

11th Durack Memorial Lecture

The 11th Durack Memorial Lecture was presented on Thursday 27 April 2006 in the Alexander Library Lecture Theatre. The speaker was Billy Cantwell, the editor of the Irish Echo.

Irish Australia: the state of the union

 What is the Irish legacy to Australia and, more specifically, what characterises the relationship between the two countries today?

I've spent the past sixteen years in my position as editor and publisher of this country's only Irish newspaper pondering the connections and seeking out stories that define these linkages. I've witnessed an altered dynamic between the two nations that has fed into how the Irish are perceived here and how Australia is defined there. Both countries have changed, changed utterly, particularly Ireland and, as a result, the relationship is very different now than the one I encountered back in 1988.

We'll have an opportunity to witness the altered dynamic next month when Prime Minister John Howard visits Ireland. Howard, who once described Australia as 'the most spectacular component of the Irish diaspora', will arrive in Ireland for the first time on 20 May for a four-night stay. He will address a joint sitting of the Irish parliament, the *Oireachtas*. What will he tell them? My guess is that he will focus less on the historical ties that, as President Mary McAleese said in 2003, join the two countries at the hip. He will instead focus on the future, on business, on trade, on the Celtic Tiger, on what we can do for each other.

Ireland and Australia have, in my view, lost some of their mutual attraction. It hasn't been a nasty break-up. It's as if the countries

have declared that they just want to be friends. The purpose of this paper is to try to work out why.

As it seems with everything these days, money talks. Both countries, like shallow debutantes, seem to be drawn to those with the most economic clout. So, it's important to understand where Ireland and Australia are at economically in 2006. According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland was Australia's 26th largest merchandise trading partner in 2005. The balance of trade is very heavily in Ireland's favour. Last year, exports to Ireland were valued at approximately A\$154 million and total imports were valued at approximately A\$2 billion. But the department also points to what it calls the 'significant and rapidly growing investment links with Ireland'.

Irish foreign investment into Australia almost doubled from A\$749 million in 1998-99 to A\$1.48 billion in 2003, before falling slightly to A\$1.24 billion in 2004. Australian investment into Ireland has soared from A\$483 million to A\$1.76 billion in 2004. Australian companies that have invested in Irish subsidiaries include the National Australia Bank, Mayne Nickless, Integrated Packaging, Michell Leather, Biocycle, Harvey Norman (which has now four stores across Ireland) and QBE Insurance. In the past three years the number of Irish companies in Australia has doubled. Australia is Ireland's number three priority destination in Asia. Irish companies operating in Australia include Independent Newspapers (APN), Kerry Foods and Coolmore. Bank of Ireland and IONA Technologies have regional headquarters in Melbourne and here in Perth respectively. Austrade's Dublin office opened in January 2005 and the first commercial trade mission to Ireland occurred in October 2005. So the two countries have been seeing each other economically, but the union has yet to be consummated.

Significantly, the volume of human traffic between the two countries is at an all-time high. The Irish tourism market is worth an estimated \$375 million per year to the Australian economy. Go to any bar in Dublin these days and you will probably be served by Kylie from Bunbury who's over on a working holiday. But as I

approach the moment at which I will have spent more of my life in this country than the place from which I've come, on a personal level, I've also given much thought to where the relationship between the countries is headed. I want to see the relationship consummated. But in order to take it to the next stage, I understand that the tough questions need to be asked.

What have we really got in common? Do we actually like each other?

Like many of us, I am Irish but I am also an Australian. It is of daily concern to me, and not just in a professional sense, as to how Irishness is portrayed, celebrated and observed in this country. Similarly, as an Aussie citizen, a husband and father, I am passionately concerned about the future of this country. Like other expat parents I want my kids to understand their cultural inheritance. So, in order to work that out, we have to look back. The historical connection between the two places is very well-documented.

What does it tell us about the legacy of the Irish here? Has the influence been over-stated, or understated?

