

A NEW IRELAND – THE HEALING PROCESS

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The conflict in the North has now gone on for some seventeen years, longer than the First World War, the Second World War and the Vietnam War put together. The statistics of tragedy are well known – the deaths, the injuries, the prison population, the unemployment figures. One would imagine that those statistics alone would have led to a deep questioning among even the most hardened of extremists as to where their methods and attitudes were leading. One would have thought that it would have led to deep and searching debate within political parties and within the community as a whole. One would not have expected to hear the language of the 1920s from political leaders of the 1980s. One would not have expected that methods which had not only failed miserably in the past, methods which had clearly increased divisions, tensions and suffering and made the problem worse, would still be actively used. Instead the old failed methods are paraded by their advocates as patriotism, the old slogans are paraded as tough talk. If tough talk could have solved our problems, they would have been solved long ago. If violence could have solved our problems, peace and stability would have long broken out.

There is nothing new in the North of Ireland in many of the scenes we witness. Sectarianism, tit-for-tat killings, have recurred in the North for centuries. Yet it is in the second half of the twentieth century that has occurred the most offensive obscenity of all. It has been necessary this time to build a brick wall in Belfast to separate Catholics and Protestant areas and to protect them from one another. Believe it or not, it's called 'the Peace Line'. That was not thought necessary in any previous period of tension. Perhaps it will make us all pause for thought.

There is only one truth that screams at us from that wall. It is that past attitudes have failed us and have brought us where we are. It is an indictment of everyone involved in the Irish problem. Past attitudes have built that wall. It therefore

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represents a powerful challenge to this generation and to the parties involved to re-examine those attitudes in depth and to find a new way forward, a way forward that will respect the diversity that exists on this island and will find a means of accommodating it which do not end in conflict.

UNIONIST RETHINK

Unionism would claim to be the protector of the integrity of the Protestant tradition in Ireland. That protection of that integrity should be a goal that we all should share. Any society is richer for differences. It is not the Unionist objective with which we quarrel. It is their method. Their method is to live apart from the people with whom they share a piece of earth. Their method is to hold all power in their own hands. 'What we have we hold.' 'No surrender.' 'Not an inch.' 'Ulster says no.' All negative, all defining the society in which they live as themselves alone. The exclusive use of power based on the maintenance of sectarian solidarity, a solidarity promoted by breeding fear of their neighbours, cannot but lead to violence in any society. If the leaders of the Unionist tradition want to live in a society which is both peaceful and stable and which respects the integrity of their tradition then the way to do so is rather different but rather simple. It is the way in which every democratic society in the world does so – respect and accommodate differences and have the self-confidence to live in a genuine democracy. That will be found when they sit down with the political leaders with whom they share this piece of earth and abandon the sheer negativism of past approaches.

It must be a matter of some concern to those in the Irish Protestant community who think deeply about the future and who do care about their neighbours to have seen a powerful and constructive people fall under the political leadership of such negativism and to watch the ensuing siege mentality dry up the creativity of a people. Where today are the talents and genius that gave eleven Presidents to the United States of America? Where today is the constitutional innovation in a people whose forebears wrote the American Declaration of Independence and fashioned the pluralism of the American constitution?

NATIONALIST RETHINK

Not that the tradition with which the Unionists share the island of Ireland can be 'holier than thou'. Indeed it could be justifiably argued that the methods of the extreme proponents of that tradition have done more to reinforce the siege mentality in the Unionist population, to heighten their fear of the future and to heighten sectarianism.

Shooting UDR men and RUC men dead is not calculated to create confidence in people with whom we claim to seek to live in peace and harmony. It is naive not to recognise that Protestant people in the North see such murders as attacks upon themselves, as sectarian murders.

It has often seemed to me that Irish Nationalism in this century has tended to concentrate on concepts of Ireland rather than on the real Ireland. To many in the Nationalist tradition, people and human life have been secondary to their objective. But the real Ireland is not a piece of earth. It is people and, in the real Ireland, Irish people are divided and cannot be brought together by guns and bombs. You cannot unite a people by dismembering them.

One of the tragedies since 1920 of course is that many of those who call themselves Republicans in Ireland are not Republican at all, they are extreme Nationalists and their definition of Ireland as expressed in their methods leaves little room or respect for Protestant or Dissenter, let alone the Catholic who might differ from them.

THE PROBLEM

Dismissal of other viewpoints is of course easy. The fact is that most people who follow these viewpoints believe in their approach. That is what makes re-examination and change so difficult. That is why criticism is not enough. Alternatives, and clear alternatives, are necessary if we are ever to convince those people who believe in those ways that may have the power of tradition behind them but have failed to build a community or an island that respects our differences.

