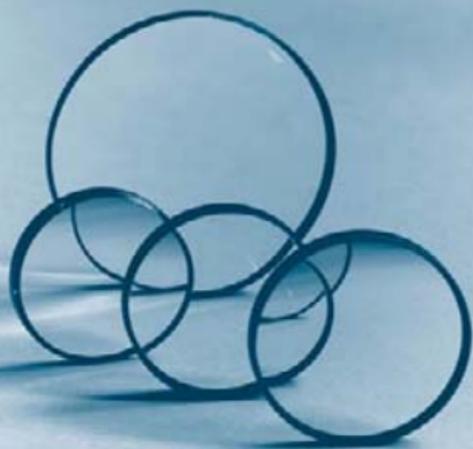


# Global citizen and European Republic

**Irish foreign policy in transition**



**Ben Tonra**

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Irish foreign policy in transition

Ben Tonra

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To Helen and Brian

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Ben Tonra  
Gortmahaw, Loughmore  
County Tipperary

# 1 Introduction

## What is happening to Ireland and Ireland's role in the world?

Those who study and write on Irish foreign policy<sup>1</sup> appear to be divided. Some argue that Ireland's evolving place in the world has been a function of individual choices. Thus, they map the Republic of Ireland's course through the choppy seas of international politics by reference to the personalities and preferences of its political leaders and senior officials. These detailed, empirical stories centre, for example, around the efforts of W.T. Cosgrave to redefine the British Empire (Mansergh 1952 and 1975; Harkness 1969), Eamon de Valera's determination to rewrite the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty and to sustain Irish neutrality (Bowman 1982; McMahon 1984; Keogh 1994), Seán MacBride's fusion of partition with neutrality (McCabe 1991), Frank Aiken's stewardship of the golden age of Irish diplomacy at the UN (MacQueen 1984; Skelly 1996) and the Republic's introduction to the global economy by Seán Lemass (Murphy 2003).

Other writers look for their explanations in Ireland's geo-strategic position. Here the predominant issue is Ireland's relationship with the United Kingdom. It is argued that the roots of Irish foreign policy are to be found in the inevitable fixation of Irish foreign policy makers with their closest neighbour (Sloan 1997). Thus, Irish foreign policy has been analysed as being an attempt to construct a meaningful independence out of UN votes and political declarations (Sharp 1990), while the most striking feature of Irish foreign and security policy – neutrality – has also been argued to be an effort to differentiate the state from Britain (Salmon 1989). Ireland, has, however, also profited from its geography – being spared the agony of making some difficult choices during the Cold War (Keatinge 1984 and 1996; Salmon 1989). Ireland's membership of the European Union has also provided both a platform for, and the necessity of, foreign policy

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1 Unless specified to the contrary, references to 'Irish' foreign policy and to 'Ireland' may be taken to refer to the Republic of Ireland.

development (Sharp 1990; Millar 2005) as well as placing traditional policies (on security and defence for example) under new kinds of pressure (Tonra 2001; Doherty 2002).

Finally, some writers look for domestic factors to illuminate the course of Irish foreign policy. In these analyses, foreign policy is a function of competing domestic claims that are adjudicated through government. Such writers look at the manipulation of foreign policy issues for party political gain (Keatinge 1984), the role of interest groups in defining the policy agenda (Hederman 1983; Holmes, Rees and Whelan 1993) and the pursuit of prosperity and economic interests (Maher 1986; Whelan 2000).

What all of these approaches lack, however, is any particular interest in linking changes in the Republic of Ireland's international role with a transformation of its national identity. If such a linkage were to be made then the story of Irish foreign policy would not be based upon an excavation of individual, strategic or domestic interests but would be rooted in a changing sense of self and an evolving set of intersubjective beliefs. This is also a point that appears to be evident to policy makers. In 1996 an Irish Foreign Minister, introducing the first comprehensive White Paper on Irish foreign policy, argued that 'Irish foreign policy is about much more than self-interest. The elaboration of our foreign policy is also a matter of self-definition – simply put, it is for many of us a statement of the kind of people that we are' (Dáil 463: 1273). If 'Irish' identity is defined differently at the start of this century than it was at the start of the last, then surely this has been reflected in the way in which the Irish relate to the rest of the world? Moreover, what is the relationship between Irish foreign policy and shared or contested understandings of what it is to be Irish? Simply by making this linkage we open up new questions in the study of Irish foreign policy and offer a new framework from which Irish foreign policy might be analysed.

