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# Anglo-Irish relations, elite Conservative rhetoric and citizenship identities

By Andrew Scott Crines

Anglo-Irish relations have historically been characterised as discordant. War, peace, dispute, negotiation - each contribute towards the description of a contentious historical relationship, polarised by advocates of either a united Ireland or integrated Union with the United Kingdom. As is to be expected, this adversarial relationship has been reflected in the rhetoric of political leaders on both sides of the Irish Sea.



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Yet, in more recent years, as diplomatic relations have improved through the process of negotiation in Northern Ireland, elite rhetoric has transformed in concordance with this reformed relationship. The Downing Street Declaration and the Good Friday Agreement emerged as important milestones in laying the foundations for an alignment of rhetoric between the political elites, underscoring closer ties between the two. Such an alignment is no easy matter to conduct. The relationship between Britain and Ireland has been a matter of some delicacy for political elites given the construction of national identity on both sides. As a political entity, "British" has been challenged by the post-1997 devolution settlements to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These are reflective of the onset of ethnic and civic nationalisms in the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, which includes the *de facto* emergence of the "English question": how should England itself be represented within the Union? Given the complexities facing British political elites within its own conception of nationhood, the way elite rhetoric is framed has garnered enhanced salience.

Such salience derives from the capacity of elite rhetoric to unite or divide on the basis of different conceptions of national identity. As an example, overtly English-focused rhetoric has the potential to generate a counter reaction amongst those of another identity. Yet, it must be remembered that *Englishness* itself is inadequate as a complete description of identity, given sub-divisions within the English nation exist between those who identify more with either a Yorkshire, Lancashire, or Cornish cultural construction. As such, the rhetoric utilised and deployed by political elites increasingly tends to reflect the subversion of a singular

definition of *British identity* by acknowledging the importance of counter identities, ethnic and constructed.

The ongoing economic crisis can serve to illustrate the models of Anglo-Irish rhetoric currently deployed in response to such dilemmas of identity.. This is an appropriate example as it illustrates the use of rhetoric by leading Westminster and Irish political elites upon an issue impacting both.

The fiscal crisis facing the Irish economy became a concern for David Cameron because of the potential impact upon the financial economy in Britain, rooted in the City of London. Faced with immediate impact upon this sector of the British economy, Cameron sought to highlight close relations between the two countries to legitimise intervention. He remarked "there is a great connection between Britain and Ireland - and that's why it's right we should stand ready to help the Irish economy." By drawing upon the immediate economic concerns, Cameron argued the "great connection" between Britain and Ireland would draw the two civic states together. The connection assumes a post-peace process closeness based upon mutual cooperation between London and Dublin towards finding a resolution to terrorism, disregarding the less than harmonious relationship prior to the process. Cameron's rhetoric enabled him to portray Britain as a saviour of the Irish economy, whilst safeguarding the City of London from what he saw as economic inclemency.

In contrast, the Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen found himself in the role of an apologist. Through his political rhetoric, Cowen chose to accept a degree of responsibility through demonstrating his displeasure at the economic situation. "No one is more sorry about this situation than I am", he said. He emphasised this position saying "I apologise unconditionally about the situation this country finds itself in.

Don't think I'm equivocating in any way". Such rhetoric demonstrates a degree of subservience to those seeking to blame him for the economic situation whilst simultaneously buying into the narrative evolving through Cameron's rhetoric vis-à-vis Ireland in need of a British rescue. Such a position enabled Cameron and the Conservative Chancellor, George Osborne to portray Cowen as an embodiment of Irish economic impuissance.

Britain subsequently entered bilateral negotiations to provide a bailout to the Irish economy. Osborne's rhetoric argued "Ireland is a friend in need, and we are here to help". This rhetoric implies a friendship connection, yet for the British journal *the New Statesman*, UK financial exposure to the Irish debt is more likely to provide a pragmatic rationale for the demonstration of altruism. Indeed, such an analysis connects Anglo-Irish relations entirely to economic kinship and a shared economic model. Furthermore Osborne had argued previously that Ireland was a "shining example of the art of the possible in long-term economic policy-making". In order to fully appreciate this position, the Conservative economic ideology of *laissez-faire* individualism implies economic austerity similar to that of the Irish governing party Fianna Fáil's earlier approach. Such a comparison, therefore, is unsurprising.

To conclude, the use of rhetoric by both the UK Prime Minister and Chancellor was designed to highlight a long standing connection between Britain and Ireland, despite the historical divergences. Meanwhile, Cameron's use of rhetoric was also fine-tuned to safeguard the financial interests of the City of London and anchor Ireland to shared problems which require a common resolution. The differences of national identity, the complexities facing the British state concept, and the emergence of the financial crisis all pose significant challenges to political elites. In order to fully engage with contemporary economic controversies, Cameron adopted unifying rhetoric which subverts historical disharmony by building upon post-peace process agreements. This rhetoric, utilised to generate economic stability, tends towards ensuring conditions suitable to *laissez-faire* individualism between the two states, leading to increasing economic dependence of the Irish economy upon the British political elite. This, it could be argued, will have significant consequences for issues of national identities over the coming years, certainly once the economic crisis fades into history.



**Framing the Anglo-Irish relationship.** "Cameron's rhetoric enabled him to portray Britain as a saviour of the Irish economy, whilst safeguarding the City of London from what he saw as economic inclemency." Crown copyright / the Cabinet Office