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Nationalism and Imperialism

By AN ULSTER IMPERIALIST

"If we believe in anything, it is that under the British Crown, though there are many races, there is but one nationality."—Letter of Lord Robert Cecil to the "Times," October 28th, 1910.

THE above quotation occurred during a discussion upon the remarkable proposals of "Pacifcus" in *The Times*: it exhibits, in a very complete form, the curious confusion of mind with which the term "nation" and its derivatives are being used at the present time: they are regularly employed to express two entirely distinct ideas. A similar haziness exists in the use of the words "Empire" and "Imperialism."

This essay is an attempt to define the meaning and relationship of the words "Imperialism" and "Nationalism" and to separate their real, permanent implication from the temporary accidents of existing party politics. Let us begin by stating their Least Common Denominator as being *local patriotism*. This at once suggests linking them up with other forms of the same sentiment; and here therefore are the four most common and best understood varieties of local patriotism, set out as a series:—

- (a) Parochialism.
- (b) Provincialism.
- (c) Nationalism.
- (d) Imperialism.

The same series of ideas is at the root of all human civilisation, as it grew from the family to the tribe, from the tribe to the clan, and so forth. In all its forms, we may call this feeling *esprit de corps*.

As soon as a man has got beyond mere individual selfishness he finds himself taking an interest in the affairs of his

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own district ; to call the result "Parochialism" is to use a rather depreciatory phrase for a feeling of *public spirit* of the same kind as, but different in degree from, "Imperialism." The first extension of this lowest form of local patriotism may be called "Provincialism." From this standpoint, for instance, Edinburgh looks down on Glasgow as vulgar, while Glasgow returns the compliment by disparaging an effete Edinburgh ; of course this mutual contempt really arises because each City is immensely proud of itself. Similarly, Ulster is convinced that she is the finest province in the British Empire, while Leinster derides Ulster for an upstart.

The second extension of local patriotism, arising out of Provincialism, is "Nationalism." The fusing of parishes makes a province : so the fusing of provinces makes a nation. Nationalism arises from a welding of smaller identities, each distinct as long as it is considered under either of the earlier headings. Influenced by Nationalism, Edinburgh and Glasgow fuse, and join in other fusions (of the Highland and Lowlands, for instance) to form one Scottish Nation. And, *pace* Lord Robert Cecil, the man who asserts that the Nationality of the Scot is identical with the Nationality of the Englishman will receive scant support North of the Tweed. Has Lord Robert ever tried the experiment of pretending to mistake a Highlander for a Englishman ?

Still travelling along the same lines we arrive, by a perfectly normal process, at Imperialism : the next and most natural extension of *esprit de corps*, but upon a much larger scale. Thus genuine Imperialism is based upon the fusing of separate Nations, without loss of their National identity, just as Provincialism is a welding of separate and separable Parochialisms. This Imperial idea is very new ; practically it has grown up in our own times, a vision seen by men of whom many are still living. It is a vision of a mighty brotherhood of Nations, linked together under the Crown by ties of blood and sentiment and commerce ; it is the same *kind* of vision that Alfred the

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Great saw when he began to build England out of the Heptarchy in the 9th century, the same *kina* of vision that Brian Boromhe saw in the 10th century, when he almost created a really unified Irish nation. But the vision, in its modern dress, which we call Imperialism, is so new and so large that many people fail to understand it; for some of them it is spoiled by associations that falsely attach to the word "Empire"—associations that suggest to them only a domineering and intolerant arrogance. This is to mistake the larger view of Imperialism as completely as Lord Robert Cecil mistakes the true meaning of Nationality.

The truth, like many other profound truths, looks at first like a paradox. The ultimate problem of the British Empire is *not* how to make one Nationality out of the diverse elements in the Empire: it is how that Empire can best develop its multiple Nationalities, present or future, to the limit of which each is capable.

Let us glance for one moment at the history of the Empire. The colonising career of England began, inside the British Isles, about 1100; it began outside the British Isles about 1600. It has been punctuated by remarkable successes, and by at least equally remarkable failures. Scotland is a success, Ireland has been, hitherto, a failure; Australia and Canada are successes; the United States is England's biggest Imperial failure. If one gets a grip on this root-principle of real Imperialism—viz., that it grows out of multiple Nationalities—one can see the explanation of a great many Imperial failures, and one holds a key to the solution of many similar difficulties in the future.

Consider the history of Ireland from the first invasion of Norman barons in 1167 down to the last quarter of the 19th century; is there any better epitome of it than this, that it was the attempt forcibly to impose another Nationality upon a whole people who had been often defeated but who never looked upon themselves as conquered? (The Irish have one trait of character that is supposed to be very English: they

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never know when they are beaten !) Seven hundred years of almost continuous effort have absolutely failed to carry out what we begin to see was an impossible task : for the new Ireland that is rising up is not less Irish than before, but promises to be more Irish than ever.

