

## Instituting regional cooperation: Nordic Horizons for a 'Council of the Isles'?

*Sara Dybris McQuaid*

In January 2012 Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, gave the 8<sup>th</sup> Hugo Young lecture entitled 'Scotland's place in the World'. The speech addressed how Scotland might move towards and beyond independence, and particularly how the advent of an independent Scotland would reconfigure neighbouring relations. It was no surprise that the speech pursued the idea of some sort of a social union on the far side of the existing political union in the UK, but it was, perhaps, surprising that in doing so, Salmond invoked two institutions that usually fly low under the public radar in domestic as well as international politics: the British-Irish Council and the Nordic Council. These were presented as existing sites and models for cooperation that might both contain and inspire common endeavours in the future.

It has almost become a commonplace to allude to the Nordic countries, when the loosening ties of the UK are debated. From the devolution debates of the 1990s; as part of the peace process in Northern Ireland; and now in the context of the various aspirations for Scotland's constitutional future, the 'Nordic model of neighbourly cooperation' has been frequently proposed as a guiding light if not a final destination for the road ahead. 'Nordic Horizons' are repeatedly used as alternative sources of identification: as examples of small, successful nation-states; as ideal social democracies; as new social, environmental and economic templates; and not least as a source of inspiration when considering the changing constitutional relationships within a 'macro-region'.

However, while Nordic cooperation is regularly invoked in Scotland, the actual institutional framework that formalizes this cooperation (the Nordic Councils) remains overlooked, making Salmond's invocation of them worthy of note. These kinds of councils – and there are others, many of them modelled on the Nordic

Councils – offer some unique possibilities for smaller states by operating in the space between sovereign states and larger political and economic unions like the EU.

What can the Nordic Council example then offer the Scottish independence debate? A preliminary answer, which resonates with many of the ways Nordic cooperation has been invoked, is that it can illustrate what a new association might look like beyond a political union. The Nordic countries used to be joined together in different constellations but are now established in varying forms of constitutional independence while retaining a voluntary socio-cultural and political interdependence in the Nordic Council. But this answer also underscores the importance of understanding the institutional mechanics of this cooperation – and not merely its idealised goals – if it is to be of use in the Scottish debate.

While there are many similarities between the ‘Nordics’ and ‘the Isles’ the two cases are on different trajectories. The current debate in the Nordic countries is about how deeper integration in the spaces between local, national, macro-regional and international can be achieved. Though this is perhaps mirrored in British-Irish relations, which appear to be historically amicable, it is also juxtaposed by the state of internal relations in the UK, in what has been termed a crisis of ‘Britishness’. The Scottish independence referendum is arguably also one expression of this state of affairs.

An initial point then is that though the Nordic countries can provide useful models for cooperation within the changing Isles, there are also key differences between the trajectories of the two macro-regions that are not easily bridged or glossed over. This is a key point to bear in mind through the following.

The chapter will proceed as follows: After briefly distinguishing the ‘Council Model’ from other forms of international cooperation, the chapter will introduce and contrast the structures of cooperation in the Nordic Council and in the Isles. It will then go on to introduce some of the new Nordic Council debates before suggesting

some problems and possibilities for the Isles in light of the comparison.

*Introducing the idea of a Council Model*

The 'Council Model' that arises from the Nordic example could also be called a 'transnational political association' because it traverses the usual confines of sovereignty as well as the boundaries between local, national and international spaces to establish a form of shared macro-regional space. It is different from other international unions and associations (like the EU or the UN) because it rests on a perceived historical and common identity between the members. A high density of linkages, co-mingling and exchanges at the level of civil society is believed to have woven a durable linguistic, social, cultural, economic and political fabric upon which an institutional cooperation is built. This strong vertical integration between civic and political society combines emotional belonging with a more practical focus on common interests. And the ability to glide almost effortlessly between the poles of social and political union makes these councils –unusually – appealing to both unionism and nationalism.

The Council model is used as an important laboratory of confidence-building, updating, exchanging views, developing common policies and thus consolidating a form of transnational identification and democracy. It is operated by consensus and primarily keeps a low-politics focus, which enables it to coexist with other national and international institutions. It has been of particular interest to smaller states worried about being dominated by more powerful neighbours or losing their voice in larger fora.

When the Nordic populations are asked whether they support Nordic cooperation and want to extend it, they are overwhelmingly positive. Still, this masks the fact that the Council model is very much, what is derogatively called, a 'talking shop'. Advances are firmly circumscribed by the principle of consensus and rival binding international obligations. Rapid change rarely pivots on Nordic cooperation and it is

a recurring complaint that the inter-parliamentary cooperation has no real capacity for agenda-setting and problem-solving.

