



THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE BRITISH ISLES

By Geoff Sloan

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In the discipline of International Relations, there are few topics that have been as condemned, misunderstood or poorly utilized as geopolitics. Despite a recent revival of interest, a negative attitude still manifests itself in the early twenty first century. In 2001, the British Geographer Brian Blouet claimed that “The history of geopolitics is a history of bad ideas—sometimes mad ideas that have led countries to wars and recessions.” What he omitted in his assertion is any understanding that geopolitics can do two important things: first, it describes geographical patterns of political history; and, second, it formulates explanations which suggest the contemporary and future political relevance of geographical configurations and locations. Thus, it is possible to evaluate how geography conditions, but does not determine, political relations and outcomes. In short geopolitics, if properly understood, can give judgment in practical conduct.

Ireland’s geopolitical relationship to the rest of the British Isles is a case in point. Too often it is still characterized as England’s first colony. As a consequence, an overly simplistic core/periphery explanation continues to be propagated. The use of the adjective “colonial,” and the abstract nouns “colonialism” and “postcolonial” are deeply embedded in most of the contemporary literature on the Anglo-Irish relationship. However, recently there has been a refreshing—and unexpected—revision of this sterile abuse of geography. Furthermore, it has come from an unexpected source—the British Conservative Party.

It was Admiral Collingwood, Nelson’s second in command at Trafalgar, who on the eve of the battle, addressed his officers with the following words: “Now gentlemen, let us do something today which the world may talk about hereafter.” Similarly, as the dust has settled after the May 2010 British General Election, the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, has done two things that will be talked about hereafter.

First, the Conservatives had to craft, along with the Liberal Democrats, a coalition government, as a consequence of the verdict delivered by the electorate last May. Second, the decision by the Conservative Party to put up, in an alliance with the Ulster Unionist Party, parliamentary candidates in Northern Ireland was ground breaking. It marked the beginning of the end of a sectarian zero sum game that has blighted the politics of this part of the United Kingdom for too long. Voters in Northern Ireland were given, like their counterparts in the rest of the country, an opportunity to elect an MP who would not only represent their interests, but who would also participate in the government of the United Kingdom. The last Northern Ireland MP who was given this opportunity was Robin Chichester-Clark, who in 1972 was appointed Minister of State for Employment in the Government of Edward Heath.

Detractors both inside and outside Northern Ireland pointed out that this alliance failed to win a single parliamentary seat. However, it is worth noting that the electorate of Northern Ireland as a whole cast over 100,000 votes in favour of this idea.

The Conservative Party leadership seems to have instinctively understood geography. Politics must be done within geography. It cannot help but be influenced by physical constraints and opportunities. In one sense, geography is inescapable and yet it has been the abuse of geography for ideological reasons that was responsible, in part, for this zero sum politics taking root in Northern Ireland in the first place.

A wise man once said that if you want to grasp the future, understand the past. One of the sources of this abuse can be seen in

an exchange between then British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and the President of Sinn Fein, Eamon de Valera, which took place in August 1921. The former clearly articulated this vital link between politics and geography:

The geographical closeness of Ireland to the British Isles is a fundamental fact. The history of the two islands for many centuries, however it is read, is sufficient proof that their destinies are indissolubly linked [...] when you as the chosen representative of Irish national ideas, come to speak with me, I made one condition only, of which our proposals plainly stated the effect that Ireland should recognise the force of geographical and historical facts. It is those facts which govern the problem of British and Irish relations. If they did not exist there would be no problem to discuss.

De Valera's response was extremely evasive. In a letter, he replied, "I shall refrain therefore from commenting on the fallacious historical references in your last communication." As his fellow Irishman Kevin O'Higgins acidly observed, "de Valera hates facts like a cat hates water."

The bequest of this mentality was harmful in the extreme. When the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1922, the geographical closeness that Lloyd George recognized was airbrushed away. In the 1950s, the Irish propaganda writer Frank Gallagher claimed that Ireland was an "indivisible island," and that the partition of Northern Ireland from the rest of Ireland was an artificial contrivance conceived by a perfidious Albion. A more recent phrase that has gained wide coinage has been the "island of Ireland." These two phrases manage to be evocative, evasive and deterministic simultaneously—quite an achievement!

