

THE WAY FORWARD AS I SEE IT

Address by Mr John Hume, M.E.P. Leader of the

SDLP

St. Anne's Cathedral, Belfast

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Servite Priory, Benburb

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One of the tests of political leadership in this community is to accept the discipline of trying, in what one says, to reach both sides of the community simultaneously. Many have failed this test and many continue to do so. After all, it is easy to appeal to one side to the exclusion of the other: it is not difficult to gratify one side by encouraging its prejudices about the other. It is difficult, sometimes virtually impossible, to bring to each side a sense of the dilemma felt by the other. Yet we know that, until our leaders and our people manage that breakthrough, we will not make progress in Northern Ireland.

On two successive evenings, the first in St. Anne's Cathedral, and the second in Benburb Priory, I am confronted by this challenge in a direct and acute way. I had just thought of speaking differently in each Church, not I hope with the intention of evading the challenge but in order better to explain the dilemma of the absent audience - the other tradition - to those present each night. On reflection I thought it better to address both audiences as though both were simultaneously present. I am therefore using the same words in both Churches. In doing so I cannot expect to gratify anyone's prejudices, merely, as I see it, to expose them both to themselves and to those considered their adversaries. Perhaps the rule for politicians the perverse circumstances of Northern Ireland should be to take an old adage one step further: instead of reminding ourselves that you "can't please all of the people all of the time" we should perhaps determine, as the only means of succeeding, to please none of the people all of the time.

Could we agree that we have all run into a brick wall? I mean this literally, not metaphorically. A brick wall is during these very days being built across Belfast, separating the two sides of our community from each other, confirming for ourselves and for the entire world the conviction of the British and our own worst fears that our differences may be literally insurmountable. Yet the wall is even more significant symbolically than it is physically. It is no more than a vivid external expression - sickening in its bricks and mortar finality - of the huge unscaled earthwork that marches all through this community, through every street of Belfast, down every country lane, through the churches I am addressing these successive evenings and which looms over the hearts and minds of every single

man, woman, boy and girl in Northern Ireland, whether Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist. The fact that a physical wall is being built is no more than a tangible confirmation of what we all have known for years but have not had the courage to acknowledge: that we are getting nowhere, that we have indeed run into a brick wall, that we must all sit down and reflect and decide how we can first of all see over that wall and then unbuild it brick by brick. That wall is a living indictment of everyone in Christian Ireland. It is a living challenge to the failure of past approaches to our problem which have led us to that wall. The particular difficulty about this community, the problem that differentiates us from other communities in crisis, other communities that have run into a brick wall, is that here we are not all confronted by the wall together: here each side has run into its own side of the wall. It is a challenge to re-examine our past approaches for if they have led us to this then surely the least that we can do is re-examine them.

Take the Protestant tradition. It is an old and honourable tradition in this island. It has produced great and good people: Swift and Goldsmith will forever exemplify their talent, Grattan and Burke their altruism, and the American War of Independence, the American Constitution and as many as eleven American Presidents their capacity and their love of liberty. It is moreover the tradition which historically played the first and leading role in propounding libertarian values in Ireland.

Irish Protestants have always sought to maintain their distinctiveness and I admire and commend them for doing so. Yet it seems to me that they have gone astray and put their own heritage at risk. Only look at the results today: Unionism has boasted for generations that it is the protection of the Protestant identity and Protestant values, but in the vitriol and sectarian diatribes of the louder voice of contemporary Unionism is there the slightest vestige of the fundamental Protestant values of civil and religious liberty? What has gone wrong?

Historically it seems to me that the central and consistent mistake of Irish Protestantism - the original sin, if I may so describe it, of this tradition - has been to seek, almost as the only means of protecting its distinctiveness to concentrate all power exclusively in its own hands. This was tragically wrong from the start, it was wrong in all the succeeding centuries,

it was wrong although perhaps more understandable when cultural and tribal exclusivity was sustained by the glories of an imperial Protestant power and it is even more wrong today. Exclusivity is an inherently destabilising factor in any society and it contains within itself all the seeds of communal disintegration and violence. It is after all, in essence negative, a denial of liberty to others, rather than an assertion of its own liberty: "No surrender", "not an inch", "Home Rule is Rome rule". Paradoxically, it is Ourselves Alone brought to its logical extremity. Tragically it seems to me their exclusivism, which is simply another word for Unionism has come to represent in communal terms in our society the inversion of those values that Protestantism preeminently epitomises in world culture: freedom of conscience, liberty of the individual, civil and religious freedoms.

In February 1782 a great and generous moment of Irish Protestant history, a convention of the Irish Volunteers, most of them Protestant, held in Dungannon Presbyterian meeting-house, resolved with only two dissenting voices:-

"that we hold the right of private judgement in matters of religion to be equally sacred in others as ourselves",

"and that, as men and as Irishmen, as Christians and as Protestants, we rejoice in the relaxation of the penal laws against our Roman Catholic fellow subjects".

It is a long and sad road from that inspiring event to the Antrim hillsides of today. A long and tragic retreat from Dungannon has yielded the ground claimed that day to those who appropriate exclusively and falsely to themselves the name of Irishmen.

