

As you come to the end of a week in which there has been widespread and detailed discussion on all aspects of the 1937 Constitution and its application to the 26 counties, I assume that the composition of this platform this evening means that we are now turning to the Northern part of Ireland. I might begin by observing that whatever arguments, criticisms or refinements one might discuss and debate about the 1937 Constitution it did give the people of the twenty-six counties the basis for a very peaceful and stable society and this is something of course which the people of the North have never had, largely because the North has never really had a Constitution, in spite of the fact that every election there since 1920 was fought "on the Constitution" and because what purported to be a Constitution or system of government never addressed one of the basic functions of a Constitution which is to accommodate difference and diversity. It is worth noting that the Constitution of the United States had a substantial input in its drafting by Irish Presbyterians, people whose immediate past memory was that they had been driven from Ireland by religious intolerance. It is not surprising therefore that the central principle of that Constitution was the recognition that the essence of unity was the acceptance of diversity — *e pluribus unum*.. That is the central principle which has given peace and stability to every democratic state in the world today and although its acceptance in the US Constitution was heavily influenced by the experiences of Irish people, the tragedy is that it is a principle, whatever about the rhetoric on the lip service has never really been put into practice in Ireland itself and certainly not by Irish Presbyterians. The challenge to all of us for the future is whether or not that principle is going to be both accepted and implemented. Without it there will be no peace or stability and we will continue as we have done in the past — not to accept difference but to push it to the point of division with all its tragic consequences. That challenge faces us starkly on the streets of the North today for what is happening there is happening because of our failure and the failure of all of those involved to accommodate our differences. As I have often said the fact that we have come to the point where, we the highest church going city in Western Europe it has been necessary to build not one, but twelve brick walls to separate Catholic from Protestant and to protect them from one another is an indictment of the failure of all those involved

in the Irish problem to accommodate differences, to accept diversity. They are also an indictment of and a challenge to our past attitudes which have brought us where we are and has built those walls.

That challenge is particularly relevant to Unionism. It is hardly unfair to say that Unionism in the North of Ireland has never been about the accommodation of difference. It has been about maintaining it. "What we have we hold". We, of course being themselves alone. When Unionist leaders talk of the people of Northern Ireland they are talking about themselves, "Ulster says No" again themselves alone. Indeed what has been utterly remarkable is that in all the utterances of Unionist leaders, or in all those policy documents there has never been the slightest acknowledgement that we live in a divided society or that there was any need to accommodate difference. Unionism has never been involved in normal politics. It has been an oligarchy based on sectarian solidarity and at any time that oligarchy was threatened by British proposals for more accommodation, the response was consistent and simple - threaten dire consequences. Successive British Governments have backed down in the face of that threat and indeed Unionists ability to threaten successfully goes right to the heart of the Irish problem and among its consequences has been the violence and counter-violence that has scarred the face of modern Ireland. Another serious consequence was that it confirmed leadership of Unionism in the hands of those who were uncompromising because they were seen to be successful and any voices raised within Unionism which suggested otherwise got very little hearing. Another consequence was that it gave justification to those in the Nationalist Community who argue that all that the British understand is force. That vicious circle of threats of force and actual force has paralysed all political development in the northern part of Ireland and is indeed the Irish problem. The first step towards sanity the movement towards peace and stability, towards accommodation must therefore be the breaking of that vicious circle and that can only be done by a British Government standing firm against such threats. The major achievement of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to date is that on this occasion a British Government has stood firm against these threats and has refused, to date, to budge. That stand opens the way to a more fluid situation in which genuine dialogue becomes possible for the first time. It is clear that a debate long overdue but very wel-

come is now taking place within Unionism about their attitudes to their future and their attitude to the rest of the people of this island. There are still old voices being raised wanting to turn the clock back but our hope has to be that, that debate will lead to genuine dialogue and to genuine proposals for the accommodation of our differences on this island. Ian Paisley again recently has made clear the fundamental objective of Unionism as he sees it - the maintenance of the Protestant ethos on this island. That is an objective with which few would quarrel because certainly no proposals that we would envisage for the future would or could include anything that would remotely involve either the destruction or the undermining of the Protestant ethos on this island. I also presume that most serious Unionists would agree that the past methods of preserving that tradition based on obigarchy, on sectarian solidarity and on ourselves alone have not served themselves let alone the whole community well.

The question that I pose to the Unionist people today is "Do you agree, when all the rhetoric is laid aside, that the central problem, the central concern from which springs all our ills in the North of Ireland is the deep division between the different sections of our people and that if we are serious about creating the peace and stability that everyone yearns for, should we not sit down together without prejudice to our opinions about anything else to discuss ways and means of breaking down the barriers between us? As we approach the 300th Anniversary of the Seige of Derry or the Battle of the Boyne should we not recall that the quarrels represented by those two dates represented wider and deeper quarrels within Europe as a whole, quarrels which have long since been laid to rest in the rest of Europe as indeed have subsequent and more bitter quarrels. Would it not be a fitting commemoration of those Anniversaries if we were finally to lay to rest the remnants of that quarrel in this small corner of Europe?

The challenges posed by what is happening in the North today and has happened over the past 18 years are not of course confined to the Unionist Community. They demand considerable rethinking among Nationalists and Republicans. Indeed they demand a great deal more honesty and a great deal less rhetoric in facing up to the realities if we are ever to create peace and stability on this island.

