland's budgetary policies.

The *Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland* read out loud from the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin on Easter Monday 1916 declared *the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible*. In an economy where markets and corporations are multinational or supranational, the sovereignty of a small nation-state has become a very weak defence. (Iceland has now become an interesting test case, having opted not to be part of the EU and to face its problems alone, but Iceland is also a very exceptional case: a nation-state of only 300,000 people). In the past the new *Sinn Féin* has proposed leaving the European Union and defaulting on debts, basing itself today on the ideals of unfettered control of Irish destinies that had motivated the Irish War of Independence in the past, but the voters preferred to give an overwhelming majority to a coalition government of *Fine Gael* and the Labour Party, knowing full well that although they are ideologically opposed to each other, they are both pro-EU.

Under the new conditions of Draconian economic and fiscal measures imposed by supranational bodies, the Irish people no longer have any illusions about what the independence of a small nation-state might mean. Twice in the past the Irish people voted no in referendums to ratify EU treaties (Nice and Lisbon) on the basis of national sovereignty, only to be called upon to repeat each of those referendums,

reversing their decision each time and voting in favour of the second time. Now the Irish people will be asked to vote in referendum on the EU fiscal compact treaty that their government has already signed and actively defends, together with the avowed support of the major political parties (*Fine Gael*, Labour, *Fianna Fáil*), while minority parties will campaign against the treaty. *Sinn Féin* now finds itself in a complicated situation because it will attempt to campaign against the fiscal compact while at the same time defending an Irish membership of the EU that the Irish people now consider to be an indispensable guarantee of their destinies.

The global economics of the 21st century make turbulent waters for small sovereign nation-states. Perhaps Ireland will yet show the way forward. The Irish economy is growing again, thanks to Irish exports, at 1.5% a year (although vulnerable to the drop in demand caused by the international economic crisis: growth may drop below 1% in 2012). The Irish people have suffered a severe drop in their standard of living (cuts of 20-30% in the real income of public servants and perhaps more in the private sector), but the policies of

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benchmarking in force during the Celtic Tiger years may have caused such an inflation of salaries that this cut does not have such drastic consequences for many sectors of the population. The traditional Irish remedy to an economic downturn – emigration – has become noticeable once again and helps keep down the growth of unemployment statistics (during the prosperous years, for the first time, Ireland began to receive net immigration, but that trend has now reversed itself as well).

What role for the 21st century nation-state?

The current crisis questions the nature and role of the nation-state. In a global economy where supranational institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation use global market forces to condition national sovereignty, the only protection available to individual nation-states is a supranational organisation, such as the EU, which dilutes national sovereignty in favour of supranational security. Around the world there are movements toward regionalisation, toward the creation of supranational entities as a way of dealing with both the turbulences and the opportunities created by global capitalism (MERCOSUR, ASEAN +3 +3 +3, etc.).

Within the current structure of the EU an opportunity seems to have been lost: the case of Ireland (or Greece or Portugal) could have been seen as the first salvo in a supranational European counterattack on the speculative international markets. An EU fund designed to relieve members of the need to sell their sovereign bonds at exorbitant rates on the international markets makes much more sense than endangering the EURO or the cohesion of the EU by allowing private credit ratings agencies to speculate against the economies of nation-states which lost their monetary sovereignty when they joined the common currency. Perhaps the EU reaction to the attacks on the sovereign bonds of EU members could also be motivated by the fear that other world players might step in for reasons of their own. Compared to the conditionality imposed by the EU-ECB-IMF, what will China ask in return for “rescuing” the weaker economies of the EU?

In the past small nations were continuously subject to economic control by large nations. Now large nations themselves cannot resist global market forces. This leads to another question: what *should* be the nature of a small

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nation-state *now*? In European history the nation-state as a political entity was defined by opposition to the continental empires of Europe that were larger in terms of territory and population, multinational, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious. European empires were seen to be obsolete and nation-states to be modern. The emergence of the post-Westphalian nation-state involved the disintegration of empires like the Austro-Hungarian Empire (although some of these same emerging nation-states built their own overseas empires).