While there's a tendency among the Irish to overstate it, the current political atmosphere demands that it be understated. The Irish are inclined to claim the finest Australians as their own. I will hold my hand up and admit that the *Irish Echo* has been guilty of this. It's an Irish instinct I think to seek out these successful sons and daughters of the diaspora, while ignoring those who, in their eyes, didn't fit the profile. We're happy to claim former Governor General Sir William Deane, Nicole Kidman or cricketer Mike Hussey. But we're less willing to brand Pauline Hanson or the most recent winner of 'Big Brother' as our own, Irish heritage or not. So, we're always looking to accentuate the positive. We're also often told that up to a quarter of Australians can claim Irish ancestry. But, according to the most recent census, in 2001, only about ten per cent of respondents claimed to be of Irish background. Slightly less than two million said their ancestry was Irish. Even taking into account that respondents were only asked to go back two generations the statistic is still interesting.

It is also often said that Australia's character is defined by its Irish inheritance. John Howard, not a noted hibernophile, said in 2000 that 'the Australian identity is inextricably Irish to a very large extent'. On this, Howard appears to be in agreement with his nemesis Paul Keating, who in 1992, declared: 'Australia without the Irish would be unimaginable. Australia without the Irish would be unthinkable. Australia without the Irish would be unspeakable.'

So, who personifies this connection? When I came here in 1987, Ned Kelly personified Irish Australia for me. Ned encapsulated those attributes that have been sourced from Ireland and worked their way into the Australian character: larrikinism, a sense of egalitarianism, a healthy disrespect for authority. But I've come to realise that these mantras, and their apparent Irish origins, may not hold up to closer scrutiny. Even Ned Kelly, as many of you will know, is not universally acceptable to Australians as an appropriate folk hero. I've even heard Irish Australians dismiss him as an illiterate thug and cop-killer. Such observations have led me to rethink what I had understood to be the nature of Irish Australia. I was wrong to assume that the constituency of Irish Australia was homogenous in any sense. So, where did that idea come from? When the *Irish Exile* first rolled off the presses in December 1988, I must confess that my own lack of knowledge of Irish-Australia was unimpeachable. Like the backpackers arriving in Australia today from Ireland, about 15,000 of them a year, in 1987 I was not consumed by concerns about how this country's Hibernian heritage was being written into modern Australian history. As Patrick O'Farrell noted in his *Irish In Australia*:

The *Irish Exile/Echo* was a full-blown ethnic closed shop, deep in today's Ireland, yet unhappily so. Not at one with its Australian location. It seemed to be caught between the worst of both worlds, and its response to this predicament leached through as tinged with bitterness, resentment, the hint that emigrant life had been a sour cheat.

In many ways the very fact that O'Farrell gave such weight to

the ramblings of a 23-year-old Irish off-the-boater was flattering, but he was correct to a degree. The motivation to start an Irish newspaper for me was not to herald or bear witness to some new chapter in Irish Australian history. It was entirely about filling an information gap for other expats like me. We were, and perhaps remain, an ethnic Irish newspaper in that regard. I remember my amazement that there was no Irish newspaper established in Australia. In 1988, bicentennial year, Sydney seemed to be full of Irish. It was, in retrospect, the start of the current wave of working holidaymaker. There was no internet or email, no live Irish sport via satellite, no Sky News on Foxtel and the cost of international phone calls was prohibitively expensive. We didn't know it at the time, but we were about to bear witness to the beginning of the end of the Irish diaspora. The bitterness that O'Farrell identified in those early editions was probably my own. Unlike today, there was little incentive for a 23-year-old in going back to Ireland even if, like other emigrants, I did want to at times.

So the Irish community was more stable than it is now. Going back to Ireland was not an option for people, so there was more incentive to recreate 'Ireland Over Here'. But I was discovering that the Ireland that was being celebrated bore little resemblance to the one I had just left. My partner at the time, Seamus Maher, and I had many clashes over the style and direction of the newspaper. In the end, we parted company and I immediately changed the masthead from the melancholy *Irish Exile* to the less maudlin *Irish Echo* (although I wish I'd have called it the Irish Australian).