They both wrongly assume that because Ireland is an island in a geographical sense, it presupposes unity in a political sense—in short, geography is political destiny. Nothing could be further from the truth. Geography does not determine political outcomes; it merely conditions other factors that unfold within a geographical framework. The fact that Ireland is an island creates no presumption that it should be one state, any more than the Scandinavian and Iberian peninsulas imply that Norway and Portugal should not be sovereign states.

It is not inevitable that there should be a united Ireland pre-determined by geography. In a geopolitical sense the United Kingdom's only international land boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic conforms to one of the most important regional divides in the British Isles as a whole. It marks off, in a geopolitical sense, the Scottish part of Ireland from the English part of Ireland.

How did this come about? Part of the answer is provided by history: the Medieval Latin name for Irishman is *Scotus*. The second part of the answer lies in the conditioning effect of geography. To be more specific, the reality is that the North Channel at its narrowest part—from Fair Head in Northern Ireland to the tip of the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland—is a mere 12 miles wide. The other part of the answer lies in a response to the question: what did geography condition? It has affected a bundle of human associations that has given, and continues to give, Northern Ireland its unique characteristics.

For example, the industrial revolution that only the North of Ireland benefited from had its origins in a similar revolution that had swept through Scotland. Today, the popular language used by people in their everyday business is the same that you would hear in Girvan or Ayr or any other part of Scotland. Finally, as the history of the word *Scotus* indicates, the movement of people between these two parts of the United Kingdom had been continuous long before the seventeenth century Ulster Plantation.

There is another set of relationships within the British Isles that are a product of, what Lloyd George called, the force of geographical and historical facts. They were given systematic expression in Sir Halford Mackinder's 1902 book, *Britain and the British Seas*. In that book, he describes what could be called a double symmetry of geopolitical relationships within the British Isles. Apart from the Scottish-Ulster axis, there is another symmetry often ignored since 1922: Southern Ireland-Wales and England. To appreciate its scope, one needs to comprehend the geographical description that Mackinder used as the core of his method. The lowland gap between the southern end of the Pennines, and the northern part of the Welsh Uplands is often referred to by geographers as the Cheshire Gap. Mackinder gave it a new name of the Midland Gate, as it gave access to the English Plain. He claimed that this configuration was one of the most significant facts in the geography of the British Isles. He drew attention to the mirror-like, similar configuration in Ireland: "The Midland Gate, affording an exit from the English Plain, may be correlated with the Dublin Gate opposite, which gives wide entrance to the Irish plains of Meath." Writing in 1957, the French geographer Pierre Flatres took Mackinder's ideas further, by claiming that the human associations within the British Isles can best be understood by recognizing what he called "two pairs of countries." i.e., Southern Ireland, Wales and England, and Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Like the Ulster-Scottish symmetry, this raises the question: what did this geographical configuration condition? Today Dublin, despite the worst excesses of Irish developers and some of its political elite, remains a Georgian city to rival that of Bath and

Edinburgh. What is also instructive are the many institutions in Irish Republic that have retained the royal prefix such as the Royal Irish Academy, the Royal Cork Yacht Club, and the Royal College of Surgeons to name but three. These human associations (and they are by no means the only ones) go some way to explain why the Anglo-Irish relationship in the twentieth century can be characterized as having been close but tortuous.

The Conservative Party's policy to bring real democracy to Northern Ireland is grounded in an implicit understanding of the geopolitics of the United Kingdom. This is part of the broader geopolitical relationship within the British Isles. It is not based on the abuse of geography, but on recognizing the contours of the geographical grain. This key element of politics is not a new discovery. Sir Halford Mackinder, writing over 110 years ago, stated:

“The course of politics is a product of two sets of forces, compelling and guiding. The impetus is from the past, in the history embedded in a people's character and tradition. The present guides the movement by economic wants and geographical opportunities. Statesmen and diplomats succeed and fail pretty much as they recognise the irresistible power of these forces”.

In short, geography must underlie the democratic politics of the United Kingdom if you would not have it subservient to sectarian politics.

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