Since the beginning of the civil rights movement in the North and the changes initiated by it there has been no shortage of scrutineers of the 1937 Constitution and its effect on the northern scene. Articles 2 and 3 have come under particular scrutiny and have been represented by Unionists in particular as asserting some sort of imperialist claim over the North. I regard them somewhat differently and again we must underline that this Constitution was drafted against the background of 1937 attitudes, not 1987. What is important in the current context is that those two articles did exactly as their author intended asserting successfully the Sovereignty of the Irish people - an assertion that was clearly necessary against the background of that time - while at the same time subtly making clear that, that sovereignty was not complete, that there was division within Ireland about the exercise and application of sovereignty. This was done by making clear that the jurisdiction of the constitution did not apply in practice or in reality to the North of Ireland. This was further confirmed by the fact that only the population of the 26 counties was asked to vote on it. Today amid the current turmoil and tragedy that is the North it is not necessary for Irish nationalists or republicans to be quite so subtle about that division but to become much more explicit about its reality in relation to the whole question of sovereignty. In facing up to the reality of that division we are approaching the heart of what has been called the Irish questions. By facing that reality squarely we also open up the possibility of real answers. We have had no shortage in this century, particularly in politics, of masters of rhetoric or sloganeers asserting with hand on heart and with all the emotional fervour at their command about the right of the Irish people to self determination or, as the more self righteous put it, the indefeasible right of the Irish people to sovereignty. Such people give the impression that simply by declaiming those rights they have already been achieved. They conveniently forget of course, or ignore, the fact that the people of Ireland are divided as to how those rights should be implemented or exercised.

Of course the Irish people have a right to self-determination. Of course the Irish people have a right to sovereignty. But what we have to recognise specifically and not set aside or ignore is the central

fact that the people of Ireland are divided as to how that sovereignty should be exercised or how that self-determination should be expressed. And by the Irish people I mean all of the people who live in this island.

It is the search for agreement among the Irish people as to how to express that self-determination or how to exercise that sovereignty that is the major challenge facing those in Ireland today who wish to achieve the unity of the people of Ireland within an independent republic. The search for such agreement is the real search for peace and stability. It is a search that has been with us since Tone first asserted it but which has never been faced up to in any serious or sustained way. It has instead been replaced with rhetoric or verbal republicanism. It is surely also self evident that it is a search that cannot possibly be pursued by force for even if victory by force were possible its results are only conquest and humiliation, no basis for a stable future. Indeed it is surely by now self evident that force in a divided people only drives them further apart.

The healing of the divisions between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland however difficult that may be and it is very difficult is the major challenge and the major priority facing those who wish to exercise the self-determination of all the Irish people and establish permanent peace in Ireland. It is a challenge that has been underlined and strengthened by the British attitude to Irish self-determination as expressed in the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

There is now widespread agreement in Britain as well as in Ireland that the future of Ireland can only be determined by the people of Ireland themselves, North and South and in agreement.

Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement spells that out. It is an article that has received very little real attention. It is a matter of fact that the unity of the people of Ireland cannot be achieved unless there is agreement between the people of the North and the people of the South. No doubt there will be voices declaring that no minority has the right to frustrate the will of the majority but whatever the ideological rectitude of that point of view, the factual rectitude is that when the Northern Protestant population with both its numbers and its concentration in a geographical area of this island, no major decisions can be

taken about the future of the people on that part of the island without their agreement. That is a fact recognised by the outside world. Can anyone here visualise the unity of the people of Cyprus without the agreement of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots? Can anyone really visualise the unity of the Irish people without the agreement of both sections of them? (of ~~Tone and Parnell~~ ~~Freelemen~~). The acceptance of that fact by all who claim to be nationalist or republican will in itself be a major step in breaking down the barriers between us because it will give the confidence to the Protestant people of the North that conquest of them or destruction of their ethos forms no part of our visions of a new Ireland. Indeed I would believe that any dialogue that would take place in such an atmosphere of genuine mutual respect would have a much better chance of really breaking down the barriers between us.

More significantly of course, the same article 1 of the Anglo Irish Agreement makes clear that in the event of such agreement the British Government will both accept it and facilitate it.

This is surely a clear statement by the British Government that in the event of the people of Ireland reaching agreement on the exercise of self-determination then they can do so and Britain's only interference will be to take the necessary steps to facilitate it. This is stated in an international ~~binding~~ ^{binding} agreement endorsed by the rest of the democratic world. That recognition of Irish sovereignty means that its final achievement is a matter for Irish people themselves. Does this not remove all justification for the use of force or armed struggle. Is the justification for such force not the belief that Britain has been using force to defend her own interests in Ireland? Are the British not now solemnly declaring that they have no such interests and are we not now challenged to begin seriously the search for agreement among Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter on the ^{exercise} ~~exclusion~~ of self-determination. The search for such agreement has never been seriously undertaken. Are those who are engaged in an armed struggle prepared to lay down their weapons and join with all the rest of us for the first time in our history in a massive programme and effort to achieve such agreement? Would the Unionist people not see such an effort as a major

gesture of good will and commitment to real peace and real agreement on this island which fully respects their ethos. Would the achievement of such agreement not be the most fitting way to commemorate the 300th Anniversary of the Seige of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne, as we in this generation of Catholics, Protestant and Dissenter in Ireland finally laid to rest our ancient quarrels. It goes without saying that the central principle of that agreement, a principle first enunciated by Irish Presbyterians in the 18th Century, would be that the essence of our unity would be the acceptance of our diversity.