Having said this, there are benefits to being 'under the radar', not least in terms of creating and maintaining mutual trust without the regular political grandstanding. While tomorrow might not be different from today following a Nordic Council decision, the politics of small steps taken in unison have produced a range of Nordic policies and laid the groundwork for a number of concrete cooperative initiatives, allowing Nordic countries to punch above their weight in international fora.

While both Isles-wide and Nordic institutional cooperation are examples of 'council models', the respective institutions have very different origins.

Nordic cooperation is a form of transnational association, which is often hailed as unique, because the *institutional* model has evolved, not from the top down but from the bottom up, from the grassroots to the treetops, from inter-popular civic associations to the institutionalised cooperation between parliamentarians and governments. Political cooperation has endeavoured to create uniform rules and reciprocal rights grounded in a perception of common politico-cultural identities. This endeavour has been undergirded by exchanges and joint ventures at the civic level between schools, universities, media, business, trade unions, NGO's etc. Association has a great deal of historical depth, as the Nordic countries have engaged in various degrees of cooperation, conflict and conquest with each other for centuries.

While Isles-wide cooperation also assumes legitimacy from the density of civic exchanges within 'the Isles', and of course also has profound historical depth, it has primarily developed from the top-down in political elite negotiations. The institutionalization of this cooperation has largely come with attempts at resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland, in part by recasting the relationships between the peoples of the whole archipelago within a shared narrative and institutional

framework. However, this has also opened up possibilities for broader forms of cooperation within the Isles. Indeed, some of the most fervent propagators of isles-wide cooperation have been those representing the new local parliaments and assemblies established by devolution. So while British-Irish cooperation was initiated within the context of conflict resolution, the potential impact of its institutions has a much wider reach not least in a post-devolution UK and presumably even a post-independence Scotland. It is of course this potential Alex Salmond is looking to explore.

### *Introducing the institutional cooperation*

Both Nordic and Isles-wide cooperation take place in two tiers – a parliamentary tier and an inter-governmental tier. In both cases an inter-parliamentary tier was established ahead of an inter-governmental tier. However, the infrastructure of the cooperation and particularly the way in which the tiers relate to each other are very different in the two contexts – I will return to this following a brief introduction to the institutions.

### Parliamentary Cooperation: The Nordic Council (NC)

In 1952 existing ad hoc parliamentary cooperation between Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland was institutionalised in a 'Nordic Council'. The impetus was a desire '[...] to promote and strengthen the close ties existing between the Nordic peoples in matters of culture, and of legal and social philosophy, and to extend the scale of co-operation between the Nordic countries'. After initial resistance from The Soviet Union, Finland joined the Council in 1955.

In practical terms, the sovereign states have the largest delegations while the self-governing territories (Faroe Islands, Greenland and the Aaland islands) have much smaller representations. While the delegations are national, cooperation inside the NC is also organized across national lines in party-based groups and issue-based committees. This ensures a vital national and ideological cross-pressure in parliamentary cooperation. Nordic cooperation has been particularly strong in the

areas of culture and education, as well as environmental and climate policy. In recent years overarching themes have included 'a Robust Welfare-state', 'Freedom of Movement', 'a Nordic Voice in the EU' 'Common Arctic Policy' and 'Community, Neighbourhood and Globalisation'.

#### Parliamentary Cooperation: The British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body/The British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA)

The British-Irish Inter-parliamentary Body was established in 1990 on a mandate in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. The purpose was to provide a link between the Houses of Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas, building new relationships in the early stages of what would later become a fully-fledged bilateral peace process. In 2001, following devolution, delegations from the new local administrations in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, as well as Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man joined the body. In 2008 the body was renamed the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Its current mission is 'to promote co-operation between political representatives in Britain and Ireland for the benefit of the people we represent. [And][...] to build on the close relationships established in recent years between politicians throughout Britain and Ireland.' As such, BIPA has been an institutional expression of the changing relationship between Britain and Ireland. The initial role of BIPA was to provide a confidence-building forum for parliamentarians in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. Beyond conflict its role is yet to be fully formalized. It has been suggested that BIPA could become a unique site of inter-parliamentary exchange where diverging experiences of electoral and parliamentary systems in the intersection between embedded tradition and new journeys can be debated. In terms of outward facing cooperation, and somewhat inspired by new Nordic debates, it has been suggested that BIPA could be a forum for devising common strategies in relation to EU and in regards to international promotion of the Isles, both as macro-regional and regional space. Obviously, this line of thinking is simultaneously curbed by individual nation-branding, radically different levels of EU enthusiasm and various degrees of

sovereignty in terms of foreign policy (obstacles not unknown in the Nordic Council).

