

LEADERSHIP IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

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My intention today is to give some indication of the lessons we have learned in our efforts to bring about peace in Ireland. I do not intend to look at the problems of other parts of the world in any detail. We cannot prescribe the cures for other ailments. However, I believe that there are some general points which apply to all divided societies and which may be of relevance to those working for peace in those societies.

Perhaps the most basic and fundamental fact to recognise that no society is an island. Conflict in one society has repercussions in many other places. The conflict in Ireland not only affected the two parts of the island of Ireland, but also Great Britain, the United States and continental Europe. The Middle East conflict has had worldwide repercussions. Ex-Yugoslavia has been a serious problem for the whole of Europe. In our case, the involvement of the outside world, particularly the US and the European Union, has been a very important factor in the peace process.

Furthermore, it is important to be clear about the definition of society. Many divided societies became so precisely because of a dispute over the inclusive or exclusive nature of that society. It has been very easy in the past for a society to be defined exclusively in terms of

race, ethnicity, religion or class. A society could be considered to consist only of people in a region who fulfilled certain criteria. That is what happened in Ireland for generations. Irish society was defined in terms of a Catholic Irish identity, excluding those who saw themselves as Protestant and British. In Northern Ireland, we had a system where society was defined in terms of being British and Protestant. Anyone else was excluded. That set of exclusions really ensured that our society would remain divided.

In order to transcend those divisions, the gradual awareness of the common interests of all our people, in both parts of the island, as well as the substantial common ground between Ireland and the rest of the European Union, including Britain has been crucial. The gradual creation of a more inclusive conception of society, where people are aware of the importance of participating in a global economy, has been an essential part of the peace process. In order to bring about an agreement between unionists and nationalists, a necessary precondition was the recognition that, even though we retain substantial cultural and political differences, that we belong to the same society. A recognition that a diminution of one of our traditions diminishes the other, an enhancement of one enhances the other. Accepting this fundamental social unity has been a long and difficult process which is far from complete. It has involved a thirty-

year effort to change the terms of political discourse in Ireland and Britain. It will involve the newer generations coming into politics to invent new language and concepts before it is complete.

This has been the fundamental principle of the peace process In Ireland. I would sum it up as the transition from the concept of division to that of diversity. For too long, Ireland has been afflicted by the perspective in which whoever is not the same as you is against you. We have moved towards the idea that you have to work together with people who are not the same as you. Differences must be evaluated positively, indeed must be regarded as inevitable in most living societies. Difference is a factor of dynamism where excessive homogeneity can be a source of stagnation. A divided society must be re-structured as a diverse society.

In short, division bad, diversity good. They can be distinguished essentially by attitudes towards difference. Fear of difference creates division. Respect for difference engenders diversity. Difference is inevitable. In itself it is not a problem. It depends on the way politicians and peoples decide to consider the matter.

One thing is clear, differences cannot be eradicated, or ignored. This is particularly true in societies with pretensions to be democracies.

But I would go further. Even in regimes prepared to employ murderous violence to eradicate differences, the price to pay is extremely high. Clearly the cost in terms of lost lives and human suffering is massive. And in addition, the attempt to eradicate difference has never successfully provided the basis for a stable political system.

Violence has had an unwelcome place in human history, particularly in the 20th century. Obviously in many conflict situations, including our own, there are military realities. But in divided societies, there are no military solutions. Only by political agreement can we put an end to conflict. By definition, agreement precludes victory. But it is the only way out of the morass into which attempts to deal with difference by force lead us.

I would like to make a few remarks on the situation in Ireland which might give you a better understanding of our specific problems. Most of our political parties signed an Agreement on April 10th 1998 on the future of our island. This was endorsed by the people in both parts of the island on May 22nd. A substantial majority of members supporting the Agreement were elected to the new Assembly on June 25th. On July 1st, the new First Minister and Deputy First Minister, representing the two major traditions, were elected by the Assembly.

We now have to work to ensure that the whole range of institutions foreseen by the Agreement are put in place in the coming months.

What, in effect, we have done is to set up a system in which the differences between the different political tendencies can be accommodated. No one is 100% happy with the Agreement. No one has obtained all they are looking for. Nor is it likely that anyone will. Anybody rational and reasonable knows that. The new institutions are designed to ensure that everyone can identify with them, knowing that although they will not succeed in obtaining all their demands, no political position can be systematically discriminated against. No one has to abandon their aims. But they must agree to pursue those aims through the new structures.

It is obvious that successfully implementing the Agreement will not be easy. It will take imagination and leadership to create a durable political system. Having said that, the very fact that the Agreement was signed and ratified shows the leadership is there, and that the people will respond positively to positive leadership.

I have been asked to talk about leadership in a divided society. But it would be mistaken not to take into account the wishes of the people and the enormous contribution made by grass roots activists of all

political views and none to the peace process. Thousands of activists have been involved in local level projects which have contributed to the changes in our society. Interestingly enough, some of these activists have emerged from the sections of society most committed to violence in the past, and who eventually recognised the futility and horror of violence. The popular and grass roots support for the peace process has been a powerful impetus in our search for a lasting solution.

I will now take a risk and suggest some plausible pointers for potential peacemakers.

First, to be effective political leadership has to be representative. In the context of a divided society, you are constrained. Inevitably, leadership is one group or another, not of the whole society. This means to some extent articulating the concerns of the group you represent. I would not decry the contribution made by people outside mainstream politics, but you cannot lead from outside the mainstream. As I have often said, when you build a bridge, you do not start in the middle of the river.

Two, you have to do more than simply articulate the concerns of your supporters. It is not sufficient to be a mouthpiece, whatever earthly or

heavenly inspiration you may claim to have. I would say that the prime function of political leadership anywhere (but especially in divided societies) is to bring the good instincts and intentions of people, and to hold in check the more malevolent ones. If you are representative, it is useful to be representative for a purpose.

Three, you have to have a vision, preferably positive, for the future. It is not enough to defend the present immediate demands of your supporters. It is your responsibility to them to look at where the group you represent is going. Do you want to confine yourself to opposing other groups, or indeed to opposing the future.? Is it not more important to set out the type of society in which your supporters are guaranteed a stable, peaceful and hopefully prosperous future.

Fourth, you cannot speak for other groups but you must make it your business to try to understand their fears and concerns. You must try to identify the ways in which peaceful coexistence at least and hopefully some more positive relationship can emerge. You must try to establish working relationships with your political opponents.

Fifth, your objective must be to widen the horizons of the group you represent. With luck, this will have also have some resonance with the supporters of other groups. Obviously, you have a tradition to

defend, but you must go beyond that. A tradition obsessed with the past and with its symbols is doomed to have no future. Perhaps the greatest responsibility of all is point out how your society can survive successfully in the global economy and in the information society. Otherwise you will be left arguing about possession of a few beans on the lake isle of Innisfree.

Sixth, patience is required, often in large quantities. Leadership in a divided society cannot be conducted in sound-bites or in terms of daily media cycles. The long view is necessary, with all the consequences in terms of short term criticism that implies. You are not only interested in seizing the headlines, important as that it. You are trying to change an entire political discourse.

Thank you