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Ireland's problems are not unique in European or World History. Many countries have backgrounds of historical national conflict, tensions with neighbouring states and internal differences of language, religion or national identity. The lesson learned by those countries including Belgium was that difference of itself need not be a problem. The issue for those seeking stability and harmony in those countries was not the elimination of diversity but its accommodation. They learned that there was no peace, no stability, no security in seeking to have political arrangements which reflected and respected only one tradition and its values. Rather stability, and the best protection for any tradition, lay in creating a political consensus with structures which neither privileged nor prejudiced the position of any tradition.

The challenge to unionists and nationalists in Ireland is to pick up that message. The tragedy is that in many ways Ireland helped to teach that message to others. When we look for instance at the United States of America and see a country of broad and deep differences protected by a political consensus we find that people from the Ulster Protestant tradition helped fashion the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They helped place in that new country the pillar of democracy and the essence of real unity - the acceptance of diversity. It is a lesson that they had doubtless learned from the Ireland which they left behind them. It was a lesson that they shared with the other groups who helped found and fashion the United States with them. They had come from elsewhere in Europe having left societies in which there was difference, intolerance, injustice and abuse of power. Many of them were persecuted or excluded in Europe. They were of course broadly Protestant.

In recognising the importance of their contribution to the understanding and operation of democracy we see the real Protestant heritage in politics. Belgium itself and other European countries which embrace societies of difference all give testimony to the positive Protestant contribution to the creation of political structures based on pluralism. The Protestant heritage in Europe and in America was not to seek political structures or societies made in their own image. Rather than proceed with ~~negative~~ motivation of suspicion and mistrust (usually well-grounded) of others, they harnessed the positive motivation of self-confidence in their talents and their values.

Unfortunately this openness is not the sense given to the Protestant heritage in Ireland. There the Protestant tradition is sadly portrayed through the perpetual use of the negative - "Ulster Says No", "No Surrender" "Not an Inch". The approach of unionist/Protestant leaders in Ireland has been to turn difference into divisions, to create separation rather than accommodation, and to have all power in their own hands. That approach has failed the Protestant/unionist community just as it has offended the Catholic/nationalist tradition.

Nationalists in Ireland must properly ask themselves why nationalism has not been fulfilled in Ireland as it was in other countries throughout Europe. The nationalism which united those other countries included that spirit of tolerance and active pluralism which has served to accommodate difference. Their nationalism sought more to unite than to assimilate or vindicate. In Ireland nationalists, understandably given a history of colonization and ascendancy, fell into the rut of identification with mainly one tradition. In doing so they were diverted from the real republicanism of pluralism, tolerance and democracy which ironically was first, and perhaps best, articulated by members of Protestant denominations in Ireland.


It is sadly true that this distortion of real republicanism was made more savage by the hurt suffered by people in the nationalist tradition through repression, partition and discrimination. This has resulted in some of the nationalist community (turning to violence and so worsening the divisions and condition of our country and its people.

It is fair to say, however, that others from the nationalist tradition want to erase that grotesque caricature of republicanism which is violent and sectarian. We have sought to come to generous and realistic terms with the rights and needs of those in Ireland who feel offended or threatened by nationalist Ireland as it has been understood, or misunderstood, for too long. We have much more to do in terms of understanding through dialogue and co-operation, achieving not assimilation but reconciliation. That would give us real Irish Unity - the Unity of the Irish people giving expression to the positive diversity of our people.

However, representatives of the Unionist/Protestant tradition have refused to engage in such a process of reconciliation. They have opposed measures aimed at achieving equality in Northern Ireland. We cannot have real reconciliation in circumstances where we do not have equality. They have been conditioned in that "laager" mentality by the political role of the British which has been to allow Unionists a veto on political development. The suspicions, self-doubts and prejudices of Northern Ireland Unionists were allowed to dictate the boundaries of political change in Ireland and to restrict the development of relations between Britain and Ireland.

In 1912 and 1974 Unionist leaders managed through the threat of violence to subvert the will of the British Parliament to pursue a course which had the assent of the majority of people in Ireland. By so vindicating the Unionists' "Ourselves Alone" approach the British served to underwrite the maintenance of sectarian solidarity and negativism as the basic method of Unionist politics. They also served to convince sections of the nationalist community that violence is the best approach to take against the British and that political approaches would be frustrated by the "Orange Card".