In both cases the parliamentarians meet in plenary sessions twice a year as well as in their committees<sup>1</sup> and make recommendations to their respective national parliaments.

#### Intergovernmental cooperation: Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)

The Nordic Council of Ministers was established in 1971 as the forum for Nordic inter-governmental cooperation. One of the purposes was to maintain Nordic cooperation in the event that one or more countries would become EC members (as Denmark did in 1973 and Sweden and Finland did in 1995). The aim was '[...] to strengthen and expand the institutional foundations for co-operation between the Nordic countries'.

There are currently ten ministerial councils,<sup>2</sup> which meet one to five times a year. One of these meetings takes place in tandem with the annual autumn session of the Nordic Council, bringing inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental cooperation together.

#### Intergovernmental cooperation: The British-Irish Council (BIC)

The British-Irish Council was established as part of the 1998 constitutional agreement in Northern Ireland. Its aim was 'to promote the harmonious and

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<sup>1</sup> In the Nordic Council there are 5 committees: The Welfare Committee, The Citizens' and Consumer Rights Committee, The Environment and Natural Resources Committee, The Business and Industry Committee, The Culture, Education and Training Committee. In the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly there are four committees on: Sovereign Matters; European Affairs; Economic; and Environmental and Social.

<sup>2</sup> Ministerial Councils for: Labour; Business, Energy and Regional Policy; Fisheries and Aquaculture, Agriculture, Food and Forestry; Gender Equality; Culture; Legislative Affairs; The Environment; Health and Social Affairs; Education and Research; Finance.

mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands'. It effectively extended the existing bilateral cooperation between the British and Irish governments to include the new administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, relating conflict resolution to overall constitutional reform in the United Kingdom and The Republic of Ireland. Being part of the Belfast Agreement has hampered BIC, as it has been suspended between 2002 and 2007 pending renewed political agreement in Northern Ireland. It has therefore met only 19 times.

BIC does not have standing ministerial councils but instead cooperates through relevant ministers and civil servants in 12 workstreams<sup>3</sup>, each led by one of the administrations. The workstream on Energy has perhaps produced the most decisive outcome in the shape of an all-islands approach to an electricity grid and marine renewals.

*Relations between the inter-parliamentary level and the inter-governmental level of cooperation*

In both Councils inter-governmental cooperation is by consensus and binding decisions are made unanimously. There are, however, significant differences in the way the inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary levels relate to each other. BIC and BIPA are not formally integrated as complementary tiers of the same cooperation and meet in separate cities as well as on separate occasions.

By contrast, the annual autumn session of the NC brings together the parliamentary and governmental tier, not just at the same venue but in consultation and debate. Following public reports from the respective ministerial councils, parliamentarians can question individual ministers, not exclusively from their own countries but from all the member states. After the end of the Cold War, this procedure has been

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<sup>3</sup> The 12 workstreams are: Collaborative Spatial Planning; Demography; Digital Inclusion; Early Years; Energy; Environment; Housing; Indigenous, minority and lesser used languages; Misuse of drugs; Social Inclusion; Transport.



extended to include policy areas that are not yet formally part of Nordic cooperation, like foreign, defence and security policy. There are no standing ministerial councils for foreign affairs and defence, but the respective ministers for these policy areas meet with their opposite Nordic numbers as part of the annual session. Since 2006 the Nordic prime ministers and presidents have also held their summits in conjunction with the Nordic Council session and importantly, take questions from the parliamentarians across the board.

There is, in other words, a very specific Nordic political culture with a profound degree of integration between Nordic and national politics, which amounts to a form of transnationalism that both includes and transcends the individual nation state. Attaching a form of democratic accountability across the Nordic countries arguably aids in developing a transnational Nordic political community and foregrounds the existence of deep-rooted cooperation. This is further emphasized by the fact that during its three-day session (which is open to the public), the NC takes over the parliament buildings of the host country, allowing for example Finnish politicians to speak from the Danish parliamentary platform. Getting inside each other's political and democratic systems in such a material way is very effective in building politico-cultural relationships.

By contrast, BIPA meet in more neutral conference venues and, despite some effort, have so far failed to become the official parliamentary tier of BIC. In fact BIC has even declined the presence of observers from the BIPA at their summits. The disconnect between the inter-parliamentary and the inter-governmental level means that the fruitful coupling between democratic deliberation and decision-making is lost. While the parliamentary tier arguably provides a permanent structure of transnational democracy, it is divested of power. By the same token the inter-governmental cooperation lacks a broader democratic remit, as well as parliamentary accountability and public transparency.