The newspaper was changing as Ireland was changing. The Celtic Tiger was now beginning to stir. Business orientated Irish clubs like the Lansdowne Club in Sydney and the Irish Australian Chamber Of Commerce in Melbourne were being set up. Perhaps the most apparent image of a new Ireland emerging was the election of Mary Robinson in 1990. Meanwhile, the Irish soccer team was thrilling the country by reaching the quarter finals of the World Cup. U2 were suddenly the biggest band in the world. The

Echo was still heavily focused on expat life. It wasn't really until Paul Keating became Prime Minister in 1993 that the newspaper's canvas extended beyond the ethnic boundaries and into the broader constituency of Irish Australia. We started to refer to ourselves as Irish-Australian. By way of illustrating this new commitment, we helped to organise a citizenship event. The Oath Of Allegiance to the Queen for new citizens was ditched that year and we approached the department of Immigration with an idea to encourage Irish expats to take up their citizenship. It was a huge success. Over 90 Irish people, including myself, and our families gathered at the Hyde Park Barracks to become Aussies. Paul Keating was no JFK but he was seen as representing that 'Irish Catholic' vein in Australian public life.

We began to report and editorialise on Australian politics where once we would only have carried news from Ireland. We looked to history to celebrate the contribution of previous generations of Irish emigrants. We began to interview prominent Australians about their Irish background. But relations between the two countries moved into a very strong phase and we were wallowing in the new affinity. Mary Robinson's hugely successful visit in 1993 fuelled the new engagement. Paul Keating went to Ireland in 1994, addressing a joint sitting of the *Dail* as Bob Hawke had in 1986, and visited his ancestral home of Tynagh in County Galway. Keating fuelled a confidence within the ethnic Irish community that had not been apparent before in my experience. Suddenly, the PM and state Premiers were showing up at Irish events. Later in 1993, as if to cement the relationship between the countries, even the Melbourne Cup went to Ireland. Keating spoke about the Republic, about changing the flag. It seemed all immediately within reach.

Later, in 1996, at the swearing in ceremony for the new Governor General Sir William Deane, an Irish Australian who studied at Trinity College as a young man, was a group of people whose Irish ancestors would have grinned. Chief Justice Francis Gerard Brennan, another Irish Australian Trinity graduate, officiated and

also present were the President of the Senate, Michael Eamon Behan, who spent part of his youth in Dalkey Co. Dublin and another Irish-Australian, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Steve Martin, along with of course PM Paul Keating. In NSW, John Fahey, the son of Galway emigrants, became Premier. I remember Bono of U2 telling a gathering in Sydney, hosted by Premier Fahey, 'It's great to arrive in a place where the Irish are really in charge.'

During this period, there were conscious moves to broaden the base of Irish Australia. Encouraged by the Embassy, Irish organisations looked at what was going on in the US as an example of what could be achieved. In America, the Irish have been influential without ever really being in control. Even fifth generation Irish are still seen as ethnic in the US and the hyphenated tag of Irish-American sits comfortably with millions of US citizens, many of whom claim the Irish passport to which they are entitled through Ireland's idiosyncratic immigration rules. Some Irish emigrants, like my opposite number in New York, *Irish Voice* founder Niall O'Dowd, have successfully built bridges between Irish America and the Irish expat community. Using the political muscle that exists through proud Irish Americans like the Kennedys and Congressman Bruce Morrison, O'Dowd and others engaged Democratic hopeful Bill Clinton in 1993, using the peace process as the hook. The manoeuvre was spectacularly successful. It politically energised the Irish community in America, broadened the base of Irish America and put the peace process at or near the top of Clinton's foreign policy agenda. The benefits for Ireland were enormous. Australia has had many more Irish Prime Ministers than the US has had Irish Presidents, yet the same scenario seems hardly possible here.