### **International relations and identity**

The last two decades have witnessed 'the return of culture and identity to IR (International Relations) theory' (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996), but with no agreement on how to welcome them back. Rationalists of both a neo-realist and neo-liberal orientation have sought to integrate identity as an independent variable alongside other factors and with some success (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Posen 1993; Kaufman 1996), while a set of poststructuralist and constructivist scholars have sought to place ideational issues (identity, norms, beliefs etc.) at the centre of their analysis (Kratochwil 1986; Der Derian 1987; Onuf 1989; Walker 1993; Wendt 1999).

In his 1988 presidential address to the US-based International Studies Association, Robert Keohane christened the latter group of IR scholars 'reflectivists', which he later went on to contrast with the dominant orthodoxy of 'rationalists' in IR (Keohane 1988). He argued that while reflectivists were right

to look into the ideational factors, such as norms, beliefs, identity and culture, their enquiries needed to be structured in such a way as they would be commensurable with the traditional social scientific method. In other words, if rationalists and reflectivists did not speak the same scientific language, then little in the way of a meaningful dialogue (and, ultimately, an aspired-for reconciliation) could take place between them. However, the level playing pitch proposed was established by rationalists in an attempt to mirror the analytical rigours of the physical sciences. It necessarily privileged the rationalist epistemology of the social sciences, based upon testing causal hypotheses. This was precisely what many of the so-called 'reflectivists' challenged.

For reflectivists, scientific objectivism is itself problematic. Facts cannot speak for themselves – they are spoken of and argued for. Thus, reflectivists assert that the material world that exists cannot be understood without shared intersubjective frameworks (language, social practices, codes, symbols etc.) that offer an agreed base for the interpretation and explanation of 'reality'. For its part, constructivism is an approach that looks at how these social realities come to be – how social facts come to be constructed.

In their attempt to foreground the role of ideas, beliefs, norms and identity in International Relations, some constructivists have sought to build a 'middle ground' or 'bridge' between reflectivist and rationalist positions (Adler 1997; Wendt 1999; Checkel 2000). These efforts have been predicated upon an ontological focus which builds upon the core constructivist interest in ideational issues and the intersubjective nature of social reality; in other words that the social world consists of 'facts that are only facts by human agreement' (Searle 1995: 12). However, the admission price to Keohane's meaningful dialogue with the mainstream of the discipline was acceptance of a modernist, causal epistemology. This would allow for the traditional pursuit of laws of social reality and for the objective analysis of competing truth claims. This model of 'thin' or 'conventional' constructivism has thus moved decisively away from its critical, post-positivist 'reflectivist' roots, but it has also facilitated an engagement with traditional International Relations on the role of ideational factors in European and world politics (Checkel 2004).

By contrast, this study attempts to take a 'thick' or 'critical' constructivist path. The ontological assumption that our reality is socially constructed is here necessarily linked to a non-causal or interpretive epistemology. In other words, if our reality is socially constructed, then there is no objective, external reality against which one can 'test' propositions. Instead the focus centres upon an understanding of reasons rather than an explanation of causes and the asking of 'how' questions rather than 'why' questions. In the case of this study, it is an analysis of the mutually constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy.

One crucial 'constructivist' assumption underpinning this study of Irish foreign policy and national identity is that there is no useful distinction to be

made between material and ideational structures, since each depends upon the other for meaning. The role of the Irish defence forces, for example, is not just a function of the number of its personnel or the equipment at its disposal. It is a creature of intersubjectively held beliefs. These are related to the functions that are deemed appropriate to it, the ambitions that are placed upon it and the beliefs that are held about it and its history in Irish society. Material structures (the physical resources associated with the Irish defence forces) are thus given meaning by social structures (intersubjectively held beliefs).

The significance of these social meanings is that they lead actors to adopt certain roles of behaviour in their relationships with other actors (March and Olsen 1998). Expectations and norms thus inform their actions. Crucially, it is in the playing out of these roles – the performative aspect – that the social meanings invested in material structures may subsequently be redefined and change (Campbell 1992).