Surely, here are lessons which may teach many things to those who aim at welding our Empire into a mighty whole. And prominent among these lessons is this—that one cardinal mistake of the English is the way they often think of, and talk of, the United Kingdom and the British Empire as if these were actually the *English* Kingdom and the *English* Empire. Worse still, they constantly act on the same assumption, and so ride rough-shod over feelings of local patriotism that demand their respect and encouragement if the Empire is to be one in something more than name.

Let me illustrate the last sentence by a rough parallel:— Suppose it be true that a German invasion is coming, and that the Germans will beat us. Suppose, further, that the Germans in England will act as did the English of bygone days in Ireland : throw down the laws and customs of the country by force, trample on its religion, stop education, confiscate property (much of it two and three times over), and put down the inevitable reprisals with fire and sword. Would this tend to make the English into loyal Germans ? And if, for one reason and another, this kind of thing had actually lasted in England from the Crusades until the time of Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse, would the reign of the present Kaiser be long enough to wipe out English memories of former German oppressions, even with the help of a long series of brand-new, though ever so healing, acts of good government and sympathy ?

It matters nothing whether this paraphrase of history be true or false : because it is the version most firmly believed by the Irish. And the Englishman who will sit down and try to realise this fact will begin to understand the difficulty of establishing any genuine Imperial partnership across the Irish

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Channel as long as English statesmen believe the constituent Nations of the Empire should, or must, begin their Imperial career by dropping their Nationality and becoming English.

Personally, I write from the standpoint of one who consciously adopts all the four varieties of local patriotism. I am Parochial (literally, being a vestryman as well as treasurer of our parish!) ; I am Provincial, being directly interested in the development of commerce and agriculture in Ulster ; I am National, in that I am an Irishman, and proud of it, anxious to help Ireland, as far as lies in my power, along the upward path she has begun to tread ; and I am Imperial, glad of my small share in the proudest boast that the world has heard—"Civis Britannicus sum"—mark the phrase: it is "*Britannicus*" not "*Anglicanus*."

We have now arrived at what, I hope, will be considered a rational account of the main varieties of local patriotism. If the argument be accepted it becomes perfectly clear that you cannot found an extension of any of the lesser forms upon the demand that the smaller position must be abandoned. You can never make a Parochial man into a Provincialist by telling him he must stop being interested in his pet hobby, the Parish Pump. You can never make a Nationalist into an Imperialist by ordering him to begin by ceasing to be a Nationalist. You could never have made one single English Imperialist by preaching the doctrine that English ideas must be abandoned in England.

Probably, the chief obstacle to a general understanding of the*true Imperialism (if the definitions above be accepted in principle) is that the permanent meaning of the words which are used to describe these various forms of "*esprit de corps*" are obscured by irrelevant events in recent history. It is true, and it is very unfortunate, that the word "Nationalism" is tainted, for many of this generation, by bitter associations in Ireland, associations which have nothing to do with the permanent fact that Ireland is not, and never will become,

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England, or Scotland, or Wales, any more than she will become Germany or Portugal :—

“ For in spite of all temptations
To belong to other Nations,
He remains an *Irishman* ! ”

Up to now the words “Nationality” and “Nationalism” have been used in their real sense in this essay : it becomes necessary to show how widely these differ from the political meanings. An Orangeman, for instance, who calls any man in Ireland a “Nationalist” usually implies that his opponent approves of dynamite and murder as political arguments, and that he would use them again, only for the police ! Almost everybody understands the term to be synonymous with “Home Ruler,” because the Home Rule movement is organised by a body of politicians who have annexed to themselves the title of Nationalists, and, thereby, have brought to their purely political campaign a great accession of strength—viz., National sentiment. One may believe Home Rule to be bad or good according to one’s political party, but Home Rule has nothing whatever to do with the existence of Nationality. If it were really necessary, there could not possibly be any Irish Nationality at this moment, for Ireland has never had genuine Home Rule since the 12th century ; and there was little enough *National* Irish sentiment before that date. Nor could Wales or Scotland now possess any remnant of Nationality.