Between 1923 and 1949, seven of the eight Prime Ministers of Australia were of Irish stock. But many of these leaders did not claim their Irishness. The aftermath of the First World War, when the conscription debate split this country along sectarian lines—Irish Catholic were against, English Protestants were in favour—created scars that were slow to heal. Fr Edmund Campion has claimed that

the Irish were so wounded by the seditious tag that was thrown at them at that time that they became super-patriots. Others have identified this, that the Irish were the first Europeans to think of themselves as Australian. As Campion wrote 'we transferred our love of Ireland to a love of Australia. It became our country'. Keating said that the Irish community was the fount of Australian nationalism. In 1996, Keating was defeated and John Howard became Prime Minister. As Keating himself said, if you change the government, you change the country. Editorially, we mourned Keating's defeat in the 1996 election. 'With regard to bilateral relations with Ireland', I wrote at the time, 'the loss of Keating is a blow. We hope that John Howard will be able to see past London to maintain the valuable goodwill that has been created.' Unfortunately, from that day to this, John Howard has not seen past London, nor has he visited Ireland and the relationship between the two countries, on a political level at least, has noticeably cooled. For the Australian Irish, the early months of Howard's tenure were dominated by another issue, the Northern Ireland peace process.

In November 1996, Howard decided against granting Gerry Adams a visa on the basis that he was not of good character. The decision met with outrage from the Irish community and provided us with a running news story. Even though many Irish did not support Adams or *Sinn Féin*, they saw the decision as a nod to the Conservative British government of John Major and a slap in the face to the peace process. It seemed ridiculous that Adams, who had visited the White House and was about to visit 10 Downing Street, could not get a visa to come and speak in Australia. While he eventually was granted a visa, the issue set Howard on a collision course with the Irish community and set the tone for his tenure.

Later, during the President of Ireland Mary McAleese's visit to Australia in 2003, no senior government minister was available to meet with her. Three years ago, the Howard government closed the Australian visa office in Dublin, forcing Irish would-be emigrants to apply through London. Headline news in the *Irish Echo*, but for all

the wrong reasons. Despite the frosty atmosphere at governmental level, young Irish people began to arrive into Australia in larger and larger numbers. With the Howard government's concentration on skilled migration, young Irish graduates found it easier to get sponsored by Australian companies. They still do. Ireland, meanwhile, newly prosperous and well connected in Europe and America, remained interested but not engaged with Australia.

I recently interviewed Minister Mary Hanafin, one of the rising stars of the Ahern government, who observed that Australia seemed isolated from Europe and the United Nations. Her conclusion was that the Irish Australian relationship had to grow and that Ireland could chaperone Australia to boost its EU and UN relations. This sounds almost patronising but it is interesting to hear it. This cultural self assurance out of Ireland, coupled with the apparent ambivalence of Howard towards all things Irish, has taken its toll. Within this apparent void, those 'Irish' issues of the Republic and the flag have all but disappeared from the political agenda. While Keating had plans to change the flag, Howard has wrapped the country up in it. While the rest of world applauded the decision by the IRA to give up the fight, Howard, alone, chose to carp. 'I'll believe it when I see it', was his contribution. Within this atmosphere, it's hard not to identify that the *Echo* has, in some ways, drifted back to its ethnic Irish origins. Whether this is because we, Irish emigrants, feel more isolated in the political atmosphere created by John Howard as Prime Minister or whether it's the changed nature of emigration. Irish people no longer leave with an idea of forever. The coffin ships are, mercifully, gone. Many thousands of Irish twentysomethings now arrive in Australia every year with working holidays visas in their passports. About a fifth of them will stay on, sponsored by an Australian company keen to utilise their skills or as one half of a de facto marriage to an Aussie citizen. The vast majority will return to Ireland at some point. Some will also come back again but the relatively low cost of international airfares plus the fearlessness with which people move around these days ensure

the fact that the traffic continues, in both directions. Ethnic does not have to mean, as O'Farrell put it, a closed shop. Migrants settle down and play their roles in the new country. In the Irish example, the move from ethnic to Aussie still takes a generation, no matter where you come from.