### National identity and foreign policy

The next assumption underpinning this study is that national identity is a process rather than a fixed state. Some analysts understand nationalism as a being a core concept underlying identity – one that has a substance deriving from, *inter alia*, language, history, culture, homeland and sense of solidarity. Anthony Smith (1983, 1991), for example, bases his conception of nationalism upon the above elements which in turn creates an ‘ethnie’ – an essential precondition for the successful construction of a national identity. With the intervention of a nation-building elite, nationalist movements can, from these elements, begin to craft a strong national consciousness and identity. The foundation, however, is constructed from the pre-existing cultural material that gives substance to the national elite’s labours. There are at least two difficulties with such an approach. The first is that it tends to essentialise identity – by assuming that these national building blocks simply lie in wait for national stonemasons to begin their work. This has the second problem of making it difficult to trace processes of change in that national identity. We know how we got a particular nation – and we can excavate its foundations – but we cannot understand or explain the emergence of new, evolving national identities or fundamental changes in existing national identities. Our understanding of national identity is thus arguably too static.

The approach to national identity adopted here reflects that of Harvard University’s Weatherhead Project on identity (Abdelal et al. 2005). National identity is here conceptualised as being a social identity comprised of shared (intersubjectively held) understandings of group attributes and identifiers. That identity is then defined through an ongoing process of discursive contestation. Using the Weatherhead typology, contestation can be identified within four non-mutually exclusive realms of national identity: its constitutive norms; its social purposes; its relational comparisons and its cognitive models (*ibid.*).

For our purposes, the constitutive realm of Irish national identity is composed of the practices that signify it – that mark it out. These would be those practices that identify themselves as being ‘Irish’ to both the Irish themselves and the wider world. Thus, one area of contestation in Irish national identity might be over what it means to be Irish in the world today and of what ‘Irishness’ is composed and what it is meant to represent. For its part, the purposive realm is said to be composed of the goals attached to national identity. We might therefore expect to see contestations over the definition of an Irish mission in the world; that is to say over some ‘historic return’ or through the fulfilment of some specified national destiny. The relational realm is exemplified in its definition of the ‘other’ vis à vis the ‘self’. In this context we might see contestations over the place of the Irish with respect to other nationalities and perhaps the suggestion of privileged relationships between the Irish and other specified national groups. Finally the cognitive realm is one associated with explanations of how the world works and as the framework of a worldview. Here we might identify contestations over respective Irish worldviews and their foreign policy implications.

By way of contrast to Smith, Benedict Anderson (1991) also looks at national identity as an ongoing, contested process. This approach does not focus simply on the ‘rise of the nation’ – the very singular phase of national construction – but instead looks at a specified group of people and analyses their sharing of an ‘imagined community’. Instead of looking backward at how the nation ‘became’, Anderson’s focus is very much upon the nation’s state of ‘being’ (Friis 2000; see also Ullock 1996) and the ongoing process of reproduction and change in national identity. Bill McSweeney calls these the ‘processes and practices by which people and groups construct their self-image’ (1996: 82).

This gives rise to the third assumption on which this analysis is based, namely that national identity is constructed discursively, by way of language and other communicative systems – the ‘processes and practices’ noted by McSweeney above. It is through the production and reproduction of these processes and practices that the notion of a national identity is created, maintained, challenged and changed. National identity becomes a ‘reality’ as it is instantiated through the discourses of political leaders, journalists, community leaders, writers, educators, artists, religious leaders, intellectuals and citizens etc., and is disseminated through the means of public and private communication. Discourse itself is comprised of a collection of ‘texts’ – defined broadly as including speech and speech acts such as written documents and social practices, all of which together produce meaning and the organisation of social knowledge (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

A fourth assumption is that the discursive construction of national identity is necessarily a political project that creates difference. McSweeney’s ‘self-image’ is also a creature of what it is not. Social identity theory has underlined the extent to which the definition of identity boundaries is a goal in itself – the boundaries do not so much provide a definition of the group’s cultural content (of its

history, language et al.) but rather of the identity border which is itself 'intrinsically valuable'. That border sets out the 'markers' that sustain the group's self-identification of difference – which serves 'basic cognitive and emotional needs' (Theiler 2003: 267). This of course creates the classic self/other boundary, which constitutes an identity that is more than the sum of its content and which relies upon relational differentiation from others. It also serves to underline the conclusion of Fredrik Barth that communication and interaction play a key role in defining difference – and that identities are always relational (Barth 1969: 10 cited in Theiler, *ibid.*). Identity thus defines insiders and outsiders more deliberately than it defines the things that unite insiders. This opens up an analysis as to how and when those internal signifiers of belonging might change over time. Since these are not the pre-existing building blocks identified by Smith but are instead plaster casts created to denote boundary lines, their evolution can now become more easily an object of study and the focus of this study is thus upon one set of these border markers – those denoting foreign policy.

