

# SELF-DETERMINATION & SOVEREIGNTY

**It is generally accepted in the world today that peoples have the right of self-determination. That is to say no that no people has the right to dominate another or others, unlike in the imperial era. This then raises the issue of what is a people. A people may be defined in both objective and subjective terms. Objectively, one has to take account of history, language, culture, economics, and territory. Subjectively, there are the considerations of consciousness and solidarity.**

## VARIETIES OF NATION

A people may be characterised by all of these features being present in common or a particular combination of some of them. For example, in Europe, Hungary is an example of the first situation in its virtual homogeneity, while Switzerland might be taken as an illustration of the second in its diversity. When a people exercises its right to self-determination, this usually results in the establishment of sovereign independence, in other words a nation-state.



In the Atlantic Isles (dubbed by some as the 'British Isles'), there are two States recognised in international law - one, officially titled the 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' and another consisting of 26 Irish counties, the official description of which varies, but legalistically amounting, in effect, to an Irish republic as so far established. The extent of the United Kingdom on the island of Britain comprises three elements: the nations of Scotland, England, and Wales; the remaining UK element is found on this island and consists of six north-eastern counties, often referred to by the establishments in London and Belfast just

as a 'Province' (as distinct from the historic province of Ulster).

## SCOTLAND & WALES

The principle of national self-determination has been acknowledged in Britain in regard to Scotland as evidenced in the referendum of 2014. However, this showed that self-determination does not always result in support for independence. Nonetheless, there will probably be a second Scottish referendum on the matter in the next few years which, given present indications, may well then result in secession from the UK. The position in Wales is that there has not yet been a majority in the Welsh parliament calling for a referendum on independence. But attitude surveys in recent years have shown the demand among the populace for independence growing from 10% to 30%. If Scotland in fact leaves the UK, the signs are already there that this figure will continue to increase and, should it exceed 50% and be reflected in the Welsh parliament, there would probably have to be a referendum on independence for that country as well.

## NORTHERN IRELAND

The provision in respect of the north of Ireland is outlined in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. In that document, it is stated "that it is for the people of Ireland alone ... to exercise their right of self-determination". The method for doing this is envisaged as involving plebiscites in the two jurisdictional areas on the island on the option of a united Ireland. Republicans have assented to this, taking account of demographic and political developments in recent times which indicate the likelihood of that approach actually enabling the fulfilment of the Irish national objective.

It is clearly understood that such self-determination would involve the emergence of a sovereign independent Ireland. Of course, following a positive outcome of the stipulated plebiscites, there would have to be negotiations about the content of such a polity. All sorts of detail have been raised about structures, devolution, language, flags and emblems, anthems, recognition of identity, bills of rights, and so on. These would all have to be addressed meaningfully and republicans have stated that they would not be found wanting under these headings.

The key point about self-determination that needs to be stressed is the sovereignty made possible by it, which signifies that British power in Ireland will at last come to a complete end.

### **THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND**

Returning to our initial observations, it is an interesting question as to how exactly one

defines the people of Ireland, bearing in mind the objective and subjective factors referred to at the beginning of this article. However, the full realisation of that task is something that will take time and need not detain us unduly in the context of working out the immediate political implications of the Good Friday Agreement. Nonetheless, one can currently envisage the construction of a concept of at least civic Irishness ranging from the Gaelic along a spectrum of identity to the Ulster-Scots.

It is notable that most unionists reflect the attitude towards them emanating from the neighbouring island in that they generally acknowledge some sort of Irishness as part of their self-description. After all, their name for the entity to which they are attached is 'Northern Ireland'

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