

THE NEW IRELAND FORUM

Just over a year ago the Secretary of State announced yet another effort to solve the Northern Ireland problem through an elected assembly. We told him that the Unionists would seek, and get, a mandate to refuse any concessions to minority interests, and that the Assembly would not and could not achieve its purpose. That is exactly what has happened. The most depressing aspect of this initiative was that it showed that British thinking had not moved one iota from the days of the Constitutional Convention of 1975. While the British maintain that attitude, the Unionists have only to refuse to negotiate in order to block any change.

It has been clear to us for some time that present British policy is as much a stumbling block in the path of progress as Unionists intransigence. It has been clear, too, that there will be no changes of Unionist attitudes until there is a change of policy in London. The main thrust of SDLP efforts in recent times has been to achieve a change in British policy. On the one hand we have identified the unilateral guarantee to the Unionists as the main buttress of their intransigence.

On the other hand we have sought to transfer consideration of the problem out of the sterile confines of Northern Ireland into the broader and more open plane of Anglo-Irish relations.

If we are seeking a change in British policy, however, it is imperative that we clear our own minds as to what that change should be. Equally, it is imperative that those, North and South, who believe in working for a new Ireland by constitutional means should work out a consensus view of the sort of New Ireland we want. Only then can maximum political strength be brought to bear behind the proposals.

As early as 1978 we proposed that the major constitutional parties of the Irish tradition, north and south, should work out a joint approach to the problems facing us. Faced with a fresh British initiative which was clearly going to fail, that task could no longer be deferred. That is why we proposed a Council for a New Ireland to the electorate in October 1982. The Taoiseach and the leaders of the major parties decided jointly upon the creation of the Forum.

When the Forum was announced, the proposal was greeted with a great deal of cynicism. It was widely described as a crutch for the SDLP and the objective of achieving a powerful consensus between the component parties was described as unrealistic. It is, perhaps, no great harm that public expectations of the Forum were low, because the Forum was thereby spared the sort of external pressures which can inhibit serious and difficult negotiations.

In the last few weeks, however, there has been a perceptible change in public attitudes to the Forum. The public sessions, in which the authors of some of the wide range of written submissions to the Forum have been questioned in depth about their views, have increased public awareness of the Forum's work. There is a growing realisation that the Forum is addressing the most fundamental and difficult aspect of the Irish problem with realism and courage and in a manner that is long overdue. It has also become clear that no participating party can afford to be accused of responsibility for its future.

There has been, to date, over 200 written submissions to the Forum, from such widely varying sources as Nobel prize-winner Sean McBride

and John Biggs-Davison MP, and including just about every strand of political thinking, on this island. Some weeks ago a team of representatives from each party in the Forum, travelled North and met with a wide range of religious and political groups for discussions. The Forum has received and is considering every conceivable shade of opinion.

This input of submissions has encouraged and stimulated a fundamental re-examination, by the Forum of the traditional and basic attitudes which have characterised the politics of both sides of the quarrel. This was, and is, the most urgent purpose of the Forum, because traditional attitudes and policies have not brought us one whit nearer to a solution. They are, in fact a major part of the problem.

We have reached a stalemate in Northern Ireland which can only be broken if all the parties to the conflict are prepared to rethink their basic position. First and foremost the British government and parliament must give the problem the degree of priority which it warrants. For several decades the British have sheltered behind the "policy" of guaranteeing the position of the Unionists, on the pretext that this is the only possible "democratic" response to the problem of the North.

We dispute the view that the guarantee is a democratic one, but the most important observation to be made is that this "policy" has not produced peace and order in Northern Ireland, and threatens to destabilise the whole of Ireland. The British must, sooner or later, confront that fact. The sooner they do so, the better for all of us.

However, the rest of the people on this island must ask themselves an equally difficult question: "Why is it that we have failed to persuade the British and the Unionists to reassess their position?" Every proposal made for change has been met with outright rejection by unionists, and has failed to enlist the committed support of the British. When the objections of Unionists are reduced to their essential core, they amount to one thing: "Any change will be a step in the direction of a united Ireland, and the Loyalist ethos could not survive in those circumstances". That same objection has been applied to power-sharing, Anglo-Irish co-operation (in almost any sphere except security), or indeed any concession to minority interests in Northern Ireland. Therefore it is imperative that we face this challenge inherent in this objection to see if there is anything in our attitudes which gives any substance to it. The challenge is to define our aspirations in such a way as to show beyond doubt

that the Ireland we seek will not prejudice any legitimate interest, or threaten any section of its population.

Consideration of these fundamental questions is long overdue, and the Forum has made a constructive and positive effort to address them. The degree of commitment shown by the four parties to the tasks we have set ourselves is immensely encouraging. The fact that the Taoiseach, the Tanaiste and other government ministers, as well as the Leader and Deputy Leader of the opposition, and front parties, have committed so much of their time to it, is an indication of the seriousness of their purpose. The strength of the initiative represented by the Forum is demonstrated by the fact they all British, Anglo-Irish or Northern Ireland (Irish) political movements awaits its outcome. Some Crutch!