Obviously, real Nationalism and political Nationalism are two entirely different things ; and we must try to disentangle the permanent meaning from the temporary, accidental one. The only method is to analyze the context. Suppose a speaker announces—“I am an Irish Nationalist, and therefore I vote for the Union.” Politically, the phrase has no meaning ; really, it conveys—“I am an Irishman, and I desire the welfare of the old country : I believe the Union is beneficial to the Irish Nation, and therefore I vote for it.” True Irish Nationalism can use words like that ; it is not affected by the catchwords of

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of the moment, it is not bound up with the future of any species of party politics ; for, just as soon as he can be shown that his country would benefit by a change of policy, of whatever kind, then the real Nationalist will begin to advocate that change. Contrast this now with another imaginary speaker, who states—“I am an Irish Nationalist, and therefore I hate all Irish Unionists.” Politically, the meaning is obvious, but translate the sentence in terms of permanent Nationalism, and every vestige of meaning disappears.

This double meaning of the same word seems to be the real obstacle which prevents people from understanding the interconnection between Nationality and Imperialism. Many, indeed, take these to be two antagonistic principles, whereas the former is really an essential preliminary to the latter. Is it not obvious that English Nationality could not exist without the smaller and older forms of English local patriotism?—that the English Nation could not be healthy unless these had preceded it, and, what is more, unless they continued to flourish?

The Early Victorian ideal of an Universe exactly like Early Victorian England is dead, and ought to be buried; the old-fashioned and, I believe, almost extinct notion that a missionary could turn a Chinaman or a Rajput into a “Wee Free” or a high-Church Anglican Catholic is not more futile than Archbishop Whately’s proposal to turn Irish babies into “happy little English” children. Some people have earnestly desired that Ireland might be sent for a few minutes to the bottom of the sea as the only solution of the Irish Question: it is really not necessary to wish for this catastrophe, for Ireland within the last twenty years has started to solve her own problems along lines of her own. Backed up by the sympathetic and helpful character of recent British legislation, she is developing distinctively national institutions of her own, and the results, recent as the change has been, are already sufficiently striking to have attracted widespread attention. From this point of view, it is lamentable that any re-opening of the “Irish Question”

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should be forced upon the country just now, while the men of the Eighties are still at the head of their political forces. It is desperately hard for an Irish gentleman, who vividly remembers the Land War (and who lost much of his property as the result of it), to lend a hand at any re-building work on which his former foes are engaged. It is at least equally hard for an Irish farmer, who took an active part in that War, to work side by side with the men, or the class of men, at whom he used to shoot! Neither variety of Irishman finds it easy to forget and forgive at such short notice. Protestant born in the South anything over 30 years ago, grew up in the firm, inherited conviction that the Roman Catholics only wanted the opportunity to cut his throat; Roman Catholic in the Protestant districts was born and bred into the belief that Protestants wanted nothing better than to exterminate him and all of his faith. If you are, say, 50 years old, and have fixedly believed these terrible things until you grew to manhood, you will not find it exactly easy to keep abreast of the rapid change that is coming over Ireland. And so, the men who are leading the Irish parties at present are for the most part fully, and no doubt honestly, convinced that the Irish Question is still practically the same as it was 20 years ago.

One proof that it is not the same is the very curious "straw" that has been blowing about lately, by which it appears that certain Nationalists in Ireland are beginning to acknowledge their citizenship of the Empire. Another is the very remarkable way in which the new movements of Irish thought have attracted Irishmen of the most various opinions in politics. If there be any truth in the theory of patriotic development which is here set out, the deduction from the two last facts is obvious: that Ireland is beginning a double evolution. If things go on as they appear to be going at present, the two Provincialisms of Ireland which we call Nationalism and Unionism will gradually give place to, or fuse into, a true Nationality, which, even as it is, underlies them both; and, just in proportion as this genuine

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Irish patriotism gains strength, so will the larger Imperial patriotism grow with it.

Naturally, this double evolution involves the disappearance, actual or political, of those whose opinions were formed during the now prehistoric epoch of dynamite and landlord-shooting ; and here again it is lamentable that political turmoil should have dragged the Irish Question once more to the centre of the stage, before the men whom the new movements are making have replaced the sturdy old fighters of last century.

Prophecies are always rash ; and this prophecy in particular may seem more rash than most ! But it is certain that England for hundreds of years deliberately and purposely thwarted the growth of a distinctive Irish Nationality so far as she had the power to do so, in the belief (1) that she was acting in her own interest, and (2) that she would ultimately make Ireland English. It is equally certain that the result was in both cases exactly opposite to that which the English expected. To-day we are living through the first years of an era in which the English have begun to build up what they formerly pulled down, and, what is of far greater importance, to allow the Irish people the opportunity of self-development. If the policy be reversed, is it not likely that the results will be reversed also ?

If this prophecy should come true (and far less likely things have happened) the Empire, which will then have added to its strength by healing a sore seven hundred years old, will indeed be able to plume itself upon its modern statesmanship, and this lesson will doubtless have been learnt once for all—that the one thing fatal to Imperial interests is the attempt to destroy, or even to weaken, Nationality within the Empire.