A final assumption relates back to a point of contestation noted above. This is that there is no single national identity but instead a range of identities that are created from different discursive contexts, each of which has its own take on the content of that national identity *vis à vis* its constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons and cognitive model. The resulting identity is not strong, fixed and immutable but is instead dynamic, moving and sometimes contradictory.

As regards foreign policy, David Campbell has argued that there are two understandings of this concept. The first is the conventional appreciation of 'Foreign Policy' as the external representation of a state. The second understanding of 'foreign policy', however, is as 'one of the boundary-producing practices central to the production and reproduction of the identity in whose name it operates' (Campbell 1992: 75) Thus, foreign policy is itself defined as a discursive practice from which national identity emerges. It is then this national identity that foreign policy sets about representing externally. As there is contestation within national identity, there is therefore likely to be contestation surrounding the practices and representation of foreign policy. Since foreign policy is a discursive practice from which national identity emerges, it has a crucial role in creating, reinforcing, challenging and changing national identity just as it then proceeds to represent that self-same identity externally. This also defines the relationship between national identity and foreign policy as being 'mutually constitutive'.

This then brings us back to a crucial distinction between the thick constructivist approach employed here (Zehfuss 2001) and that of a traditional social science approach noted above. Traditionally, in looking at the relationship between identity and foreign policy the task would be to identify the causal relationship between the two. Here, instead, the assumption is that national identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive. Thus, the questions under-

lying this research are: How is stability and instability created and/or undermined; and How does identity and foreign policy evolve? Following Lene Hansen (2005), the core research agenda is thus focused upon theorising the scope of, and mutually constitutive relationship between, national identity and foreign policy.

It is important to emphasise again that the assumption here is not that national identity is immutable or indeed that it can be reduced to zero-sum constructions of 'self versus others' – quite the contrary. The assumption of this study is that such intersubjective understandings as national identity can be re-imagined (Anderson 1983) and is the subject of constant reproduction and evolution. Competing conceptions are always present – whether at the margins of political discourse or battling for discursive supremacy. It is precisely this cultural, political and intellectual ferment which allows for change in national identity and, hence, in the shape, definition and objectives of foreign policy. Similarly, since external challenges are a feature of the global environment, the ease or difficulty with which such challenges can be accommodated can have a significant impact upon national identity and foreign policy.

While it is argued here that change is likely, it is not necessarily dramatic (Dittmer and Kim 1993). Aspects of identity may be deeply rooted and it can therefore be a process of gradual – even perhaps glacial – evolution. The possibility must also exist for there to be no change at all. At other periods, the contest between competing identity narratives for discursive dominance may be highly visible. More often than not, however, national identity is the political muzak that state actors and national publics unconsciously hum together. It is likely that the assumptions upon which this identity is constructed will be largely invisible until those at the political margins manage to be heard singing (bravura) a contrasting melody.

What's of particular interest here obviously is also the 'naturalising power' of identity, the extent to which dominant narratives – exercising their discursive power, their ability to shape and frame debates – have the capacity to make of themselves the apparent order of things, the 'common sense' view. Thus, it is also a part of a 'thick' constructivist research agenda to identify more clearly the alternative narrative identities that are contesting national identity and which thereby create the frictions that underlay so much of the wider foreign policy debate (Hopf 2002: 184).

Foreign policy change is often controversial. Irish membership of the European Union, for example, has had a major impact in many areas of Irish life not least in the context of foreign policy formulation itself. Since 1973 Irish politicians and diplomats have been involved in a system of foreign policy co-operation among the member states of the EU and have more recently begun to co-operate in the realms of security and defence policy. By and large, the participants in this process conclude that Irish foreign policy has been strengthened as a result of this co-operation. By contrast, many foreign policy activists – and

policy outsiders – complain that it has limited the options available to Irish governments and that a distinctively Irish foreign policy voice is being progressively silenced (Tonra 2001). In a sense both arguments are valid within their own terms of reference, but these are based upon very different views of an Irish place in the world.