That is the nub of the political deadlock in Northern Ireland. Only when the "Orange Card" of threat, violence and sectarianism is denied political currency can that deadlock really be broken. This requires the creation of an alternative approach by Britain and achieving that demands a more politic, positive and realistic approach by nationalist Ireland. Through the New Ireland Forum we laid the groundwork for the Irish Nationalist approach following the first openings of a new framework between Britain and Ireland in the meetings between the Haughey and Thatcher governments in 1980. In the Anglo-Irish Agreement we find Britain committed to a different approach. In the Unionist reaction to that Agreement we are seeing yet another attempt to play the "Orange Card". By standing firm with the development of new relations between Britain and Ireland and by standing by the commitment to achieving equality in Northern Ireland, the British Government can serve to trump the "Orange Card" and ease the deadlock in Northern Ireland's politics.



The Anglo-Irish Agreement does not jeopardise any legitimate rights of Unionists. If anything jeopardises their position inside the UK at present it is not the Agreement itself but the Unionist reaction to the Agreement. The Agreement states the clear fact that Northern Ireland will remain in the UK so long as a majority of its citizens wish. That is hardly a threat to the rights of Unionists. It specifically recognises the particular identity and aspirations of the Unionist Community. That is hardly "stealing their birthright".

Unionist politicians seem to object because the membership of the UK will no longer be solely on the terms demanded by them. They oppose it because it also gives recognition to the Nationalist identity and the reality of the rightful interest of Southern Ireland in the affairs of the North. They suspect it because they recognise that it shifts the unconditional veto from them and perhaps because it offers a process of reconciliation which can lead to a real unity of the Irish people. Sadly they fail, or refuse, to see that they have nothing to fear from that process and much to gain. That refusal is not a failure of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; it is an indictment of the past approaches which have created that Unionist mind-set.

Just as it is not stealing anything from Unionists, nor is the Agreement selling anything out for nationalists. It gives recognition in an international Agreement to the Irish identity of people living in Northern Ireland. It commits the two sovereign governments to a process of ensuring equality between the two traditions. It contains an undertaking from the British government to fully comply with any wish for a United Ireland expressed by a majority of citizens there. In other words Britain has no interest of her own against a United Ireland. Irish Unity is a matter of those who want it persuading those who do not. This should make clear to nationalists that their method should be to address the question of difference in Ireland and the fears of Unionists rather than engage in violence nominally aimed at the British and in reality maiming the Irish people themselves.

Nationalists must not shirk that challenge and must not miss the opportunity to create advances that could never be achieved through slogans, violence or political non-involvement. Unionists too must meet the challenge to create

new relationships which will not only protect but enhance their heritage by allowing expression of the Protestant identity without the corruption of exclusivism. But let no one ignore the clear responsibility on the British government to properly address those matters of legislative offence, administrative insensitivity and legal injustice which infringe the rights of citizens and communities in Northern Ireland. The two sovereign governments must work to resolve such problems and create ongoing progress in British - Irish relations as a backdrop to improving the political climate within Northern Ireland itself.

People in Belgium which hosts some of the important elements in the European Community structures, might recognise that the structures established by the Anglo-Irish Agreement reflect those of the European Community. That is no accident. As a member of the European Parliament, I have been reassured about the ability of political means to help effect reconciliation among differing people.

I serve in that parliament and in the same political grouping with representatives of peoples who lived in enduring enmity and in this century alone have killed each other by the million in bitter conflict. If political structures such as those of Europe can be developed to allow people to work together, exchange concerns and ideas and grow together addressing their common problems but protecting their essential diversity then surely the same can happen in the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement has established an Intergovernmental Conference which is charged with working to address and resolve important problems in Northern Ireland and which can work to promote co-operation and co-ordination of policies in both parts of Ireland for the benefit of the entire island. Comprised of Ministers from both governments it is the equivalent of the European Council of Ministers. The Intergovernmental Conference is served by a permanent Secretariat based in Belfast which prepares and follows up much of the Conference's work. This Secretariat is analogous to the European Commission. The Agreement also provides for an Inter-Parliamentary tier comprising elected representatives of political parties in Britain,

Northern Ireland and the south of Ireland. Through this feature not yet established, broader considerations and criticisms than those of the two governments can enhance the operation and development of the process offered by the Anglo-Irish framework. This Parliamentary tier would have a role similar to that of the European Parliament.

Nobody has anything to fear from such a process. They have much to contribute and much to gain. For the first time the rights and needs of both traditions in Northern Ireland are clearly recognised in a political framework which represents the peoples of both Ireland and Britain. It provides a framework in which we can grow together politically rather than stagnate in sloganising, prejudice, hurt and suspicion. If Unionists or Nationalists with their proud traditions really have confidence in themselves and their identities then they will realise that such a process has no danger for them. If they are afraid then they do lack self confidence in the values and ideals which they articulate. If this is the case then there can be no progress in subscribing to demands for political arrangements solely based on their political inadequacies. The only possible way forward is for the two sovereign governments to maintain and develop that framework which actually measures up to the full dimensions of the problem and which can give the people of Northern Ireland in particular the room to grow together.