I do not believe however, that this mistaken path was chosen consciously or strategically by the Irish Protestant tradition. Events showed the way and principal among them was the consistent encouragement given by centuries of British policy to maintain a separate and exclusive existence apart from the other tradition in Ireland. This was solidified by the decision in 1921 to establish a political entity in the North-East of this island based on a simple sectarian headcount which deliberately created a guaranteed system of sectarian majority rule in this part of Ireland. The majority in Northern Ireland were thus clearly encouraged by the guaranteed link with Britain to maintain and never to dilute their own solidity as the only available basis of their security. I do not blame the Protestants of this area for adopting this posture: no other group faced with their situation, granted that

guarantee, conditioned by that history, would have been able to take a different view of where their vital interests lay.

Other more tragic events have recently supervened: the immense suffering shared by both sides, the thousands of deaths and injuries, the collapse of our economy, the end of the hopes of our young people, the vision of our future dominated by a brick wall which is for the moment blank but which will soon be smeared by the pornography of hatred and triumphatism in two languages for gn to each other but both English. Irish Protestants - and Irish Catholics - must now take a new and different view of where our vital interests lie if we are to survive. After centuries of misconception and false illusions, it will be difficult and painful but it must be done.

The other tradition, my own, has also failed to grasp the fundamental dimensions of our problems. We have failed to define our concept of unity in terms which would be meaningful and truly unthreatening to the other Irish tradition. Because of this fatal omission the original sin of the nationalist tradition - our aspiration has by default come to mean and to be understood to mean: conquest. Unity - and Unity by agreement should be, if these words have any meaning, synonymous. This must mean the deliberate abjuring of conquest and triumphalism. Our failure in this matter - the result of misconceptions, weakness and illusion - has itself encouraged an extremism which perverts all the higher principles of our tradition. Those who claim the right to kill and the right to die in the name of what they conceive to be Irish Unity subvert not only the hope and meaning of Unity but the integrity of their own tradition. When the most fundamental right, the right to live, is made subsidiary to a political principle, all other civic and religious values are diminished. This is what has happened in our community. Thirteen years ago a murder would have filled whole pages of our newspapers, today it receives the passing comment merited by a squalid and routine misdemeanour. Other crimes are now so commonplace as not to receive any mention. Yet the suffering, the dislocation and the despair occasioned by all these tragedies are no less real now to those directly touched by them than they would have been 13 years ago. The men and women of violence subvert and destroy the meaning of what was momentarily achieved at Dungannon and they wreck the future not only of those whose will they wish to dominate by force but of those in whose name they falsely claim to act. The challenge now to my tradition is to reject violence unambiguously and to redefine and communicate a

a true vision of reconciliation between the two traditions on this island.

The picture I have painted so far has been bleak and unpromising. We know what must be done, yet history and circumstance seems, in both sections of our community, to conspire against us. I believe that we can only understand our situation and grasp our opportunities if the responsibility of Britain is realised and acknowledged.

Britain created Northern Ireland, Britain is in charge of Northern Ireland, and cannot now be regarded as a remote and benign referee whose well intentioned whistle the participants no longer hear in the din of conflict. Britain is as responsible today for our ills as she was in 1921 and there will be no resolution until she, like us, takes a new view of the interests of all of us.

Northern Ireland today represents unfinished business in the ancient conflict between our two islands. It represents the residual area of failure of the peoples of the two islands to work out their interlocking relationships in a satisfactory way. The problems, resolved elsewhere, have been pushed into this corner of Ireland where, it was hoped, they would be forgotten. The people of Northern Ireland, all of them, have been the victims.

We are all of us at fault. We all have a choice. We can indulge in an endless sterile exchange of "what aboutery" starting with the outrage that suits us. What about the outrages of violent men? What about the sectarian murders? What about Bloody Sunday? What about discrimination? What about 1912? What about 1916? What about 1689? What about 1641? and so on, each whatabout being used to justify another tragedy, another whatabout. Let us instead, all of us, ask ourselves just one question. What about the future?

We all need a new and generous vision. We need both to abandon the sterile exclusivity of "ourselves alone" and we need the positive encouragement of the third party - the British Government not by creating structures which underline and advertise our abnormality, but by patient public policy which

I believe that there are those in the Protestant community who have that wider vision. I believe that there are those who cherish their Irishness and resent those who would narrow its definition to exclude them. I would appeal to such people to step forward now and present us with proposals for a new Ireland that is acceptable to Protestantism as opposed to Unionism. Let them by so doing mount a positive challenge to those of my own tradition to meet the responsibility we have not yet measured up to, to spell out in clear and tangible terms what we mean by Unity, what we mean by partnership, what we mean by reconciliation.

I am encouraged by the commitment of the British and Irish Governments to construct a framework whose objective is to accommodate a more positive relationship between our two peoples. Within that framework it is my hope that we can build a more positive stable and lasting relationship among the people of this island. We can have a form of Ireland with a new relationship with Britain that will protect the vital interests of our major traditions. If we have the will to achieve it. Better to build such a framework than a wall in Belfast.

The time has come for us to be undaunted by adversity, to surmount our divisions and to echo to each other the Psalmists' prayer

"Peace be within thy walls".