

Ukraine, United Kingdom, Ireland, Scotland

Keith Rankin, 16 September 2014

The Ukrainian civil war discomferts me. It seems to me the most dangerous political crisis since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. And it's because of our unwillingness to examine the issues in a holistic way. We innately prefer to look for a bad man or a bad organisation, and see the solution as being the immobilisation of that man or those men. In this case we in the west have an easy target in Vladimir Putin. So, once we perceive a global villain, we can worry, but we don't need to think.

I watched *The Fog of War* on Sunday, the award-winning documentary about the life of Robert Strange McNamara, an intelligent and humane man who served Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as the United States' Secretary of Defence from 1961 to 1967. The documentary features 11 lessons learnt in his unintentionally political life. The first lesson, learned in the 1962 Cuban crisis, is to understand your adversary.

The Cuban crisis was defused because of an American diplomat who was acquainted with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader. The diplomat understood that Khrushchev would back down if given the opportunity to present his actions to his own people as statesmanlike. President Kennedy gave him that opportunity, and global nuclear war was averted.

We should know what the Russian people want, and understand that Putin does considerably reflect the Russian viewpoint. We can see from what happened in Georgia in 2008 that those parts of Georgia that residents and Russians alike identified as more Russian than Georgian effectively became Russian. And that those areas that identified as Georgian were not threatened by Russia. The tanks entered South Ossetia, but not Tbilisi.

We cannot let national boundaries become 100% sacrosanct. Lines on maps are not always the best fits in terms of the people who live on either side of them. In geology we have plate tectonics, which give rise to earthquakes. In geopolitics, old boundaries, like continental plates, get stuck, and then release in the form of earthquakes. It makes more sense to try to mitigate rather than prevent these human tectonic adjustments. We need to formulate ways to release human geographical tensions without over-reacting.

In World War 1 we failed spectacularly. The great powers were fighting each other because they were fighting each other. They lost track of what they were fighting *for*, which was actually the territories of the Ottoman caliphate, in the area we persist in calling the Middle East. Today we again have simultaneous tensions in Eastern Europe and the Middle East that are generating disproportionate rhetoric rather than constructive solutions; the kind of talk that aggravates the emotions rather than calms them down. One of McNamara's other lessons was that responses should be proportional to the problem.

Empathy, proportionality, and above all, engagement of the brain; that's the way to approach conflict.

Comparing the English and Russian Empires

I am struck by the parallels between Northern Ireland, an outpost of the English empire that we call the United Kingdom (UK), and Eastern Ukraine. And it's this week that, more than any other since the last week of January 1649, the United Kingdom is under threat.

The main difference between the events of 1990-92 (the break-up of the Soviet Union) and the events of 1919-22 (the *partial* break-up of the UK) lies in the word 'partial'. When Ireland split from

the UK, the other parts of the UK did not simultaneously split. Otherwise, the analogy between Ireland and Ukraine is close.

The Irish split was violent, emotive, and involved a new national boundary drawn through the green fields of the green isle. The people of Ulster (effectively synonymous with Northern Ireland, though Donegal is in that split province), or at least a small majority of them, wanted to remain in the English empire. They got their way. It was as if Moscow had occupied Eastern Ukraine at the time of the separation of Ukraine from Russia.

The subsequent conflict between the pro-Dublin and pro-London residents of Ulster created decades of civil war in the UK. I lived in London when that civil war extended to London. And I visited Ireland, in sunny April 1976, with my partner, riding my trusty Honda 175. As well as travelling in the Republic, we visited Enniskillen, Derry, the beautiful Antrim coast, and downtown Belfast.

Hopefully Donetsk's troubles will not last as long as Belfast's. In 1976 Derry (Doire) and Belfast were cities under military occupation. (RIP, Ian Paisley; a man very prominent on our TV screens in the early 1970s, a man who travelled the fraught path from pro-English demagogue to conciliator and peacemaker.) I was unmistakably in a war zone. Doire – Londonderry to the English – once a beautiful medieval walled city, was like a city under siege.

The main point however, is that the British Civil Wars that were most intense in the late 1910s and in the 1970s, were not seen as a threat to global peace. While many Americans sympathised with the anti-London forces, just as they do with the anti-Moscow forces today, there was never an underlying fear that the 'Troubles' could end in nuclear war.

