

IRELAND, WEST OF THE SHANNON, WEST OF THE BANN:

WHAT FUTURE?

IRISH ASSOCIATION

16 OCTOBER 1993

DERRY

JOHN HUME MEP MP

We have a saying in Derry that the distance between Belfast and here is twice the distance between here and Belfast. It is nice to welcome so many people from the east to our northwestern outpost of civilisation.

I must admit that I am in two minds about the theme of our discussion today. On the one hand, it is encouraging that, for once, there is an opportunity to take stock of contemporary Ireland from a non-metropolitan perspective - neither Dublin 4 nor Belfast 7 but from a land beyond the tyranny of the postcode.

On the other hand, the fact that we can focus on the east-wide divide within Ireland is a worrying indication that a new partition, based on economic and social structure, is in the making.

The growing concentration of population and employment in the urban sprawls of Dublin and Kildare in the Republic, and of Belfast, North Down and South Antrim here in the North, is striking. The concentration of media and cultural resources is common to both the Northern and Southern parts of the East coast. Indeed, even the very welcome proposal for an East coast economic corridor, is a recognition of the common interests of the areas east of the Bann and Shannon.

All this contrasts with the problems of the West. Even 20 years ago, we thought that the type of decline charted by John Healy in the case of Charlestown was long past. But desertification seems to have set in once more. Towns and villages are being devastated by immigration, both to the east of Ireland and further afield. Increasingly the economically inactive old and very young predominate. The remaining agricultural population sees itself under threat from the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the GATT negotiations. The fear that the West will become a theme park for affluent tourists from the East and abroad is widespread.

The material conditions for a new partition are emerging. But just as I would argue that the North-South political divide has been destructive for both parts of Ireland, a new socio-economic partition between East and West would be equally damaging to all our interests.

For us in the West, there is nothing to be gained from indulging in begrudgery at the expense of the East. While matters are relative, there are obviously massive problems of unemployment and deprivation to be found in the East as well.

A West kept alive on a drip feed of transfer payments would not ultimately benefit the East, either politically or economically. The tensions between a relatively affluent North and a more impoverished South have had a serious impact on both the economy and political systems of at least two of our European neighbours, Italy and Belgium. Given the existing divisions within the island, it does not seem sensible to accentuate our problems by creating new disputes as a result of unbalanced development.

No doubt our neo-classical economists will tell us that the shift to the East is inevitable and therefore to be welcomed. It was an economist who coined the phrase "the best is the enemy of the good". But I have always been baffled by the description of economics as "the dismal science" since so many of its practitioners spend so much time claiming that "the worst is the friend of the good".

I do not believe in the inevitability of the decline of the West. Balanced development is in our collective interests. Just as it has been accepted that the European Community has a responsibility to promote convergence between the richer and poorer member states, the respective metropolitan centres have a duty and self-interest in the welfare of all the territory under their jurisdiction.

Bringing about such balanced development requires a new model of centre-

5

periphery relations, which I would term polycentric.

Two different models prevailed in the two jurisdictions until relatively recently. For many years, the Republic operated in, to use Professor Garvin's phrase, a "periphery-dominated centre" mode. The political representatives of the Western periphery dominated the legislature and executive, and attempted to model an entire society on an illusory image of the West. Unfortunately, this image idealised precisely the factors that forced massive immigration from the West to Britain and the USA. Clearly, that model did not ultimately serve the interests of the West. Indeed, the great advances of the West were secured when Sean Lemass broke its political hegemony.

Here in the North, particularly West of the Bann, and nowhere more blatantly than in Derry, we suffered from being a satellite-centre-dominated periphery. Neglected by the official centre in London, we were stifled by the satellite centre at Stormont. The result was political stultification and economic stagnation

Neither of these two approaches worked. The problem is that we have not found a new and more effective relationship between the two Wests and their respective metropolitan centres. Here in Derry we have tried to elaborate a new approach that calls into question both the notion of centre and periphery, which for want of a better word, I will call polycentric.

The concept of peripherality is useful but double-edged. It is obviously a helpful tool of economic analysis, and serves as a foundation for any coherent strategy of balanced development. Obviously, if decision-makers in the centres recognise the specific problems caused by geographical remoteness, they are more likely to take our interests into account. Similarly, if ministers and civil servants in Dublin, Belfast and London understand that they, given the global nature of the economy, are also someone else's periphery, they are more likely to respond sympathetically to our problems.

Perhaps paradoxically, the geographical periphery stands to gain more if the concept of peripherality forms part of the intellectual framework of the centre. Because there is a real danger if we in the periphery internalise the notion and come to see ourselves as culturally, politically and economically marginal, we will surrender to the "victim syndrome". If we identify ourselves as victims, alternatively persecuted or neglected by the centre, we are preparing the way for a profound psychological demoralisation, and setting the stage for a capitulation to the so-called laws of economics.