Maintaining inter-parliamentary links as well as connecting these to the inter-governmental level of cooperation is a pivotal lesson to draw from Nordic cooperation for post-devolution UK. Maintaining the separation of the parliamentary and the governmental tier in the British-Irish context suggests that a top-down attitude persists in the BIC and indicates that government ministers are reluctant to be subjected to transnational parliamentary scrutiny. This makes the institutions of the Isles decisively different from Nordic cooperation, which is precisely an exercise in compensating the democratic deficit that often prevails in international organisations, in order to maintain a rooted sense of a transnational political community.

### *Secretariats*

Another crucial difference between the two Councils is the organisation and composition of their secretariats. The NC has a longstanding secretariat that employs 100 people and disposes of a £ 99 mill budget. In comparison BIC has only just opened a permanent secretariat in Edinburgh in January 2012, which is minimally staffed with a budget of only £ 183,000.

Further, recruitment for the secretariats takes place within very different parameters. The people employed by the BIC secretariat are on assignment from their 'parent' administrations, and can be likened to a diplomatic force with clear national loyalties.

In the NC secretariat, people are employed by the NC and not as representatives for narrower national interests. The existence of a permanent secretariat (comprising both tiers of Nordic cooperation) yields many benefits. Firstly, it ensures continuity in a political environment that is by definition characterized by much coming and going, reflecting electoral fortunes in the member-administrations. This 'political tourism' that might otherwise disrupt the flow of cooperation is to some extent tempered by the continuous work of the secretariat. Secondly, precisely because the staff is not bound (officially at least) by national loyalties it can be an institution that

‘thinks across’: across national interests and across party political interests in order to develop specifically ‘Nordic’ ideas and policies.

While this kind of strong secretariat yields advantages, it also has drawbacks: it can almost depoliticize cooperation and preempt political debate, as all problems are cleared away by civil servants in between the parliamentary and ministerial meetings. Furthermore, since the secretariat does not always pursue a strictly administrative line, but occasionally actively works to create new Nordic initiatives, it risks robbing the politicians of the policy initiative or pushing agendas that have no political mandate.

#### *Dynamics of Nordic cooperation – New Debates*

One of the main challenges for transnational councils is obviously to find suitable common endeavours in an environment that is also characterized by rival national identities, rival international institutions and separate interests. In the Nordic context external dynamics have been pivotal in spurring on cooperation.

While Nordic cooperation rests on a narrative of shared history, norms and identity it is important to remember that the Nordic identity is not only constructed from the inside out but also from the outside in. A number of important contributing external (particularly geo-political) factors have acted as catalysts for Nordic identification and cooperation, and are now increasingly driving changing Nordic objectives.

After the First World War, Scandinavian unity played a crucial role in deflecting outside interference. The same applied during the cold war, where the Scandinavian countries managed to strike a unique balance in a bi-polar world assuming an alternative position between east and west (despite the fact that both Denmark and Norway had joined NATO in 1949). In this way external pressures helped foster and nurture the Nordic identity. Today the external impetus for cooperation is particularly found in the enlargement of EU and wider globalisation (accentuating Nordic commonalities); the financial crisis (accentuating the stability of the Nordic

welfare-state model); climate change (an area of Nordic expertise); the growing importance of the Arctic (in which the Nordic countries have developed common interests); and the increased competition for seats in international organisations, like the IMF and the World Bank (challenging the inclusion of small states). Arguably, the NC has managed to survive as an institution because it has responded to internal and external dynamics and successfully redefined its purpose and position along the way. Where the period up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was primarily about internal Nordic consolidation, Nordic cooperation is now seen as a launch site for potential global leverage.

### *New Nordic Debates*

The shift from facing inwards to acting outwards is perhaps best illustrated with two examples from recent NC debates. These debates have been said to herald a new 'golden age' of Nordic cooperation, because they unfold bold Nordic visions and horizons, one emerging from the bottom-up and one from the top-down.

In 2009, amidst great media controversy, the historian Gunnar Wetterberg suggested that the Nordic countries should enter into a political union reminiscent of the Kalmar Union of the late middle ages. Adapted to meet the challenges of a globalised world, this would make 'Norden' the world's 10<sup>th</sup> largest economy and secure a place in G20, according to Wetterberg. The idea was, not surprisingly, immediately denounced by all the Nordic heads of government. However, whilst most politicians rejected the idea of a fully-fledged political union, many nevertheless argued for deeper ad hoc integration and stressed the benefits of a unison Nordic voice in international institutions like the EU, UN, IMF and the World Bank, as well as a unified response to global problems like the financial crisis, and climate change.