The second main point is that Moscow has not threatened Kiev, just as it did not threaten Tbilisi, and just as London never threatened Dublin post-Irish independence. (I am sure Britain would have sent a gunboat to Dublin if the army of the Irish Republic had entered Ulster, let alone some other part of Britain.) It is most important that those who distrust Moscow do not give Mr Putin a defensive reason to invade Kiev.

Realities of Irish and possible Scottish Independence

Travelling in Ireland in 1976 (from London), I needed no passport. The Irish pound exchanged one-for-one with the British pound. British and to a lesser extent Scottish notes circulated freely. If we put the Ulster issue to one side, Ireland has clearly proved that a component country of the UK can successfully leave that union, while still maintaining a pragmatic relationship with it.

In 1976 the British pound was undergoing its own serious currency crisis, which meant it had been depreciated. But, in general, the Irish economy was held back by the fixed exchange rate between the Irish and British pounds. Just as the Irish currency (Euro) has been overvalued in Ireland in recent years, the overvalued Irish pound was Ireland's millstone in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1979 the Irish pound (punt) was devalued in time for Ireland to avoid the ravages of Margaret Thatcher's monetary policies. Scotland, however, felt the full force of Thatcher's monetarism.

I hope that Scotland votes 'Yes'. (While I'm not a Scottish nationalist, my Rankin great-grandparents came to South Canterbury from northern Aberdeenshire in 1874, and in 1891 remigrated, as a family of 11, to the Manawatu.) Rather I like to think that the faultlines of human geography are as amenable to shifts as are those physical faultlines. I like the idea that Scottish independence might become an exemplar for good process in the realignment of nations. It can show that old alignments are not sacrosanct.

I think that the argument about Scotland sharing the pound is fear-mongering. As noted, Ireland is the precedent. If Scotland becomes independent, at some point it will establish a Reserve Bank of

Scotland, and the Scottish pound will differentiate from the Bank of England pound. And, like the Irish Pound, it may be devalued.

An issue of great interest to me would be the status of the town of Berwick on Tweed, reached on the train north by crossing the spectacular Royal Border Bridge. Historically a Scottish city at the eastern end of the border, on the northern bank of the River Tweed, it was annexed in 1482 by England. Its football team plays in the Scottish League, and, to travellers, it always seems like the beginning of Scotland and not the end of England, possibly because of the name of the bridge. The burghers of Berwick will not get a vote on Thursday, but hopefully, if 'yes' prevails, they will be given the option to join an independent Scotland. (I remember eating haggis in Berwick!)

The Future of the United Kingdom

Unlike the Irish split, the really big issue of a Scottish split is the future of the United Kingdom itself; the future of the English empire that dates back to the 12th century reign of Henry II. The flag of the Union (Union Jack) still includes the Irish cross of St Patrick, as well as the blue and white of the Scottish saltire.

What will be left after Scotland leaves? Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man are sort of part of the Union (Crown Dependencies). Indeed, the Isle of Man could be a good model for Scotland to follow if there is a 'No' vote. Wales could also follow the Manx model. (The border between England and Wales was properly determined only in 1974. When the All Blacks were beaten by Newport in 1963, Newport was ambiguously a part of England, even though it played rugby for Wales.)

The thorny issue is, of course, Northern Ireland. It could be said to be the 'elephant in the room' of Scottish Independence. Indeed Ulster is really an outlier of Scotland, not of England.

Commonsense would dictate that Northern Ireland would be allowed to devolve at least to as great an extent as Wales. What we never want is a return to civil war, with English soldiers once again occupying Ulster.

What of Ireland itself? I could see eventually a new union – the British Isles – forming, a Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) style passport union (or an informal union like Scandinavia) that incorporates the Irish Republic. Each member could choose whether or not to retain the Queen as head of state, and would each be recognised in the United Nations as an independent country. England would be its own country. So would be Northern Ireland.

Could this be the model for Crimea (an analogue for Wales), Ukraine (analogous to Ireland), Eastern Ukraine (analogous to Northern Ireland), and Russia (an analogue for England)?

What of the Union Jack? That would have to die, much as the Hammer and Sickle flag is a part of history. Yet it could survive on the New Zealand flag, as a symbol of our British Treaty partner, as she was in 1840.
