

Bureau fax No. 01-222 4967

These are hopeful days for the relations between Britain and Ireland. The history of this relationship is ancient and, to the point of claustrophobia, intimate. Except for a few brief intermissions it has been a depressing tale. The British role has variously been one of exploitation, neglect, tyrannical brutality and arrogance. On the Irish side it has been an inheritance of suffering and sullen bitter remembrance, frustrating dependence and occasional explosions of blind and vengeful ferocity.

Those of us who believe that unremitting rational democratic effort can transform this dark legacy of the past that we are now witnessing, ~~will~~ will participate in, the first comprehensively serious point of departure in this unhappy saga.

There have of course been "solutions" and "arrangements" tried before. A few commentators have described the Anglo-Irish Agreement as simply the latest of a line of attempted solutions. Those who have a real understanding of the problem are not so naive as to see the Agreement as a solution to the interlocking problems of relationships within these islands. It is, rather, a framework within which these different relationships can properly develop.

The problem is not the "Northern Ireland" problem. Northern Ireland, remember, was created as part of the "solution" offered in 1921. It is in its origin, its reality and its impact a British-Irish problem. If this simply amounted to problematic relations between two islands it might be more readily solved. However it is about relations within the island of Ireland as well where one tradition identifies itself as British and another identifies itself as Irish. In its most acute manifestation it is about relations between these traditions in the political creation which is Northern Ireland.

For too long every approach to this problem has overlooked at least one of the three dimensions to the problem. What is needed is a process which takes account of the "totality of relationships" within these islands. That phrase was first used in 1980 when then Taoiseach Charles Haughey succeeded with Mrs Thatcher in establishing a British-Irish process.

The democratic nationalist tradition in Ireland addressed the problem of relations within Ireland as well as between Britain and Ireland in the New Ireland Forum from May 1983 to May 1984. In an honest enterprise that tradition acknowledged many hard realities and conceded mistakes in our past attitudes. In its internationally acclaimed final report the Forum declared:

"The solution to both the historic problem and the current crisis of Northern Ireland and the continuing problem of relations between Ireland and Britain necessarily requires new structures that will accommodate together two sets of legitimate rights:

- the right of nationalists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity; and
- the right of unionists to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity, their ethos and their way of life".

It was the Forum report which informed the negotiations which went on between the British and Irish governments for more than a year, leading to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The preamble to the Agreement clearly bears this out and explicitly acknowledges that the problem it is addressing is about relations between two countries, north-south relations in Ireland and relations between two traditions within Northern Ireland. This point is still lost on many people who claim to have read the Anglo-Irish Agreement simply as a new factor in party political relations in Northern Ireland. The line runs that this is "a gain for the SDLP" and so something must now be given to the unionists with the SDLP seen to do the giving.

However the problem which manifests itself in Northern Ireland is not one of distribution of political arrangements but one of accommodation of political difference. Those who are advocating a policy of "rent-a-gesture" ignore the complexity of the problem.

The Agreement is not a gift or gesture to us or any other particular party. It is a declaration by the two governments recognising the special British-Irish relationship, affirming the equal validity and equal rights of both traditions in Ireland and committing themselves to the achievement of arrangements in the north which will allow both communities support and participate in all the institutions of authority to the greatest extent possible. All

this is a basic pre-requisite for real political change and progress. To treat this commitment to equality as a "concession" to the SDLP is to trivialise the real political import of the agreement. It would also dilute the prospects it offers for a real process of reconciliation.

Only a process of reconciliation can heal the prejudice, distrust and divisions in Ireland. That process of reconciliation can only take place against the backdrop of a framework which matches the framework of the overall problem. This is what makes the Anglo-Irish Agreement such an opportunity because it provides such a framework.

Since it has been signed, however, most attention has been focussed on the "No" campaign by the unionist parties in the north. Unionist politicians claim the Agreement is a threat to unionist rights. Equality threatens nobody's rights, reconciliation threatens no legitimate political position. They can only threaten unjust privilege, prejudice and irresponsible intransigence.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement gives guarantees to both unionist and nationalist. It offers both a framework for the expression and protection of their identity and rights and it offers both the possibility of working together to manage the affairs of their community. This is what unionist politicians are saying "No" to. No unionist politician has yet been able to identify one right or need of unionists which has been harmed threatened by the structures which have operated since the Agreement.

Unionist people are slowly realising that the "betrayal" and the "threat" of the Agreement are figmentary. They are gradually accepting that the problem is one of interlocking relations within these islands. It will not be easy for many of them to come to terms with these realities. I know because I have seen the strain undergone by nationalists as they came to acknowledge these realities.

Unionists can be helped in this process by those operating the Anglo-Irish Agreement showing both resolve and sensitivity. The unionist veto of threat which frustrated previous moves in 1912 and 1974 must be trumped if unionists are ever to find themselves engaged in a meaningful political arrangement offering genuine reconciliation.

Unionists and nationalists in the north will have to emulate the courage and perseverance shown by both governments in their lengthy and sometimes difficult negotiations. We both must commit ourselves to sharing in structures and processes which will help peace and stability in our society. We both have the opportunity to do so within the British-Irish Agreement.

The SDLP and I are ready and anxious to enter into genuine dialogue with the unionist parties. It is disappointing, but hardly surprising, to see unionists isolate themselves by their present campaign. Nevertheless, I believe that there will be unionists who will reflect on the words of their old Prime Minister and hero, Lord Craigavon, "we cannot forever be apart".