Ireland was “pacified” by Great Britain during the 16th-18th century post-Westphalian period (“colonised” from the point of view of contemporary postcolonialist theory), but retained its status as a separate state until the Act of Union created the United Kingdom in 1801. Irish nationalist resistance to the Union was fuelled by both the German

Romantic theory of nation-building based on a common linguistic and cultural identity (emphasising the Gaelic language and the Catholic religion as signs of native identity, English language and Protestant religion as signs of the invader’s identity) and by North American and French republicanism (that led to a rebellion in 1798 in which both the gentry class of English-speaking and Protestant origin and the Irish-speaking and Catholic natives fought together unsuccessfully to restore Ireland as a nation-state thereby provoking the Act of Union as a British reaction). In order to prevent such a common cause from re-occurring, sectarianism was actively promoted thereafter, sowing the seeds for internecine conflict that would ravage the North of Ireland until the culmination of the Peace Process in 1998.

The Irish nationalist and republican traditions are based on “restoring” the Irish nation-state by unifying both parts of the island. The Irish unionist and loyalist traditions are based on “maintaining” the UK nation-state. Both tendencies are rooted in a process that has now been superseded by regionalization processes that tend toward the (re-)creation of supranational entities. The historical process that created

the nation-state in Europe was also a process that involved the reconciliation of two kinds of power: political and economic. When both political and economic power belonged to the same social force, order could be maintained. When political power remained in the hands of an obsolete social force but economic power belonged to a new social force, conflict ensued. Obsolete political structures allowed those who had lost economic power but retained political power to extract wealth for their own purposes from the new social force that was economically potent but politically vulnerable. This conflict

produced the transition from feudalism to liberal democracy: the bourgeois revolution that defines *modernity*.

Today political power and economic power have become separated once again and the existing political structures can no longer control the economic forces. As a result, the existing national political structures are giving way to forms of supranational technocracy. Within the EU today the Prime Ministers of two sovereign nation-states (Italy and Greece) have been replaced by technocrats who previously worked for the global financial markets. The Prime Minister of Greece was dissuaded from holding a referendum on the conditions of his country’s bail-out. The Central European Bank is directed by another veteran of the international finance sector. Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy have lost sovereign control over their own fiscal policies and 25 of the 27 member states of the EU have signed a sovereignty-limiting fiscal

compact. All of these tendencies are serious symptoms of the obsolescence of the traditional concept of the modern nation-state under global capitalism.

United in dilution

Dilution of the nation-state concept within a supranational structure (the EU) was one of the factors that aided the Republic of Ireland and the UK to reach a historic agreement on the status of Northern Ireland. It is also a factor that is modifying relations between the opposing communities in the North. The UK's decision not to join the Eurozone has had serious repercussions for cross-border tourism in Northern Ireland when people from Eurozone countries visit the Republic. The North has now developed an unofficial double currency. The amount of cross-border cooperation in basic services, including energy and health care is increasing steadily. The First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, recently became the first unionist leader ever to attend a Gaelic Football match there, and the Deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, former Commander of the IRA in Derry, reciprocated by attending a football match. Last year Queen Elizabeth visited the Republic (the first royal visit in more than a century), paid homage to both the Irish who fought in the British armed forces and those who fought for Irish independence, and apologised for historical errors in relations between the two islands. Now McGuinness has indicated his willingness to meet with her when she visits the North.

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The "Good Friday Agreement" (1998) that set these new tendencies in motion de-territorialised the concept of Irish identity by uncoupling it from a unified national space and shifting it to a voluntary self-identification (the Republic amended its Constitution in order to remove any territorial claim to the entirety of the island, and citizens of the North may hold either an Irish or a UK passport; even Barack Obama has been given a "certificate of Irish heritage" that recognises his great-great-great-grandfather's emigration to the US). For two decades now the Irish government has actively promoted the inclusion of the Diaspora in the definition of a collective –and now globalised—identity. So the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger has moved from defining itself by constant reference to the United Kingdom toward feeling itself to be independent and free among all the other nations. Sovereign debt and global financial problems have hemmed in that freedom and independence but Ireland no longer looks to Britain for the source of its problems or for the framework for its identity.

The Irish people cherish their national sovereignty but have lost their illusions about what the independence of a small nation-state might mean. Meanwhile it is only in the world of sports that Ireland plays as a united nation once again. Ironically, those sports are rugby and cricket.