What has become obvious to me from running this newspaper is that Irish migrants no longer need to gather in large numbers as once they did in Bankstown or Surry Hills. The ghettos or enclaves, in the Irish context at least, are gone. The closest we have is in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, which has become known as County Bondi, on account of the amount of Irish backpackers living there. This is testimony to how the Irish are integrated here, in a much more complete way than they are anywhere else in the world. We sourced some figures from the 2001 Census, which showed that almost every suburb in Australia has a few Irish migrants, not what you want to discover when you're distributing a newspaper. But perhaps to compensate for that is the fact that the new Irish are strictly AB demographic. They are the highest earning Europeans in NSW, according to the census. Only Malaysians, South Africans and Zimbabweans earn more.

More than Seamus and I were fifteen years ago, the new Irish are 'deep in today's Ireland'. They see themselves as more European than we ever did. They even have a northern hemisphere allegiance in rugby, which did not exist in 1987. Also, crucially, they come here because they choose to. Their future looks more secure than any generation of Irish migrants to Australia. They are ambitious. Irishmen here now run Optus, Intel and Jetstar Airlines, the Sydney Opera House and, until recently, the National Gallery of Australia. We are the newspaper of record for a changing community. But it is essential for the credibility and feasibility of the *Echo* that we are in touch with the changed Ireland. Like the *Irish Post* in London, which has just undergone a major makeover, we have to take stock of the new realities and be ready for generational change. Part of that is to take stock of how Australia sees itself.

Under John Howard, there's been an increasing concentration on defining what it is to be Australian. Multiculturalism is out. Neither is this a time to buy into a hyphenated version of your nationality. In 100 years time, it might be different. This nation is still perhaps too young to begin to examine and celebrate the cultural inheritance in this way, although this is beginning to change. The re-enactment of the Castle Hill rebellion in western Sydney in 2003 marked a new dawn for commemorations of this type. It was steeped in Irishness, yet it was an Australian event. It was conceived, funded and organised by Australians. Catalpa Day here is another good example. On a democratic level, the Irish power base may have lost its punch due to the fact that the Irish no longer vote as a block. Some might think that the Irish are rusted on ALP supporters here. After all that is the ALP's inheritance. Catholic, Republican, union, labour. Over sixteen years, I've identified the fact that you make those assumptions at your peril.

The ethnic Irish are far more likely to vote consistent with their income, not their tribe. So in conclusion, and on the eve of the first visit to Ireland by an Australian Prime Minister in almost fifteen years, I think we can conclude that the two countries are embarking on a new phase of their relationship. This new phase, which is high on practicality and low on sentimentality, may have been seeded ironically by Paul Keating. When he addressed the *Dáil* in Dublin on 20 September 1993 he made it clear from the outset that he did not want to focus exclusively on the historical connections. He said, and I quote:

I am here for the less tangible but utterly inescapable and irresistible attraction of history. I have a feeling the people in this Chamber may inwardly groan every time a politician of Irish ancestry comes here and signals that he or she is going to give them a history lecture. It would not surprise me if you are thinking—here we go again, he is going to tell us about our Irish past or our literary tradition; he is bound to quote Yeats at us; tell us about 1798 again or give us his views on our character. I would dearly like to spare you this and I will.

But he also spoke of the affection that seems to have waned in the intervening years. ‘Australians’, he said,

feel uncannily at home with the Irish. They feel a great affinity which apparently transcends ancestral connections and this seems to me to speak of the immense power and importance of history, memory, language and culture. I am not talking about some quaint showcase of the past. The attraction of Ireland is an elemental thing; it fulfils a need in us. It is almost as if one can say that if Ireland did not exist countries like Australia would have to invent it.

Of course the seeds of the future relationship between the countries is not exclusively the domain of political leaders and, it is my profound hope, that each new wave of Irish arrivals here and Australians there, will enshrine the connections into the future. I’ll leave you with a prediction. Ireland to beat the Wallabies by six at Subiaco Oval. Ireland to regain the International Rules trophy against the Aussies in October. And twenty years from now, Australia’s first directly elected President—Eddie McGuire—will declare St Patrick’s Day a national holiday.