Difference is not our problem. It is that we have pushed differences to the point of division. From that division springs the many symptoms that are a consistent cause of complaint

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and that waste so much time and energy that ought to be devoted to the central problem. The Irish of all traditions have made a powerful contribution to the building of so many democratic societies in this world by accepting that the essence of such democracies is the acceptance of diversity. The wonder is that the Irish in Ireland have never yet learned it.

THE PROCESS AND ITS STAGES

We in the SDLP have always argued that we should begin where we are and not where we would like to be. The statement of sloganised objectives is easy. Achieving them is another matter. There are no instant or sloganised answers. Only a process, as we have said time and again, will heal the division in Ireland. Only patient work in developing that process over the years will produce the final stability. We believe that to look back over twenty years of steady and sensible building will reveal and achieve far more progress than twenty years of either sloganeering or violence.

We see the road ahead in three stages. The first stage is the creation of equality of treatment in the North for all people. The second, based on that equality, is the process of reconciliation, of breaking down the barriers that divide us. In practice that means working together in all institutions of the North and by so doing over the years to build the trust to replace the distrust that has disfigured us till now. There will of course be many hiccups and setbacks on that road. Anyone who thinks otherwise or who thinks that one simple package will heal the divisions of centuries is not living in the real world. The second stage, the breaking down of barriers, will evolve naturally into the third stage, the development of new relationships within Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. That will bring the only unity that really matters, a unity born of the agreement on how we are to live together, the forms of such unity to evolve by agreements and out of mutual trust and respect. This is a process that no-one need fear since all are involved and since the Ireland that will emerge will be an Ireland built and agreed to by generations of building together.

THE ANGLO-IRISH ACCORD

This brings me to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. What I find remarkable is that the Anglo-Irish Agreement bears no

resemblance to the descriptions by its critics. One wonders whether they have either read it or understood it or whether party prejudices have run so deep as to blind their judgement. The framework for the process outlined above ought to be the Anglo-Irish framework. Firstly, because it is the framework of the problem. The relationships that are in conflict are not confined to the North, they are within Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. The framework of the problem, the British-Irish framework, should be the framework of the solution. Secondly, it is the framework of maximum consensus, since it is based on the consensus of the 59 million of both islands, rather than the consent of one-and-a-half million of them. Thirdly, and because of that, it is the road of minimum risk. Every road towards an answer is fraught with risk. The road of minimum risk is the road based on the democratic consensus of the peoples of both islands.

The framework that has been created is the Anglo-Irish Conference, which is in effect a permanent Council of Ministers from Britain and Ireland meeting on a regular basis, serviced by a permanent secretariat, to deal with a wide range of problems affecting the people of Northern Ireland. It is a decision-making process which is much fairer than any previous such process and which is the ideal framework, firstly, for tackling immediate grievances within the North and ensuring equality of citizenship, then for dealing with the wider relationships which have a direct bearing on the problem of the North. It is, in short, an opportunity to use the democratic process to the full in order to pursue the healing process outlined above. It is not a solution to the Irish problem, which is the false assumption on which many of its opponents criticise it, it is a framework of opportunity whereby we can move together towards a solution. It is permanent, and future governments, using the framework, can make their contribution to the healing and building process. More importantly, when taken in conjunction with the declarations embodied in the agreement, it removes completely the slightest justification for the use of violence in Ireland to achieve political objectives.

DECLARATION OF INTENT

There are two declarations, only one of which has received detailed public attention. There shall be no change in the status

of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people. That is a statement of fact. Does anyone believe that the people of Ireland can be united by force or coercion? Does anyone believe that they can be united without agreement? Is it not the evidence of divided peoples elsewhere that attempts to unite them by force have led only to partition and repartition?

The second declaration is that if a majority in the North wish for Irish unity that the British Government will facilitate and legislate for it. This is a clear statement by the British Government that it has no interest of its own, either strategic or otherwise, in remaining in Ireland. It is a declaration that Irish Unity is a matter for Irish people, for those who want it persuading those who don't. It is a clear challenge to all who really believe in the common name of Irishman to do what has never been done, to enter a sustained period of persuasion, of breaking down of barriers. To seek to do so by bullets is an approach not alone of cowardice but one that reveals an almost total lack of self-confidence.

The process involved is not one that any Northern Protestant need fear if he or she enters the process with self-confidence. They must be part of the process, part of the building. What emerges must have their hallmark too and must respect and cater for the diversity of the Irish people. In the second half of the twentieth century, what is the alternative?

The harsh truth is that we will be sharing the same piece of earth for a long time to come. We can live together or we can live apart. Living apart has not been very pleasant and has brought out the worst in us all. Living together and growing together will be painful and difficult. There will be many hiccups, many setbacks but the goal is worth achieving and it will take time. Is there another way?