The most important lesson we have learned in Derry over the last few years is that, from where we stand, we are the centre. We are, in a sense, a periphery-centred periphery. But that is only a foundation for a strategy of peripheral development based on multiple centres - in our case, Belfast, London, Dublin, Brussels, and the USA.

I am not pretending that we do not have serious difficulties in our city. But most visitors seem to detect a certain frame of mind that has resulted in Derry being one of the few expanding urban centres in the West.

To the extent we have succeeded in regenerating this part of the West, it is down to two principles. First, we do not expect the centre to solve our problems, we expect it rather to make it possible for us to resolve them ourselves. Second, we do not believe in monogamy in our relations with the outside world. As far as the centre is concerned, we are polygamists. Rather than put all our hopes in the Belfast or London baskets, we look for opportunities and partnerships with an entire harem of centres.

Just a few examples: our airport and new harbour are primarily due to our contacts with Brussels; new investment projects have come in from California: civil service offices have been located in the city; and the International Fund for Ireland has helped to finance the restoration of the city centre. In a polycentric world, promiscuity is an advantage.

Our relationship with the rest of Europe, and the wider world, is just as important as the relationship between the various parts of Ireland, North, West, South and East. Not only must we strive to establish cooperative projects between the various corners of our island, we must also look outwards.

The image of a supplicant, downtrodden West holding out its palms to the East, or looking to the metropolitan centres of the island for redemption has no place in the vision of the new Ireland we must imagine and invent. That imagination, that invention are essential if we are to guarantee collectively a secure future for our regions and our island.

The future will be polycentric. We can see this in the institutional and geographic diversity of European structures. For example, the main EC institutions are located in Brussels, Luxemburg and Strasbourg. We look to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to uphold our fundamental freedoms. Vienna hosts the European Conference on Security and Cooperation, and its valuable work in maintaining peace in Europe. Frankfurt, it seems, is to be the home of the European Central Bank. Other common institutions are scattered throughout Europe, such the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in London. In Dublin, we find two headquarters of Community organisations, the Centre for the Improvement of Working Conditions and the European Bureau for Minority and Lesser Used Languages. The point is that we can no longer simply look to a unifying centre. The peripheries are multiple, and the centres diverse.

This diversity reveals itself in the increasing importance of the concept of the

Europe of the Regions. The regional aspect of Community policy has gained substantially in importance since the mid-1970s to the point where regional policy spending is the second largest item in the Community budget. Until fairly recently, however, regional policies tended to be administered by the central Community and member state institutions. The most progressive development has been the emergence of regions and local authorities as autonomous actors.

Sub-national authorities throughout the Community no longer sit back as passive recipients of largesse, they take an active role in the formulation and implementation of policies. They no longer simply address themselves to the Community authorities, they are building links between themselves, and are initiating projects and policies. In Ireland generally, we lag behind the successes of many of German, Dutch or Belgian counterparts. There is no doubt we can all learn a great deal from the strategies other regions have adopted to overcome their natural disadvantages, just as we have much to teach.

These exchanges between regions are helping to create a more spaghetti-like pattern of relations between the regions, and with the respective national capitals. From our point of view, one of the major benefits of the Maastricht Treaty is the institutional recognition which it gives to the regions in the shape of the Committee of the Regions. For the first time, the regions of Europe will be properly associated with the decision-making processes of the Community. Exactly how effective the Committee will be depends on how imaginative, responsible and self-confident its members will be in putting forward proposals and policies. If it is used simply to put forward complaints, it will lose much of its credibility. I hope and believe that that the former strategy will prevail.

In this part of Ireland, such developments have been overshadowed by scare tactics of the British government and its alleged supporters. The Maastricht debate has been dominated by a completely false dichotomy. The Government has, so it is argued, put up a heroic fight to protect the ancient rights and freedoms of its

citizens against the centralising ambitions of the Community.

Standing where we are on the edge of Europe, being much less obsessed with the value of the nation-state, and more engaged with the European mainland, this portrayal of the Community seems to have little relationship to reality.

The truth is that a polycentric rather than an imperial vision is driving Europe forward. Associated with the development of multiple centres is the creation of multiple layers of identities. Simultaneously or successively, we can be Europeans, British, Irish, Northern Irish, Derrymen or Derrywomen - whatever we want. In this new world, there are no incompatibilities between identities, there is no superiority of one identity over another, we can be free to invent ourselves. Ultimately, identity will simply become a matter of comfort and convenience, not a sign of tribal loyalty.

I believe that such a diverse society, in which we are not confined by rigid structures or identities, has much more chance of tackling the problems of employment, environment, social justice and peace. Above all, our new polycentric world will provide a pragmatic challenge to the 19th century orthodoxies which have generated the profound North-South divide and which is now in danger of creating a new and equally profound East-West barrier.

If the West is to have a future, it cannot be in hostility to the East. We must look to ourselves and to all points of the compass. In a multi-polar world, a compass is a necessity since the traditional road signs merely point us on the road to nowhere.