

PROGRESSIVE NATIONALISM

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

In a recent article in *The Irish Times* (29/1/18), Joe O'Toole, ex-Senator and ex-General Secretary of the INTO, wrote about the situation in the north. In this, he made several references to nationalism.

He told us that “nationalism will always divide”; “nationalism ... has recently delivered to us an eclectic global gaggle of nationalists including, inter-alia, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, UKIP, Marine Le Pen and of course the Brexiteers”; “Nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise”; “nationalism is a nasty and uncomplicated, political philosophy characterised by superiority and inflexibility”; “nationalism by its nature can never unite ... the country”; it is a manifestation of “extremism”; nationalists seek to “impose their culture, history, language, customs and beliefs with those of a different persuasion ...”; “Nationalism has divided our schools, our communities, our hospitals, our graveyards and more”; “An investment of our hopes in nationalism is counter-productive”; “It will never bridge the cultural gaps that divide us.”

This is not an untypical example of reactionary historical and political muddle-headedness. For a start, nationalism emerged in modern history as a progressive force on the side of popular democracy and national independence. Expressed in a different way, it is what could now be called anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism. The first major manifestation of nationalism came in the shape of the American Revolution against the British Empire. It was followed shortly afterwards by the French Revolution which asserted the sovereignty of the people and had to cope with foreign counter-revolutionary intervention. National resistance was further evident in the 19th century in Latin America against Spain and Portugal. Nationalism initially came to the fore in Germany in response to Napoleonic imperialism and was eventually fulfilled through German unification in 1871. In the 1860s, Italy went through a similar process of resistance to foreign interference and struggle for unification. Other examples of nationalism were to be found in central and south-eastern Europe. In the first instance, Poland and Hungary were to the fore in challenging the might of empire. Poland was worst off in having to cope with three empires – German, Austrian and Russian. Hungary had as its adversary the Austrian Empire. In south-eastern Europe, or the Balkans, the antagonists were the Austrians to the north and the Turks to the south. In the early 20th century, nationalism also came to fruition in Norway, Finland, and Czechoslovakia.

Throughout the 20th century, the liberation struggles ranging from the edge of Europe (Ireland) to the Third World were also manifestations of nationalism.

In Ireland, nationalism has always meant popular sovereignty and national independence. There have undoubtedly been Irish nationalists who sought to link it to Catholicism and Gaelicism. But the first attribute was grafted onto nationalism and did not emanate from its essential nature, while the second is an authentic linguistic outgrowth of nationalism which should rely on persuasion rather than imposition. Of course, it is legitimate for a nationalist to be a Catholic and advocate that faith, without imposing it on anybody or seeking to enshrine it in the constitution and laws of the State. Likewise, it is legitimate for a nationalist to adhere to Gaelic culture and to seek to promote that unique phenomenon without forcing it on people, while legitimately demanding that the State award it due recognition, status and rights. Thus, Catholic supremacism has been resisted and Gaelic hibernianism not sought by true Irish nationalists, although many cannot see these distinctions. More particularly, in the religious sphere, they confuse sectarianism with nationalism.

On a broader front, nationalism has also come to be distorted when it is asserted that one's nation is superior to others (chauvinism) or has the right to rule over other nations (imperialism) whereby it ironically does to other nations what has originally been done to one's own nation. This corruption of concept and language has therefore led to the necessity to refer to progressive nationalism as opposed to aggressive nationalism.

However, this distinction is deliberately lost by reactionary anti-nationalism which is the current tactic of those who strive to construct a European Federation or a United States of Europe which, in effect, will be dominated by a Franco-German axis.

The problem with many on the Left in the ex-imperial metropolitan countries is that they hand the national question on a plate to the Right. For them, class and nation are an antinomy instead of a complement. They simply do not understand the importance of the nation as a political, cultural and social expression for the majority of people and, indeed, in some cases wish to think that the nation does not exist at all. In this, they contrast with the Left in former colonial countries which comprehend the nation all too well and the attempts to suppress it. The root of socialist anti-nationalism runs deep in Europe and had its most pungent expression in the thought of Rosa Luxemburg. In the early 20th century, the Austro-Marxists also assisted in diminishing national liberation. It is this ideological infection which has largely contributed to the collapse of European social democracy and is nowhere more evident than in the Irish Labour Party.

A final comment might be made on the difference between nationalism and republicanism. All republicans are nationalists but not all nationalists are republican in the sense that one can be for national independence in the shape of a constitutional monarchy as happened in Norway at the beginning of the 20th century when it broke away from Sweden. However, this is a matter of form rather than substance, although strictly speaking democratic nationalism is incompatible with even the most shallow symbolism of monarchy. But, as one of our great poets once put it, truth is never pure and rarely simple.

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