

# Diversity need be no barrier to unity



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IN THE sixth century a convention was held at Drumceat, near Limavady, in Co. Derry. The dispute at the meeting was rather familiar in that it was largely between the sixth century constituents of the honourable member for North Antrim (Mr. Ian Paisley) and those of my own area.

The clans in Antrim insisted they would pay their tribute to the king of Argyll since they belonged to the Dalriada, who were also in the south west of Scotland. My constituents argued that, since they lived in Ireland, their tributes should be paid to the high kings there. St. Columba, returning from exile in Iona to resolve the argument, found a solution: to let them pay tribute to both.

by **JOHN HUME**

In a sense it was a sixth century Anglo-Irish agreement. It was a recognition of the duality of identity that has persisted ever since and has been with us long before the Plantation intensified it in the 17th century. It is time for another Columba and another convention.

The deaths and injuries of human beings in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years are the equivalent of 100,000 in Britain and an indictment of everyone involved in our problem. They are also a challenge to us all to re-examine in depth our past attitudes, if we wish to create a lasting and just peace.

The Unionist people rightly wish to protect their identity. My quarrel is not with that objective but with the methods used up until now. The Unionists see holding all power in their own hands and excluding everyone who is not one of them as the only way of protecting themselves. In the end, that is a deeply violent attitude.

There is no evidence that approach has changed given the composition of Belfast City Council and other local authorities, where Unionists hold a majority. For that reason the SDLP will not support any system of government controlled by an assembly that would be Belfast City Council writ large. Instead we argue for separation of powers with an executive directly responsible to the electorate.

The nationalist community must also re-examine its attitudes and its approach to resolving the problem. The right of the people who inhabit the island of Ireland to self determination is a principle that I would not question. But the people who live on the island are deeply divided as to how that right is to be exercised.

Agreement among people cannot be brought about by any form of coercion, whether peaceful or violent. Violence is the enemy of a divided people as it intensifies bitterness and distrust.

The British government, by clarifying that the country has no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Ireland, has already made a positive contribution to forcing a re-assessment on those who support violence.

However, that re-assessment could be considerably strengthened and the IRA armed struggle totally undermined by a simple declaration. The British government should underline that the Irish people have the right to self-determination, although regretting the divisions on how that right is to be exercised and deploring the price people have paid for such disagreement.

The British government has said that if such an agreement took the form of Irish unity it would facilitate that. What is supremely important is to underline that any agreement, whatever form it

takes, must be a matter for the people of Ireland north and south.

The SDLP proposal that any such agreement should be subject to a referendum north and south requiring a yes from each is important. This reassures the Unionists that we mean what we say, when we say we are seeking agreement. From a nationalist point of view it would be the first time the people of Ireland as a whole had expressed their self-determination. For the first time all institutions north and south would have the full loyalty of all the people, the only true basis for lasting peace.

In the recent talks my party put forward detailed proposals for such an agreement. These proposals were deliberately distorted by those who broke the agreed rules of confidentiality by leaking them to the press.

The SDLP approach could be summed up in our definition of the problem we faced as the need to accommodate two sets of legitimate rights — the rights of the Unionist people to their identity and their way of life and the rights of the nationalist people to the same. In that regard it was actually agreed at the talks that "there are at least two distinct communal identities within Northern Ireland, both of which need to be given respect by the other so that they can be appropriately accommodated in the political system, taking account of the wider framework of relationships within these islands".

It was also agreed that each individual and community has the right to define its own identity, which should be respected. In addition it was reaffirmed "that any new political institutions should be such as to give expression to the identity and validity of each main tradition."

Those principles were agreed. For that reason, the SDLP proposals at the talks contained provision for the accommodation of the Nationalist identity as well as a strong provision for the Unionist identity.

We propose that the Northern Ireland electorate elect three people by proportional representation to be members of an administrative commission. These three could then appoint six people, who could be experts from the community at large, to be heads of government departments. They would also be joined by two nominees, one from London, one from Dublin. As in Europe, decisions of this council of ministers would be unanimous so that no unacceptable proposals could be imposed on either section of the community.

Under these proposals the Unionist identity is strongly protected and Northern Ireland remains in the UK, together with its Westminster representatives. The only expression of Nationalist identity is the Dublin appointee, an appointment matched by one from London.

The SDLP is committed to the accommodation of difference as the basis for lasting peace. And we can assure the Unionists that no solution is possible without respect for both traditions. Indeed, we would be prepared to agree that any agreement should be reviewed after a defined period.

We are ready to accept John Major's invitation to resume dialogue. No party should have the right to veto such dialogue and, if any party tries to, the talks should continue without them, ensuring that at the end of the day any agreement will not be imposed, but will be endorsed by the people.

I have no doubt that, if we agree to accommodate our differences and to work our substantial common interests together, over time the old prejudices and distrusts will be eroded and a new society will emerge based firmly on respect for diversity. That is the true healing process. Is there any other way?