For many diplomats and politicians Ireland's role in the world might best be described as that of a 'European Republic'. It is therefore asserted that Irish values and interests can most effectively be pursued through co-operation with our partners in Europe. In that context, it is the task of Irish foreign policy makers to make our European partners sensitive to Irish values and interests and to pursue these through a shared policy framework. That framework, so they argue, is a far more potent means of pursuing these values and interests than any effort the state could make in isolation. By contrast, many foreign policy activists see Ireland's international identity as being more like that of a 'Global Citizen'. They argue that Ireland's historic and political experience has established a unique national perspective on global issues. It is thus the responsibility of Irish policy makers and citizens to work with other like-minded states and through various non-governmental and multilateral channels in pursuit of these shared values and interests.

The contest between these two narratives – between two contrasting stories of who the Irish are in the world – creates a friction within Irish politics that underpins much public discussion about foreign policy. While these are perhaps the two most obvious identity narratives in Irish foreign policy, they are not unique or necessarily mutually exclusive. They underline the fact that the way in which Ireland and the Irish are defined by contrasting narratives may invest its foreign policy with a particular meaning.

The relationship between foreign policy and identity is also evident in the evolution of policy towards Northern Ireland. The language of pluralism and of multiple identities has become integral to a domestic political consensus on a long-term solution to that conflict. It is now commonplace to hear commentators, academics, community workers and politicians speaking of the need for an 'Irish' identity to be open, to reflect values of moderation and modernity and to be inclusive of multiple traditions. This evolution remains challenged, however, by a more traditional vision of Irish identity that has a much longer and deeper pedigree. This approach invests 'Irishness' with very particular characteristics. The shape of this identity debate has been vividly reflected in the development of policy towards Northern Ireland since the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1921 through to the peace process that began in the early 1990s. This is a debate that has important consequences for peace on the island of Ireland as well as for other regions where identities – and their representation through states – are contested.

Another realm where changing identities and foreign policy intersect is to be found where Europe's evolving security environment calls into question the

traditional definition of Irish security and defence policy. In the post-Cold War era, Irish neutrality has been faced with a major challenge of definition and purpose. As a consequence, Irish policy makers are struggling to reconcile the competing demands of a deepening European security and defence identity with a more traditional perception of Ireland's status as militarily non-aligned (Keatinge 1984 and 1996). Historically, neutrality served both to set Ireland apart from its nearest neighbour (thus partly defining it as an independent Irish Nation) and later to facilitate its self-image as being progressive and anti-colonial (defining it as a good Global Citizen). As against this, some political leaders throughout Irish history have declared that Ireland's commitment to the 'free world' as well as its links with other Commonwealth and/or English-speaking states, demands greater commitment, contribution and acknowledgement.

The significance of the relationship between identity and foreign policy is not restricted to areas of political interest. Many Irish policy makers and a significant proportion of public opinion have traditionally seen Ireland as a relatively poor European state with its own history of anti-colonial struggle and a strong profile of missionary work in the developing world. This narrative of global citizenship has thus been built upon a belief in solidarity with peoples suffering deprivation and hardship at the hands of local or distant oppressors. That narrative is perhaps more recently challenged by one that places Irish interests more firmly within a European mainstream and/or a more liberal Anglo-American model of socio-economic development.

Taken together, the above suggests that the scope for an analysis of the relationship between foreign policy and identity is potentially wide and rewarding. The next step is to consider the means by which this study might proceed.

### **Narrative and discourse**

As noted above, narratives have the capacity to shape our understanding of the world. They illustrate 'the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity,' and offer thereby an integrated account that gives meaning to a series of what might otherwise be seen as unconnected and unconnectable facts and events (Hinchman and Hinchman 2001). Narratives often also simplify what might otherwise be very complex, conditional and excessively contextualised stories. Bach (1999), for example, argues that narratives have four functions: they order, delimit, perpetuate and challenge.

In ordering, narratives offer us a beginning, middle and end to our story about ourselves. However, facts and events, even if placed in chronological order, give us little in the way of an understanding of what 'really' happened. Here, through the use of language and linguistic devices – plot, characterisation, motivation etc. – narrative ordering gives us an understanding of reality and establishes a template into which new facts and events can be fitted to ensure the ongoing relevance of our identity story.