Even if the idea of a political union was officially rejected, the Wetterberg proposal has reinvigorated Nordic cooperation. A series of new Nordic imaginings and practical propositions on how to fashion closer links, common and transferable

policies for the benefit of all Nordic citizens have since been unleashed – orchestrated in part by the Nordic secretariat – suggesting that ‘pie in the sky thinking’ can still open new horizons

Another and related debate began in 2008, when the Nordic foreign ministers requested that the former UN high commissioner, Thorvald Stoltenberg explore geopolitical challenges 20-30 years ahead with a view to drafting proposals for practical cooperation between the Nordic countries on foreign and security policy. His task was to think beyond the electoral horizons of individual governments and to effectively leverage the Nordic dimension to impact on the international community. The subsequent report suggested 13 areas of cooperation, among them an integrated Arctic strategy, joint diplomatic representations abroad, as well as a Nordic musketeer clause akin to article 5 in the North Atlantic treaty. Again, Stoltenberg’s suggestions dramatically broadened the scope and horizon of Nordic cooperation in an international context – and decisively recast the sphere of political community to embrace a bolder, outward-facing perspective. However, the vision remains hampered by the fact that foreign and security policy are not, in fact, part of the formal Nordic cooperation since there are no standing ministerial councils for these policy areas.

An on-going debate in the NC is thus whether common foreign policies and joint forces should become formally included in the Nordic cooperation. These issues are at odds with the traditional ‘low-politics’ focus of the Council, and obviously strike at the heart of sovereignty sensitivities. The long-term ideology of Nordic cooperation has always been deliberately diffuse, but these new debates are forcing a focus that can strengthen Nordic cooperation.

At the same time hammering out shared foreign policies or political superstructures is also sure to bring out the many existing Nordic ideological differences, complicated further by asymmetrical international obligations. Further, training the focus of Nordic cooperation at the level of a political elite on an international stage,

also risks severing the connection to the roots of civil society. And so while new broad horizons might provide the *raison d'être* for reinvigorated Nordic cooperation in the future, they also hold disruptive potential for the vertical integration of the transnational Nordic community.

### *Nordic Horizons for the Isles?*

Clearly, these Nordic debates about closer political integration and common foreign policy cannot be easily transferred to the Isles at this time. The two systems of cooperation are on quite different trajectories, reflected not least in Scotland's impending referendum.. But a potentially reshaped Council of the Isles might still usefully seek inspiration in earlier iterations of Nordic cooperation and should also draw lessons from its institutional structures.

While it is, as outlined in the introduction, perhaps not difficult to see the attraction of a Nordic style of cooperation for Alex Salmond, it should be clear from this discussion that he faces a number of structural challenges in implementing it. First, BIC has been established through a top-down negotiation by political elites, rather than being the bottom-up result of civic cooperation, which has ramifications for the legitimacy the institution enjoys and so its possibilities to act. (which is further circumscribed by the principle of consensus) Second, the lack of stacking of the inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental tiers seriously hampers the development of a viable transnational political arena, and underscores the fragmentation of the political cultures in the Isles. Third, the lack of a strong secretariat makes the development of new regional visions and strategies more difficult, as the civil service infrastructure that can help spur debates, clear away roadblocks, and produce transnational policy positions is simply lacking as of yet.

This having been said, the Nordic model for cooperation continues to provide tantalizing visions for ways in which small states with strong social and historical linkages can organize themselves in an increasingly globalised world. The extent to

which these visions can be materialized in the Scottish future hinges on a number of open questions:

A key motivation for Nordic cooperation is to strengthen and promote the close ties between the Nordic countries based on common values and norms. Is this also the case for the Isles? Can shared norms of governance be identified and developed across the sharp political divides between the countries of the Isles?

The vertical integration of levels (civil society, parliaments and governments) in the Nordic Council both stimulates practical cooperation and nurtures a common Nordic identity. Can the cooperative institutions in the Isles achieve the same kind of integration to become the institutional framework for expressing and developing a common identity? Indeed, is there a common identity to motivate cooperation?

Do the current Isles-wide councils have the institutional muscle to find and cultivate common ground? Or do they risk being used to assert differences and suit more exclusive national interests, rather than expressing and developing commonalities?

The Nordic Council has found a new outward purpose in the face of globalisation, can Isles-wide cooperation explore the same possibilities by identifying common projects on the other side of political union? Or is this avowed interest in increased cooperation between the Isles merely meant to soften the blow of political breakup?